

# **Eighty Years of Indo – Serbian Orthodox Relations and Saint Dositej Vasić of Zagreb**

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Reception at Belgrade on 21 September 1937  
H. H. Basalios Geevarghese II, Catholicos of the East,  
Abo Alaxios O.I.C. & Metropolitan Dositej of Zagreb

**E**cumenism was something novel in the Christian world a century ago. While every denomination was nesting in their doctrinal shell, Inter-Church relations were absurd. Politics, lack of communication and transport kept the Orthodox Churches away from interaction amid them. Perhaps except in the Holy city of Jerusalem, it was almost zilch till the middle of the twentieth century, where also the relation was hostile most of the time.

Even in this scenario, the Malankara Orthodox Church of India, a member of the Oriental Orthodox community in the south-west corner of the Indian Peninsula and the Serbian Orthodox Church of the Byzantine community in the Eastern Europe, developed a warm relation as early as in 1936. It expanded even to the mutual visits of the Hierarchs in 1937. The amazing story of the brotherhood of two geographically remote Churches of

the Pan Orthodox community was initiated by the Serbian Orthodox Confessor Saint Dositej Vasić of Zagreb.

### **Saint Dositej of Zagreb**

Metropolitan Dositej was born in Belgrade in 1887. He took his Master of Theology from Kiev Religious Academy in 1904. He spent two years at the University of Berlin studying theological and philosophical science followed by philosophy at Leipzig. From 1907 to 1909 he taught at the Seminary of St. Sava in Belgrade. He studied at the Sorbonne and the College of Social Sciences, Paris from 1907 to 1909 and in Geneva from 1910 to 1912. Besides his native Serbian, he was fluent in Russian, Czech, German and French. He also learned Bulgarian and English.

In 1899, he was ordained to the rank of the monk in the monastery of Manasija. In May 1913, the Holy assembly of bishops of the Kingdom of Serbia elected him as a bishop. Subsequently, he was consecrated as the bishop of Nis on 25 May 1913. It was a herculean effort to tender his sheep through catastrophic situations crated by successive wars and the earthquake of 1927. The Bolshevik revolution of Russia in 1917 also added up his burden. When the Russian people in exile dying of hunger in 1920's, Bishop Dositej was the delegate of the Royal Yugoslavian Government in the International League for the facilitation of hungry Russians, and preached throughout Yugoslavia, urging mercy and brotherly love for the Russian people die painfully.

In 1931, Bishop Dositej was appointed the first Metropolitan of the newly established Zagreb Diocese. He was described as an excellent teacher at the seminary, a great organizer, a good orator, well-mannered and full of Christian goodness and a true patriot. He was sent abroad by the Serbian Orthodox Church frequently as its delegate to Geneva, Basel, Athens, Bulgaria etc. Metropolitan Dositej visited India during the winter of 1936/37.

During the World War II, Metropolitan Dositej was arrested and imprisoned by the Nazi controlled regime of Croatia. He was brutally

tortured in the prison. It is accused that the Roman Catholic nuns were also actively participated in enhancing his agony while he was hospitalized. Later, the Germans transported the unconscious and terribly battered Metropolitan Dositej by train from Zagreb to Belgrade where he was housed in a Gestapo prison. Later, Metropolitan Dositej was transferred to a sanatorium since he was in critical condition. Even though he escaped a sudden death, he never recovered mentally or physically.

Metropolitan Dositej spent the last days of his life at Belgrade Monastery of the Ascension under the care of the sisters of the Russian abbess Angelina. He entered into eternal rest on 14 January 1945 by sustained physical and psychological wounds from the persecution. He was entombed in the churchyard of this monastery.

On 22 May 1998 the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church declared Metropolitan Dositeja (Vasic) of Zagreb and Ljubljana as a Confessor.<sup>1</sup> Hiero-confessor Dositej of Zagreb and Vavedenje, was added to the list of the Serbian saints by the decision of the Holy Assembly of Bishops of the Serbian Orthodox Church from May 2000. On May 13, 2008, his sacred relics were transferred to the monastery church from the tomb in which he rested from January 15, 1945.<sup>2</sup>

### **Saint Dositej in India**

According to the Serbian cyber data, "It is little known that the Metropolitan Dositej was also in India. There he resided during the winter of 1936/37 year, the Russian mission among the Indians. Metropolitan Dositej was preaching even visited the Malabar Coast. Great was the love of Christ and courage converts Hindus, because they were persecuted majority Hindus. How many missionary work in these climates sometimes be dangerous, it can be seen from the following events. On one occasion, Metropolitan Dositej observed in the church, behind the icon, a cobra

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<sup>1</sup> A.) [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Dositheus\\_\(Vasich\)\\_of\\_Zagreb](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Dositheus_(Vasich)_of_Zagreb), B.) [orthodoxhr.blogspot.com/.../sv-dositej-zagrebacki.htm](http://orthodoxhr.blogspot.com/.../sv-dositej-zagrebacki.htm)

<sup>2</sup> [www.spc.rs/eng/celebration\\_st\\_dositej\\_zagreb\\_vavedenje\\_monastery](http://www.spc.rs/eng/celebration_st_dositej_zagreb_vavedenje_monastery)

snake. She repeatedly appeared. He was later informed that a believer died from its bite.”<sup>3</sup>

We have no evidences to confirm or counter-check his mission in India or even the Russian Orthodox Mission in India. But the records of the Malankara Orthodox Church confirm his visit to India, especially to Malabar, now known as state of Kerala in India, in 1936/7. Metropolitan Dositej participated<sup>4</sup> in the world conference of Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) held at Mysore, India from 2 January 1937 onwards.<sup>5</sup> According to the available sources, he visited India in connection with this conference.

According to the Indian Sources, Metropolitan Dositej visited Kottayam, Kerala, India along with F.T. Pianoff<sup>6</sup> in January 1937 after the Mysore conference. Feodor T. Pianoff (1889-1969), a leader of the Russian Student Christian Movement. He had left Russia in 1918. He had worked for YMCA and actively participated in the activities of the Orthodox Theological Institute, Paris. As the guest of Catholicos H. H. Basalius Geevarghese II, he stayed for about two weeks at Old Seminary, Kottayam, with the former.<sup>7</sup> By informing his joyful experience with the Catholicos, to H. H. Patriarch Vernava of Serbia, he established the relation between the Malankara and Serbian Churches. He created a colourful impression about the Malankara Church to Patriarch Vernava.

### **Father Andronic, the Russian**

Another important event during the Indian tour of Metropolitan Dositej was his meeting with Father Andronic, a Russian monk – priest. Father Andronic was stayed with the monastery of Transfiguration, Mount Tabor, Pathanapuram, Kerala, India for nine years as a visitor. He expressed his desire to engage in farming since he studied the same while in Germany. The monastery allocated one of its detached farmlands at Pattazhi, Kerala,

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<sup>3</sup> orthodoxhr.blogspot.com/.../sv-dositej-zagrebcki.htm

<sup>4</sup> *The Orthodox Sabha Magazine*, Chingam 1113

<sup>5</sup> A) *Malayala Manorama*, 8 January, 1937, B) *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 20, 1937

<sup>6</sup>(a.)[http://samlib.ru/j/jarich\\_irina\\_georgiewna/russkiepisma.shtml](http://samlib.ru/j/jarich_irina_georgiewna/russkiepisma.shtml),b.)<http://www.borisogleb.de/lieb3.html>

<sup>7</sup> *The Orthodox Sabha Magazine*, Chingam 1113

India at his disposal. He constructed a small building and a chapel in that property along with his farming activities. He visited several Malankara Orthodox parishes and attended many priests meetings to preach. Perhaps this was referred to as “the Russian mission among the Indians” in the Serbian records about Metropolitan Dositej.

Metropolitan Dositej also visited the monastery of Transfiguration during his Indian voyage. During his stay at the monastery, he too enlightens the monks over there. From there, he visited Father Andronic at Pattazhi and elevated him as Archimandrite. Later, Father Andronic left India since his services were requested among the Russian migrants in the North America.<sup>8</sup> Even after his departure, Father Andronic was in warm relation with the Malankara Orthodox Church. He even gifted three sets of chalices for the Diaspora parishes of the Malankara Orthodox Church in 1950's.<sup>9</sup>

### **Visit of Catholicos Geevarghese II to Belgrade**

As the result of the report given by Metropolitan Dositej, Patriarch Vernava invited Catholicos Geevarghese II to Yugoslavia that was accepted by the latter. Catholicos Geevarghese II planned to visit Yugoslavia after his participation in the second World Faith & Order Conference assembling at Edinburgh, U. K., in August 1937. Catholicos Geevarghese II invited Patriarch Vernava as the chief guest of the silver jubilee celebrations of the establishment of the Catholicate in India scheduled for 1937.<sup>10</sup>

Unexpectedly, Patriarch Vernava demised on 23 July 1937. Catholicos Geevarghese II received this tragic news *en route* to Edinburgh. On 25 July, he conducted a memorial service at Paris, France, together with Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Eulogius Georgievsky of Paris.<sup>11</sup> As the result, Catholicos Geevarghese II considered calling off his Yugoslavian trip after this awful incident. But Metropolitan Dositej, who was the *Locum tenens*

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<sup>8</sup> Thoma Mar Dionysius Metropolitan, *cf* in Chandanappally, Dr. Samuel, *Malankara Sabha Pithakkanmar Vol II*, 2012, Chandanappally, pp 657-8

<sup>9</sup> Alaxios Mar Theodosius Metropolitan, *cf* in The Indian Orthodox Church Mission, *The History and Report of the Orthodox Parishes Outside Malabar*, 1955, Madras. P 5

<sup>10</sup> *The Orthodox Sabha Magazine*, Chingam 1113

<sup>11</sup> Kuriakosu Remban, M.C., *Edinburgho Yaathra*, Kottayam, 1938

Patriarch as the president of the synod, insisted to continue with the scheduled tour. Along with this, the accomplices of Catholicos Geevarghese II encouraged him to carry on. Finally he agreed to visit Belgrade.<sup>12</sup>

### **Catholicos Geevarghese II in Yugoslavia**

Immediately after the Edinburgh conference, Catholicos Geevarghese II left to Yugoslavia, with Abo Alaxios O.I.C. They reached Belgrade via Paris by train On 21 September 1937. The Indian primate was received royally by Metropolitan Dositej and a large array of Serbian clergy. Catholicos Geevarghese II was honoured with the same reverence extended to their own Patriarch. He was made to sit on the Patriarchal throne in all parishes and monasteries they visited. He was addressed as “Patriarch Basali” in the Holy Eucharist and Litany. Metropolitan Dositej assigned two bishops, Bishop Seraphim and Bishop Nicholas, as the ‘bishops on waiting’ to accompany Catholicos Geevarghese II during his travels.

On 23 September, Catholicos Geevarghese II addressed a gathering of about 1,000 Serbian priests and several bishops. On the next day he visited Military Museum and National Museum in Belgrade. On 26 September Catholicos Geevarghese II visited the monasteries of *Pustinja* and *Žiča* followed by a visit to the famous *Durđevi stupovi* on the next day. He was received by clergy and laity at all Serbian parishes *en route* joyfully. He was accompanied in these visits by Bishop Seraphim and Bishop Nicholas of the Serbian Church.

Catholicos Geevarghese II and Abo Alaxios O.I.C. left Yugoslavia on 30 September 1937 to India via Rome. Metropolitan Dositej, Metropolitan Anastasy Gribanovsky of Kishinev, then prelate of the Russian Orthodox Church in exile, four bishops and a huge gathering was assembled at the railway station to see them off.<sup>13</sup> They reached back Kottayam, India on 30 October 1937.

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<sup>12</sup> Philipose Mar Theophilus, *Malankara Sabhayude Yasassuyarchy*, cf in Paulose OIC (Ed), *Bethaniyude Panimalar*, 1976, Ranni-Perunad. p 40 -1

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, Dr. M. Kurian Thomas, *Kurichy Bavayude Moonnu paradasha Yathrakal*, 2015, Kottayam, pp 293 -5

The emergence of the Second World War, captivity and martyrdom of Metropolitan Dositej followed by the political restructuring of the Balkan countries made further communications and visits impossible. And hence, the strong relations started to build up were broken. Even then, the visit of Catholicos Geevarghese II was sweet memory at Belgrade even in 1952.<sup>14</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Even though the Indian documents reveals these much about the Indian connection of Metropolitan Dositej and the Serbian Church at large, there are still some unsolved mysteries. They are;

1. Does Metropolitan Dositej have any knowledge about the Malankara Orthodox Church prior to his arrival in India?
2. Did he ever in touch with Abo Alaxios during the latter's tour in England for more than six months in 1933?
3. Did Metropolitan Anastasy Gribovsky of Kishinev have any role in the visit of Metropolitan Dositej to India? The former met Catholicos Geevarghese II at Jerusalem on 24 September 1934.<sup>15</sup> He urged for the close relation between Indian and Russian churches during that meeting. As the chief organizer of the Russian Church in exile, he often had been in Belgrade too.
4. Did Metropolitan Dositej pre-known to Father Andronic while in Germany? If not, how does he dare to elevate him as an Archimandrite?
5. Did Russian Orthodox Church in Exile in general or F.T. Pianoff in particular had any role in the visit of Metropolitan Dositej to Kerala?

These questions cannot be answered on the basis of the available Indian sources.

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<sup>14</sup> Philipose Mar Theophilus, *cf* in Thomas, Dr. M. Kurian, *Abo Alaxios – Nadithulyam Saantham*, 2015, Kottayam, p 66

<sup>15</sup> Kasheesha, C, M, Skriah, *Jurusalem Yathra*, 1935, Kottayam. p 172

