Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan (1878–1945) took charge in Trichur, India in February 1908. He decided to start a Syriac printing press. There were no qualified people in Trichur at that time. So in 1920, returning from a visit to Iraq, he brought with him Deacon Joseph de Kelaita, one of the greatest Syriac scholars of the present century, to Trichur to prepare Syriac types for starting a Syriac printing press in India. Deacon Joseph de Kelaita was a cousin of Mar Timotheus.

There was no Syriac printing press in India, or outside, for the Church of the East. The American Mission in Urmia, Persia, had set up a printing press in 1840. There was later a Catholic mission press and still later (1889) the press of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission, in the same city. But the church of the East had not owned any printing press. Although their books were printed at the Anglican press, there was a need for the Church to have its own press. Mar Abimalek Timotheus, who had undergone training under the Revd W.H. Browne in Kochanes, had a desire to found a Syriac press in India. After World War I, the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission had stopped its functioning, which made the need for a Syriac press greater.

The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission Press printed most of the liturgical books needed for the Assyrians. The liturgy of Addai and Mari was printed for the first time in 1891. The Metropolitan’s Palace, Trichur has three copies of this liturgy. In one copy it is written that it was presented to Abimalek of Mar Bhishu, who was a student in the school of the Anglican missionaries, in 1896. This eighteen-year-old son of a priest was not yet a deacon then. He had exhibited his excellence in studies. It was twelve years later that he took charge as metropolitan in Trichur.

Joseph de Kelaita was a competent Syriac scholar. An English Bible society had used his talents to edit a reprinted Syriac Old Testament.¹

¹ The Trinitarian Bible Society in London published Ktba qadi Sa hanaw diyathi, that is, the Old Testament, in 1913. According to the first page, this book was printed by Deacon Joseph d-Beth Kelaita from the copy which was printed in Urmia in 1852 at the
The visit of Mar Timotheus Metropolitan to Baqubah refugee camp near Baghdad in 1920 convinced him of the need to utilize the services of this great Syriac scholar for preparing the font for casting Syriac types.

Mar Timotheus Metropolitan lived in Trichur in the bungalow of the Adattukaran family, as there was no metropolitan's palace then. Deacon Joseph de Kelaita stayed in the house and started work very earnestly with the smiths who worked on the Syriac types as written down by him. Thus within two years the work was almost complete. Trichur was not ready for starting the Syriac printing press as the church suit was in an appeal stage in the Chief Court of Cochin. Financially the church in Trichur was overburdened by protracted litigations.

Deacon Joseph de Kelaita decided to give up the idea of helping his cousin to start a Syriac press in Trichur. With all the types made so far he proceeded back to Iraq to help found a Syriac press by the Assyrians for the Assyrians in Mosul. The departure of Deacon Joseph de Kelaita was a deep disappointment for Mar Timotheus. The forty-three-year-old metropolitan would not give up hope. He called the smiths and asked them to refresh their memory and develop another set of matrices to produce Syriac types. The local smiths did their job admirably.

In April 1925 the litigations ended. Mar Timotheus Metropolitan regained possession of Marth Mariyam Cathedral from the hands of the Court receivers. There was fresh enthusiasm among the members of the Church of the East to found a Syriac printing press. The members started collecting a fund for the linguistic progress of the Church. In 1926 Mar Timotheus started the Mar Narsai Press in the Marth Mariyam Cathedral premises. At present that building houses the Chaldean Syrian Lower Primary School (standards 1–4). This was the first Syriac press. A new plot of land was purchased on 4 May 1931 beside the High Road just one furlong away from the Cathedral. Thus the Mar Narsai Press was transferred to that commercial area. Mar Narsai Press still stands there in the building owned by the church. Mar Narsai Press is not for Syriac language printing only. It runs on regular commercial printing in English and Malayalam in addition to the church work.

The Assyrian Press in Mosul started by Deacon Joseph de Kelaita began to print the Ţâksa, Marganita and many other
books. In India the church felt the need to print such books locally India also. But it was not easy to print Syriac books at the Mar Narsai Press in India. Although types were now available there were not enough competent people to set them. Deacon Gevarghese S. Benjamin of Ashitha, the most brilliant student of the Revd Joseph de Kelaita, came to India in 1929 to assist Mar Timotheus in printing work as well as in teaching Syriac to students. Deacon Benjamin was young (about twenty-six years old) and was willing to put in extra hours for printing Syriac calendars and books.

In 1933 Deacon Benjamin returned to Mosul. Therefore Mar Narsai Press could not publish many books. Mar Timotheus Metropolitan had no time to supervise the printing of the Syriac books. Therefore Mar Narsai Press did not grow as fast as Mar Timotheus had wished. Isaac Simon, ten years older than Mar Timotheus, was the only Assyrian in Trichur. Although a layman he taught deacons and helped Mar Timotheus in printing. Being personal secretary to Mar Timotheus he found some time to supervise Syriac printing at the press.

In addition to Deacon Benjamin (1929–1933) Mar Timotheus could not get other Assyrians to assist him in his publication projects apart from Isaac Simon. This was a major setback for Mar Timotheus who had a greater vision for this ancient church. Alphonse Mingana, the well-known Chaldean priest from Mosul (1878-1937), had corresponded with Mar Timotheus around 1912 to go over to Trichur to teach our students. Owing to financial reasons Mar Timotheus was content with the help of his secretary Isaac Simon. Had Mingana been brought to Trichur, that would have been a great help to Trichur but a terrible loss to the scholarly world in England where he sojourned and laboured much.
Printing the *Hudra* was a dream unfulfilled for Mar Timotheus. He died on 30 April 1945. For the next seven years, Deacon A.T. Joseph of Trichur managed the Mar Narsai press and printed Syriac calendars etc. Deacon A.T. Joseph could not do much, as there was no bishop or any native Assyrian in Trichur.

In June 1952 Mar Thoma Darmo came to India as the successor to Mar Abimalek Timotheus. He too had been a student at Revd Joseph de Kelaita’s school, a contemporary of Deacon Benjamin in the 1920s. Mar Thoma Darmo (known as Deacon Mansour in the Assyrian school in Mosul) used to work in the Revd Joseph Kelaita’s printing press too. Therefore he could strengthen the Mar Narsai Press by increasing its output in the Syriac language considerably.

Deacon Kaku Lazar was brought by Mar Thoma Darmo to Trichur from Baghdad in 1955. He was to teach the seminary students in Trichur as well as proof-read Syriac printing at Mar Narsai Press. During the year 1955-56 when Kaku Lazar stayed in the Metropolitan’s Palace, he assisted in Syriac printing. But in 1956 the new seminary was opened ten kilometres from Trichur, and Deacon Kaku Lazar shifted his residence to that seminary.

The publication of the *Hudra* was the dream of the late Mar Abimalek Timotheus. But it was his successor Mar Thoma Darmo who started the work in right earnest, buying a Russian printing machine named Monot from an exhibition in South India. The *Hudra* was printed on that machine in the branch of our printing press started in the building adjacent to the metropolitan’s palace. Mar Thoma Darmo supervised the printing personally.

Father Francis Pullukaran, Deacon A.T. Joseph, Deacon E.L. Verghese and Deacon P.K. Raphael assisted the Metropolitan in the very difficult task of proof-reading. The compositors at Mar Narsai Press never learned the Syriac language. They looked at the alphabet and set the types. It was difficult to put proper vowels on even simple words, because the compositors did not have a grasp of the meaning of the Syriac words. It took about four years to bring out the first volume in 1960, and the second and third volumes appeared in 1961 and 1962. When the Church of the East published this prayer book called the *Hudra*, it was hailed as a great

---

*Studies and Woodbrooke Scientific Publications. For further details on this great scholar, see Samir Khalil Samir, S.J., *Alphonse Mingana 1878–1937 and his contribution to early Christian-Muslim studies*, Selly Oak, 1990.*

5 Deacon Kaku Lazar was one of the best Syriac scholars in recent years. After his return from India in 1958 he became a priest and served Mar Zaya Cathedral in Baghdad until September 1968. Later he served as a priest in England, Canada and the U. S. A. He became an archdeacon and passed away a few years ago. The writer of his article was his student in Trichur in 1955–56.

6 During his stay in India Deacon Kaku Lazar published a Syriac book *Memra Habosha* (no. 14 in the list at the end of this article).
achievement of Mar Thoma Darmo Metropolitan. Although the Archbishop of Canterbury’s press had printed most of the books including the liturgy of qurbana, baptism, etc., the publication of this work was to be accomplished only in 1960–62 and that too in India.

Around the same time some difference of opinion developed between Mar Thoma Darmo and Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun living in California. Mar Narsai Press afforded an opportunity for Mar Thoma Darmo to print and publish leaflets against the hereditary succession in the episcopal families. Patriarch Mar Shimun insisted that the Hudra should have his foreword only and Mar Thoma Darmo should not write any foreword in this liturgical book which was for the use of the churches universally. On the other hand Mar Thoma felt that Mar Shimun’s foreword was not essential and his own publisher’s note was inevitable as he was the only prelate who had spent hours and hours daily for four years on the work. This controversy was settled during the historic visit of the patriarch (the only time in history when a patriarch of the Church of the East visited India) to Trichur in December 1961 and January 1962.

Mar Thoma Darmo (1904–69) hailed from the village of Iyel near Mar Bishu near Urmia. He did not belong to any hereditary family of bishops. He took up the cause of opposing the hereditary succession prevalent in the patriarchate and in some episcopal families of the Church of the East for five centuries. During the first half of Mar Thoma Darmo’s administration in Trichur he translated some books into modern Syriac (Swadaya). After the controversy with the patriarch most of the works in this language had the motives of attacking Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun. Mar Narsai Press printed thousands of pamphlets and circulated them in Iraq, Syria, the U.S.A. and such other countries where the Assyrians were scattered. Pamphlets written by the priests in Khabour, Syria and other places were printed at Mar Narsai Press. The attention of the Assyrian world was focussed on Mar Narsai Press.

Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun wrote letters to the clergy asking them to tear off the pages from the three volumes of the Hudra where the name of Mar Thoma Darmo was printed. He asked his followers to boycott Qala min Madnha (Voice of the East), the magazine published from the Mar Narsai Press which had published articles and news in modern Syriac meant to discredit hereditary succession. The usefulness of the Mar Narsai Press, as the only Syriac press for the whole Assyrian church, was curtailed. Alternate arrangements were made by Patriarch Mar Shimun to print calendars and magazines.

In 1964 Mar Shimun adopted the Gregorian calendar. Mar Narsai Press printed only the Julian calendar and not the Gregorian. Therefore there is a decrease in the volume of service of Mar Narsai
Press to the Church of the East at present. The New Calendarist group started a printing press in Baghdad. A press in Chicago too is printing some Syriac religious books. Still Mar Narsai Press continues to be of service to the Old Calendarist group especially by printing the Julian calendar which is being used in Australia, Iraq, Syria, the U.S.A., Canada, and of course, India.

Since 1968 when the present Metropolitan took charge it has become difficult to print new Syriac books. There was no Assyrian-speaking person in India. Even the compositors who set types for the Hudra and other Syriac books began to quit work or retire from service owing to old age. Thus there was a decline in output at the Mar Narsai Press. An edition of the letters of Patriarch Timothy I was in the press when Mar Thoma Darmo left India for good in September 1968. The printed sheets remained in the Mar Narsai press for a few years. Finally the book was published in its incomplete form with a foreword by this writer. The lectionary and Turgama were reprinted with the help of Fr K.P. Yohannan who learned Syriac typesetting. But ecclesiastical duties prevented him from sparing more time for typesetting work. Two Hindu girls were trained to do this job. Teach yourself Aramaic, authored by this writer, was printed in 1981. Ezekiel Gabriel Babana, a retired railway employee in Baghdad, wrote a book in Swadaya on the ‘True history of the Assyrians’. He came and stayed in Trichur to proof-read and supervise the publication of his work, as our compositors at the Mar Narsai Press could not read his handwriting.

The supporters of Mar Shimun in India separated from the majority and began to function as a separate group in January 1964. They started Mar Oudeesho Press in Trichur as a rival to Mar Narsai Press. They approached Mar Narsai Press to give them a font of Syriac types for printing Syriac calendars and some books. Since Mar Narsai Press did not supply Syriac types they could not do any Syriac printing at Mar Oudeesho Press. As for their Syriac calendars according to the Gregorian reckoning, they are content with the Assyrian calendars published from Chicago under the direction of Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV.

Requests have repeatedly come from Assyrians in Iraq, Sweden, Australia, the U.S.A., Canada and England to print their books. The Mar Narsai Press has had to turn down such requests as it felt itself incompetent to do such work satisfactorily without Assyrians supervising it. In 1983 Mar Narsai Press accepted a request to reprint Marganita d-’al šrara Kristiyanuta authored by Mar ‘Abdišo’ of Soba. This book had been previously printed in Mosul by Deacon Joseph Kelaita in 1924. In 1955 Mar Narsai Press printed it in two columns, i.e., of old and spoken Syriac side by side. The order for reprinting in 1983 from Eshai Chemmani of Baghdad living in Ealing, London, could not be completed as several types were missing. A thief had stolen some Syriac types to sell for a little
money for the metal. As the requests for the *Hudra*, *Turgama* and *Sogiyata*, and *Teach yourself Aramaic* were repeated, these books were printed by offset printers in Trichur and published by Mar Narsai Press.

The purchase of an offset machine in 1994 to reproduce Syriac books or manuscripts without the help of compositors was a step in the right direction. Although this modernization cost nearly one million rupees, the Mar Narsai Press was able to print their Syriac calendars for 1995 on their own offset machine. Syriac books such as the *Taksa* for *qurbana*, baptism, marriage, etc., are proposed to be reprinted on this offset machine. The Mar Narsai Press does not own any computers. But it is hoped that soon computers with Syriac fonts will be available so that it can cope with the demands of the time from many countries for the printing of Syriac books.

Some Syriac books published by the Mar Narsai Press:

3. *Kiabona d-tešmeša d-qurbana d-anide ... 'am burak bate*, 92 + 23 pp., published by Isaac Simon, 1937. (There is no foreword in this book. There is a note in the second part, the *Burak bate*, that this service was arranged by Mar Timotheus Metropolitan of Malabar and India.)
4. *Kiaba da-qdat taa-d-batar*, 483 pp., 1940. (The foreword, by Mar Timotheus Metropolitan, is dated 1941.)
5. *Kiaba d-turgame*, with *Rušma d-qeryane*, 88 pp., n.d. (This is a reprint of two books printed by Rev. Joseph de Kelaita in Mosul in 1924 and 1925.)

* There is no list of all the Syriac books published by the Mar Narsai Press so far. The following list is complete only for the years 1954–63.
29. Taš'ita w-matle d-Ahīqar ḥakima 'am memre d-Plutarkos, 230 pp., 1961. (This is said to be a reprint of an edition of 1941.)
34. Taš'ita d-Mar Qardag saha, 3 + 87 pp., 1963.
37. Taška d-si'yamida d-kulhon darge 'edtanyae men qaroya 'dama l-patriyarka, 192 pp., 1966. (This book had only 50 copies printed. Mar Thoma Darmo who published it insisted that an ordination takṣa should not go for public distribution.)
39. Teach yourself Aramaic, by Dr Mar Aprem (foreword by J.F. Coakley), 152 pp., 1981.
41. Kitabona d-tešmēšta d-qurbana d-'anide ... 'am burak bate, 92 + 23 pp., 1984 (reprint of no. 3).
42. Kitaba d-turgame, with Rušma d-qeryane and Sogyata, 8 + 176 + 88 pp., 1992. (This is a reprint of two books printed by Rev. Joseph de Kelaita in Mosul in 1924 and 1925.)

Postscript
This article was completed before the union of the author’s Old Calendarist group in India with the New Calendarists under Mar Dinkha in November 1995 (see below, p. 194).