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A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION INTO ASSYRIAN IDENTITY

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By Anand Paul Mangalam

Voice of the East

We are Assyrians, I used to hear this statement from my grandpa and father a million times when I was a teenager. They never tried to furnish a simple explanation for the word 'Assyrians' and as a child I never showed any interest in understanding the depth of this term. As a grown up individual, who is born and brought up in an ethnic community having an explicit identity, I started the quest to know my genesis. Are we considering ourselves as members of the Assyrian nation? Identifying with the ideals and ways of life of the Assyrian ruling class? Are we rather classifying ourselves in terms of our diverse ethnic origins? Most of us especially youngsters don't know the very meaning of word Assyrian. As a matter of fact, we never bother to understand our culture, history and origin. In order to know all these we may probably need to tune our eyes and ears back to Mesopotamian civilization, which is known as 'cradle of civilization' established before Christ between two giant rivers Tigris and Euphrates (now in Iraq). When you peer through literature you can see enormous information on Assyrians.

The Assyrians are a group of Christians, also known as Nestorians, with a long history in the Middle East. From the historical and archeological evidence, it is thought that their ancestors were part of the Mesopotamian civilization [Akbar 1986]. Actually, Assyrians are an individual group of indigenous people who lived (still living) in northern Iraq and are members of Assyrian church of the east who read and write Aramaic, a Semitic language which is used in their religious observances. They are descends of Assyrian nation that conquered ancient Syria, Israel and Mesopotamia in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. Before digging deep into details of Assyria we need to know few things about Mesopotamian civilization in which Assyrians, Babylonians, Akkadians and Sumerians were all a part of. Assyria and Babylonia were the most famous kingdoms originated on the banks of Tigris and Euphrates which became part of Mesopotamian civilization. Assyrians were famous for their devastating Power of armed force, which often get unleashed toward the Jews of Israel. Probably Assyrian Army was the only force who attacked Israel more than three times and consequently gained hatred from Jews which often echoed in the Holy Bible as "Behold of Assyrians".

Assyrians Kingdom was found in 1700 BC by Bel-Kap-Kappu. In 1500 BC King of Hanilgalbat (another kingdom during that period) sacked Assyrian king and made Assyria a vassal. Later, Assyrians became independent evolved into a conquering power, and shook the yoke off of its Babylonian masters. Tiglath-Pileser I, (1120 BC) the greatest of all Assyrian Kings was considered to be the founder of first Assyrian empire. He made Assyrians, a power subjugating the states of Northern Syria and finally conquered them completely. Babylonia became part of Assyria in 731 BC, when Tiglath-Pileser III invaded the country and ascended to the kingship of Babylon.

Sister states of Babylonia and Assyria had contrasting characteristics. Babylonia was a land of merchants, agriculturists and priest whereas Assyria was an organized army camp. When Assyrian kingdoms were found by powerful and able generals, Babylonian dynasties came to power through priests by a revolution that raised them to throne. The Babylonian king remained a priest to the last, under the control of a powerful hierarchy; the Assyrian king was the autocratic general of an army, at whose side stood in early days feudal nobility, aided from the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III onwards by an elaborate bureaucracy.

Aramaic was an exotic language brought into Assyrian heartland by hundreds of thousands of foreign 'Aramaic speaking' people who came and settled down in Assyrian kingdom. Before introduction of Aramaic into the Assyrian mainland, what

was the language used by Assyrians for communication? I couldn't find any literature on the original language used by Assyrians despite my best effort. However, script they used for writing was recorded in couple of literature as a particular type of script called 'cuneiform'. Hardly very few people know this fact today. The mass immigration of foreigners apparently converted the previously large monolingual society of Assyria into a multilingual one. Within a relatively short period of time, Aramaic became established as a common language throughout the Empire. Concomitantly, Assyrians started using Aramaic script along with cuneiform script. Later archeologists excavated a couple of clay tablet (clay slabs) having cuneiform script engraved on it from the city of Nineveh. Nineveh was the capital city of Assyria (now Mosul in Iraq which is recently in news) during their peak of glory (700-500BC).

Though Assyrians tried to preserve their culture and religion, they were receptive to Christianity, whose central ideas were in line with the central tenets of Assyrian religion and ideology, because of the Aramaic affinity of Jesus and his disciples. From the third century AD onwards Assyrians (we) embraced Christianity. Intense Christian faith among us made Christianity an indelible part of our identity which later made us subjected to endless persecutions and massacres, first from the hands of the Romans, then from Sasanian, Persians, and finally from Arabs, Kurds and Turks. These persecutions and massacres have reduced the total number of Assyrians from an estimated 20 million or more to well under 2 million today.

During the World War-1 we had an uneasy relationship with Turks and requested refuge from British (that time Turkey was an ally of Germany). That might have provoked Germany and they start forcing Turkey to exterminate Assyrians. On January 1914, and as early as December 1914, the Assyrians were been banished from their homes. By the middle of 1915 the deportations and killings are in full swing. About 750,000 Assyrians, or about three fourths of the entire Assyrian population, were killed during "The Year of the Sword" (1915) bitterly recalled by us today. These atrocities made young blood in the community to extend their overwhelming support to British and later ended up settling down in Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. Unlike the Kurds, the Assyrians never expected a nation or state of their own after World War I, but they wanted some temporal authority in the north of Iraq for the Assyrian patriarch, the Mar Shimun, and was blatantly refused by British and Iraqis alike. Hence, the Assyrians refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Baghdad government under the British mandate.

One thing is obvious from this, ever since the establishment of rich tradition of Assyrian Christians, young blood (including me and the whole youth living in Trichur) always showed radical thinking and strong ideologies independent of social clutches.

Guys, be proud of being an Assyrian. We have rich tradition and culture to talk about and we are the oldest Christians. We ruled the world's oldest civilization once upon a time and will rule the whole world in days to come.

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