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## Syrian Christians in Kerala and their Enterprising Ventures in the Twentieth Century

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**Abstract:** Syrian Christians of Kerala played a significant role in transforming society through their enterprising ventures. These enterprises helped in bringing people of Kerala together to remove disparities that were existed in the society. This paper tries to explore the various enterprising ventures of Syrian Christians and the subsequent role played by it in bringing change.

**Keywords:** Syrian Christians, Print, Banking, Plantations, Malayalam Manorama, Chitties and Kuris.

**Introduction:** Kerala as a state came into existence on 1 November 1956 by joining Travancore and Cochin princely states along with the erstwhile Malabar region under the Madras presidency and their relationship with social, economic, political aspects of the society that surrounds them. Throughout the centuries, the state maintained a secular identity in incorporating every religious community into the society. This nature of integration recognised Syrian Christians of Malabar, as fully integrated members of Kerala's distinctive moral and political order.<sup>1</sup>

The members of this community call themselves as St. Thomas Christians, as they trace back their origin to the preaching of the gospel by St. Thomas in Kerala in the first century AD.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch and English used the term Syrian Christians. Moines a Dutch governor coined the term Syrian Christians for administrative usages based on the liturgical language Syriac.<sup>3</sup> *Tharissappalli inscriptions*, issued by Ayyandikal Thiruvadikal,<sup>4</sup> bestowed on the immigrant mercantile community with the responsibility of collecting taxes and customs duties. These privileges, they gained, made them establish themselves as an enterprising community.

Economically speaking the Syrian Christians were involved in different types of professions in pre-modern Kerala, viz., trade and financing, spice cultivation and as fighting militia for local rulers<sup>5</sup> helped them to achieve royal status and power in the

<sup>1</sup> Bayly Susan, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in south Indian society 1700-1900* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003) p.241 p.241

<sup>2</sup> Malekandathil Pius, *St. Thomas Christians: A Historical Analysis of their Origins and Development up to 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.* p.1-2

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kurien .M., *Nazarani Samskaram Deshiyatha* (Kottayam, Malankara Orthodox Publications, 2013) p.53. It is believed that the term Syrian Christians were also used to denote people who migrated from the west Asia in the Third and Eight Century A.D.

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<sup>4</sup> Ayyandikal Thiruvadikal was a feudatory of Chera ruler Sthanu Ravi Verma

<sup>5</sup> Roy Kumkum (eds.), *Looking Within, Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through the Time, Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai* ( New Delhi, Primus Books, 2015)

society before the advent of colonialism. They were closely integrated with traditional Brahmin-centred ordered caste, without losing their identity as Christians.<sup>6</sup>

Soon after the English came, Syrian Christians witnessed a collapse in their integration, especially loosening of their privileges.<sup>7</sup> It all began when the state of Travancore decided to resist the Mysorean invasion under the Tipu Sultan through an alliance with the East India Company. The English travellers observed in their accounts that the Syrian Christians lacks modernization and regeneration in their attitude.

Between 1810 and 1819, the colonial state under Col. Munro decided to transform the Syrian Christians through certain reforming activities<sup>8</sup>. The policy of purification and reformation, Col. Munro appointed LMS (London Missionary Society) missionaries in the judicial and administrative posts. Resident Col. Munro initiated mass proselytization from the depressed sections disrupted the honour system. The disruption of the honour system aroused severe communal tensions between Syrian Christians and high caste Hindus during the 1880s and 1890s. This colonial policy results in the overall disruption of the honour system. The disruption in their honour system made them reinvent themselves as the harbingers of modernisation in the field of agriculture, invested heavily in education and banking. Subsequently, allowing the community to achieve a character of vibrancy and a progressive demeanour- a community perpetually on move<sup>9</sup>. In course of time, the Syrian Christians began to emerge as one of the progressive communities of Kerala.

This essay tries to explore the enterprising achievements of Syrian Christians and its impact in the social-political milieu of colonial Kerala.

### **Syrian Christians and Print**

In the fifteenth century, the Portuguese introduced the printing establishments in Kerala. *Herman Gundert*, a member of Basel mission contributed to the growth of Malayalam language and Print in Kerala. London Missionary Society and Church Mission Society started to print books in vernaculars. Benjamin Bailey produced and sold a Malayalam monthly that contained 'news' and useful knowledge about natural science in 1863. Similar printing presses were noticed in several parts of Kerala like *Paschimatharaka*, *Keralamithram* in Cochin and *Nasrani Deepika* (1887) and *Malayala Manorama* (1890) belonged to **Kandathil** family a prominent Syrian Christian family in Travancore. *Nasrani Deepika* and **Malayala Manorama** marked the beginning of the modern Journalism. The discriminatory policies of the state were criticised initially by the *Nasrani Deepika* (Syrian Catholic daily) against the appointment of expatriates to the state services. The religious communities and' leaders consolidated under *Needhirikkal Mani Kathanar* decided to raise their concern about the domination of Tamil Brahmins in the government services. In 1891, they gave memorandum addressing the Maharaja to curtail the appointments of expatriates in the government services. The Memorandum submitted was known as '*Malayali Memorial*'. The joint action of these communities aroused citizens politically

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<sup>6</sup>Varghese V.J. *To Survive or To Flourish? Minority Rights and Syrian Christian Community Assertions in Twentieth Century Travancore/Kerala*, History and Sociology of South Asia 5,2 (2011) p.107

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.107

<sup>8</sup> Bayly Susan Opcit p.285

<sup>9</sup> Varghese V.J. Opcit p.108

asserting their rights. *Malayala Manorama* wrote an article in favour of *Malayali Memorial* called 'Travancore for Travancorians', criticised disparity and disability from the government in appointing the natives as higher officials in the state of Travancore. *Malayala Manorama* then published an article to support the civic right movements in 1918, asking the government to make appointments in favour of its citizens. *Malayala Manorama* and *Deepika* together attacked C.P.Ramasami Aiyar, then Dewan of Travancore against his agenda of creating a Hindu state and a unified Hindu community hegemonised by the upper castes. The Travancore government closed *Malayala Manorama*, by then a daily based newspaper was shut down in 1938 because the policy of the paper to incite people for disobedience of law. The Princely State of Travancore was communal, entire non-Christian communities relied on Syrian Christians for asserting their rights. The present study throws light on this aspect too.

### **Syrian Christians and Banking**

Banking is an institution which accepts deposits from the public and creates credit. Banks play a severe role in the development. Travancore and Cochin topped the list. Most of the banks located in the villages which gives credits to peasants and traders. The traditional banking system of Kerala is *Chitties* and *Kuris*. The modern banking began in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in India as a product of constant interactions with the international trade and establishment of industrial sectors.

The absence of the *chaturvarna* system, Buddhists and Jains created a vacuum in the society gave the opportunity to the Syrian Christians. Syrian Christians of Travancore was able to obtain the status of *Vaishyas*. This resulted in the creation of *Angadis*<sup>10</sup>. Most of the *angadis* are located around the churches of Syrian Christians and linked with the trading maritime centres of exchange in the fifteenth century A.D. The traditional banking system of Travancore and Cochin, the *Chitties and Kuris*<sup>11</sup> form twenty-three joint stock banks established in the year 1900 under the factory acts of 1881. These indigenous banks concentrated mostly in Thiruvalla, Ambalapuzha, Thalavady and Chenganoor. The emergence of joint stock companies provided opportunities for investments. Syrians in good stead in their application for banking loans, giving them an advantage over members of other communities because Christians considered charging high-interest rates is unethical.

K.C. Mammen Mappillai founder of Travancore National Bank transformed the bank into a modern commercial bank in 1912, had branches across British India and Ceylon. In 1937, Travancore National Bank and the equally successful Quilon Bank of C. P Mathen amalgamated into Travancore National and Quilon Bank. The sharp price-rise in cash crops and the resulting increase in farmers' income provided the spur to banks expansion during the time of great depression. Indubitably, the emergence of the modern banking system prospered the indigenous plantations. Nairs looked at the dynamic and flexible economic activities of Syrians Christians with a certain degree of feudal contempt.

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<sup>10</sup>Angadis a malayalam term for market centres

<sup>11</sup>Chits and Kuris are traditional method of banking that are seen in Cochin and Travancore

By the end of 1931 Syrian Christian domination in the Travancore, politics was shaken when Sir C.P. Ramaswami Aiyar (C.P), a towering personality appointed as the adviser to the Maharaja of Travancore. Sir CP took a bold step by reforming the state legislature by not granting any powers to its members. During this time Syrian Christians, Muslims and Ezhavas formed an organisation called Joint Political Congress demanded proportional representation by boycotting the legislature, the abstention movement. All these political movements in Travancore were a threat to the then political administration. The political situation prevailed in Travancore made Sir C.P. liquidate the Syrian Christian enterprises. The Travancore National and Quilon Bank became the victim of the harsh communal policies of Sir C.P so as to safeguard the interest of the then Nair community. Travancore National Quilon Bank liquidated with a deliberate strategy to disrupt the Syrian Christian banking system. The purpose of the study is to reveal how Syrian Christians asserted their might in the development of this sector and contributed to the economic status of the area.

### **Syrian Christians and Plantations**

Plantation agriculture was generally considered as the tributaries to link the underdeveloped countries with the world economy. Plantation agriculture was an instrument for modernising the underdeveloped areas of southwest India. The history of plantations in Kerala started with the conversion of cardamom to plantation agriculture along with coffee and then shifted to tea and rubber. In the early 1860s, the Europeans acquired the hilly tracts of Travancore initiated and dominated the tea and coffee cultivations in these regions.<sup>12</sup> In the twentieth century, the Syrian Christians of Travancore ventured into the plantation sector. Initially, the Syrian Christians were employed in plantations owned by Europeans in Kerala at the mid-level especially in clerical and supervisory levels. This made them become well acquainted with the art of plantation and cropping. Syrian Christians of the Central Travancore region dominated in this category. The ill effects of great depression affected the tea plantations of this region, forced the Syrian Christians to substitute tea with rubber. P.J.John started *Kaliyar Rubber Estate* in 1905 followed by Rev. C.P. Philipose and K.C. Mammen Mappillai with *Malankara Rubber and Produce Company*, and then the *Marthoma Rubber Company*. *Malayala Manorama* in 1905 advocated the need of indigenous plantations and its necessity, aroused a sense of nationalism and patriotic feeling against the colonial rule. This transformed Travancore as one of the dominant regions of plantations in the twentieth century.

### **Conclusion**

The influence of print was tremendous in influencing and attracting the community to venture into the field of Banking and Plantations. Syrian Christian newspapers encouraged them to put their ideas into practice. The print establishments of Syrian Christians were successful in coalescing the community which aroused them with the sense of nationalism. Syrian Christian banking institutions of Travancore provided funds to their family members to venture into the enterprising sectors of Travancore. Syrian Christians were able to consolidate and emerge as one of the dominant communities of Kerala in the twentieth century.

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<sup>12</sup>Monech Marcus .*Politics of Deforestation: Case Study of Cardamom Hills of Kerala*, Vol 26, No 4, (January 4, 1991), p. 49

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