

Religious Ideologies, Confrontations and the Colonial Space: Syrian Catholics in Early Modern Kerala

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Abstract

Traditional Kerala society underwent drastic changes with the arrival of British colonial administrators and the Protestant missionaries. During the early phase of colonial administration, society was suspicious and reluctant to adapt to the ongoing changes. The traditional society had to confront with modern ideas and institutions, Protestant Christian doctrines and beliefs as well as western Christian morality. Each community had different challenges to face with. It is in this context, the study of Syrian Catholic community is taken up. Syrian Catholics are the traditional Christians of Kerala, who had acknowledged the papal jurisdiction and are also known as Romo-Syrians, Pazhayacoor or they themselves call Catholics. Here the attempt is to trace how the Protestant ideology confronted with the Catholic ideology in a colonial space, which was a continuum of the religious conflict in Europe. This paper also looks into the ideology of the Raj which club the colonial rule with religious activities. The Latin prelates in Kerala were also suspicious of the possible conversion to the other Syrian factions. In this background, the study of Syrian Catholics, under the Latin jurisdiction, till the fag end of 19th century is significant. Moreover the mechanisms employed by the ecclesiastical authorities to evade all sorts of other indoctrinations, especially through modern institutions like schools are quite interesting.

Keywords: Catholic, Protestant, doctrines, indoctrination, Colonial modernity, Cultural construction.

Missionary activities had a fresh start in the beginning of the 19th century. The Charter Act of 1813 granted permission to missionaries to work in India and began their proselytizing activities.¹ Although Christianisation was not in the colonial agenda, a nexus between government officials and missionaries came to be established during this period. Within the government a strong lobby favoured encouragement to missionary pursuits, not only as a religious enterprise but also as a

possible prop for the permanence of the empire, as they believed that evangelization would help ensure loyalty. The conduct of these officials gave the impression that the missionaries were acting in collaboration with the government (Panikkar, 2001:102).

The British brought with them new technology, institutions, knowledge, beliefs and values. They slowly laid the foundation of a modern state by surveying land, settling revenue, creating modern bureaucracy, army and police, instituting law courts, codifying the law; developing communications - railways, post and telegraph, roads and canals; and establishing schools and colleges (Srinivas, 2010:49). In fact the colonial state apparatus functioned as instruments of ideological dissemination and the institutions functioned as ideological instruments aiding political control. The ideological dissemination was inherent in every policy pursued by the British in India (Panikkar, 2001:71). It was a means to subjugate the Indian people to the colonial system. The cultural agency for the colonial consolidation was the new education system in schools, colleges and universities (Ganesh, 2004:155). In India, the rise of the Western knowledge, generally believed to be the crux of the modern civilization in the West, enabled Indians to access new knowledge and ideas of the West under the colonially shaped educational system. The colonial administrators and missionaries engaged in evangelisation and conversion, choose the same institution, the school as the instrument of spreading their culture and religion. Schools and colleges gradually acquired the status of agencies for modern education, learning English became a necessary means for upward social mobility and entry into echelons of power (Ganesh, 2004:155).

Under the colonial rule, Christian missionaries emerged as a notable agency to educate the people. The prominence of the mission were facilitated by three factors: first, Christian missions, a product of evangelistic movement of the West, functioned under the political suzerainty of colonialism; second, essentially as a welfare subject and thirdly, Christian missionaries always took Western education as an expedient tool for their missionary object (Bara,2010:25). In Kerala, London Missionary Society (1806), Church Missionary Society (1816), and Basel Evangelical Mission (1834) started its activities in the first half of the nineteenth century. A large number of schools were started in the first phase of British rule, i.e., up to 1850, which is also known as ‘the age of mission schools’. The schools started by them gave both secular and religious education. Admission to the schools was irrespective of

caste and creed, though it was not acceptable to many. The curriculum included, English literature, hygiene, health, family budget, child care, history, moral science and Bible. Secular education was seen as the best means to educate the other communities in Christian ways (Ganesh, 2004:168). Period after 1850, i.e., in the second half of the nineteenth century, state began to take initiative to start schools, especially English schools. Only later, Government paid attention to start Vernacular schools. Turning point occurred with the beginning of grant-in-aid to private schools. Grant-in-aid system provided the communities, opportunities to start educational institutions according to their need and they vied with each other to start schools.

With the coming of the British, the traditional Christians of Kerala, who came under the Roman Catholic Church through the Portuguese interlude, had to face challenges from the colonizers. British began to take so much interest in the case of separated Syrians or the Jacobite Syrians or *Pazhayakooru*, saying, “Latin Catholics and the Romo-Syrians had European missionaries to keep them up to the mark, but the separated Syrians had been under a series of hereditary rulers who let their church sink into apathy and ignorance” (Aiya, 1999:214). It is in this pretext, Colonel Munroe, asked clergyman of the Church of England to instruct the separated Syrians and in 1816 the Church Mission Society sent out Messrs. Bailey, Baker, Fenn and Norton to Travancore. According to Hough, the design was “to raise the prostrate Church from its degraded condition and weed it of the errors and superstitions which the Church of Rome has introduced into it” (Hough, 1831: 326). But soon differences arose over the Syrian believes and Protestant doctrines and their alliance broke up. The discord reached to such a height that the Travancore king had to interfere in it (Aiya, 1999:215). The explicit understanding of this plan drew away the Syrian Catholics from the Protestant missionaries and their accomplishments in Kerala, who were under the *Propaganda Fide*² at that time. But the main objective of the mission arrived at Travancore at the initiative of Col. Munroe was “to improve the spiritual condition of the Syrian Christian population” (Aiya, 1999:447) With the British support the Syrian Jacobite Christians were the earliest to facilitate modern education, educational institutions and job opportunities.

Improving the spiritual condition of a sect, separated from the Roman Church meant a stand against the Catholic Church and collaboration with a dissenting faction. P. Cherian has noted: “Though Munroe showed special favour to *Puthenkur* Syrians (i.e., the non-Roman

Syrian Christians), he seem to have done nothing of this kind for the Roman Syrians” (Cherian, 1935:62). This was deemed necessary to acquire the support of native Christians and to furnish a group always loyal to the British. Munroe looked forward for securing for the Raj, the support of a respectable body of Christian subjects, connected with the mass of the people, by a community of language, occupations and pursuits and united to the British government by the stronger ties of religion and mutual safety.³ Intervention of the native Christian life for the sake of spiritual formation was actually the best way to communicate the Protestant Christian faith. Thus the Catholic-Protestant encounter in Europe had a follow up in colonies and this is illustrative of the Kerala church.

The ideology of the Raj to get the native support as well the dissemination of the protestant doctrines estranged the Syrian Catholics from the modern educational institutions started by the British and had least participation in the colonial administrative apparatus. This was in fact to maintain the Catholic belief and practices in Kerala, which was established by the *Padroado regime*⁴ in the 16th century and later on continued by the *Propaganda Fide* till the end of the 19th century.

The religious life of the Syrian Christians underwent tremendous change by the sixteenth century. The Synod of Diamper was the first organized attempt to bring Syrian Christians to Latin way of life and to correct the ‘error’ of the Syrians (Zacharia, 1976:19). The Jesuits, who accompanied the Portuguese to India, were appointed as bishops to rule the Syrians under the *Padroado* jurisdiction. For the next fifty years, the Jesuits endeavoured to implement the decrees of the Synod among the Syrians. They started seminaries in different parts of Kerala. Library and press⁵ attached with the Ambazhakad seminary had exerted tremendous influence over the spiritual life of the native Christians. Prayer books printed in the seminary were circulated among the priestly class. These books were used in their services, since no other works were available at that time⁶. A clear change in the spiritual life and liturgy of the Syrian Christians occurred during this period. The ancient way of prayer life has slowly changed to many pious practices. With the coming of Carmelite missionaries under the *Propaganda Fide*, rosary, novenas, devotion to saints and scapular, and other pious devotions of Europe were imported to Kerala. In the course of centuries, these practices were firmly established among the Syrian Christians (Urumpackal, 1986:286). The Catholic ideology and practices evolved within the Syrian Christians were rather more influenced by the *Pro-*

paganda than the *Padroado*. This ideology was working throughout their lives, or to them nineteenth century amalgamated tradition, Catholicism and modernity. The Portuguese and Dutch missionaries who preceded the English rather concentrated on the religious hegemony over the Syrian Catholics and their spiritual formation than the secular education.

“Even after the appearance of the Protestant English Missionaries and their introduction of English education, the Catholics remained indifferent to the educational needs of their flock”, says Nagam Aiya (445). Commenting on the attitude and approach of the Latin Carmelite Missionaries, Mar Mathew Makkil wrote:

Though the Carmelites here ruled the Syrian Christians for more than 200 years with great glory, they have established no educational institutions among this people for their secular development and education ...At the time of the arrival of Bishop Charles Lavigne (1887), the number of Syrians who had learned or had been learning English in this vicariate might not be more than hundred.⁷

Though Catholics do not seem to have much interest in educating the Catholics in pre-British period, reason for the indifference of Carmelite missionaries towards the educational needs of the community, in the nineteenth century seems to have been, “perhaps most of the clergy being men of other nationalities than the English, that they found it extremely difficult to take part in English education” (Aiya, 1999:445). But the fear of Protestant indoctrination and ideological difference between the two mainstream Christian doctrines was the major reason that alienated the Syrian Catholics from the British machinery, in the early phase of colonial modernity. The Carmelite missionaries, in order to protect their interests in Kerala viewed the Protestants with suspicion. The context of the mutual suspicion goes back to reformation in England. The division of the Roman Catholic Church and the spread of Protestantism led to the rivalry between the two in Europe. The result was the counter reformatory efforts taken by the Catholic Church in the Council of Trent. The reforms that were enacted through the Council of Trent had its reverberation in Kerala through the *Padroado* regime and missionaries (John, 2001: 270). The Carmelites had not done anything in the educational sector (Payngot, 1980:41) and Catholic educational institutions were absent till the fag end of the nineteenth century. Even then, they forbade the Syrian Catholics in entering any school run by non-Catholics and there by the modern English education were denied to them for a long time.

Thus in the latter half of the 19th century the Syrian Christians were in between confronting Christian ideologies and colonial modernity. One and the same time, they wanted to preserve the Catholic faith and to cope up with the socio-cultural changes in Travancore and Cochin. The efforts were taken up by an indigenous Catholic priest, Fr. Chavara Kuriakose Elias, who later became the first Vicar General of the Syrian Catholics. A great visionary of the Catholic Church, he was the first Keralite to start a school (1834) and a press (1846), the press being the third in Kerala.⁸ The press was to print necessary prayer books and materials needed for religious practices. He founded a Sanskrit school in Mannanam and entry into school was irrespective of caste and creed. A number of schools for lower castes were also started by him. He also assisted the foundation of first indigenous monastery for men and started the first indigenous religious congregation for women in Kerala.

In 1865, a circular was issued by Archbishop Bernadinos at the instance of Fr. Chavara, the Vicar General of Syrian Catholics, calling upon all parish churches under his jurisdiction to start schools attached to each of them (*Pallikorupallikoodam*) and threatened to close down the churches that failed to comply with his orders.⁹ Syrian Catholics, so far educationally backward, fearing the possibility of Protestant indoctrination; conversion to or entry into the other Syrian faction, were asked to study in schools attached to their parishes as it was necessary to educate, guide and control young ones, so that they will hold firm in Catholic ideology.

The other side of the picture was that, in the 19th century the Catholics under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Carmelite missionaries were trying to free themselves from their dominance and attain autonomy. The Carmelite presence in Kerala was a hedge against the Protestant influence over the community. The Carmelite anxiety about the proselytization and evangelization of the Protestants had a remarkable influence over the Catholics. They were fighting for the autonomy of the indigenous church since 17th century and the Syrian church was separated from the Latin jurisdiction of missionaries by Pope Leo XIII and two separate Syro-Malabar vicariates, i.e. Kottayam and Trichur were created in 1887 under foreign bishops. (Vithayathil, 1980:53-83). Later in 1896, the Roman Catholic Church granted their demand for autonomy. Three Apostolic Vicariates of Trichur, Ernakulam and Changanacherry were created with Rev. John Menacherry, Rev. Fr. Louis Pazheparambil and Rev. Fr. Mathew Makil as Vicars Apostolic,

respectively. Disruption of the traditional church by *Padroado* in the name of correction of 'errors', and the subsequent domination of the West over the Eastern church was an eye opener to the Syrian Catholics. They were conscious about the further intrusions and more than that they themselves were caught hold of the Catholic ideology.

Years of struggle for autonomy have created community consciousness among the Syrian Catholics but in the phase of colonial modernity, a conscious effort has taken to build the community within the Catholic mould and also the material development of the community. Even before the establishment of the autonomous church, efforts were taken by the native priests with the support of the Carmelite authorities to establish seminaries, printing press, Catholic schools and religious congregations for men and women.

Education is conceived as the most effective tool for cultural construction (Ganesh, 2004:154). In order to construct a firm Catholic base, education under the control of the church was a necessity. The most important means to develop a community was to educate the children. Mar Charles Lavigne, the first Vicar Apostolic of the Vicariate of Kottayam, through his pastoral letters¹⁰ repeatedly gave instructions to the believers on the significance of education, both spiritual and secular. He considered education more important than cultivation or agriculture and emphasized the need to acquire scientific knowledge. The letters which were meant for the community development instructed that both boys and girls should be given education. But that should be exclusively in Catholic schools¹¹. In one of the letter, he mentions the names of Catholic higher education institutions like Mannanam, Brahmamangalam and Changanacherry. He insisted that Catholics should abstain from going to schools other than Catholics, like, Protestants, *Puthenkoor*, other Christian sects and Hindus¹². The Catholic bishops were not ready to compromise with the education imparted through the Protestant and other educational institutions. He sees more danger in studying in Protestant schools and though others were not without danger.¹³ He also asked the believers not to do anything that disturbs their faith. They were prohibited, to hear the speeches or to read the books of other sects. It is a sin against God also. Those who do not abide to the rules will be excommunicated.¹⁴ All these instructions were in fact to keep the Catholic faith intact.

Rev. Fr. Mathew Makil, first Vicar apostolic of the indigenous Vicariate of Changanacherry, also gave similar instructions through the *Decrethu Pusthakam* published in 1903.¹⁵ The Decree was about the

rules and regulations related to various aspects of religious life, like belief, sacraments, priests, believers, churches and festivals. Some of the decrees related to belief as well as education were: Learning catechism was compulsory (Makil, 1903: 24); Schools for the religious and secular education should be run systematically and modified if necessary. New schools should also be established in necessary places. Each parish should start schools according to their capacity and should also give financial support to schools. Books taught must be in tune with the Catholic believes and practices. Teachers should be Catholics and children should compulsorily be sent to school. More higher grade schools should be started and girls should be sent to convent schools run by Women religious (Ibid: 48-50); Books of children who are studying in government schools, English schools or church schools should be inspected so as to confirm that they are not against Catholic faith and morality (Ibid: 26); Order no. 17 says that children should be send to Catholic schools in the native places or nearby places. Teaching in other schools is strictly prohibited, otherwise known, they will not be allowed to receive the sacraments (Ibid: 46); no children should be permitted to reside in the houses of non -Catholics (Ibid); no one is permitted to read or sell books of other sects. If so, they will be excommunicated (Ibid: 48); believers were encouraged to read books printed and published by Catholics or under Catholic supervision (Ibid: 48); those who sent their daughters in marriage to *Puthenkoor* will be excommunicated (Ibid: 24). All the decrees were asked to read in the churches on three consecutive Sundays. Catholic ideology was explicit in these decrees and how conscious they were about community and community building activities. The intention was to create a Catholic identity for the community. In a letter dated 1890, *Vrichikam* 7, Bishop Charles Levigne, instructed the believers that, at the time of census, instead of telling themselves as Christians, they should reveal their identity as Roman Catholic Syrians or Romo-Syrians, otherwise they will be counted among the Jacobites, or Protestants. Thus they were made conscious of their identity as Romo-Syrians or Roman Catholic Syrians.

The changes within the community, in the latter part of the 19th century were also due to the material prosperity of the community. Though some historians maintain that the Syrian Christians had been a community of traders in Kerala, the overwhelming majority of them in Travancore were, in fact, agriculturists, mostly inhabiting the midland regions in North Travancore (Joseph, 1990: 136). When compared,

Catholics took to agriculture rather than other communities and from 1820 onwards their land holdings began to increase (Corner, 1863:72). In the latter half of the 19th century Syrian Catholics took to agriculture while Syrian Protestants went to education and government jobs. The Jacobites and Mar Thomites used their educational opportunities to increase their trade, commerce and small enterprises like printing presses besides improved agriculture.¹⁶ The lack of education estranged the Catholics from the mainstream and they turned to agriculture.

Epoch-making events which were destined to exercise a decisive influence on the Christians were the *Pattom* Proclamation of 1865 and 1867,¹⁷ abolition of slavery and the encouragement of the government to cultivate waste lands and forest lands. This provided a fillip to the rise of Syrian Catholics as a strong class of peasant farmers in Travancore.

The flowering of the Catholic ideals among the Syrian Catholics and the introduction of Protestant ideals and Christian morality through Protestant missionaries occurred simultaneously in Kerala. As echelons of power the Protestants had an upper hand in implanting Christian ideals and morality than the Catholics. The Christian virtues and morality spread through modern institutions and state machinery, initiated by the British and the missionary activities, were taken as a threat to Syrian Catholics. To counter these efforts as well as to cope with the changing situations and accustom to the modern institutions, materially prospered Syrian Catholics started to build their own institutions within the ambit of Catholic doctrines. The community building activities which was started in the nineteenth century, continued vigorously in the twentieth century, leading to the crystallization of Catholic ideology and identity. By early decades of the 20th century, Syrian Catholic faction owned one third of the educational institutions of Kerala and began to claim proportional representation in civil service¹⁸, which amply demonstrate the solidarity with which the community worked for higher education and achieved high hand in the educational sector of Kerala.

Notes

1. During the early days of the East India Company the entry of European missionaries into India was banned; this ban was lifted in 1813 when the British parliament permitted them to enter the country under a new system of licensing. This threw the entire subcontinent open to missionary activity; M.N. Srinivas, *Social change in Modern India*, New Delhi, 2010, p.50.

2. Pope Gregory XV on 6 January, 1622 founded a new congregation called *Propaganda Fide* to direct the missionary activities of the church especially in America, Africa and Asia. The Pope took this initiative because the missionary patronage of Portugal was useful at the beginning but later it was hindered by various reasons and so there was a need to liberate the missionary apostolate of the church from the civil authority and put it directly under the Papal control; See T. Pallipurathukunnel, *A Double Regime in the Malabar Church (1663-1716)*, Alwaye, 1982, p. 5
3. The minutes of the Madras Government by Col. Munroe, reproduced in CMS proceedings, Vol. VIII, cited in W.S. Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin 1816-1916*, Kottayam, CMS, 1918, p.57.
4. *Padroado* means “patronage”. The papal bulls gave Portugal and Spain the sole right to sail the sea, to conquer the new land and to take their wealth under the condition of Christianizing these lands and taking responsibility for financing all the phases of cultic life. Pope Nicholas V’s Bull Romanus Pontifex of 8 January 1455 laid the foundation of the *Padroado*. Pope Alexander VI by the Bull cum Sicut Magestason 26 March 1500 gave the Portuguese kings the right of *Padroado* in India; J. Wickie, “The Portuguese *Padroado* in India in the 16th Century and St. Francis Xavier”, in H.C. Perumalil & E.R. Hambye (ed.), *Christianity in India: A History in Eccumenical Perspective*, Alleppy, Prakasam Publication, 1972, pp. 46-64.
5. Portuguese and Spanish Jesuit missionaries came to Kerala and took efforts to propagate education. Many Tamil, Malayalam and Syrian texts were written and printed .It was at this time the Dutch, who were Protestants came over here and Portuguese were ousted from here. Dutch attacked the Cochin fort in 1661 and even destroyed the seminary and library. Portuguese priests were expelled from other cities also. However Jesuits in Ambazhakad continued there until the seminary and library were destroyed by Tippu Sultan., P. J.Thomas, *Malayala Sahithyavum Christianikalum*, (Mal), Kottayam, DC Books, 1989, pp.96-97.
6. *Complete Works of Chavara*, Vol.I, C.M.I Publishing Committee, Mananam, 2000, pp.70-71.
7. Mathew Makil Diary, Vol.1, p.215 cited in Mathew Moolakkatt, *The book of Decrees of Mar Mathew Makil*, Romae, Pontificum Institutum Orientale, 1992, p.150.
8. The first press was Bayley press (1821), second, Government press Thiruvananthapuram (1839); Samuel Nellimukal , *Keralathile Samuhyaparivarthanam* , Kottayam, K.S.Books, 2003,p.151,.

9. Chronicle of St. Joseph's Monastery, Book III, 1864-1871, Mannanam and also Circular cited in Valerian, *Vazhthapetta Divyasree Kuriakose Eliasachan*, Mannanam, St. Joseph's Press, p.137.
10. Pastoral letter is an open letter addressed by a bishop to the clergy or laity of his diocese, containing either general admonition, instruction or consolation, or directions for behaviour in particular circumstances. Through this, the power relation between the ecclesiastical authority and the ruled as well as the hierarchical structure of the church is firmly established. Ideology of the church infiltrated through this letters, bound the religious community together in terms of belief system, values and ritual practices. Acting as a social system, the religious community could generate we feeling among them and religious identities form valuable instruments to maximize economic advantages, political power and social status.
11. Charles Lavigne, letter No.14, dated.1891 *Makaram* 1 in Joseph Perunthottam (Ed.). *Mar Charles Levigne Jeevacharithravum Edayalehanangalum*, Changanacherry: HIRS Publications, pp.77-84.
12. Ibid., Letter no.17 dated.1893 *Edavam* 21, pp.95-103.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Though the work was published in 1903, it was based on the rules regulations already published in 1871 by Rev. Leonard Louis, Bishop of Varapuzha and the *Decrethu Pusthakam* published in 1891 by Mar Charles Levigne, Vicar Apostolic of Kottayam Vicariate.
16. Interview with Puthupally Raghavan., cited in George Mathew, *Communal Road to Kerala*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing House.1989, p.58.
17. *Report on the Administration of Travancore for year 1040 ME* (1864-65) Superintendent, Government Press, Trivandrum, pp.27-30.
18. John Kachiramattom, *Catholic Grievances* (Mal). Kottayam ,2007,p.76; The memorial given to Sree Chithira Thirunal Rama Varma, Maharaja of Travancore on 26 November 1931, by Catholics of Kerala was printed and published by M. M. Varkey the publisher and editor of the news paper *Kerala Dasan*, in the title *Catholic Grievances*. The text is reproduced in Kachiramattom. It is cited in the 'grievance' with ample proof, the Catholics at that time formed 1/6 of the total population of Kerala and 1/3 of the educational institutions were owned by them.

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