

## CASTE ELEMENTS IN CATHOLIC COMMUNITY IN KERALA

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In this article we intend to make a general survey of relevant literature on Caste Elements in the Catholic community. Rao Bahadur L.K. Ananthakrishna Ayyar's study, 'Anthropology of the Syrian Christians'<sup>1</sup> is a comprehensive and reliable work on the manners and customs of the Syrians of Kerala. The field work was conducted as early as 1910 and the observations were first published as chapter 16 of the second volume of the "Cochin Tribes and Castes".<sup>2</sup> Anthropology of the Syrian Christians is an enlarged version of it with further additions under the changing conditions.<sup>3</sup> The volume begins with a preliminary historical account of the Syrian Church in Kerala in four chapters, and the remaining thirteen are devoted to the description of the manners and customs of the various sects.

Since the Syrian Christian community was divided into different sects, the author was compelled to bring out often, the inter-group relations especially defined by the caste elements. Hence we make reference to this work whenever it is relevant for our study.

The existence of caste in the Christian Church is pointed out by the author throughout his work. He speaks about the Syrian Christians as follows: "...Some of these groups, separated as they are by merely differences of doctrine or Church government, have during the long lapse of time, crystallised into regular castes."<sup>4</sup> "Each division among the Syrian Christians has become, as in a Hindu caste, an endogamous sect, with no

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<sup>1</sup>Ayyar, Ernakulam, 1926.

<sup>2</sup>Ayyar, L.K., "Cochin Tribes and Castes", Madras, 1912. Vol. II.

<sup>3</sup>Ayyar, Ernakulam, 1926, preface.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, p. 1.

intermarriage between the members of one sect and those of another, though no objection is made to inter-dining."<sup>5</sup> "The Southerners and Northerners do not inter-marry and any conjugal relations effected between them subject the former to some kind of excommunication. This exclusiveness is excused on the score of their descent from the early colonists of Syria. The Chaldeans of Trichur do not enter into wedlock with the Catholics (Syro-Romans and the Latins) and other denominations. The old caste prejudices are still in existence though in religion they are Christians. The Syrian Jacobites, the reformed Syrians or St. Thomas Syrians and Syrian Protestants do not inter-marry... Thus says Sir Herbert Risley: 'Of these seven sects, five appear to have been crystallised into regular castes between the members of which no inter-marriage is possible.'<sup>6</sup> There is no inter-marriage between the Seven Hundred, the Five Hundred and the Three Hundred, which are the three divisions of the Latin Catholics.<sup>7</sup>

Louis Dumont speaks about caste elements in the Christian community of Kerala, in his classic work, "Homo Hierarchicus". "The case of Kerala where the Christians constitute a considerable part of the population, would be a good example of their internal subdivision into groups strongly resembling castes, but we have scarcely anything save generalities on this topic. The Syrian Christians whose legendary origin goes back to Thomas, Christ's disciple, are divided, as a result of colonial history, into several persuasions which while authorizing commensality with each other, are mostly endogamous. Even the Catholics of more recent origin, are divided into four distinct groups or castes. Christians originating from the untouchables seem to have their own Churches."<sup>8</sup>

According to Mandelbaum, the Christians were not different from the Hindus with regard to caste organisation. "The Jatis of Syrian Christians jockeyed for status as other sectarian Jatis have done and like them they

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, p. 60

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid*, p. 61

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, p. 261

<sup>8</sup>Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, The University of Chicago Press, 1966; English translation, 1970, p. 202.

become part of the local caste orders."<sup>9</sup> He further states that though Christian missionaries insisted on equality of human beings, it did not influence the practical life of the Christian. "The equality they (the missionaries) insisted on seemed confined to the hours of Church worship and even the padre sahib was unquestionably the actual first among putative equals."<sup>10</sup>

Social hierarchy is a by-product of caste. Kathleen Gough observed the high social status of Syrians and low grades of the Latin Catholics. "As landlords, tenants and administrators, as well as traders they ranked socially parallel to the Nayars and were served in the same manner by Hindu polluting castes and serfs.....The Portuguese converted some Syrians to Roman Catholicism, but the converts still retained the Syriac Rite. All Syrians were readily distinguishable from the lower ranking Latin Catholics, converts to Catholicism from Portuguese times who were drawn from various polluting castes."<sup>11</sup> She repeated her observation in 1963. The Jacobites, Romo Syrians and Marthomites have retained the high social and ceremonial rank accorded to Syrian Christians in the traditional society, a rank parallel to that of the higher sub-castes of Nayar landlords and village head-men. "Within the large category of 'Latin Catholics', by contrast are many families whose forebears were converted to Catholicism from the Tiyyar caste and also from the lowest exterior castes."<sup>12</sup> "As a separate caste of low ranking 'Latin Catholics', these came under the jurisdiction of the Portuguese, and later of the Dutch and English, in their settlements within the ports."<sup>13</sup>

"The Latin Catholics' most painful barrier was with the 'true' high caste Syrian Christians of supposedly ancient descent. In villages where there were large groups of both Syrians and Latin Christians, the caste barriers were virtually impassable. Even if both group were Catholics, high

<sup>9</sup>Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, Bombay, 1970, p. 565.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.* p. 566.

<sup>11</sup>Kathleen Gough, "Nayar: Central Kerala", *Matrilineal Kinship*, by Schneider and Gough, University of California Press, 1961, p. 298.

<sup>12</sup>Kathleen Gough, *Indian Nationalism and Ethnic Freedom*, David Bidney (ed.) Mouton & Co., The Hague, 1963, p. 195.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 180

and low caste Christians had their separate Churches and did not inter-marry or inter-dine."<sup>14</sup>

Sonia Dougal's "The Nun Runners",<sup>15</sup> is an explosive story of the nun smuggling racket that took place in Kerala during this decade. Though this is not a sociological study of caste in the Catholic Church, she has dedicated, with due consideration to the seriousness of this topic, a full chapter to describe the caste behaviour in the Church.

"The Christians of Kerala are divided into rites, of which the two most important ones are the Syrians and the Latins...The rite's question is one of the touchiest of Kerala problems. People fight over it, quarrel over it, even hate each other over it."<sup>16</sup> (The Syrian Christians) "pride themselves on their noble origin and are inclined to despise those who belong to the Latin rite. They have a lot of money and they are very influential in Rome, while the Latin Catholics being of humbler origins are, often put aside and trampled on by their more powerful neighbours. Have you ever noticed that the Indian priests studying in Rome, nearly all of them are Syrian rite? They obtain all the scholarships It is very sad that there are these divisions and these jealousies especially among those who call Christ their King and try to follow his teaching... Once there were two Churches in a place near here, one for the high caste Syrians and one for the lower caste. They consider that the low caste was born to serve. Even now that the Government has officially abolished the caste system, they don't change. It is not the people so much—many of them would like to see the feud ended—it's the clergy who keep it alive. It has happened that a Latin rite priest has obtained permission to build a Church on a certain spot and hearing of it the Syrian rite has gone over his head to get permission to find one there instead...In the same convent you often find people of different rites, but they don't treat each other in the same way. There is a sort of rivalry among them and a feeling of superiority on the part of those who are Syrians."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 195-196.

<sup>15</sup>Sonia Dougal, *The Nun Runners*, Sterling Publishers, 1974.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid*, chapter 8.

The motivation of low caste Hindus in accepting Christian faith and the problems which they had to face after conversion were studied by some Sociologists.

"The conversion of the so-called low castes to Islam and Christianity in many parts of India, and to sects such as Sikhism and the Arya Samaj in the Punjab and Western U.P., was often motivated by a desire to shed the odium attached to being low. But the converts found that it was not at all easy to shake off their caste and that, in fact, they carried it with them to their new faith or sect."<sup>18</sup>

The Christian missionaries who worked among the Hindus wanted to present themselves in an Indian way that they might be accepted. This demanded of them to observance of certain practices of purity and pollution. A Catholic priest who ministered to Brahmins had to avoid any contact with his fellow priests who were working; among untouchables. But this accommodation to Jati practices clashed too violently with European notions of equality and it was baned in a papal decree of 1704.<sup>19</sup>

According to Max Muller, a caste Hindu who relinquishes his caste through conversion to Christianity wanted a substitute to play the roles attached to the caste. "In a certain sense no man ought be without caste, without friends, who take care of him, without companions who watch him, without associates whose good opinion he values, without companions with whom he can work for a common cause...and in a country where caste takes the place of all this, the abolition of caste would be tantamount to a complete social disorganization."<sup>20</sup> But quite often the missionaries were not capable of finding a substitute for caste against which they were fighting. "A Hindu who embraces Christianity now-a-days must make up his mind to lose everything that makes life pleasant... He is abandoned and shunned by everyone."<sup>21</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>18</sup>Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn, (ed.), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Aldeine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1968, p. 194.

<sup>19</sup>Mandelbaum, *op. cit.*, pp. 567-568.

<sup>20</sup>Muller, 1868, p. 358, quoted by Mandelbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 568.

<sup>21</sup>Abbe Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, translated Henry K. Beauchamp, Oxford, 1928, p. 301.

converts were mainly made from very low Jatis who had nothing to lose and perhaps could gain something in status and livelihood."<sup>22</sup>

The cases of high caste Christians demanding separation for fear of pollution, from the low caste Christians are not rare. In 'Structure and Change in Indian Society', edited by Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn, the court case of Michael Pillai versus Barthe is mentioned. A group of Roman Catholic Pillais and Mudalis sued for an injunction to require the Bishop of Trichinopoly to re-erect a wall separating their part of the Church from that entered by low caste Christians and to declare plaintiff's exclusive right to perform services at the altar. But the petition was rejected on the ground that the plaintiff not being Hindu could not invoke the authority for perpetuating caste distinction.<sup>23</sup>

### **Sanskritisation**

Kathleen Gough observes that conversion to Christianity has been a means for the low caste Hindus to improve their social status "In Hindu eyes the mere conversion of a Pulayan raised him a few notches in the caste hierarchy. He was no longer a mere untouchable agricultural labourer; if he was lucky, new occupations might open up to him, in a trade or in service of Christians and vis-a-vis, the Nayars, who not concern themselves with the Christian's internal divisions, would tacitly accept him as belonging to the higher ranks of Christians with whom, in any case, they had few ceremonial relationships."<sup>24</sup>

During our field work we found a similar trend among the Latin Catholics which has been already noted by Kathleen Gough in 1963. "For the prosperous Latin Catholics, there were, however, gradual avenues of mobility upward into the Syrian caste. In any case, Latin Catholics tend to call themselves "Syrians" where they are not known and in cities often pass as such. Inside the Catholic Church which, in theory, does not uphold caste distinctions, a wealthy and educated Latin Catholic family may

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<sup>22</sup>Mandelbaum, *op. cit.*, p. 568.

<sup>23</sup>Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn (eds.), *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, Aldeine Publishing Company, Chicago, 1968, p. 306.

<sup>24</sup>Kathleen Gough, *op. cit.*, p. 195

eventually inter-marry with Romo Syrians of another area and assimilate itself to them."<sup>25</sup>

Ninan Koshy's study on the "Caste in the Kerala Churches"<sup>26</sup> explores "the attitudes to and practices of caste distinctions in the life of the Christian Churches of Keraia".<sup>27</sup> This is an empirical research on the relations between Syrian Christians and Backward Class Christians with special reference to Church of South India, Mar Thoma Syrian Church, Orthodox (Jacobite) Church and St. Thomas Evangelical Church. The field work has been conducted in Tiruvalla and its neighbourhood. The size of the sample was about one thousand, of which two-thirds were traditional Christians and one-third backward class Christians.<sup>28</sup>

While emphasizing the problems of the backward class Christians of the four churches mentioned above, the author has rather under-estimated the same in the Catholic Church.<sup>29</sup> K.C. Alexander's study of the same subject<sup>30</sup> and our observations show that the situation is not different in the Catholic Church.

He observes two important attitudes among the Syrian Christians towards the Backward Class Christians: attitude of Patronage and Hostility. "What is lamentably lacking is the real Christian Spirit, the genuine concern for the true sense of fellowship in the Church."<sup>31</sup> The Syrian Christians would like to have the Backward Class Christians as neighbours, because the land owning Syrian Christian can always have them at their disposal for manual work in the field and for other household assistance.<sup>32</sup> Marriage between these two groups is not welcome because

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid*, p. 196.

<sup>26</sup>Ninan Koshy, *Caste in the Kerala Churches*, Bangalore, 1968.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, preface.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 1-2.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid*, p. 25.

<sup>30</sup>(i) Alexander, K.C., *The Problems of the Neo-Christians, Man in India*, Vol.47, No. 4, 1967, pp. 317-330. (ii) Alexander, K.C., *Social Mobility in Kerala*, Deccan CollIM, Postgraduate and Research Institute, Poona, 1968

<sup>31</sup>Alexander, K.C., 1968, p. 29

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, p. 34.



the Backward Class Christians lack a long tradition and culture. Their family status and educational standard are not up to the expectations of the Syrian Christians. "They are not neat; they have superstitious practices; their moral standard is low; they have dark skin, etc., are other reasons given by the Syrian Christians for not having any marital relation with the backward Class Christians. Thus these two groups remain strictly endogamous.<sup>33</sup> The opinions of the Syrian Christians indicate a master-servant relationship toward the Backward Class Christians. Membership in the Church has not established that fellowship which would have promoted a different social relationship.<sup>34</sup>

There is no inter-dining between these groups. The Syrian Christians usually do not invite the Backward Class Christians as guests to their social functions like wedding or baptism. On such occasions a few Backward Class Christians who occupy good positions in the Church or society alone may be invited. On the other hand, the Syrian Christians usually do not accept any invitation to take a meal with or eat in the house of Backward Class Christians.<sup>35</sup>

In the Mar Thoma Church and the Jacobite (Orthodox) Church, there are no priests ordained from the backward classes. The few priests from the backward class in the Church of South India are facing serious problems in Church administration since they are not acceptable for the Syrians. The transfer order of a backward class pastor to an upper class parish had to be cancelled in view of the opposition to such appointment from vociferous and influential Syrian elements in the parish.<sup>36</sup>

In the Central Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India and in the Mar Thoma Church, separate places of worship are usually provided for the backward classes. There are many instances both in the C.S.I. and the Mar Thoma Church where Churches for Syrians and backward classes exist side by side within distances of even one or two furlongs. A Syrian Christian does not mind walking a few miles to reach his own Church

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 34-35

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid*, p. 40

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid*, P. 40

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*, P. 46



when there is a Church of the backward class nearby; the same trouble had to be taken by the backward class Christians too<sup>37</sup>. The places of worship used exclusively by the Backward class are known as 'Pulayappally'. The existence of such caste Churches seems to be the loudest proclamation of the caste system in the Church.

"...For a long period they (the Syrian Christians) considered themselves as having a status similar to that of the high caste groups in the Hindu social Hierarchy and for this reason they followed caste customs and conformed to the caste system, including the untouchability and unapproachability of the outcaste groups... The conversion of Scheduled Castes did not lead immediately to a fellowship, transcending social barriers, even at worship; the places of worship for the new converts were largely separate from those of the Syrians, but the principle of fellowship at worship came to be gradually recognised, though its realization is far from complete yet. But even where Syrians and non-Syrians worshipped in the same Church, religious fellowship co-existed with almost total mutual social exclusiveness.<sup>38</sup>

The most dominant characteristic and chief contributing factor of inter-caste tensions in the Kerala Church is the exclusiveness of the Syrian Christians as a distinct caste and their apparent determination to perpetuate it. This attitude controls their behaviour towards the backward class Christians.<sup>39</sup> The backward class Christians in general are not happy with the position given to them in the Christian Church. They feel that they are alienated, they are not cared for or completely ignored by others. They don't find true Christian love and friendship which they expected while accepting Christian faith. The upper class people dominate Church administration, generally the backward classes do not have representations in Church Councils and Boards.<sup>40</sup> As a consequence of this, they do not get considerable financial help from the Church as they deserve. Finally

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<sup>37</sup>*Ibid*, p. M

<sup>38</sup>Mathew, C.P., and Thomas M.M The Indian Churches of St. Thomas, ISPCK, Delhi, 1967, p. 142.

<sup>39</sup>Alexander, K.C., op. cit., p. 51

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, p. 58

they have to be content with their undeveloped socio-economic conditions. The two groups are more and more polarised rather than integrated.

In 1971, C.J. Fuller studied the caste system among the Kerala Christians.<sup>41</sup> But his field work was limited to Changanacherry Taluk<sup>42</sup> where we do not find all the caste groups of the Kerala Christians. Fuller left out completely the Latin community.<sup>43</sup> Such a serious omission cannot be justified in a study of caste among the Christians of Kerala. This may be also the reason why he failed to note the existence of marriages between Latins and Syrians. "The Syrian grouping is endogamous. Except for the very occasional 'love marriage', there are no marital unions between the Syrians and Latin Christians."<sup>44</sup> In our study we have found many cases of marriage between Syrians and Latins especially in Ernakulam and Cochin area where they live intermingled. We have conducted a special study of 50 inter-rite marriages (marriage between Syrians and Latins) analysing deeply their social implications.

The Northists and Southists ('Nordist' and 'Sudist' or 'Northerners' and 'Southerners' in many writings) are two endogamous divisions of the Syrian community. The division is real and the southists are very strict in observing the endogamous nature of their group even today. Since Fuller's field work was limited to Changanacherry area, probably he could not observe the social distance kept between these groups. "The Syrians with whom I worked were northists but I have little information about the significance of the division today as my informants were not even aware of its existence."<sup>45</sup> It is true that the Northists do not mind contracting marriage with the Southists, but it usually does not take place because of the resistance of the Southists.

We also do not agree with Fuller's statement regarding the superior status of the Southists over the Northists. "The Northists are by far the

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<sup>41</sup> Fuller, C.J., *Kerala Christians and Caste System*, Man, 11, 1, pp. 53-70.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 55.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

more numerous, but they are ranked below the Southists".<sup>46</sup> Our observation is that both the groups claim superiority over each other; the claim of the Southists that they are superior, is not admitted by the Northists. There are legends and stories popular among them which would question the claimed nobility and superiority of either group, propagated by the other.

The classification of the Christians into three broad groups, namely, Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians,<sup>47</sup> is incomplete for a study of caste among them. The sub-divisions of these major categories are perhaps more important since they keep a greater social distance between them than do the major categories among themselves. Therefore, a typology of the Syrian Christians could include the division of the Syrian community into Northists and Southists and the Latin community into the Seven Hundred, Five Hundred and Three Hundred as observed by Ananthakrishna Ayyar.<sup>48</sup>

By examining the social status of each group and its relation with other groups, Fuller empirically proves that the three Christian groups mentioned above are strictly caste groups.<sup>49</sup> He further affirms that "Christians and Hindus are members of one total caste system, not two separate ones existing side by side."<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, he adds that "Christian sects are, at least now, very much nearer to our ideal sect than they are to our ideal caste and that we should not regard them as castes or sub-castes, although it is true that they do have a structural role in defining the village similar to that of castes or sub-castes..."<sup>51</sup> He substantiates this statement by pointing out the fact that membership in a Christian group is not only by birth but it is also by affiliation.

Fuller examines the criteria for membership in the Syrian community. "The principal criteria for membership of the Syrian caste, as I shall now

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>48</sup>Ayyar, Ernakulam, 1926.

<sup>49</sup>Fuller, *op. cit.*, PP. 55-58.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid*, p. 61.

term it, is that one can claim descent from St. Thomas' Nambudiri converts and that the claim is accepted by others.<sup>52</sup> Date of the original conversion is another important criterion<sup>53</sup> that would determine the status of the group. The correlation seems to be as earlier the time of affiliation, higher the status, with the result that the new converts have come to be ranked very low in the social ladder. "It was generally agreed by informants that if a new convert acquired land and had a fair complexion, his descendants would probably be accepted, publicly at least, as Syrians after two or three generations.<sup>54</sup> Fair skin is required in order to pass as a Syrian because of the stereotyped belief of almost all Syrians that they are fair like the Nambudiris, considered to have the lightest skins in Kerala.

The observance of bodily pollution connected with birth, menstruation and death are not totally absent among the Syrians at present though Fuller maintains a position contrary to this. "Unlike Hindus, however, Christians like Muslims (Mines, 1972: 339), have no concept of bodily pollution consequent on birth, death, menstruation or other bodily conditions, nor do they observe pollution with regard to these... Within the Christian community, purity and pollution rules have only a very restricted application and, in particular, birth, death and menstrual pollution—central features of Hindu society — are absent.<sup>55</sup> Ananthakrishna Ayyar speaks clearly that such practices existed in the Syrian community also.<sup>56</sup> The fact that Synod of Diamper seriously scolded the Christians for preserving such beliefs and practices connected with pollution is a proof for its existence in the early centuries.<sup>57</sup> It is true that such practices are not common among the Christians just because of the insistence of the Church to make Christians free from all such superstitions. In spite of all these, during our field work we have observed at least some, especially women in villages,

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<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>53</sup>Alexander, 1972.

<sup>54</sup>Fuller, C.J., *op. cit.*, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>56</sup>Ayyar, *Op. cit.*, Menstruation, p. 92; Pregnancy and Child Birth—pp. 103-104; death—p. 201.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

not attending the Church and not entering the kitchen for fear of pollution during menstruation and after child-birth.

### *The New Christians*

The New Christians themselves do not constitute a single caste since they do not have a common origin, culture, etc. The only common characteristics are that they hail from different Hindu low castes and they are recent converts to Christianity. They are rated very low on the social ladder and face similar problems. From this point of view alone they may be considered a single group.

K.C. Alexander has made an exhaustive study of the problem of the New Christians.<sup>58</sup> The New Christians were called 'Puthukrishianikal' which, though literally means 'New Christians', effectively signifies 'lower caste Christians'. They were, for all practical purposes, ritually untouchables, economically poor and socially slaves. Even the prohibition of slavery by the British did not bring spectacular improvement in their status. Conversion to Christianity could not integrate them to the Christian Community. They continued to be looked upon as Pulayas and Parayas. They were addressed by the Syrian Christians as Thoma Pulayan, Mathai Pulayan, etc., and in turn, they addressed the Syrians as 'Thampuram'. They had to remove their head dress before the Syrian Christians and keep their mouth closed with a hand while speaking to the Syrians. They were not served food inside the Syrian house and they had to wash the dish after taking food.

Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the New Christians were not permitted to worship in the same Church with the Syrians. Consequently separate Churches called "Pulappalli" had to be constructed for their worship.<sup>59</sup> When the missionaries tried to admit them in the Syrian Churches, it was objected to by the Syrians. Therefore the missionaries had to instruct them not to enter the Syrian Churches and to respect the Syrians as masters. This was a formal and explicit acceptance of caste in the Church. "The problem

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<sup>58</sup>Alexander, K.C., 1967 and 1968.

<sup>59</sup>Fuller, op. cit., p. 63.

of casteism continues as a stumbling block in the Evangelistic path of the Churches in Kerala."<sup>60</sup>

In the secular sphere too, the New Christians keep a very low standard. Most of them are illiterate. Since they have to work day and night to earn their daily bread, there is no time for schooling and they are not motivated for it. There are only very few among them engaged in white collar occupation. In the matter of dress and appearance, they are not careful. Their houses are just small huts which may not be kept clean. Thus, judged on the basis of secular standards, the New Christians are ranked low, with a great distance from the Syrian Christians.<sup>61</sup>

Alexander concludes his study as follows: "There is great distance between the Pulaya Christians and Syrian Christians in all the spheres of life. In the religious sphere, as a whole, even now many of them are only nominal Christians and have not completely given up their faith in demonic cults. In the sphere of family, it is still far from the Syrian Christian ideal type of family. In the economic sphere, the hiatus is as wide as it ever was. It is argued that it is this inability of the Pulaya converts to change their social image which prevents their integration with the older Christians."<sup>62</sup>

Mandelbaum also has made the same observation regarding the status of converts to different religious groups. "The direct status gain that converts derived was usually not great. Untouchables who become converted to Christianity, to Islam or to Sikhs... were not immediately taken as social equal by their co-religionists and certainly were not treated more respectfully by neighbours of different faiths."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Ninan Koshy, *Caste in Kerala Churches*, Bangalore, 1968, p. 25: Ayyar, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-219.

<sup>61</sup>Alexander, K.C., *The Problem of the Neo-Christians of Kerala*, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 329.

<sup>63</sup>Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, *op. cit.*, p. 524.

### Religious Ideology and Caste

It is generally admitted that caste system in Hindu society is supported by certain Hindu ideologies like 'dharma' and 'karma'. According to dharma, the divinely ordained norm of good conduct one should carry out the duties enjoined on one at birth as a consequence of having been born into a particular caste, because according to Bagavad Gita, it is better to do one's own duty imperfectly than to do another's well. Karma the result of the deeds of ones life, affecting the next, with the associated concept of 'samsara' i.e., continual transmigration of souls, explains why one has been born into a particular caste in this life.<sup>64</sup>

If Hindu theology justifies a social hierarchy, the Christian ideology is egalitarian based on equality and universal brotherhood of men.<sup>65</sup> "Although certain forms of Christian teaching have, at various times, given some prominence to egalitarianism, it is historically the case that its dogma has not emphasized this aspect and that hierarchy, as exemplified by the concept of the 'chain of being' has been a constant and fundamental element in Christian thought."<sup>66</sup> In the Kerala Catholic Church we find not only the ordinary faithful but also the religious leaders who preach universal brotherhood and equality of human being vigorously supporting and faithfully practising caste.

However, there are "basic differences between Hindu and Christian teachings and these presumably have their effect both on what ordinary Hindus and Christians think and on what they do. For example, there is a greater stress on the concept of the individual in Christian than in Hindu thought."<sup>67</sup> Christianity tends to stress the importance of the individual as opposed to the group, as the 'normative subject' more than does any variety of 'orthodox Hinduism'. But, Fuller feels that this difference

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<sup>64</sup>Fuller, OP. cit., p. 65.

<sup>65</sup>Ayyar, op. cit., p. 216.

<sup>66</sup>Fuller, OP. Cit., p. 65.

<sup>67</sup>*ibid.*, p. 67.



should not be exaggerated for it is a matter of relative emphasis and Christianity does not totally devalue the group."<sup>68</sup>

A consequence of this difference according to Fuller is that individual mobility between castes is empirically possible within the Christian community, whereas it is not, except perhaps in some circumstances arising out of modern socio-economic changes, in Hindu communities, where social mobility is a group phenomenon only.<sup>69</sup>

"Alienation or Liberation" is a critical evaluation of the History of Christianity in India by a team of scholars: John Arakkal, M.V. Cyriac, and Abraham. Koothottil.<sup>70</sup> The authors have made an attempt to distinguish between real history and legends. Their remarks on caste system in the Catholic community of Kerala is of great interest for us.

The belief that Syrian Christians are converts from high caste Brahmins is not supported by historical evidences according to the authors. "The claim that the Thomas tradition is written in the hearts of the people and is therefore reliable is indeed very unreliable."<sup>71</sup> As we are not prepared to give any historical value to the claims of the small Moslem community in Kashmir which strongly believes that they have descended from Jesus Christ, so with the traditions of the St. Thomas Christians' too. The authors feel confident to attribute the origin of the Syrian Christians to the different immigrations, that took place in the early centuries. The fact that until recently the Syrians were called upon as pollution neutralists by the caste Hindus indicates that they were descendants of migrants and outside the caste system.<sup>72</sup> It is likely that there were conversions to Christianity from Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. It is possible that some of the converts came also from the Brahmins, especially those ostracized for violating the caste regulations. "Historically speaking, however, it is difficult to justify the claim of most Syrian Christian families

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<sup>68</sup>*Ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>70</sup>See Jeevadhara, 1977, 37, pp. 17-85.

<sup>71</sup>John Arakkal and Co., "Alienation or Liberation". Jeevadhara, 1977,37, p.24.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid*, p. 27.

of Malabar that their forefathers were Brahmins."<sup>73</sup> An attempt for nobility through the process of 'sanskritisation' is not a rare practice in India. This may explain the claim of many a Syrian Christian for a noble origin.<sup>74</sup>

The Catholic Church through its opportunist spirit prepared a favourable background for the growth of caste system in the Catholic community. "Proud of the place they had managed to attain in the caste hierarchy, the Christians became almost a caste in themselves with their own sub-castes and observing untouchability and unapproachability."<sup>75</sup> Caste discrimination and exploitation existed in the Christian community. Therefore for the outcaste of Malabar, the Christians were not in any way different from the high caste Hindus. The 'self seeking conformism' of the Syrians made them incapable to offer any challenge to Indian life and thought.

The rigid attitude and closed mentality of the Syrian community are clearly expressed in their relation to the converts. The converts from the low Hindu caste still remain unintegrated with the Christian community. It is a striking phenomenon that the Church of Kerala does not accept candidates from new converts for priesthood and episcopate, while their own counterparts elsewhere in India have already priests and bishops from among them. It is regrettable that southists do not accept converts from other communities so that they can preserve their racial purity.<sup>76</sup> In the territories outside Kerala, where the Kerala Syrian missionaries are working, an aggressive attempt is found to bring converts under the Syrian rite rather than to Christianity. This indicates the closed mentality and caste sentiments of the Syrian Christians.

"To be sure, Christianity could not abolish all differences and discrimination even among Christians, let alone suppress all exploitation. Nor were all the missionaries interested in achieving this end. In fact, for some of them, caste discrimination and the exploitation of the poor were

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<sup>73</sup>*Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid*, p. 28.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid*, p. 52.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid*, p. 53.

social realities with which religion had little to do.<sup>77</sup> Since the Church had alliance with colonial powers, it was forced to be blind to the exploitation and oppression which colonialism entailed.<sup>78</sup>

The communalism of the Malabar Syrians was motivated by their desire to preserve their position in the caste hierarchy. They placed themselves under the Portuguese, to protect their privileged position in society.<sup>79</sup> "In its effort to attain and preserve a respectable social status, Malabar Christianity with its cultic emphasis—probably derived from its Syrian origin—accepted to such an extent the social attitude of its Hindu environment that almost lost sight of the universalism characteristic of Christianity."<sup>80</sup>

"Caste among Non-Hindus in India", edited by Harjinder Singh, is the latest work available to us for this survey.<sup>81</sup> This collection of papers by a group of ten scholars offers a variety of observations on Caste in a number of non-Hindu settings, namely, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jews. Most of the contributors approach the subject of caste by examining the extent to which the social organisation of a particular non-Hindu group is based on caste as an organising principle. Some of them also compare it with Hindu society on the basis of specific features of the caste system.<sup>82</sup> The two essays in this collection on Christian Community, namely, "The Catholic Church and Caste in Rural Tamil Nadu" by Paul D. Wiebe and S. John Peter and "The Problem of Caste in the Christian Churches of Kerala" by K.C. Alexander are of great interest for us. These authors perfectly agree with regard to the influence of caste in the Catholic Church. "There is no doubt that caste considerations similarly underlie the social organisation of the Catholic

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<sup>77</sup>*Ibid*, p. 54.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid*, p. 57.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid*, p. 58.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid*, p. 61.

<sup>81</sup>Harjinder Singh, (ed.) *Caste Among Non-Hindus in India*, National Publishing House, Delhi, 1977.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid*, p. vi.

Church in India. Yet little specific attention has been given to this matter."<sup>83</sup>

### **The Anglo Indians**

The Anglo Indians are all Christians; but they have little interaction with other Indian Christians. Their style of life shows a predominantly western influence which is reflected in their dress, speech, food habits and recreational activities. Most of them live in cities and towns which are located on the main railway lines concentrated at Agra, Allahabad, Jhansi, Ajmir, Jabalpur, Hyderabad, Calcutta and Mysore. A small section of them is living in Kerala also. They have almost developed an occupational sub-culture, but have little incentive and opportunity to interact effectively with the other sections of the Indian people. Their literacy rate is high, but very few have higher university education. The community in general is suffering from serious economic problems.<sup>84</sup>

Frank Anthony's book on the history of the Anglo Indians – "Britain's Betrayal in India" is an account of the community's ambivalent feelings towards the British, its past and present achievements, its sense of pride, the other communities' apathy towards the Anglo Indians and the kind of step-motherly treatment the community received from the British in India.

According to the figures of the All-India Anglo Indian Association (AIAIA) nearly one lakh Anglo Indians now live in India. Another 75,000 people of Portuguese, Dutch, and French descent, live in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. But the AIAIA does not recognise them as Anglo Indians. The association leaders refer to them as Indian Christians because they speak not English, the Anglo Indians' official

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<sup>83</sup>Paul D. Wiebe and S. John Peter, *The Catholic Church and Caste in Rural Tamil Nadu*, Harjinder Singh (ed.) op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>84</sup>ICSSR, *A Survey of Research in Sociology and Social Anthropology*, Bombay 1974, Vol. 1, p. 46.

tongue, but the regional languages. This single disqualification apparently excludes them from being part of the community.<sup>85</sup>

### **Caste Among the Goan Catholics**

An enquiry into caste elements in similar social systems may be beneficial for a better understanding of our subject. J.M. Montemeyer's study of a Goan village gives facts about the existence of caste among the Catholics of Goa.<sup>86</sup>

Caste consciousness seems to be more prevalent and widespread today among the Goan Catholics than among Hindus. In the case of individuals and households the most vocal and articulate about caste are the Catholic Brahmins. Caste ideology reveals a difference in accent as between Hindus and Catholics. It seems that ideologically the principle of ritual purity-pollution still governs caste relations among Hindus, but has practically disappeared among Catholics. But in its practice Catholicism is used even as an idiom to express caste differences and distinctions. The religious privileges, in fact, follow caste privileges and reinforce each other. For some time under the Portuguese, only those of upper castes were ordained priests. The caste based society of Goa was quite acceptable for the hierarchical Church.

Religion structured the Goan society further by adding the Catholic community to the pre-existing Hindu and Muslim communities. Moreover, the process of hierarchisation dichotomised the civil from the ecclesiastical jurisdiction and within the latter as an ecclesiastical polity, clergy and laity formed the two halves of the hierarchical pyramid. Religious associations and allied bodies reflected the caste hierarchy. The Catholic tradition operative under the Portuguese rule concerning authority stressed its order maintaining value. This tradition reinforced the position of the Catholic Brahmin Jati from among whose members priests came and, in effect, canonised the valuation of authority, the position of authority of the Brahmin Jati and caste system which gave meaning to both. In general,

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<sup>85</sup>Devendra Mohan, *Anglo Indians, a Search for Identity*, Times of India March 27, 1977.

<sup>86</sup>Montemeyer, *A Sociological Analysis of a Goan Village Community*, unpublished thesis, University of Delhi, 1970.

Catholics look at the caste system primarily as the main management mechanism in the economy of social relationships, which economy aims at the minimisation of chaos and the maximisation of order.<sup>87</sup>

### **Caste Among the Catholics of Rural Tamil Nadu**

Paul D. Wiebe and S. John Peter, in their study, "The Catholic Church and Caste in Rural Tamil Nadu" mention six untouchable caste and 25 other caste groups in the Catholic community of South Arcot.<sup>88</sup>

Kovilanoor parish studied by the authors, has 83 per cent of its population from the untouchable castes. A number of groups in the Kovilanoor area have patron-client relations with each other. The principal patrons are the peasant groups and the principal clients, the untouchables. The relationships between particular families has often extended over at least several generations. Client families work in the fields of their patrons, help their patrons with tasks around their homes, care for their animals and perform other services the patrons define. In return, client families receive, for example, grain at the times of harvest, other material goods on special occasions and representation when they need it to persons of greater power and influence. Thus the caste structure is very lively and exerting power in this Catholic Community.<sup>89</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This survey of literature gives us a clear picture of the stratification in the Catholic community, the nature of the relations cherished between the sub-groups and especially the caste elements that gave shape to those relations. The Catholic community also has endogamous groups similar to those found in the Hindu Social System. These sub-groups take superior-inferior positions in the social hierarchy and keep social distance between themselves. Some of the scholars whom we have cited in this paper, have given descriptive accounts about the superior position and the special privileges enjoyed by the Syrian Christians in the past, parallel to

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<sup>87</sup>*Ibid*, p. 489.

<sup>88</sup>Paul D. Wiebe and S. John Peter, the Catholic Church and Caste in Rural Tamil Nadu, Harjinder Singh (ed.) op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>89</sup>*Ibid*, p. 41.

those of the high caste Hindus. As a result of the missionary activities of the European missionaries, there were many conversions from the low caste Hindus to the Latin Catholic community. They continued to be affected by the stigma usually attached to the low castes, even after their conversion. The superior-inferior feelings between the Syrians and the Latins are thus perpetuated and the Church Administrative system offered favourable conditions for their growth. Though the Church is against all forms of discriminations, especially on the basis of caste, as Ananthakrishna Ayyer puts it, it was practised more by its violations than observances. Consequently the scholars on our list did not hesitate to consider the different Christian sects as clear caste groups since they could identify all the caste elements in those groups especially in their inter-group relations of the Latins and the Syrians.