Chapter 2

Women in Traditional Social Space

The events from first century onward is portrayed in this chapter to analyse and reflect upon the emergence of Syrian Christian community and what space they have shared in the social hierarchy in the traditional period. The word ‘tradition’ refers to the practice of handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs etc. from generation to generation, especially by word or mouth or by practice. In a traditional society, the kinship groups or community are given more importance than the individual. In traditional society the social space and the religious space is one and the same. It is religious institutions that keep traditional practices intact. The assumption is that it is colonial imperialism that introduced modern ideologies in Keralam.

Historians like M.G.S. Narayanan and Lemercinier\textsuperscript{37} supported the view that the early rulers of this region were indigenous Dravidian kings or chieftains of tribal origin. The most significant change in the tribal social configuration of pre-modern period was brought about by the Brahmin migration (which may have begun in early centuries but became numerically significant by seventh or eighth centuries) from the rest of

India (Hindusthan) and resulting in the Brahmin supremacy and formation of caste system. The social formation of the pre-modern period is divided into two parts, the first, early centuries up to 800 A.D. It was a period during which a number of religions flourished under an indigenous king, the prosperity of whose kingdom rested on maritime trade. The social configuration of the later centuries was marked by the changes brought about by increasing Brahmin migration and Brahmin supremacy.

Part A. Social space - Early centuries (up to 800 AD Before Brahminisation)

The traveler’s records help to throw light on the past socio-political structure of Malabar. Many historians are of the opinion that the three ancient dynasties of south India, the Cera, Chola and Pandya described in Sangam work (‘muvarasar’ mentioned in old Tamil anthologies or ‘tinai’songs’38), were most probably of indigenous tribal origin. The ancient Cera kingdom of the Sangam age was probably a Dravidian kingdom. Lemerciner39 supports the view that a clan type organization of political power, the ancient concept of collective power- ‘koottu vazhai’ and clan custom of ‘Mutakury vazhai’ – leadership given to the eldest chieftain each lineage, indicting a hierarchical structure. M.G.S. Narayanan suggests that the prosperity of the kingdom was due to its trans marine

38 Geo-ecological division of ancient Tamilakam
39 Lemerciner, Religion... Op cit. p 46.
trade. Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varrier also suggest the absence of infrastructure development of a state but do not deny the possibility of an independent trade group with their own warriors, indicated by the presence of Jewish and Christian settlements in the early centuries. The continued presence of full-time foreign traders, the ever-growing demand and supply of spices and such goods and the development of several port towns along the Malabar sea coast. More over this land was famous for pepper and other spices even in centuries before Christ.

Ancient societies were considered as mutually related totalities with natural plurality. Keralam was famous for its non-confrontationist communal relations and plurality of religions. This plurality of religions is attributed to its geographic trade links all over the world, from time immemorial. This was mainly due to the geographical location of the land in western seaboard, at the center of the international highway of sea-borne trade. The presence of Vedic religions - Budhist viharas and Jain chaityas, in Vanchi, the political center of Cera kingdom and the ancient port town, Muziris, is described in Tamil anthologies, Chilappathikaram and Manimeghala and in Tinai songs. The social configuration of Malabar, in the early centuries AD consists of heterogeneous religio-cultural group

40 M.G.S. Narayanan, Perumals. Op cit p 85.
consisting of Tribals, Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, Jews, Christians and Muslims. Lemercinier observes in Kerala society a plurality of religious systems, not only of religion as such but also plurality within each religion. He also notes the co-existence of different religious groups without conflict, with the relationship between religious belonging of castes and ethnic groups, the religious factor as a component of the culture of each of these groups. There was no demarcation of social and religious space in ancient societies. Durkheim holds the view that religion is central to the beliefs and modes of conduct, which cohere the ancient society ('less developed society'). Religious beliefs express the character of the social totality and that religion is considered to be the original source of all forms of thought.\(^43\) 

Historians assume that in the traditional rural setting of ancient Malabar, there was no hierarchical order, either of a particular community or their gods. The predominance of tradition and custom is characteristic of such societies. M. Muralidharan\(^44\) points out that 'the traditions were linked together, not by a common community but by a common set of rules that were either implicit or explicit in manuals or logic'. In each 'tinai' the 'Sampradayas' (rules or customary practices) were forms of life in themselves. There was no lay community attached to each sampradaya but

a common outside world of householders or there were no hard and fast rules to demarcate each community. He further argues that, in the absence of clearly defined lay communities in terms of sampradaya, it was possible for the natural assimilation of more religious groups or communities into the existing dynamic heterogeneous society. The presence of Budha viharas and Jain Temples in ancient Malabar, the acceptance of Syrian Christian and Jewish trading communities by the Cera kings and the assimilation of Brahmins in the existing social formation can be explained in this background.

In ancient Malabar no one religion performed an all-inclusive ideological function for the whole ensemble, preventing the existence of other religions in pre-historic period. This resulted in the religious plurality of the region. The religious system may have played an important role in the identity formation of various communities here. Each community had its own legends about their origin, and all these legends had some religious connotations connected with their genealogy and development. Before the spread of the temple centered religious system of the Brahmins, ancestral worship, worship of the ‘totem tree’ and stones, kavu and distinct gods for each ‘tinai’ were the characteristic feature of Dravidian religious practice. Different communities have different ways of worship without any hierarchical order.\footnote{M. Muralidharan observes that the religious practice prevalent in the land was a religious system in which different communities had different ways of worship. Temples associated with chieftains like Padmanabha Swami temple of Trivandrum and the one at Ampalapuzha: practices associated with Kavu meant for Bhagawati worship, a distinct feature of nair community, family shrines for ancestral worship, that in many times related...}
Religious Practices of the Syrian Christians

The Syrian Christians trace their origin to the tradition of St. Thomas who is believed to come to the Malabar Coast in the first century A.D. But there is no epigraphic evidence to support this claim. The Syrian Christians of Kerala believe in the apostolic origin, that they are the descendants of those who converted to Christianity by St. Thomas himself from higher caste. In fact there was no caste formation in first centuries. This is the basis of their tradition and identity as well, distinguishing them from the other indigenous communities from time immemorial. The nature of their religious and to some extent their social organization is inscribed in the St. Thomas tradition itself, in the establishment of seven Churches with priests selected hereditarily from certain families, organized under a supreme religious authority, hereditarily from pakalomattom family. There is no evidence about the nature of the community organization or religious practices of the original St. Thomas Christians. Jacob Kollaparampil suggests that, they may have organized in groups formed of kinship relations around local parishes, under the priests selected from among them as the term 'Desathu pattakkaran' denotes and was the practice in later centuries. The church administration also may have entrusted to the elders with Kaleri, less institutionalized worship of izhavas and the practices associated with Kavu of other craft jatis and Budhaviharas and Jaintemles. A highly segmented form of worship is noticed. The shaiva and vaishnava cult associated with 32 Brahmin settlements, popularized by 'Bhakti' movement. 'Hindu... Op. cit., 241.

Malankara (near Cranganore), Koottakkayal (Paraur), Falur(chavakkat), Kokkamangalam, Niranam, Quilon and Chayal (Nilakkal).

and the 'Yogam' or the church assembly, as was the practice of the later centuries.

The first evidence about the social formation of the period is from the Malabar Christian Copper Plate Deed, given to Thomas of Cana the West Asian merchant prince who settled down here, by Ceraman Perumal, the legendary Cera king. T.K. Joseph gives the date of arrival of Thomas of Cana as 315 AD and M.G.S. Narayanan as 535 AD. The picture evolved from the charters is that of a stratified society, different kinship groups or communities, having their own specific and rigid religious and social customs and norms. Their position in the hierarchy was decided by the privileges sanctioned by the rulers. It seems that economic factors also played an important role in the sanction of social privileges. As merchants and traders the Christians of this period may had the access of economic capital which in turn helped them to gain cultural capital as sanctions and privileges through the ruler’s favour.

In traditional societies, the whole identity or sense of being was expressed through religion. As Stuart Hall and Gay observe, 'religion has really performed the function of social identity. If religion constituted one of the principal component of group and religious identity in Malabar, so

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48 T.K. Joseph, "The Malabar Christian Copper Plates" in *Kerala Society Papers*, Series 4, p. 204. This Copper Plate grant is missing since 1544 AD. The translation of which is kept in Vatican and British museum.


far as the symbolic medium, both socially shaped and shaping, then it was one of the key cultural factors which conditioned the very existence or the habitus of the social groups. The authors further argue that the religious forms may have been the only cultural resource that human beings have to make sense of their world in the pre-historic period. In one historical social formation after another religion has been bound up in particular ways, wired up very directly as the cultural and ideological underpinning of a particular structure of power. In these societies there were powerful, immensely strong ties of tendential forces, articulating that religious formation to political, economic and ideological structures. In such societies it is impossible to detach religion from its historical embeddedness. Historically, it has been inserted into particular cultures, in a particular way, over a long period of time, and thus constitutes the magnetic lines of tendency, which are very difficult to disrupt.

Social space of the Syrian Christians

The Syrian Christians became numerically significant around fifth century. Cosmos Indicopleustus who came to Malabar in 522 A.D reported the presence of Christians in Malabar, in 'Universal Christian Topography'.

The Syrian Christian identity and their belief of the superior position of their ancestors in the traditional social space is based on the 72 social

privileges granted to Thomas of Cana. The 72 aristocratic privileges (viduper) 'beginning with earth and water for marriages, the right to employ day lamp, decorative cloth, palanquin, umbrella, kettle drum, trumpet, gateway, arch, arched roof, weapon' given to the tenants of the nagaram and to the Ancuvanam and Manigramam (Syrian Christian fascicle2). According to this charter Thomas of Cana was given the title 'Cocurangen Cananeo' - the Cera Emperor's merchant supreme, the city of Cranganore and jungle near by, which he converted into a town with a church and 62 houses. In addition to this by giving him the title of 'Mappilai', which was inferred as the son-in-law to the king, he was elevated to a very dignified position. Besides the social privileges of using seven kinds of musical instruments and palanquin or elephant as a vehicle, he and his posterity, associates and relations, as well as followers of his faith were granted five kinds of taxes. These factors indicate clearly that Syrian Christians were accorded a higher position in the social space.

Disposition of women

There is no direct evidence to assess the position of women in the social configuration of the period, especially that of Syrian Christian women. In clan settlements and kinship groups, the identity was relational. The knowledge was the past experiences of the group as a whole and was imparted by the elders of the group. It is generally assumed that women

enjoyed an equal status to that of men in Cera society as in other kingdoms of Tamilakam. The only evidence to support this view is the presence of women among Sangam poets, who were drawn from all walks of life and of all tribes in Tamilakam. From these accounts it seems that in traditional society there was a custom of women to perform dances in groups to propitiate the gods. Since it had a religious connotation, this might have taken place in temple premises during festivals. Christian women may have no participation in these performances, occupying different religious space and strictly adhering to patriarchal practices.

**Part B. Evolution of Social space from 800 to 1500 A.D.**

The available historic evidences point out that the prosperity of ancient kingdoms here may have been associated with the development of trade centers, the ancient Cera empire with that of the maritime trade center of the port town Cranganore (old Tamil Songs), Cera kingdom of Mahodayapuram (800-1200 A.D.) with Cranganore and the development of Venatu as an important principality with the development of Kuraikkoni Kollam (According to Tarsappaally copper plate deed, the establishment of

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54 M.G.S. Narayanan considers the age of Ceras between 800 AD- 1200 AD and considers them as the successors of a branch of ancient Cera kings who followed matriliney. Archeological, epigraphically, and literary evidences in the forms of inscriptions, Old Tamil anthologies in addition to the charters, suggest the period of the 'Ceras of Mahodayapuram' from 800-1200 A.D.
Kollam Nagaram was by Mar Sapir Iso in 825 AD\textsuperscript{55} as an important harbour city. The popularity of Kollam era (the establishment of Kollam town) which was restricted with in the city during the Cera period, eventually came to be widely followed in Malabar, showing the popularity of the town\textsuperscript{56}. Syrian Christian history is invariably connected with these ancient trade centers, for they were traders and merchants according to tradition. It was mainly through the charters given by the then rulers to the west Asian and other merchants and their associates that we get a glimpse about the socio-political configuration of the region.

There is no historical evidence to show how the ancient Cera kingdom declined and the agency responsible for that. It is assumed that the second Cera Kingdom of Mahodayapuram or Kulasekhara kingdom had its roots from the former. The basic structures (rule- resource sets implicated in the institutional articulation of social systems)\textsuperscript{57}, were stretched over to the latter. The reign of later Cera kingdom of the Perumals of Mahodayapuram or Makotai is considered as a transformative period in which a distinct socio-political structure evolved with a temple centered administrative system. By 5\textsuperscript{th} century AD Brahmin migration intensified to this region. The major change took place in the transformation of clan settlements and the gradual decline of Jainism and

\textsuperscript{57} Anthony Giddens, The constitution of Society, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p377 (rule- resource sets implicated in the institutional articulation of social systems)
Budhism due to the spread of Brahmin ideology and religious practices. The presence of several Brahmin settlements, side by side with the well organized Syrian Christian and Jewish merchant guilds. Manigramam and Ancuvanam was a distinct feature of this period. Historians regard this period as the one in which caste system was introduced in Malabar by increasing Brahmin migration and the resulted division of labour based on heredity. The formation of a new language from Tamil and Sanskrit, Malayalam also evolved during increasing Brahmin supremacy. The end of Cera dynasty around 1122-24 AD, coincides with the transformation of the districts of Cera kingdom into independent principalities or ‘swaroopams’. By the time of the decline of the second Cera kingdom Brahmin supremacy was well established in the social configuration of the land. The powerful merchant guilds declined gradually.

Emerging Social space revealed through various charters

The social totality is revealed through the copper plate grants. It is also considered as the first clear land marks in Cera chronology. Syrian Christian copper plates (The Quilon Tarissa Church copper plates

59 MGS Narayanan, Perumals... Op. cit., The disintegration of the Cera kingdom of Makotai, according to Keralolpathi legend is that the last Perumal gave power to the governors of various nadu, accepted Islam and went to Mecca with Muslim merchants. A Cola record, dated 1122 AD refer to a Ceraman. Another record dated 1126 mentions the second regnal year of an independent ruler in venadu, fixing the end of Perumals reign as 1124 AD. Perspectives of Kerala History, Vol.2, Part2, p 263.
60 Raghava Varrier and Rajan Gurukkal in Kerala Charithram and M.G.S Narayanan in Perumals of Kerala.
Fascicle1-three plates, last missing, fascicle2-Four plates, first missing and Iravicortan’s copper plates) and Jewish copper plates. A lot of particulars are available regarding the land relations, revenue rights, judicial powers, mercantile monopoly and political jurisdiction in the nagaram through royal sanctions. It is noted in the copperplate grant that the ‘ilavars’ (Ezhavas) were allowed to bring their carts to the bazaar and the fort to do their business as well as the ‘vannars’, indicating the absence of distant pollution and untouchability, characteristic of caste system prevalent in Kerala during later periods. A glimpse of the governmental structure, headed by the Cera kings, who were sovereign hereditary monarch, is available from the above grant. The monarchy was constituted by several nadus (districts), ruled by natuutaiyavar or natuvalumavar,61 each naidu comprised of several villages and corporations of trading and agricultural communities. The headman of Ancuvanam and Manigramam (Joseph Ramban and Iravicortan) were ranked (hereditarily) equal to that of the chieftains of the naidu. The headmen of the trading corporations, Joseph Ramban and Iravicortan were raised with hereditary rank (at least nominal), equal to that of the chieftains of the ‘nudu’. The institution of ‘munnuruvar’ (group of 300), ‘annuruvar’ (500), ‘arunnuruvar’ (600), ‘elunnuruvar’ etc. mainly constituted of nairs, present in the naidu and kingdoms were responsible for the maintenance of law and order. The duty

61 ibid. Natu utaiyavar- governor of the district ruled independently under the king and may have been sending feudal regiments to support the king in wars.
of these nair associations, according to 'Keralolpathi' "was to prevent the rights from being curtailed or suffered to fall into disuse". In short the custodians of ancient rights and customs. In fascicle 2, the protection of the church and the land was entrusted to the 'arunnuruvar' with the Ancuvanam and Manigramam. It is inferred that the social status of the Jew's and Syrian Christian's associations were similar to that of the Nairs.

Side by side with the development of the nagara, a temple-centered village organization was progressing with the Brahmin settlements. One major development with the decline of second Cera empire in twelveth century was the transformation of the Brahmin settlements into big agrarian corporations, known as the sankethams, with large territories of their own, and controlling the rural economy. These brahmanical establishments had strong alliance with the political powers (Swaroopams) by giving priestly assistance to enter into Kshatriya status for the naduvazhis and the chieftains who had a tribal ancestry.

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62 M.G.S, Perumals... Op. cit., pp 109-111, Rajan Gurukkel. The Kerala Temples & Early Medieval agrarian System, Valithol Vidya peetham, 1992, p.34, the charters of some smaller Brahmin settlements, Panniyur and Coikkiram and several other temple inscriptions around 1168 AD, reveal that the hereditary proprietorship ('uranmaitanam') was given by the governor to the Brahmins. The general political structure of the 'ur' or gramam is that 'uralar' ('nattar') formed the general body of the village assembly, group of Brahmin land owners and express feudal oligarchic pattern, were responsible for the management of temples and villages.

63 M.G.S. op, cit. p. 112, The agrarian expansion was multifacial. In addition to the devaswam (of the temples) and Brahamaswam (of Brahmins), the military lords also got the ownership of land by way of service tenure with administrative, judicial and military power.
Revenue system in Manigramam

Revenue was shared among various authorities of the district, nagaram and village. The taxes were fixed. The land tax, when leased out- 1/10th share to the sovereign (ko-pattvaram) and 1/10th share to the overlord, was given to Ancuvanam and Manigramam. All the occupational taxes64 were exempted or remitted for the service tenants given to the church. The customs duties (1/60 duty at the time of entrance and at the time of sale, 8 kasu per carriage at the time of entrance and departure) were exempted for the tenants of the nagaram. Taxes were to be fixed for taxable articles and the prices of articles had to be fixed in consultation with ancuvanam and manigramam. Standards in weights of measures (‘varakkol’, ‘kappan’ and ‘paincakkandy’) were to be kept by Sapiir Iso and the weighing fee was given to the church. The ancuvanam and manigramam was also entrusted with to keep the duty collected each day65.

Social space of Syrian Christians

Most of the historians agree to the fact that by about ninth century Christians were able to find a space in the social formation of the region. ‘Ancuvanam’ and ‘Manigramam’ mentioned in the Syrian Christian copper

64 T.K. Joseph Op. cit., p 204 'Talaikanam (fetter fee), enikkanam (ladderfee), mania meppan kollum erai' (tax for permission to thatch house), 'cantan mattu meni pponnu' (Per capita gold payment for cantan), 'polipponnu' (gold payment for special occasions), 'iravi coru' (night meal for soldiers), 'kuta nali' (may be landlord's share of toddy)
plates are considered as Jewish and Syrian Christian Trade Corporations.\textsuperscript{66} The Jewish and Christian merchant power guilds – the Ancuvanam and Manigram were very powerful during this period as king’s representative in trading activities of the land, decides the kind of articles and price of articles, enjoyed the monopoly of maritime trade as evident from the copperplates. According to this copper plate grant\textsuperscript{67}, the Perumals granted the management of the nagaram, administrative as well as the judicial to the tenants-Ancuvanam and Manigramam together. Some judicial powers were also given to these merchant corporations by the ‘water contract birth right’; they had the power to punish offences of the service tenants and to levy fines.\textsuperscript{68} They had also the right to withhold the tribute to the king.\textsuperscript{69} This indicates the superior and powerful social status of Syrian Christians in the social formation.

A continued prosperity of the Syrian Christians can be inferred from Iravicortan’s copper plate grant.\textsuperscript{70} Iravicortan was given in addition to the social privileges, the office of the manigramam, probably the headship of the Craganore merchants and all other merchants (‘Ceraman loka perumchetty’), artisan class made subservient to him, monopoly of over

\textsuperscript{66} Dr. Gundert (William Logan) and many other historians like T.K. Joseph, Gurukkal, M.G.S. Narayanan are of this view.
\textsuperscript{67} T.K. Joseph, op. cit. p 204, William Logan, op. cit. pp 110-120, Gurukkal, op. cit., The Kerala..., index.
\textsuperscript{68} ibid. ‘If they commit any offence what so ever, the palliyar arone shall enquire into them’ p 205.
\textsuperscript{69} ibid ‘If they had any grievances, the y are authorized to redress the grievance even by obstructing the payment of duty and weighing fee’.
\textsuperscript{70} ibid p 205.
land and sea-borne trade, brokerage of all sorts of goods, and customs duty or toll as heritage possessions. According to Rajan Gurukkal\textsuperscript{71} the second charter (Iravicortan's) reveals higher institutional manifestations of manigramam and shows the establishment of regional base of servicing with the royal sanction. He is of opinion that the status inferred upon the merchant was politically and socially to that of Panniyur and Cokkiram, the Brahmin corporations of the time, or that of the rulers of the nadu such as Venadu, Otanadu, Eranadu or Valluvanadu, who were present on the occasion of the grant. This elevation of the merchant headman to the princely status in the contemporary polity and society through royal charters is a unique event seen only in the history of Kerala. John De Maringoli (1348 AD) reported that Quilon Christians were in his day masters of public weighing system, and stated that pepper grows in gardens and its proprietors are the Christians of St, Thomas.\textsuperscript{72}

**Evolution of the caste system**

Gradually this Brahmin oligarchy gained dominance in the social formation. It was a very complex process involving political, social and religious factors. Dr. Cornish observes, “the whole caste system as it has come down to us, bears unmistakable evidence of Brahmanical

A gradual legitimization of the supremacy of Brahmin gods through myths and legends is observed during this period. Through their dominance in the religious field, they may have acquired the symbolic capital. Then it would have been easy to spread their supremacy to other fields, establishing the caste system. Through codes and regulations, various groups or communities previously differentiated on the basis of religious practices, were arranged in the social space in a hierarchical order, according to their occupation. Manual labour was devalued for work was considered polluting. Communities were gradually graded according to their birth or ‘Kulathozhil’. No escape possible by this categorisation or Caste mobility was virtually impossible.

William Logan, *Malabar Manual* Op. cit., p 110. “The natural explanation of origin of caste is that the later Aryan colonialists in order to preserve their individuality and supremacy, wanted to distinguish themselves from the earlier and partly degenerated Aryans and the brown and black raises of the country made some hard and fast rules”. The name ‘jati’ itself is of Sanskrit origin, connected with ‘jenmam’ or birth. Similarly ‘karalar’ and ‘karanmei’ are also Sanskrit origin. Such a practice of leasing out the land that was one’s birthright and the title jenmi was unknown to a tribal system.

According to the Parsurama legend land of Kerala was created and donated by ParasuRama. Once the supremacy of the Brahmin gods were established, these gods were made inaccessible to others through rules and regulations. Only Brahmins of noble origin were allowed to study and practice Vedas and all others were kept along different distances from the most sacred and the place of worship. The hierarchy worked in two ways: one by ordering the people along different distances from the places were the sacred was not concentrated. More legends were created to ensure the inferior nature of the local gods, like the ineffectiveness of the magic of the lower caste on upper caste people and the namputhiris power to subdue ‘yakshis’ and other lower spirits. M. Muralidharan; “Role of... Op. cit., p 242.

ibid. The Brahmins when they became the legitimizers of the code and conduct of the society, included those who were useful to them in higher caste category, as rulers, officers, commanders and soldiers. The kings, whose patronage was essential, was given the Kshatriya status even though they were of tribal lineage and for this certain rituals were introduced, making them the protectors of dharma—the Brahmin, the cow and the caste system. Sudra status was given to the skilled workers, gradually relegated the rest to the position of serfs and slaves to work in the field, making them outcastes. Those who resisted the system were pushed back to the forests to lead a semi-nomadic life.
In addition to this the matrimonial alliance known as ‘sambadham’ of the high caste Namputhiris with the matrilineal families of the naduvazhis and chieftains, resulted in the formation of a graded level of aristocracy. According to Brahmin customary law, the possession of land was possible only by one’s own birth in that community. The ‘Jenmi’ means one who got land by ‘Jenmam’. Most of the land was gradually taken over by the priestly class. Tribal population was turned into menial workers. The concord between the two upper sections of society, namely the Brahmins and Kshtriyas, the priestly class and the ruling class, established and maintained through various strategies is considered as the chief building block of caste system.

This differentiation and stratification of the social formation were reproduced through practices like the introduction of distance pollution and untouchability. The Brahmins were the ritually pure community. Specific rules were formulated for all other communities to keep the spatial distance from the Brahmins in a graded level. This decided their position in the caste space. Each caste and sub-caste had specific spatial position in the hierarchy. Even among the so-called outcaste there were further spatial divisions. Each and every subdivision considered themselves in superior

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position to some other group. The caste system thus established the Brahmin hegemony.

The Syrian Christians were outside the formation of this caste system, as people not directly connected with the agrarian system and having its own religious practices based on their own myths and legends. They have recreated the St. Thomas legend according to which St. Thomas converted high caste Brahmins to Christianity, during this period to establish their position in the caste hierarchy. They were also keen in maintaining their caste position, for as traders and merchants, their interaction was mainly with higher castes. The increasing Brahmin supremacy including the ownership of land, side by side with the formation of a number of 'swaroopams' in which the Syrian Christians have no active participation (diminishing social capital) may have detrimentally affected the position of Syrian Christian community as a whole in the evolving social space.

The capital of the Perumal may have continued to flourish as port town for a few more years as indicated by Iravicotans Copperplate, granted by Vira Raghava Chakravorthi, most probably in 1320 AD, which is still extant. The witnesses of this copper plate grant include the

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77 T.K. Joseph, op. cit. p 204. According to Gundert the fully ordained secular priests of Syrian church known as 'catanars' was derived from the word 'cartan'.

78 By Keihorn, T.K. Joseph, op. cit. 204 and also evident from some Sandesa Kavya of 14th and 15th centuries.
heads of Panniyur and Chovur Brahmin villages. After the Iravicotan’s charter there is no evidence of the Syrian Christian trade corporations. They may have migrated from Cranganore when the Mohammadans obtained the trade monopoly in this region. The gradual disappearance of prominent trade guilds, giving way to individual merchants is a noted feature of this period. Documentary evidence apart from tradition reveals commercial favours granted by kings and chiefs to Christian colonies like those in old Kampolams (markets), angadies and iheruvu of Thiruvancode, Kollam, Kayamkulam, Kallada, Thiruvalla, Kottayam, Muttom, Parur, Irinjalakuda, Paloor and many other important centers in Travancore, Cochin and British Malabar. Chetti, Tharakan, Mudalali are three titles used by several old Christian families even today, noting their merchant tradition.

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80 M.R. Raghava Varier, “Socio Economic Structure” in *Perspectives on Kerala History*. P 117. According to Keralolpathi tradition and from the records of Sheikh Ibn Batuta (1342-47 AD) the development of Kozhikode as a prominent trade center predominated by Arabs and Mohammadans were described. The same tradition explains that the prominence of the Zamorin of Nediyirupu Swroopam with the assistance of a rich Mohammadan merchant, Ma Huan records the appointment of two officers directly by the king to supervise the buying and selling of articles when a treasure ship arrives. Various travelers’ records during this period do not mention the presence of Syrian Christians or Jewish merchant Guilds.
81 Ibid. p 118. An increase in the number of port towns and interior markets were registered, indicating the development of regional power centers.
82 T.K. Joseph, “Kings and Christians of Kerala” in *Kerala Society Papers*. p 112. Like Ceraman Perumal, Kuttuvan and other kings of pre Muslim period, later kings and kinglets of Kerala specially invited surian Christians to their capital gave land tax-free and built their shops and churches.
Religious space of Syrian Christians

The religious and social life of the Syrian Christians was organized around the church. According to the charter, the jungle given to Thomas of Cana, was converted into a town with a church and 62 houses. It is probable that they may have built their residences near by the church for, the land was given to the church by the rulers as evident from the later copper plate grants also. In the Tarsappally Copper plates, the church was given extensive land as 'Karanmei'. The Ancuvanam and Manigramam took up the tenancy of the ‘nagaram’ with various service tenants and slaves. These tenants were given to ‘guarantee that the church is not lacking anything in the form of oil etc, by sawing what is to be sawn, giving what is to be given”.

There are various indications of the centrality of religion and religious practices in their social life. The archdeacon, who was the native head of the Christian Churches was the social leader of the community also, although the presence of foreign prelates is suggested. According to

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84 One family of ‘Tachar’ (carpenters), four families of ‘velliars’ (agricultural people connected with cultivation), two families of ‘---’-(not clear), four families of ‘illaver’ (toddy tappers), one family of ‘vannars’ (washermen) ibid.
85 M.G.S: Perumals... Op. cit. Existence of slavery is well evident from the charters, ‘slave tax shall not be realized for the slaves purchased by them’. M.G.S. opines ‘talaivilai’ and ‘mulaivilai’ (headprice and breast price) as the owners: right to sell male and female tenants to slavery for committing serious offences or a fine for killing one of these people and amount received when a slave girl was given out in marriage.
86 ibid
Kollaparampil, the archdeaconate with its proper title started in India with the arrival of Thomas of Cana, as the title had the origin in the east Syrian Church. In later centuries the ‘Jatikku kartavian’, also became known as archdeacon, was the supreme head of the community. The east Syrian connection of the St. Thomas Christians start with Thomas of Cana and bishop Joseph of Uraha, who accompanied him.

The first evidence of an organized church in Malabar in 6th century is from the account of Cosmos Indicoplestus and he mentions the presence of bishops ordained in Persia. The two bishops came with the West Asian merchant, Maravan Sapir Eso, Mar Sapro and Mar Prodh in AD 825, evident from the Tarsapplly copperplates, this pointing to the presence of an established church. There is evidence for the St. Thomas Christians sending a delegation of 3 well-instructed men to Mar Semeon, the catholic patriarch of the East, to obtain bishops in 1504 AD. One of them died on the journey and the other two George and Joseph were ordained as priests and sent with them two bishops and “they were received with great joy by those believers, who came to meet them with gladness carrying before them the book of gospels, the Cross, censers (thuribles), and torches, and they introduced them with great pomp and the singing of

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88 Philippose EM, The Indian church of St. Thomas, 1907 In a reply of Mar thoma V1, the then Bishop of Indian Jacobites, to the madras Government on 20th April, 1812, he stated that all archdeacons of India from AD 345 to 1653, one metropolitan and 7 bishops had been from the family of pakalomattom.
hymns. They consecrated altars and very many priests for they had long been deprived of bishops. From this account it is clear that the St. Thomas Christians gave much importance to the upkeep of their Christian identity in risking the hazardous journey to obtain the assistance of bishops. The representatives were sufficiently instructed, so that they were ordained priests indicating the constancy of their religious practices even in the absence of bishops and ordained priests. The reception of the priests and the bishops with great pomp, singing hymns and psalms shows a well versed people practicing their religion. Again three bishops were sent to Malabar by the then Catholicos. In their letter they wrote to the Catholicos, there are here about thirty thousand Christian families of the same faith as we.... Now they have begun to build churches and they abound in all things and are mild and peaceful. A religious revival by the arrival of the bishops and the cordial relationship between the native Christians and the foreign bishops is evident from this letter.

The available information points to the autonomous nature of the local churches, governed by the parish assembly or 'yogam' (presided over by the priest) consisted of the ‘elders’ selected from the senior male members of the church. Giving due respect to the elders and seniors were

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90 Rev. H. Hosten, S.J., St. Thomas Christians of Malabar, AD 1490-1504, Bangalore, 1997, p 225. Four Nestorian Bishops, who had been sent out by the head of the Nestorian church, wrote a letter to him concerning their visits, which had awakened religious activity amongst the Christians of St. Thomas.
an invariable custom of these people. Each Parish assembly was independent and autonomous without any hierarchical order and claimed their origin from one of the seven churches established by St. Thomas. This ‘yogam’ decided all the social and ecclesiastical aspects of the community. The main income of the churches was the one tenth of the dowry and income from the church properties, which was managed by the ‘yogam’.

It was the responsibility of this assembly to select the candidates for priesthood, which was also a hereditary office in the past. These candidates were trained locally by learned priest known as ‘malpan’ in his house similar to that of the gurukula institute of learning. Sometimes there were more than three priests of different generations in one family at a time. All Cathnars (priests) held equal rights in administrating sacraments, conducting marriage ceremonies, burying the dead etc. The old priests were held in great respect and the income was equally distributed among them. The means of subsistence of the Parish clergy was provided from the properties of the church, from the benefactions made by the people to the church and from the fee for marriages, baptisms, and funeral feast. The striking factor is that the priest were selected by the ‘yogam’ from among the parish members, designated as ‘desathu pattakkaran’. The candidates

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93 Mundadan A.M, History of Christianity in India, Theological publications in India Bangalore, 1984, p 190.
for the priesthood were brought before the metropolitan with a recognition letter of the parish known as the ‘deshakuri’. The priest was subject to the control of the ‘palliuyogam’. These parish assemblies followed traditional customs and manners. Scaria Zachariah (1994) is of the opinion that, as there was no system of ‘yogam’ in the East Syrian or Western churches, this could be considered as the most significant element of Syrian Christian peoples’ indigenous identity.

In addition to the parish assembly or ‘edavaka yogam’, there were regional assemblies or ‘pradeshika yogam’ and general assemblies ‘pothu yogam’. Selected members of the parish assemblies constituted these assemblies. The regional assembly decided punishments. The general assembly was presided over by the Archdeacon or ‘Jathikku Karthavyan’, the one who is responsible for the community. This was the highest authority of the community. The bishop, mostly from the west Asian countries were honored, received their pre-requisites, but seldom interfered in the administration of the local church. No ecclesiastical community questioned the decisions taken by the general assembly. The presence of churches and number of houses near by, in the old commercial centers,

known as 'angadis', indicate that they followed the traditional pattern of community organization in the new settlements also. In all probability, the increasing Brahmin influence in the following centuries had little impact on the religious structure of the community. It seems that these religious customs and practices (structures) were continued until intervened by an external agency, in the form of the Portuguese.

**Disposition of Women**

The position of women in the social configuration can be assessed from the prevalent social practices of the period. As observed above the position of women the spread of Brahmin ideology resulted in the stratification of the social formation, devaluing the manual jobs as polluting, placing the traditional occupation that requires physical work in graded categories, the work and workers closely related to land in the lowest strata. The regulations were inscribed in the spatial distance allotted to various castes. Each caste and community had their own rules and regulations for women, within their caste space. In the traditional social space of Malabar, there was no common category of 'women' as such. The division was based more on the caste and communal lines than that of gender. They were part of the caste group to which they belong, constrained by the caste and religious practices. Meanwhile the position of women was inferior to that of men with in the caste space due to their biological difference. According to the rules and regulation based on purity and pollution, women were
considered doubly polluting, especially in certain periods of their life due to their biological difference. In early tribal culture menstruation or attaining the reproductive capacity was a matter of celebration\(^9\). But in caste society it became a means of discrimination of women. In tribal societies the sexes were considered as complementary, their roles and status different, but equal\(^1\). The reproductive work as well as the domestic work was devalued in caste society, degrading the position of women.

In Indian context female sexuality is controlled by caste and class factors\(^2\) and patriarchy. Indian society is highly hierarchical. This hierarchy is visible within the family (of sex, age, ordinal position and so on), with in the community (of caste, occupation, lineage, wealth etc). In addition to the caste practices, the Brahmins and the Syrian Christians followed patriarchal practices. The Brahmins community occupying the uppermost strata of the caste based social formation, had the most stringent patriarchal practices in addition to the caste rules and regulations about chastity for women. Only the eldest son of the family had the right to marriage from the same community (the younger one enter in to ‘sambantham’ with Nair women). So a number of women remain unmarried. Their women were strictly confined to the domestic space with

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\(^9\) Indu Idappally, “Kerala samskarathil streeyude sathva nirmithi” (the creation of subjectivity of women in Kerala culture) in 500 Years of Keralam , Chila Arivalayalangal (maiy), ed. by V. J. Varghese, VijayaMohanan Pillai, Kottayam, 1991, p 326.


specific codes of conduct, as their name denotes, ‘antarjanam’. Girls were married young before attaining puberty. They were not allowed to go out of the house (mana, illam), even to visit the houses of close relatives or see any men other than the husband. They had to wear white dress, no gold but silver or brass ornaments.

The practice of matriliney among Nairs and some other communities is reported during this period pointing to a certain extent of freedom for women, belonging to this community. Here also the head of the family was the elder most male member and the decision-making authority of the family.

The division of labour based on gender is practiced in traditional period. This phenomenon is a social construction and social structure. It appears to represent the natural order of the world, since it is based on the division of sexual labour and thus has a biological foundation. Simone De Beauvoir notes that a woman experiences her body, sexuality and feminine identity as a social being located in a particular cultural setting with its dominant values and norms. She holds the view that the psychological and behavioural aspects of ‘sex’ are the products of

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patriarchal cultures and not the inevitable products of biological differences
and woman is a biological and not a social historical category, even though
all the behavior associated with femininity is attributed to biology. Hence
their identity and dispositions (habitus) was formed according to
that. Tradition incorporates power relations and tends to naturalize them.
This is very true in the case of gender relations. Gender differences are
deeply enshrined in tradition and resonant with concealed power. The
absence of women in the public domain and the ongoing attempts to keep
them in the domestic space by creating new norms can be analysed in this
background.

Disposition of Syrian Christian women

The Syrian Christians adopted the patriarchal nature of Christian tradition.
Moreover, as followers of monotheistic religions of West-Asian origin
(compared to that of indigenous religions of tribal origin, ancestral worship
and plurality of gods), and occupying the same position in the social space
as traders and merchants Syrian Christians might have been more
influenced by the patriarchal culture of the Jews. The Syrian Christian
community adhered strictly to patriarchal customs and practices in
religious and social field. The whole life style and customary practices,
religious as well as social of the Syrian Christians were based on St.

105 ibid. p 295.
106 Anthony Giddens, "Living in a Post Traditional Society" in Reflexive Modernisation, ed. U.
Thomas tradition summarized in the term "marthomayude margavum vazhipadum" (can be translated as the life style and pilgrimage according to Mar Thoma), indicating the importance given to the religious practices in their life. All the religions are andocentric and Christianity was not an exception. It was the ‘elders’ who were the decision-making body and members of the idavaka yogam or pothuyogam. Women were not present in these bodies and had no place in the religious hierarchy. Their sole social appearance may have been the occasional attendance at church services.

The traditional belief of higher social status is associated with the social privileges granted to the West Asian merchant Thomas of Cana and Mar Sapir Iso. It is believed that a group of people, including women came with Thomas of Cana. The association of the native Christians with the new arrivals may have strengthened the patriarchal structure of the community. It may have also influenced their life style and the way of dressing. In domestic life also the respect given to the elders is legendary. The youngsters never sat before the elders or participated in their conversation unless specifically asked. So the decision-making process of the home also rested upon the elder most male members of the family. The community was patrilineal. Patriarchy always attributes a lower social position to women. The word ‘patriarchy’ denotes the rule of the father or patriarch. It refers to a social system where the father controls all members
of the family, all property and other economic resources and makes all major decisions. Linked to this social system, is the belief or the ideology that man is superior to women, that women are and should be controlled by men and are part of a man’s property. Patriarchy in its wider definition means the manifestation and institutionalization of male domination over women and children in the family and the extension of male domination over women in society general. It also shows the power relationship between men and women which prevent women from the access to property, education and other basic amenities as well as to division of labour which take control over women’s labour, sexuality and fertility. Max Weber considers patriarchy as a form of traditional power. Feminism holds the view that patriarchy is the main structure that oppresses women. The rigid observances of the patriarchal practices may have confined women strictly to the domestic space. In this space their interaction with the outside social world was limited. Their only contact would have been with the women of their kinship or family during religious functions and family ceremonies. In the day-to-day life their dealings were confined to the servants and slaves. Their knowledge of the outside world might have been through the conversations of the men of the family, which they overhear, since these were not discussed with women.

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Conclusion

The overall picture emerging may be said to be the increasing subordination of women of almost all communities in the caste society. In traditional social space there was continuum between religious practices and social practices. Hence along with caste, the patriarchal religious and family structure had its influence on the disposition of Syrian Christian women. The division of labour based on gender in vogue from traditional period onwards also affected the position of women.