Chapter 6

Discussions and Conclusion

The present research on “Cultural Landscape and Architecture of Medieval Churches of Kerala” has been carried out with three broad objectives; to understand the antiquity of Christianity; second, to identify the cultural landscape of the Churches and third, the nature of architecture of the Medieval Churches. There has been an endeavour to understand the establishment of churches within the political, economic and religious landscape of south central Kerala, their similarities and dissimilarities both in architecture as well as decorations and their religious functions. Apart from this, it also aims to understand the differences in architecture of Churches belong to various denominations of Christianity. It analyses the archaeological data from various sources like epigraphy, numismatics, sculptural and paintings in relation to the historical interpretations of Christianity. Furthermore, field survey has been oriented in documenting several regional cultural environment of Christianity, location of the churches and the Christian settlements. Again an attempt has been made to look into various rituals associated with different denominations, especially, certain churches where practices have been quite close to the regional local traditions seen in the other communities like Hindus. For the first time, an attempt has been made to prepare the layout of the Church plans and in some cases, the elevations too. The thrust has been to study the architectural features of the churches with the help of freshly prepared layout and the elevation. This has been carried out as most of the Churches have undergone renovations, modifications and displacement of objects in the course of their transition to the present existence. In almost all Churches, the old construction is either not remaining or drastically changed to make it look new. The summary of the research findings, observations, interpretations and the scope for the further research are described below.

6.1 Antiquity of Christianity

Most of the works on Christianity of Malabar coast have attempted to trace their history from the beginning of the Christianity, starting with St. Thomas’ tradition. It is presumed that he arrived around 52 CE. But their interpretations remain unsatisfactory because the source of this inference is based on conjectures regarding
the advent of Christianity in Kerala till the medieval period. Documentation of the first fifteen centuries provides a rather confused and chaotic picture of events. It does not help in creating a chronological frame work of the history of Church activity in the study region. Therefore the present study proposes four broad phases of propagation and consolidation of Christianity in Kerala especially in the Malabar Coast; The first phase that extended from first century C.E. to about 6th century C.E (about which very little is known); second phase; from about 6th century C.E. to the arrival of the Portuguese in Malabar Coast in 1498 C.E.; third phase from about 1498 C.E. to the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653 C.E and the fourth phase from 1653 to the recent times.

The first phase represents the active trade between the Malabar Coast and Indian Ocean region with the Western world as it has been mentioned in the classical texts of Sangam literatures (Akananuru 149) and other travel accounts like the Periplus of Erythraean Sea (PME 53.17.27-8), Pliny’s Natural History(NH 6.104) and Ptolemy’s Geography(Geography 7.1). It is substantiated with recent archaeological findings from the Early Historic sites like Pattanam (Cherian 2009; 2015) and Vizhinjam (Kumar et al. 2013; Abhayan et al. 2014) and findings of Roman gold coins from several hoards. However, regarding Christianity in India, very few evidence are found in the north western part of India. The depiction of crosses near the 2nd century Sogdian inscription at Tankse and crosses engraved on bricks found at Taxila are the rare specimens. These few depictions obviously testify the presence of Christianity and the fact that it was not a totally unknown entity to the Indians. However, these sporadic findings also show that the adherence to Christianity was very scarce and might have probably more associated with the early travellers and traders coming from the West Asia.

The second phase, extending roughly from 6th century C.E. to the arrival of the Portuguese, have much more evidences than the phase I regarding the propagation of Christianity in the Malabar Coast. The first and foremost reference was made by Topographia Christiana of the 6th century C.E. It was followed by several references during the period between 8th Century C.E and 15 century C.E as described in chapter one and three (Iban Hurradadbih in 9th century C.E; Al Buruni c.973; Al Idrisi in c.1160; Al Watwat in 1318; Al Dimasqi in 1327; Abu Al Fida in 1331; Qalqasandi in
The antiquity for this period regarding the Malabar Coast is associated with the Copper plate of Sthanu Ravi in 849 C.E and findings of several Persian cross with Pahlavi script datable to this period. This period marks the emergence of several Christian settlements close to the trade centres not only of Malabar Coast but also on the Coromandel Coast and Sri Lanka. Paintings in the cave no. 1 of Ajanta corroborate the trade link between Persia and the Western Coast of India (Dhawalikar 1973; Griffiths 1983; Yazdani1983). Thus, the present understanding of the antiquity of Christianity in the Malabar Coast begins with this phase. It is the pre-Portuguese Syrian periods which extend from c.6\textsuperscript{th} century C.E to the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 C.E.

The third and the fourth phases correspond to the arrival of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British and their involvement in the religious matters of Malabar Coast. It also witnessed the destruction of several books written in Syriac, renovation of pre-Portuguese churches and construction of new churches, construction of open air crosses and baptismal font in the churches. This period is fully recorded by both the Portuguese and the Dutch. As far as the antiquities of this period are concerned, it is illuminated with various inscriptions on the open air crosses, tomb stones and various palm leaf records in the churches across the study area. These palm leaf records can throw considerable light on the present subject if they can be accessed. Hence, the churches built during the time of the Portuguese and the Dutch are deficient in terms of their antiquity. Most of these churches might have been renovated many a times. However, both the foreign and Indian literatures provide references to their existence.

But certain questions remain unclear as to when Christianity had appeared on the Malabar Coast? Of the four phases, the last two have lot of archaeological and literary references whereas second phase has some credible evidences like the references made by Topographia Christiana of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century C.E, reference made by various Arab and Italian travellers and traders, copper plate of c.849 C.E and several Persian crosses with Pahlavi inscriptions. However, no credible evidence for the presence of Christianity in Malabar Coast during the first phase has been available. Archaeological records from the early historic sites provide evidence of trade and urban settlement but no data for the presence of church during this phase are available so far. Again, some of the churches on the Malabar Coast, like the ones at Palayoor,
Kottakkavu, Kodungallor and Niranam claim their antiquity from early phase without having concrete evidence to substantiate it.

Most of the earlier researches on the church history of Malabar Coast confined themselves to the first phase ignoring the details of subsequent three phases. Remarkable evidences of the last two phases that extend from the arrival of the Portuguese to the modern period were not fully recorded. Several churches have been destroyed; the inscriptions on tombstones of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are no longer there today; great amount of palm leaf records scattered within the churches are not yet been classified and studied. Hence, the future dimensions of the studies of understanding the history of Christianity on Malabar Coast needs to be thoroughly investigated and it was beyond the purview of the present work.

6.2 Cultural landscape and Regional Traditions

Looking into the settlement of churches, it has been observed that they have been located on the places where economic condition along with Christian population was important and concentrated. The geo coordinates of the Medieval Churches shows that they are spread from north latitude N10°38’ to south N09°14’. The longitude wise spread of Churches extended from coastal belt to the midland region with its maximum penetration up to E076°37’ at Kothamangalam in Ernakulam district, E076°46 at Aruvithura and E076°47 at Kanjirappally in Kottayam district. It has also given the details of the location wise pattern of Churches within the seven towns of different size with assortment population, religious practices and economic conditions. Churches found in the large, medium and small size settlements show similar pattern of being located in the middle of the settlement. The case is not different with regard to the larger settlements also. It seems the settlements surrounding the Churches have grown leaving the Churches in the centre and occupation of the settled population began to be diversified. Each settlement has two or more churches. New churches have been developed/ separated, parallel to the formation of new denominations within Christianity in the 17th and 18th centuries C.E. It has been observed that the churches and the other religious establishments are located in close proximity to communities lived over there and maintained close relationship with them. Religious circumstances after the Coonan Cross Oath was the major reason for the formation of several denominational groups and it further
necessitated construction of new churches. More churches have been constructed when the Christian population increased by natural reasons as well as by absorption throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Churches have fulfilled the religious aspirations of the Christian communities as well as the missionaries who lived in such places.

The nature of the offerings in the churches vary in an area that extend from N10°38’ to south N09°14’ with a catchment area of 1000 sq. km. However, the most common offering across the region, regardless of the disparities of various denominations, is the oil offering. Practices of oil offering have been observed both inside as well as outside the church. Oil lamps are placed both inside the Nave and Kestroma among the Yacobite and Orthodox sects. Catholic Tradition in Kerala, on the other hand, prompts for lamp stand or open air crosses outside the churches.

Field survey in the study area reveals that people themselves initiated the offering of lockets depicting animals, human and other motifs. Prompted by the indigenous traditions existing locally and necessitated by the sudden occurrence of any untoward incidences, generating helplessness, made them to resort to these offerings. It gradually became a common customary practice related to churches and they formulated theological and religious significances connected to them. Several churches made such lockets of varying features for their devotees. Thus, many of these offerings probably became a regular practice and a requirement like a talisman and it did not form a proper Christian religious custom.

Practice of using banana leaves and plants and coconut leaves are rampantly associated with Christian ceremonies especially during the Church festivals. Palm Sunday observances in Kerala show how they have adopted the regional flora into the churches where there is no scope for getting olive leaves. It also reminds us how people carry forward some of these traditions from the past. Such practices, probably, are the result of long periods of transmission and are handed down to generations. These did not appear, all of a sudden, as a religious practice; rather showed regional cultural continuity. Offerings of the first agricultural products from seasons and other products and, at times, even animals are observed at various churches across the study area. It comes as an acknowledgment of the bounty of the saint or the deity which is believed instrumental in getting a good crop. Such practices cannot be alluded to
practices of proper Christian tradition or theology, but seem originated from the local traditions, especially of the Hindus.

This amalgamations and continuous cultural retentions in which Christian society has been moulded with inspirations, interactions and exchange of ideas and customs with the local communities continue to influence various activities till today. Furthermore, the other indigenous social groups also have adopted several elements from the Christian society through such interaction and exchange. For example, the practices like the circumambulation around the Church during the festival, procession of the Idol and sacrifice of animals etc. are adopted from the Christian practices.

Church festivals are characterised by long processions, elaborate arrangements and decoration of streets, usage of colourful umbrellas, oil lamps, local musical instruments like Chenda, and practice of images of saints being carried by elephant. These reflect the convergence of regional cultural traditions. In certain occasions, it has been seen that the people belonging to other faiths participate in the church activities, while in certain cases; it has become a tradition that their presence is essential and inextricable in the procession during the church festivals.

The idea of keeping the images or statues of saints in the concealed sacred rooms and the ceremonious taking out of the same during the festival for public veneration is a practice found at several churches. This concept is not related to Christianity proper. The custom of keeping the statues of St. Sebastian and St. Mary in the treasure room of the Churches at Arthunkal and Manargad respectively is observed. They are taken out for the public veneration during the church festival and are returned to the treasure room at the end of the ceremony. There are similar customs that exist in many temples, like Siva temple at Ettumanoor in Kottayam district and Siva and Parvathy temple at Aluva in Ernakulam district, in the study area.

Religious preparation of vegetarian or non-vegetarian food and distribution of the same to the devotees is a common practice among various churches across the study area. It is seen in many churches irrespective of denominational differences. However, the Kozhi Neeracha (chicken offering) as part of the festivals is something unique in the churches dedicated to St. George. The Kozhi neercha (chicken offering) of St. George church, Puthuppally, Edappally and Kadamattom are worthy of special
mention. Moreover, St. George Church, Kadamattom has chicken offering with a rather different mode of sacrifice, practiced in the church premises, and it is continued even today. Church premises have permanent facilities and structures to facilitate such practices.

Material used for the construction of churches, lamp stand, flag pole, open air cross and outer wall also show their affiliation with the regional cultural attributes. Moreover, the tall open-air cross has many inherent Hindu-Buddhist influences and has several decorations similar to that we find in the temples.

These influences were probably adopted by the church/Christians in two ways; it was transplanted by the people who were absorbed into Christianity from these communities and gradually widespread and secondly, it was borrowed from Hinduism by the Christians as these two religions have been living together in the same cultural landscape of Malabar for long time. The demographic profile of the Christians of Kerala corroborates the possibility of the former. The devotees were used to such practices and worship prior to accepting the new faith. Probably, the concept of God continued even though the faith and forms changed. All this reminds us the close cultural relationship in the past tradition and this still remains with the local community who has adopted or accepted Christianity.

Cultural environment of Christians of every denominations of south central Kerala is amalgamated with several regional cultural traditions. It is the combination of the Syrian, European/Latin and Indigenous cultural behaviours that give shape to and solidify the Cultural landscape of churches in south central Kerala.

6.3 Architecture of Churches
An attempt was made to document the ground plans of the existing Churches where the researcher was allowed to draw the plans. Along with the existing Churches, a careful note was also taken about the earlier Churches which are no longer there or those form a part of the extension programme. The study was oriented to find out any alteration, modification and changes which had taken place in the recent years. This was done with a view to ascertain whether the gradual change of demography and economic condition of the people have any impact on expansion. The present study tries to find out any local influence on the architecture, use of raw material, and the
incorporation of common local beliefs and faiths which might have come deliberately or as a process and which did not mean much to the edifice as embellishment. The present study also tries to look into the gradual growth of church premises, incorporation of certain elements like the open air crosses, the basement of lamp stands, the purpose and the function within the premises and association of the structural remains. Besides the architectural features, the present study also tries to look into the paintings and the wooden architecture within the church premises to understand the contemporary wood work, their necessity and execution in keeping the regional ethos.

Churches in the study area regardless of the denominational differences show a similar conceptual layout. However, minor differences have been noticed. All the churches, though they show similar concept plan, variation is observed in the dimensions of the altar, nave, veranda, porch and details of their execution. Associated rooms and structures are, often, make the architectural layout different. This variation in the dimensions has been made by renovations and alterations at different periods.

All the medieval churches are oriented from east to the west with altar at the east. All the Churches stand above the ground in varying degrees. In many case, it has been observed that when any addition like the construction of rooms and even the modification of the altar has taken place, the level of these additions are often placed higher. Longitudinal plan of all Churches consist of high altar, nave and sometimes a porch in front. The high altar is characterised by the vaulted roof and thick walls. All the churches have three altar tables; main altar table with decorated retable or Thronose at the eastern end of an altar room and two additional altar tables on either side of the sanctuary arch. The side altars have been found blank in some of the churches like St. Mary’s Church, Kalloppara. Temporary/permanent additional altars are seen added to either side of the main Thronose at St. Thomas Jacobite Syrian Church, North Paravur and Old Syrian Church, Chengannor.

The floor level of the altar of St. Xavier’s Church, Velur, St. Thomas Church, Palayoor and St. Thomas Church, Pala have been reduced in order to create rooms on either side of an altar. Altar of the Church at Palayoor has been completely removed and extended further east to create transepts like hall on either side, whereas the altar
of the Church at Velur and Pala are retained. A hall was added to the southern side of main altar by reducing the floor height at St. Xavier’s Church, Velur probably to accommodate more number of devotees in recent years. The altar of Our Lady of Hope Church, Vypin has also renovated as it is explained in chapter five. The transepts like halls were added to the altar, probably to accommodate more people during the services in course of time when Christian population was increasing.

The altar of the catholic churches have retable (European influence) made of wood or laterite with elaborated European decorations and motifs and is attached to the eastern wall of the altar. But, the Yacobite and Orthodox churches do not have similar retable whereas; it has simple Thronose consist of a wooden table surmounted with a wooden frame decorated with floral motives, geometrical patterns and cherubs. The retable is generally attached to the eastern wall of the altar in the catholic churches whereas the Thronose detached from the back wall in most of the Jacobite and Orthodox churches. The space between the Thronose and eastern wall provide space for the sacristy. Catholic churches are more attached to the Latin or the Roman traditions and therefore, have accommodated several European elements whereas the Jacobite and Orthodox churches are maintained their link with Syria (For Jacobites, at present their head priest lives in Lebanon and controls from there).

Earlier churches did not have windows and doors in the altar which has been added in the later stages as evident in the layout. Out of twelve churches, the only one church which does not have windows or doors in the lateral wall of its altar is St. George Jacobite Syrian Church, Kadamattom. All other churches have either windows or door or both in the thick lateral wall of the altar. A miniature window was added to southern wall of the altar at St. Mary’s Church, Kanjirappally whereas two windows were added on either side of the altar in the Church at Akapparambu. All other churches have fashioned the doors and windows according to the extensions made.

Kestroma is usually separated from the nave by a wooden (rarely concrete) railing in every church. However, some churches where the modification of the altar had taken place, it has been noticed that Kestroma is kept inside the altar room. It facilitates to extend the nave towards the east and to accommodate more devotees inside the nave. The churches at Pala, Ramapuram(2 churches), Palayoor and Velur depict that such changes were made in the past.
A lot of renovations had taken place in the nave of the churches. Major changes are found at St. Mary’s Church, Kalloppara, Old Syrian Church, Chengannoor, St. Augustine’s (old) Church, Ramapuram, Mar Sabor and Afroth Church Akapparambu and St. Thomas Church, Palayoor. The nave has been extended towards the western end at Kalloppara, Ramapuram and Chengannor. However, at every place, it seems to have retained the original lateral wall of the nave. The side veranda on the either side of the nave of the earlier structure has been extended towards the west and two additional side porches were added on either side of the nave at Kalloppara. Similarly, two phases of the extension has been noticed at Chengannor as it is explained in chapter five. The lateral wall of the nave is plain and additional windows and doors were made in the nave at several places. The medieval churches did not have any upper windows, but it was added to the nave of the churches at Akapparambu, Palayoor and Chengannor. The upper windows of Old Syrian Church, Chengannor were created by increasing the height of the lateral wall as well as the roof.

The earlier structure seems to have single entrance at the western end of the nave and more doors might have been added when they started to extend the nave to the either sides without removing the lateral walls. The construction of façade with three or more bays also facilitated to accommodate more doors at the western end or on the façade wall. To accommodate the façade, churches are constructed in such a way that the lateral wall of the nave is not in accordance with the earlier architecture model. When the extension of the nave takes place to either side without removing the original lateral wall, the earlier roof has been elongated to the either side over the extended area or the side roofs have been step down with an additional roof. New ceilings have been added to the roof of every church which hides viewing the pattern of rafters and beams which adorned the interior.

Four out of twelve churches retained their side veranda with upper storey as has been observed during course of the study. This wooden upper storey is found attached to the northern side of the nave in all the churches. Several other churches of contemporary period as well as later period also have side veranda and upper storey in its northern side.

Construction period of the front porch of the Churches in most of the cases are not known, it was probably added in the later stages. The field survey across the study
region, personal interviews with several senior priests and laymen reveal that at some places, the front porch was added to the Church for the newly converted Christians. The front porch is also interpreted to be the storing place of arms when Christian warriors of local chiefs attended church services. The reliability of such tradition in the past needs to be further studied and evaluated. However, the front porch has been utilized and extended further at several places to accommodate more people when the population was increased. The front porch of the Churches at Velur, Palyoor, Kottayam and Chengannor has been extended towards west. The earlier old front porch with wooden gabled roof, balustrades and sculptures of the churches at Kalloppara, North Paravur and Akapparambu has been replaced with concrete structures today.

During the course of field work in the study area, it has been noticed that a few earlier Churches were built for the newly converted Christians in the vicinity. Some of those structures still survive without any service but are used as cemetery chapel as it is discussed in chapter four.

Normally, laterite is used for the construction of vaulted roof, lateral walls and façade wall. Construction of vaulted roof in laterite shows the craftsmanship of the period. However, the wall is covered with thick plaster and does not allow viewing the internal structures and their bonding pattern very clearly.

Murals generally appeared in the altar only. They mostly narrate the events related to Jesus Christ, his life and associated events. The churches like St. Mary’s Jacobite Syrian Church, Angamaly and St. Antony’s Church, Ollur have painting on the lateral wall of the nave. A great number of church murals are retouched or repainted.

All the dates regarding the beginning of the church architecture like the churches founded by the St. Thomas and construction of other churches have been referred from the brochures provided by the church. There is no authentic record to verify the dates mentioned in the brochures. Furthermore, no church has kept any record of the renovations which took place at different times to understand and verify the necessity of the renovation, and the changes that they have made.

The church architecture of south central Kerala shows that they are not large edifices as the contemporary churches in Europe and in Goa. They are mainly meant for the
local people and then reinforced and modified in terms of the requirement of each denomination during the passage of time. The peculiarity of the layout of these churches in the south central Kerala is essential to understand, how closely it is with the influence emerging from the region. These similar plans are not mostly seen in the contemporary churches built in other parts of the country especially in the Portuguese Goa. Similar plan for the both the catholic and Jacobite/Orthodox churches show that, they have retained their original plan, with influences coming from Europe by the Portuguese and the Dutch. It is difficult to categorise any of these churches as the Portuguese church or the Dutch church as they have not strictly followed the detail execution and the pattern. However, these churches have accommodated the influences coming from various regions (especially from Europe) into their basic plan.

It is significant to note the existence of Syrian Churches prior to the arrival of the Portuguese in south central Kerala. The basic plan of the catholic and the Jacobite /orthodox churches are the continuation in the case of these pre-Portuguese Syrian churches. When the adherents increased, then new churches were built in new centres or towns, retaining the basic plans with minor differences in dimensions during 17th and 18th centuries of C.E.

The European architectural features or the Neo Roman features found in the churches in Goa have not much influenced the churches of south central Kerala. However, the European architectural elements have mainly appeared on the façade of the churches. But it has not strictly followed the architectural rules of Neo Roman approaches like the Renaissance, mannerism, Baroque, Rococo and Neoclassicism. Churches of all denominations have copied these features without understanding the theory behind it. Other European architectural elements found in the churches are the retable and pulpit. However, pulpit is not found at any of the Orthodox and Jacobite Churches.

Apart from this, all other elements of the church, like the layout, material used for the construction, decorative motifs, paintings, wooden architecture, stone carvings, pillars, seem more oriented to local and regional models.

It is a regionally based edifice for the purpose of accommodating the community for prayers. It has lot of provisions to accommodate the regional environment like rainy season and humidity. As the dimensions increased with increased size of the congregation, a need for more openings like doors and windows arose.
In short, the architecture of churches of south central Kerala is the amalgamation of three schools of traditions; Indigenous; European and Syrian. Of these, major influence comes from the indigenous tradition, around a quarter from the European and miniscule portion from the Syrian tradition.

6.4 Limitations
The construction of new Churches by demolishing the old Churches was a great challenge for the present research as it was difficult to get an authentic picture of the earlier ones for comparison and documentation. Though some of the Churches have records, it was not possible to access. Documents available from other sources were not enough to give details for the purpose of the present research requirements. Moreover, some of the Churches have undergone thorough renovation at various times and the murals are no more there if they were there in the past. Again, the parish authorities do not have or kept any documents regarding the renovations in the past. Thus, due to unattainable data on the renovations, it is difficult to make out the exact period and the nature and extent of the renovations. Documents available in some churches are not in a good condition which will facilitate authoritative study. In most of the cases, the internal wooden architecture of the contemporary period is missing. It often showed the motif of the period, having a bias towards regional tradition, rather than adhering to the western dictums. In a few cases they are found, but are not in a condition suitable enough to draw a very good comparison.

Though it was intended to prepare detail layout of all the churches in the study area, it has not been possible in few cases where the church authorities did not allow the documentation the Church. Sometimes churches didn’t allow documentation within the premises. Though the ground plan of the churches are made by taking the permissions from the church authorities, detailed description of the altar of some the Churches was not possible, since they did not permit the entry to the altar area to make detailed descriptions.

Hence, only observations and casual photographs have been used to document the evidences emerge out of it. However, in most of the cases, these limitations have been overcome by the preparation of the sketches of ground plan and comparative analysis of architectural features of similar Churches across the study area.