Chapter 2

The Syrian Christian Mode of Nomenclature, Dress and Cuisine

The Syrian Christian Mode of Nomenclature

“What’s in a name?” asked William Shakespeare in Act II Scene II of his play Romeo and Juliet (43). Shakespeare might say so but names, their etymology and significance do mean a lot. Names are social and cultural markers and therefore very important. It is no exaggeration to say that his name can make or mar a man. When the great social reformers of Kerala exhorted their followers to give up their caste names they were cutting at the root of the system that judged a man according to his caste. In those days those who were outcastes could not hope to grow if hampered by their names. After India attained independence with the reservation that is offered by the government to the backward sections of society, names are no longer a hindrance to development. Yet the social stigma still prevails in the mind preventing marriage alliances with the blessings of the family.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala follow a special form of nomenclature. Several writers have been intrigued by the manner in which Syrian Christians name their children perhaps to preserve their identity as a special group of people in Kerala. Each family has a common name which is usually closely linked to the environment. Some families take their name with trees as their reference point as in the case
of Pulimoottil, Thannickal, Plammoottil and the like where Puli
(Tamerindus indica), Thanni (Terminalia bellerica) and Plavu
(Artocarpus heterophyllus) are some of the common trees of the land.
Others take some building or institution as their markers and formulate
their names accordingly as in Pallithazhe meaning ‘below the church’,
Peedikayil, Shappil, the two words being vernacular versions of the
word ‘shop’ and so on. Still others take topographical features as their
point of reference as in Kandathil, Mannil, Thottathil all signifying the
relationship with field, soil and garden respectively. Certain rooms and
implements also lend their names to families as in Kalathara,
Chakkummoottil, Chakkattu, etc with the first signifying ‘granary’ and
the other two to the crude structure used to extract oil from dried
coconuts

The name of a person is usually affixed along with his family
name. The eldest son of a house is given the name of his paternal
grandfather which becomes his official Christian name. His surname is
his father’s name. The same is the manner of naming the second son
except that he is given his maternal grandfather’s name. These two are
mandatory and the third son is usually named after his father though this
is by no means compulsory. Similarly the eldest daughter is named after
her father’s mother and the second daughter after her mother’s mother.
Here also the third daughter may or may not have her mother’s name.
Thus a Syrian Christian man or woman has three names viz. his family name, his Christian name which he has inherited in the manner described above and his surname which is his father’s name. Thus we have Pulimoottil Thomas Varghese, Perumpallil Chacko John, as a few examples. As such long names are unwieldy and clumsy; two names are usually shortened to initials one of which is usually the family name which is generally a mouthful. Thus we have P.T.Varghese, P.C.John as the shortened versions of the names given as examples above. Women’s names too were shortened to initials as K.N.Mariamma or T.J.Alice which can be expanded to Kadavil Ninan Mariamma and Thalamada John Alice respectively. After marriage women took the name of their husbands as their new surname.

With the passage of time family names retreated into the background and did not express themselves in the names of individuals. People began to use names unburdened by initials. So we have names like Thomas Varghese, Jacob George, Philip Ninan etc. It was usual for people to have pet names used only by relatives and close friends. By and by these pet names were attached to the name that was inherited and the surname. Thus we have names like Appu Jacob John, Deepak Elias Varghese, Anju Miriam John and the like where the first name is the pet name of the individual. In some cases the inherited name shrinks into the relevant initial and takes its place between the pet and the surnames as in
Sudeep K. Abraham where the initial is the short form of Kuruvilla. The pet names are usually drawn from any language and are appealing because they are short and easy to articulate. Some of the old names have undergone modification. The name ‘Chacko’ has been replaced by its modern version ‘Jacob’; ‘Aleyamma’ has become ‘Elizabeth’; ‘Kurien’ has become ‘Cyril’; ‘Gheevarghese’ has become ‘George’ or ‘Varghese’. Interestingly the use of three names complete with family name is coming back into fashion particularly among those who work abroad. The passports that are now issued insist on the use of the family name as well. Consequently people apply to the Government for the addition of the family name instead of the initials into which it has shrunk.

There is a pattern in even the pet names chosen. In early days the name ‘Kunju’ which means ‘child’ was used either as a full pet name or as a prefix or a suffix as in Kunjukunju, Kunjappen or Achenkunju, Koshynjunku etc. Other names used in the same sense as Kunju are ‘Kochu’ and ‘Kutty’ as in Mathukutty, Kochukoshy and the like. All these names are unisex and used without discrimination for both men and women. Thus we have Marykutty, Kochumolly and so on. The name ‘Baby’ like the name ‘Kunju’ is a favourite name for both sexes and only the context demarcates the sex of the bearer of this name. One would not be far off the mark if one were to say that most of the early
pet names were formed by adding ‘kochu’, ‘kutty’, ‘kunju’ either as prefixes or suffixes to the Christian names which were most often the ones taken from the Bible. The Biblical names are usually the Syriac versions like Yakob, Yohanan, Seemon and not their English counterparts of Jacob, John and Simon. Most of the female names had the suffix -amman like Saramma, Susamma, Mariamma and so on, and correspondingly many of the male names had the suffix -achen like Yohanachen, Thomachen etc.

Terms of endearment like ‘Mon’ and ‘Mol’ were and still are used to refer to boys and girls younger to one in age. They are also used as supplementary terms along with the Christian name like Susy Mol or Aby Mon. Besides, they are very convenient methods of addressing young people with whom one has little or no acquaintance. These pet names employed with prefixes or suffixes were displaced with ones which were devoid of such embellishments. Perhaps this was due to the greater exposure of the Syrian Christians to the world outside through their availing themselves of the educational opportunities before them. They began to leave the shores of Travancore in search of gainful employment in India and abroad. They learnt new languages and came into contact with people of other cultures. Naturally the names used in these places were attractive and there was a veritable flood of such names in Syrian Christian households. Two such names were ‘Raju’ and
‘Babu’ and there are very few households which do not have these names or similar ones. While the first has a Hindi touch to it the second has a Bengali taste and both indicate people of power and position. Names with a Sanskrit touch to them like ‘Mohan’, ‘Valsa’ and ones with a Malayalee touch to them like ‘Leela’, ‘Suseela’ ‘Omana’ etc. also came into use along with the traditional Christian names of Anna, Mariam and so on. Some traditional names like ‘Elizabeth’ used its diminutives of ‘Lizzy’, ‘Liza’, ‘Elsie’, ‘Elsa’ as pet names. Certain names have a Malayalee version which is employed almost as a matter of course, like ‘Avarachen’ for ‘Abraham’, ‘Oudha’ for ‘Joseph’. Sometimes the suffix-y is used with the name in order to indicate intimacy as in ‘Johnny’.

From these pet names which indicate a person’s knowledge of the world and its inhabitants and which have a real meaning and significance, the Syrian Christians moved to a state where names were employed neither for beauty or meaning but for ease in use. Thus names came to be chosen more for their rhythm rather than meaning. These names were mostly two syllabled names whose only attraction was the ease in utterance as in the case of names like ‘Biju’ ‘Saju’, ‘Viji’, ‘Giji’ and so on. When more and more people began to use such names without distinction of caste or social position, the Syrian Christians began to make use of Biblical names which have very worthwhile
meanings. Thus came names like Samuel which means ‘answer to prayer’, Joshua meaning ‘the gift of God’, Susannah meaning ‘pure as the lily’ and so on. Still later the desire to preserve the essential Syrian Christian identity resulted in children being given names which had been the pet names of their grandfathers and grandmothers. Thus names like ‘Chackochan’, ‘Thomachen’ are once again making their way into Syrian Christian society. Finding suitable names for their children taxes the ingenuity of young parents; therefore they are good market for enterprising publishers who bring out books exclusively devoted to names and their significance. Many of today’s mothers and fathers rely entirely on such books for their choice of pet names.

Terms used to address elders are also important in Syrian Christian society. Fathers used to be addressed by the term, ‘Appachen’ and mothers by the term ‘Ammachy’ which are only extensions of the Malayalam words for father and mother. The prefix ‘Valiya-‘ meaning ‘great’, when attached to these terms would give the equivalent of great father or Grandfather. So with ‘Valiyammachy’ which means Grandmother. The mental picture that one gets when one thinks of ‘Valiyappachan’ or ‘Valiyammachy’ is that of a benevolent but stern patriarch and a domineering matriarch before whose wishes the whole household bowed. Their word was law and nobody dared question it. In some families the grandfather was addressed as ‘Appachan’ and the
grandmother as ‘Ammachy’ dropping the prefix. In such cases the father would be called ‘Achayen’ or ‘Achachen’ and the mother would be called ‘Ammamma’. These two terms are translated to mean elder brother and elder sister respectively. It is an indication of the position held by the parents in the patriarchal society of the past.

As time passed and the Syrian Christian society progressed with education and exposure to other climes and cultures, mothers and fathers came to be addressed with the English forms of addressal, though not in the very formal way of the British as ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’ but in the more intimate manner of ‘Daddy’ and ‘Mummy’ or ‘Papa’ and ‘Mamma’. These took on Malayalam counterparts of ‘Appa’ and ‘Amma’ or ‘Achen’ and ‘Amma’. When Syrian Christian women also left the household hearth in search of good jobs their position in society changed. In fact it can be truthfully said that the progress achieved by Kerala today is in a large measure due to the Syrian Christian women who went to the different states of India and abroad and made a name for themselves as dedicated nurses, doctors and teachers. Most of these employed women retained their maiden names even after marriage in order to avoid the hassles of making their married names official and accepted in all official records.

When the terms of addressal of the parents changed, the grandparents began to be called by the terms that had once been used to
refer to the parents. Besides, the grandparents of today are better preserved and do not like to be reminded of their age. Uncles and aunts who used to be called ‘Appappen’ and ‘Kochamma’ on the paternal side and ‘Achayen’ and ‘Ammai’ on the maternal side are now lumped together under the English honorifics of ‘Uncle’ and ‘Auntie’. These terms are convenient to refer to elder acquaintances as well. However, it is to be noted that there is an attempt to preserve the old terms of addressal though the move is only slowly gathering strength.

It is a fact that these names are clear indications of a person’s status in society. They are also helpful in tracing his ancestry because most of the reputed Syrian Christian families are united by ties of blood and marriage. The Syrian Christians adhere strictly to these naming practices according to S.G. Pothan in his book, The Syrian Christians of Kerala (58 – 60). Most of the family genealogies of the Syrian Christians which have suddenly become very popular these days also deal with the preoccupation with names, particularly as a way to trace out the family tree.

The six works studied here show the Syrian Christian mode of nomenclature in a more or less degree. Frances Collins, the author of The Slayer Slain had stayed in Central Travancore for several years. As the wife of the Rev. Richard Collins, the Principal of the CMS College, Kottayam, she was very familiar with the regions in and around
Kottayam. But her familiarity did not perhaps go right into the depth of some of the Syrian Christian practices like that of nomenclature. So in *The Slayer Slain* only one of the central characters is given a full name - Koshy Curien- a typical Syrian Christian name of Central Travancore. We are not given his family name which is proof of the fact that family names do not have as much importance for the author as they have for the Syrian Christians. None of the other characters have full names except the rich Syrian Christian whose name is Ummen Thoma. Perhaps this is because they represent types of the fallen Syrian Christian who can be redeemed only through Protestantism according to the authors. Koshy Curien’s daughter Mariam bears a name that is typical of the day and age. Perhaps Mrs. Collins shortened the original form of Mariamma to indicate that Mariam is a progressive educated lady. Besides, that name would be more familiar to her than the longer Malayalam version. The slave Paulosa is obviously one who has been converted to Christianity because such names from the Bible particularly from the New Testament were given to those persons newly converted to Christianity, Paulose being a favourite one. The catechist who eventually marries Mariam is appropriately named Mathew after the Apostle who wrote one of the extensive gospels of the New Testament. Most of the other characters in the novel are not given any names – neither the Protestant pastor, nor the rich old Brahmin, not even
Mariam’s mother or grandmother perhaps because they are only types. Mariam’s brother is named George but his role is a tiny one. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the fact that the novel was left unfinished by Mrs. Collins who was snatched away by death. Rev. Collins who completed it was not interested in such trivial matters.

While both Rev. and Mrs. Collins do not give any importance to Syrian Christian names and naming practices, Dorothy Clarke Wilson is interested in these practices. In Take My Hands she tells us about the names of Mary Verghese and her family. Mary’s father’s family name was ‘Puthisseril and her mother’s was ‘Mazhuvancheriparambath’. As it is the father’s family name that is used in the Syrian Christian families Mary and her siblings had Puthisseril as part of their name. Mary’s brothers were called John and Joseph- the names which they had inherited from their paternal and maternal grandfathers. These names were Biblical also and they were tacked on to the family name and the surname. All three names would be unwieldy and so two were shortened to initials. Mary’s name also followed this pattern. She was originally called P.V.Mary which could be expanded to Puthusseril Verghese Mary. However, she became popular as Dr. Mary Varghese after she made a name in the world of medicine as the paraplegic who did rehabilitative hand surgery. Mary’s name does not have the usual – amma suffix unlike her sisters Annamma and Aleyamma. Pet names are
found in Mary’s family. Her brother Joseph had the ubiquitous pet name ‘Baby’ which remained his throughout his life long after babyhood had passed him. Mary’s father too bore the pet name ‘Kunjooru’ meaning ‘little child’. Names like these had nothing to do with age or size but were just tokens of affection. It is not customary to call people older than one by their names. So Mary calls her brothers using the title ‘Achayen’ attached to their names. Her sisters too who are older to her are addressed with the title ‘Edathi’. To this is prefixed the terms ‘valia’ meaning ‘big’ and ‘kochu’ meaning ‘little’. This is in order to distinguish between the elder sisters according to their age.

The Syrian Christian naming practices are given due importance in the four works that remain, in fact they give us the perspective of the insider in the Syrian Christian community. Meena Alexander tells about her paternal family name which is ‘Kannadickal’ and about her mother’s family name which is ‘Kurichieth’. Her maternal grandfather to whom Meena is deeply attached bears the name ‘K. K. Kuruvilla’ the shortened version of ‘Kurichiethu Kuruvilla Kuruvilla’. Her own father is Kannadickal George Alexander. He dropped the family name for ease in use though he did not resort to initials. Meena’s mother’s maiden name was Mary Kuruvilla which was changed to Mary Alexander after marriage. The name Mary itself was a refined form of the typical Syrian Christian name Mariamma. Meena’s maternal grandmother, whom she
had never seen, had the name ‘Elizabeth’ which was the anglicized form of the old name ‘Aleyamma’. She also had the usual pet name of ‘Kunju’. The unisex nature of the name ‘Kunju’ is best seen in the fact that Meena’s maternal grandfather K.K.Kuruvilla also had the pet name of ‘Kunju’ like his wife. Meena herself was christened in the traditional Syrian Christian manner and was given the name of her paternal grandmother. However, she so liked her own pet name of Meena that she dropped the traditional name. Again though she was supposed to take her husband’s name as her surname she prefers not to do so as she wants to preserve her own identity. Thus we have her with the name by which the world knows her. Meena Alexander follows the Syrian Christian tradition in giving her children three names though one of those names is not the family name. Her son is Adam Kuruvilla Lelyveld and her daughter Svati Mariam Lelyveld. She chooses the name ‘Adam’ obviously in an attempt not to put the child into any particular mould, Kuruvilla is the name of her maternal grandfather whom she had loved dearly and Lelyveld the surname of her husband David. With regard to her daughter the name ‘Svati’ is clearly Indian and Malayalee. Her second name Mariam is an abbreviation of the name of Meena’s paternal grandmother Mariamma and also an expansion of the name of Meena’s own mother Mary. According to true Syrian Christian tradition the children should have inherited the names
of their paternal grandfather and grandmother. This did not happen because Meena’s husband is a Jew and does not belong to Syrian Christian tradition. Even within that tradition Meena makes a few modifications and instead of giving her son her father’s name which is ‘George’ she gives him her maternal grandfather’s name as a mark of her affection for the latter.

Even in the matter of addressing the elders, Meena calls her grandfather ‘Ilya’ as a corruption of ‘Valia’ and an abbreviation of Valiappachan which means grandfather. This tradition of using short forms to address grandparents is a tradition followed by Meena’s children as well who call her parents ‘mechan’ and ‘mechi’ which are corrupt forms for Appachan and Ammachy.

In A Video, a Fridge and a Bride, it is possible to trace the changes that have taken place in the choice of Syrian Christian names. Lissy’s father is Kunnumpurathu Abraham Cherian shortened to K.A.Cherian. His wife’s name is the typical Syrian Christian name ‘Kuttiamma’ and one of his sisters has another traditional Syrian Christian name – Annamma. His younger sister has the local name of Rajam with the suffix ‘-amma’ tacked on to it. Rajamma’s husband too has a local name which is popular in Syrian Christian families viz. Thampan. Annamma’s husband on the other hand has the ubiquitous name ‘Baby’ though most people refer to him not by name but by his
Army designation of ‘Major’. Aby and Lissy, Cheriachen’s children are named according to the family tradition though the family name is dropped. Their pet names are natural derivatives from Abraham and Elizabeth. The younger cousins of Lissy, two boisterous boys, sons of Rajamma bear fashionable names of the times like Reji and Arun. These names are easy to use because they consist of only one or two syllables. One of the men who came to ‘see’ Lissy brought with him a bevy of sisters all with rhyming names ending in –cy like Vincy, Jincy, Rincy. The man had the name of Princy. Among all the suitors Lissy had been compelled to think of as a probable husband, the one with the ugliest name was the new-rich fellow with the impossible name ‘Welcome’.

Names tend to be more traditional in the village rather than in the town or the city. Often servants are given only one name like the odd job man Seemon whose name is the Malayali version of the Apostle Simon Peter in the Malayalam Bible. Sometimes first names tend to deceive people about the religion of their bearers. Lissy is very surprised when her room mate answers to the full name of Renjini Ruth Susan Pothen. Lissy had thought that Renjini was a Hindu as the name was common among Hindus. Besides she had four names instead of the usual three or even two. The explanation for this is that the second name was her godmother’s and the third the traditional one of her father’s mother. This points to another practice followed by the Syrian Christians viz. a
minimum of at least two persons stood *in loco parentis* for a child at the
time of his/her christening. These god parents are supposed to bring the
child up in the event something happened to the child’s parents. It is not
usual for the child to be given the name of the god parent though that
practice is flouted by Renjy’s parents.

Names have a significance in *The God of Small Things* as well.
Estha and Rahel, the dizygotic twins about whom the book is about, do
not have surnames. Their mother Ammu who had at first made a
runaway marriage with their Bengali father, had left him and returned
home to Ayemenem. She hated her own father and disliked her ex-
husband. Therefore she could not decide whether to give her children
the surname of her hated father or her callous husband. So the children
have no surname which itself is indicative of the fact that they do not
belong to anybody. Even their names- Estha and Rahel- are not very
usual in Syrian Christian circles though they are quite common in Syrian
Catholic households. Estha is short for Esthappen which is the Syriac
form of Stephen. Perhaps Roy chose to give him this name because he is
a living martyr carrying a load of guilt regarding the murder of Velutha.
Estha’s second name is ‘Yako’, the Syriac version of Jacob. ‘Ammu’
and ‘Chacko’ are two names generally found among Syrian Christians
though often the suffix-achen is added to the latter name. Ammu’s
father’s sister is Navomi Ipe. Navomi is the same as Naomi, the name of
a character in the Old Testament of the Bible. Ammu calls this aunt by her pet name Baby to which the additional title of Kochamma is added. Arundathi Roy makes fun of this name, so common among both males and females among the Syrian Christians that it has completely lost its lexical meaning. She keeps referring to Baby Kochamma as ‘baby grandaunt’ because she is not a baby either in age or size.

Rahel and Estha call their uncle Chacko by name and they think of their mother by her name- Ammu. In the first case they do so because when they called their uncle by the usual terms of addressal, he promptly teased them by calling them the corresponding equivalents. Finally the twins gave up and fell back upon his name alone. They thought of their mother as ‘Ammu’ because they felt that they had to protect her from the world around, that they had to love her in double measure because she was both father and mother to them. This addressing of elders by their names is emphatically not a usual Syrian Christian practice and therefore it is indicative of the unusual nature of the characters in this novel. The twins call their mother’s parents ‘Pappachi’ and ‘Mammachi’. The usual appellation of ‘Appachen’ and ‘Ammachy’ is not used, rather the suffix-chi is attached to the titles ‘Papa’ and ‘Mamma’ by which Ammu addresses her parents.

Names have a way of identifying the caste and class of their bearers. The great social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru exhorted his
followers to get rid of their caste names which are so much a burden on them. So Achoo Parayan, Keloo Pulayan and others like them dropped such names and took on others which not only did not reveal their castes but gave them a sense of self esteem. This caused upheavals in society as depicted by the writer Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai in his novel The Scavenger’s Son where the scavenger dares to give his son the name Mohan, a name of the upper classes. In spite of such outbursts from the upper classes, the practice continued and today one cannot make out a person’s caste and place in society by merely looking at his name. In The God of Small Things Velutha’s name can be considered the most important single factor that destroyed him. The importance that is given to a fair complexion is reflected even in names. The name Velutha is given to one who has a dark complexion, probably in order to indicate the longing for a fair skin. Perhaps it reflects the perverted nature of the upper castes who think nothing of making fun of a person by giving him a name so different from the reality. Inspector Thomas Mathew does not bother to check Velutha’s case or position because his name indicated that he does not have the backing of any powerful lobby.

Something Barely Remembered is full of Syrian Christian names used mostly by the Orthodox and Jacobite factions of the Syrian church. The families involved are all cousins and close relations connected by blood and marriage. Therefore many of them have the same first name
and share similar surnames. The usual practice of naming is followed.
Lukose Achen is named after his paternal grandfather who had been a
priest in the Syrian church. His brother Behnan is no doubt named after
Lukose Achen’s mother’s father. Another character bears the name Ivan
which is the short form of Ivanios. This name is supposed to be the
Syriac version of John. Ivan explains to his friends that he has inherited
his name from his ancestors who had been given the names of the
disciples and associates of Jesus when St. Thomas the Apostle baptised
them way back in 52 AD. The family name ‘Vazhayil’ presents itself in
the initial ‘V’ which is attached to Ivan’s name. His sister Annamma has
the typical Syrian Christian name complete with the suffix-amma. The
next generation drops the suffix and just keeps the name Anna. There
are two Anna-s in the work. One is Anna the wife of Philip, ex-tapioca
exporter and now paper merchant, the other Anna is the orphan who
lives in Rome with her Uncle Job and his Italian wife Marcella. Anna,
the wife of Philip, has a friend named Mariam who used to call her Hana
in order to distinguish her from Anna, the niece of Uncle Job.
Anna/Hana’s mother is Soshamma whose name was later shortened to
Sosha and then Susan. She had, many years ago, been the talk of the
sleepy village of Puthenkavu, when she ran away with Azor, an expert
on antiques, abandoning her husband George and her three month
daughter Anna. She lived in swinging Europe and her husband called
her by the fashionable name of Sasha. The name Aleyamma has also undergone great change. In the work it is spelt ‘Eliamma’ and is shortened to Eli, Elizabeth and even Elena. The choice of Syrian Christian names is limited to the names from the Bible with very few exceptions. This definitely is the main reason why the same names of John, Jacob, Mary, Mariam, Anna, Sara keep popping up throughout the work.

It is therefore quite possible to arrive at the conclusion that the six works studied give a faithful representation of the naming practices employed by the Syrian Christians and the changes that have taken place in them over the years.

**The Syrian Christian Mode of Dress**

Dress is an important marker to indicate a person’s caste and position in society. In Kerala the traditional form of dress is very simple and consists of a white cloth called *mundu* which is tied at the waist and reaches up to the feet. There used to be another white cloth with which the upper half of the body is covered. In bygone times this dress was common to both men and women. Only the rich and the upper castes covered the upper half of their bodies. Both the cloths would be edged with gold and the width of the gold border would be determined by the wealth and social status of the wearer and the occasion on which the dress is worn. Men and women thought nothing of going bare chested
wearing just the essential clothes to cover themselves. This mode of dress was ideally suited to the tropical climate of the land. The rich colours of the land, particularly the lush green of the paddy fields, were a lovely contrast to the white and gold favoured by the people. The cloth was woven in Kerala itself and had its own distinctive beauty.

It was with the coming of the colonizers in the fifteenth century that the Christians were indoctrinated into the need to dress differently from their Hindu brothers. Christian women began to cover their breasts with a loose white blouse which amply covered the upper part of their bodies. The blouse had a narrow V neck in front and a round neck at the back. The white cloth which is tied at the waist and extends down to the feet, had a fan of pleats right in the middle of the lower back. Over this would be worn another cloth, embroidered or gold-edged, like a half sari which is passed over the left shoulder and held in place by a brooch. This form of dress was adopted by all Syrian Christians without any demarcation of sect. The Syrian Christian men also wore a white cloth tied at the waist in the same way as their Hindu brothers. Their upper bodies would be wrapped with another white cloth. After the CMS missionaries came to Central Travancore the Syrian Christian men began to be familiar with the western mode of dress and their concept of shame. Western education fostered this thinking so much that it was considered that an educated man should wear the three piece suit of the
Englishman. As education was the monopoly of the missionaries there was a dress code for the Indian teachers and the students. They had to wear a shirt to cover the upper half of their bodies along with their mundu and a topee on their heads. The teachers were also expected to wear a black coat over the shirt. These instructions were complied with but many of the teachers also wore the gold edged cloth which they draped over the left shoulder. The ensemble would sometimes be rounded off with a beautifully carved walking stick embellished with a gold handle.

A woman’s dress is not complete without ornaments and the Syrian Christian women like their Hindu sisters wore gold bangles on both arms. The number and weight of the bangles depended on the wealth of her parents who provided her with ornaments before and for her marriage. The gold chains that the Syrian Christian women wore were also not much different though the married women also wore a gold chain with a tiny locket with the cross engraved in the form of tiny beads. This was the minnumala only slightly different from the Hindu thalimala.

What set the Syrian Christian women apart from others, were the ear ornaments that they wore. The heavy gold ornaments crafted into intricate shapes hung from the lobes of their ears. So heavy were they that the hole in the ear lobe dangled down and in some cases almost
touched the shoulders. Such dangling ears were even considered a sign of beauty. The upper part of the ear was also pierced and thick gold rings fixed into them so that they stuck out on either side of the ear. Sometimes one more ornament was fixed in such a way that it connected the upper ear and the earlobe. This was called the *murisu*, the one on the earlobe was called the *valika* and the one that stood out was known as the *kunukku*. Usually the ornaments that stood out from the ear were worn by the Syrian Catholics who do not form part of this study. These ornaments are now no longer fashionable and are scarcely worn even by the older generations of Syrian Christians but form part of their racial consciousness. Most of the older Syrian Christian women tie their hair back in a knot at the back of their heads and do not leave it loose down their backs.

By the second half of the twentieth century sartorial tastes changed. More and more women have taken to wearing the sari, the national dress of independent India. With the passage of years saris have been replaced to some extent by *churidhars* and jeans. The *mundu* has been replaced for the most part by trousers and jeans. Fashions in dress and dress material keep changing and the Syrian Christians are always eager to keep up with the latest trend. The case is the same in the matter of hair styles and in the design of ornaments too. The old trusted goldsmiths working in the privacy of their homes according to the order
placed by valued patrons have now been replaced by lush showrooms in which gold ornaments of all descriptions are put on display for the delectation of everyone who has the money.

It is possible to trace an evolution in the type of dress worn by Syrian Christian women in the six works that are studied. In ‘The Slayer Slain’ Frances Collins describes the dress worn by a Syrian Christian man when she describes the appearance of Ummen Thoma the man whose son is a suitor for Mariam. Mrs. Collins is not too enamoured with the man and his appearance and presents him thus.

He was of middle height, and very fat, with a large new cloth wrapped comfortably round his loins, and tucked up a little on one side. On his head he wore an ample amount of clear book-muslin, which he unwrapped as he came along and spread over his shoulder. He had in his hand a large walking stick with a silver head, and stuck within the folds of his ample cloth a handsome gold embossed style, with handle visible. His appearance was that of a first class Syrian Christian. (SS 82).

This is the kind of dress that is worn by the son also with the only difference that he also wore on his head, “a scarlet velvet cap with a band of tinsel coming in a point to his forehead”(SS 84). The dress of the women is not described in such detail except that the white cloth
worn by them was always clean and neat. There is a mention that Mariam wore beautifully embroidered jackets and so did her mother, well in keeping with the fact that they were the daughter and wife of a prosperous Syrian Christian like Koshy Curien. With regard to the hairdo of the women, Mrs. Collins makes a mention of the long hair of the children which is oiled and washed everyday. Mariam’s mother also ties her hair up in a knot at the back of her head. The ornaments worn by a man’s wife and daughters are indicative of his wealth. Koshy Curien’s wife and daughters are no exception. Even the youngest of his children wears ornaments suitable to her age. Mariam’s mother wears gold bangles and a thick gold chain and so does Mariam.

A century later fashion in dress has undergone a great change. In Take My Hands though the traditional dress of the Syrian Christian women was still worn by the older generation, more and more women were turning to the sari for a variety of reasons chief among them being convenience and easy availability. Mary’s mother wears the traditional attire but none of her daughters do so because it is not fashionable and a lot more cumbersome. Mary’s mother bemoans the fact that the traditional attire was dying out but none of her three children are willing to rescue it from its moribund state. Mary favoured neat, narrow bordered saris which she wore even after she became confined to the wheelchair. The heavy gold ornaments for the ear have become
outmoded and dangling ears are no longer considered a sign of beauty. However, gold bangles, chains and earrings continue to be in use though in accordance with the demands of changing fashion. Mary, for instance, designed a special gold chain for herself with gold beads graduated in size along with a pair of matching earrings. The gold ornaments were made by goldsmiths in the privacy of their homes and were made to order. The hairdo of young women generally was restrained to one or two plaits which kept the hair out of the way and made for a cooling effect. Those who went for professional training as in the case of Mary Verghese had to put their hair up in a knot at the back of the head. Mary’s hair was so unruly that no amount of combing or oiling could smooth it down and so it gave her an untidy appearance until her accident when her hair had to be trimmed.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century the mode of dress has undergone a lot more change brought about by changing circumstances. In *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* the traditional dress is restricted to Lissy’s grandmother in Pallissery. Her own mother wears the sari and so do many women of her age. Along with the stiffly starched organdie saris which young office going women and those women who have the time and deft fingers prefer to wear, there are also the synthetic saris which are easy to wash and are uncrushable. These nylon saris brought home by the many Malayalis who have gone abroad were all the rage in
the sixties and the seventies. They were very colourful and had bright prints. They were so compact and handy and needed so little effort that the women took to them especially in the monsoon season. Lissy is provided with nylon saris by her mother’s sisters who work abroad. These saris are bright and colourful but Lissy’s mother does not approve of them. She makes the common mistake that girls with dark complexions should wear only clothes that are light in colour. Light colours only make dark girls look sallow and washed out. If Lissy had been dressed in brighter colours she might have looked appealing to the many young men who came to see her. It is only when she is away from the domineering influence of her mother that she learns how to dress so as to look her best.

As the greatest number of Keralites who went abroad and to other states in the country were the Syrian Christians it is quite feasible to think that they set the fashion in the matter of dress. Those who went abroad, especially if they came from families that had been poor, have a habit of flaunting their new found wealth. One of the proposals that came for Lissy was that of a man who worked in Muscat. He came to ‘see’ Lissy accompanied by his parents and by his elder brother and his wife. While his parents wore the traditional white, the suitor was dressed in the latest fashion and so were the elder brother and his wife. The elder brother sported a flashy watch and a flashier shirt. His wife wore a green
Kanjeepuram silk sari, at least a dozen gold bangles and carried a large brown ladies’ bag. Her hair was piled high up in a big knot made so by the help of an enormous bun and a load of hairpins.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, women, particularly the educated college and office going women, have begun to be beauty conscious and try to make themselves as attractive as possible. They try out all kinds of home remedies and many of the powders and creams available in the market for the removal of pimples etc. Lissy has an oily skin and so pimples are the bane of her life. She tries to remove them with the help of natural remedies like raw cucumber and some cream from the market which does not have any real effect. Her mother is impatient with her because Lissy does not have the kind of looks that will attract men to her and yet she does not show much interest in beautifying herself even in the simple matter of shaping her eyebrows.

In Fault Lines Meena Alexander describes her Kozencheri Ammachy, her paternal grandmother, who wore the traditional dress with grace and style, the fan at her back starched with the right number of pleats to it. Her own mother wore the sari and covered her head with it when speaking to her father-in-law though this was not a practice usual with Syrian Christians. As for Meena herself she also wore the sari but used sleeveless blouses when the weather was too hot. The latter was anathema in Kozencheri though it was tolerated in Tiruvalla. The very
persons who went about with great modesty in Kozencheri thought nothing of wearing diaphanous saris and sleeveless blouses at Malabar Hill, Bombay which only showed the double standards practised. Meena Alexander’s description of her mother’s wedding as recounted by her mother gives a vivid picture about the saris worn by the bride at her wedding. In keeping with Syrian Christian tradition the bride wears white to church, Meena’s mother wore a white tissue sari which had been bought for her by her aunt from Madras and also white and gold slippers to match the sari. Tradition demanded that the sari given to the bride by her husband after he had tied the minnu would be used to cover her head as a symbol of her husband’s promise to cherish her. This sari called the manthrakodi is cherished by the wife and used on very important occasions, the final occasion being the death of the wearer. Then the manthrakodi would be used as her shroud. Meena’s mother’s wedding sari had been a beautiful one bought especially from Madras by her aunt. This was a modification of the Syrian Christian practice of the bridegroom providing the bride with her wedding finery and the bride doing likewise for the bridegroom. Sometimes, for the sake of convenience the bride and groom would buy their own dress so that taste and size could be taken care of as seen in this case. Though this sari has a lot of sentimental value sometimes practical considerations get the upper hand. Meena’s mother sells her wedding sari to a door to door
salesman who buys old saris for their gold brocade. Her wedding sari had become old and discoloured and she considers that she had got a bargain because she now had got more money than the five hundred rupees the sari had originally cost. The ornaments that she had worn for the wedding had been simple but elegant – their very elegance costing a lot of money because they had been gold studded with rubies and pearls.

Meena’s marriage on the other hand, had been a simple ceremony at the office of the sub registrar but she had worn a red Kancheepuram sari bowing to the suggestion of her friend Chirantan who had insisted that she wear red for her wedding because the colour red signified prosperity. If it had not been an inter caste and race marriage, Meena too would have had a proper Syrian Christian marriage with all its trappings and though she does not regret the marriage she does regret having lost all the paraphernalia of the ceremony.

In *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy draws attention to the dress worn by the maid Kochu Maria who is very particular that she should wear the traditional Syrian Christian dress complete with the fan at the back and the heavy earrings which cause her ear lobes to dangle. Even though her right ear lobe had split open once and had to be stitched together by the doctor, “she couldn’t stop wearing her kunukku because if she did, how would people know that despite her lowly cook’s job, (seventy five rupees a month) she was a Syrian Christian
Marthomite." (GST 170) But Kochu Maria has to bow to her mistress’ orders that she should wear an apron in the kitchen. Therefore Kochu Maria wears a frilly apron which looks ludicrous over her chatta and mundu, the fan at the back obliterated by the apron.

Mammachi’s concession to tradition lies in the fact that she always wears the typical Kerala off white and gold sari, starched to perfection. Ammu, on the other hand is outrageous in her choice of dress especially during the days she lived with her husband when she wore sleeveless and backless blouses which were meant to draw the attention of people. Perhaps it was this flaunting of her physical charms that captured the attention of not only her husband but also that of his boss which led to the latter’s propositioning of her. This ultimately causes her marriage to collapse and leads Ammu to return to her paternal home thus condemning her children and herself to life in a place where they had no locus standi. In Ayemenem she wears a housecoat over her petticoat.

Housecoats and nighties have become the standard homewear of women of all classes in the last decade of the twentieth century, the only difference being in the matter of the quality of the cloth used and its price. Only women of the older generation wear the traditional dress or even the sari at home. There is also a mention of the sheet that is spread on the bed where Ammu has a nap. It is a sheet on which pictures of
people, animals and plants are worked out in crossstitch. Cross stitch was taught as handicraft in many schools and in the early eighties many women made a hobby of working out elaborate pictures in cross stitch. One might even say that cross stitch sheet is the Syrian Christian equivalent of the western tapestry because many Syrian Christian houses have framed pictures of the scenes of the Bible worked out in cross stitch.

Children’s clothes have also changed with the times. Estha’s dress is only a younger version of the dress popular among young men of the times. When he is taken to the airport to meet his cousin Sophiemol and her mother Margaret Kochamma he wears “a long sleeved red shirt with a pointed collar and black drainpipe trousers.”(GST 137). Drainpipe trousers had been all the rage in the late seventies. Rahel’s dress was “a cloud of stiff yellow lace with tiny silver sequins and a bow on each shoulder. The frilled skirt was underpinned with buckram to make it flare.”(GST 136). She had matching knickers as well. Years later when Estha is re-returned to Ayemenem he wears clothes that are of the drip dry variety which are easy to wash and need no starching or pressing. Rahel too, when she comes to Ayemenem in order to see Estha, wears only nondescript clothing. Baby Kochamma, on the other hand, has let herself go in the matter of dress. She wears voluminous housecoats at home. Even when Rahel and Estha had been
children in Ayemenem, Baby Kochamma had been enormous in size. The fat simply seemed to hang from her upper arms and only the tailor Chellappen from Chungom could fashion blouses in keeping with Baby Kochamma’s size and taste. Velutha and the other outcastes wear clothes which are strictly utilitarian. Chacko normally wears a bush shirt over his mundu and tennis shoes but when he has to go to the airport to meet his ex-wife, he wears a suit and a tie.

Ammu’s father, however, as Imperial Entomologist was a picture of sartorial elegance. There was a picture of him in his three-piece suit with his hair well combed and slicked down, his full sleeved shirt fixed up with cufflinks. In fact so finicky was he about his dress that he had a good collection of cufflinks which after his death, Chacko distributed among the poor people so that they could be put to better use. Pappachi like every anglophile used a silver hairbrush to brush his hair and would not dream of going about without using his cologne. Not much is spoken of Ammu’s hairdo except the fact that she wore her hair loose those times she was feeling especially restless and that she had long curly hair. Rahel as a child had her hair gathered on the top of her head and fastened with a Love in Tokyo, “two beads on a rubber band, nothing to do with Love or Tokyo…” (GST 137) As for Estha, his hair was carefully brushed up to form a puff rising above his hairline in front, “like well-whipped egg white” (GST 137). It must be noted that like
drainpipe trousers, puffs too were the in-thing among dashing young men.

In *Something Barely Remembered* all the senior ladies wear the traditional dress like Mariam’s grandmother who lives in a small house down the river. She is a capable woman with a great love for standing on her own feet even when debilitated by age. Eli’s grandmother too is dressed in the traditional dress. Though we meet her only when Eli goes to see her in the evening she, in her white *Chatta* and *mundu*, looks tranquil and calm and is most concerned that her grand daughter has lost weight and looks terribly under nourished. Sara’s mother-in-law is also dressed in the traditional dress. She, however, is different from the other two senior ladies because she loves working in the soil and therefore it is not reasonable to expect her to be chic like her compeers. Anna’s mother Sosha who ran away with Azor when he came collecting antique boxes is equally at home with army jackets and saris. Anna, however, especially after her marriage to Philip, wears only the sari. Mariam, who returns home after her marriage with Paulo breaks down wears jeans and sometimes saris with sleeveless blouse in order to keep the heat at bay. As for Eli she wears tight jeans and a shirt that she tucks into the waist band of her jeans. Those women who have gone abroad think nothing of smoking as in the case of Sara the doctor who had been a close friend of Anna’s husband Philip before his marriage. As for ornaments most of
the younger set prefer to go about without them because they are irksome and a bother. Even if they wear the occasional chain or earrings or bangles, they are mainly artificial items and not gold. Only Anna, the submissive wife of Philip wears all the usual items of gold chain, bangles, earrings and so on. As for the men most of them wear the usual ensemble of shirt and mundu with or without gold edging. There is a mention about the shirt worn by Chako when he visited Puthenkavu as a naturalist. It had a Chinese collar which was a novelty at the time. Dress is no longer a marker about the social status of its wearer.

The beauty industry has caught on in Puthenkavu as well. Ammini Beautician is a refuge and solace to people like Mariam from the sheer boredom of life in this one horse town. Ammini does not pry into any secrets but offers comfort in the shape of tea and new shampoos. She is not interested in building up her business because it is for her only a way to pass the time and to relieve the sameness of her life with a husband who is so wrapped up in the memories of his dead first wife that he ignores his living wife. Even though there are beauty parlours, people do not make regular visits there as they do in metropolitan cities. The old methods of hair care are still followed as in the case where Eli’s grandmother scolds her for not taking care of her hair and allowing it to degrade into coppery rat tails. Men also are conscious about keeping themselves well preserved and take pains to
trim and dye their hair and beard though they do not yet frequent beauty parlours except on rare occasions.

The Syrian Christian Cuisine

The cuisine of each community has specialities which are the result of the geographical position in which the community is placed and the flora and fauna of the land. As Kerala has a long sprawling coastline washed by the Arabian Sea it is only natural that fish should form an important part of the food eaten by the people of this land. Central Kerala, the area under study is amply blessed by lakes, rivers and backwaters. Therefore the Syrian Christians who occupy a large chunk of the population have fish as one of the main dishes on their table. Fish appears in a large variety of forms- fried, curried, sautéed, salted and pickled- quite understandable considering the easy availability of fish even today though they might not be of the finest variety and may cost the earth. With the development of refrigeration techniques and with easy transport to foreign countries ensured, the fish of Kerala have obtained a great deal of export value and so only fishes of a second quality reach the tables and markets of the ordinary Keralite.

The coconut palm or Kera Vriksha which is to be found everywhere has given the state its name of Kerala. So ubiquitous and useful is it that one can honestly call it the Kalpa Vriksha or the tree that gives all one desires. No part of the coconut tree is wasted – neither the
root nor the stem, the leaves, flowers and fruit. While the root and stem are put to various uses, the leaves are used to thatch roofs, the flowers are a beautiful decoration for auspicious events. The fruit yields refreshing, invigorating juice which when fermented, produces toddy, the local mead. When the white kernel is squeezed thick coconut milk is obtained which is a very important ingredient in several dishes; viscous oil when the same is dried and crushed also forms part of the many tasty dishes made in Kerala. As the topography of Central Travancore is one that has hills, dales, plains and as it has a variety of soils from sandy to loamy to alluvial, it has a wide variety of fruit trees. The most prominent among them are the tamarinds, the mango and jack trees. Therefore it is only natural that they too make their presence felt in the form of an assortment of curries in which they are either whole or in the form of ingredients. In the case of a wide choice of mangoes and jackfruit they remain on the table in the form of pickles and chips and sweetmeats all the year round. The tamarinds, both the big black type and the reddish brown variety, are used as ingredients for different curries. They are also means by which family relations are preserved because in the old days those who did not have these absolute essentials of every Syrian Christian family were provided with them by the ones who had them. It was also usual for families to have a small kitchen garden which allowed them to be more or less self-sufficient in the matter of
vegetables which were in addition supplemented by tubers grown in the yard. Among the tubers the most prominent one is the tapioca. Though not native to Kerala, it nevertheless became most popular because it was easy to cultivate and did not need any special care. It was also tasty and nutritious and in addition very cheap. Even the poorest person could afford a bit of tapioca and it was excellent when eaten with fish. Milk and milk products were also in a way homegrown in the past because most families had a cow or two in their own household which provided the family with their needs of milk and was, in many cases, a source of income. A few hens and sometimes a few ducks gave the family eggs the year round and chicken and duck preparations on festive occasions.

When the Syrian Christians began to leave the home turf in search of employment necessity forced them to abandon many of their tastes and preferences. Their cuisine underwent change as it was practically no longer possible to follow the old methods of collecting and cooking. Women being employed in other fields were now saved from the drudgery of the kitchen and so the kind of food cooked underwent change. Even the manner of cooking changed. Instead of cooking over the open fire in earthen vessels, cooking came to be done in aluminium and steel vessels over cooking ranges run with gas or electricity which were convenient and fuel efficient. A number of gadgets in the kitchen freed women from having to spend hours in the
effort of cooking. More and more women began to hold responsible jobs outside the home which resulted in their having to resort to the supermarket culture. Milk now comes in sachets and so do eggs, meat, fish and vegetables. Houses with cows and hens have become a rarity even in the countryside.

The Syrian Christians have now become global citizens because their presence is felt in all the important countries of the world. They have become acquainted with the cuisine of these countries where they work and so have developed a taste for some of their dishes. Thus we have the popularity of noodles, kubbuz, hamburgers, pizzas, bread of various shapes and sizes, wines of different taste and colour. Fast food and microwave ovens have come to stay, so have the practices of dining out, having continental food and taking part in business lunches. Those who wish to experiment with new methods of cooking have only to resort to the cookery books which are easily available in every bookshop. Some of the culinairy queens are to be found in the Syrian Christian community like Dr. Thangam Philip who had obtained the Ceres award from the United Nations for her services in the field of nutritious cuisine. Two names closer to home are the names of Mrs. B.F.Varghese and Mrs. K.M.Mathew both of whom have become literally household names because their recipe books line the shelves of the kitchen. K.M. Mathew in his book, Annamma, reminisces about his
wife’s insatiable desire for experimenting with new dishes and improving upon old ones (33).

With regard to the six works that are studied, The Slayer Slain does not give much importance to the food that is served at the table of Koshy Curien except to remark that it was wholesome. However, there is a mention of the buttermilk that is served along with other curries. The English palate that is used to yoghurt might have been quite intrigued by the watery version of yoghurt so popular with Syrian Christians especially when it is garnished with chillies and curry leaves. Mrs. Collins was familiar with the rice gruel favoured by the poor and also the chutney which could be easily made by grinding together coconut, green chilly, a little onion, salt and curry leaves. Even the earthen vessel in which the gruel or curries are cooked, the chatty, is mentioned here. Mrs. Collins was also fascinated by the sweetmeat that is made by squeezing the pulp of ripe mangoes onto mats and then dried. It would not be wrong to say that the process of making this sweetmeat attracted Mrs. Collins more than the sweetmeat itself. It is usual for meals to be rounded off with fruits which take the place of desserts, most popular of which are ripe plantains and mangoes. In typical Syrian Christian households conversation flags as soon as the meal begins because each person would concentrate on the business of eating. It is not customary for the women of the household to eat along with the
menfolk. Perhaps Mrs. Collins departs from custom in order to present Koshy Curien as a very progressive person who does not exercise patriarchy all the time. The fact that no such evocative descriptions of food items appear anywhere in the latter half of the work points a clear finger to the fact that Mrs. Collins had been replaced by her husband.

In *Take My Hands* Dorothy Clark Wilson has a field day describing some of the typical Syrian Christian items of food. As Mary Varghese lived in the tiny island of Cherai, fish is a main item of food. Sea food like shrimps and prawn are not the costly delicacies they now are but formed part of the daily diet of the people. One favourite dish is the one made by a combination of shrimps and raw mangoes. Sometimes sea food does not agree with some persons like Mary’s brother Babi. Coconuts in any form, from the tender ones that are popular for their juice and sweet half formed flesh to the fully developed ones, which make up an absolutely necessary ingredient in many of the Syrian Christian dishes, are described in the work. Tamarinds too find their way to the dinner table in various preparations and they are also much appreciated for their “puckering sourness” (*TMH* 16). When Mary Varghese speaks of home she cannot but associate it with “the smells of simmering curries and chutneys so hot that the very anticipation of their flavours would make your throat smart deliciously.” (*TMH* 16) The Syrian Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter are also festive
occasions on the culinary side. The festivals would not be complete without *appam* and mutton stew, or that truly Syrian Christian delicacy of *vatteppam*. The author even gives the recipe for this eatable. The Syrian Christians who have plenty of landed property consider themselves as feudal landlords. It was therefore customary for the servants and the families of the employees to be served the Christmas meal at the house of the master. In Mary’s house her mother served food to all the servants and employees during these festive occasions.

Descriptions of food abound in *Fault Lines* also. Meena Alexander gives a vivid description of the kinds of food served in a Syrian Christian household during a wedding. This picture that she draws is taken from her mother’s description of her wedding in the days following independence. Weddings in those days were big fetes for families. Aunts, uncles, cousins -even those removed several times- descended on the house of the bride or groom and helped with the cooking of the various dishes particularly the different preparations of fish as curry made with chilly and tamarind, small fishes made with “mounds of coconut flesh, scraped into freckled bits fried with turmeric and onions” (*FL*, 220), fleshy sea fish or parrot fish cut into slices and fried in a paste of spices. On the eve of the wedding, meat in the form of beef, mutton and chicken would also be cooked into various dishes in which spices would be added according to taste. Cutlets too were
prepared to be served along with bread to the groom’s people. This was European style and had not caught on yet as a usual item of food.

On the day of the wedding food was served on banana leaves and apart from the various preparations of fish and meat, there were also lentils and vegetables, *sambar*, yellow buttermilk and curd, *papaddoms* and pickles. The men would eat in the big marquee set up in the front courtyard and the women inside the house. Meena’s mother recollects how the well in the home garden had dried up and how water had to be brought from other places and stored in various urns kept on the verandah of the house. Such emergencies which crop up in houses where important events are to take place are handled with calm efficiency by the different members of the family.

Changes occur in the culinary tastes of the Syrian Christians by the last quarter of the twentieth century. This can be seen in the items of food described in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride*. Though not much change has taken place in the dishes served during the festivals of Christmas and Easter, other items have been added to the usual menu. Lissy has a flair for cooking and is interested in learning and trying out new recipes. She attends the cooking classes conducted by the YWCA where she learns how to bake and ice cakes. She makes a very good iced cake for Christmas at Palliserry which is greatly appreciated by children and adults alike. The usual red fish curry, the different meats which are
cooked on Christmas Eve fill the whole house with a nice and appetizing smell of rich and spicy food. The fare on Christmas morning is the traditional *appam* and mutton stew, at Pallissery the *appam* is white and puffy in the centre and has a golden brown frill which is indicative of its fine quality. The dining table is loaded with dishes of meat, fish and vegetables for the afternoon meal and all the non-vegetarian items are polished off very fast leaving behind the vegetarian which are eaten only for fear of being wasted. One new item that has begun to be seen on the festival menu is the *pulao*, the taste of this dish has rapidly caught on the Syrian Christian taste buds especially among the younger generation. The *pulao* that is cooked by Lissy is fast devoured by her young cousins Arun and Reji while the older folk prefer the traditional unpolished rice and big helpings of the various fish and meat preparations. The usual Syrian Christian dessert is a mulch of a handful of rice, curd, sugar or cane syrup and plantain. This has now been replaced by sweets like icecream or *payasam*, Lissy serves sweet vermicelli *payasam* as dessert in the novel. Apart from these main items, there are also a lot of snacks which is standard fare like *kuzhalappam*, *achappam* and diamond cuts. Young children keep the pangs of hunger at bay by eating these between meals.

One ubiquitous breakfast dish that is found in every Syrian Christian household is *puttu* which is a preparation of rice flour and
grated coconut steamed in a cylindrical device. It is most popular because it is easy to prepare and is nutritious and filling. Even an unexpected guest can be rapidly served with puttu. The marriage broker Joshua times his visits to the house in Pallissery in such a way that he must be served with breakfast or lunch as the case may be. He has no compunction in tucking in large quantities of puttu before conveying his news bad though it is. Living in a city one soon becomes used to buying whatever one wants because it is quicker and more convenient. When Kuttiamma’s brother makes an unexpected visit to her house she is able to have a tasty meal ready for him having bought a dressed chicken from the nearby supermarket. Lissy is squeamish about killing chickens in Palliserry because it is so easy in Trivandrum to get dressed chickens which only need to be cooked. In the city one relies entirely on gas stoves and on hot plates, infinitely preferable to open hearths and earthenware cooking vessels.

When Lissy has to stay in the hostel she is shocked by the kind of food that is served to the inmates. The food is absolutely tasteless and so bad that it can hardly be eaten. The pangs of hunger are satisfied by resorting to bread and jam which are easily available in the market and by occasional visits to reputable restaurants for a snack or two. Eating out has become a very well accepted practice among Syrian Christians, as much as an indication of social status and wealth as for convenience
and a much needed change from the drudgery of routine. The sister of one of the proposed suitors of Lissy averred that they had bought land near the airport not only because the area was developing fast but also because it was close to the bright lights of the city and was very accessible to eating joints which served Chinese and continental fare!

In *The God of Small Things* there are very few descriptions about culinary activities except for the big iced cake made by Kochu Maria in order to welcome Sophiemol. As the Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas do not make their appearance in the novel, the dishes associated with them are not described. However, as the family business is the establishment called ‘Paradise Pickles and Preserves’, Mammachi’s experiments regarding the pickling of mangoes are mentioned. It is only when Chacko returns from Oxford that Mammachi’s small cottage industry burgeons out into a small scale industry with a factory, workers, trade unions and a pompous name and finally debt and liquidation. The recipe that Estha copies down in his second best handwriting is one for the making of banana jam which is neither jam nor jelly. This is the only mention of food in the novel apart from the description of the messy manner in which Comrade Pillai eats his food.

*Something Barely Remembered* also does not describe festival food but Susan Viswanathan describes the food that is served to the
family after the funeral of the father, the head of the family. Funeral lunch which is served to the mourners is totally vegetarian and consists generally of rice gruel, fried rounds of bitter gourd, boiled greengram, yellow buttermilk, pappadom and pickle. Susan Viswanathan deals in detail with the various dishes that are served in a house of bereavement in her book *The Christians of Kerala* (142).

Fish is essential for lunch and dinner, and when there are no good fishes, even the less acceptable *kuri* is welcome because it is very tasty when cooked well. Behnan enjoins his wife and daughter not to tell anyone that they had eaten this second rate fish because such a confession would bring shame upon a prosperous business man like himself. The main reason why good fishes are not found in the local market is because they are all exported to foreign countries especially the Gulf countries where there are a large number of Malayalis. When these non-resident Indians return home for Christmas the price of fish in the local market shoots up. When Ivan comes to his ancestral house stricken with disease he looks for fish but his spinster sister promises to make him fish the next day. She herself has given up eating fish because she is always on one fast or the other. Fish is so loved by Syrian Christians that it is made in all its different preparations especially when there is a visitor. Eli’s grandmother tries to tickle her grand daughter’s palate by
telling her of the different preparations of fish that have been made for her.

Even when Syrian Christians go to “fresh woods and pastures new”, to all the countries of the world they carry with them the tastes of their home, their childhood. They adjust and adapt to the food in the new land but with the raw materials they have in hand and the spices they have brought with them they manage to recreate their own cuisine to some extent. Those who are unable to do this live on their memories of boiled rice, fish in red hot curry and with grated coconut, the sour green mangoes eaten raw with salt and red chilly powder and a host of other memories as in the case of Mariam in Something Barely Remembered. Those who live in America have a packet and carton culture, the women have no time or inclination to cook and therefore get their families to live almost entirely out of packets which provide them with pre-cooked food. All that needs to be done is to tear open the packets and eat the food provided after warming it in the microwave oven if necessary. This is what Susa’s sister in law Anna does when the former comes to visit her brother. They eat broccoli and asparagus and do not listen to Susa’s complaints that both items must be as old as the dinosaurs because they are so hard. In distant climes Syrian Christian women think nothing of having cocktails which are mildly alcoholic - something which they would not do back home.
Having food outside the home and eating precooked or ready to cook stuff have come to stay in Kerala although it is not a daily affair. And yet the love for the traditional dishes of the Syrian Christians continues in the mind of the Malayali wherever he may be and whatever he has become. During festive seasons, he cannot but recreate what his palate remembers of the taste of the past. Few are the husbands who do not remark with nostalgia about the taste of the food his mother had prepared for him in the old days when rice was pounded into powder and ground into paste on the granite mortar after hours of hard labour. The special taste of food cooked in earthen vessels over an open wood fire is now a thing of the past and the Syrian Christian cuisine is rapidly losing its exclusive nature. Instead it has become part of the menu in star hotels.