Chapter 7

The Syrian Christians and the Environment

The environment is an issue that exercises the minds of everybody these days. This is especially so in today’s world when the environment is becoming so cruelly degraded that it needs to be protected for the sake of the continued existence of mankind. Dr.N. Balakrishnan Nair in his paper *Environmental Issues of Kerala* (5) warns the people of Kerala of the dire effects of environmental pollution and degradation. In fact man’s health depends upon the health of his environment.

Like other organisms man also continually interacts with his environment. This was so right from the beginning of human history. Every event in man’s life was closely linked with his observation and understanding of nature. Thus man learnt to live in accordance with the rhythms and cycles of nature. The rising of the waters of the River Nile was regarded as the sign for a good crop; the annual monsoon was the signal for maritime explorations into the exotic east. The environment was inextricably intertwined with the history and culture of the human races. This respect and worship for the environment was predominantly seen in the oriental races rather than in their western counterparts.

It would not be wrong to say that the Syrian Christians are more than a little responsible for the degradation of the environment. All old
rituals and practices which indirectly aimed at preserving the environment were dismissed as superstitions and decried as ancestor worship. Even the observance of the heavenly bodies and the belief that they do influence man was rejected as questioning the almighty power of God and as an attempt to look into the future forbidden to man. The Christians clung to the Biblical verse which said that God had created man to rule over all nature. With this divine permission man felt that he had been licensed by God himself to wreak his will upon nature, conveniently ignoring another verse which said that God employed man to take care of his creation rather than rule over it.

The Syrian Christians community of Kerala had lived like the other communities in close harmony with nature. Of equal status with the Nairs who were the major community, the Christians originally earned their livelihood by providing the temples with oil to light the lamps and rice to make the sacrificial offerings to God. In fact many of the Syrian Christian families bear names that reflect their erstwhile occupation of making oil as in ‘Chakkummoottil’ where the ‘chakku’ is a crude device that was used to crush dried coconuts manually. Family names like ‘Kandathil’ (which means ‘within the field’) can be a pointer to the fact that the family cultivated paddy which was beaten out into rice and supplied to the temples. Many of the families bore names that
were closely connected with features of the environment like the vegetation of the land or its topography.

It was with the coming of the western colonizers that the Syrian Christian attitude to the environment began to change. In the beginning questions of allegiance and the opposition to it occupied the minds of colonizer and colonized. When the Anglican missionaries arrived for the purpose of reforming the ancient Syrian church they found themselves involved in the life of the people of the land. The abject poverty of the people caused the missionaries to seek ways and means by which the poverty could be alleviated at least in a little measure. Therefore they struck deeper inland, away from the plains and into the hills which were more or less forest land. The land was cleared and plantations of tea, coffee and cardamom came into being in the very upper reaches. The smaller hills too, once the habitat of foxes and other wild creatures became the haunts of man where coconuts and bananas were cultivated along with a host of other plants including the pepper vines which freely climbed up arecanut trees. The people of Kerala were beginning to grow away from the environment. Though the environment belongs to people of all religions, it is a fact that much of the degradation brought about in the environment today is the handiwork of Christians in general and the Syrian Christians in particular.
The liberal education offered by the CMS College opened up a whole new vista for development and progress for the adventurous Syrian Christians. Having conquered the reaches of the Western Ghats they began to move further afield in search of material progress in the different continents of the world. They spent the best part of their lives in these countries of their adoption and either remained there or as in many cases returned home to their native shores to live in retirement. When they returned they brought back with them the possessions that they had used in their homes abroad. At first it was the Syrian Christians who came from Malaysia and Singapore who began to use these gadgets in their homes thus causing in others a desire for similar labour saving devices. The market which is always sensitive to such demands began to import -legally or otherwise- such devices which were eagerly purchased by the consumers. Then came the influx of persons going to the rich tropical countries of Africa mainly as teachers and in other white collar jobs. They also did not settle down in these places but returned home to their native Kerala. With the Gulf boom the number of families and single individuals going to seek their fortunes in the land of the black gold increased manifold. As a result a total change came about in the living conditions of the people, particularly the middle class who were the ones who took the full advantage of this market for skilled and unskilled labour in the Gulf countries. As immigration was not allowed
in the Gulf States those who went there had to come back to their native places. The country benefited from the foreign exchange earned by the Malayalees who worked abroad. In fact Kerala is the only state in India that brings in so much of foreign exchange to the country.

The first missionaries were careful not to offend any religious Syrian sentiments because of their innate tact but they were able to influence a lot of people by example and precept. The CMS College, Kottayam became the centre which accorded western liberal education to the sons and scions of the enlightened families of Kottayam. Their constant contact with the white missionaries and their families attracted these young men to the English way of life. This accounts for the reforms made in two chief areas – agriculture and architecture. It is possible to trace the changes that came about in these two areas in the six works that are subjected to study.

The Syrian Christians of Central Kerala are by and large interested in the environment mainly for their own material advantage. They believe that the environment is to be used for the material benefit of man and they consider any attempt to protect it as simply the obstructive work of certain persons. Those who believe that the environment should be protected are usually denigrated as being anti development and anti progress. The rivers and the backwaters which are the generous gifts of Mother Nature are so exploited that they have
changed beyond recognition. Though Kerala is blessed with forty four rivers many of them have been reduced to sluggish drains which flow only during the monsoon. The rivers have been maltreated by having effluents dumped into them from the factories that are situated conveniently on their banks. These have polluted the rivers so badly that no life grows in them except the pernicious variety which frequent swamps and marshes. Excessive sand mining has done irreparable damage to the beds of the rivers and reduced them to treacherous gorges where the water lies stagnant and polluted. While these activities are done on an organized level, there are others which are done in an unthinking careless manner by ordinary men and women who have no higher stakes than keeping their own immediate surroundings clean. This is how people come to consider rivers as one huge waste dump into which anything can be thrown from the organic kitchen waste to inorganic waste like the ubiquitous plastic. Barrages and spillways like the Thottapally Spillway in Alappuzha District and the Thaneermukham Barrage in Kottayam District which were erected in order to prevent the saltwater from the sea seeping into the rivers has spoiled the health of the rivers and prevented the smooth cycle that Nature had ordained for it. Such interference with Nature was done by man in order to increase his profit. Dumping effluents into the river saved him the expense of having to set up proper plants to treat the waste. The sand from the river
could be sold at many times the expense incurred for mining it. If the salt water could be prevented from reaching the river there could be another crop of paddy – a further profit. Those who bring all this about are not concerned about the long term problems that are caused by such activities. They are least bothered about the dying river or the skin diseases that are the result of bathing in the polluted rivers. Polluted water bodies have become the breeding ground for the many kinds of mosquitoes that carry germs that cause fatal diseases. The paddy fields which used to give Kerala a carpet of green are now left fallow as there is nobody to work the fields. Besides, these days the paddy fields are filled in with soil in order to construct multi storey flat complexes.

Even the flora of Kerala has undergone marked change in the last two centuries. Many of the trees have been cut down both for their wood and in order to clear the ground for new constructions. The jack, mango, cashew, tamarind trees have for the most part been cut down, so have the coconut and arecanut palms as well. In their place rubber has been planted because rubber milk fetches plenty of money in the market. There had also been a fad for planting cocoa in the belief that this too would bring in money. This, however, was shortlived. Today other plants like vanilla have taken the place of cocoa. Teak too is now planted because it grows faster and fetches a good market price. Social forestry was introduced in an attempt to replace the green cover of
Kerala which had been so badly denuded by the indiscriminate felling of the trees. Fast growing plants like acacia and eucalyptus were introduced into the soil of Kerala. This was an experiment which did not work very well because of the health hazards posed by the pollen of the acacia plant upon people having allergic problems. As for the eucalyptus, it drained the soil of all its fertility, allowing nothing else to grow.

It must be noted that short sighted planning deprived Kerala of its fruit trees which were replaced by trees whose products bring money but not food. The kitchen gardens which once used to be the pride of the land have now become another rarity. This is one of the main reasons why Kerala is so dependant on other states for its food, why it has become such a consumer state. Even the forests have not been left untouched. Large chunks of the forest have been cleared and brought under cultivation of cash crops like tea, cardamom, coffee and the like. Human habitation has deprived the forest of much of its bio-diversity.

The flats and apartments that have taken over Kerala have small gardens shared by all the residents. Each family satisfies its desire for plants by having potted plants placed on tiny balconies. Sometimes there are not even pots but only earth filled sacks which serve as pots in which plants grow well. The courtyards are usually paved and do not allow seeds to sprout in unsuspecting cracks and fissures. This is so even in independent houses which have paved courtyards. Only the rich can
afford the luxury of a proper garden which is devoted to exotic plants needing great care and attention. These homes have manicured lawns as do hotels of the five star category. The annual flower shows have now become the one place where it is possible to see a wide variety of plants as well as vegetables which have been grown by a few individuals. A family self reliant in vegetables has become a rare phenomenon in the Kerala of today.

High rise buildings raise their heads to the skies thus effectively changing even the topography of the land. The garbage too reaches frightening proportions and becomes the home of many a plague and pestilence. The environment is therefore in a most vulnerable condition and has to be very carefully protected just as one would protect an endangered species.

Another area in which the environment is degraded is in the field of architecture. The architecture of Syrian Christian houses has undergone remarkable change though it is still possible to see houses of all descriptions in Central Kerala. Syrian Christian houses used to be low roofed wood panelled structures. The main room was originally used to store grain and the menfolk slept on the verandah encircling the house, while the women bedded down in the inner recesses of the house. Later on the grain was shifted to a part of the house and the rest of the house used for living purposes. The wooden walls had small windows
cut into them to let in air and light. The missionaries who came in the early years of the nineteenth century built houses and halls with high roofs and big windows which let in plenty of light and kept the rooms cool and airy. The Syrian Christian landowners realizing the beneficial effect of such construction also began to build their houses in the same way. With the passage of time and with the exodus of Syrian Christian to other states of India and abroad, the architecture of their houses changed. Those persons who earn their bread working in foreign climes were naturally eager to build a house for the day they come back to live permanently. They wish for a house that replicates at least to some extent the ones they are used to or at least dream about in their work place. Thus there are chocolate box houses all over Central Kerala easily identifiable as the ones belonging to people who are either working or have worked abroad. In the last years of the twentieth century Central Kerala has been taken over by the flat and apartment culture. Real estate has become a big and lucrative business today and the environment has become the casualty to man’s avarice for material gain.

The churches too are responsible for the spoiling of the environment. Churches come up by the score, each one vying with its neighbour to build bigger structures and fill them with more and more materials that are not environment friendly. Some churches have air coolers which usually do not work because of the erratic nature of the
power supply. Generators are used to work the air coolers thus creating air and noise pollution. As the church is provided with air coolers there are not many large windows to let in natural breeze. No wonder is it if the worshippers keep away from such a stifling place of worship. Also in the construction of the modern church the only consideration that is taken into account regarding the direction in which the church should face is its proximity and accessibility to the main road. In the old churches, however, very great importance was given to the direction of the air flow which is why they were very airy and comfortable. Most of them were built on the summit of hills which allowed the breeze to blow into the church without other high rise buildings standing in its way. The churches today are in the heart of the city and are often built above a hall which can be rented out for parties, particularly for the weddings solemnized in the church. This provides the church with additional income. Other examples of practices which are not environment friendly are the use of plastic chairs which have replaced the old reed mats used in some of the traditional churches. Even churches which have wooden pews for the believers to sit on, make use of plastic chairs also. Most of the churches which have choirs have also a great deal of electronic instruments which magnify the voices of the choir many times and thus deafen the congregation. Apart from the noise pollution it also deprives the worshippers of the peace of silent meditation.
The church has now become aware of the dangers of environmental pollution and many churches have Ecological Commissions and the like. They also undertake such drives as Greening the Parish with prizes for the best Green Parish and Diocese. The priests speak loud and long about the dangers of environmental degradation from the pulpits and try to conscientize the flock about the need for protecting the environment. Yet the craze for construction continues unabated and manifests itself in several types of building undertaken directly and indirectly by the church and funded by the parishioners. The former Metropolitan of the Mar Thoma Church His Grace Philippose Mar Chrysostom flays the present trend of the churches “to dismantle existing church buildings and build bigger ones,” in an interview with Dr. Jesudas Athyal in the work Mission in the Market Place (77).

The changes that have come about in the environment during the last century and a half are vividly recorded in the six works studied. While The Slayer Slain extols the pristine beauty of the unspoilt countryside of Central Kerala particularly Kottayam and its environs, Something Barely Remembered records the state of the old houses which are left neglected. The God of Small Things graphically describes the sad plight of the Meenachil River which has become a swollen sluggish drain carrying all the waste of Kottayam in its arms as it makes its tired way to the sea. Take My Hands written in the sixties contrasts
the lush greenery of Kerala with the arid dryness of Tamil Nadu while Fault Lines is full of nostalgia for the lovely landscape of the house in Tiruvalla with its memories of a doting grandfather and leafy hidey holes. While the two English writers enjoy the unsullied beauty and freshness of the landscape and the hospitable climate of the land, the four Indian writers are full of nostalgia for the environment of their memory which is so very different from the shocking reality of the present. The four works written in the last decade of the twentieth century bear witness to the vast changes in the environment that have taken place in the name of development and progress.

One of the worst casualties in the environment is the waterways. All the six novels describe the state of the different waterways, be they the backwaters of Cherai, the Vembanad lake of Kottayam or the Meenachil and Pamba rivers. In The Slayer Slain the Meenachil river is broad and deep, the people living on her banks have a great affection for her because she is the source of their sustenance both in the form of fish and in providing fresh silt deposits which increase the fertility of the soil. Koshy Curien is the proud possessor of several acres of land on the banks of the river and he even entertains a proposal from a very wealthy Syrian Christian for the hand of his daughter in marriage because the latter’s land lay adjacent to his. The emerald green of the waving paddy fields is a matter of great pride for the owner. The Meenachil in spate is
no longer the giver of all good gifts, instead she is like a dervish out for
blood. Mariam in *The Slayer Slain* who is swept into the water is
totally at the mercy of the river. She might have drowned if it had not
been for the timely intervention of Poulosa. More than a century later
this violent manifestation of the Meenachil serves to sweep away
Sophiemol in *The God of Small Things* into its strange watery depths.
Sophiemol drowns and floats about in the river a prey to fish until her
body is fished and brought ashore to the Ayemenem house. The
Meenachil had witnessed many an enjoyable frolic by the twins who had
been taught to swim by their uncle Chacko and to fish by their dear
friend Velutha. They had played to their hearts’ content on the banks
and on the one third of the river nearest to the shore. The Meenachil in
its placid moods had allowed them to steer their little boat across it to
the History House which had become their refuge from wicked men or
irate mothers. It had flowed along gently witnessing the stolen love of
Ammu and Velutha. The Meenachil had given them everything but also
had taken away everything when Sophiemol was drowned because that
set in motion a chain of events which had terrible effects on all of them.
When Rahel returns to Ayemenem many years later as an embittered
and alienated adult she is shocked to find a Meenachil river totally
devoid of any sparkle. It is a dying river, sluggish and choked with
weeds. The Thaneermukham barrage prevents the intrusion of salt water
from the Vembanad lake so that one more crop of paddy could be produced. The yearly ebb and flow of the seawater which used to invigorate the river had been checked by artificial means in order to satisfy man’s greed for yet another crop. The crop was achieved at the expense of the river. The Meenachil has become exhausted because the movement of the water has become slow and sluggish. The river has so little life in it that it does not wake into awesome zestful energy even during the monsoon. Arundhati Roy describes the Meenachil that Rahel sees after an absence of twenty three years thus:

Despite the fact that it is June and raining, the river is no more than a swollen drains now. A thin ribbon of thick water that lapped wearily at the mud banks on either side, sequinned with the occasional silver slant of a dead fish. Once it had the power to evoke fear. To change lives. But now its teeth were drawn, its spirit spent. It was just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea…

On warm days the smell of shit lifted off the river and hovered over Ayemenem like a hat (GST 125).

The River Pamba makes its appearance in Something Barely Remembered and remains placidly in the background. Unlike the Meenachil the Pamba does not take centre stage in the story but is
merely there as a vital presence, a comfortable feeling. Momentous decisions are taken on the banks of the Pamba like Lukose responding to the call of God. On the banks of the Pamba God seems to be closer than elsewhere which is why Lukose’s family does not question his decision to take up the ministry. The Pamba is a sweet memory, a nostalgia which causes Anna to long for her own native land and “the sound of the sea and the hush of river water” (SBR 25). Mariam who returns from Italy after her divorce from Paulo finds balm for her wounded heart in the gentle waters of the Pamba down which she sails to her grandmother’s house down the river. Mariam’s grandmother retires to her own house on the banks of the Pamba so that she could live independently without getting in the way of her grown son and his family. Markose takes his sister in law Sarah on the banks of the Pamba and only the river can reveal Sarah’s whereabouts afterwards. Not for nothing is the Pamba called the holy river of Kerala because many churches and temples are on its banks including the famous Sree Dharma Shasta temple sacred to Lord Ayyappa. The dry portion of the river bed of the Pamba at Maramon is the site of the greatest Christian convention in the world. In the second week of February the faithful gather here to listen to the rousing speeches made by speakers from all over the world for the space of one whole week. Every Syrian Christian family, chiefly those who belong to the Mar Thoma dispensation, makes
it a point to attend the Convention at least for one day in that week. This
convention is now more than a century old and still plays a most
important role in the lives of the Syrian Christians as is seen in A Video,
a Fridge and a Bride. Even though the Pamba does not appear to be as
dirty as the Meenachil, its state too is not much better. “The river was
green, covered with lilac water hyacinths and the boats had to fight their
way through the root tresses of these water weeds” (SBR 19). The
Pamba too floods now and then. In Fault Lines Meena recalls how her
mother’s aunt whom she called Chenangeril Ammachy had to house her
brood of chickens in her clean pantry when the Pamba flooded during
the monsoon season. The bigger animals are accommodated on the
higher ground near the house. While the house is surrounded by the
flood waters men and beasts live in close harmony with each other until
the waters go down in a few days’ time.

The sea does not evoke so much of a sense of fellowship as the
rivers do. On the other hand, the sea whether it is the one that transports
Meena and her family to Sudan in Fault Lines or the one that dashes
against the beaches of Alappuzha in Something Barely Remembered
remains as infinitely mysterious as it has been throughout time, though
its beaches have undergone change in terms of population and
environmental pollution.
It is also possible to trace the changes that have taken place in the flora of Kerala in the space of the last two centuries. Mrs. Collins waxes eloquent about the careful manner in which the trees are planted in the garden and in the yard of Koshy Curien’s house and the great care that is taken in keeping the place clean and tidy. The many trees that grow in his big compound are all fruit trees which afford welcome shade. They provide the family with abundant and nutritious food both in their raw and ripe state throughout the year. There are mango, jack, coconut and banana trees in abundance, of which many of the first two varieties had been planted by the grandfather of Koshy Curien. The courtyard was swept clean of dead leaves and all the waste heaped in a far corner where it was left to decay and become compost. A garden full of flowers, a sight familiar to Rev. and Mrs. Collins back home in England, was not a common sight in Syrian Christian households. Nor was it to be found in the households of other communities as well. Perhaps this was due to the agrarian background of the families. A large courtyard was very necessary in order to thresh the paddy and then dry it after it was boiled to the right degree. Such an operation was necessary in order to keep the family in rice for the rest of the year. However, there was a well tended kitchen garden in most homes. The Kerala variety of spinach with red leaves, chillies of different colours and degrees of keenness are a common sight in the kitchen garden. The different
vegetables which grow abundantly in the yard are a riot of flowers and the tendrils which creep along the walls and the ground bear on their slender stalks a profusion of cucumbers and pumpkins. There are also the yams, both the ones that put forth climbers that festoon the tall jack trees, as well as the big round ones that hold their stalks in straight umbrella-like majesty. All these serve as filling nutritious food and as the latter have greater shelf life they supply food during the lean days of the monsoon. Mrs. Collins appreciates the majestic elephant foot yams that are carefully nurtured and admires the flowers that grow wild by the river banks and in the jungle. She wonders why the women of this land do not take pains to grow these flowers as garden plants taking pride of place in the front yard soothing in sight and enticing in scent! The absence of a good kitchen garden signifies bad housekeeping as is evident from the overgrown state of the garden of the drunkard visited by the Protestant pastor. Even here nature is kind because he is able to pluck a coconut from the tree, a few chillies and curryleaves from the bushes enough to make chutney to go with the rice gruel.

The change in the environment is not very marked even after a hundred years as can be seen in Take My Hands. The big fruit trees continue to hold sway in the garden. Mary as a young girl has her own mango and love apple trees, the ubiquitous coconut trees continue to be
found in large numbers. There are also the sprawling tamarind and jack
trees which provide juicy fruit and a lot of shade.

One feature that is slightly different in the environment of the
home in Take My Hands from that in The Slayer Slain is the fact that in
the former there is a well marked area that is defined as the garden of the
house. This area is adorned with red and orange crotons which grow in
luxuriant bushes. As Mary’s house is in the island of Cherai the white
sea sand in the garden “glistened like jeweled toe rings when you
burrowed into it with your bare feet”( TMH 15). Cherai too had its share
of waving paddy fields in shades of emerald green. The love apple tree
with its thick foliage is the tree that fills the mindscape of Meena
Alexander in the Fault Lines. This tree had been her hidey hole from
interfering grown ups during the carefree days of childhood. The guava
and mango trees with their long leafy branches are ideal for climbing,
the long waving fronds of the coconut palms serve to make a whole
variety of playthings. The cashew trees with their alluring red gold fruit
capture the interest of urchins for whom the fruit becomes an attractive
addition to their meagre daily diet. The adult Meena finds herself
regretting her vigilant safeguarding of the fruit thus preventing the poor
boys from supplementing their food. The incense tree in the middle of
the garden becomes symbolic of her own life because like the incense
tree she too does not run deep roots but sheds the fragrance of incense
all around. Apart from these fruit trees which naturally are more appealing to a young child, the garden also has some bushes of jasmine and box flowers with their beguiling scent.

In _A Video, a Fridge and a Bride_ a garden of one’s own has shrunk to a number of potted plants which are kept on the small terraces of little box like houses in tiny plots of land in the busy city of Trivandrum. Lissy is a gardening enthusiast. The little rented house in which the family lived until Cheriachen’s retirement is transformed into an attractive home by the roses blooming in the confines of the pots in which they are lovingly tended by Lissy. The jasmine creeper which is guided up the terrace fills Lissy’s room with its gentle perfume and soothes Lissy at her most troubled moments. Even at Pallissery the plot of land which is Cheriachen’s inheritance is not a very fertile piece. A big mango tree stands guard over the house and gives it shade in all weather. There are also other trees like jack, cashew, tamarind, breadfruit, gooseberry, besides the coconut and arecanut palms. They are, however, not cash crops and because the soil is so inhospitable not very high yielding either. In fact Cheriachen tries his best to make a little money by planting some rubber trees in an attempt to exploit the demand for rubber in the market. However, as this endeavour is still a young venture it has not become a profitable enterprise, not profitable enough to increase Lissy’s value in the matrimonial market. It is a
different story in Piravanthanam which is Lissy’s mother’s home. This place is in the valley and has very fertile soil. The family had owned acres of paddy fields and several coconut plantations. When the Kerala Government introduced the Land Reforms Act many of the old families lost heavily. Lissy’s maternal grandfather had seen the writing on the wall and had wisely invested in property in Edathua and Tiruvella. He had also bought land in South Malabar in the names of his sons and nephews by which wise act he was able to keep the family fortunes intact in spite of losing heavily on his paddy fields. There are no formal gardens either in Pallissery or in Piravanthanam though there is of course a vegetable patch which supplies the family table with fresh vegetables.

A truly formal garden of the English variety is to be seen in the Ayemenem house in The God of Small Things. This garden was the pet occupation of Baby Kochamma after her abortive stint as a nun in the Catholic sisterhood. As she had earned for herself notoriety for having dared to become a Catholic and a nun not for the love of God, but for the love of Father Gilligan, she had shut the doors on any hope of an arranged marriage. Her father had therefore sent her to Rochester so that she could specialize in horticulture. When she returned home armed with her degree, her father gave her charge of the front garden which she
transformed into an exotic bower which was the talk of Kottayam and to see which people came from even distant places:

It was a circular, sloping patch of ground, with a steep gravel driveway looping around it. Baby Kochamma turned it into a lush maze of dwarf hedges, rocks and gargoyle. The flower she loved the most was the anthurium. Anthurium andraeanum. She had a collection of them, the ‘Rubrum’, the ‘Honeymoon’, and a host of Japanese varieties. Their single succulent spathes ranged from shades of mottled black to blood red and glistening orange (GST 26).

Baby Kochamma worked off all her frustrations by devoting all her energies to her garden in which she grew all kinds of exotic plants from bristling cacti to rare orchids. She tried to acclimatize edelweiss and Chinese guava to the tropical climate. It was a familiar sight for the people of Ayemenem to see Baby Kochamma clad in sari and sensible gumboots battling with the vegetation in the garden and thus creating a garden which is more a showpiece than a refuge, more an expression of bitterness than a manifestation of love. The garden is left to the mercy of Nature after the terrible events described in the novel take place. The all encompassing weed takes over and sends shoots growing over all the
accoutrements of the garden. When Rahel returns many years later it is to a garden that is completely overgrown and untamed.

The flora of the countryside is mainly the coconut and areca palms as well as the cashew, mango and bilimbi trees. Rubber trees too are planted in abundance and carefully tended so that they would yield the maximum quantity of milk. The History House is none other than the house in which the Kari Saipu had once lived in the middle of his rubber estate. Both estate and house had been left abandoned until they were taken over by a hotel group which now makes its money by selling old world ambience to the unsuspecting tourist. Rubber trees continue to grace the surroundings of Ayemenem as they do in most of the areas of Central Kerala.

In *Something Barely Remembered* also it is possible to see the many fruit trees that grow in the homes of Lukose, Anna and Mariam which are situated on the banks of the River Pamba. Apart from the many emerald paddy fields there are also stretches of sugarcane growing on the banks of the river particularly in the area called Mannar. Though this area was once known for its output of sugar it is now no longer so as most kinds of cultivation in Kerala are not profitable. When Ivan discovers that he is victim to a fatal disease he wants to return to his ancestral home so that he can again enjoy the sight of the old house and its yard with the banana trees with their crimson buds and the gently
waving coconut palms. Mariam in faraway America longs for the red rice of Kerala and the tamarind pods with their sour taste that set the teeth on edge, the citrus fruits which look like pink jewels. Anna in faraway Italy longs for the familiar sights and sounds of Kerala with its greenery and the salty tang of the sea. The botanist George chooses to stay in Puthencavu in order to identify and take photographs of certain rare herbs thus preserving them for posterity. Mariam’s father Behnan is a rubber dealer and Philip, Anna’s husband is a paper merchant after dabbling in the tapioca exporting business. Tapioca has also become a chief food item of Kerala in the last century. While it was once considered the staple food of poor people, tapioca has today risen in status and is served as a typical delicacy of Kerala in the best restaurants. The gardens are not laid out in formal patterns but there are clumps of attractive flowers like the golden red canna and the ubiquitous red and yellow crotons. The latest trend in upper middle class houses is to have formal gardens laid out in beds of square and circular shapes properly tended by a gardener.

It is possible to perceive changes in the architecture of the Syrian Christian houses in the houses described in all the six works. In The Slayer Slain, Koshy Curien’s house with its lime washed walls and big windows, airy rooms with ventilation that allow free flow of air, comes in for a lot of comment from Ummen Thoma who had come to ‘see’
Mariam as a prospective bride for his son. The latter’s insomnia is diagnosed by Koshy Curien as the result of sleeping in the ill ventilated rooms of the typical Syrian Christian houses. Mary Verghese’s home in Cherai is a big, “sprawling two storey house with its walls of whitewashed cement, its red-tiled roofs, its verandahs, its barred windows with their wooden shutters to keep out the noonday heat.” (TMH 15) The Kurichiethu ancestral house in Tiruvella which fills the mindscape of Meena Alexander is similar to the house of Mary Verghese. It was a house “with a gracious courtyard and tiled roofs, whitewashed walls and ceilings set with beams of rosewood.” (FL 7). The doors and windows of the house were fashioned in teak and were quartered so that one could open the upper halves and leave the lower halves closed. The house had a timelessness about it which endears it to Meena. Her maternal aunt who lived in the water logged area called Chenangeri had a very old fashioned wooden panelled house. The carved wooden panels of the house lent grace to it, there were innumerable nooks and corners where brass vessels were stored and in which the hens laid their eggs particularly during the time of flooding in the monsoon season. A special part of the house was set apart as a shrine at which candles were lit in front of the image of Jesus. The furniture in the house were almost antique pieces because they were crafted with care and made of rosewood.
Lissy’s house in Trivndrum is a tiny one in just a few cents of land. The doors are made of plywood which was all the rage in the seventies but which did not wear as well as the strong teak or jack. However, as the house is only a rented one it does not reflect upon the building instinct of Cheriachen or the other members of his family. The Kunnumpurathu house in Pallissery is a typical Syrian Christian structure set atop a hillock. It is almost a century old but it had been renovated in Cheriachen’s father’s time about fifty years before. It was built in the shape of an ‘H’ with the bedrooms at one end and the kitchen and storeroom at the other end. The middle portion made up the living room. There was a verandah running down the three sides of the house. The house had a wooden loft just below the high tiled roof. This loft kept the house cool and also provided storage space for articles that were no longer in everyday use. The furniture was not vintage variety but was old and solid, utilitarian rather than beautiful. Each room had windows which were made entirely of wood, bars and all. There was a tall hayrick in the courtyard and the house was redolent of woodsmoke and hay. Lissy loved the house in Pallissery and was never tired of spending her vacations there. Apart from the electrification of the house, things remained much the same as they had been in the days of Cheriachen’s father. If Lissy’s father’s house was on a stony hilltop which gave only a scanty yield; her mother’s house in Piravanthanam
was situated in very fertile land in the middle of lush paddy fields. The Padinjaremmanil house, Lissy’s maternal house stood on an elevation. It was one of the oldest houses in the locality, more than a century old. It was old and gracious but Lissy’s maternal grandfather was a man who moved with the times. He had had the house electrified and a water tank built to provide the house with a constant supply of running water which could be obtained at the turn of a tap. Besides

New bedrooms had been built at the rear, and the kitchen had been renovated when the younger son had got married. But from the front the house looked the same. The massive ‘ara’, the store and the loft that covered the house were polished so that the wooden ceiling and walls gave a warm, gentle glow in the half light that filled the front rooms. A few skylights had been provided but they did not disturb the duskiness of the long passage. The bedrooms had windows which opened onto the fields, keeping the rooms airy and pleasant (VFB 97).

The Ayemenem House in The God of Small Things is a grand old house. Nine steps led from the driveway up to the front verandah and the elevation of the place gave it the aura of a stage and everything that happened there was like a performance. The steep tiled roof had wooden gables with intricately carved triangular pieces that smoothly fitted into
sockets. The light that slanted in through the gables fell in patterns on
the floor. The polished wooden doors had four panelled halves where
the top half could be opened and the lower half closed. The front
verandah overlooked the garden created by Baby Kochamma and also
afforded a good view of the approach road. It was a deep verandah and
cool even in the hot summer months. When the red cement floor was
laid the white of nine hundred eggs was said to be added in order to give
the floor a bright polish. The pictures of the Rev. E. John Iype and his
wife Aleyooty were hung on the walls of the verandah in the company
of bison’s heads and looked out into the bustling road in the front. They
had once hung on the verandah that overlooked the river when it had
been the main thoroughfare and people came and went by the river.
When the new road came the verandah that overlooked the river became
the back verandah which was enclosed into a room with a green baize
door that opened out into the yard. It became a room for the exclusive
use of Chacko. The house used to be given the best care and attention in
the days of Mammachi who sat in her wicker chair on the front
verandah supervising the running of her small business of preserves. She
was always chic, even in the setting in which she placed herself. An
example is “the green glass vase with a single stem of purple orchids
curving from it” (GST 166) placed on the wicker table near the low
wicker chair in which Mammachi sat. Pappachi’s study was everything
one would expect of the study of an Imperial Entomologist with glass cases in which butterflies were mounted, impaled on pins. There were several precious books on entomology in the bookcase, the relics of Pappachi’s days of glory in Delhi.

When Rahel returns to Ayemenem after many years it is to find the house totally neglected and almost broken down. Years of dust and dirt had collected in the dimly lit corners of the house. The two women who lived in the house, Baby Kochamma and Kochu Maria, mistress and maid were indifferent to the needs of the real world and were concerned only about the happenings of the virtual world brought to them by television. The monsoon was taking its toll of the house as there was damp everywhere, the cupboards swelled with it and the locked windows burst open. The books got wavy and was home to all kinds of insects particularly the silver fish that tunneled its way into them and left the spines of the books weak and disabled. The dirt had piled up everywhere and had become a greasy film that coated every surface depriving it of its former sheen.

The History House which used to be the abode of Kari Saipu is also a gracious sprawling house with verandahs that run all around the house. It had cold stone floors and while its doors were locked, its windows were left open letting in the damp and the heat. After the Saipu died the house was closed up and left to Nature. There is an aura of
mystery about the house in which it seemed as if, “waxy ancestors with
tough toe nails and breath that smelled of yellow maps whispered papery
whispers” (GST 306). It is to the History House that Estha and Rahel
turn when Ammu screams that they are millstones round her neck. This
is the place that Estha considers a refuge from the paedophile in the
Abhilash Talkies. The broad verandahs are convenient places for the
rendezvous of the lovers. The exhausted children sleep on the verandah
of the History House when they are worn out with swimming for their
lives in the flooded Meenachil into which their boat had capsized. Here
it is that Velutha sleeps the sleep of exhaustion after being accused of
the rape of Ammu and abused by Mammachi. It is here that the children
witness the brutal assault upon Velutha by the policemen. The History
House has thus experienced the history of marginalized persons like
Velutha and abandoned children like Estha and Rahel.

When Rahel returns she finds the History House taken over by a
prominent chain of hotels with the ability to market the ambience of
history and tradition to the foreign tourist. The house had turned its back
on Ayemenem, instead it now overlooked the waterway along which the
foreign tourists were brought straight from Cochin so that they could
enjoy the sheer loveliness of the backwaters without being put off by the
sluggish, shit bearing river or the potholed, garbage dumped road. The
water near the hotel was green and toxic, so there were large signs
warning people against swimming there. They could cavort in the swimming pool of the hotel instead and enjoy the fresh food cooked in the hotel. They could not, however, keep out the smell of the shit that pervaded everywhere but

The trees were still green, the sky still blue, which counted for something. So they went ahead and plugged their smelly paradise. ‘God’s Own Country’ they called it in their brochure- because they knew, those clever Hotel People, that smelliness like other people’s poverty, was merely a matter of getting used to. A question of discipline. Of Rigour and Air-conditioning. Nothing more (GST 126).

On the other end of the social scale is the kind of house in which people like Velutha live. His house is in a grassy clearing surrounded by mango, cashew, coconut and bilimbi trees all huddled together. The house is just a low, little hut

with walls of orange laterite plastered with mud and a thatched roof nestled close to the ground, as though it was listening to a whispered subterranean secret. The low walls of the hut were the same colour as the earth they stood on, and seemed to have germinated from a house-seed planted in the ground… (GST 205).
There is just one room and the different parts of the room are earmarked for different purposes ie. one corner serves as the bedroom of Velutha’s brother Kuttappen who is totally bedridden having broken his back; another as the kitchen where Velutha cooks food for his drunken sod of a father and his incapacitated brother. It also serves as Velutha’s work place where he does all the fine jobs of carpentry. Here Estha and Rahel feel welcome and wanted.

Such old houses are to be found in *Something Barely Remembered* also. Lukose Achen’s house is one of the old variety. Its wooden lattice work lets the sunlight in filtered beams and bars. There was a wooden carving in the shape of the Persian Cross and Lukose as a young boy used to indulge in the game of putting his hand into the intricate whorls of the cross. Most of the early houses like the Ayemenem House in *The God of Small Things* face the river and are wooden houses for the most part. The Vazhayil house of Ivan and Annamma is also of this kind. The interiors are cool and dim and they fill the labyrinths of Ivan’s memory which is one main reason why he chooses to return to his ancestral house in order to spend the last days of his life. The house in which the child Anna stays is also of the same type with small wooden windows that overlooked acres of banana trees which belong to her father. Eli’s grandmother lives in yet another old house which has a wooden ceiling and small windows cut into the wood
panelled walls. The small window of her grandmother’s room has lace curtains which wave in the breeze. Sara’s old room in Alappuzha has a thick brown ceiling from which hung lights in wicker baskets which serve as lampshades. Everything in the room from the walls to the furniture is wood. The cupboard in the room is made of solid teakwood which is, “thick and old, the latch was a solid block which ran across the length of the two doors.” (SBR 82) Mariam’s parents lived in the house that had been left by her grandfather for his daughter, Mariam’s mother. The house is quite a grand one for those days, it had big iron grilled windows unlike the comparatively tiny windows of the wooden houses of the past. The kitchen is large and old fashioned with its earthen floor hardened over the generations. “The fireplace had large copper urns out of which there arose the fragrance of steaming rice. Sunlight, smoky and dull, filtered through the windows” (SBR 159).

Changes have taken place in the architecture of houses as is seen from the description of the exterior of Sara’s house in Alappuzha. The house has been newly painted and there is a mosaic ledge encircling the open verandah which serves as good seat for the visitor who has to wait for admittance into the house. The old teakwood and jackwood which had been used to make doors and windows have now been replaced by cheap wood, called by such impossible names like ‘violet’ and
‘pincoda’, imported from distant countries like Malaysia. Houses of the chocolate box variety are, however, not to be found in this novel.

The Syrian Christian churches also display changes in their architectural pattern. While the Syrian Christian churches of the eastern Episcopal tradition are low roofed with a wooden ceiling, the Syrian Protestant churches are high roofed though they also have a wooden ceiling. The Syrian Orthodox and the Syrian Jacobite churches have only mats and rugs spread on the floor for the worshippers to stand on and occasionally sit. One or two benches are placed at the very back for the use of the old and infirm. The Syrian Mar Thoma and the Protestant churches have wooden pews for the convenience of the worshippers so that they could sit during the time of the sermon and a few other prayers. It is part of Indian tradition for footwear to be left outside the place of worship and this tradition is zealously followed in the Syrian churches though not so faithfully in the Protestant churches. Perhaps this is so because the white priests and officials never take off their footwear even in church though they approach the sanctum with sock clad feet. The Protestant churches have separate choir stalls in the front of the church for the exclusive use of members of the choir. Such choir stalls are not to be found in the other Syrian churches because the choir is not the essential item it is in the Protestant churches. The Mar Thoma church which combines the traditions of both the older Syrian churches and the
tradition of the Protestant churches believes in taking the best of both worlds. Therefore there are choir stalls and wooden pews in these churches. However, the choir is not robed as it is in the Protestant churches. While the Protestant churches have a belfry as part of the main structure of the church, the Syrian churches either dispense with the belfry entirely and simply hang the bell on a convenient rope or have a separate bell tower for the bell which tolls for the faithful. In today’s world churches come up by the score, either as entirely new structures or as extensions of the old structure. In some cases the old church is entirely demolished and a new one erected in its place. Even the shape of the church has undergone changes and some of them look more like big halls meant to house a large number of people. Most of the Protestant churches have little or nothing to reduce the severity of the surroundings except the glorious colours of the stained glass windows most of which display scenes from the Bible. The Syrian churches, on the other hand, are decorated with the portraits of the fathers of the church as well as old murals in vegetable colours that have not faded in spite of the passage of time. The traditional lamps of Kerala are also hung from the ceiling of these churches besides the big stone lamp at which worshippers light candles and apply on their foreheads with great devotion the oil that lies at its base. The sanctum sanctorum which is divided into a central main section and two subsidiary sections on the
right and the left are hidden from the general public by heavily embroidered curtains. The ceremonial robes of the Syrian priests, Jacobite, Orthodox and Mar Thoma, are fashioned like the dress of the Jewish high priests described in the Bible, though with modifications. The censers bearing frankincense are swung in all the Syrian churches at appropriate times during the two hour long service especially during the service of the Holy Communion. Many Syrian churches, particularly, the Syrian Orthodox and the Syrian Jacobite have big wooden or stone crosses erected over a shrine in front of the church proper. If the church is on a steep incline these edifices are erected at the bottom of the incline and are therefore more accessible for passers by who can always stand there and offer their prayers to whoever is the patron saint of that church.

Many of the churches have their own cemeteries usually within the precincts of the church. The earlier graves were single six foot beds with gravestones to mark the place where lie the mortal remains of the dear departed. Lack of space today has brought into being the common vault system where corpses are placed in cubicles as in a filing cabinet. Many families sought to adjust to this reality by having family vaults where at least one could be buried with one’s own dear ones instead of in the anonymity of the common vault. Such family graves, however, in the case of large families are more or less like the common vaults with
the only difference that all those buried there have the common factor of bearing the same family name. In big metropolitan cities where the churches do not have enough space to have graveyards of their own a big burial ground on the outskirts of the city is bought to lay their dear ones to rest. Persons who die abroad are usually buried abroad. Those whose bodies cannot be brought home have their ashes interred back home in their own native land. As these burial grounds are away from the city they are not usually visited by the family nor are the graves tended. Those churches which have their own cemetery have people tending the graves of their dear ones. In fact some of the Syrian churches set apart November 1, which is celebrated as All Souls’ Day, as the day for cleaning up the graveyard. Churches which are financially sound employ gardeners to tend the graveyards.

The environment encompasses the whole existence of everything, living and non living, and their interdependence for the survival of each and all. It is, however, cumbersome to do true justice to this subject. Therefore only a bare outline is given in this chapter about the environment and the way in which the Syrian Christians have influenced it in two of its most important aspects namely agriculture and architecture.