Chapter 1

The Syrian Christians of Kerala

The Syrian Christian community of Kerala claims an ancestry that goes back to A.D.52 when St. Thomas the disciple of Jesus Christ came to India to preach the Gospel to the people of this land. Apostle Thomas was carrying out the Great Commission placed upon the disciples by Jesus Christ. This was to bring the good news of Christianity unto the ends of the earth. There is historical evidence to prove that there were good trade relations between Kerala and the Middle East even before the coming of Jesus Christ and so Thomas’ decision to come to Kerala was neither a foolish nor an ignorant one. He is supposed to have landed at the port of Kodungallur which was then the famed and busy port of Musiris. No doubt St. Thomas was welcomed by the Jewish community living in Kerala and no doubt his abilities as a good carpenter were highly appreciated. In fact there is even a legend which says that Thomas came to India at the insistence of a certain king named Gondoferes who had him come to India in order to construct him a new palace. A large number of people were converted to Christianity by Apostle Thomas. It is believed that there were some Brahmin families among those who accepted the Christian faith in Kerala. The Syrian Christians of Kerala believe that they are the descendants of those Brahmin families. A large number of the do’s and don’ts of the
upper caste community continued to be followed by the Syrian Christians in their daily lives even though they followed a different religious faith.

They lived for many centuries as just another caste and community in Kerala without any marked difference from their Hindu neighbours. In fact many of the customs and traditions followed by them were only modifications of similar ones followed by the latter. Even the architecture of the early churches was similar to that of the Hindu temples especially in the matter of the outer boundary wall. The outer wall of the Orthodox Church, Cheriapally and that of the Sri Mahadevar Temple in Thirunakkara, both in Kottayam, have little difference in appearance. The festival sacred to each temple has its counterpart in the feast days celebrated in the different churches, over and above the festivals that are celebrated in all churches and all temples. With regard to the rites of marriage no Syrian Christian marriage is complete without the ‘minnu kettu’ which is the tying of the sacred thread on which a small locket of gold is threaded. This locket has the shape of the cross embossed on it in the form of tiny beads. This gold locket is the ‘minnu’, very little different in shape from the ‘thali’ of the Hindus which is in the shape of a tiny banyan leaf, the banyan tree being sacred to the temple. The above are only a few examples put forward to emphasize the point that there was very little difference between the
Syrian Christian community and its Hindu neighbours in all matters except that of faith.

The Syrian Christians considered themselves an indigenous group of Christians owing allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch. Their priests were those who were consecrated by the Patriarch though they did not have any formal training in any seminary as priests have these days. Instead they learnt the theology, the liturgy, the Syriac language in which the church services were conducted, the manner of administering the sacraments and everything else to do with the church and the parish by being apprenticed to the serving priest at a very tender age.

Priesthood and its duties were for a lifetime and a priest continued to minister to his flock until his death after which his successor would take over without any hitch. The priest performed the functions of administrator, judge, counsellor and confessor. Though he did not have any material power his influence was enormous and in many cases more effective and lasting than sword or chain. The Syrian Christians called themselves so because they used the Syriac language in church liturgy, their priests owed allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch in Syria and they believed in a faith which had its roots in Syria.

The discovery of the sea route to India and the East by Vasco da Gama had immense implications for all humanity. It was the lure of pepper and spices that brought the West to the exotic East but once they
came here they realized that the land was immensely rich in human and natural resources. They set about mastering both by the sword and the pen. They came for gold, realized that they could further cement their position by preaching the Word of God and converting people to Christianity. Ultimately their objective was the glory of conquest as concluded by Robin W. Winks in his work British Imperialism: Gold, God and Glory qtd. in A History of British Colonialism: Social and Literary Aspects (9).

The Portugese who were the first colonizers found that Christianity in Kerala had roots which went back to the very first century. At first the relationship between the Portugese colonisers and the St. Thomas Christians as the Syrian Christians were then called, was cordial. Later, however, differences cropped up in the matter of rituals, traditions and allegiance. The Portugese wanted the Syrian church in Kerala to owe allegiance to the spiritual lord of the Portugese viz. the Pope of Rome, not the Patriarch of Antioch to whom the Syrian Christians had had a loose kind of allegiance. The greatest wish of Dom Alexio de Menezes, Archbishop of Goa was to bring the St.Thomas Christians of Malabar, by persuasion or coercion, within the See of Rome. Thus he summoned the Synod of Diamper - Udayamperoor in Ernakulam district - in 1599 and called upon the Christians to become part of the world Christian community by accepting the Pope as their
spirtual head. S.G. Pothen in his work *The Syrian Christians of Kerala* vividly describes this synod meeting where the Syrian Christians had to meekly accept all the proposals put forward by Archbishop Menezes, because he came armed with the “terrors of the Inquisition, the spiritual authority of the Pope and accompanied by the local civil and military representatives of the Portugese, including Don Antonio, the Governor of Cochin.”(45). The Syrian Christian were forced to see all their own special traditions and privileges being stripped away and even worse see all their books written in Syriac consigned to the flames. Such a cruel action effectively deprived them of documentary evidence regarding their heritage.

There followed a period of repression of the Syrian Christians. The alleged murder of a prelate from Antioch by the Portugese brought matters to a head. The Syrian Christians who did not like the authoritarian attitude of the Portugese gathered in 1653 at Mattanchery, in Cochin. *The Mar Thoma Church Directory* vividly describes that event thus

… they assembled in their thousands in front of a church at Mattanchery and took an oath to have nothing to do with the Portugese any more. This is known as the “Oath of the Coonen Cross” because the granite cross round which the people assembled inclined to one side. This
event marks an important turning point in the history of the Syrians.

Those who took the oath were led by Elders who were given the title ‘Archdeacons’ and who came from the sleepy hamlet of Kuravilangad. Thus the united church of Malabar divided into two. Though they had to face persecution from the Portugese Church the Syrian Christians survived without too much of decimation under the direct rule of the Archdeacons. They continued to owe allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch. The rites and rituals of the church which had been followed for several centuries continued without change or question. In the first sixteen centuries there had been a few groups who had arrived and established their own sects like the Nestorians and the followers of Canai Thomman. These were, however, rather insignificant episodes and did not affect the larger body of Syrian Christians.

The fortunes of the colonizers changed with the passage of time. Once the sea route to India was discovered there was a flood of adventurers trying to stake a claim on the land on behalf of their countries. Thus the Portugese were succeeded by the Dutch, the French and finally in greater strength by the English. With the coming of the English as the masters of the country the question of Catholicism and Protestantism came to the fore, particularly because England was a Protestant country and the church there was the Church of England.
which had the Archbishop of Canterbury as its supreme head. The last
decade of the eighteenth century saw the formation of several societies
and organizations whose purpose was to bring the Word of God to the
various colonies in all the continents. The Society for the Propagation of
the Gospel was formed in order to bring out the Bible in the languages
of the colonies so that people could read and understand the tenets of the
Christian faith for themselves. This Society was succeeded by the Bible
Society which has done and continues to do yeomen service in the
mission of making the Bible accessible to many millions in their own
native languages. Other societies like the London Missionary Society
and the Church Missionary Society were formed.

The Church Missionary Society was started in 1799 with the
purpose of bringing the knowledge of God to the distant colonies as a
measure of relief to the poor people who were being cruelly exploited by
the colonizers. The first field of their work was Africa and the
missionaries tried to do something to alleviate the miseries of the people
there especially in the matter of slave trade. Then they turned their sights
on India which needed to be freed from the chains of superstition and
ignorance and from the shackles of caste and Brahminism.

Though Travancore was not directly under British rule there was
a British Resident who functioned as the Dewan of the state and chief
advisor to the king. One of the most liberal and popular Residents of the
state of Travancore was Colonel John Munroe who played a very decisive role in deciding the fate and future history of the land. He was very much enamoured of the Syrian Christians of Kerala and was awestruck by their ancient heritage. However, Colonel Munroe was troubled by the customs and rituals followed by the Syrian Christians which were little different from the ones followed by their Hindu friends. He therefore requested the CMS to send their missionaries to Central Travancore so that the Syrian Church could be reformed and shorn of some of the rituals that made it so riddled with superstition. This request was complied with and the first missionary to come to Kerala was the Rev. Thomas Norton in 1816 closely followed in the next year by the Rev. Benjamin Bailey, Rev. Henry Baker and Rev. Joseph Fenn in quick succession. While Rev. Norton concentrated all his efforts on Alappuzha and its environs, the other missionaries made Kottayam the centre of their activities and so they came to be called the ‘Kottayam Trio.’ They made their presence felt by undertaking several endeavours that were to have a momentous effect on the very fabric of Kerala society. While Rev. Bailey was in charge of the task of translating the Bible into Malayalam and establishing the printing press of the CMS, Rev. Joseph Fenn was the Principal of the CMS College which was established in 1817 in order to impart liberal English education to the people of Central Kerala. Rev. Henry Baker concerned
himself with parish work and the establishment of several churches with
schools attached to them through the length and breadth of Central
Kerala. Modern education on the lines of the curriculum imparted in the
schools and colleges of England were given to the bright young men of
the land. They were given the education that would equip them to be
good teachers and loyal servants of the Government discharging their
duties with dedication and commitment. In fact so well did they acquit
themselves that they were an automatic choice in the holding of
responsible posts in Government service. The Proceedings of the Church
Missionary Society for the year 1851-52 quotes the Report made by the
Rev. Henry Baker about the demand for educated Syrian Christian men
to hold government posts.

The Syrian Christians occupied the status which was accorded to
the Nairs, the lowest in the ranks of the upper caste. The caste system in
Travancore did not have all the accepted divisions of caste, which is to
say that though there were the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Sudras,
the Vaisyas were practically non existent. Instead their work of trade
and commerce was undertaken mainly by the Christians and the
Muslims. As they were experts in their chosen fields of work they were
accepted as another respectable caste by all, even by those governing the
land. They followed the same customs as the other castes in the matter
of their attitude to people outside the caste. The same rules of pollution
with regard to food, distance to be maintained by the outcastes etc. were rigorously practised by the Syrian Christians like any of the other upper castes.

The coming of the CMS missionaries who had been invited to Travancore by the British Resident in order to reform the ancient Syrian church brought about a sea change in the attitude of the Syrian Christians. At first the missionaries taught at the Seminary of the Syrians and gave the seminarians a taste of the liberal education of the west. They attended the services of the many Syrian churches and preached sermons there in the language of the people. It must be remembered that preaching sermons was at that time not usual in the Syrian churches. The whole service was conducted in Syriac, even the reading from the Bible. The congregation did not understand a word but only went through the motions of worshipping. One wonders if even the priests fully understood the true meaning of their incantations. The short and simple sermons delivered by the missionaries were understood and widely appreciated by the people. The Syrians and the missionaries lived in peace and harmony with mutual respect and regard for two decades and more. Differences cropped up when new persons took over the reigns of governance which finally led to the parting of ways. The CMS missionaries established a new seminary for the education of the young viz. The College, Kottayam. The Syrian Seminary thus became the Old
The liberal education that was imparted to the students at the CMS College equipped them to think for themselves and to arrive at decisions that were wise and prudent. Liberal education inspired people to read the Bible for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions. The translation of the Bible into Malayalam and its easy availability in print were the result of the hard work of the Rev. Benjamin Bailey who translated the Bible and established the CMS Press in order to print it. The round Malayalam script was cut and cast under the personal supervision of the Rev. Bailey. Consequently the need for reform was felt by the Syrian Christians in general. One group was so enamoured by the missionaries and their charisma that they joined them and became part of the Anglican Church to which the missionaries belonged. Another group wanted reform but did not want to identify entirely with the missionaries. They wanted the Bible to be taught and preached in church and also wanted the liturgy in Malayalam so that the whole congregation could understand the service that was being celebrated. Thus was born the Malankara Mar Thoma Church which owes allegiance not to the Patriarch of Antioch but to its most senior bishop who is the Metropolitan of this Church. The Syrian Christians who
remained had their own priests and bishops and continued to proclaim their allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch. With the passage of time and towards the second half of the twentieth century the struggle for power within this church resulted in one group breaking away to form a faction that replaced the allegiance to the Patriarch of Antioch with loyalty to a Bishop from among their own clan. This group called themselves the Malankara Orthodox Church with the Blessed Catholicos as its chief, differentiating themselves from the Malankara Jacobite Church which continues to have the Patriarch of Antioch as its head. Those Syrian Christians who had become part of the Anglican Church called themselves the CMS Christians. With the coming of independence they organized themselves as part of the Indian church following the traditions of the Episcopacy. This church was further classified into the Church of North India (CNI) and the Church of South India (CSI). These were divided into dioceses each under the rule of a bishop. A federal system is followed with each bishop ruling his diocese according to a constitution. One among the bishops of the various dioceses is elected to be chief for a certain term. This chief bishop is given the title of Moderator. Both the CSI and the CNI have Moderators.

The process of reformation is an ongoing one and it takes place within all the churches. Those who wish to have greater reformation often form breakaway groups and establish churches of their own like
the many Pentecostal churches. These days there are also many kinds of charismatic groups often centred around individuals. Many of these groups come under what is today broadly termed as New Life Churches.

The CMS Missionaries were instrumental in bringing the equalizing message of Christian love to the many thousands of people who were outside the caste and therefore untouchables. These untouchables were taken into the Anglican churches and readily accepted by the white missionaries who were not troubled by considerations of caste. This was, however, not the case with the Syrian Christians who could not even imagine sharing the same church with those whom they had kept at a distance for fear of being polluted. So they built separate churches for them - the outcastes, now called Dalits - to worship in. Where there was no separate church, services were held separately for the Dalits. On no account were they allowed to mingle with the Syrian Christians. There was no question of sharing anything with the Dalits and they were ostracized if they dared to do anything above their station. It was unthinkable to consider any alliance between a Dalit and a Syrian Christian especially in the matter of marriage. Though not much of a change has occurred in the mindset of the Syrian Christians regarding the Dalits the latter today no longer accept the patronizing attitude of the former, instead they are now a force to be reckoned with both within and without the church.
The Syrian Christians of Kerala have always been regarded as a community worthy of note. In Appendix V of the Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society for the year 1822-23 quoted by P. Cherian in his work, The Malabar Syrians and the Church Missionary Society, the Syrian Christians are lauded for the moral superiority of their character which they preserved through all the vicissitudes that befell them.

They may be said to possess, in no small degree, the virtues of honesty and plain dealing accompanied with a peculiar simplicity of manner, which distinguishes them in the eyes of the stranger from the other inhabitants of the country (237).

This opinion about the Syrian Christians continued without much change. Many are the encomiums showered upon them. K.P.S. Menon, former diplomat and Ambassador to many countries, in his autobiography Many Worlds applauded the Syrian Christian teachers who had taught him in the CMS College High School for their total sincerity and dedication. These teachers were, “distinguished by those virtues which are generally regarded as typically Christian, humility, patience, resignation and fortitude.”(18)

The Syrian Christians of Kerala have been able to carve out positions of authority and importance at the national and international
level. Many are the priests, teachers, lawyers, diplomats, doctors, engineers and other professionals who have distinguished themselves in their chosen fields. Liberal education which was given by the missionaries in the educational institutions that they had established enabled the people of Kerala, particularly the Syrian Christians, to make their mark upon the world at large. The importance that was given to female education by the missionaries is perhaps the single factor that brought about so much of progress and development in Travancore because educated women mean an enlightened society. Education widened the outlook of people and enabled them to seek their fortunes beyond the confines of Kerala. Thus it is that the Syrian Christians began to put down roots in different countries of the world. Their attitudes and opinions began to change even though they still retain a nostalgia for their native culture.

Prof. Ninan Koshy in his work *Caste in Kerala Churches* considers that the Syrian Christians as a group are

- Industrious, with a high sense of duty, self reliant in the face of difficulties, and thrifty in the use of material possessions. The community sense is very strong in them and every youth is challenged and expected to work towards personal success. The limitations placed on their goals by the advances made by other communities… have
driven some of them to look for pastures beyond the boundaries of the Kerala state. The material prosperity of the community is enhanced by the money that flows back to the community as pensions and earnings of those outside Kerala.(7).

All the six works that are studied are set in the milieu of the Syrian Christian community. They also depict the changes that have taken place in the community over the last century and a half. The works studied are the first works of their authors all of whom are women. While *The Slayer Slain* and *Take My Hands* were written by white missionaries, the other four works are by Syrian Christian women. Frances Wright Collins, the author of the first book was the first wife of the Anglican missionary Rev. Richard Collins who was the Principal of the CMS College, Kottayam between 1855 and 1868. They lived in the lush green surroundings of Kottayam for about a decade during which time Mrs. Collins began writing her novel set in the background of Kottayam and the Meenachil River. Though she started writing the novel in 1859, she fell ill and died without completing it. It was later completed by her husband who used it as a method of proselytization. As a result the second half of the novel lacks the local colour of the first. No other personal details are known about the first Mrs. Collins, her shadowy figure obtains substance only through her novel.
More is known about Dorothy Clarke Wilson the author of *Take My Hands*. She was a Methodist missionary of America who was greatly enamoured of the life of Dr. Ida Scudder and the saga of the Christian Medical College, Vellore. She was so charmed by Dr. Ida that she visited India and Vellore and was bowled over by the great work that was being done in Vellore by the dedicated band of doctors and nurses, many of whom were Syrian Christians. Among these dedicated men and women one person stood out – Dr. Mary Verghese who was a brilliant surgeon in spite of being a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair. The story of Dr. Mary Verghese was so inspiring that Mrs. Wilson took upon herself the challenge of recording it. Thus was born *Take My Hands* the biography of Mary Varghese. As biographer, Wilson was most careful in researching the background of her subject. Therefore she is able to capture with fidelity the Syrian Christian atmosphere of Mary Varghese’s home and family.

*Fault Lines*, the autobiography of Meena Alexander is the first of the books in chronological order to be written by a Syrian Christian herself. From this book onwards we get the insider’s perspective of the community. This is a view which holds up to the light the attitudes, customs and behaviour of the community in relation to the author. She possesses a proud heritage being the eldest daughter of Kannadickal George and Mary Alexander and the grand daughter of Kurichiethu
Kuruvilla Kuruvilla and Elizabeth Kuruvilla of impeccable Syrian Christian lineage. The book is an attempt by the author to find her roots in her parents’ Syrian Christian heritage. The remaining three works are novels but the strand of autobiography running through them is very prominent. Nirmala Aravind’s *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* deals with the travails of the salaried middle class Syrian Christians in finding husbands for their daughters. A girl without much of a dowry and a dark complexion is definitely not a matrimonial catch even if she has a good job and pleasing manners. The story of Lissy is a clear reflection of this painful reality in the Syrian Christian community. As the daughter of Mr. M.I Chacko and Achamma of the Muthuthottathu family of Mallappally, Nirmala Aravind was no stranger to this reality. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* is frankly autobiographical according to an article in *The Hindu* (January 4, 1998) by Kala Krishnan Ramesh in “Small Things and Afterwards”. Ramesh quotes Roy’s own words - “…touches things which I do not wish to address in my everyday life. It deals with areas I do my best to avoid thinking about. It unleashes terrors that I have always tried to get away from.” It is easy enough to identify Ammu as Mary Roy in part and Rahel as Arundhati herself in part. Estha, eighteen minutes older than Rahel is modeled upon Arundhati’s brother Lalit eighteen months older than her. The heritage of the Syrian Christians with the myths of St Thomas forms the
background for this tale that deals with love and death, lies and laws. In fact what happens in the novel is the result of the revolt against the patriarchy of the Syrian Christian family and its unjust laws. The part played by Mary Roy in getting the Christian Succession Act modified to give daughters too equal share in the property of the father if he dies intestate, is by no means, ancient history. Another attempt to hold the mirror up to the hypocrisy and slow disintegration of the Syrian Christian community is made by Susan Viswanathan in her work *Something Barely Remembered*. A series of fragmented stories they nevertheless tell about the breaking up of the close knit structure of the Syrian Christian community. Much of the pristine nature of the community is rapidly fading away. Born into the reputed Syrian Christian family of Vazhappalli, Niranam as the daughter of late Kuruvilla Paul and Mariam, Susan Viswanathan was brought up in Delhi where her father worked in the Dept. of Social Work, Jamia Millia University. All these books give us a glimpse into local history and the events of the present day.

It is a fact that the clannish nature of the community is fast breaking up. This fact is again proved by the four Syrian Christian authors themselves. All of them broke through the barriers of Syrian Christian orthodoxy and spread their wings in order to scale great literary heights. All of them were able to achieve national and
international fame, particularly Meena Alexander and Arundhati Roy. These four writers found their soulmates in people who came from entirely different backgrounds. And yet the pull of heritage and memory is so strong that they return time and again to their recollections of the past.

The Syrian Christian community of Kerala is thus not a mere social construct. On the other hand, this identity runs in the blood and very psyche of those who firmly believe themselves to be Syrian Christian. It is this identity that expresses itself in the works of writers so disparate in time, so different in thinking but united in the Syrian Christian perspective.