Chapter 3

Missionaries in Kerala: Conversions and Slave Christians

Christianity is generally assumed as a liberating force and blessing to the Dalit lives in Kerala, but there are grey areas when it comes to the missionary and Syrian Christian attitudes towards the lower castes, who formed the major population of the missionary church. Though the contributions of the missionaries in the socio-political changes in Kerala cannot be ignored, a critical analysis of the missionary motives and activities would also reveal its colonial and capitalist colours. This chapter attempts to look at how Christianity, as a religion, played a major role in the ‘disciplining’ and ‘amelioration’ of the lower caste or Dalit lives in Kerala, majorly in the Travancore region. This disciplining of the Dalit subject was not only carried out by the European missionaries, but also by the British colonial administrators who were crucial in policy changes towards social reformation in the state. Even the upper caste Syrian Christians who gathered new positions of power in relation to the missions played a major role in this disciplining process of the Dalits.

The major accounts on the conversions of several Dalit castes in Kerala are available in the European missionary reports of their activities in Kerala as well as through the literary works of the period. At the same time, the fragmentation of the notion that ‘truth’ is central to historiography has led to multiple histories from the margins, like the subaltern historiographies that deal with the Dalit and Adivasi pasts in India, which reveal different routes and readings into history, quite different from the traditional, colonial and dominant histories and accounts. Religious conversions of the

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1 The possibilities of empowerment and liberation for the lower castes through Christianity are explained in novels like *The Slayer Slain* and *Pullelikunju*. 
lower caste communities and individuals in Kerala into Christianity could be understood to have begun with the arrival of the European missionaries in the early half of the nineteenth century. But, a study of the origins and the motives of these missions would reveal that they were primarily begun not to deal with the lower castes, but as missions to restore the Syrian Christians into 'true Christianity', as a 'Mission of Help' as it was known. On the other hand, the effects of these conversions and the missionary activities could be seen as multiple and complex and playing a major role in moulding Kerala into a welfare state.

In this chapter, I would study the various European missionary organisations, like the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), London Missionary Society (L.M.S.) and the Basel Mission that worked in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar regions of Kerala. This would involve an analysis of their modes of operation, their protestant and capitalist ethics and the various ideological concerns with which they operated. The chapter would also involve a study of how the questions of caste, inequality and liberation that they raised became crucial in the event of Kerala embracing what could be termed as 'colonial modernity'. Along with this, the chapter would analyse the transformation of the status of the Dalit castes from 'slaves' into 'converted slaves' and 'slave Christians'. The cultural baggage that came along with conversions and the disciplining acts that were imposed on the converts would be looked at in the chapter. I would also study the Mission of Help in detail to understand the engagement of the missions with the various Syrian churches. The available records of the C.M.S. and other missions along with the official church histories would be employed to study the early histories of the European missions in Kerala.

The chapter would critically study the various social reforms and changes that were brought about as a result of the missionary intervention, like the establishment of
schools and colleges for the lower castes, abolition of slavery and even, the introduction of plantation labour. In this chapter, I attempt to look at the various social reforms that were brought by the Christian missions in Kerala, studying the contexts that made these possible. A study of this sort is vital as it helps one understand better the historical, cultural and social backings of a 'Kerala model of development' as popularised by Amartya Sen¹ and his like. I would also try to analyse how the attempts of the Christian missions were often contradictory to the interests of the Syrian Christian communities in Kerala.

I would also be analysing the politics of the missionary conversions by reading closely the depictions and accounts of conversions and the condition of the converts in the missionary records. For this, I would mainly employ the C.M.S. records available at the C.M.S. College, Kottayam, some missionary reports and books on the activities of C.M.S. and L.M.S. and few of the available early literary works of the period that had dealt with the questions of caste, Christianity and social justice. Literature, be it in the realistic format or otherwise, has always proved to be a valuable source for the study of social changes and hence, my study of the formation of a Dalit Christian subjectivity in Kerala during the colonial times would involve an analysis of the representations and understandings of Dalit religions, religious conversions and the complex processes by which newer identities are formed as portrayed in selected literary works and translations. These works include Pullelikunju (1882) by Archdeacon Koshy D. D. and Saraswativijayam (1892) by Potheri Kunhambu in Malayalam and The Slayer Slain

¹ Amartya Sen is an Indian economist and Nobel laureate (1998). He has, in collaboration with few other economists, worked extensively on the economic, social and political advancement of Kerala in comparison with other states in India as well as many countries in the West, thereby giving rise to the 'Kerala Model of Development' as a yardstick for development.
(1864-66)\(^1\) by Frances Wright Collins (Mrs. Richard Collins or Madame Collins) in English. These works are also fine examples of how didactic literary works were in Kerala during the missionary period.

**Christian Missions in India**

The right-wing Hindu groups in India, like the RSS and VHP or the Sangh Pariwar as a whole, always attempt to project Christianity as a result and a leftover of the European project of colonising the East and thereby something which is highly objectionable (Pinto 3633). It is also argued that the many social processes that were initiated by the Christian missions have religious conversion and colonisation as its motives. Nationalist leaders like Gandhi strengthen this notion by claiming that even the educational and medical missions that are associated with the Christian missions ultimately aim at conversion and not at the betterment of the Indian society. According to him, the various ways in which the Christian missions work—through schools, colleges, hospitals etc.—are aimed at the conversion of the people who benefit from these services. "The social work of the missions is undertaken not for its own sake, but as an aid to the salvation of those who receive social service. ... While you give medical help, you expect the reward in the shape of your patients becoming Christians (qtd. in Ambedkar 446)."

Ambedkar questions Gandhi's argument and asks why it is not possible to believe that the missionaries serve the suffering humanity as an essential requirement of their religion. Here, Ambedkar refers to the absence of any opposition from Gandhi's

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\(^1\) *The Slayer Slain* was initially serialized from 1864-66 in the magazine *Vidyasamgraham* that was brought out by the C.M.S. College, Kottayam, Kerala. The novel was translated into Malayalam (the first novel to be translated into Malayalam) in 1877 by the author herself and was named *Ghathakawadham*. 
side when Maulanaa Mohomed Ali, in his presidential address at the annual session of the Congress held at Coconada (now Kakinada, in Andhra Pradesh) in 1923, pointed out that Islam as a religion demands its followers to add to it numbers by converting people. Ambedkar quotes George Joseph⁴ to prove that this attitude is a result of the realisation for Gandhi, the Congress and the Nationalist movement that Muslims are a big number as compared to other minority groups: "The only difference is that there are 75 millions of Muslims and there are only 6 millions of Christians. It may be worth-while making peace with Muslims because they can make themselves a thorn in the side of Nationalism: Christians do not count, because they are small in numbers (qtd. in Ambedkar 448)." Thus, Ambedkar accounts for Gandhi's antagonistic attitude towards the Christian missions in India and the double standards he employs in his response towards two proselytizing religions.

The attempts of the European missionaries to convert the lower castes of the Indian society have always been criticised by the Hindu upper caste leaders in a similar manner. The missionary initiatives were questioned based on its aims and authenticity. Many have argued against the validity of the lower caste conversions into Christianity, accusing the lower castes of having no genuine concern towards the religion into which they are converting. The lower castes are often blamed of converting for the material benefits that come with Christianity rather than out of a spiritual quest. At the same time, the material benefits that come with Christianity have also been understood as social reforms of the Indian society.

⁴ Joseph was a Syrian Christian from Kerala, who was noted during the Indian independence struggle as an associate of Gandhi, Nehru and other national leaders. His engagements in the national politics aimed at secularizing it and creating a space for the Indian Christians in it. For further details of Joseph, see George Joseph: The Life and Times of a Kerala Christian Nationalist by George Gheverghese Joseph (2003, Orient Longman).
On the other hand, many of the Dalit and Dalit Christian accounts of the missionary activities, in literary works and otherwise, also talk of it as interventions that are appreciable, though of a patronising nature. These accounts do not identify the missionary actions as mere attempts to gather more 'sheep for the fold' or as the imperial agenda to win over the indigenous, but also as morally and ethically charged actions that are based on the ideals of love, equality, justice etc. The moral and ethical bases of the missionary activities could have made the Protestant Christianity more appealing as a religion to the Dalits. The missionary attempts at charity of various forms like education, health care, public dining etc. that they extended towards the lower castes have indeed been read against the attitudes of the upper caste Hindus, who, in general, propagated untouchability as a dictum of their religion. On the other hand, one need not be carried away by the genuineness of the missionary discourses as well, since there are many grey areas and contradictions within them. Hence, an overall study of all the resources is required to understand the social, cultural and historical conditions that made conversions possible.

Mission of Help, Evangelising and Colonising

While the European missions in Kerala (especially the C.M.S.) claim to have started primarily as a ‘Mission of Help’ to the Syrian Christians, to bring them back to their original Christian spirit, one cannot completely isolate the missions from the British colonial interests in Kerala. W. S. Hunt, one of the missionaries in Travancore, reveals this inseparability in his writings on the early days of Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) and the role the British Residents to Travancore, Colonel Colin Macaulay (1800-10) and Colonel John Munro (1810-19), had to play in it: "Macaulay and Munro were both examples of the sturdy Christian officers to whom India owes so much. Both
had to do with the beginnings of the Mission (6)." The initial attempts were to 'rescue' the Syrian Christians from their 'degraded state, both in a civil and religious view'. The depiction of the Syrian Christian church as a fallen one that needs help reveals the superior status the European missionary assumed to possess. The disciplining of the Syrian Christians was not restricted to the material level. A missionary advising a Syrian Christian pilgrim on the futility of his pilgrimages and the need for him to devote himself to 'the practice of righteousness and the good of his fellow-creatures' shows how the missionary attempts to venture into the spiritual and belief terrains of the local Christianity (Madras Church Missionary Record, Vol XVII, No. 6, 143). The cause of the Anglican missionary is, here, indeed to spread his own belief and practice system.

While one wonders whether it was the spread of the British colonial empire that benefitted the growth of Christianity, the proceedings of the C.M.S. also points to the other direction as well.

Lieutenant Colonel Munro's ultimate object, is the general extension of Christianity in Travancore- an object, prompted equally by a sense of the benefits to be thereby conferred on the people, and those to be acquired by the British Government; between whom and the Natives of India, it has been justly remarked, there subsists at present no common attachment or feeling, founded on any of the sympathies of nature, of association, or of religion (Proceedings of the C.M.S. Eighteenth Report, 110).

Thus, as all the disciplining agents operate for the benefit, not just of the subject who undergoes the disciplining process but also of one's own, the missionary's sympathy and benevolence (Madras Church Missionary Record, Vol XVII, No. 6, 143) to win the heathens and their souls for Christ has other colonial contours as well.
The various protestant missions that operated in Kerala, the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.), the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.), and the Basel Mission Society (B.M.S.), are always considered responsible for the initiation of several social reform movements, especially amongst various Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan communities in Kerala. While L.M.S. focused its works in Southern Travancore (parts of which fall in the present day Tamil Nadu), C.M.S. worked in Central Travancore and Basel Mission in the Malabar region. The missionary zeal towards social reforms is always criticised to be a tool of the European colonising agenda- a way to capture the minds of the masses to make them think in accordance to the interests of the colonial powers.

The models of the new schools and hospitals were the contribution of missionaries for whom the services in sectors like education and health were part and parcel of their evangelisation efforts. They were forced by the dictates of their involvement to cater mainly to the marginalised sections (Isaac and Tharakan 1994).

At the same time, the 'protestant attitude' is also held responsible for the social reforms that were initiated by the missionaries. Programmes of social awareness and social action by the Christian missions were projected in the colonial times as an outcome of the enlightened study of the Bible and Christianity by a group of modern Christians in Europe (Grafe 183). Antony Copley, on the other hand, discusses many arguments that are given for and against these activities and the conversions of lower castes, especially in large numbers.

Kooiman, for example, has suggested that fear of cholera was as likely to be the reason for conversion as for apostasy. There is a considerable body of evidence that low caste peasants turned Christian the better to draw missionaries as their apologists into land disputes with local zamindars.
But the charge of 'rice Christians' is open to abuse and Duncan Forrester, for one, has argued passionately that low caste, and especially untouchable, conversion was out of genuine search for spiritual improvement (179).

The missionary activities, together with the threat of British rule, thus, created a favourable relation between the lower caste demands and the state, which later formulated Kerala's developmental policies (Desai 463).

At the same time, most of the missionary activities in Kerala had started as agents of reformation in the Syrian Christian Church, as a 'Mission of Help'. The proof of this kind of a beginning, which later branched into and focused on the lower castes, could be seen in the Proceedings of the C.M.S., 1817-1818, in which the various stages of associations and dissociations between the European missions and the Syrian Church are mentioned. The British Resident in Travancore during the period, Lieutenant Colonel Munro, is said to have taken keen interest in establishing relations with the native Syrian Church.

Among the chief means planned by the British Resident for the melioration of the state of this Church, were—the translation of the Syrian Scriptures and Liturgy into Malayalam, the vernacular language of the country—the formation of a College for the education of the Priests—and the establishment of Schools at every one of their Fifty-two remaining Churches, for the instruction of the Children at large (111):

Thus, it could be understood that the missionary intervention in the initial stages, 'Mission of Help', as it is called, was an attempt to reform the Syrian Church to make it conform to the standards and the protestant ethics of the Christian Church in England and Europe.
At the same time, one cannot deny the role of the missionaries in the transformation of the Travancore society, with what can be termed as colonial modernity. The various notions like equality, justice and individual development that were propagated by the missionaries had a definitive role to play in the transformation of the various communities and their inter-relations and status quo. At the same time, Sanal Mohan, in his doctoral thesis, "Imagining Equality: Modernity and Social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala", argues that the arrival of the lower caste communities at the threshold of cultural modernity was not as easy as it might seem. The lower castes, at least in the initial years of the mission, attended the night schools to obtain literacy and they did this after their work in the fields of the Hindu and Christian landlords. Also, the objective of providing literacy to the lower castes was limited to enable them to read the scriptures (12). Simultaneously, the notions of progress and development introduced by the missionaries and the colonial administration, both at the individual and societal level, had a larger impact on the Travancore state with the state bringing forth a developmental model that later leads to Kerala emerging as a 'model state'.

Sanal Mohan refers to the C.M.S. archival documents in the University of Birmingham and argues that the missionaries were keen in implementing the notions of development and progress amongst the lower castes. In the later decades of the mission, they also focused on providing education to the lower castes and not mere industrial training ("Imagining Equality" 26). The missionaries also attended to other welfare activities like establishing schools and colleges in Travancore.

A School has been established by Mr. Norton, at Allepie, in which between 40 and 50 children are instructed; and at his instance, a House has been appropriated by the Travancore Government for a Hospital, for
the numerous destitute and diseased objects, which, he reports, formerly crowded the Bazars (Proceedings of the C.M.S. Eighteenth Report, 112).

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that the missionary discourse is a part of the annual report that they formed for a benevolent sponsor public in England. Hence, the claims by the missionaries of receiving appreciations and applause from the native population need not be purely based on facts. One might see similar accounts when it comes to the conversion experience as well. While the missionaries claim the slave castes of being in pitiable conditions, both socially and intellectually, the post-conversion slave behaves in such ways as to appeal to the Anglican Christian public in England. Rev. J. Hawksworth writes

In this country these poor creatures are regarded by the higher classes, and even by common kulis (labourers), as utterly unclean and polluting. But now they have heard of Jesus; and it is quite delightful to hear them pronounce His name, and tell what He has done for them; how He has died for them, and is now pleading for them. Some of them speak as if they had at length found a friend—"a friend that sticketh closer than a brother." And it is quite affecting to hear them repeat the Lord's Prayer; addressing God for the first time as "Our Father," and proceeding with broken accents till they stop, overpowered by their feelings (Proceedings of the C.M.S., 1851-52, 145).

Thus, the missionary does not just 'introduces' a new God, he also claims that the slave castes are grateful to them for doing so. The emotional appeal of these accounts on the Anglican Church back in England could have been the source of 'inspiration' for further activities. This could be, thus, seen as a clear example of the 'White Man's burden', as

5 "The White Man's Burden" (1899) is a poem by the English poet Rudyard Kipling, which is notorious
it is called. Simultaneously, the missionaries, at a later stage of their work, were also aware of the way in which their activities were conceived by the upper caste Hindus and Christians. Most of the landlords, including the Christian ones, feared that the missionary education will raise the slaves to "an equality with themselves" (Madras Church Missionary Record, Vol XVII, No. 3, 64).

The missionary's European Anglican Christian value system disagreed with the caste system in Travancore and his eagerness and belief in religious conversion as an effective tool to remove such differences are evident in the accounts. For instance, in a missionary account from 1850, the missionary tells us how Chogans, who are above the slave castes in the caste hierarchy, got baptised into the church and 'both are united by the same spirit into the true faith', thereby overthrowing the traditional 'ideal' distinctions (Madras Church Missionary Record, Vol XVII, No. 10, 238). The missionaries also claim that some of the hill tribes, the Hill Araans, demanded them to destroy their traditional worship places and idols so that they can learn to pray to the Heavenly Father (Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society, 1852-53, 130). The missionary accounts also talk of the spiritual life of the 'Slave Christian' through and after the disciplining process.

Jan. 10, 1851- a few days ago one of these people asked his wife to give him his supper; but she would not give it to him, as he had not prayed. He immediately retired to an adjoining jungle, to perform his evening devotions. On being asked by some of our people, who happened to be on spot, why he did not pray in the house, his reply was that he feared his mind might be disturbed by the prattling and cries of the children

for its imperial and colonial overtones. Kipling justifies the need for imperialism and the 'burden' on the Europeans to dominate and colonize the world.
But, contrasting opinions have existed about questions of caste and slavery within the missionaries also. For instance, while facing opposition from a Brahmin landlord about teaching his slaves, the missionary assures him that 'if we taught his slaves, we should not allow them to show disobedience to the master (Madras Church Missionary Record, Vol. XVII, No. 7, 166). One should remember that obedience to the master in this context would require the lower castes to remain slaves and be satisfied with a lower and discriminated status in the society. Thus, the missionary's primary interest, here, becomes to gain more people for the church but not to attempt to change the evils in the society.

Hence, a detailed analysis of the history of the Christian missions in Kerala is required to understand the various currents that added to the flow of lower castes into European missions and Christianities.

Missionary Organisations, Welfare Measures and Lower Caste Mobility

London Missionary Society (L.M.S.), having started its operations in the Travancore state in 1806, is the first European protestant missionary organisation to work in Travancore. On the other hand, Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) began its Travancore mission in 1816 and operated majorly in the central Travancore and Cochin regions transforming many a social practice and disturbing quite a few of the power relations in the society. And, Basel Mission Society (B.M.S.), a Swiss-German missionary organization, initiated its activities in Calicut and other parts of northern Kerala in 1834. B.M.S. could be termed as the pioneers, who introduced weaving and tile-making units as well as printing press to the region.

L.M.S. records provide a valuable opportunity for the study of Travancore's
geography, history as well as cultural and social practices. Interestingly, a major portion of the records written by L.M.S. missionaries as well as others who associated with it, also offer valuable critiques of the social order that prevailed in Travancore.

Travancore is in a wonderful manner isolated from the rest of India, by a range of mountains, which in the north attains an altitude of nearly 9000 feet, and includes the highest peak south of the Himalaya. All down the western coast it is washed by the blue waters of the Indian Ocean, and the shores are fringed almost to the water's edge with forests of coconut palms. Its extreme length is 174 miles from its northern frontier to Cape Comorin, and its greatest width is 75 miles, while its area is 7091 square miles, being somewhat smaller than Wales (Hacker 11-12).

Thus, there is a description of the geography of Travancore that the missionary account provides for the European readers. The L.M.S. accounts also give the first glimpses of the caste system and hierarchy in Travancore. It not only talks of the upper castes of the society, the Brahmins and the Nairs, but also attempts to provide us with a picture of the lower caste groups.

Below these again are many classes, out-castes, true children of the soil, chief of whom are the Pulayas and Paraiahs, whose near approach, even long before contact is reached, is sufficient to pollute the high castes. These classes, until within the memory of men still living, were the slaves of the land-owner and were bought and sold with the land. To this day, though the letter of the law is on their side, custom and popular prejudice deny them the free use of public roads, bridges and ferries, and the law itself is not strong enough to secure for them free access to the law courts and schools (Hacker 16).
It is to be noted that the L.M.S. missionary accounts are not always of sympathy, but also of disgust and aversion. The lower caste situation is being criticised without always analysing the hierarchies and structures that result in such a state.

'The slave castes—the lowest of the low—comprehend the Pallars, the Pariahs, and the Pulayars. Of these the Pariahs, a Tamil caste, are found, like the Shanars, only in the southern districts and in Shencotta, east of the Ghauts; but they appear to be in many respects inferior to those of the eastern coast. Their habits generally are most filthy and disgusting. The Pulayars, the lowest of the slave castes, reside in miserable huts on mounds in the centre of the rice swamps, or on the raised embankments in their vicinity. They are engaged in agriculture as the servants of the Shudra and other landowners. Wages are often paid to them in kind, and at the lowest possible rates. These poor people are steeped in the densest ignorance and stupidity. Drunkenness, lying, and evil passions prevail amongst them except where of late years the Gospel has been the means of their reclamation from vice, and of their social elevation (Lovett 26-27).'

The C.M.S. records, on the other hand, not only document these changes, but also reflect upon the traditions and histories of the area. It provides one of the early documents on the specificities of caste practices in the region.

Thus, a Nair may approach but not touch a Brahmin; a Chogan must keep 36 steps from a Brahmin, and 12 from a Nair; a Pulayan, one of the slave communities, must keep 96 steps from a Brahmin or Nair, and must not even approach a Chogan. Even a Pulayan is defiled if he is touched by a Pariah. And besides all these there are the wild jungle and hill tribes
The missionary records also provide us with descriptions of various castes, communities and practices of the period, of course through the colonising White male’s eye. But, these accounts prove beneficial as we are deprived of any light into the Dalit lives otherwise. For example, the Madras Church Missionary Record (Vol XVII, No. 6) of June 1850 describes who a ‘Pariah slave’ is, thereby giving us not only a piece of the Travancore society, but also an insight into the notions with which the missionaries dealt with it.

*October 12th.*—Was able to converse with a Pariah slave. Persons of his caste hold in every part of India the lowest rank in society. But nowhere is their degradation so complete as in this country. They are regarded as so unclean that they are supposed to convey pollution to persons of other castes by contact and even approach. They are so miserably provided with the necessaries of life, that the most loathsome things such as carrion, are a treat to them and are swallowed by them with avidity. Their persons and property are entirely at the disposal of their masters, by whom they are bought like cattle, and are even worse treated. They are addicted to robbery, burglary, kidnapping and other crimes, which in connection with their ceremonial uncleanness of person, renders them objects of aversion to all parties... Their most common crime, however, is the killing of cows, belonging to others, by secretly administering poison to them. In this their interest and feelings are alike concerned; for the carcasses of all domestic animals in whatever manner dying belong to them by right and custom; and also they feel the same horrid satisfaction in the slaughter of a cow as in murdering a Brahmin, both the crimes
being of equal magnitude in the opinion of the Hindus. He believed in the
existence of one supreme Being, the original cause of all things; but was
unable to comprehend how the government of this vast world, could be
carried on by Him without the assistance of subordinate agents. During
the short space of time I was enabled to speak with this man, I
endeavoured to correct his views on this and other important subjects,
and to impress him with a notion of the exceeding love of God to men in
giving up His only beloved Son for their redemption. The state of these
poor creatures is in every point of view so wretched, that it cannot fail, if
only made known, to draw forth the sympathy of all benevolent and
religious people on their behalf (143).

The missionary’s account appears to have been well informed and, by depicting the sad
state of the Pariah slave, “the sympathy of all benevolent and religious people” is
invoked for the missionary activities in Travancore. The liability and responsibility of
the English Christians, commonly referred to as the ‘White Man’s burden’, to redeem
and empower the ‘wretched of the earth’, the slaves of Travancore, is the point the
missionary seems to highlight in this account of his day. On the other hand, the manner
in which the missionary has sketched the social and spiritual state of the Pariah proves
to be amongst the few accounts that are available from the period.

While one may, on the one hand, fall for the assumption that the C.M.S. mission
was primarily aimed at redeeming a society of lower castes, on the other hand, the
records of the mission are not always very convincing. C.M.S. mission in Travancore

*The Wretched of the Earth (1963) is the English translation of the French book Les Damnés de la Terre
(1961) by Frantz Fanon, a Martinique-born French philosopher, revolutionary, and postcolonial
theoretician. The book deals with various theories on the psychological processes that are involved in
the formation of the colonizer and the colonized.*
was begun as a 'Mission of Help' for the Syrian Church. The missionaries like Benjamin Bailey, Joseph Fenn and Henry Baker were entrusted with the duty of training youths for priesthood, translating the Bible of the Syrian Church from Syriac to Malayalam and guiding the Churches into a 'purer doctrine' as defined by the C.M.S. Thus, the concern of the missionaries was not initially anything to do with the lower castes, who later became the backbone of the mission and subsequently the missionary Church.

The object of the Mission was expressly to benefit the Syrian Church—not to interfere with its liberty to "ordain rites and ceremonies," but to encourage and aid it to reform itself—"not to pull down the ancient Church and build another, but to remove the rubbish and repair the decaying places." For though free from some of the grosser errors of Rome, it was overlaid with most of the corruptions of doctrine and practice common to the Oriental Churches; and its lack of spiritual life was evidenced by the total absence of any effort to evangelize the surrounding heathen (C.M.S. Atlas 1879, 98-99).

In 1837, C.M.S. decided to sever its connections with the Syrian Church as they realised that the Syrian priests and bishops would not change from their age-old ways, most of which appeared heathen and superstitious to the missionaries. At the same time, we can feel the greatness that the missionaries associated with the upper castes in the society from the manner in which they took pride in the upper caste conversions as compared to the lower caste ones. "Nor must we omit to mention the name of Joseph

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7 Bailey (1791-1871) was a British missionary in Travancore in the nineteenth century and is known for his contributions towards the development of printing technology and book publishing in Malayalam. He is also remembered for translating the Bible into Malayalam and publishing the first English-Malayalam dictionary in 1846.
Peet, who was for many years a very prominent figure in the Travancore Mission, and to whom in particular it pleased God to give some remarkable Brahmin converts (C.M.S. Atlas 1879, 99).” While we look at this statement now, we can identify not just the patronising attitude that the missionaries had over the converts, owning them, but also the clear preference and pride on the Brahmin converts in the society. Hence, we can see that even while the missionaries were criticising the Brahminical order, they had also internalised the caste hierarchy as legitimised by the same order. This is more evident from the way C.M.S. missionaries in places like Mallapalli and Tiruvalla are quoted to have recorded the various incidents that happened in their mission fields. Rev. J. Hawksworth is quoted to have reported the following incident about a Syrian Christian ‘master’ and his ‘slave’ from the ‘Tiruwella’ (now Tiruvalla) station:

_A Master and his Slave_

In the Tiruwella Mission we have been afflicted by the death of the leading man among the slave converts, and also of the chief man in our congregations. But as the bow brightens the darkest cloud, so we have been greatly comforted by the assurance that both the slave and his master—they stood in this relationship—are before the throne. The slave convert was called away very suddenly: a snake bit him in the jungle. He immediately exclaimed, “The Lord has called me;” and then told how he had received the summons. He never for a moment lost his confidence in Saviour; and when all around him were in confusion and dismay, he quietly asked to be baptized. In the anxiety to save his life his request was passed over, and he was carried to a celebrated Brahmin doctor, who directed him to swallow some holy water, but the slave refused, and died almost immediately: he died like the penitent thief, a Christian.
unbaptized... His master was so deeply grieved, that his neighbours, when trying to comfort him, said, “You must not distress yourself thus: you did not mourn so much for your brother as you do for this slave.” Since then the master himself has been called away. He was the most influential man in our congregations. For many years he has walked as a consistent Christian, and his firmness, judicial counsel, and good example, have been of the greatest benefit to our congregation at Mallapalli. Of this slave I should add, that after the erection of our first Sunday School he was never once absent from divine service. ... His widow and children, with two other families of slaves, have been baptized during the past year (Church Missionary Intelligencer, Vol. III. 306-07).

The above given account speaks volumes of the ways in which the European missionaries understood and carried out their 'conversion missions'. As the title given to the incident indicates, it is about “A Master and his Slave”, two individuals who stood at different positions of power as sanctioned by the caste and feudal hierarchy and not about two fellow believers in Christ. The Christian maxim that all are one and equal in Christ does not seem to have materialised in this context. The missionary refers to the believer from the lower caste community as the ‘slave convert’ and the ‘slave’, while referring to his Syrian Christian landlord as the ‘master’. The fact that the ‘slave’ was an active and committed member of the church does not entitle him for a baptism even at his deathbed, nor is he referred to as a ‘brother in Christ’. At the same time, the missionary considers the Syrian Christian as the “most influential man” in their congregation, having stood as a “consistent Christian” for many years. On the other hand, the fact that the landlord was associated with the missions for many years and still
continued to treat the lower castes as slaves is indeed despicable. Thus, when the missionary refers to the Syrian landlord as the master, it becomes evident that the missionaries, at least some of them, in one way or the other, adhered to this feudal ideology of hierarchical positions in the society. The ‘slave convert’, on the other hand, is portrayed by the missionary as one who is sturdy in faith, even when his life is in danger. At the same time, he dies as a ‘slave convert’ and not as a complete ‘baptized member’ of the congregation. This romanticised portrayal of the ‘heathen’s faith’ needs to be seen as a means to gather appreciation for the missionary work in India, and in Travancore in particular, as these mission accounts are primarily meant for well wishers and readers in England, who support the mission financially and otherwise.

The above mentioned attitude of the C.M.S. missionaries, quite contrasting to the popular one of reforming and empowering, is evident in another account at the beginning of 1862 by Hawksworth. A ‘wealthy high-caste Nair agriculturist’ comes to the missionary and discusses the mission and the slaves as follows:

He was told that our object was to inculcate the fear of God, and effect an entire reformation, so as to make these men humble, obedient, honest and respectable; not proud, disobedient and idle, as the farmers and others had greatly feared, and therefore opposed us for awhile. The Nair quietly pointed to one of the converts, and said, this man is a proof of what the teaching has effected. He was requested to state what he knew of the convert. His brief reply ran thus, “This man was a wretch and the terror of all who knew him, and now he is a gentleman.” … The subjoined testimony by my esteemed native coadjutor, the Rev. K. Koshi, to one who has been “called up higher,” will speak for itself. Mr. Koshi was writing to inform me of the schoolmaster’s death, and he thus expresses
his sorrow—

"I am very much grieved to tell you, if you have not heard already, of the death of our Chengalum slave teacher, Pattros, by small pox. In him we have lost a faithful, earnest fellow-labourer (Church Missionary Intelligencer, Vol. III. 309).

In the above accounts, we can see the missionary and the conversions performing the role of civilising the slaves to make them better workers, both for the local feudal-caste set up as well as for the mission. The slave is taught to conform better to the system and perform her/his duties as legitimised by the norms and even scriptures. The missionary records give insights into the missionary understanding of the lower caste lives as well as their concern about how to get them into the fold without antagonising the upper caste Syrian Christians and other landlords. The missionaries are aware of and take special care to not disturb the local power status quo in a very radical manner. The Madras Church Missionary Record (Vol. XVII, No. 3) of March 1850 brings light to the spirit with which the missionaries started their work amongst the lower castes in many areas as well as how it was received by the local gentry.

We are endeavouring, if possible, to have the slaves at Moolicherry instructed. A member of our congregation, who owns several, has engaged to allow us to have his; and we are endeavouring to get others also. A man has been appointed to teach them. But the owners in general grudge every second of time that the slaves are absent from work, and hence we cannot always insure their regularity. Many also object from the idea that instruction will raise their slaves to an equality with themselves, and that they will not in future be obedient to their commands. We have therefore some difficulties to contend with; but
doubt not that they will be duly overcome. Both as regards their worldly and spiritual state, the slaves are in a most degraded condition, and measures should be taken to ameliorate their state. After the toil and labour of the day, they drown their cares by intoxication, and so lead on this miserable existence to the end of their lives, ignorant of futurity, and a future judgement (64).

To begin with, we can understand that a member (a Syrian Christian landlord) of the congregation formed by the missionary organisation ‘owns’ some of the lower castes as ‘slaves’. It is interesting to notice that the missionaries do not seem to raise any objection to their own congregation’s member, who owned slaves, though “from the middle of the 18th century, movements had been afoot in England calling for the abolition of slavery, largely in response to a series of slave rebellions taking place in the colonies (Raman 7).” “Slavery was abolished in Malabar in 1843 by the British and through Royal Proclamations in Travancore and Cochin in 1853 and 1854 respectively (Basu, 2008: pp. 57, 62-63) (qtd. in Manmathan 61).” Thus, one would want to question the anti-slavery tag that historians and social scientists easily assign to the missionaries who worked in Travancore.

The grey areas in the missionary discourse get added to their patronising nature, which discards anything of the culture and lifestyle of the lower castes as unwanted and lowly. The L.M.S. attitude towards Shanar converts in South Travancore would inform us of the scepticism with which many of these converts were received by the missionaries. The missionary appears to be conscious of the various factors, other than the spiritual quest, that would prompt conversions.

At the outset, in the days of their ignorance, no doubt inferior motives prevailed very widely. They hoped by becoming Christians to get some
immediate temporal good, with scarcely any idea of spiritual profit. The missionaries fully acknowledge this. In Travancore for instance, Mr. Mead, I have said, acted as a judge, and numbers thought to get lawsuits decided in their favour by adopting the judge's religion. Col. Munro about the same time procured an order from the Rani, allowing the Christians, slaves and all, to rest from labour on the Sabbath. Many tried to get the benefit of that order, who would otherwise have been forced by the government to labour on that day (Mullens 111).

While the missionaries are aware of such interests that lead to conversions, they also fail to identify the converts with a fair sense of respect or dignity. For instance, the missionaries portray the lower castes, the 'slaves', as they are referred to, as having no agency and sense of future. They are described as indulging in the worldly vices and leading a miserable existence. This description, while projecting the Anglican White Christian as the better 'other', also justifies the missionary's attempt to 'ameliorate' the state of the lower castes. In the postcolonial context, this understanding of the lower caste and Dalit lives and culture could be a major concern, especially when contemporary scholars like Kancha Ilaiah\(^8\) attempt a celebration of the same emphasizing on its unique nature(s) and distinction from the upper caste one(s).

**Missions, Modernity and Social Reform**

- The beginning of the missionary period in various regions of Kerala could be

\(^8\) Ilaiah is a political scientist, activist and writer from Telangana, who is famous for his formulations on the Dalitbahujan history, culture and politics. He is currently professor and director at the Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy in Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad. His popular books include *Why I am not a Hindu?* (1996) and *Buffalo Nationalism: A Critique of Spiritual Fascism* (2004).
termed as marking the onset of modernity and its enlightenment values. The several missionaries who worked in Kerala, starting from the early decades of the nineteenth century initiated their works, were inspired and informed by the ideals of a ‘protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism’9. The various markers of modernity and its ethics were introduced in Kerala during the period. Dilip M. Menon uses the term ‘colonial modernity’ to understand the various events that started off social transformation in the nineteenth and twentieth century in Kerala. The several significant changes include the rise of the individual into the public sphere, and the discourse of free labour. Thus, the missionary campaigns against slavery could be seen as a reflection of the modern order. “The fundamentally hierarchical and inegalitarian notion of caste came to preside alongside religion as an irreducible essence of Indian civilisation, amidst the professed colonial commitment to the institution of equality (Menon, 75).”

A study of the various motives that drove the European missionary organizations is vital in the understanding of the project of colonial modernity. Basel Mission Society, for instance, lists out their aims in a clear manner in the Annual Report of 1879. The various educational and industrial missions of B.M.S. in the Malabar and Konkan10 region are accounted for in this report.

The object of these industrial pursuits, as we have frequently stated in our Reports, is both directly and indirectly to further and strengthen the Mission cause. … We may briefly distinguish between three contiguous objects: first, a philanthropic one, i.e. to provide employment and

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9 The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1930) is the English translation of a series of essays written by Max Weber, a German sociologist and economist. The book explains how the spread of the protestant work ethic in Europe coincided with the growth of capitalism.

10 Konkan region comprises of the western coastline of India, including districts of Karnataka, Maharashtra and the state of Goa.
honourable means of subsistence to many Christians as well as probationers, who otherwise would hardly know what to live upon.

Second, a pedagogical object: to train our Native Christians to habits of regularity and steady, honest labour, and thereby to raise them both socially and morally. Third, a civilising object: to benefit the country at large by creating a class of Christian artisans, mechanics, tradesmen, etc. Fourth, a financial object, to find new sources of revenue (qtd. in Philip 215-6).

The B.M.S. report, thus, lists out a variety of objectives for their mission in South India. Several underlying philosophies and ideologies of the mission are made explicit in this account. The protestant work ethic, as informed by the growth of capitalism in Europe, could be seen as the major deciding factor of the European missions in Kerala. The growing markets in the West required a steady supply of raw material and other goods from the plantations and industries in the colonies. The role of the missionary organisations in facilitating this mode of capitalist production is controversial as it provides a modernity-betterment package to the native with hidden monetary and other motives. The class of mechanics, artisans etc. that emerged in the colonies were vital in the sustainment of a colonial capitalist mode of production.

On the other hand, while the effects and motives of the interventions of colonial modernity and the missionaries are debatable, it cannot be denied that the changes that came along in the power structures and hierarchies in the society were massive.

To be an individual was to construct oneself against the collective imagination of a well-regulated hierarchy; it was a matter of both affect and reason. If caste defined the organisation of community and the subordination of the individual within it, missionary discourse posited the
choosing, reflective person as the premise of a new community of
equality and brotherhood in Christ... In Kerala, in particular, Christianity
was the interface through which the subordinated castes experienced
modernity. It was Christianity that allowed for their entry into a public
sphere generated by inter-religious discussions (Menon 85-6).

Though the Christian ethics behind the missionary discourses could be
challenged on multiple grounds and many a common sense about Kerala and its
development claims that the Communists were responsible for institutionalising a policy
regime in Kerala that greatly reduced poverty and led to egalitarianism, at least to a
noticeable degree in comparison, Manali Desai argues that it was the missionary
activities that affected the social policies in Kerala, especially those of the erstwhile
Travancore, in many ways:

through the actual services they provided to the lower castes, such as
education and health care, which stimulated the state to respond; through
the impact on the monarchy and upper caste populations of mass
conversions to Christianity among the peasants; and finally, through the
offering of an alternative worldview to the lower castes as well as the
possibility of exit from the caste system through conversion (470).

Desai furthers this argument by pointing out that the Communist counterparts have
failed to achieve comparable success and create such outcomes elsewhere, not even in
West Bengal. On the other hand, British Protestant missionary organisations appear to
have given equal importance, if not greater, to social reform along with conversions.

The British missionaries were very concerned with the caste system and
the effect it had on the Christian converts. They wanted their converts to
renounce all ties to the caste system and to accept each other as brethren
without any prejudices based on pre-conversion caste relationships (Bugge 93).

Thus, it can be seen that the late nineteenth century lower caste movements in Kerala, with the support of missionary activities, radicalised the political struggles of early twentieth century Kerala and led to the creation of a responsive state, a Kerala model. These welfare expansion activities included land reforms, expanded education and education policies. The missionary vigour to question the caste practices in the Kerala society provided the lower castes and backward castes like the Ezhavas with a powerful weapon, the threat of religious conversion, to negotiate with the upper castes, mainly the Nairs, argues Manali Desai (478). The missionaries also led a campaign for social rights for the low caste converts on par with that of the Syrian Christians.

Using all the publicity skills at their command the missionaries broadcast the claim that all converts, whatever their caste origins, were effectively Syrians. In large numbers of appeals, petitions and widely circulated pamphlets and journals they insisted that once a low caste Pulaya or Ezhava converted to Christianity he was entitled to all the marks of social and ritual standing held by Syrians, including the right to enter Hindu temple streets and all the other privileged precincts from which they had customarily been banned (Bayly, “Hindu Kingship” 210).

Bayly talks of how the claims of the ‘Syrian’ status by the lower caste converts into Christianity led to conflicts between the converts and upper castes and between the Nazaranis and the converts in many parts of Northern Travancore and Cochin.

Low caste Hindus-Izhava toddy tappers as well as untouchable Cherumas and Pulayas-and also Christians converted from low caste fishing and agricultural castes by western missionaries were all groups who were
specifically banned from temples and adjacent procession streets just as they were barred from physical proximity to ritually superior persons (“Hindu Kingship” 185).

Another important social reform movement that was supported by the Christian missions in Kerala was the struggle for the rights for the lower caste women to cover their breasts. The caste laws in Kerala had prohibited the lower caste women from having a breast cloth, especially in the presence of the upper castes. The missionaries also struggled to end slavery in Kerala and for the rights of lower castes to use public roads and temples. ‘Love-feast’ amongst the upper caste and lower caste converts was one way in which the missionaries tried to ensure equality and brotherhood amongst their church-men. Modernity, as professed and spread by the missionaries, needs to be studied in detail with the several radical changes that it brought to the Kerala society in due course of time.

Missionaries, Education and Conversions

The role of the various missionary organizations in institutionalising and promoting education in Kerala is very vital. The missionary involvement in the diverse aspects of native life produced scholarship that led to modern education in several areas. The role of B.M.S. in the Malabar region is crucial in the project of modernity for the natives. Gundert, a Basel missionary, compiled the first Malayalam dictionary. Frohnmeyer wrote a Malayalam grammar and several textbooks on science, and was conferred a fellowship by the University of Madras in

\[11 \text{ Love-feast could be termed as an occasion when the members of a congregation share a meal together. It was a popular practice for many Christian sects and is believed to strengthen the feelings of friendship and harmony amongst the members.}\]
recognition of his scholarship. The BMS set up tile, dyeing and weaving factories "where technical know-how was imparted to the locals by German experts". These were managed by the Basel Mission Trading Company (later incorporated into the Commonwealth Trust Limited), which also established Mission presses at Balmatta and Mangalore for publishing "spiritual and educational books" (Philip 213).

It could be understood that education and technology went hand in hand for the B.M.S. and progress was made in different fields of life. On the other hand, the contributions of the C.M.S. and L.M.S. in Travancore towards developing the education, especially of the socially marginalised classes like the Dalits and Bahujans, are massive. The missionary interventions for the education of the lower castes also influenced the larger educational policies of the state. Manali Desai argues that the fear that the Travancore state had of conversions of various castes into Christianity had also led to the introduction of the Education Code in Travancore in 1909-10, which, in turn, opened schools for all sections of the society, provided full-fee concessions to the backward classes, half-fee concessions to the other poor students and aid to night schools for the agricultural labourers. It is to be noted that the missionaries adopted various measures to open schools in Kerala, to raise funds for it and to ensure the lower caste education. They used their influence to raise support for the schools in money and material. They also introduced methods like pidiyari or the way of saving one handful of rice everyday in each family towards the missionary activities, which was also known as '5 percent'.

The remark made by Father Nidhiry in the late nineteenth century that an English school was hundred times more precious than a gold cross in the church and his instruction that each parish should start a school, reflect the enthusiasm and the enlightenment of the society and its leaders in this
This also tells us why, even now, schools are referred to as Pallikoodams in Kerala, suggesting the schools association with church or palli, as it is called in Malayalam.

The missionary schools and the fear of these schools prompting lower caste conversions made many of the upper castes to demand the government to open schools for the lower caste students. At the same time, missionary schools were essential for the Travancore government to provide education for the lower castes.

In particular, conversions to Christianity rose during famines (e.g., 1810–12), as missionaries planted trees and dug canals and tanks to provide relief to the poor. Land grants from the princely state also helped to attract new converts, as did the drop in the poll tax ordered by the dewan for Christians (Kooiman 1989: 72). Dick Kooiman (ibid: 73) notes that when the exemption from the poll tax was extended to Hindus, there was a sharp drop in the ranks of the missions (Desai 477).

Thus, the Christian missions' educational ventures, along with many of the others, have been understood as a tactic to amass people for their religion.

On the other hand, the increased number of educated lower castes in Travancore demanded better educational policies from the Travancore government, which had effects on the neighbouring states as well.

The Cochin government eventually followed the Travancore example, but more suddenly and disruptively. Cochin's literacy figures, which had reached a plateau in the 1890s based on high-caste and Christian school-going, increased sharply from the 1910s as governments opened the schools to most social groups and spent increasing sums on education. Similarly, after the constitutional reforms of 1919, more funds were
available in Malabar District as well. In response to the demands of Malabar’s people, its District Board and local educational entrepreneurs built the largest system of district schools in the Madras Presidency (Jeffrey 470).

One can find a considerable change in the governmental policies towards providing education to the lower castes of the society. Though this happened in different stages with oppositions from and disagreements with various communities, by the middle of the century, Travancore had moved ahead with rules for education for all in private institutions to thoughts of compulsory primary education for all. The Education Code of 1909-10 played a major role in achieving this progress.

By 1904, the government took up the entire cost of primary education of backward classes; the principle of education of all children irrespective of caste, creed or race, being the responsibility of the government, was also accepted in the same year.

The indigenous schools which had catered to the educational needs of the people of Travancore from ancient times began to decline. The process of their decline was hastened by the introduction of an Education Code in 1909-10 which laid down strict conditions for management, accommodation, equipment, teachers’ qualifications, school terms, fees, text books and school record (Nair 33).

Thus, by starting many of the educational initiatives across Kerala, the missionary organisations paved way for the larger policy shift towards education for all in the society irrespective of caste and gender. Hence, one could argue that the various missionary organisations catalysed progress in the field of education.
Education to the Lower Castes and Women

The opening of schools across the state could be argued as one of the main reasons that led to the upward movement of the lower castes in the Kerala society. However, the role of the missionary organisations in this regard cannot be disregarded. Most of the schools were begun by the missions and the activities of the missions also forced the government to adopt similar steps, which paved way for the larger public education system in Travancore. London Missionary Society pioneered in this venture by opening schools that catered mainly to the educational needs of the untouchable families. These schools also performed the role of congregations for the mission. By 1830, there were 100 schools run by the L.M.S. and this tripled by 1860 with approximately 14,000 students, who were neglected by the state's educational policies attending these schools. The financial difficulties forced the L.M.S. to ask for grants from the Travancore government, which they offered in return of having the right to supervise these schools (Desai 470-71). Desai refers to Dick Kooiman to argue that the government was relieved by the L.M.S. activities because the untouchables had their own schools, thereby not coming to and disturbing the government-run schools for the upper castes (471).

While the missionary efforts to improve the educational practices in the state improved the opportunities for the lower castes, it had favourable effects on the condition of women as well. The quality and availability of education for women improved manifold in the state that it continued to show its good effects in a remarkable way even in the postcolonial period.

In 1971, 21 per cent (the highest in India) of the population of Kerala were Christian compared to less than 1 per cent in West Bengal. The Syrian Christian missionaries are reported to have come to Kerala in the
1st century AD but the Christian activities in education effectively started in the early 19th century through the Protestant English missionaries. The native rulers and the Dewans (ministers) responded to the efforts of missionaries favourably. The first school for girls in Travancore was started by the missionaries in 1819. In 1887 the Government of Travancore opened a school to train female teachers. In the census of 1901 Travancore was foremost among Indian states in female education (Nag 889).

Though the mode adopted for women's education in the initial stages might look biased and unappreciable now, it was indeed a leap in the history and the modernising process. The ideas regarding the empowerment of women have taken a drastic change since the missionary times. But, the fact that the missionaries realised and identified the need for education for women as a primary concern for the development of a society has to be appreciated.

The girls, in the Female School, pursue their studies in the mornings, and in the afternoon learn needle work. Within the last year, two girls have married and two left for Cochin to reside with their parents. I am sorry to say, that the funds of the Female School are greatly in arrears—there being an expenditure of Rupees 108-3-7 above the receipts, and for the defrayment of which we have to depend on public subscriptions. We should be thankful for any assistance to enable us to carry on this department of our labours with efficiency, as it is generally admitted that female education is of primary importance, in the present corrupt state of Indian Society (Madras Church Missionary Record Vol. XVII, No. 3, 65).
The notion of preparing a girl for marriage and family life seems to be the focal point in the missionary interest in women's education.

Breast Cloth Movement

The Christian missions in Kerala found the restrictions on breast cloth for lower caste women barbaric and encouraged campaigns against this caste custom. This custom would have looked uncivilised to the English missionary, who is spirited with European enlightenment and a growing capitalist outlook. The absence of the right to wear breast cloth was, for the missionary, thus, not only sad considering the bad living conditions of the lower castes, but also an infringement of the dignity of an individual, as it was being celebrated in the West. Hence, when the Pulaya women won the right to wear breast cloth, it marked the incorporation of western notions of culture and civilisation into the Kerala society.

In 1813 Colonel Munro, in his capacity as dewan-Resident, granted Christian women the right to cover their breasts, as Christians did in other countries. They were, however, urged to do so in the fashion of the Syrian Christian women or the Mapillas, and not in that of the Nayars. In 1822 the caste Hindu women reacted against this violation of taboos. They began by tearing off the blouses of the low-caste Christian women, which led to riots, arson and even murder (Houtart and Lemercinier 9).

The struggles of the lower castes women, especially those of the converts, took place in many parts of the Travancore state. At times, the government and the British had to intervene to avoid tensions between the upper castes and the lower castes, as in the case of Shanars or Nadars of Southern Travancore. In 1859, a Royal Proclamation declared that there was no objection to the Shanar women covering their breasts by wearing a
blouse, on the condition that it will not be of the same pattern as that worn by the upper castes (Houtart and Lemercinier 9). But, one can see that the missionary intervention in the breast cloth struggle has paved way for better rights and dignity for the converts and this could have prompted many of the marginal sections of the Travancore society into embracing the missions.

The practices of caste and notions of bodily purity that had kept the subaltern communities from entering the public space and being assertive is being challenged through the breast cloth movements. On the other hand, it cannot be argued that the Shanar struggles for the breast cloth rights were to ensure social justice and equality to all. The Shanar antagonism towards the Dalit castes improving their social status and the exclusivist manner in which the Shanar struggle occurred could be considered as bases for this argument (Sheeju 168). At the same time, the Pulaya and Shanar struggles for the breast cloth could be understood as a result of the modernization process of these communities, where the subaltern communities realised and asserted their rights over their bodies, which were prohibited by the caste hierarchy in Kerala. The presence and interventions of the missionaries in the region could be seen to have facilitated this transition from a subordinate and submissive ‘impure’ body to that of one with dignity. The role of religious conversion in this context is vital as it could be argued that the demands for ‘universal modern’ practices by the missionaries, in terms of clothing, occupation of public spaces and individual rights triggered the visibility of the lower caste bodies in the society in contrasting manners to that of its earlier ones. “The caste Hindus rose up against the Shanars only when the latter violated the continuance of an older practice, of Shanar women not covering the upper parts of their bodies (Sheeju 169).”
Abolition of Uzhiyam

Converting into Christianity also entitled the lower castes with certain new rights; rights to say no to certain caste duties that were entrusted on them before conversion. Uzhiyam was one such, a compulsory service that every lower caste was expected to render to the state, without any remuneration in return. The missionaries found this custom unacceptable, and going against the liberal ideas of Christianity. The support of the Christian missions to the lower caste converts helped in abolishing Uzhiyam from Travancore. Thus, the converts enjoyed many privileges under their missionary patrons.

In 1814, at the instance of the Resident, they were exempted from the polltax, which applied especially to the Nadars- a caste in Tamil Nadu equivalent to the Izhavas. They were also exempted from the uzhiyam (obligatory service) on Sundays, but they used this to refuse it on the other days also. They were completely freed from this service by the Rani of Travancore in 1815 (Houtart and Lemercinier 9).

Thus, we can find that the missionary intervention in the social customs of Travancore led to the abolishment of certain practices that were oppressing to the lower castes and barbaric to the 'European civilised eyes'. The missionary intervention and the spread of ideas of modernity, thus, resulted in the caste structures losing its hold on the lower caste bodies by rejecting the customary and traditional rights it had over the functions of such a body.

The act of abolishing the Uzhiyam could be understood as the modern step in the liberation of the lower castes as it refutes the subordination of the lower caste bodies to the service of the upper caste state. The caste rights that were sanctioned by the society on the upper castes and its state got challenged with the abolition of Uzhiyam. Hence, it could be argued that the potential of liberation from the traditional bondage and duties
through conversions into Christianity could not have been unappealing to the lower castes. Though the missionary discourse on the Dalit body might also be biased, it definitely created certain situations for making the same significant.

Abolition of Slavery and the Growth of Plantation Labour

Many of the lower castes in Kerala like the Pulayas in Travancore and the Cherumas in Malabar were bought and sold as slaves till the British intervened and abolished the practice of slavery. At the same time, it is to be noted that slavery in Kerala was not a domestic one as the purity laws did not allow the lower castes to approach the upper castes. Instead the lower castes worked in the fields, cultivated the land and produced the grains for the upper caste land lords. Slavery was abolished by the Law numbered 5 in the British Malabar on April 7, 1843. This made the thirteen missionaries working in Travancore to request the Maharajah to abolish slavery in his territory as well, which he accepted on October 17, 1843, thereby bringing an end, at least legally, to the age-old system of slavery in Travancore (Houtart and Lemercinier 22-23).

In the 1840s the LMS together with other missionary societies started to press for the liberation of these people. In 1847 they presented a joint memorial to the Raja, referring to the abolition of slavery throughout the Company’s territories in India and urging the introduction of similar legislation in Travancore (Kooiman, “Conversion from Slavery” 62). At the same time, the abolishment of slavery led to many of the ex-slaves to go without any work and their subsequent shift to plantation labour in many parts of Travancore and Malabar. The establishment of plantations required free labour to be available and the untouchables, freed from slavery, became a direct answer to this requirement.
In the 1860s the first plantations were opened in the Travancore hills and in 1877 south Travancore numbered no less than 98 coffee estates. At the same time the government established a Public Works Department, which was started during the great 1860 famine as a ‘food for work program’. Instituted for the general improvement of the internal transport system, the construction of central roads to the most prominent coffee centres indicates that the new network of communication was primarily meant to serve the planting interest and to connect the plantations in the hills with the coastal ports (Kooiman, “Conversion from Slavery” 62).

These plantations and the establishment of the Public Works Department (PWD), thus, opened a new world of employment for the ex-slave castes in Travancore and nearby regions. One should also critically examine the role missionaries played in recruiting the ex-slaves to these plantations and allied activities, where they had undeclared interests. Referring to H. Lovatt’s *A Short History of the Peermade and Vandiperiyar District*, Moench argues

Most of the early European settlers in the High Ranges who were not involved in establishing plantations were missionaries. Many of the plantation owners were the sons of missionaries. As early as 1888, the Church Missionary Society encouraged a Tamil pastor to settle in the Peermade area and run a mission for Tamil labourers (49).

Though these high range plantations became a source of employment for the ex-slave communities, it also played an important role in the growth of the European capitalist model in Kerala. The missionary fervour and admiration for plantations is evident in an account by the Basel Mission Society in *Annual Report*, 1912, where the Christian mission itself is compared to a plantation.
Take, for instance, the work [the British] have done in the coffee plantations of the Wynaad [sic]. How much time did it take before those plantations yielded fruit! How many working people had to be engaged in order to prepare the soil and how much money had to be spent! But finally the jungle was converted into beautiful gardens, and these yield now a precious harvest. In the same way Christianity has first to prepare the ground in this land, and to remove the obstacles, as for instance, sorcery, astrology and others. These must be removed just as the jungle weeds and old roots had to be removed, before the new plantations could grow (qtd. in Philip 203).

While on the one hand, the account is merely a contextual comparison drawn to explain the scenario and motivate the mission; on the other hand, the capitalist mode of mass production through plantations is being glorified here. The obstacles that are mentioned here—sorcery, astrology, etc.—are not merely obstacles to the Christianization of the natives, but also to their modernization. Thus, material development and spiritual betterment go hand in hand for the missionaries of early twentieth century. The abolishment of slavery, thus, meant that the untouchable castes who became free from slavery lost their bonds with their landlords and had to support themselves with the wage that they got from plantation and other kinds of labour. This was, indeed, a massive change in the life style and concerns for the ex-slaves. At the same time, conversion into Christianity also brought about some radical changes in the lives of these castes. Kooiman argues that this amounted to considerable loss and the continuation of inequalities in newer forms.

The commandment not to work on Sunday, which some missionaries strictly enforced, meant a severe reduction of the exslaves' already
meagre earnings. Apart from that, the missionaries were also very keen on fighting theft. Pulaya Christians in the neighbourhood of Quilon, who were not paid enough to buy proper food, were used, in times of scarcity, to steal their master’s property. But after conversion they had to give up that habit on penalty of being struck from the congregational list, making it still harder for them to keep body and soul together ("Conversion from Slavery" 66).

The strict rules of Christianity were, in many ways, as unequal and unjust as the caste and slave rules under which the untouchable castes lived before their ‘liberation’ by the missionaries. Kooiman also argues that the upper castes and landlords realised that Christianity made the erstwhile uncivilised untouchable castes ‘disciplined’ and thus, made them better workers than they were before conversions. The civilising and disciplining role of Christianity, thus, helps in transforming the Dalit into a dedicated labourer.

**Mission in and through Literature**

The prose writings in Malayalam during the nineteenth century like *Pullelikunju* and *Saraswativijayam* and *The Slayer Slain* reflect upon the Kerala society with all the changes that have been brought about by the missionary intervention. These writings deal with the conversion question of the lower castes and the promise of a bright future that Christianity brings.

Even while one may not agree with Vijayan Kodancherry’s claim, as put in the “Introduction” to *Pullelikunju* (11-18), that it is the first Malayalam novel, one may also not find enough reasons not to agree with his argument that this prose work could have been sidelined from the main stream Malayalam literature due to its evident questioning
of the caste system and Hindu religious practices. Though *Pullelikunj* put forth the Christian gospel and a select collection of Jesus' teachings in the final section, one could understand clearly that both the first and second sections are outright attacks on the credibility of the casteist practices in the Kerala society of the nineteenth century. Fear of conversions can also be seen as responsible for the porosity of the state to social demands. *Pullelikunj*, written by Archdeacon Koshy D. D. in 1882, discusses Christianity and the prospects of conversion in detail. Throughout the novel and especially in the last section, the novelist, a Christian minister, portrays Christianity as a religion that will eliminate the evils in the society, thus redeeming the untouchable castes from the clutches of the caste system. Though propagandist, *Pullelikunj* can be considered as a work that provides hope and offers the lower castes a future of equal treatment and opportunities through conversion into Christianity and the social reforms that accompanied it.

In *Saraswativijayam*, a novel by Potheri Kunhambu in 1892, there are references to the work of Basel Mission in the Malabar region of Kerala in annihilating caste and working for the development of the lower castes. The protagonist of the novel, Marathan, is a lower caste who got education from the mission school and this becomes objectionable for the upper caste Nambudiri Brahmin landlord. The novel also talks of how Christianity and the missionary influence changes the basic appearance of the converts. For instance, the converts are said to be moving about happily with women wearing clean dress including a blouse and with neatly combed hair. Men are also wearing shirts and all of them appear neat and decent. They are also described as speaking clearly with standard pronunciation. This is a picture contradictory to the

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12 The author claims in the preface to the book that sections of *Pullelikunj* were serialized in the newspaper *Jananikshepam* before its publication as a book in 1882.
general picture of the lower caste, which would be a dirty and shabby one, with no good
clothes and the use of the lowly language (59). Thus, the Christianising process by the
missionaries also leave the lower caste transformed, both physically and spiritually.

The ‘Syrians’ or ‘Nazaranis’, on the other hand, are not a product of the
European evangelising missions. They have enjoyed a higher status in Kerala with
social and ceremonial privileges, like the right to use the public roads, to be part of
temple festivals etc., in a state ruled by orthodox Hindu kings (Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses
and Kings* 8). They also claim to have originated from the ‘upper’ caste Nambudiri
Brahmins in Kerala by conversion by St. Thomas. Syrians, thus, integrated with the
larger Hindu society and observed the same rules of ritual purity as the Nairs. They
refrained from proselytising amongst the Dalit and Backward castes to prevent
challenging their own special privileges and status. Koshy Curien, the anti-hero of
Frances Wright Collins’ *The Slayer Slain* (1864-66), is the perfect example of Syrian
resentment towards the education of Dalit castes.

“They are gone where the master has forbidden them to go.”

“Where is that?”

“To the school which they have built, and where a Missionary Sahib goes
to teach them.”

“What does he teach them?”

“To read the Bible and disobey their Master (21).”

The coming of European Protestant missionaries, thus, marked the beginning of
a new era in the education and social progress of the erstwhile ‘untouchable’ and lower
castes in Kerala (Nag 889). The arrival of the missionary into Kerala also leads to
opportunities for the lower caste to move out of their discriminatory societal space and
claim larger roles across India. For instance, in *Saraswativijayam*, there is a reference to
how the white people make the lower castes who work for them wear neat dress and have a decent life. Also, it becomes possible for these lower-castes to accompany their masters' all over India, whereas the traditional upper caste landlord would keep their lower caste slaves away from themselves according to the casteist norms of untouchability and unapproachability (98). The old Poulusa in *The Slayer Slain* is a fine example of how the missionary Christianity makes the 'slave' a better one, who does not steal from his master but offers whole hearted services. The 'good slave' also prays for his master when the latter beats Poulusa's grandchild to death: "Saviour of mercy, Saviour of love, look down and pity us. Bless and forgive my cruel master. Lay not this sin to his charge, Amen, Amen (18)." We should also note that Poulusa, even after his conversion into Christianity is referred to as 'the slave' or maximum as 'the Christian slave' by Madame Collins. At another point, the native minister associated to the European mission is projected as the saviour of the slaves, against their cruel casteist Syrian Christian master (29). The native minister threatens the servants of invoking action by government against them to save old Poulusa. At the same time, Collins also makes sure that the way Christianity and its effects are portrayed does not antagonise the upper castes. Instead, it appeals to them by making the converted Dalits as dedicated to both their master and their work while being pious Christians.

"We wish to love our master, and our work; and we love the fields where our fathers and grandfathers have worked before us. We know every flower, and every bird that wades deep in the watery swamp. We know the sound of every chuckram which from our childhood to old age we have turned in their nightly course, while we have joined with the jackals in their howlings. Our fathers' spades have dug the soil and made their graves; and they have been handed down to us, and we will again and
again sow and reap the paddy, and our bodies shall die and help to fatten the soil: but we will never leave our master; neither will we break God's holy Sabbath day (27-8)."

Thus, we can understand the missions were seen as a patronising, generous attempt from the white man's side to spread the gospel to the heathen, to the slaves. And, care is taken to make the missionary Christianity appealing to the upper castes Syrian Christian landlords and Brahmins.

The old lady opened her eyes at this speech, and said she never heard of such a thing as a Brahmin turning Christian.

"Neither have I," returned Mariam; "but if their devotion to Brahma gives them no hope, no comfort, why should not they turn to something which can give both hope and joy here, and everlasting peace hereafter? I think as soon as the Brahmins begin to read and learn more of the truths of science and Christianity, light will begin to spread rapidly; even their very pride will be of use to them, for they will be ashamed to be amongst the lowest in the scale of progress. They will feel compelled to move forward by the very force of circumstances (57)."

Thus, Christianity of the European missionaries is associated with progress and enlightenment, as opposed to the ways of the traditional upper caste Syrian Christianity which is oppressive and feudal. The ending of The Slayer Slain brings the glory of Christianity in full dimension as everyone turns out to be a Christian and there is peace and harmony.

"Yes," said the Brahmin, "give me his hand, for we are all brethren;" and 'God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him'.
“And see,” said the native Pastor, as the old Brahmin held the hand of Poulusa, “what Christianity can do, it makes all one in Christ Jesus (84).”

The various efforts of the Christian missionaries in Kerala can be understood as having played a major role in the social upliftment of the various lower caste communities as well as in the transition of Kerala into a modern model state. At the same time, one cannot praise the missionary efforts without igniting the politics and propaganda of conversions and social reforms that are associated with and accused on these missions. One can definitely understand the social reforms that were introduced, supported and promoted by the missionaries as having set the political and social base for a communist regime in Kerala, which could further these activities to achieve better literacy for all¹³, land reforms¹⁴ etc. The European white man’s protestant urge to ‘civilise’ the natives, the heathen can, thus, be seen as the base of all the missions in Kerala.

¹³“The Kerala Education Bill” was introduced in 1957 in the assembly by the then Education minister Professor Joseph Mundasseri and was aimed at standardizing the practices in the educational institutions to ensure just opportunities and facilities for all. It also attempted to regularize the appointments of teachers in the service.

¹⁴The land reforms that were initiated by the Communist government in Kerala in 1957 led to the “The Kerala Land Reforms Act” of 1964. The land reforms were aimed at ending the zamindari system and to distribute the land to the peasants.