Chapter II
THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS

The state of Kerala formally came into existence on November 1, 1956. It was formed by combining areas which were under three distinct governments when the British ruled India. Nevertheless, sharing as they did a common language, Malayalam, they were amalgamated into a single state. The northern portion, Malabar, was part of the erstwhile Madras Presidency, and directly under the British. Further south were the princely states of Cochin and Travancore.

Kerala is a narrow strip of land bounded by the Western Ghats on one side and the Arabian Sea on the other. Its geographical position has considerably influenced the course of its history. The Western Ghats ensured a certain degree of political and cultural isolation from the rest of the country. The long, low coastline on the west has been a decisive factor in Kerala's history. It meant that from ancient times, Kerala not only had a maritime tradition of its own, but extensive commercial and cultural contacts with the outside world. Contact with the Arab and European world in search of pepper and spices from the interior of Kerala has materially affected its economy, society and culture.

Kerala's three natural divisions - coastal lowlands, midlands and highlands - run longitudinally. The coast is
lowlying, alluvial and fertile. It is also the most densely populated region. In fact, Kerala is not only the most densely populated state in India, but one of the most crowded rural areas in the world. The average density of population is 747 persons per square kilometre compared with the national average of 267 persons per square kilometre.\textsuperscript{1} The midlands zone is made up of a 200-600 feet high plateau, heavily dissected by intensely cultivated valleys. The highland zone is wet, relatively cool, and naturally either forest or downland.

Kerala has several firsts to its credit. It is not only the most densely populated state in the country. It has the highest literacy rate of 80.59% compared with the national literacy rate of 52.11%. It is also the only state in India with a sex ratio that is favourable to women - 1,040 women to 1,000 men.

It is hardly surprising that mountains and sea helped Kerala to evolve a special version of Indian civilization. It was here that the Hindu caste system achieved its highest degree of elaboration, with the concept of pollution extending beyond untouchability to unapproachability. It was here that social institutions like matriliney or \textit{marumakkathayam} as it was called, prevailed and flourished, and here too that distinct styles of art and architecture were developed.
Kerala also provided congenial ground for the meeting of several Indian and world religions. 'Native' religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism permeated from the north and left their mark on Kerala culture. In addition, such world religions as Judaism, Christianity and Islam came to Kerala by sea, took root and flourished. Chennamangalam, in the erstwhile state of Cochin, was a shining example of such a confluence of religions, housing in addition to the Hindu temple, a Jewish synagogue, a Muslim mosque and a Christian church, all within an area of about one furlong. India is 83% Hindu. Kerala is only 60% so. There are substantial Christian and Muslim minorities. It is one of the two major states in India, apart from Punjab, where two-fifths of the population is non-Hindu.

Within the Hindu community, two castes, the Nambudiris, the tiny group of Brahmins, and Nairs, who were nominally Sudras and the largest category, dominated the economic and social life of Kerala. They stood at the apex of the ritual caste hierarchy. Their pre-eminent position, however, was related to their status as the two largest landholding castes. These two castes enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with one another. In Nambudiri families, which were patrilineal, only the eldest sons could marry in order to ensure impartibility of the joint family property. The remaining sons were expected to contract alliances with women of Nair
Hindu Population as a Percentage of Total Population 1961

KERALA 1961: Hindus as % of Total Population BY Taluk

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families, among whom it was a matter of some pride that their women were given to Nambudiri men. The offspring of such unions were the exclusive responsibility of the impertible Nair joint family which followed the *marumakkathayam* or matrilineal system of inheritance.

Table 11.1: Kerala 1981: Distribution of Population by Religion

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of Total Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Religions</td>
<td>25,453,680</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>14,801,347</td>
<td>58.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>5,409,687</td>
<td>21.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5,233,865</td>
<td>20.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>1,295</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td>223</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jain</td>
<td>3,805</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religious persuasions</td>
<td>489</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion not stated</td>
<td>3,159</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Christians, Muslims and Jews in Kerala differ in many ways from their counterparts in the rest of India, not least in their antiquity. Christianity and Islam, for that matter, are as much religions of Kerala as Hinduism is. To refer to them as alien faiths in the context of Kerala would be inappropriate.
THE JEWS

The Jews formed part of the community in Kerala from very early days. According to tradition, they came to the Kerala coast in the 1st century A.D. in order to escape religious persecution. As a community, they achieved a large measure of economic prosperity and secured valuable privileges from the native rulers. Although their religious observances isolated the Jews from their neighbours of other religions, they did become acculturated to Kerala ways in language, dress and other customs. Both Christianity and Islam had many more followers in Kerala than did Judaism, probably because proselytization was encouraged in both. With the birth of the Jewish state of Israel, Jewish immigrants from all corners of the Diaspora were welcomed. The bulk of Kerala Jews readily emigrated, all the more so, since they and their ancestors had regularly prayed for this promised land.3.

MUSLIMS

Islam also found its way into Kerala at an early period in its history. There may well have been Muslims in Kerala, almost as soon as Islam was established in Mecca, since trade between Kerala and West Asia was common by the 7th century A.D. The first definitive evidence of Muslim settlement in Kerala though, dates to the 9th century A.D.4
Like the Jews, they enjoyed religious acceptance and judicial autonomy and established themselves as a predominantly mercantile community. Today, next to the Hindus, they are the largest religious community, and mainly concentrated in the Malabar district.

THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS
The History of the Syrian Church in Kerala

The introduction of Christianity into Kerala and the subsequent history of the church is buried in obscurity. The available information is to a great extent based on the legendary traditions of St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ. According to this tradition, St. Thomas in the year 52 A.D., established seven churches in the Malabar region and gained many converts to Christianity. The belief in the St. Thomas tradition is firm and widespread among the Christians of Kerala; indeed they are often referred to as the St. Thomas Christians. In the background of the extensive trade relations between Kerala and the Mediterranean countries before the Christian era, there is nothing intrinsically improbable in the St. Thomas tradition. Yet the lack of definitive evidence has made it difficult for scholars who have inconclusively debated the question, to attribute it to anything other than legend. Some scholars feel that no more can be said for the legend than that it is possible. For the Syrian Christians as a
group, though, the St. Thomas legend is indubitably true. As W.I. Thomas, the well-known sociologist has said, if men define their situation as real, they become real in their consequences.

Another account traces Christian origins in Kerala to the 4th century A.D. It is said that a considerable immigration took place in 345 under the leadership of a merchant, Thomas of Cana, who settled in Kerala with his followers and made converts.

Whatever may be said about the aforementioned traditions of the origins of Christianity in Kerala, the immigration which took place in the 9th century A.D. is well substantiated. A Persian merchant, Marwan Sabeso, came to Quilon from Persia with a large number of Christians, including two bishops. The year is said to be 825. They settled there, having obtained from the local ruler, Ayyan of Venadu grants of land and various other privileges. Evidence of these grants is available in the form of fifteen copper plates, three of which are now at the Jacobite seminary, and two in the possession of the Mar Thoma church at Tiruvalla. The effect of the special position which these privileges conferred upon them was that they were practically recognized by the Hindu rulers as forming a high caste. Their work as traders was no doubt valuable to the state,
and it was on this account that these privileges were granted.

The lack of sufficient material has always made it impossible to present the history of the Syrian Christians in Kerala up to the 16th century as a connected story. The one fact which emerges from the period with full clearness is the connection of the church in Kerala with the church in East Syria or Mesopotamia. The ecclesiastical language or liturgy was Syriac. In fact, the Syrian Christians came to be known as Syrian Christians precisely because they followed the Syriac liturgy and owed allegiance to the Bishop of Antioch in Syria. Until the coming of the Portuguese, the Syrian Christians maintained tenuous connections with the patriarchs of orthodox churches in West Asia, without developing either an ecclesiastical organization or language of their own. 8

The Portuguese arrival, beginning with Vasco da Gama who landed in Calicut in 1498, brought about significant changes in the church of Kerala. He made a second voyage to India in 1502, landing this time in Cochin. The Christians sent a deputation to him asking for his protection. To begin with, relations between the Syrians and the Portuguese were cordial. But the Portuguese soon brought the spirit of the Inquisition to bear. Like all of Europe at the time, the Portuguese as Roman Catholics owed allegiance to the
Pope. The Syrian Christians to them were virtually heretics, acknowledging as they did the patriarch of the East, and following practices which were in many ways different from those of the Roman Church. Although it was the hope of material gain that brought the Portuguese to India, it was also the purpose of their kings to spread Christianity. It was now felt that the neglected eastern church and its old customs needed to be corrected.

By 1600, the Syrian church was in submission to Rome. The Synod of Diamper was held in 1599, at which the Syrian clergy and laity professed their faith in Christianity and swore allegiance to the Catholic church under the Pope. The Syrian church accepted under pressure, but without serious resistance, the rule of the Portuguese hierarchy, and cut themselves off from the mother church. They also consented to abandon many traditional customs, although they retained the Syriac liturgy.

Unchallenged Roman domination however only continued till the historic year of 1653, when Syrians gathered in a large crowd outside a church near Cochin. There, they swore on a stone cross called the Coonen (crooked) cross that they would no longer be subject to Roman bishops. The oath of the Coonen Cross split the Syrians into two sects, the Romo Syrians and the Jacobites who again sought links with West
Asian patriarchs. If the history of the Syrian church prior to Portuguese arrival was one of obscurity and lack of historical material, its history after 1653 was one of feuds and schisms. The next encounter that the church in Kerala had was with the Church of England. From 1800, a British resident was appointed to the courts of Cochin and Travancore. When the East India Company in 1813 removed restrictions on missionary activity, Col. John Munro, the then Resident of Travancore, invited the Anglican Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) to send out missionaries to work in the Syrian church. The British connection had a profound impact on the Syrian church, particularly as Col. John Munro, a staunch Protestant interested himself greatly in Syrian Jacobite affairs.

Uninterrupted C.M.S. work began in 1816, and lasted until 1836. Renowned missionaries like the triumvirate of Benjamin Bailey, Henry Baker and Joseph Fenn influenced the Christian community a great deal. Fenn became principal and joint manager of the Jacobite seminary with the Metran (Bishop). Bailey did literary work translating the Bible and other books into Malayalam apart from teaching. He also set up the first printing press. Baker started a number of schools in Syrian parishes.
The C.M.S. was clearly instructed not to interfere with the Jacobite Syrian church except in perfect understanding with the Metran. After Bailey, Baker and Fenn, new men came on the scene. The Jacobites, angered by the interference in their affairs by arrogant missionaries like Joseph Peet, broke off their association with the C.M.S. in 1836. A few thousand, however, remained loyal to the C.M.S. and a third sect, the Anglican Syrians, was established.11

The further result was the continuance of a reforming party within the Jacobite church. Some of the priests of the Jacobite church had, under the influence of the C.M.S. advocated reforms, which included the replacement of Syriac by Malayalam as the language of the church. The proposals were looked upon with disfavour by the clergy. Eventually, by the end of the 19th century, the reformers formed a new church, which came to be known as the Mar Thoma church, and was named after Mar Thomas Athanasios, the leader of the reforming party. This schism in the Jacobite church was the culmination of a long and tortuous dispute over bishops and church property. In fact, court legislation over property eventually meant that the Mar Thomites lost nearly all their church property.12

Thus, in the course of the nineteen centuries following the arrival of St. Thomas, the Syrian church came under the influence of foreign churches and eventually split up into
four broad sects: the Roman Catholic church, the Anglican church which is now part of the Church of South India, the Orthodox church, and the Mar Thoma church. In addition, there are a number of minor missions and churches.

The spread of Christianity in India is often associated with missionary activity. In fact, as we have seen, Christianity has had a far older tradition in Kerala. If the St. Thomas tradition is given credence, then Christianity was introduced into Kerala three centuries before it gained acceptance in Rome. Also, unlike the Jews and the Parsis, also considered alien faiths in the Indian context, these Christians were never groups in flight, but came to India primarily as traders. They were never a persecuted minority. The idea of a distant homeland as in the case of the Jews, for example, certainly never existed for the Syrians.

The Social Position of the Syrian Christians

The copper plate grants of rights and privileges given to the Syrian immigrants in the 9th century was an indication of the strong and respected position that this group enjoyed. At the time of their origin in India, they clearly received the patronage of local chiefs and gained converts from 'respectable' castes. Both high and low castes looked on the Syrians as honorary high castes, usually on par with the Nairs. Kerala's caste society had refined the notion
of ritual pollution to include distance pollution. ‘Polluting’ caste groups were required in varying degrees to keep a specified distance away from members of high castes. These distinctions were recognized both by the high and low castes in question. The Syrians were not considered a polluting group themselves. Kerala’s caste rules also included the requirement for low caste women to be bare-breasted in the presence of a superior caste. Syrian women wore a long sleeved blouse which they were not expected to remove before high caste Hindus. The respectable ‘caste’ position as was tacitly accorded to the Syrians was important. Indeed, in Fuller’s\textsuperscript{15} opinion, to describe the caste system of Kerala, one would have to include the Syrian Christians.

Kerala’s caste society had a structure all its own. There were the Nambudiris, a Brahmin group peculiar to Kerala, and a powerful Sudra caste, the Nairs, who were farmers and fighters. There was, however, no hereditary trading caste, the Vaisyas. Many writers see the Syrians as filling the role of Vaisyas in the four fold varna scheme.\textsuperscript{16} They suggest that therein lies the explanation of how the Syrians, many of whom were traders, came to enjoy a degree of acceptance in Kerala society. This acceptance may have been lacking had they been in competition with a local Hindu trading community.
Interestingly, the Syrians were not only given respectable status, but were endowed with the power to cleanse food and objects polluted by lower castes. This is best expressed in the Malayalam saying, "Thailadi vastukal ashuddhamayal, Paulose thottal shuddhamakum" (the pollution of oil and similar objects may be cleansed by the touch of Paulose. Paulose is a common Syrian name). This degree of acceptance of an 'alien' group into as rigid a structure as the Kerala caste system is astonishing. Christians elsewhere in India, that is, the Anglo Indians and tribal Christians, and, much more so, converts from untouchable castes, are seen by others and by themselves as distinct from the majority. For the Syrians themselves, the social structure of Kerala Hinduism was the matrix for their own social organization. They were careful not only to distance themselves from low caste Hindus, but also the more polluted of their own faith - the Latin Christians and the new Christians, who were products of European mass conversion of depressed castes, and not, like themselves, descendents of caste St. Thomas converts. According to Fuller, Syrian Christians, Latin Christians and New Christians (in Malayalam putiya kristyani or new Christian), the three groups of Christians in Kerala are distinguished according to two main criteria - to which caste the original convert from whom the members of each grouping claim descent belonged, and the date of these original conversions.
Thus the bulk of Latin Christians were from the lowly fisher castes, converted by St. Francis Xavier. The New Christians are the descendants of those converted in the missionary wave of the 19th and 20th centuries, which concentrated on the lowest 'untouchable' castes. They were Protestant unlike the Latins, who were Catholics. The Syriams make up about three quarters of Kerala's Christian population, and about 16% (3.2 million in 1968) of the whole population. They are concentrated in central and northern Travancore and southern Cochin.

Syrian families were patrilineal and patrilocal. The practice of bequeathing one's property by means of a will, unknown to Hindu law, had been in existence among the Syrian Christians for many centuries. There has, however, been considerable uncertainty about Syrian inheritance, particularly as it related to the rights of women. Sons and daughters are recognized as having a right to their father's property. But a daughter to whom a dowry has been paid by her father, should, according to the customary law, be considered to have received her share in his estate. The amount is practically settled at the time of her marriage, and it depends upon the wealth of her father, and the demand made by the bridegroom's family. In the majority of cases, it is equal to or more than half the value of a son's share, but in rich families, below a third or a fourth of the value.
Christians as a Percentage Of the Total Population 1961

- 45 & Over
- 35 - 45
- 25 - 35
- 15 - 25
- 7 - 15
- Under 7

KERALA 1961: Christians as % of Total Population
BY Taluk

MAP-3
of his share. A daughter to whom no dowry has been paid or promised is practically at the mercy of her brothers, particularly in the event of the father dying intestate. They then have only a moral obligation to see that she is fairly dealt with. A female heir to whom dowry has been paid in the intestate's lifetime has no further claim on his property. In the absence of sons, daughters have claim to the property.

The Economic Position of the Syrian christians

From the earliest times, indeed since Thomas of Cana came with a group of merchants, the Syrians had been associated with trade. Yet, by 1931, the then Census Commissioner for Travancore, T.K. Shankara Menon, was to write,

As remarked... Census Report of 1901, the Christians compete with the Tamil Brahmins in quasi commercial callings and lead in industrial occupations. Indigenous banking has now passed mostly into the hands of the Christians. The higher education of the community has enabled them to compete successfully with others in public administration, professions and liberal arts. The catholicity of Christians in the choice of occupations, which was rightly emphasized in the previous Census Report, is once more revealed by the occupation statistics of 1931.

This diversification of occupation was to become one of the enduring characteristics of the community. They had, for instance, no unique occupational tradition as did minorities like the Parsis, Jews or Jains. But this was not always so. To begin with, the Syrians lived under benevolent rulers.
They enjoyed considerable privileges under the Perumals who ruled until about 1100 A.D., and under the petty chiefs who ruled thereafter. In the absence of a traditional trading caste in the region, they never had to confront rival interests. Syrian interests in land, too were there in as much as Nambudiri and Nair interests would allow.

However, with the advent of Martanda Varma, a petty raja who, by 1728, consolidated the area which became the state of Travancore, the political and social condition of the Christians began to decline. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Syrian Metropolitan of Malankara, Mar Dionysius III was moved to write,

The majority of the Syrians are poor and support themselves by daily labour; others employ themselves in merchandise and agriculture. There are very few among them possessing property worth Rs.5000.

The 19th century marked the beginning of change everywhere in India, and likewise in Travancore. With the establishment of a British resident in Travancore, the winds of change set in. From 1816, the C.M.S. introduced western primary and secondary education; the world of capitalistic enterprise was opened up to the region; the example of commercial agriculture was there to be emulated; in short, there were plenty of opportunities for groups that were enterprising and ready to take advantage of the exciting new
avenues that were beckoning them.

The Nairs had traditionally been the dominant group in Central Travancore, and, together with the Nambudiri Brahmins controlled a good part of that valuable resource, land. They lived in matrilocal joint families called *tharavads*, and most of these joint families owned land. The spirit of communality that pervaded the *tharavad*, and its impartibility meant that the Nairs were very much the landed gentry of Kerala. Nair youths were assured of adequate food and shelter and very little incentive for individual hard work. This was to have great implications for them in the changing world of the 19th century.

The Syrian Christians also had interests in land, but the most widespread control of it was in Nambudiri and Nair hands, under a system of land tenure in Travancore under which most land was held under *sirkar* or government tenure, and was non-transferable.²⁸ The government of Travancore pursued a policy of annexing lands of local chieftains from the end of the 18th century. Consequently, by the mid-19th century, 80% of the cultivated land and all waste land became government property. This meant that the majority of cultivators became tenants of the state. The remaining 20% of the cultivated land was owned by a small number of landlords, mainly Brahmins, Brahmin temples and *madampis*, descendants of local chieftains. They employed tenants,
mainly Nairs, who further leased out the land, so that the actual cultivators in many cases, as in Alleppey, were mainly Syrian Christians and a small number of Ezhavas.29

At the beginning of the 19th century, Syrian interests centred chiefly around trade, although they did not have a monopoly on it, the Muslims and non-Malayali Brahmins having similar interests. To the extent they could, they had interests in land. In this largely subsistence economy, where cash was not very important, the Syrian concentration on trade was not very advantageous. But with the changes that were imminent, they were perhaps already best poised to take on new challenges. They enjoyed the double advantage of having a respectable status in Hindu society, and yet being relatively free from inhibitions as to what did and did not constitute respectable occupations. In the extended patrilineal and patrilocal families they lived in, individual familial responsibility made for the desire to better one's lot in every way. In the 19th century, opportunities for the upwardly mobile were many. Responses to those changing opportunity structures were varied, but the most marked and positive response was that of the Syrian Christians.

Perhaps the most important changes in the 19th century for the Syrian Christians were the changes in the structure
of the economy. With the proclamation issued in 1865 by the then Dewan of Travancore, Madhava Rao, proprietary rights were conferred on those holding sirkar tenures. This meant that land now had a market value, and for the first time, the possibility was opened up of Syrian Christians acquiring it, a fact which they used to great effect. This was a critical point in the history of the community. When Nairs and Nambudiris began selling their land, the Syrian Christians began acquiring it. The accumulation of capital through their interests in trade and commerce as well as their development of chit funds and kuris stood them in good stead. From being essentially tenant cultivators, they became landowners, substantially improving their social and economic status, since land ownership was highly prized at the time.30 By the early 20th century, the greatest transfers of land that were taking place were to the Syrian Christians. The remarks of K.P. Padmanabha Menon31 to the Marumakkathayam Committee seemed to sum it up,

Travelling from Kottayam to Muvattupuzha, I was surprised... not a single patch of waste land was being cultivated by a Nair... the hill sides were aglow with cultivation. But it was the hand of the industrious Christian.

Also, in 1925, the Travancore government legalized the partition of joint family property. As a consequence of this, much land passed into Syrian hands.
By 1931, in Travancore, the Syrians had already overtaken the Nairs in terms of annual income per family. To some extent this was as a result of the partition of the joint family property among the Nairs. (See Diagram 2.1) In 1968, only 1.6% of all Kerala households were estimated to have an annual income in excess of Rs.8,000. 3.1% of Syrian households fell into this bracket, constituting nearly 30% of all high income households. 32

Even earlier in 1818, a government regulation was issued, encouraging conversion of waste lands into agricultural land with tax concessions offered as incentives. With the capital they accumulated from trade, the Syrians were quick to react. They pioneered reclamation of the backwaters and by the eighties of the 19th century, the reclamation of the Vembanad lake for paddy cultivation had begun. What was significant was that this process was essentially a private enterprise, a classic example of entrepreneurial innovation, and pioneered by the Syrian Christians. Kuttanad was transformed into the rice bowl of Kerala by such Syrian enterprise. Some of these agricultural pioneers started out as tenants or farm supervisors of Brahmin or Nair landed families, and finally outdid their former masters. 33
Diagram 2.1: Travancore 1931: Distribution of Annual Income per family by Caste and Community.


By 1931, virtually the whole of the available land in the lowlands and midlands of Travancore had been brought under cultivation. Thereafter, land hunger could be satiated only by migration to the hills or to the cultivable wastelands of Malabar, where land was available as late as 1951. In both cases, Christians were prominent.
With the opening up of Travancore, it was found that the highlands in the region afforded great scope for the plantation of coffee, tea, rubber and cardamom. British capitalists began to open estates. The demand created by the new commercialized agricultural economy in Travancore was for basic literary skills, and the Syrians who were the first to take to modern education found lucrative jobs on plantations. As managers and clerks appointed on estates, the Syrians got an introduction to the cash crops and plantation systems. In time, many acquired holdings of their own, of between fifty and a hundred acres. Migrations from the densely populated lowlands to the high ranges in aras like Mundakkayam and Peermade began. Challiyil Mathai, the father of India's first finance minister, was one such early planter. Although he himself suffered financial ruin after coffee failed, other Syrians persevered and took to tea in the 1890's. By the second half of the 19th century, the Syrians dominated in cash crops. With the rubber boom of the early 20th century, a number of joint stock companies were floated to carry on the cultivation of rubber on a large scale, and the bulk of these concerns were managed and owned by Syrian Christians. The profitability of cash crops was becoming obvious, and in addition to their commercial interests, the Syrians had a strong tradition of farming.
Another aspect of the Syrian interest in land was what is sometimes referred to as the Malabar colonization. Individual farmers began, from the 1920's onward, moving to Malabar in search of cultivable land, and these excursions grew into a migration of sizeable proportions by the 1940's. An important aspect of this migration was that the majority of the migrants were Syrian Christian Catholics. The early migration was mobilized by land hungry small peasants, who wanted a better life in the virgin lands of Malabar. Population pressures on land in Travancore and the subsequent escalation of land values, encouraged dwarf peasants to sell land. They used this capital to buy large tracts of waste land in Malabar. Life in these lands was not easy, and success did not come to everyone. Long physical labour involving clearing of the forests, experimentation with new crops and battling health hazards, particularly malaria, would have deterred less determined people. A vivid account of this struggle is portrayed in Pottekat's famous Malayalam novel, Vishakanyakal (the poisonous virgins). Many peasants did overcome and were transformed into middle and rich farmers. Between 1940 and 1950, the wave of migration strengthened further. Middle and rich peasants who accumulated capital as a consequence of war time price rises invested in Malabar and started large plantations. Landless labourers also began to migrate to Malabar in search of jobs.
on these plantations. After the 1960's, when land availability began to diminish, the migration of peasants began to take place towards places like Shimoga and Coorg in Karnataka. 38

The introduction of western education in Kerala beginning with the C.M.S. efforts in 1816, marked the steady expansion of educational facilities through the 19th century. The C.M.S. was active in Kottayam with the setting up of a school which, in 1892, became the C.M.S. college affiliated to the University of Madras. After 1840 and the ensuing rivalry between various groups, it was interesting that this sectarian rivalry was most intensely reflected in a competition to start more schools. Between 1881 and 1883, the number of aided schools in Travancore increased from 437 to 1375. 39 It was not until the 1880's though, that Syrian Catholics became active in education. When they did, with the active encouragement of prominent Catholics like Father Immanuel Nidhiry, they made spectacular progress. Between 1882 and 1887, the number of schools under Catholic management increased from about 10 to over 1,000. 40 Emphasizing as the church did the importance of education, most Christians sent their children to school. Another factor which facilitated their educational activities was the change in their church organization. Under protracted western missionary dominance, church organization became more central-
ized and hierarchical. The advantage was that the hierarchical organization could mobilize the increased resources of the community and could channel it more effectively into building public institutions; including schools and colleges. The Syrians were also helped by the availability of liberal grants-in-aid from the government. In 1893, Christians controlled half of the aided schools in Travancore with 53% of the enrolment. The Syrian connection with the C.M.S. educational efforts paid off in terms of lucrative jobs. Literacy was coming to have an obvious commercial value by the 1850's. In 1853, Henry Baker reported a fall in the enrolment in the higher classes at C.M.S. College. It resulted from 'the very great demand among the mercantile gentlemen for writers, domestic servants and workers...'. It partly explained the lack of graduates among the Syrians. Catholics viewed with interest the advance made by fellow Syrians through modern education and jobs. As jobs became more and more linked to educational qualification, educational achievements became a prized asset in Travancore society. This explains the motives of Catholic efforts in the field of education. One of the main complaints voiced against the Portuguese and Italian missionaries by the Syrian Catholics asking for bishops of their own was that these missionaries were not interested in English education and therefore Catholics were left behind.
in the race for sirkar or government service and the resulting social influence. Of all the changes destructive of the traditional order in Kerala, education has probably been the most important.

By 1991, the literacy rate in Kerala had reached 90.59% compared with the all India figure of 52.11%. Virtually all Malayali children attend the four standards of upper primary school. What has distinguished the Kerala educational system is not so much the levels of initial enrolment, but the lower rates of drop out and the fact that the levels of attainment of those who do fall by the wayside are higher than anywhere else in India. The cumulative effect of education provision on the traditional caste and communal structure can be seen in Table II.2. Syrian Christians, as is seen, are strongly overrepresented.

By the late 19th century, Syrians were thus expanding their interests in education, trade and agriculture. They also established a commanding position in journalism. All the four presses that existed in Kottayam in 1896 were owned by various sects of the Syrian Christians. The first Malayalam newspaper was started by O. Philipose in 1864, and was called Paschima Taraka. In 1887, the Nasrani Deepika was established by Father Nidhiry. Two years later, the most famous of them all, Malayala Manorama, was founded by Varghese Mappillai. In 1893, there were ten newspapers
Table II.2: Kerala 1968-69: Index of Educational attainment by Caste and Community

(100 = number of enrolments exactly proportional to community's representation in population)

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<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Estimated percentage of population in 1968</th>
<th>All Standard X students</th>
<th>All students on graduate course in arts and science</th>
<th>All on degree courses in engineering</th>
<th>All on degree courses in medicine</th>
<th>All on degree courses in law</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>372</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nair</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrian</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brahmin, Nair, and Syrian</td>
<td>(32.3)</td>
<td>(51.7)</td>
<td>(86.5)</td>
<td>(60.1)</td>
<td>(48.4)</td>
<td>(56.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of seats</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezhava</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin Catholic</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled castes (Hindu)</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled tribes</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The Brahmin, Nair, Syrian, Ezhava, and Latin Catholic designations related to the predominant community in each of the Groups used in BCRG, but in each case certain other small communities are included.

publishing in Travancore, and all were Christian owned.\textsuperscript{48} Earlier, in 1848, the C.M.S. began to publish a Malayalam journal, \textit{Gnana Nikshepa}, a treasury of knowledge.\textsuperscript{49}

Kerala has had a long tradition in banking. Among the provinces and states of the Indian Union at independence, Cochin and Travancore topped the list in the range of area and population served by an office of a commercial bank.\textsuperscript{50} Another unusual feature of its banking history was the communal organization of early banks, which were largely founded by the Syrian Christians, who dominated the field for several years. Also, a great proportion of these banks was in rural areas, receiving deposits from small savers and giving credit to small peasants and traders. Perhaps it was not surprising that Syrian Christians, so dominant in other fields already should also have dominated finance. Syrians were prominent in trade, and from trade it was a short step to finance. Traditional financial institutions, \textit{chittis} or \textit{kuris} they were called in Travancore, had existed in Kerala certainly by the 19th century, and most prominently among Syrian Christians. The \textit{chitty} was originally initiated by Syrians to help church members in financial distress. With its increasing popularity, independent ventures were soon formed. Gradually \textit{chittis} and \textit{kuris} took on new institutional forms like joint stock companies. The Travancore Banking Enquiry Commission of 1856 noted,
Most of the banks in the Travancore-Cochin area have grown out of the womb of chit and kuri funds that have been operating in the state since ancient times. The subscription paid by the members of these funds are analogous to the deposits that are kept with the banks, and the prize amounts distributed resemble the advances made by the commercial banking institutions. From such an institution, the transition to a modern form of banking was an easy step.51

A few leading families who had experience of running chit funds were pioneers of joint stock companies and banks in Travancore. The Kandathils were one such family. After the first joint stock company in Travancore, the Punalur Paper Mills was floated in 1899, the Kandathils floated Malayala Manorama in the same year. The third company was the Kandathil Kudumba Yogam Company which was floated in 1892. Out of the profits of this company rose the first organized commercial bank in Kerala in 1893, the Travancore Bank. It was managed by Eapen, a lawyer, also of the Kandathil family. From the early years of this century, there was a concentration of joint stock companies, particularly banking companies in the Tiruvalla, Ambalapuzha, Quilon and Kottayam taluks.

The latter part of the 19th century saw the phenomenal expansion of trade and commerce. The growing demand for cash crops created the need for transforming traditional agriculture, and a demand for bank loans. The tie-up between the Syrians as bankers and Syrians as agriculturists
was important. Farmers and traders were important clientele for banks. Loans were made against personal security, but also on security of land. Since, unlike the major Hindu communities, the Christian law gave individuals sole proprietary rights over land, theirs was the more acceptable security. Not surprisingly then, the Syrian Christians turned out to be the major recipients of loans.

Thus we see that by the beginning of the 20th century, the Syrians had a broad range of occupational interests, ranging from growing interests in various kinds of cultivation to trade and banking. They had always enjoyed a high social status. At the same time they did not have constraints regarding their commercial activities, and were prepared to take to most enterprises in the new opportunity structure of 19th century Kerala. Apart from trade, they controlled the newspapers, the printing business and banking. With the reclamation of the backwaters, increasing acquisition of land from dominant groups like the Nairs, and the success of plantation agriculture, the Syrians were forging ahead in the control of land as well. Also, as a group, they benefited greatly from the educational expansion of the 19th century. Many factors helped this Syrian success. Their early interest in trade and kuris, leading to the accumulation of capital, which, in time, enabled them to acquire land when it was saleable. Their links from the
earliest times with the C.M.S. and the access it gave them to education, and then to lucrative jobs, also helped the Syrians.

Examining the history of the Syrian Christians, we begin to see that, although they share the blanket title 'minority' with other groups, they are clearly distinctive and must be studied as such. The Christians in India form one minority group. They are, however, hardly homogeneous. Apart from forming collectivities in terms of denomination, they differ considerably in terms of origin. We can look at Christians in India, broadly speaking, under three categories - pre-colonial Christians, that is, the Syrian Christians, colonial Christians and offshoots of the colonial order.

COLONIAL CHRISTIANS

With the establishment of the East India Company, Protestantism entered India through the chaplains of the company. During the late 18th century, William Carey, the founder of the Baptist Missionary Society, began to work in Bengal. People like him, however, made few converts, mainly because the East India Company as a policy decision, discouraged inroads made by missionaries. With the removal of such restrictions in 1813, missionary activity began to take on a more organized character. Such mission-
ary activity was particularly marked in the north-east of India, the tribal belt in central India and southern India. In the late 1860's, Christian missions became aware of an unexpected and dramatic movement. In various parts of India, churches began to grow at a rapid pace through group conversions among untouchable castes. For both these groups, joining the mainstream of society has not been easy. The more recent timing of their conversions, coupled with their origins, have made them assert their tribal or caste identity.

OFFSHOOTS OF THE COLONIAL ORDER

From the 17th century onwards, there was a slow emergence of a hybrid community, which came to be known as the Anglo Indians. An Anglo Indian is described as a person whose father or any male progenitor was of European descent, but who was himself a native of India. Offspring of mixed marriages like these usually grew up loyal to the nation of the father, since his mother was usually excommunicated from her family. But although this identification with the British was useful from the point of view of education and employment, they were never accepted by the British as their own. Consequently, when Indian independence seemed imminent and the British declared the Anglo Indians to be Indian, the community faced a crisis of identity. They were caught
between two worlds and accepted by neither.

PRE-COLONIAL CHRISTIANS

The Syrian Christians, unlike Christians of these two categories, have a long and ancient tradition of existence, predating the colonial period considerably. They also gained a measure of acceptance, and were respected by the dominant Hindu population. Not only did they absorb local customs and be conferred with high social status, but they were even accorded an unofficial standing in the caste hierarchy in Kerala. Christians elsewhere in India could only aspire to the level of acceptance that the Syrians enjoyed. Christians, who were the products of colonial rule or offshoots of it, have tended, everywhere in India, to be marginals. Not so the Syrian Christians.

Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and the Baha'í faith are regarded as alien in the context of Indian religious pluralism. In contrast, as we discussed in the last chapter, Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism are regarded as indigenous.

In contrast to these groups, the Syrian presence in this country was associated with early interests in trade, and their roots here are deep. Unlike groups in flight, who have a strong sense of a distant homeland, the Syrians' sense of territorial allegiance is marked. Thus, although
they are of an alien faith, in this they are much like the Sikhs.

The occupational catholicity of the Syrian Christians has been a hallmark of the community. As a community it was, again like the Sikhs associated with occupational diversity unlike the occupational specificity of the Parsis, Jews and Jains.

Given the nature of their occupation, it is not surprising that the Parsis, Jews and Jains have tended to be located in urban areas. Unlike these groups, the Syrian Christians have been urban but strongly rural too. This is again similar to the Sikh situation.

Through the 19th and continuing into the 20th century, the Syrian Christians have been involved in the educational expansion in India. Like the Parsis and the Sikhs, education has been an important factor in their development. The eagerness to be educated had encompassed the Parsi community by the last decades of the 19th century. The emancipation of the Parsi laity from the clergy in the 18th century removed any chances of an effective opposition to acceptance of the new changes taking place around. As such, the Parsis as a group were able to take advantage of new educational opportunities. In the case of the Syrians, the church and the clergy itself pioneered education.
The 19th century was one of change; how various communities responded to these changes and adapted to them established their positions in the 20th century. The Syrian Christians had the benefit of ancient roots in Kerala as well as acceptance by the local population. Traditionally their interests centred around trade, but with the winds of changes blowing, this meant that they were well poised to seize new opportunities. This was nowhere more evident than in the dramatic acquisition of land by the Syrians that was made possible by capital accumulated through trade. From tenant cultivators, they became middle and rich owner cultivators. As Christians they had the benefit of access to and a certain sympathy with the new colonial rulers, both of which brought several opportunities their way. This meant that through occupational diversification, the Syrian Christians entered the 20th century as one of the most mobile groups in Kerala. The following chapters examine the sources and patterns of this mobility.
Notes


2. Chennamangalam was once the capital of the Raja of Villarvatom, one of the rulers who rose after the disintegration of the Chera empire. Evidence shows that it was once a busy centre of activity for Jews, Christians, Muslims and Hindus, important enough to attract the attention of Ibn Batuta who visited it in 1342. See P.M. Jussay, "The Songs of Evarayi" in Thomas A. Timberg, The Jews in India, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1986, p.151.


9. Ibid., p.92.

10. Ibid., pp.89-103.


32. BCRC, *op. cit.*, App.XVIII.

33. Oommen, *op. cit.*, p.149, refers to one such well-known case. A Christian owner of over 3,000 acres of land and known as the Paddy King of Kuttanad, had been the farm supervisor of a local Nair family.


56. This definition was given in independent India's constitution in 1950 as a reproduction of that in the Government of India Act, 1935. Anglo Indians was a term given by Lord Dalhousie. Earlier, they were contemptuously referred to as half-caste, half-breed, Eurasian etc. See V.R. Gaikwad, *The Anglo Indian*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1967.