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Syro-Malabar Churches

Syro-Malabar Churches refer to a composite group of Christian communities located in Kerala, a Southern Indian State established in 1956 out of the former British Presidency region of Malabar and the two Princely States of Travancore and Cochin. Kerala is a multi-religious state, where the majority faith tradition, Hinduism, coexists with two large Christian (19%) and Muslim (25%) minority groups. According to the 2011 census, nearly 93% of the Christians are Syro-Malabar, the rest being Roman Catholics.

A clear-cut internal classification of the 'Syro-Malabar Churches' is difficult: schisms, reunifications, and reciprocal influence among these communities - as well as their relations with the Roman Catholic Church and/or the Oriental Churches - have changed considerably across history. Stepping outside of this group, and with a certain degree of approximation, it is however possible to identify two broad categories that include these Syro-Malabar Churches. Firstly, there are the churches that are in full communion with the Roman Catholic Church, although the Second Vatican Council (1962-5) and the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (1990) grant them a certain degree of ritual autonomy and self-government. This group includes the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, the Syrian-Malankara Catholic Church and the Mar Thomas Church.

Secondly, we have a set of churches that differently identify with Oriental Churches: the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church (Oriental Orthodox Church), the Jacobite Syrian-Church (Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch), the Chaldean Syrian Church (Assyrian Church of the East) and the Malabar Independent Syrian Church (Oriental Orthodoxy). These churches have a different dialogue with the Catholic Bishops of India Conference, while ultimately, they function as autonomous or autocephalous entities with respect to national and international institutions.

The distinctive status of Syrian Christians in Kerala is rooted in two myth of origins. The first one traces the origins of this community from the conversion of high-caste Brahmins by St. Thomas

the Apostle in A.D. 52. Brahmins occupy the highest position in Indian socio-religious hierarchies. The second identifies Syrian Christians as descendants of a Syrian merchant, Thomas of Cana, in the Vth century. While there are no historical evidence of these events, we have records of a thriving Christian community in Kerala since the VIth century. The myths of origin have traditionally functioned as markers of caste distinction for Syrian Christians. These tend to claim a higher caste status when compared to the more recent Kerala Latin Catholic Church, which is mainly composed by descendants of lower castes converted by the Portuguese in the XVI-XVIIth centuries. In this context, caste considerations intertwine with the valuing of the 'indigenous' nature of the Syro-Malabar rite and society with respect to the 'Western' Catholicism of former colonizers.

As with Hindu castes, intermarriage between Syro-Malabar Christians and Roman Catholics has been prohibited for a long time. Today, community endogamy remains a customary norm, although intermarriages generate less ostracism when compared to the past. Importantly, status distinction is reasserted in the Kerala Christian diaspora. In migrant destinations such as Europe, the US or the Gulf countries, the establishment of Kerala church communities continue to reproduce a spatial and social distinction between Syro-Malabar Christians and Roman Catholics.

British colonialism contributed to the crystallization of caste distinction, as well as the class mobility, of Syro-Malabar Christians. Anglican missionaries and colonial officers identified in these communities a potential ally in the development of the state apparatus, and in the formation of an indigenous and well-educated middle class. In the eyes of British representatives, the distance of the Syro-Malabar Church from Roman Catholicism made this group more 'loyal' to Victorian society, to the point that official documents of the time assimilated the Syrian orthodoxy to the one of British Protestantism. In a similar line, the higher degree of literacy and entrepreneurship of Syro-Malabar Christians, if compared to the rest of Kerala society, brought their inclusion into the educational and bureaucratic apparatus of colonial Kerala/India, and in professional migration and trade activities across the Indian Ocean and in other British colonies.

While Syro-Malabar Christians continued to look with suspicion at British missionaries - and eventually refused conversion to Anglicanism - their privileged position in British India enhanced their consolidation as a modern middle-class, both in Kerala and in their diaspora. Syrian Christians have seized considerable power and authority in contemporary Kerala society, and economy as cosmopolitan entrepreneurs and businesspersons. Widespread philanthropy from international Syro-Malabar Church members has also contributed to the development of flourishing religious communities in Kerala and in the diaspora. The building of new churches has been accompanied by, on the one hand, the establishment of religious training centers for priests and nuns and, on the other hand, of schools, hospitals and other civil society organizations which are very active in providing Church members with welfare and cultural services.

In the last two decades, a renewed dialogue between the Vatican and the Catholic communities of the Syro-Malabar Churches has brought to the establishment of a pastoral training centre in Rome. The *Pontifical Institute San Giovanni Damasceno* hosts today 50 Syro-Malabar priests from Kerala. The Vatican has indeed recently reasserted how the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, the Syrian-Malankara Catholic Church and the Mar Thomas Church symbolize some among the most flourishing and revitalizing expressions of contemporary Catholicism.

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Cross-Reference: Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Vatican II, Vatican, Hinduism

Further Readings

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