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K. E. JOB

THE SYRIAN CHURCH OF MALABAR

INTRODUCTION.

Probably no other branch of the Oriental section of the Catholic Church has been so sadly misunderstood by the whole of Christendom as the Syrian Church of Malabar. Its Apostolic origin, though passed on to us by the lips of twenty centuries, has been severely called in question by a band of recent Scholars. Its Catholic Communion, too, has been most unjustly denied by a group of historical writers. To attribute sinister motives to them, would, probably be unfair. But it appears to me that most of the current errors could have been corrected, if only the sons of the Malabar Church took greater pains to popularise the truth about the past events of their Community. It is this conviction, in fact, that has prompted us to Publish this hand book.

It is however a matter of gratification to find that in this labour of love, the authors of this handbook do not stand alone. There have been in their own Church, such illustrious predecessors as Very Rev. Fr. Bernard C.D. of St. Thomas, and Rt. Rev. Mgr. J. C. Panjikaran. Among our foreign sympathisers we are happy to count such illustrious scholars like Rev. Fr. George Schuhammer S.J. (of Germany), Rev. Fr. H. Heras S.J. (of Spain), and Rev. Fr. Giuseppe Beltrami (of Italy) to whom our profound thanks are due.

We are extremely thankful to Rev. Fr. Heras S.J., Director, Indian Historical Research Institute, Bombay, for having kindly favoured us with a Preface to Fr. Placid's learned Paper on the Catholic communion of the Malabar Church. The Editor does not lay claim to any original research or deep scholarship, but he feels, he is second to none in his love of his Community, its Catholic faith, and its national culture. His thanks are due to Rev. Dr. Placid for permitting him to edit his paper, and to the Manager St. Joseph's Orphanage Industries Changanacherry, for the neat and speedy execution of this work.

Changanacherry

S. India. 5th June 1938

K. E. Job M. A. L. T.

PREFACE.

Mr. K. E. Job's Historical Survey of Syrian Christian Culture is a very interesting study. It presents in a short compass the salient points in the development of a great community. The light of Christ's Gospel was brought to them by the Apostle Thomas in the First Century of the Christian Era. So powerful was the impassioned eloquence of the great teacher and his followers, and so great the moral grandeur of their character that while in many other parts of the world, conversions were made from among uncivilised and illiterate people, in Malabar the well-to-do classes, living in an atmosphere of civilisation, contributed in no small measure to the growth of the Christian Church. The Syrian Christians venerate their religion, but they also respect their ancient traditions and customs. They are the oldest of the Indian Christians. They occupy a prominent place in the educational chart of Malabar and of India. They preserve "the wine of Western civilisation in the bottles of the East."

Mr. Job's estimate is a fair one and the facts have been selected with care. I am sure that literary efforts of this character will tend to show to the world that, notwithstanding the different races and religions in Kerala, its life is homogeneous and its culture undivided and indivisible.

Trivandrum
3rd June 1938.

(Sd.)
Sadasya Thilaka T.K. Velu Pillai B.A.B.L.
State Manual Special Officer
Travancore.

The Syrian Church Of Malabar Its Cultural Contributions (A Historical Survey)

Preliminary.

The Syrian Christians of Malabar form one of the major communities in the native States of Travancore & Cochin and British Malabar. The impression likely to be produced by these people on a fresh visitor from Europe has been vividly described by Mr. Nagom Aiyya, the compiler of the Travancore State Manual, in the following words:-

"The importance of the work of Christian evangelisation in Hindoo Malabar, may be better understood, if we reverse the situation, and picture eight million Hindus distributed over every county, district and parish of England and Wales, owning 30,000 temples, having endowments of lands and gardens attached to every one of them, and severally dedicated to Siva and Vishnu or Goddess Bhagavathi and having close by numerous tanks and rivers provided with neat and spacious bathing ghats, which only a Hindu could rightly appreciate, and wells reserved for cooking and drinking purposes, and groves of the *ficus religiosa* and the Nim tree or their more congenial substitutes suitable to an English climate growing luxuriantly on their banks, with stone images of Ganesa and the snake-gods planted under them, and a perennial flow of devout Hindu worshippers, men in their multi-coloured dhoties and scarves and women in their charming silk saris and velvet bodices richly embroidered with gold lace and pearls, their raven-black hair smoothed with fragrant unguents and tied into large knots covered with sweet-smelling jasmine and rose, their fore-heads beautified with the distinguished caste marks of either the ancient *Tilakom* or the *perfumed sandal* or the *crimson Kumkumom*, illuminating their gladsome faces, which remind you of the Milky Way in the sky, "a meeting of gentle lights without a name", and carrying in their hands, on well-polished silver basins, flowers and fruit offerings to temple deities and all laden from top to toe with elegantly wrought and resplendant jewels of gold and silver, pearls, diamonds and rubies after the fashion of their fellow religionists in India, making their morning rounds of prayers and *Pujah* to their hearts' content or celebrating the car festival of the temple god or accompanying in thousands the procession of the idol with native music, sounding of bells and beat of drums with the usual accompaniment of torches, *cadinas* and pyro-technics-all unmolested and unhindered under the protection of the English police and English magistracy, and let the reader fancy that this happy state of things has been going on in Christian England since 52 A.D., what impression would this scene produce on the prosaic English mind and what a testimonial does it not offer to the wisdom and tolerance of former English administrations since the time of the Druids?"¹

The fanciful description given above serves its purpose very well, except for two misconceptions which it conveys, namely, that in point of culture, the Malabar Christians are poles apart from their Hindu brethren, and that their culture is entirely of a western origin. But the fact is that the Malabar Christians have assimilated many of the high caste Hindu customs of their Indian forefathers, besides what they have borrowed from Jewish, Babylonian, Persian and European communities, with whom, they, either came in contact, or mingled together in the chequered course of their cultural evolution. In the following pages, we shall briefly examine the chief ethnical and cultural contacts of the Malabar Christian Community and the permanent marks these have left on their social and economic position.

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Part I.
THE EARLY PERIOD.
(From the Apostolic Period to the 4th Century)

Nobody has, as yet, dared to speak the last word on the origin of Malabar Christianity. Some are inclined to attribute its origin to the missionary labours of St. Thomas, the Apostle, while others discredit this view as not being sufficiently supported by direct, contemporary, historical monuments and inscriptions. But the tradition of the Apostle's preaching and martyrdom has been passed on to us by the lips of twenty centuries. Most of the early Fathers, whether Greek, Latin or Syrian, seem to have had a confirmed belief that the Apostle St. Thomas preached and died in India. As Dr. Mingana, the well-known Syriac archivist says :- "There is no historian, no poet, no liturgy, no breviary, no writer of any kind, who, having had the opportunity of speaking of Thomas, does not associate his name with India".² Hence it is that Dr. J.N. Farquahar, an Orientalist of no mean reputation, has thus given his verdict in 1927 : - "Thirty years ago, the balance of probability stood absolutely against the story of the Apostolate of St. Thomas in India. We suggest today that the balance of probability is distinctly on the side of its historicity".³ Any how, there can be no hesitation in agreeing with Dr. Vincent A. Smith, that the Malabar Christianity is of very ancient origin and that it may be traced back with certainty to the second century after Christ.⁴ The castes and tribes converted to Christianity on the Malabar Coast, in those early days were, no doubt, mainly Brahmins and other high caste Hindus, though a handful of Jewish colonists at Cranganore were likely to have been included in the list of converts. The Nambudiri Brahmins of Malabar who belonged to the earliest wave of Aryan immigration into South India, and the native Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras, who lived close by them, were the main body of early converts to the Faith. At any rate the Ezhavas, who are supposed to have immigrated at about the second century after Christ, and the Adi-Dravida tribes who lived far away from the centres of civilised human dwelling could not have been absorbed into the early Christian community.

An interesting folk lore regarding the *en masse* conversion of a Brahmin settlement at Palur might interest our readers in this connection. It is said that when the Apostle St. Thomas approached the Brahmin village of Palur in North Malabar, he found the Brahminical priests throwing up handfuls of water from a tank, while performing their morning ablutions, as they practise to this day. St. Thomas, seeing this, approached the Brahmins and asked them if they could suspend the water thus thrown up in the air, to which, the Brahmins answering in the negative, the Saint undertook to perform the miracle, with the help of his Divine Master, if only they promised to accept the Faith of the Messiah. The Brahmins agreed, St. Thomas threw up the water in the air, and behold it was suspended in the air, in the shape of beautifully sparkling flowers in the air! Most of the Brahmins, who were overpowered by the miracle embraced the religion of Jesus Christ, while the rest fled from the village, saying "From next day onwards our ablutions shall be at Vempenad".⁵ This is a Malabar legend, shared by the Hindus and Christians alike and the credibility of the legend is supported by the fact that even to this day, no orthodox Brahmin in Malabar takes a bath or a meal in the Christian village of Palur, which is nicknamed Chavakad (modern Chowghat) which means accursed desert. Even now Chowghat is a Christian village and Vempenad is a Brahmin strong hold.⁶ In this connection it is worthwhile remembering that many a purely Hindu social custom can be pointed out among the Syrian Christians, such as *Pula* (pollution after death) *Valayma* (pollution after birth) and *Talickettu* (tying a gold ornament on the neck of the bride). At a place called Kunnankulam in North Malabar, all the customs of the Nambudiri caste are observed by the Christian women folk.

Unmistakable traces of this strong admixture of the Aryan element in the early Christian community in Malabar can be seen in their early church architecture, their social customs and even in their physical demeanour.

That the early Christian churches were shaped like Hindu pagodas had been testified to by the earliest European historian of the Malabar

Church, namely Gouveau, the Private Secretary and camp follower of Dom Alexis Menezes, Archbishop of Goa, who convoked a Syrian Synod in 1599. He says:- "All the ancient churches (of Malabar) were made in the manner of pagodas of the Gentios, (ie Hindu temples) but, full, all of them of crosses the ancient churches of these Christians, built many years before the arrival of the Portuguese in India, were all of them, adorned with these, both in painting and in sculpture". An example of the lithic structure of the ancient Malabar Churches can still be seen at Thiruvankode, in South Travancore, where live even now, a Hinduised sect of Christians, about whom, mention is made in the Synod of Diamper. So much was the resemblance between the Christian Churches and the Hindu Pagodas in the Pre-Portuguese period, that some Portuguese Christians are reported to have actually worshipped in Hindu temples, mistaking them for native Christian churches.!

As for their primitive priesthood, ecclesiastical ceremonies and vestments, nothing can be definitely stated, except what the time-honoured Malabar tradition says. It says that, when St. Thomas left Malabar, he gave Holy Orders to members of four Brahmin convert families of Pakalomattam, Sankarapuri, Kalli, and Kalikavoo and that in course of time, those families came to be known as priestly families, out of the former of which, the Archdeacons or the heads of the Malabar Church, came to be chosen until modern times.

Of late, a bronze statuette was found at Neelamperur in Central Travancore, which is believed to have been the effigy of a Malabar convert - King, *Pallivanavar*, mentioned in the Hindu legend, *Keralolpathi*.⁷ This statuette has a conspicuous cross in the middle of a string of pearls or a rosary of *Tulasi beads* hanging from the neck. It has a staff each in both hands, of which the one in the right hand was surmounted by a cross. "It is an interesting point to be elucidated by further research whether the drapery, headgear, coiffure, and the rod and staff correspond to any style of episcopal paraphernalia, in vogue in any *hot regions of Christendom* during the early centuries"⁸

Little as we know about these early periods, it is reasonable to conclude that in point of culture the early Malabar Christians differed little from their Hindu brethren.

Part II.
THE MEDIAEVAL PERIOD.
(From 4th Century to the 16th Century)

Between the 4th Century and the dawn of the 15th century, the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar came in contact with the Syrians of Babylonia and Persia, with whom they seem to have amalgamated, to the mutual benefit of both nations. In the year 345, according to a well-attested tradition, there came to Malabar, an Edessan merchant, by name, Thomas Cananeo, according to Portuguese, and Thommen Kinan, according to Malabar songs and traditions. He brought with him 472 families of Mesopotamian Christians. They sailed to India in 3 ships from Mesopotamia and landed safely at Cranganore, the Capital of the Chera King, who receiving rich presents from them, assigned them extensive lands adjacent to his Capital City, Cranganore, on the mouth of the Periyar River. There he built a Church, with rows of streets, all around, surrounded by ditches, forts, towers, etc, according to the Syrian Christian songs still sung on festive occasions⁹. Unfortunately there arose a split among the colonists, four hundred families standing as one party, while 72 families remained separate. The four hundred-group was subsequently made to settle in the northern streets of the colony; while the seventy-two-group was made to settle on the southern¹⁰. This explains, according to traditions, the racial difference between the Nordhist and Suddhist sections of the Malabar Christians, which has no basis, in the matter of religious doctrine, geographical location, or rites of worship. The Nordhists are found in all parts of Malabar, whereas the Suddhists are confined to Kottayam, and the surrounding places only. The Nordhists admit their racial admixture with the original St. Thomas Christians, who belonged to the nobility of the land; and they do not deny the absorption of lower castes into their ranks, in modern days: whereas the Suddhists maintain their racial isolation and alien origin. There are slight differences between the social customs of the two communal groups, in point of female attire, marriage customs, etc, which are however falling into oblivion, with the spread of western ideals of social equality.

Ecclesiastically, the Syrian Immigration of the 4th century took away from the Malabar Christians their native line of Episcopacy-which in all probability was in existence-and they came to be ruled by the Chaldean Prelates of Babylonia. Though this brought them in living cultural communion with the western seats of Christianity, the extinction of the indigenous line of episcopacy was much to be deplored. But the racial admixture of the Indian Christians with a foreign race, fairer and more advanced-both culturally and economically-served to improve their stock and to better their political, social and economic status. How all these happened, we shall see presently. Thomas Cananeo was evidently a merchant Prince, and came to occupy a place in the good books of the Cheraman Perumal, not only on account of the rich presents he offered the King, but also due to the great advantages accruing to the State Treasury as a result of foreign trade. The Babylonian merchants purchased pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, tortoise-shells, rice etc, from Malabar; and sold in turn carpets, pearls, gold, silk, perfume, etc, which were very attractive to the South Indian princes and people. In addition to these services, as the tradition has it, Thomas Cananeo won the favour of Cheraman Perumal by a still more valuable service rendered to him personally. This is celebrated in the ancient *panan song* or the *Veera-Adiyan Pattu* sung traditionally at Syrian Christian weddings.¹¹ The story goes how, Cheraman Perumal offended the national sentiments of four artisan tribes in his realm by enforcing a marriage, contrary to the tribal customs, at which the afore-said castes left their country and went away to Ceylon in a body. These four artisan tribes were carpenters, blacksmiths, bronze-smiths and goldsmiths; and the Perumal was at his wit's end, as to how he should build and repair temples and houses in his Kingdom. So the King requested Thomas Cananeo to reconcile them and to bring them back from Ceylon, which he did with the help of a clever tailor or *panan*. The four tribes, however, on their return offered the Perumal, a golden crown, which the grateful Perumal presented to Thomas Cananeo himself, and asked him to be ever grateful to the Panan, who assisted him in bringing back the artisans from Ceylon. An old emblematic crown, called *Ventham Mudi*, is still preserved in the Chumkom Church, near Thodupuzhai to keep this tradition alive. The right of the Syrian Christians to wear a turban or head-dress, even in the Royal Presence, is attributed to this incident. The Perumal was not satisfied with this reward. He, further, gave him, in favour of his correligionists and followers, several privileges in his Kingdom and had them transcribed on copper plates. These copper plate grants are not forthcoming at present, since they were lost by the Portuguese, to whose care, one of the Chaldean prelates of the Malabar Christians, Mar Jacob, had entrusted them, in the 16th century. Gouveau, the Portuguese historian of the 17th century, however, mentions some of these 72 privileges, which ordered among other things "that the Christians alone, when they married were allowed to wear the hair of their head tied with a golden flower¹², to ride on elephants, a privilege granted only to the heirs of kings, to sit on carpets, and other honours, which no other castes had and which are of very great value and esteem among the men of Malabar. The author of the *Jourada* says in continuation: "The Christians esteem them so much that, because the king of Paru wished, a few years ago, to grant one of these privileges to certain Moors of his Kingdom for a great sum of money, which they gave him, the Christians rose against the Moors, and there were many deaths and much bloodshed on both sidesAnd owing to these privileges and honours, these Christians are liked by the Hindu kings and considered of the oldest nobility of Malabar, even the first place therein being given to them, one more noble than the Nairs, who are the fidalgos and nobles of their kingdom."¹³

The major portion of the Syrians gradually mingled with the native Christians and thus gave rise to a stronger, sturdier and more enterprising trading community on the Malabar coast. This foreign connection taught the Syrian Christians of Malabar such occupations as Navigation, and foreign trade, and such arts and crafts as medicine, banking, lacemaking and, to a certain extent, magic and occult sciences; and in all these respects the Mesopotamian Christians were experts.¹⁴ Moreover coming as these people did, from the centres of Christian education and culture, they served to broaden the cultural out-look of the country.

If in the fourth century a Syrian Immigration settled in the City of Cranganore, another mightier body, came and settled in the 9th century at that part of Quilon which is called *Kurakeni Kollam*.¹⁵ They were merchant princes, who had achieved much renown, in the arts of peace, chiefly in medicine and occult sciences. These people gradually amalgamated with their native brethren-in-faith and thus contributed not a little to the enrichment of Kerala Culture. After the advent of these foreign Christians, the Malabar Christians began to carry on commercial relations with Egypt, Venice, Mocha, & Ormuz,¹⁶ their chief article of commerce being pepper. For Malabar, in those days, possessed a virtual monopoly of pepper cultivation. Hence it is that the Alexandrian traveller, Cosmos Indicopleustes, refers to this country as "Male where pepper grows". The chief emporium for pepper trade in the West being Venice, Venetian gold coins began to flow in large quantities to Kerala, and garlands made of them, began to be worn as an ornament by the Syrian Christian women folk. Similarly such articles of domestic use as cots, square tables, round tables, screens and articles of dress such as ornamented jackets, sarees and rosaries began to be used in Syrian Christian towns like Cranganore, Palur, Parur, Procad and Quilon¹⁷. Neither was this racial admixture barren of artistic, literary and educational values for the country and its people. For, Syrian language and literature began to spread among the Malabar Christians, and a part, at least of their prayers and liturgy seem to have been repeated in Syriac. They even used Syriac characters for transcribing their vernacular¹⁸. Moreover, the use of such excellent poems as the Psalms of David, and such peerless prose as those of the New Testament, could not but have exerted a profound influence upon the culture and arts of the Malabar Country. St. John Chrysostom, who lived in Antioch in 4th century has testified to the fact that the Holy Scriptures have been in his time translated into the Indian languages¹⁹, while others have recorded that there were some Indian students among the disciples of St. Jerome, who flourished at Antioch in the 4th century.²⁰ Since Malabar was the chief Indian Province trading with Alexandria and the Near East, the probability is that these references are to the Malabar Christians, who came in touch with their fellow Christians abroad, by virtue of the Syrian colonisation headed by Thomas Cananeo. The use of paper was unknown in India before the advent of these Assyrian merchants, and it has been, probably imported into Kerala for the first time by these merchants. The ink used by them had been skilfully made by mixing several Indian drugs. Hence the durability of the ancient Syriac Manuscripts on foreign-made paper.

This commercial ecclesiastical, and cultural intercourse between the Near East and the Malabar Country had continued for several years, before we come across another wave of foreign Christian colonisation, which took place in the first quarter of the 9th century. The leader of this colonisation was a Persian merchant Prince called Sabariso, alias, Bar-Jesu, and he was followed by a band of Persian Christians, who were welcomed by the ruler of Venad, in the South of modern Travancore. Two copper plates containing several privileges to Christians had been granted by Ayyan Adikal, King of Venad, in favour of the Church built at Quilon in Travancore by this Bar Jesu, alias, Sabariso. The first of these conferred the services of four families of the Ezhava Caste and one family of Washerman Caste for menial services, and they were exempt from paying certain specified rates and taxes to the

THE SYRIAN CHURCH OF MALABAR

Its Cultural Contributions.

By

K. E. JOB M. A. L. T.
CHANGANACHERY,
TRAVANCORE
INDIA.

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State, and permitted by royal commands to go into the Quilon fort and Christian streets despite their low birth in polluting castes. The King also conferred on the same Church the custodianship of the public weighing office, and the right of trying civil and criminal cases among themselves and their dependants. The second copper plate grant, made a little subsequent to the first, was in favour of the Quilon Jewish Settlement and the *Manigramam* or the recognised leaders of the indigenous Christians at Quilon²¹. How these three sets of people were favoured at the same time is an interesting piece of information. The donor is Ayyan Adikal of Venad and he conferred on the *Tarisa* (Orthodox) Church of the Persian Christians at Quilon, the services of one family of carpenters, four of vellalas (an agricultural caste of sudras) and two of another caste. Along with these, he gave extensive grants of land with the right of civil and criminal jurisdiction, within its boundaries and with the right of collecting fee for weighing the articles of merchandise. The *Tarisa* Church was also entitled to the protection of the Venad militia and that of the Jewish and the *Manigramam* leaders²². And in return for these services, several social, civic and commercial privileges have been recited in the second grant in their favour! What a fine idea for ensuring communal harmony and loyalty at the same time!!

At about the same time, or a few centuries later, according to Kielhorn²³, another copper plate grant has been made in favour of the Malabar Christian Merchant Prince at Cranganore, by one Vira Raghava Chakravarthi. The donee, Iravi Korttan of Cranganore is referred to in the Plate as "Lord of the City", with the grandiose title of "the Chera King's Great Merchant, supreme in the whole world". The purport of the deed is to give him the office of *Manigramam*, or the headship of the Cranganore Merchants, together with several social privileges mentioned in the previous plates, and commercial privileges, like the monopoly of carrying on overland and seaborne trade, a right to brokerage on goods and customs duties and tolls. All the merchants of Cranganore, and the five artisan classes of the City, were made subservient to him by these grants, which were bequeathed to his children, grandchildren and their descendants also. This grant is evidently a renewal of the earlier grants made to Thomas Cananeo, which was necessitated by the Christian reverses brought about probably in the 9th century by the burning of Cranganore City at the hands of the Arabs.²⁴

What light does all these copper-plate records throw on the social and economic position of the Malabar Christians? Evidently those grants were made by the Malabar rulers on account of the services rendered them by the donees, in enriching the State Treasury, by carrying on foreign trade in towns, and agricultural operations in rural areas, and also on account of the high position they occupied in the social hierarchy of caste-bond Malabar. That high caste Hindus looked upon the Syrian Christians as equal in rank to the highest of them, can be easily seen from the fact, that some of their ancient churches, namely those at Parur, Palur, Kaduthuruthy, Niranom, etc. are found in close proximity to the Hindu temples of the locality. Moreover until very lately, it has been the custom for temple - authorities and Church authorities to exchange elephants, torches, cadins and other paraphernalia of worship on festive occasions. The services of casteless Nazranis were also requisitioned in Hindu temples in those days to remove the pollution on ghee, oil and other articles, by the touch or approach of low castemen. For according to a Malayalam proverb, flies, cats, dogs and Nazranis have no caste. Nay, there have been instances of Nazranis being appointed trustees of certain Hindu temples. One of the eleven trustees of the Anaprampal Bhagavathi temple in Travancore, for example, was a Syrian Christian called Vallezhattu Panicker.²⁵

Another point on which the Syrian Christians of Malabar were highly esteemed by their Hindu compatriots was their artistic skill and martial valour. In this connection it is specially remarkable that these Nazranis of Malabar were second to none in the country, in the matter of education, both literary and military. Born and brought up in Hindu surroundings, the Malabar Christians took to Sanskrit and Tamil studies early in life; but the period between 8 and 25 years of age, they devoted mainly to military equipment and martial practices, under well-trained teachers called *Panickers* who were either of Nair or Nazrani community. There have been among them a national war-play, *Parisamuttu kali*, which is reminiscent of their martial skill and literary

genius. References abound in the writings of later European writers to the military prowess of the Nazranis, and their high, social and economic position in the Middle Ages.

We shall be satisfied with making only a few quotations. Says Gibbon :- "In arms, in arts and possibly in virtue, they excelled the natives of Hindustan. The husbandmen cultivated the palm trees, and the merchants were enriched by pepper trade. Their soldiers preceded the Nairs or the nobles of Malabar, and their hereditary privileges were respected by the gratitude or the fear of the King of Cochin and the Zamorin himself"²⁶.

Francis Day adds : "The Syrians were much esteemed. The greater, the number of them, a native prince had in his dominions, the more he was feared by the neighbours. They were said to be very faithful and trustworthy. The men always went about armed and were well-trained in the use of weapons, their education being carried on in this science from their 8th to 25th year."²⁷

Barretto has another passage to the same effect. He says :- "These Christians are highly esteemed by the gentile kings, in whose territories they live, and they engage themselves in respectable occupations such as commerce and military serve"²⁸.

In order to rightly appreciate the social privileges and military prowess of the Syrian Christians of Malabar in the Middle Ages, one has to clearly visualise the political condition of the country during the period. Ever since the days of the last of the Perumals, who it is believed, bore sway over the whole land, Malabar or Kerala was divided into a number of petty chieftaincies like, Cochin, Alengad, Parur, Kayenkulom, Perumpadappu, Mangad, Pindanivattom, Desinganad, Elyadathuswaroopom and Venad. And as Ibn-Batuta (1342-47) says, "The district of one king was separated from that of another by a wooden gate generally known as the gate of safety. For when any criminal escaped from the district of one King and got safely into that of another, he was quite safe. Under the circumstances each one had to protect his own life and property, as best as one could". These petty chieftains had organised their governments on a feudal basis and each community and individual therein, had, not only to protect themselves, as best as they could, in times of peace, but also had to come forward with a stipulated number of soldiers in times of war, which were of rather frequent occurrence.

In fact the prestige of the Syrian Christian community of Malabar consisted in the fact, that they were the fighters of the land, and that they could, not only defend their own rights against the transgressor, but could also stand by their liege- lords, whenever such a necessity arose.

Not being satisfied thus, with their Hindu *territorial overlords*, the Malabar Christians also desired to have a *communal chieftain* of their own, to defend their communal and religious rights. References abound in the historical documents of the Middle Ages to the existence of such a Christian Prince of Malabar. By the time that the Portuguese Captain, Vasco de Gama, visited Cochin in 1502, there was no Christian Prince in Malabar. So the Syrian Christians hailed De Gama as the Viceroy of the Most Christian Prince of Portugal, and applied to him for protection against their Mohamadan neighbours, and presented to him the sceptre of their King. Vasco de Gama dressed his ships with flags, assembled around him his most brilliant suite, fired a salvo with all his artillery, and formally accepted the sceptre in the name of the King of Portugal and dismissed the Christian envoys with gifts, assuring them, that fleets would arrive, more powerful and able to free them from their neighbours.²⁹ This Christian royal family has been known to the Portuguese historians of the 16th century as *Beliartes*, which is supposed to be the Europeanised form of Villal vettam. (ie light of archers) Fr. Luis De Salvador, one of the eight Franciscan Missionaries, who had accompanied Cabral in 1501, it is recorded, had tarried some time at the vacant palace of the King of Diamper.³⁰ It was in all probability, the existence of such a King that caused Pope Eugene IV in 1439 to send envoys with a letter addressed "To my most beloved son in Christ, Thomas, the illustrious Emperor of the Indians"³¹, though the envoy entrusted with this letter did not reach India Hence it is that Assemani says "that in process of time, the prosperity of the Christians of Quilon and Cochin so increased that they gave themselves a King".³²

Marco Polo, the Ventian traveller, who visited Malabar towards the close of 13th century also refers to this same Syrian Christian royal family when he says:- "These Syrian Christians, who have the administration of the church, possess forests of trees, that bear the Indian nuts and from them, they draw the means of their livelihood. As tax, they pay monthly to one of the royal brothers, a groat for each tree"³³ But by the time the Portuguese had set foot in Malabar, the ancient glory of the Malabar Christians was already on the decline. How their social and cultural position fared at the hands of their European correligionists, we shall examine in the next chapter.

Part III

SYRIAN CULTURE DURING THE PORTUGUESE PERIOD.

When the Portuguese merchantmen touched at the Malabar ports towards the close of the 15th century, the Syrian Christians of Malabar hardly realised that it would bring about a thorough going revolution in their social and cultural history.

The Portuguese were not only a nation of daring adventurers, ambitious traders and zealous crusaders, but were also the advance guard of Latin Culture in the East. In several respects the Syrian Christians of Malabar agreed with their correligionists from the West, and looked up to them for guidance and protection against the Moorish traders and Hindu chieftains, who harassed them in several ways. Several traditional anecdotes are in vogue reciting the inveterate feud that existed between the Arab traders and the Nazranee (Syrian) community.³⁴

It is true that the Hindu Chieftains were not openly persecuting the Syrian Christian subjects. But as we have already seen, the Syrian Royal Family of Beliarthes was no more, and they therefore had no national leader to enforce their communal claims and to vindicate their national rights. Hence it is that the Malabar Christians chose to pay homage to Vasco De Gama at Cochin, as the representative of the Most Christian King in Europe, and as the protector of the national rights of his Oriental brethren-in-faith.

This newly formed alliance of Malabar Christians and the Portuguese nation went on smoothly for a time, to the mutual benefit of both the parties. The Portuguese secured the services of the Syrians through their Babylonian Bishop, Mar Jacob, of whom St. Francis Xavier, who visited him at Cochin, in 1549, has left a brilliant record. From the letters addressed by him to the Portuguese King³⁵, it is found that, that Mr. Jacob was instrumental in bringing together the Syrian Christian pepper producers and the Portuguese pepper buyers. Moreover, in the very same letters, the aged Babylonian Bishop tells the Portuguese King that he would find in the Malabar Syrians a military alliance of 25000 warriors³⁶. In point of ecclesiastical observances too, the aim of this Syrian Christian Prelate, Mar Jacob, seems to have been to bring about greater resemblance between the Malabar Syrians and the Portuguese Latin Christians. Evidently these schemes were planned, not because, Mar Jacob wanted to prove a traitor to his Babylonian Patriarch, but because he wanted to strengthen the alliance between his Malabar flock and the Portuguese, who alone could put a stop to the ravages of the Moorish traders and the transgressions of native enemies.³⁷

But this mutual alliance could not, unfortunately, continue for a long time, owing, mainly to the conflict of cultures, involved in the process. To the Portuguese Missionaries of the 16th and 17th centuries, the ideal thing to do was to Latinise the Syrian Church, and to do away with the Babylonian and Indian customs of the Malabar Syrians, and to conform them, as much as possible, to the Latin Christianity of the West. In this respect, the Portuguese were evidently following an unwise and uncanonical policy, which gave rise to many a catastrophe in future. They wanted to do away with the Syriac Rite of the Malabar Christians, with a view to bring them under the Padroado Archbishop of Goa. This policy was not without a political motive. Hence it is that Geddes says:- "The Christians of St. Thomas being bymuch, both the stoutest and best firemen in the Indies, as the Portuguese knew very well, which made them to be the more zealous to reduce them to the Roman Church, in order to make them subjects to the King of Portugal."³⁸ Sir William Wilson Hunter also endorses the same view when he mentions how it was a Syro-Malabar soldier that helped the Portuguese General Albuquerque, to capture the City of Goa in 1510, though there were several Portuguese warriors under him.

Moreover the Syrian Christians with their patrician pretensions could not see eye to eye with the Portuguese imperial policy of forming matrimonial alliance with the conquered nations with a view to compensate for the shortage of their home population. The Malabar Syrians were very strong and unbending in their high caste exclusive feelings, and they had strong objections to pollute themselves even by kissing the ring of the Portuguese Archbishop Dom Menezis, who came on a visit to their Churches in 1599. The Portuguese traders at Cranganore were not quite free from the charges of immorality, already levelled against the Moors, and so this formed another incentive to the Syrian Christian residents at Cranganore, Cochin, and other Portuguese settlements to flee to the inland hilly regions. Moreover, the Portuguese Latin Missionaries of the first half of the 16th century and later, looked upon the Syriac language as the channel through which all heresies flowed into Malabar, and so the ideal thing in their eyes was to win over the Syrians to their own rite. The means employed for this purpose, were the missionary work of Portuguese Latin priests and the education of a native Latin clergy taken from their midst. But this Latinisation policy was highly distasteful of the St. Thomas Christians of Malabar, not because they disliked Roman control, but because such a step would be derogatory to their communal prestige and would go against the grains of their cultural progress. In fact the Malabar revolt against the "Romanising" tendency of the Portuguese, was a conflict of cultures, rather than a conflict of faiths.

As we have seen, the St. Thomas Christians were of the highest nobility and they enjoyed several privileges which entitled them to a place, second to none in the social hierarchy of caste-ridden India. On the other hand, they knew very well, that if they adopted the Latin rite, they would be classed with recent converts who were recruited mostly from the lower strata of Hindu society.³⁹

The most remarkable efforts for the Latinisation of the Syrian Church was planned by Dom Menezis, Archbishop of Goa, who made a rapid tour of Malabar in 1599, and convoked a Synod at Diamper with a view "to bring the Syrian Christians into conformity with Rome",⁴⁰ if necessary, with the help of the civil power. This was preceded and followed by a visit to the various Syrian Christian centres throughout Malabar, which showed the Metropolitan the real nature of the Syrian Christian culture. The Malabar Syrians made strong demonstrations against the introduction of the Latin rite and the abolition of the "Babylonian customs", as they called the Syriac rite. Any how, Dom Alexis found that the Latinisation policy was quite impossible. So he was satisfied with a Quasi-Latinisation policy, retaining the Syriac liturgy with slight modifications, but adopting Syriac translations of the Latin sacramentaries etc.

Some of the resolutions passed in the Synod of Diamper, as well as other contemporary historical sources, throw a flood of light upon the social and cultural features of these Christians in the 16th century, some of which subsist even to our own day. An examination of these sources will convince any one, that the Malabar Syrian Culture, was essentially a Kerala Culture, despite its frequent connection, with Babylonian, Persian and Portuguese cultures.

The education of the Syrian Christian youths lasted from the age of 8 to the age of 25, during which time, they learnt Malayalam, Tamil, Syriac, Sanskrit and the Military sciences. These who taught the art of war were called *Panikers*, whether they were Nairs, Christians or of lower castes. "The Syrians were so skilful in the arts of war, that the Portuguese respected them as allies and good soldiers"⁴¹ For the same reason the Syrians were much esteemed by the native princes of Malabar also. "The Greater the number of them a native prince had in his dominions, the more he was feared by his neighbours, as they were said to be very faithful and trustworthy. The men always went about armed and were well trained in the use of weapons, their education being carried on in this science from the 8th to 25th year."⁴² Hough also bears testimony to the same fact and shows how the Syrians used to make their body light and agile by massaging their body with medicated oil, and how they seldom went out without bearing the poniard, muskets and spears. Besides bearing arms during times of war, they were during peaceful times, expert traders and agriculturists. But by the time the Portuguese had arrived in the country, they were already being reduced

to misery and abandonment, although they were still esteemed by the Pagan Rajas for their military skill.

One of the resolutions of the Synod of Diamper aimed at reforming the educational system of the St. Thomas Christians. This was deemed necessary, because the Portuguese Prelate considered that the education of the Syrian Christians savoured too much of Hindu traditions and practices. When the child was between 5 and 6 years of age, he was sent to the village schoolmaster known as *Asan*, who initiated him in education, on receiving presents of *pansupari* on a plaintain leaf, by handing over to the pupil a palmleaf on which the first sixteen letters of the Malayalam alphabet were written with sharp iron nails, and blackened with charcoal. The first letter of the alphabet was used to be written by the child on sand, spread over the ground, with the help of the *Asan*. But before beginning the alphabets, a prayer, worshipping the Hindu dieties, Hari, Sri and Ganapathi, was used to be written on the palmleaves and recited by the pupils. The synod of Diamper naturally took strong objections to this practice, and hence from the seventeenth century onwards, this invocation of the Hindu Gods began to be substituted by the Prayer "Glory be to the Almighty" The day on which all the 500 and odd letters of the Malayalam alphabet were mastered, and the child began to write on palmleaf with iron nails, was a glorious day, which was attended by the lavish presentation of sweets to children, and clothes and money to the *Asan*. On that day, the *Asan* writes on the palm leaf, a song describing the circumstances of the receipt of the Declogue, by Moses. After this, as we have seen, the boys began to study Sanskrit, Tamil and Arithmetic, minutely till 8 or 10 years of age, after which they devoted themselves to the study of military sciences, medicine or divinity according to the occupation they preferred to take up.

From some of the decrees of the Synod of Diamper we can get a glimpse of the national festivities and amusements of the Syrian Christians of Malabar in those days. In the month of August, all Malabar, Hindu and Christian alike, used to celebrate a national festival called *Onam* which was attended by sham fights and sports. This, too, seems to have been severely censured by the Synod as being akin to pagan worship. This is what a Hindu scholar has recorded on the subject:- The Christians also joined these sham fights held during *Onam*, and one of the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper expressly prohibited them from joining their heathen neighbours, during the Hindu feast of *Onam*⁴³.

Another social amusement of the Malabar Christians was a national dance, called *Margom Kali* and *Parisamuttu Kali*. In both these social functions, an old-fashioned brass lamp was placed on the floor, and the dancers, usually 12 in number, used to go round the same, (wearing peacock feathers on their heads,) with measured steps, singing religious songs on St. Thomas, the Apostle, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. They remind one of the *Yathra Kali Pattu* of the Brahmins, of the miracle plays of Europe, and similar social amusements of ancient Babylonia. Some of the songs now used are rather modern, or better, modernised versions of ancient songs. They are akin to the old ballads of Hindu Malabar called *Payannoor Pattu* or the ballads in honour of *Aromal Chevar*, the famous Ezhava hero. Such songs and dances among the Syrian Christians are referred to in the 16th century in Portuguese writings⁴⁴.

Similar songs and ballads of great antiquity and historical importance were used to be repeated at Syrian Christian weddings from time immemorial. The wedding festivities usually lasted 4 days, and gave free play to the artistic sense of the people. Early marriage was the custom and the first day's functions began with giving presents to the *Asan*, who had conducted the early education of the children, about to be married. This was followed by the ceremonious shaving of the bridegroom, the understanding being, that as soon as a boy came of shaving age, he should enter into wedlock. At the same time, the bride, too, had to go through a similar ceremony, when the nails of her hands and feet must be smeared with the violet juice of a herb called mailanchee-a sign of sexual attraction and fecundity. After this the bride and bridegroom were treated with sweets called *Ayini*. Several sweetmeats are used by the Syrians during the wedding days, which are peculiar to themselves. They are known as -No-, -w, -Ip-g-e-, -w, -Wn-b-, -w, -tX³-Ip-

gÂ, -A-h-tem-kv, -Jm-n, -Np-cp-«vetc.

But the earliest function in every wedding pandal was a song invoking the blessings of St. Thomas, their Apostle. Similarly when the shaving ceremony and the smearing of mylanchee essence were going on, also songs were used to be sung, narrating appropriate anecdotes from the Holy Bible or from the History of their ancient community. Besides the usual ceremonies to be performed within the church, according to ecclesiastical prescriptions, the bridegroom has to tie a *Tali* (or a small gold ornament with a cross on it) with a white thread on the neck of the bride, and to cover her head with a sheet of cloth-both purely Hindu customs, with the necessary Christian modifications. Marriage procession used to proceed on elephant's backs, or in palanquins with the 5 traditional Indian types of music, and with loud hootings of joy, generally known locally as *Kurava*-one of their 72 privileges! When the party reached home, they were received with lighted lamps-another sign of nobility-and the bride and the bridegroom were seated on a finely decorated throne, called *Manarkolom*, while the rest of the party were seated on the floor, spread with mats and carpets. First of all, *Pansupari* used to go round, and before meals, a concert began which expatiated on the ancient glories of the community. Some of these are highly beautiful and throw a flood of light on the Syrian Christian antiquities. These customs are even now scrupulously preserved in the Suddhist sub-community, and women play a prominent part in singing the wedding songs in the marriage pandal. On the fourth day of the marriage, there used to be a ceremony called *Adachuthurai*, (ie. shutting the door and opening it) The supposition is that the bridegroom gets offended with the mother-in-law, for some reason or other, and shuts the door of his room; when the mother-in-law knocks at the door entreating him to open it. But the bridegroom is insistent and refuses to open the door, until she promises to give him cows, gold, land and what not? And the beauty of it is, that all these promises are to be made in songs: and so, unless the mother-in-law happens to be a woman of exceptional musical gifts and physical strength, the poor creature would be in a sad predicament !

According to the Syrian Christian *mamool*, the first confinement of the daughter should be in her father's house, and for this purpose she is taken home in the seventh month of pregnancy. Immediately after the birth of the child, it has to be fed with honey and gold by the father (-another Brahmin custom). The child is baptised usually on the 7th day, and this is an occasion of a splendid feast in the mother's house.

Similarly after the death of an aged person, the members of the family observe *pula* or pollution, usually for 11 days, after which there is a vegetarian feast, and prayers offered for the repose of the soul. Anniversary of an individual's death is also celebrated with vegetarian feasts and prayers for the dead. This is called *Sradha* or *Chathom* in pure Hindu style. The Synod of Diamper has left it unchanged and this practice is still observed among conservative Roman Catholic and Jacobite Syrians; but the reformed sects of the 19th century have foreseen it altogether as not compatible with their religious belief.

In personal attire too, the Malabar Syrian Christian of the early centuries could not be distinguished from any high caste Malabar Hindu. Their men had long hair-tufts and ear-ornaments, when the Portuguese saw them in 1498, and some of them continued to have them even as late as 1820, when Ward and Conner conducted their survey of Travancore and Cochin.⁴⁵ This evidently shows that the Malabar Christians did not change their manners and customs, until after the whole Malabar nation began to change them.⁴⁶

Another instance of their addiction to the high caste national culture of Kerala can be seen in their observance of untouchability and unapproachability - a practice⁴⁷ which was severely censured by the Synod of Diamper, as being contrary to Christian principles.

In this connection it is interesting to note that among the contemporaries of Dom Alex Menezes, the convener and the officiating high priest of the Synod of Diamper, there were some learned ecclesiastics, who could not see eye to eye with him, when he forced upon the Malabar Christians certain unwarranted decrees, interfering with their national customs. Such for instance was the afore said Decree that forbade the Malabar Christian women, the expansion of their ear-lobes on which they hang large gold ear-rings; and another, which proposed to change

the whole system of inheritance among the Malabar Christians by introducing the Portuguese system of inheritance. In all these matters, the Decrees of the Synod of Diamper had little influence upon them.

As we have already seen, the Malabar Syrians disliked their Portuguese Ecclesiastical Superiors and their actions, not because they were Roman Catholics;⁴⁸ but because they interfered with their national culture and oriental liturgy. But with all these interferences, they submitted themselves to their Portuguese prelates for well nigh 54 years, (from 1599-1653) until at last they assembled together at the foot of the Coonen Cross at Cochin, and swore never more to be ruled by the Portuguese Jesuits.

Commenting upon this unhappy revolt led by the Malabar Archdeacon, Thomas, and his people, Fr. Heras S.J. Director, Indian Historical Research Institute, Bombay, says as follows:-⁴⁹

"This lamentable step, which was the cause of the formal division of the Church of Malabar that lasts till at present, was undoubtedly, the effect of the offended nationalism of Thomas and his friends. Yet this nationalism was not offended all of a sudden. A series of events commencing from the time, immediately after the first arrival of the Portuguese in Malabar, had finally led Archdeacon Thomas to this extreme measure. The unsuccessful intervention of the Portuguese in the religious affairs of Malabar Christians, by changing their rite and their jurisdiction; and especially the activities of Archbishop Menezes at the Synod of Udayemperur (Diamper) by interfering even in social and purely civil customs, that had nothing to do with their religion, were responsible for this final division that caused so much harm to the Christians of St. Thomas".

Part IV.

(FROM THE LATTER HALF OF THE 17th CENTURY TO OUR OWN DAYS)

The anti-Syrian policy followed by the Portuguese nationals in India, from the dawn of the 17th century was one of the causes that contributed to their subsequent decline of power in the west coast and the fall of their fortress at Cochin, (1661). This has been emphatically attested to by Hough, who says:- "From the arguments used by Francesco de Mella, in support of his proposal, it is easy to perceive, to whom the Portuguese nationals should attribute the loss of Cochin, Cranganore, and their other establishments on the Malabar coast. If the Jesuits had not so totally alienated the Syrian Christians from their order, and from all who patronised it, the Dutch would most probably have failed in their attempts upon those places, in defence of which the Syrians could, at the shortest notice, have furnished forty thousand of the best soldiers in India, well equipped and accustomed in the use of arms".⁵⁰

So long as the Portuguese and the Malabar Syrians presented a united front, they were feared and respected by the Moorish traders and native princes, as we have had occasion to mention before. But as days went by, the Portuguese lost their original purity of intention and crusading zeal. As W.W. Hunter says, the early Portuguese explorers were "knight errants and crusaders rather than merchants and conquerors." But their zeal degenerated into fanaticism and greed within a short period. In the words of one of their own historians, "the Portuguese entered India with the sword in one hand and the crucifix in another; finding much gold, they laid aside the crucifix to fill their pockets; and not being able to hold them with one hand-they were grown so heavy-they dropped the sword too; and being found in this posture by those who came after, they were easily over come"⁵¹ And naturally the fall of the Portuguese power in Malabar proved a great blow to the Christian culture in Malabar - both Eastern and Western.

The greatest loss suffered by the Syrians was that they were deprived of the helping hand of all (non Dutch ⁵²) European missionaries, after the capture of Cochin by the Dutch. The after-effects of the tragedy of the Coonen Cross were about to be healed through the tactful ministrations of the Italian Carmelite Apostolic Commissary, Joseph Sebastiani, and his native Syrian collaborators; and the Portuguese were silently cooperating with this movement, when all on of a sudden, the Dutch flag was hoisted at Cochin, and orders were issued, asking all non-Dutch Europeans to leave the Dutch centres of influence. Though this paved the way for the nomination of the Malabar Syrian Bishop, Alexander De Campo (Palliveetil Chandy Mettran), and was, thus, a

source of immense gratification for all Syro-Malabar, yet it left the southern half of Travancore, still outside the Roman Catholic pale. This is the reason why, until very lately, there was not a single Catholic Syrian family south of the Lapalam in Changanacherry. This has eventually led to a great cleavage in the cultural unity of the Syrian Christians, one sect following the lead of Rome, and the other that of Antioch.

But a greater catastrophe befell the Christian culture of Kerala, consequent upon the down-fall of Portuguese power. This consisted in the ruthless destruction of the Portuguese Seminary at Cochin by the Dutch-an act of vandalism which finds a parallel, only in the wanton destruction of the Alexandrian Library by a different set of people. This collection of rare books and manuscripts, no doubt, included, the works of native Syrian Christians and foreign scholars, of which mention is made in contemporary Portuguese records. Among such are the works of St. Francis Xavier, Francis Ros, George Castro, Enriquez etc., which might have thrown much light on the development of prose literature and western philosophical writings in the vernacular.

As the Dutch expelled all Catholic missionaries from their centres of influence, we find them hard at work in the adjoining British territory. Among them we come across the famous Austrian Missionary, Fr. Ernest Hanxleden S.J. who acquired deep scholarship in Sanskrit and Malayalam, with a view to compose poetic works for the use of the Malabar Christians. Perhaps this might seem extraordinary. But it was a real necessity. For, by this time, the Malabar Christians were without any decent poetic religious literature for daily use, unlike the Hindus who had their *Adhyatma*, *Ramayana*, and *Bhagavatha*, composed in high-class Malayalam verse by Ramanujan Ezhuthachan. It might, at first, appear strange, why the Syrian Christians with their high Caste traditions and Sanskrit learning, could not compose such poems for their own use. But it was due to the fact that ever since the Synod of Diamper, their ecclesiastical superiors had strictly discountenanced their dabbling in (Hindu) Sanskrit lore. Ezhuthachan, himself, the son of a Brahmin - could become the maker of modern Malayalam literature, owing mainly to his deep study of Sanskrit literature; and hence it is no wonder that the Malabar Christians, despite their former literary traditions came to occupy the position of a backward community in the literary pursuits of the country. It was the great dream of the great Austrian missionary, to find a remedy for this deplorable state of affairs, and to supply them with a modernised poetic literature, inculcating the truths of their religion. So he composed several works like "The Four Ends of Man", the "Life of Christ" "The Life of Blessed Virgin" etc. These poems were used as family readings in the Catholic as well as Jacobite Syrian houses until recently, and except for their highly Sanscritised diction, and their highly didactic aim, they can be regarded as equal to any of the contemporary poetic works of indigenous poets.

In the 18th century, the Roman Catholic section of the Syrian Christians were governed by the Carmelite prelates of Verapoly, and several European missionaries among them had contributed much to the cultivation of Sanskrit and Malayalam literature, though they too did not encourage their flock to drink deep of literary works, either in English, Sanskrit or Malayalam, fearing that it would lure them into Protestant heresy or Hindu paganism. This accounts for the comparative educational and cultural backwardness that characterised the Roman Catholic section of the Syrians until very recently. The foremost 18th century scholar among the Verapoly missionaries was *Paulinus* who was a contemporary of Marthanda Varma, the Great, (Anizom Thirunal) and Rama Varma the Great (Karthika Thirunal) the two great makers of modern Travancore. He visited Trivandrum as the Legate of Pope Clement XIV carrying a Papal message of felicitations to the scholarly Maha Rajah Karthika Thirunal, who was deeply impressed with the profound scholarship of the missionary legate.

In this connection the following account of his personal experiences taken from his work, *India Orientalis Christiana*, may be read with interest :-

"The Gentile King, Rama Varma, evinced a great propensity towards the Christian religion in 1775 and 1776, and he was greatly desiring to be instructed in the Christian mysteries, after he had read the *Compendium Doctrinae Christianae* edited in Rome in the Press of the

Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide in 1772, in the common Malabar language, by the Rev. Fr. Clement of Jesus, formerly my companion in the missions. But since there was not any easy access to the King, this cause was neglected, and when I in the year 1780, approached the King for the first time, the King twice signified to me, this, his desire, through the interpreter Mr. Emmanuel Rodriguez of the Anglican Society, (East Indian Company ?) and he desired to make me his teacher of the English language, in order that his intuition might remain hidden to the Brahmins. Often he used to send to me his noble secretaries Padmanaban Pulla and Payyampalli Curipu, and through them he tried to introduce me even into his own apartment. But the Brahmins speedily detected the King's intention and casting many calumnies on the Christian religion, they caused the King to throw away the *Compendium Doctrinae Christianae*, and to give attention more fervently to gentile purifications and to the cults of the gods. These men, especially, the first minister of the King, Cumare Cembaga Rama Pullai, a very acute fellow, were sorry that I conversed with the King, not in the common Malabar language, but in English, of which, since they were ignorant, they were troubled by many suspicions; and so hastily were they transacting my business, that the time and occasion were taken away, for remaining long in the King's apartment. By these tricks it happened, that no definite conclusion of the affair, did ever take place, since sundry occupations were dragging me and the King to and fro. Then I composed in the Malabar Language, a poem "On the Six Divine Attributes," several manuscript copies of which I brought out in public. In this I attacked the very root of the Brahminic cults, since entirely overthrowing it, there was greater hope of taking the Brahmins to task. But to few (only) these could be of profit."⁵³

Among the indigenous Syrian Christians also there were some towering scholars, linguists and prose writers in the 18th century. As may be gathered from their communal history, the Syrian Catholics (or the old sect as they are known) were striving for ecclesiastical home-rule, and their European prelates wanted to tighten their own hold over the Syrians. Among their national leaders who bore all the troubles of this national fight was one Dr. Joseph Cariatti of Alengad, who, early in life joined the Propaganda College, Rome, and returned with a tripple Doctorate, worked as Professor in the Syrian Catholic Seminary at Alengad, for some time, and then braved the terrors of an adventurous deputation to Portugal and Rome, got himself consecrated as Archbishop of Cranganore, tried ambitious schemes of healing the schism among his people and alas ! met with a tragic and unexpected death at Goa. His wonderful life and journeys had been recorded in an exquisite prose biography by his collaborator and secretary Paremakal Thoma Kathanar. It is the earliest book of travels extant in Malayalam prose, and it portrays very well an account of men and things in Europe, India and the way between, in an inimitable manner. The Bishop of the new sect (Jacobites), Mar Thomas VI, thereupon felt discomfited, and though he was reunited with Rome, for some time, he soon seceded and the unhappy schism continued. Soon, even intermarriages discontinued owing to the strict injunctions of the Latin Catholic Prelates, which widened the gulf between the two sections.

Early in the 19th century, an Anglican Mission of Help came to work among the Syrian Christians, and thoroughly revolutionised the cultural outlook of the Syrian Christians of Malabar, even before the rest of India was influenced by English education and culture. This was brought about by the good offices of Dr. Claudius Buchanan, an Anglican Missionary, who visited the Malabar Christians, and reported to his headquarters in England, that he perceived among them, "all-round symptoms of poverty and political depression, and an air of fallen greatness"; and through the political influence of Colonel Munroe, the British Resident in Travancore and Cochin, who was subsequently appointed Dewan in these two states. A staunch member of the Reformed Church of England, Colonel Munroe addressed a memorable report to the Government of Madras, in 1818, in which he expressed his passionate longing for the spread of Protestant Christianity among the Syrians, which he thought "would be beneficial to the interests of humanity, and would also contribute indirectly to the stability of British rule in India." It was through this strong recommendation that the first batch of Church Missionary Society members set foot in India, and took up teaching in the

Old Syrian Christian Seminary for the non-Catholic Syrians, at Kottayam. Schools were founded by them for boys and girls, and English education began to make rapid strides among the non-Catholic Syrian Christians. But the Catholic Syrians kept aloof from this movement in strict obedience to the injunctions of their Carmelite superiors at Verapoly.

At the same time, under the benevolent care of Colonel Munroe, the Non-Catholic section of the Syrians, began to make tremendous strides in cultural and temporal advancement. Firstly, as Colonel Munroe himself says, since his arrival, they were "relieved from their most oppressive burdens". For, in his efforts to help them, he could always rely upon the good and benevolent Queen of Travancore, whose pleasure was to win the confidence of the British Government, so ably represented in Her state by Munroe. She made lavish gifts of land, timber and money to the Puthencoor Syrian community. Secondly, Munroe persuaded the Travancore Queen to take a considerable number of Syrians into the public service of the State, and to see that there should be a Christian judge in every court of law in the major divisions of the State. Thirdly, Munroe enjoined on the Anglican Missionaries to take a lively interest, in the civic welfare of the non-Catholic Syrians, and to form, as it were, a channel of intercourse between himself and the Syrians. But a reaction set in, soon after the retirement of Munroe. Many of the benefits procured by him for the Syrians were discontinued shortly after Colonel Munroe left the country. "It strikes me" says Digby Macworth commenting on this, in his Diary, "that perhaps, the good man showed too much favour; more than what in justice he ought to have done, and their present miseries are the natural consequences of a reaction."

Transitory as the immediate effects of this Government patronage were, yet many valuable contributions were made to the culture of Kerala by the educational institutions of Anglican Missionaries. For, it opened the flood-gates of modern knowledge to many a young man and woman, in the land, irrespective of caste or creed, and it indirectly opened the way to the modernisation of Travancore and Cochin. Since English education was a necessary qualification for official preferments, it opened the gates of civil service to many, and led to the development of western philosophy and thought among all classes of people in the land. Among the alumni of the C.M.S. College at Kottayam were also some talented Syrian scholars like Rev. George Mathan, whose works on Malayalam Grammar, Social Reform, Philosophy and Economics, stand unsurpassed even at the present day. The educational enterprises of the C.M.S. missionaries also led to the rapid development of female education, and also hastened the abolition of slavery and social inequalities.

Great as were the contributions made by Anglican and Catholic missionaries to the culture of Kerala in general and to the Syrian Christian Culture in particular, a note of qualification on this matter has to be added, in fairness. And it cannot be done with better grace, than in the words of a European missionary, Rev. Jacob S. Winslow, of the Christa Seva Sangha of Poona. He says:-

"The Christian Church, must, also, not be behind those of other faiths in appreciation of India's splendid literary heritage. Here, we have, it must be confessed, been open to grave reproach. It is comparatively rare to find among us scholars really familiar with the great Sanskrit classics, or even with the treasures contained in the literature of various vernaculars. In some parts of the country (owing largely to the inadequate and literal translations of the Bible and other books made by missionaries who have not properly grasped the language, Christians have developed a language of their own, marked by curious solecisms of grammar and idiom"⁵⁴. It is however a matter of supreme gratification to note that there had been among the members of the Syrian Christian community, many a scholar and literary man, like Rev. George Mathan, and Rev. E.A. Nidiry, and Messers Maha Kavi Kattakayom, O.M. Cherian, K.I. Varghese Mappilay, C. Anthapai, I.C. Chacko etc., who have contributed their quota for the development of Malayalam language and literature, without the defects referred to in the above Passage.

When the Anglican missionaries were thus carrying on English education and printing several books at Kottayam, the Catholic section of the Syrian Christians were confining their attention to agriculture

trade and industries, and were making fresh conquests in the marshy littoral of Kuttanad or in the lower heights of the Western Ghats, with the result, that by this time, they own more landed property than their non-Catholic brethren.

Neither were they destined to remain in this position for long. The various schisms and dissensions that broke the peace of the Catholic Syrian community in the 19th century were due to their discontent with an ecclesiastical administration that left them behind their non-Catholic brethren in cultural advancement. At last the Holy See granted them Bishops of their own nationality, and under their benign care they are taking rapid strides in educational, cultural, civic, literary and artistic progress.

In this connection, a word about the modifications brought about in the Syrian Christian culture by the impact of European missionary agencies naturally suggests itself. This has manifested itself in church architecture, in ecclesiastical vestments, paintings, church music and in social customs. Whereas in Pre-Portuguese days, Churches were built in the shape of Hindu Temples, during the subsequent periods of European influence, all these came to be rebuilt in Roman, Gothic or mixed styles. Pure Gothic structures are rather rare, the one significant example being the Anglican Bishop's Cathedral at Kottayam. The St. Mary's Cathedral at Changanacherry shows a harmonious blending of both Gothic and Roman styles, while many of the Syrian Christian churches with beautiful facades show the influence of Portuguese architectural designs, the types of which, we find in Portuguese India. There are however a few Syrian Christian Churches, without facades, notably those at Kallupara, Kundra, Karthikappally and Mailakompu. In the matter of Church paintings and sculpture also, the Syrian Christians borrowed several details from their occidental brethren. The Syrian Church of Malabar being a part of the great Oriental section of the Catholic Church, it did not possess statues, as in the West, but possessed only paintings. A popular tradition says that the painting of the Madona and Child found in the St. Thomas' Mount Church at Madras was executed by St. Luke the Apostle, and brought to India by St. Thomas the Apostle. In some of the oldest churches in Malabar, for example at Kuravalangad, similar paintings, or their recent reproductions may be met with. But most of the modern church paintings and carvings of Catholic Syrians have been executed by Portuguese painters or their descendants from Goa or Cochin. But despite all these European influences on Syrian Church architecture, paintings and carvings, types of purely Hindu art can, still, be traced, in some Syrian Christian Churches. For example in the Jacobite Syrian Church of Kallicherry, there are carvings of the Lotus flower, with the Infant Jesus reposing inside, just like similar carvings of Infant Krishna! On the walls of many of the 18th century churches, we find symbolic carvings of a man shooting a tiger, with a peacock standing near by, while at Kaduthuruthi (Major Church) and at Kallupara, we find sculptures of mermen carrying ships! Huge lithic crosses erected in front of Kaduthuruthi and Changanacherry churches are reminiscent of the Vijayanagar architecture.

But it is in ecclesiastical vestments and in Church music that the Syrian Christians, -at least many of them- have adopted western models. The Syro-Malabar Catholic priests and Bishops dress themselves exactly like their European brethren, whereas the Jacobites and Mar-Thomites dress like their Oriental brethren in the Near East. The Syro-Malabar Catholics sing Syriac songs in their Churches, but their tunes have been borrowed from the Portuguese Latin Christians in 17th century! The Jacobites sing Malayalam songs with Syriac tunes, where the Anglians chant Malayalam songs in English tunes, often causing jarring effects! In all these respects, there is much room for improvement on purely national lines, and the matter is engaging the attention of the leaders concerned.

Conclusion.

The one dominant trait that we notice in the cultural history of the Syrian Christians of Malabar, throughout the ages is the esteem and respect they have always commanded at the hands of their civil rulers. As Barreto has said, long ago:- "These Christians are highly esteemed by the gentile kings in whose country they live". Hence it is, their leaders were granted the civil and criminal jurisdiction in their settlements

and spheres of influence, in the past. An adequate recognition of the nobility, loyalty and culture of the Syrian Christians of Malabar was made, when in August 1880, that Prince of scholars in Travancore, H.H. Sri Visakhom Thirunal of happy memory, in replying to an address of welcome presented to him at Kottayam, spoke to an assemblage of Syrian Christians in the following telling terms:-

"Yours is an ancient community with a glorious historic literature, and it is a model of contentment, peace and loyalty. I dare say, even if Sri Parasu Rama⁵⁵ were to revisit this ancient land, he would not find a community of greater loyalty and moral uprightness. You refer to the privileges which your community has long enjoyed from our illustrious predecessors; and the same, you may well rest assured, will be scrupulously maintained".

NOTES :

P.S. We are under a deep debt of gratitude to Sadasya Tilaka T.K. Velu Pillai Esq. B.A.B.L., Travancore State Manual Special officer, for the very appropriate preface he has favoured us with, which being received late, we regret, we could not duly acknowledge in our Introductory remarks.

¹ Travancore State Manual Volume II Page 118-119.

² Early Spread of Christianity in India (1925) pp 15-16

³ Bulletin of John Rylands' Library (Manchester)

⁴ Oxford History of India : By Vincent A. Smith.

⁵ Vempenad is a village near Palur.

⁶ Vide London Tablet : December 21. 1935.

⁷ Malabar Christians and their ancient documents: By T.K. Joseph. 1929.

⁸ T.K. Joseph. Malabar Christians and their Ancient Documents.

⁹ Marriage Customs and Songs of Syrians by Dr. P.J. Thomas. Page 16

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Marriage Customs and Songs : By Dr. P.J. Thomas Page 19.

¹² A Photo of such a golden flower belonging to the Church at Chumkam in Travancore, was published by Mr. T.K. Joseph in the *Indian Antiquary* for 1928. It is like the cluster of leaves forming the crest of the pine apple.

¹³ Journado. fol 4r. col.2.

¹⁴ Christian Literature in Kerala Dr. P.J. Thomas Page 6,9.

¹⁵ The foundation of the Malabar Era (in 825 A.D.) is attributed by a version of the Hindu Work *Keralolpathi* to the joint efforts of these Persian merchants and the local Rajas. This is also known as the *Quilon Era*.

¹⁶ These places are mentioned in the Ancient songs of the Malabar Christians, says Dr. P.J. Thomas *The Christian Literature of Kerala*.

¹⁷ Christian Literature of Kerala: Dr. P. J. Thomas Page 10

¹⁸ Such characters are locally known as *Karson*

¹⁹ Thomas : *Christian Literature of Kerala*.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ *The Malabar Christians & their Ancient Documents* : By T.K. Joseph Pages 34. 35.

²² Some of these Manigramam members have later on relapsed into Hinduism, and they can still be seen around the banks of the Ashttamudi Lake, in Quilon District. Many a Christian social custom has lingered along among them-an unmistakable sign of their recent apostasy.

²³ Kielhorn fixes the date at 1320 A.D.; while Burnell fixes in the 8th century.

²⁴ There is a fast of 8 days among the Malabar Christians beginning on the Sept. 1 and ending with the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 8th sept. This is peculiar to Malabar Syrians, and their women observe the same very strictly. This observance is attributed to a vow made by them, in thanksgiving for protection from the inroads of Arab marauders in ancient days.

²⁵ *Vido Christian Literature of Kerala* Vol. I Page 7, Thomas

- ²⁶ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Page 836 of 1787 Edition.
- ²⁷ Day : *Land of the Perumals* Page 219.
- ²⁸ Barreto : *Relazione Della Missione P 20* Quoted in *Indian Indian Antiquary* 1924 Page 259.
- ²⁹ Haklyuit Society : *Threer Voyage of Vasco de Gama* P 354
- ³⁰ Vide Manoel Xavier : *Compendio Universal de todos os Vis-Reys-Mullbaver, 44)*
- ³¹ G.T. Mechenzie : *Christianity in Travancore* P. 10
- ³² Assemani IV 442
- ³³ Mackenzie : *Christianity in Travancore* Page 7.
- ³⁴ One of these describe how the Christian quarters in The City of Cranganor was set on fire by the Moors, causing the Syrians to escape with their families during day time. The daughter of a family is said to have expressed unwillingness to go out without a covering sheet for the head and the mother to have consoled her saying :-
 "The City is in ashes and we go out a broad day light
 Why then do you want a covering for the head"?
 It is now a Malayalam Proverb.
- ³⁵ G. Schurhammer S.J. *Three Letters of Mar Jacob*
- ³⁶ Placid : *Malabar Church and Rome* Page e 14.
- ³⁷ Ibidem Page 14.
- ³⁸ Geddes : *History of the Church in India* Page 58
- ³⁹ But there have been remarkable exceptions of the Latinisation of a few original St. Thomas Christians, after the Coonen Cross tragedy. They are known as the Latin Syrians.
- ⁴⁰ The expression is very frequent in contemporary Portuguese writings. The beauty of it is that it might mean either **Latinisation or Conversion to the Roman Catholic faith.**
- ⁴¹ Journada : Page 28.
- ⁴² Day : *Land of Perumals* P. 219.
- ⁴³ K.P. Padmanabha Menon : *History of Kerala* Page 470
- ⁴⁴ Vide Journada.
- ⁴⁵ See foot note 6. *The Malabar Christians and their Ancient Documents:* By T.K. Joseph.
- ⁴⁶ This too was condemned by the Ninth Day's Session 17th Decree. Vide Hough's *Christianity*
- ⁴⁷ Ibidem, Ninth Session and Decree.
- ⁴⁸ For, all their sixteenth century Chaldean prelates were in communion with Rome as shown by Fr. Placid in the accompanying paper on their Catholic communion.
- ⁴⁹ Vide Article on the Syrian Christians of Malabar By the Rev. Heras S.J. *Bombay Examiner* Page 207 dated April 9, 1938.
- ⁵⁰ *Christianity in India* : Hough Vol. II Page 319.
- ⁵¹ Quoted from the "*Rise of Christian power in the East*" By J.D. Basu.
- ⁵² The Dutch had ordered all non-Dutch Europeans to leave the country, which virtually barred all Catholic Missionary enterprise in Malabar.
- ⁵³ *India Orientalis Christiana* Pp. 226-227.
- ⁵⁴ Winslow and Elwin : *The Dawn of Indian Freedom* 203-4.
- ⁵⁵ The Mythic founder of Kerala.

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