

IS CASTE SYSTEM PREVALENT AMONG THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS OF KERALA? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The concept of caste has ever been a reality in all societies and countries, and yet there exists some ambiguities in understanding the concept of caste in some communities. A great confusion exists among the academicians as well as in the general public about the concept of caste in the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. The multiplicity of denominations among them, each having their own Rite, Liturgy, Clergy, Ecclesial hierarchy etc. had created great confusion among the people especially among the non Christians. Vague ideas had taken position and a majority including learned historians and thinkers are totally mistaken in this regard. Some interpret these varieties as separate castes. Hence, an earnest attempt to find out the truth in this matter is urgent. This article is an attempt to deactivate the wrong concepts about the caste factor in the Syrian Christian community and to replace it with the most reasonable and genuine knowledge of the same. It finds out that all the different Syrian Christian groups except the 'Knanites' forms one single cast and the difference is only denominational.

Keywords: *Caste, Religion, Syrian Christians, St. Thomas Tradition, Synod of Diamper, Coonan Cross Oath, 'Mission of Help' Malankara, Jacobite, Knanaya, Marthoma Syrian, Pazhayakooru, Puthenkooru, Idavaka.*

Introduction

The Syrian Christians form an ancient Christian community in Kerala. Until a little after the middle of the seventeenth century, the Thomas Christians were all one in faith and rite. But with the Synod of Diamper in 1599, and the Oath of Coonan Cross in 1653, divisions arose among them and consequently they have been divided into different groups with exclusive claims of traditional origins. They are today Catholics and non Catholics of different rites and denominations. These numerous sections have created a lot of trouble and confusion in the public regarding what and who in the Syrian Christian community. They have often been misinterpreted as separate castes even by scholars of eminence. Ordinary people will certainly consider these divisions as different castes in Syrian Christianity. Hence an objective and balanced study on the topic is an urgent need. This article is an attempt to find out whether these divisions in Syrian Christianity are different castes or only social formations of minor differences of opinion on matters religious and temporal. It also tries to place the most possible interpretation of the caste concept about them.

Objectives of the Study

This study is mainly aimed to:-

1. Measure the extant of stratification among the Syrian Christians and to identify and differentiate them.
2. To make a critical and comparative evaluation of all these groups and to assess whether these assortments forms separate castes or not.
3. To replace the incorrect cast concept about the Syrian Christians with the right one.
4. And, to open up new vistas of discussion and research in this matter.

Materials and Methods of Study

The materials used for the study are mainly secondary and textual in nature. Some reports, practices and beliefs of primary nature have also been taken into account. The method used in this study is argumentative and analytical. Mainly, historical method of research together with interpretive methodology is applied in this study. Textual research is used with utmost care and a sceptical attitude. A technically comparative method of study of different sociological aspects of caste is also used. A citation at End notes and bibliography also is given.

Who are the Syrian Christians?

There are volumes of literature, both traditional and historical, about the origin, growth and significance of the Syrian Christian community in India. The tradition regarding its apostolic origin is not a matter of our discussion now. It is true that this is an ancient Christian community having a history of over 1800 years. But contrary to this there is a belief that Christianity in India is a modern importation from the west as all the imperialists were Christian countries and proselytisation and conversion were concomitant of their domination. This had made a general view that Christianity is a western product in India. But the reality is that Christianity came to India long before it went to European countries. To quote from Jawaharlal Nehru, "It was in existence from the very early times in the west coast of India. It has a longer history and ancestry than that of many European countries." Within hundred years or so of the death of Jesus, Christian Missionaries came to South India by sea. They were courteously welcomed by the natives and many of them had been converted to the new faith. This early Christians in India have been known by the appellation "Syrian Christians". They are called Syrian because Syriac, one of the dialects of the Aramaic language used by Jesus Christ and his apostles, became the language of the mother church of Persia and so it became the sacred language of the daughter church in Kerala. There were also from time to time Christian immigrants mostly Syrians who settled in Kerala. But basically the members of the Church of Kerala are called Syrians not because they claim Syrian blood in their veins, but mainly because they have a Syrian liturgy. They are not of the Syrian nation but of the Syrian rite. The name is not an ethnological or geographical designation but is purely ecclesiastical. Their social customs, physiognomy build etc. indicate that they are essentially children of the soil like other Hindu brethren. The Syrian Christians are also called St. Thomas Christians, *Malankara* Christians, and '*Nazarene Mapillas*'. The members of this community own a curiously mixed spiritual allegiance, some belonging to the Patriarch of Antioch, some to the patriarch of Babylon, and some to the pope of Rome while others again obey a Bishop of their own and call themselves 'St. Thomas Christians.'

Many factors had contributed for the growth of the community in Kerala. Constant visit and help offered to it by the Persian Patriarchs, and some other native factors like the support and consideration of the native Hindu rulers, existence of the Brahmanic Caste system etc. too had helped the growth of the Community. Epigraphic records such as the Tarissapalli Copper plate issued by Ayyan Atikal Thiruvattikal, the king of Venad in the fifth regnal year of Emperor Sthanu Ravi in 849 A.D., and another copper plate grants to Iravi Kortan of Mahadavarpattanam issued by Veera Raghava Chakravarthi, likely to be a Chera king who died in 1028 A.D. while fighting against the Cholas, are instances of the support and protection of the native rulers of Travancore had provided to the community. These grants were issued conferring upon them many favours including tax free land and revenue and allowed to erect churches wherever they pleased. The community had comparatively an uneventful growth except certain oppressions from some quarters until the coming of modern Europeans in India. But the Colonial struggles in India between different European countries and their evangelical rivalry to introduce and propagate their own forms of Christian religion and worship in India resulted in divisions and disunity among the members of the community. This divisive attitude of the colonialists was well evidenced in the Synod of Diamper of 1599 which culminated in the Coonan Cross oath of 1658.

The Synod of Diamper (1599) and the Coonan Cross oath (1658)

The Synod of Diamper (*Udayamperoor*) and the consequent *Coonan Cross* Oath are two mile stones in the history of the Syrian Christians of Kerala. The Portuguese after establishing their head quarters at Goa started a policy of conversion of the Syrian Christians into the Latin rite under the supremacy of the Pope of Rome. They intercepted all correspondence of the Syrian Christians in India with the eastern Patriarchs. Franciscan and Dominican friars and Jesuit fathers were entrusted with winning over the Syrian Christians to the Roman Catholic communion. They established the Inquisition at Goa in 1560 and a Jesuit church and a seminary were founded at *Vaippacotta* near Cranganur. Before the Jesuits the Franciscan and the Dominican friars tried at the latinization of the Syrian church. But the Jesuits were more successful in this process. However, the antipathy of the Syrians towards Roman faith remained so strong and they were

adamant in the faith of their forefathers. The Jesuits were completely defeated in their attempt to convert the Syrians and this led to an open fight with the Syrian bishops and consequently the most odious and tyrannical measures were adopted. Alexis - De - Menezes was appointed Archbishop of Goa by Pope Clement VIII and an Inquisition was started into the crimes and errors of Mar Abraham, the Bishop of the Syrians at *Angamali*. Menezes could not win over Mar Abraham and following his death in 1597, Archdeacon George became the leader of the Syrians and resolved no longer to admit any Latin priests in their churches. Hearing of this move Archbishop Menezes arrived personally at Cochin on January 26, 1599 and visited the important Syrian churches and the seminary and ordained as many as 153 priests. Armed with the terror of Inquisition, invested with the spiritual authority of the Pope, and encouragement of the Portuguese kings backed up by his governors; Archbishop Alexis De Menezes held the historic Synod of Diamper or *Udayamperur* on Sunday June 20th 1599 which was attended by 813 members in all; 133 priests, 20 deacons, and 660 laymen. Clerical members and lay delegates in the Synod were compelled to swear a solemn oath declaring their faith in Nicene creed, all Roman additions by Pope Pious IV contained in the Nicene creed and to never receive into their church any bishop, archbishop, prelate, pastor, or governor unless appointed by the bishop of Rome. Thus archbishop Menezes and the Jesuit assistants had the satisfaction of having converted the whole Syrian Church into the Roman Catholic faith. Many other reforms also were introduced. The Syriac language was allowed but the Syrian mass was altered at the Synod, and it is the one used by the Syrio-Romans even to this day. The service books of the churches were expurgated and all Nestorian passages were expunged. All popular Nestorian books were destroyed to the flames. The Synod of Udayamperur came to an end after a session of six days on 26th June 1599.

A good part of the Syrian Christians who adhered to the Roman Catholic faith, as a result of the deliberations of the synod, had not done so on their own free will. Their silence against the force and coercion of the Portuguese were mistaken as their submission. But as the Jesuit activities became so intolerable to the Syrians they resolved to seek a bishop of their own from the East and applied to Babylon, Alexandria, Antioch and other head-quarters. The Patriarch of Antioch sent a bishop named Ahatallah also called Mar Ignatius. But he was, on the way, said to be, captured by the Portuguese and was drowned in the sea or burned at the Inquisition of Goa. Another view is that he was sent back to Europe. This had provoked many Syrian devotees in Malabar and they assembled in front of the cross at Mattancherry in Cochin and renounced their allegiance to the Roman Church. This incident is known as the famous *Coonan Cross Oath*, another milestone in the history of the Syrian church in Malabar as it led to the first split within the church. The Syrian community got separated into two parties - the *Pazhayakooru* and the *Puthenkooru*. The former is otherwise known as the Syrian Romans who declared their allegiance to the Church of Rome as per the decisions of the synod of Diamper. Archbishop Alexes De Menezes may be considered the founder of this new rite. This rite retained the Syrian language and rituals and acknowledged the spiritual authority of the Pope and the Vicar Apostolic appointed by the Pope.

The latter, also called the Jacobite Syrians, held fast to the traditional Syrian creed and revoked the decisions of the synod of Diamper. They rejected allegiance to the Pope or Church of Rome. The Patriarch of Antioch sent them a new bishop called Gregory and thus continued their spiritual allegiance to the Eastern Syrian Church. This was the first split in the Syrian church. Next division in the Syrian church happened in connection with the 'Mission of Help' to the Jacobites (*Puthankooru*) established in 1816 sponsored by the Anglican Church Missionary Society. When this 'Mission of Help' was dissolved in 1836 a small number of Syrian Christians went with the missionaries and joined the Anglican Church. Their descendents are the Syrian element in the Church of South India (CSI) today. The 'Mission of Help' also stimulated a secession of evangelicals from the Orthodox Syrians (*Puthenkooru*) who formed the Mar Thoma Church in 1842. The remaining *Puthenkuru* fraction again divided into Jacobite Syrians and Orthodox Syrians in 1912 and in 1930 the Orthodox Syrians split to form the Syro-Malankara Catholic Rite in 1930.

The Syrian Christians thus came to be divided among a number of Sects distinguished from each other by recognising differing ecclesiastical authorities and by minor differences in liturgy and theology. These different groups have been often mistaken as diverse castes in Syrian

Christianity. Even great scholars like Ananthakrishna Ayyar, Jean Antoine Dubois etc had mistaken these sects as castes within the Syrian Christians. But the real fact is that despite these sectarian differences, the Syrian Christians as a whole form one community which has most of the qualities of a caste - endogamy, shared social status in the caste hierarchy, etc. The only internal division which is closely similar to a sub caste distinction is that between Northists and Southists; the other divisions are better regarded as Sects. The bewildering diversity of the Syrian Christian community had often created a great perplexity among sociologists and they labelled these assortments as separate castes. But this is not the reality. An analysis of caste system and its features will make it clear.

Determinants of Caste

What are the determinants of one's caste? Caste and its manifold aspects, its merits and demerits, and its utility etc. have been explored well. So our task is simplified only to examine how far the caste determinants work among different Syrian Christian denominations. Caste can be defined as an endogamous and hereditary subdivision of an ethnic unit occupying a position of superior rank or social esteem in comparison with other such subdivisions. Andre Beteille defines caste as "...a small and named group of persons characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership and specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and is usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system." Caste is any class or group of people who inherit exclusive privileges or are perceived as socially distinct. Each Caste is distinguished by relative degrees of ritual purity or pollution and of varied social status. In short, caste is a form of social stratification characterized by endogamy, hereditary transmission of a lifestyle which often includes an occupation, status gradation in a hierarchy, and customary social interaction and exclusion. Indian society is often considered as a classic ethnographic example of the division of society into such rigid social groups. In short, the main characteristics of a caste are separate origin, distinct ethnic identity, practice of endogamy, separate religious administration, and worship, a social hierarchy, social distance, purity and pollution, occupational differentiation, etc.

Kerala is known as the area where the Caste system survived longest in its most rigorous form and also as the home of the oldest Christian community in India. This situation leads to the issue of relation of caste to Christianity taking on a rather different form in Kerala. Syrian Christians had been accorded a high status in the caste hierarchy in Kerala. They were held in high esteem, probably in the second or third rung from the top of the hierarchy. They were either equal or immediately below the Nairs. There is, however, a total absence of reliable evidence concerning the original establishment of Christianity on the Malabar Coast and its gradual assimilation into caste society. J W Pickett points out that, certain characteristics of the ancient Syrian Christians suggest a mass movement origin which connotes that the Syrians as a whole operate very much as a caste. By the sixteenth century it was encapsulated in Hindu society. They were regarded as a caste and had a recognised place in the caste hierarchy. They observed pollution and their relations with other groups were governed by rules which were not influenced by their Christian beliefs. The various low castes were reckoned as polluting by the Syrian no less than by the Nambudiri or Nair. Endogamy was enforced and social intercourse with lower castes was banned. Syrians removed pollution by bathing, changing of clothes, and prayer just as did the Nair or Nambudiri. In addition, the touch of a Syrian was regarded as capable of purifying objects which had become polluted, of neutralising pollution. There was no attempt on the part of the Syrian Christians neither to legitimise the caste system nor to attack it based on Christian principles.

The pattern of internal segmentation within the Syrian Christian community is very complex and seen only among the Knanaya Community. They were divided into two endogamous groups - the Northists and the Southists. Every Knanaya Syrian Christian is either a Northist or a Southist irrespective of his ecclesiastical affiliation. Ferent congregations, and seldom worship together but they practice commensalism. Now the question arises as to what are then the different assortments like the Malabar Syrian Catholics, Syrian Jacobites, Syrian Orthodox, Malankara Syrian Catholics, Malankara Marthomites etc, among the Syrian Christians? What term can be used to denote them? It is true that there are different religious beliefs among these groups. But these

different beliefs and practices do not qualify them to be called separate caste formations. They are instead different Cults, Religious Group, Faith Community, Denomination, Religious order etc. All the divisions occurred among the Syrians were schisms due to external or internal influences. All the fractions are closely similar in their social customs and inter marriage between these sects are not only prohibited but widely practiced. The most notable distinction is only in their respective ecclesiastical allegiance. All these sects share a common origin and tradition and hence they all together form a single caste. There are only sectarian differences among these groups. At present all these sects inter dine, inter marry, share equal status, occupy superior rank, follow same marriage customs, funerary traditions, social hierarchy and claim distinct ethnic identity. At the same time there is often, acrid disagreement between these sects on matters of dogmas. The best term to denote each of them is 'Rite'. They all are diverse Rites within the one and same Syrian Christian community. The oxford English dictionary defines Rite as "a determinate way of performing a sacred function" It is also used to signify the whole of liturgical laws and customs, mode of worship, etc. proper to an ecclesiastical community by which it is distinguished from others. Here we must understand that Caste is determined by birth and not by voluntary affiliation. Sect and Rite are voluntary affiliations. One becomes a Syrian by birth and by choice he selects the Sect. Matrimonial advertisements in websites as well as News papers are clear proof of this. Usually such an advertisement reads like this- 'Syrian Christian parent seek grooms / brides from Syrian Catholic, Syrian Jacobite, Marthoma, Syrian Orthodox etc....

Plight of the Converted Christians (Puthuchristianikal)

Even though there is no caste stigma among different Syrian Christian sects there exists caste distinction towards the converted Christians or new Christians in Christianity. The efforts of the CMS and LMS Missionaries to convert or recruit Hindus to the fold of Christianity and labouring for the poorest of the society was seen by the Syrians as an example to follow, though distasteful. Though they were accepted into the Christian fold no priests or clergies were selected from among them until recently. By 1880s there were about 16,000 CMS Christians of whom, more than half were of the Pulayas, and the remainder from Ezhavas, and other low castes. The positions of the converted Christians were more deplorable that there were separate congregations for them. The Syrians were not ready to accept them into their church or congregation. At some places there were separate churches of the same faith furlongs apart - one for the Syrian elements and the other for converted Christians. They were not permitted for inter communion. Slave chapels existed called Mission centres and were not considered as *Idavakas*. The Mar Thoma Church was more evangelist than any other Syrian churches since 1888. There were about 10,000 low caste converts in the Church who were organised into *Sabhas* as against the *Idavakas* of the Syrians. The *Idavakas* are self supporting and are managed by the authorities of the Evangelistic Association called Diocese or *Rupatha* while *Sabhas* worship in a building which serves also as a school and do not regularly have the services of a priest. The *Idavakas* have their own elected church council to administer while one or two backward converts were nominated to the council. They have very little influence on the policies of the church. The converts are very rarely accorded equality of esteem of treatment with the Syrians. In the CSI Church in the south there happened a schism in 1964 in which a considerable number of 'backward class' Christians formed a separate CMS Church. For many years in the CMS College at Kottayam, all the scholarships were reserved for 'boys of Syrian parentage' attached to the Anglican Church. 'The backward class Christians were often despised, not taken seriously, overlooked, humiliated or simply forgotten by the Syrians. Caste appellations are still occasionally used in Church. Their claims were again and again put on the waiting list. In appointments, in distribution of opportunities, in pastoral care and in the attitude shown towards them, the treatment they receive in disputes with the authorities, when compared with that received by their Syrian brothers, suggests a lack of sympathy, courtesy, and respect'. Imtiaz Ahmed narrates the problems of the converts to Islam or Christianity as follows -"when a person is converted to Islam or Christianity, he automatically loses the membership of his old endogamous group following a different religion, but, on the other hand, he does not become member of any one of the endogamous groups of the new religion. Thus he comes to acquire a distinct status in the new religious category and is usually referred to by others

as a 'new Christian or a new Muslim' implying slightly inferior status." The relationship between Syrians and New Christians (*Puthu Christianikal*) is inconsistent and the caste attitudes and operative norms remain exceedingly strong among the Syrians. K C Alexander observes that the Syrian Christians are vacillating in nature in their attitude towards the Backward Class Christians: They are supportive and antagonistic to them at the same time. The Syrian Christians would like to have the Backward Class Christians in their congregation because they expect them as manual labourer in their large estates or in the house hold. They think that the recruited parties may remain under their beck and call. These two groups remain strictly endogamous. We see a master-servant relationship toward the Backward Class Christians. Membership in the church has not established that fellowship which would have promoted a different social relationship.

Conclusion

To wrap up the swot, the facts detected in this attempt are summed up as follows.

1. The Syrian Christian community as a whole forms a caste.
2. Various schisms or different denominations within the community are not separate castes.
3. They are Sects or can be called different Rites sharing equal social status.
4. Sect is optional.
5. All the Syrian Christian communities are considered forward caste by themselves and by the government.
6. There is caste approach by the Syrians towards the 'New Christians' or 'Backward Class Christians' converted from low caste Hindus into their community.
7. In this sense, the great Christian principles of equality and universal brotherhood and fellowship are not practiced but propagated well by the traditional Christians.

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