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427**

**TO SURVIVE OR TO FLOURISH?  
MINORITY RIGHTS AND  
SYRIAN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY  
ASSERTIONS IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY  
TRAVANCORE/KERALA**

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## ABSTRACT

The arrival of modernity not only constituted communities but also impelled them in competition against each other in Kerala. Modern politics of the state as a result is inextricably linked with intense community politics. The success of community politics for rights and resources varied across communities, so also strategies of assertion. This paper will focus on different instances of community assertions by the Syrian Christians in twentieth century Travancore/Kerala. The confrontation of the community with the Hindu state and the then Dewan in the 1930s, the 'Liberation Struggle' against the Communists during late 1950s and the anti-eviction movements of 1960s testifies to its lack of primordial adherences and openness to heterogeneous strategies as required by different historical circumstances. It moves freely from secular to non-secular, minoritarian to majoritarian and lawful to unlawful, with claims to a greater citizenship. The hegemonic developmentalist ideology to which the community subscribes, along with reiteration of a righteous and industrious citizenship, ensured the transformation of the 'unlawful' into 'lawful'. Using even 'state secularism' in Travancore of the 1940s as a route of sectarianism, Syrian Christian politics resorted to no permanent self-representation, resulting in unfixed community constellations. The paper also suggests that the recent recourse of the community to minority rights may hint at an internal crisis and a loss of moral weight it possessed earlier.

**Keywords:** Syrian Christian, community, minority, secularism, communalism, communitarianism, citizenship, developmentalism.

## Introduction

*It was a hot day sometime in the 1930s and Tharitathu Kunjithomman, who represented the Syrian Christian community in the Sree Mulam Praja Sabha of Travancore, could not help dozing off. He woke up with a start, however, when the matter of importing two giraffes for the Thiruvananthapuram zoo was being discussed. He didn't really catch what was going on except that it had something to do with filling places in a public institution. Now, this meant that there was no time to lose. Up he jumped, demanding in uncertain terms that "one of them should be a Syrian Christian"!*

Thus goes the local folklore about the Syrian Christian zeal about claiming space in the institutional machinery of government. Hostile storytellers sometimes replace the giraffes with donkeys, but no one today can deny the success of Syrian Christian community politics in Kerala. One of the key elements that gave Kerala the reputation of being a 'problem state' within the Indian Union in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was undoubtedly the preponderance of community maneuvering in its political field. This was particularly true of the southern region that corresponded to the erstwhile princely state of Travancore: indeed, among the Malayalam-speaking areas, Travancore

had acquired such a reputation for politics defined by community-competition that in the early years of Independence, avowed nationalists in Malabar, like K Kelappan, viewed the prospect of United Kerala with some trepidation, fearing that the ‘communal canker’ would spread to Malabar.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have been deeply divided on the significance of the powerful presence of organized communities in politics. For some, it defines Kerala’s politics as rather ‘sub-modern’ and fundamentally inimical to transparent democratic processes – the argument, often, is that Kerala’s politics should be understood as the extension of religion and caste into the public domain, and thoroughly modern forms of mobilization, such as that of the communists, succumbed to it sooner or later (Hardgrave 1965, Fic 1970, Gopakumar 1986). Some have accused it of being the prime reason for political instability (Gopakumar 1986). In contrast, others have been markedly optimistic, suggesting that that organized communities have competed with each other largely around resources and most often within the terms of democratic politics. This, they point out, has helped to create a fairer distribution of social and economic resources among communities, and to a large extent, mitigate communal hatred such that outright violence between communities has been relatively less in Kerala compared to other parts of India (Jeffrey 2003, Mathew 1989, Thomas 1985, Nampoothiri 1999, Kooiman 1989, Chiriyankandath 1993).<sup>2</sup> These studies have argued that for these reasons, ‘community politics’ in Kerala should not be lumped with

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1 Reported in *Deepika*, Oct.31 1949, p. 3.

2 Though many argue that caste and community affiliations have become more influential in recent times. See Isaac and Tharakan 1995.

‘religious nationalism’ (Van der Meer 1994) or ‘communalism’.<sup>3</sup> A third view has stressed that such formations arose from the fact that caste- and class-divisions in Kerala have often coincided – and that communist and nationalist engagements with community politics have often been driven by perceptions of such coincidence and distance (Karat 1970, Menon 1994, Nossiter 1982). In general, there is agreement that in the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Malayalee society, ‘communalism’ referred not to fierce hatred and violence between communities, but to intense competition around rights and resources within the field of modern politics and centred upon the state.

But the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century offers a different picture. Several events since the 1980s – from the controversy over the alleged violation of the sacred geography of the Sabarimala temple by the Christians [known as the Nilakkal controversy (1981)] and the furore over the alleged desecration of the New Testament in the controversial play *Kristuvinte Aaraamtirumurivu* (1984) to the recent outbreak of communal violence at Marad in north Kerala – indicate that the nature of communal politics may be changing.<sup>4</sup> This period coincides with the

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3 The working definition of ‘communalism’ here is politics that is built upon religious sentiments, identities, and claims, which assume internal homogeneity and external uniqueness of the religious identity, which works to exclude other faiths and cultivate animosity towards them. Menon (2006) explains the difference of South India in this regard from the North in terms of the spread of liberal education through Christian missionaries, anti-Brahmin mobilizations and the Dravidian movement, large-scale conversion to Christianity and Hindu reformist movements led by the lower castes.

4 There are scholars who explain this as a transition from the ‘communitarian to the communal’. According to K.N Panikkar the violent incident at Marad indicates that communalism has crossing a stage of proto-communalism, which had a long period of incubation (Panikkar 2003). There are others who feel that it is difficult to mark a line between communitarianism and communalism in the context of Kerala. Sarada Muraleedharan, the Director of Kudumbashree programme of the Kerala government, for instance, has recently expressed concern over the increasing tendency of communal polarization in the neighborhood groups and Kudumbashree units, blurring the distinction between the communitarian and the communal (<http://signoff-shahina.blogspot.com/2008/08/enigma-of-empowered-women-kerala.html>).

rise of Hindu politics in Kerala – the BJP and the Sangh Parivar, which appeared in the electoral scene in the mid-1980s, though with minimal gains (Suresh 1988: 195). Nevertheless it may be not only interesting but also rewarding to revisit the early and mid 20<sup>th</sup> century decades and inquire about Syrian Christian community assertions which defended and extended the community's access to rights and resources – to gain some understanding of the strategies deployed which produced state responses that favoured the protection of community interest.

But before, it may be important to be aware of the limits of communalizing imperatives, even of the above form. What we have seen in Kerala did certainly work, for a long period, to deflect group rivalries away from violent and hate-generating forms of contest. However, this did not mean that rivalries have ended or even lessened; nor does this mean that greater mutual understanding between communities has risen substantially. Scholarship on community politics in Kerala, with its endless reiteration of the goals, self-projections, and self-definitions of communities, has been complicit in the reproduction of such rivalries. This is most evident in the manner in which in much of the existing literature on community politics in Kerala, historical analysis is often implicitly elided through the presentation of a teleological narrative of the community as a collective historical subject-agent.

The story of the modernizing community, then, is one of 'birth' sometime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> century decades as a result of the weakening of vertical social ties and the emergence of economic class distinctions which followed colonial penetration of local society and economy, 'taking shape' through internal reform and homogenization efforts, and progress in time through the acquisitions of rights and resources with varying degrees of success in competition with other communities/sub-communities and political movements in the expanding field of modern politics. By reproducing dominant representations of community-



building, social science scholarship naturalizes its external boundaries, if not its internal hierarchies. That scholarship appears to be content with this limit to thinking may be explainable. Though the competitive politics of mutually-exclusive communities in Kerala has not really resolved conflict but rather suppressed it, liberal scholars heave a sigh of relief at the sight of a liberal island amidst what appears to be the veritable sea of illiberalism that is South Asia.

However, the important task of critical scholarship would be to retrieve these not as homogenizing or homogenized communities but as non-homogenous traditions of rationality and difference. In other words, such teleological narratives obscures the fact that far from being merely a ‘community’, Syrian Christians and Mappila Muslims of Kerala are ‘historical traditions’ accrued around a core of ideas and imbued with distinct rationality, but are neither completely homogenous nor incapable of conversation and borrowing from other such traditions – this is inspired, of course by Alasdair McIntyre’s reflections on ‘tradition-constituted enquiry’ (McIntyre 1984). Sadly enough even critical scholarship continues to reproduce the self-representations of the communalizing initiatives (undoubtedly powerful in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) within these historical traditions of difference, making the former stand in place of the latter.

This paper, however, has a far more modest aim. In this essay, we hope to question the homogeneity attributed to ‘community assertion’ through the analysis of different instances of Syrian Christian community assertion in 20<sup>th</sup> century Travancore/Kerala. Certainly, in Travancore too, many of the processes initiated through and in colonial rule – the census, and the constitutional reforms — did set in motion the transformation of a moral-political-economic caste order into an order in which communities, which projected themselves as mutually exclusive and internally homogenous, began to compete for resources (Chiriyankandath 1993). There were other factors as well, such as the

opening up of a new modernizing domain in which the modern nation of Travancore was consecrated.

However, the strategies of community assertion in moments of conflict were not simply and repetitively around religious identity and uniqueness. They are neither homogenous nor fired by the same kinds of strategies or ideologies. Neither was there any stable relation of opposition to the 'secular' as it appeared in the pre-independence Hindu kingdom of Travancore and in the post-independence context. Thus it may be necessary to examine the constitutive historical contexts which supply the specific elements that make up specific instances of community assertion. Our focus, then, is the process of primordialising/naturalizing the community through avowed performances over time, with different strategies, under different historico-political circumstances, to specific ends; community, then, appears as an unfixed, non-static constellation, which travels through times with inventions, deletions and renewals. It is our contention that any deliberate effort to actualize secularism as 'principled distance' needs to take this into account, as communities will have their own 'contextual reasoning' under different circumstances.

The Syrian Christian community has been widely recognized to have made sizeable gains through community competition in 20th century Kerala. They trace their origins back to the first century AD, to the story of the evangelization of the Apostle St. Thomas in India, which is firmly entrenched in faith. The Syrian Christians are distinguished from the Latin Christians, supposedly converted by the Portuguese, and described themselves as 'Nazranis' or 'St. Thomas Christians', till the advent of the Dutch. The Syrian liturgy that was being followed by the community due to their ecclesiastical commune with the East Syrian Patriarchate made the Dutch missionaries to distinguish them as 'Syrian Christian' as different from the 'other' Christians who adhered to the Latin liturgy. The nerve centre of the Syrian Christians is in south and central Kerala; their migration to Malabar is relatively recent. Before

colonialism, they were prominent in mercantile activities, soldiering, and agriculture and said to have enjoyed high-caste status close to the Nairs. They also were closely integrated with the traditional brahmin-centred order of caste,<sup>5</sup> but without losing their difference as Nazranis (Bayly 1984). Their history under colonialism is one of resistance to Latinisation, and fragmentation into several distinct denominations, including the Syro-Malabar, the Orthodox-syrian, the Malankara Syrian, the Syrian-orthodox, the Marthoma, and others (Varghese 2006: 172-83). In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Syrian Christian community – especially Syrian Catholics — emerged as Kerala’s most ‘advanced’ community, as a recent effort to compare the socio-economic profiles<sup>6</sup> of Kerala’s major communities revealed (Zachariah 2006: 197; for a historical account, Jeffrey 1976, Baak 1997). They are at present a substantial minority, a powerful presence in all fields of life in Kerala. Their successful survival against Hindu chauvinism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Travancore state is often held up as evidence for Kerala’s exceptionalism vis-à-vis the rest of India – of the ‘communal road to a secular Kerala’, as the title of an important study puts it.

## I

From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, political modernization proceeded in Travancore through a series of moves and counter-moves between the British colonizer and the ‘Hindu State’ of Travancore. By the ‘treaty of perpetual friendship and alliance’ forced upon Travancore by the British, political power passed effectively into the hands of the British Resident initially, and later, to the Dewans formally appointed by the Raja but always with British assent. The sole concern of the Travancore king, as voiced by the Rani placed on the throne of Travancore by the British after

5 Muraleedharan (1996) argues that the category ‘Hindu’ can scarcely be used to make sense of the pre-colonial order of caste in Kerala.

6 Constructed from the specific demographic profile, migration patterns, control over resources, housing and other amenities, and ownership of consumer durables.

the suppression of the revolt led by Velu Thampi, apparently, was that the kingdom should continue to be ruled according to *mamool* (customary usage) – that is, rule should continue to reproduce the brahminical caste order of which the ‘Hindu State’ of Travancore was the self-appointed guardian. The kingdom escaped annexation probably because of this firmly established ‘Hindu’ legacy. Indeed, Travancore’s claims to being a ‘true’ and ‘unsullied’ Hindu State had been built up from the times of Marthanda Varma, the founder of the kingdom of Travancore, through elaborate performance of public rituals, institution of charities, and other means, all of which continued to be evoked to produce ritual authority in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well (Kawashima 1998: 16-25). In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, then, Travancore was the scene of a tussle between the British and the ‘Hindu State’, the former seeking to extend political control and extractive power over the region and the latter seeking to both placate the former and refurbish its legitimacy in local society.

In the early-mid decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Travancore underwent extensive reform – a systematic hollowing of the crown — under the supervision of the British Residents. At the same time, despite initial reluctance, Travancore’s state policy opened up its economy to British interests, encouraging a new agro-economy that encouraged monoculture of commercial crops. Plentiful concessions began to be offered to European planters, especially with the coming of the modernizing Dewan, T. Madhava Rao (Raviraman 1997: 36; Kooiman 1989: 120; Baak 1997: 61-137; Pillai 1940/1995: 475-87). The political and economic autonomy of the kingship was clearly waning.

In pre-British Travancore and later too, the temporal authority could and did intervene in the affairs of caste groups within the framework of *mamool*. For instance, in 1822-23, Rani Parvati Bai of Travancore issued a proclamation regulating dowry payments among Malayala brahmins in Travancore, and ordering that all unmarried women above the age of 14 of these groups must be married without delay, pointing out that the

increasing burden of dowry was leading to the alienation of brahmin lands and causing distress to women (Nair and Pushpa 1992: 181-2). However such authority was not easy to wield anymore, as was evident in the course of the 'Breast Cloth' struggle in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore. In a series of intense challenges, lower caste converts to Christianity, supported by LMS missionaries (concerned, however, much more about new virtues like modesty), sought to defy dress codes that justified the established hierarchy of caste (Jeffrey 1976, Yesudas 1975). In this case, the Travancore ruler had to formulate a solution that would answer the missionaries' cry for modesty and 'civilization', but would not offend the established caste hierarchy (Jeffrey 1976: 57-67).

The 'Hindu State' attempted to refurbish its traditional sources of legitimacy through the deployment of the modernized version of its (Hindu) self-description as *Dharmaraajyam* or the 'Land of Charity'— and this inevitably involved the expansion of strategies of government and promotion of techniques of the self rooted in the political and economic imperatives of the modern state. A network of modern schools and hospitals were opened in Travancore under state aegis and generous encouragement was provided to local communities, missionaries, and individuals to come forward to initiate such ventures (Jeffrey 2003). Missionary schools began to admit lower caste pupils and began to be eagerly sought out by people lower in the caste hierarchy, and by the 1930s, they had established a wide network of primary schools throughout the State. Simultaneously, a class of peasant proprietors – potential 'industrious producers' – were created through tenancy reform, prominently the Pattom Proclamation of 1865, which created a new market society based on individual rights on the soil (Varghese 1970). The nascent public sphere that emerged in this period was largely perceived to be fulfilling the pedagogic function of shaping ideal industrious subjects for the nation.

In this new domain thus opened up in which the Hindu State could renew its legitimacy— that of the 'modern nation' assumed to be in the

making, promising a unified community animated by ‘love’ and ‘care’ in the future — a new relation came to be posited between the state and the citizen. Individual citizens are not simply born into modern nations; they must fashion themselves as ‘industrious subjects’, as contributors of wealth and well-being, to claim citizenship for themselves. In turn, the state bestows benevolent care on citizens, creating ideal conditions for their functioning as hardworking and obedient subjects. The citizen’s ‘positive link’ to the modern nation, however, involved more than finding adequate subsistence for oneself. It involves, rather, the effort to improve the condition of immediate fellow-beings – in one’s family, social group, and economic network. The space for individual prosperity, it was argued, could well accommodate a sense of duty to the nation in defining the traits of this newly construed citizenship. At the heart of all imagined collectivities laying claim to the ‘modern’ at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Travancore lay this appeal for ‘positive ties’.

This version of developmentalism deeply informed the attempts of modern-educated elites of powerful caste groups to transform their caste identities into community identities – and the Syrian Christians were prominent among these — advanced their claims as loyal, industrious wealth producers. ‘Community’ in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore, then, was no simple reassertion of primordial ties or defined by an insulated inner space.<sup>7</sup> It was imagined as taking shape in the

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7 This is particularly evident when we consider the refashioning of the domestic among the Syrian Christian community through legal measures to regulate inheritance and property rights of women, through the Travancore Christian Succession Act in 1916. Sure, the rhetoric of disapproval over the adoption of a more liberal provision for women was around how it would lead to the ‘destruction of the community’ but it appears evident that this was no defense of a sanctified and inviolable ‘inner space’, but the active creation of one that would be in step with the project of ‘industry and enterprise’ opened up in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kodoth (2002) points out that the underpinnings of the reaffirmation of patriarchy through this iniquitous law were institutional rather than structural or canonical. Since then, however, the ‘inner space’ has been hotly defended, most recently in the context of the Mary Roy Case in the late 1980s (Phillips 2003).

future and deeply informed by the logic of this specific late 19<sup>th</sup> century developmentalism,<sup>8</sup> often projected into the constructed vision of the community's hallowed past – of how the Syrian Christians were welcomed into Kerala as productive subjects.<sup>9</sup>

What was interesting about this imagined national community constructed in the emergent Malayalam public sphere was that it did not nullify or override the presence of the modernizing caste community: one could well be a believer of a specific faith, member of a particular caste-community, and a patriotic-industrious producer-citizen, all together. The shaping up of the common linguistic identity around modern Malayalam, too, did not demand such homogenization, as G Arunima has recently argued — the new public realm that emerged in late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala was not “...a purely ‘secular’ one, where secularization implied a rupture with faith.” (Arunima 2006: 74). Syrian Christian efforts to build up a community-modernizing apparatus began with a network of modern schools, which drew upon liberal grant-in-aid from the state – and no contradiction was perceived. Nor was the mediation of the missionaries perceived to be a problem. Even though tensions between Syrian Christians and Nairs were reported since the 1880s onwards, missionary schools were sought out by both communities since they were perceived to be efficiently run, despite the fact that

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8 The collapse of the native state including its demilitarisation and a British dominated commercial system heaved the community out of their traditional economic niches and it had to recreate itself (Bayly 1989: 282-90).

9 Several modern historians have concurred with this view. See Varier 1981; Narayanan 2006. However, it appears that the Latin Catholics could not claim such a relation – precisely because they were raising challenged to the established brahminical caste-order. Latin proselytisation, some authors, claim, began since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and faced opposition from the ‘Hindu’ kings because of this. The Kolathiri of Malabar, they argue, wrote to the King of Portugal in 1507 asking him to stop conversions of Tiyyas and the Mukkanu fisherfolk, since it irritates the Nairs and deprives them of income. See John 1981: 347-54.

these schools did have compulsory Bible-sessions. Both official accounts and community-histories of these times reflect on such overlap, evoking a timeless history of tolerance and consideration of the ‘Hindu State’ towards its subjects of different religious persuasions. The Syrian Christians proudly cited a long history of being ‘industrious subjects’ of Hindu kings and of being rewarded for their hard work and law-abiding nature. Writing of the conferment of ‘seventy-two honours’ to the Christian merchant by the Chera king of Cranganore, the historian T.K. Joseph (1923/1981) commented, “[E]vidently the Chera King found the Christians a very valuable commercial asset” (p. 331). However, as Syrian Christians prospered with the opening up of Travancore’s economy in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, they began to feel that these ‘ancient tradition’ were strained.

In the tense years of the 1930s, Syrian Christian spokesmen would indignantly condemn the Travancore state’s alleged abandonment of such traditional generosity and what they perceived to be the abandonment of a relationship of mutual benefit. The loss of benevolence and partisanship of the Hindu state was not really sudden. In *Malayala Manorama*, Kandathil Varghese Mappila expressed his resentment against the Travancore’s government’s regulations on constructing new churches. He recollects the earlier system wherein the subjects and the king shared “hearty mutual dependence and warmth,” informing the king was just a formality, only to generate financial support from the king for constructing the church (‘Thiruvithamkotte Christianikal Anubhavikkunna Oru Sankatam’, Editorial, *Malayala Manorama*, 28 October 1893, in Mappila 1997). Two years later Mappila again criticized the Travancore government in discriminating Christians against Hindus in the question of sanctioning government schools for girls (‘Thiruvithamkotte Hindukkalum Christianikalum Thammilulla Bhetham’, 5 October 1895, in Mappila 1997). This sentiment intensified in the 1930s, and one such author lamenting the loss of a past in which “we find them [Syrian Christians] a homogenous social unit in the



national polity of Travancore, not merely important in numerical strength, but enjoying a social prestige only accorded to the Hindus of the highest caste...Travancore, my home-land, which for centuries had set an example of a national unity, a sustained spirit of mutual goodwill and forbearance among citizens, such as no other part of India has been able to attain to, was now in the throes of a bitter strife” (Matthen 1935: 14, 26). This framework, which assumed a certain non-existent equivalence between differently-endowed communities, however, was clearly one that favoured the powerful communities to the disadvantage of others.

While the equivalence between membership in the nation and membership in distinct faiths/communities continued to be actively constructed in the emergent public sphere, claimed, especially, by communities disadvantaged in the hierarchical order of caste, there were clear structural and ideological hurdles in the way of its actualization. The Travancore kingdom relied heavily on upper caste elites, with its self-projection as ‘Hindu’. This is something that was well internalized by other religious communities like the Christians. For instance, Kandathil Varghese Mappila describes Travancore as a state with “Hindu government under which all religious communities supposed to have no unfreedom.” Mappila was concerned for the fact that the established principle has not been followed at times (‘Thiruvithamkotte Christianikal Anubhavikkunna Oru Sankatam’, Editorial, *Malayala Manorama*, 28 October 1893, in Mappila 1997). This became especially evident with the formation of legislative bodies and modern civil social forums (such as the ‘citizens’ assemblies convened in local towns to fete the Maharaja on special occasions such as his birthday), where upper caste dominance was assumed. Chiriyankandanth (1993: 650) mentions how the perceived denial of this ‘natural right’ of the Nairs as ‘Hindus’ in the ‘Hindu State’ (elected chairs of a series of such meetings were all Christian) in the 1913 provoked the founder of the Nair community movement into starting the Nair Service Society. Electoral politics made

this bias apparent, and it kept Christians, Muslims, and lower caste-communities out of key areas in the administration, and disallowed proportional representation to these groups in Travancore's legislative bodies, even in the 1920s, when the Christians and Ezhavas had proved themselves to be 'industrious subjects' beyond all doubt, actively entering the plantation sector and commercial banking (Kooiman 1995: 19). Secondly, over the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, tensions between Christians and Nairs in Travancore had risen (Jeffrey 1976); adding to these were the echoes of the Mappila Rebellion in Malabar in the early 1920s. In 1921, at the height of the violence of the revolt, Hindu students boycotted the compulsory scriptural classes at the Church Missionary Society College at Kottayam in protest, and the view that government-aided institutions should not conduct Bible-reading sessions became stronger (Jeffrey 2003: 63). 'Secularism', thus, made its entrance as a violation of the imagined political framework of tolerance and encouragement of all faiths and a reassertion of the Hindu State's determination to foster a Hindu-centric order – a point to be raised innumerable times in Syrian Christian polemics against Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer in the 1930s and 40s. Syrian Christian belligerence was frequently directed against the violation of the 'positive link' that ostensibly bound the state and the industrious citizen in nation-building, which had not required the renunciation of community identities and, indeed, was credited with a long and respectable history.

In the 1930s, such tensions grew to bursting point, with a full-fledged confrontation between the Syrian Christians elites and the Dewan, who defended 'Hindu' interests, also defended by upper-caste Nairs. The 1931 Census set the alarm bells ringing among the high caste 'Hindus'. The 'Hindu' population seemed to have declined from 69.9 per cent of the total in 1901 to 61.6 per cent in 1931 – which was below the Indian average of 68.2 per cent. The Christian population, however, had increased from 23.6 per cent to 31.5 per cent between 1901 and

1931(Kooiman 1995 : 17). Conversions did happen,<sup>10</sup> however the chief reason for the rise in Christian numbers was the very ‘flourishing’ of the community – through high fertility, enabled by the spell of prosperity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kooiman 1995 : 17).<sup>11</sup> The *Travancore State Manual* of 1940, drafted by T. K. Velu Pillai, a leading Nair intellectual close to palace circles noted the rise of Syrian Christian population with almost a sense of anguish – from 4.6 per cent in the 1820s to 31.5 per cent in 1931.

‘Hindu’ anxieties hardened in the 1930s, manifested in C P Ramaswamy Aiyer’s blatant favouritism towards the Nairs, promotion of Hinduism, and animosity towards Christians (though he did make some attempts to divide them by favouring some groups), and hostility towards attempts to promote Nair-Syrian Christian amity. The Nair elite assisted him.<sup>12</sup> Besides resisting Ezhava, Muslim, and Syrian Christian

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10 For instance the Census reports of Travancore for 1931 and 1941 show that on the coast, the efforts of the educated members of the elite Araya community to create a coastal Hindu group had met with moderate success, however, the lower caste groups also converted in large numbers to Christianity, as both reports reveal (Census 1931: 384; Census 1941:132)

11 They had also acquired considerable amounts of land from Nairs, with Nair joint families disintegrating after the Nair Bill sanctioning partition of joint family properties in the mid-20s, and later, from European planters abandoning land in the wake of the Great Depression (Varghese 2006: 67). After nationalist outcry blocked the assignment of large chunks of government land to the Brooke Bond company in the late 1920s, the state adopted the policy of giving preference to natives in the allocation and registration of land for plantation (Varghese 2006: 70). The impact of the Great Depression, however, was hard on the Syrian Christian peasantry, though, and a major response, as we will see, was migration.

12 Both C.P and the Nair elite accused the Syrian Christians of harboring a plot to abolish the Hindu dynasty and turn Travancore into a ‘Christian State’; a Nair conference in 1932 declared that “..the Nairs were the lords of the soil in Travancore and... and that the Maharaja was the Maharaja of the Nairs” (Ouwkerk 1994: 86; Matthen 1951: 26; report of Nair conference, *Nazrani Deepika*, 20 Jan 1938).

demands for proportional representation in legislative bodies (Kooiman 1995: 39-42), Sir CP led a formidable effort to ‘revitalize’ the Hindus through a range of measures, from the Temple Entry Proclamation, allegedly to prevent the disgruntled Ezhava elites’ plans to convert, to his welcoming of the Hindu Mahasabha to reconvert those who have moved out, to training in Sanskrit and scriptures for priests (Ouwerkerk 1994: 96-99; 171-72). In these, he managed to secure Gandhi’s approval – and the Congress’s constructive work in Travancore did fit into the upper caste revitalizing–Hindu project<sup>13</sup> (Ouwerkerk 1994: 97; Gandhi 1936/1942). Gandhi interpreted the Temple Entry Proclamation as an effort on the part of the Hindu ruler to revise his traditional authority as regulator of caste groups — as attempting ‘contextual reasoning’ for intervention within the framework of Hindu *mamool*, thereby democratizing the latter and remained partial to the Dewan until quite late. However, by no stretch of imagination could it be perceived as remotely connected to secularizing imperatives. The Dewan was viciously hostile to Syrian Christians and determined to create a new base of legitimacy for the Hindu state, a unified Hindu community hegemonized by the upper castes. Ouwerkerk, a direct observer and participant in the turmoil of the 1930s, recalls that the “favourite term of abuse used against the Christians and Muslims by the Nair press was the accusation of ‘rank communalism’ (Ouwerkerk 1994: 90).

The later actions of the Dewan in the 30s and 40s – his repressive measures against the Joint Political Conference set up by Christian,

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13 Interestingly, Gandhi, in the 1920s, had thwarted the efforts of his Syrian Christian disciple, George Joseph, to frame the struggle against caste at the Vaikam Satyagraha as a battle for civil rights, for free access to roads around the temple for all. Gandhi, however, was adamant that this was a ‘religious issue’, and a Hindu one, in which Christians could not be granted any major role. (Joseph 2003: 164). However, Gandhi’s emissary to Travancore, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur in 1937, reported to him that the Dewan was obsessed with anti-Christian sentiment and the party of Nairs that he set up, the Travancore National Congress, was full of “real communalists, too communal-minded to want responsible government.” (quoted in Ouwerkerk 1994: 154).

Muslim, and Ezhava leaders, and later, against the Travancore State Congress which demanded responsible government, his alleged role in the destruction and discrediting of Syrian Christian banks,<sup>14</sup> his hostility towards the International Fellowship that worked to reconcile the different warring groups, and his unwarranted insistence (since the Travancore Educational Reforms Committee Report (1945) had not recommended any such measure) on taking over schools run by minorities for a ‘secular’ welfare project — the establishment of universal and compulsory primary education – all came to be interpreted in the light of his open support of the high caste project of Hindu community-building.<sup>15</sup> His wrath was seen as particularly directed towards the Syrian Christians (Kooiman 2002, Kusuman 1976, Mappillai 1997, Matthen 1951, Koshy 1976, Mathew 2008). The compromise reached in February 1947 allowed the Christians to keep their schools, but only Christian students were to be admitted to such schools (Ouwkerk 1994: 235).

It is however, important to note that the Christian response to these attacks was not just to assert their religious identity, but draw upon the discourse of ‘industrious and law-abiding subjects’. Within a self-identified Hindu kingdom, minorities could claim no formal rights;

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14 The Syrian Christians ran most of the banks in Travancore. The Travancore Bank, the first organized commercial bank in Travancore was started in 1893 under Christian ownership. The Travancore National and Quilon Bank, owned by two Christian families namely Kandathil and Chalakuzhiyil, during the late 1930s was ranked first in India in terms of number of branch offices and third in the total volume of business. Only the Central Bank of India and the Bank of India exceeded this Travancorean bank in the volume of business. Sir C.P engineered the liquidation of the bank in 1938 (Ommen 1976)

15 This support is reconfirmed by his (very sympathetic) biographer, who quotes his speeches in which he argues that Christian prosperity in Travancore was a result of ‘Hindu largesse’, and offers details of his efforts to curb Christian religious instruction in government-aided schools (Sundararajan 2002: 311). Also, CP’s attempts at ‘secularism’ in the 1940s were widely supported by Hindu communal organizations in Travancore and elsewhere, but not by the communists in Travancore (Ouwkerk 1994: 233).

they could only appeal to the ‘age-old’ moral obligations of the king towards non-Hindu subjects. The campaign for fair representation was named the ‘Abstention Movement’ (1934), precisely to distinguish it from Civil Disobedience, and the Christians emphasized its difference in the face of the Dewan’s attempt to lump the two together. As C P Matthen argued, civil disobedience was a struggle against a foreign ruler; in Travancore, however, it was the “assertion of the rights of one group of citizens of that portion of these rights of which they had been unfairly deprived of in order to confer it on another group of citizens in the same state. The Ruler was not merely the judge, but the trusted judge, in this claim” (Matthen 1951: 22). Besides, innumerable articles in newspapers and public speeches lamented the sheer unfairness of the Dewan’s hostility towards its most hard working and enterprising subjects, something that was totally against the very essence of Kerala’s ‘ancient polity’ through the 1930s and 1940s. Things were arguably more or less the same on the issue of establishing the independent state of Travancore after the independence. K.M. Mathew remembers that the only condition Sir. C.P put forward for granting permission to resume *Malayala Manorama* was to support the independent state of Travancore. The Dewan threatened K.M Cheriyan who met him for the permission, if they fail to concede, he “will see that you are ruined” (Mathew 2008: 229-31).

Indian independence ushered in an altered context – most importantly, the Indian Constitution, which supported the rights of religious minorities. However, too many other things remained unchanged. Most prominent was the upper caste Hindu domination within the Congress, evident in the hostility that many prominent Congress leaders displayed towards community politics, much of which had a distinct Hindu-majoritarian tinge. Secondly, the efforts to form a unified upper caste hegemonized ‘Hindu community’ were active in the early 1950s: the Travancore Dewan had made strenuous effort to create a united ‘Hindu’ front of Nairs and Ezhava elite (Ezhava working classes were with the communists; Ouwerkerk 1994:208), and proposals to create

a 'Hindu Mahamandalam' were voiced by the Nair and Ezhava community movements in the early 50s (Gopakumar 1986). Indeed, it must be remembered that the Catholics now faced a significantly different political milieu: of being a really small minority within the hugely-expanded national context. As Savarkar had hinted in his address to the Hindu conference held at the Nair Service Society's annual meeting in the early 40s, it would be easier for the Hindu majority to check the Christians within such a national context in which they would be reduced to a minuscule minority (Ouwerkerk 1994: 171-72). In this new milieu, efforts to regulate primary education in the early 1950s continued to look like an anti-Christian conspiracy.

These fears worsened when the communists came into power in the first elected government of the newly-constituted State of Kerala. Interestingly, while Hindu organisations were overwhelmingly in favour of the Dewan's scheme, communists in Travancore had supported the Church's resistance to the Dewan's attempts to take over schools (Ouwerkerk 1994 : 233). However, in the post-independence context, they were formidable adversaries because (a) they could not be directly accused of majoritarianism (b) they were as committed to developmentalism and the shaping of 'industrious citizens', except that theirs was an 'egalitarian developmentalism' which was clearly supported by the Indian Constitution, which did not privilege 'industrious citizens' and allowed state regulation and intervention in the larger interests of development and democracy. This meant that regulation efforts initiated by communists could not be easily attacked as majoritarian takeover. The communist threat appeared daunting also because of the international context, in which Christianity/Catholicism was being threatened by communists in Eastern Europe.

At the centre of controversy was the Kerala Education Act, 1958, which according to its left supporters was a measure designed to bring social justice into the largely-Christian controlled sector of school

education (Leiten 1982). However the Hindu rightwing approved of regulation efforts; sections of the Congress too were openly supportive of the Bill, and used anti-minority language, exhorting the government not to allow the State money contributed by Hindus, Muslims, and Christians and other communities to be spent on spreading the religious faiths of the minorities” (Leiten 1982: 47). The Communists were prompted not by contextual reasoning in minority affairs that took into account the national and international scenario – but by political calculation in the immediate context. They aimed at extending the state’s infrastructural network, and thereby undermining the Catholic Church’s growing biopolitical network. The threat was massive, and it was apparent that the self-representation of the community as an industrious and law-abiding minority being persecuted was not sufficient. The Kerala Land Reforms Bill added fuel to the fire and for many the bill was the root cause of Liberation Struggle, though it was fought explicitly on the Education Bill (Pulikunnel 2004: 10-12)

The Syrian Catholic elite actually overcame this crisis by a dual strategy: by deploying the persecuted-minority argument, and interestingly enough, by creating a majoritarian front against the communists. The Education Bill was referred to the Supreme Court of India for advise on whether it violated minority rights; the Court in its ruling classified the disputed classes into three: those that violated Article 30 (1) of the Constitution; those that are reasonable regulations and fully permissible; and those permissible under the circumstances, but appeared to be “perilously near violating” the right of administration (Chander 1981: 84). While this seemed to vindicate some of the alarm raised by the Catholics, it did not help their efforts to retain control over the community-building network (Rajeswari 2005: 127). The communists could not be accused on Hindu bias directly, but they were, however, open to the charge of ‘Godlessness’: nine out of eleven ministers in the first communist ministry had refused to take the name of god in the oath of office (Rajeswari 2005: 75).



The challenge was thus met by a violent majoritarian assault, the infamous ‘Liberation Struggle’ which brought down the first Communist government in 1959 : against the alleged ‘Godlessness’ of atheist communists, and their numerous alleged attempts at ‘socialism’ undermining individual liberty and right to property (Chander 1981, Leiten 1982, Rajeswari 2005). This allowed the Catholics to build (albeit temporary) alliances with all sorts of religious fundamentalisms, including the Hindu and Cold War fundamentalism in the US, which in effect turned the issue into a confrontation between majoritarian ‘Faith’ against ‘Godlessness’, atheism and rationalism, which were clearly minority! (Rajeswari 2005) The Church has been also directly combative about state-sponsored sex-education that may challenge Catholic dogma, both in the 1960s and at present, and here again it works not as a minority but as a brutal majority via alliance with the entire gamut of conservative forces (Devika 2007, Rajeev 2007). Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, right into the present, such a majoritarian response has been characteristic of the Church’s opposition to most of the state’s efforts to create spaces for individuals and groups who may choose to exit from communities or straddle them – and the history of such conservative alliance between communities is almost as long as the history of their competition. In 1929, when the Travancore Legislature was discussing the Civil Marriages Act, both the Nairs and the Catholics were united in their opinion that such a move would bring only decadence and licentiousness to society.<sup>16</sup>

It would be no exaggeration to say that in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian and Muslim communities in Travancore

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16 See report of Nair conference at Karuvatta, 4 May 1929; V. C. George, ‘Civil Vivaaham Sambandhiccha Jayabheri’, 16 April, 1929; Report of protest by the All-Kerala Catholic Conference, 8 May 1929; report of debate on Civil Marriages Act and its rejection at the Nair conference at Changanashery, 2 May 1930 – all from *Nazrani Deepika*.

encountered ‘secularism’ – early attempts to separate religion from the state – as a strategy of elite caste Hindus to consolidate their power over emergent modern fields. The claims of the Dewan that he was merely avoiding favours to particular religion rang hollow in the face of several facts: that Travancore was a self-professed ‘Hindu State’, that the Dewan was himself a champion of Hindu communalism, that many of his measures against ‘rank communalism’ brought significant, if indirect, gains to the Hindu elite. Secularism as the clear separation of religion and state was indeed not a possibility at all under the given circumstances; indeed, the Travancore kingdom’s late 19<sup>th</sup> century efforts to shape a realm of modern government had not produced secular spaces. Instead, a version of developmentalism provided its ideological underpinnings, which did not necessitate the renunciation of community identities. The Syrian Christians, whose ‘initial conditions’ were such that the ideal of the ‘industrious and law-abiding citizen’ fitted them perfectly, bolstered their advantage through the projection of Kerala’s traditional polity in which Hindu kings were imagined to have extended equal tolerance to subjects of all faiths especially when such subjects were ‘industrious and law-abiding’. The Dewan’s final strike at the community was to attempt a takeover of their community apparatus, which was perceived as a hostile move initiated by the Hindu state. The Syrian Christian resistance to this move implicitly accused the Dewan of breach of the moral bond between Hindu ruler and industrious and law-abiding non-Hindu subjects. *Their claims were not just as a numerical or cultural minority, but as a group of industrious wealth-producers – and more importantly, as the most important modernizing force in the kingdom – who had a moral right to conditions under which they could flourish.*

In the 1950s, however, the entire backdrop had changed. The Indian Constitution had come into force. Community movements had declared their willingness to work within the framework of the nation, renouncing claims to formal political representation but vowing to stay active outside to ensure that their members received full membership in the emergent

nation. However, tensions were apparent, and suspicions whether ‘nationalism’ would deliver the promise of secularism were voiced actively in the Christian press. ‘Secularism’ in these discussions clearly referred to the restoration of entitlements and rights lost to the Christian community during Sir C. P’s rule, such as the welfare entitlements of converted Christians and the right to start schools (*Deepika*, editorial, 3 June 1949; Chacko 1949, 1).<sup>17</sup> The All-Kerala Catholic Congress officially abandoned its political programme but announced that Catholic legislators of different parties would work together to end ‘religious disabilities’, of which four were identified as most important – disabilities in educational ventures by Catholics, denial of free education to dalit Christians, the denial of inheritance rights to converted Christians, and difficulties in establishing churches and cemeteries (*Deepika* 15 June 1949, 2) – some of these, for instance the inheritance rights of converted Christians — had been demanded much earlier (‘Mathabhethavum Avakashabhethavum’, 8 August 1896, in Mappila 1997).

In general, from the Catholic view, two things appeared ominous: one, the prospect of the state extending its infrastructural network was quite real, however, given the hegemonic status of developmentalist-socialist ideologies and the strength of the communist movement. Also, the experience of the Catholic Church in East European countries under communism conditioned the Church’s opposition to communism here. Second, while the threat of Hindu majoritarianism could not be raised against the communists in any direct sense, this threat still loomed in the political field in the form of the Nair community and Ezhava elite. The Education Act was perceived as a threat of takeover, this time not from the Hindu but the developmentalist-socialist welfare state. The earlier argument defense against government interference – that which foregrounded the Syrian Christians’ contribution as industrious

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17 Chacko, P.T. 1949. ‘Moothumradiccha ‘Desheeyatvattil Ninnu’ (From an Ossified ‘Nationalism’), *Deepika* 14 June 1949, p.1.

producers and pioneering modernizers of the larger population – worked much less now precisely because the communists’ commitment to such developmentalism was beyond doubt. And as the Supreme Court ruling’s revealed, the secular Indian Constitution’s guarantee of minority rights did not erode the developmentalist state’s power to extend its infrastructural network. *The solution then was to both claim lawful state protection as a minority and erect a majoritarian front from which violent struggle against the government, which slid into the unlawful, was launched.*

In short, Syrian Christians in Kerala did not always pitch their claims and demands to the state on the grounds of being a minority. While they have sought to access the protection offered to minorities by the Indian Constitution, from the Syrian Christian community politics of the 1950s, it appears as though such protection was perceived as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the community’s ‘flourishing’ in a society driven by capitalist competition among social groups endowed with unequal resources. Nor has the community limited itself to minority politics in any strict terms. At crucial moments, minority politics seems to have transmogrified into majoritarian culturalist politics.

## II

Indeed, the deployment of the lawful and the unlawful in securing Syrian Christian interests took an interesting turn in the anti-eviction struggles of the 1960s. The discourse of the ‘industrious subject’, as early as the 1930s, also prompted a move *away* from the state towards the community and the church – in a context of mounting material distress in the face of the depredations to small peasants in the Great Depression, the rise in the Syrian Christian population, the food crisis triggered by the stoppage of rice imports after the fall of Burma, and the Dewan of Travancore’s repressive policies. This weakening of the state’s biopolitics is evident in editorials in Christian newspapers that criticize the community leaders’ concentration of energies in securing adequate representation in public services and legislative bodies, and instead

recommend that they take a lead in transforming members into 'productive human beings'.<sup>18</sup> In 1949, the *Deepika* paid an indirect compliment to the Syrian Christians when it remarked that communities which lack an ethic of work and enterprise are bound to remain economically backward and this sows the seeds of communal competition (*Deepika* 14 Sept 1949).<sup>19</sup> This was already bearing fruit, in the active encouragement of migration to Malabar, to other regions of India, and to other countries by Syrian Christian Church and lay leadership.<sup>20</sup>

The late 1930s and 40s saw the intensification of material distress among the poor in Travancore and with food shortage deepening, the government allowed peasants to enter wastelands and forests as part of the 'Grow More Food' campaign, with some technical restrictions, but in practice, none. Cash and food crop cultivation in the risky, malarial

18 *Deepika*, editorial, 'Samvidhaana Lakshyam', 16 June 1941; 'Samudayasanghatanakal', 17 June 1941; 'Samudayasanghatanakal' (Community Movements), 14 Sept., 1949; 'Thozil Cheyyanam' 19 January 1949. Even as late as 1958, *Deepika* editorials disparaged the way in which the Christians wasting their age and health by resorting to government jobs for making their living, instead of establishing their affluence through physical labour. *Deepika* editorial, 'Catholica Congress', 6 May 1958.

19 Also see the editorial of *Malayala Manorama*, "Krishi Parivarthanavum Christian Missionarimurum"- I & II, 1-2 August 1950.

20 Dr. L.J. Chittoor ('Kutiyettam', 27 November 1960, *Deepika*) invoked the Papal indoctrination that 'wealth of the world is for all human beings' and calls for the termination of all international regulations that disallow people moving across the world and sharing its riches. P.J. Thomas was an ardent supporter of migrations for making use of the abandoned landscapes. See 'Kutiyettam: Keralathinte Adiyanthira Aavashyam', 15 August 1958, *Deepika*; 'Brazil Kutiyettam: Prayogiga Vasangal', 25 September 1958, *Deepika*; 'Kutiyettam Sanghatithamayai Venam', 11 November 1958, *Deepika*; 'Janavardhana Thadayukayalla, Ulppadhanathe Vardhippikkukayanu Vendathu—Dr. P. J. Thomas', 7 April, 1938, *Nazrani Deepika*. 'Prakrithi Sambathinte Nadukku Pattiniyum Thozhilillaymayum—P. J. Thomas', 11 August, 1952, *Mathrubhumi*; 'Madhya Pradeshathu Laksham Thiru-Kochi Kudumbangal Kutiyerunna Karyam Planning Commission Aalochikkunnu', 10 January 1956, *Deepika*; See for a discussion Varghese 2009: 49-56.

tracts of northeast Travancore spread rapidly, and by 1951, 98.1 per cent of the total area available for cultivation in Travancore was occupied. The lead was taken by Syrian Christian small peasants, who later began to migrate to the ‘unoccupied’ areas of Malabar. Cultivation of wastelands, in these years of intense want, was widely accepted as a solution to the food crisis – it was hegemonic, shared by communists and the Congress, the Catholic Church, and the Nair supreme, Mannath Padmanabhan.<sup>21</sup> That this venture by the Syrian Christian peasants was closely supported by the Church points to the intensification of the Church’s pastoral role in secular times and forms is unmistakable.<sup>22</sup> The migration to Malabar was analogous to the Israelites’ journey from slavery to Egypt to the light of freedom in Canaan, as the head of the newly-erected Syro-Malabar diocese of Malabar Mar Sebastian Valloppilly (1954-89) liked to put it.<sup>23</sup> In the period between the 1960s and 70s, the Catholic Church in Kerala was quickly and firmly institutionalized through an impressive network of wide-ranging institutions including schools, hospitals, convents, livelihood training centres, prayer and research centres, small-scale industries, charities, orphanages, and care homes. Between 1965 and 1973, the Church was running 816 development projects throughout the State; 550 hospitals, had 840,000 students in its schools, and had received 32 million rupees as foreign aid for development and charity work (Lemerclinier and Houtart 1974: 323). This points to the growth and consolidation of an alternate source

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21 Mannathu Padmanabhan, ‘Athmavisvasavum Swasrayasheelavum Valarthuka’, speech delivered in the Kothamangalam Karayogam meeting, 1928, in *Mannathu Padmanabhante Prasangangal*, pp. 5-7; ‘Kutiyeri Parkkatha Samudayam Oridathum Orukalathum Nannavukayilla—Mannam’, 18 May 1955, *Deepika*.

22 This included the efforts on the part of the church to provide objects of modern secular development to the newly reclaimed areas and its organising role in the anti-eviction struggles in Malabar (Valloppilly 1999: 352-62, Pazheparambil 1978: 143-53, 203-56; Kunnel 2000: 42-50, 54-68). See for a detailed discussion Varghese 2006: 201-07, 236-69).

23 Mar Sebastian Valloppilly, “Avatharika,” to Pazheparambil 1978, pp. vii-x.

of welfare and social governance, outside the state but nevertheless powerful.

However, the migrants to Malabar and northeast Travancore were often ‘beyond the law’ in that they were not often confirmed owners of the land they cultivated and therefore vulnerable to eviction. Indeed, the numerous anti-eviction struggles of the 1960s were all desperate attempts to attain legal rights on the land by the migrant peasants. What we see is a series of struggles by what may be called a Syrian Christian ‘political society’ – in Partha Chatterjee’s use of the term — clamouring at the gates of the state for legal rights to their often-illegally occupied land, supported by the church and the communists. The nature of the eviction threat differed from instance to instance – at Udumbanchola in Travancore (1961), the evacuation was from reservoir areas of the proposed Idukki hydroelectric project; at Kottiyoor (1961) and Pulppally (1967), the threat of eviction was from the government which sought to evict peasant occupants from ‘illegally occupied’ temple-lands; at Kakkadavu (in the 70s), it was eviction for a dam; at Gudalloor (the 60s till early 80s) the Tamil Nadu government sought to evict early migrants who had occupied the land as part of the Grow More Food campaign in the 40s for rehabilitating Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka; in Churuli-Keerithode, it was eviction of occupants of forest lands; while Shimoga in Karnataka witnessed eviction apparently for the same reason. The struggles were mostly organized and conducted by the able figures in the Catholic Church, with the active presence and support of communist peasant organizations and immensely popular leaders like A K Gopalan (Varghese 2006: 260-62). The Malanadu Karshaka Union was formed for the evictees as an apolitical forum first, and later converted into a political party, the Karshaka Tozhilaali Party, led by the firebrand Catholic priest Joseph Vadakkan of the ‘Liberation Struggle’, who was now working alongside the communists for the migrant peasants’ cause. Most of these struggles were successful and farmers were granted ownership and/or compensation, except at Shimoga, where the church

took the lead in buying 500 acres of land in Kerala to distribute among the displaced (Valloppilly 1999: 356-59, Kunnel 2000: 54-68, Valavoor 1995: 123-28).

What is also important and interesting about the anti-eviction struggles is that here too, the question is rarely posed as a ‘minority issue’. Indeed, the bulk of energy was spent on evoking the discourse of hard labour and wealth-creation for the nation – industrious subjects surfaces again, demanding a moral response from the state, projecting themselves as a morally-superior group of people labouring to feed their compatriots without thought of their own comfort. In the numerous articles that appeared in the 40s and 50s commending migration in the Syrian Christian press; these qualities are prescribed as absolute necessities for people seeking to enter an inhospitable terrain. Besides enterprise, industry, and endurance, the fourth quality demanded is a moral one – non-attachment to comforts. This would crown the future depictions of the ‘warriors against poverty’: “[T]hey did not want the luxuries of city life. They came not with guns and swords but with spades and axes. Terrible forests and valleys were their battlefield.”<sup>24</sup> This alone was sufficient; it seemed, to demand a moral response from the state, evident in a farmer’s answer to a question on the threat of eviction in Shimoga: “[I] have nothing to say. I came here to live by hard work. If that is something wrong, the government may evict me.” Bishop Valloppilly assured prospective evictees: “[N]othing to fear if you can work hard.”<sup>25</sup> Besides, it was argued, the migrants produced food for their brethren – and hence authors call for the recognition of the migrants as “national assets”. Indeed the failure of the welfare state to

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24 K.C. Ninan, ‘Manninodu Mallidan Vannu’, 23 March 1954, *Deepika*.

25 Nechikkad, ‘Mysore- Kuthichuyarunna Shimoga Colonikal’, *Girideepam*, Vol. 5, Issue. 10, April 1966, pp. 7-9, 27; Mar Sebastian Valloppilly, ‘Kutiyettam: Chila Charithra Smaranakal’, in *Kutiyettathinte Ithihasam*, pp. 18-20.



provide succour to the poor and the hungry is frequently pointed out and the courage of the migrant peasant who took it upon himself as a “self-assumed national obligation” is saluted (Sivaswamy 1945).<sup>26</sup> Many an article of these times in the Syrian Catholic journals pleads for humanitarian considerations in such matters, arguing that migrants were driven by sheer want and lack and not out of greed. E.M.S. Nambutiripad actually summed up this attitude during the anti-eviction satyagraha at Amaravati in the early 60s (in which A K Gopalan went on a 12-day fast), condemning the eviction attempts and stressing that the issue was both “a humanitarian problem, and a nationalistic one as well.”<sup>27</sup> The discourse of humanitarianism was a powerful tool used by the migrants and their supporters, which annoyed people like K. Kelappan, Sarvodaya leader and nationalist, who were staunch critics of the egalitarian developmentist model. He strongly advocated eviction of Syrian Christian migrants occupying temple and forest lands. He was irritated by the fact that no action had been taken no the ‘encroachers’ as the government fears the ‘humanitarianists’. (K. Kelappan, ‘Bhumi Kaiyettavum Kudiyirakkum,’ 16 September 1961 and ‘Vanasamrakshanam Karyakshamam Akkanam,’ 11 October 1961, *Mathrubhumi*)

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26 The mission of the migrant was to “save the country from starvation deaths.” See for such representations in the contemporary media, Varkey M. Maruthanamkuzhy, ‘Wayanattil Chennai Kanjivellam Kutichu Marikkam’, 19 April 1950, *Deepika*; ‘Malabarinte Aiswaryam Vardhichathu Kutiyettakkarude Aagamanathodukuti’, 13 February 1950, *Deepika*; O.V. Lukose, ‘Keralathile Nandanodyayamayi Highrangine Roopantharapeduthanam’, 13 December 1956, *Deepika*; ‘Malabarile Colonial’, 26 March 1962, *Malayala Manorama*; ‘Malabarile Malayorangalil-I : Thiruvitamkur Kutiyettakkar, Oru Mukhavura,’ 17 March 1961, *Mathrubhumi*.

27 Nambudiripad, ‘Amaravathi Prasnam Deshiya Prasnam Kootiyanu’ and ‘A. K. G. yude Jeevan Kondu Panthadaruthu’, speeches in Kerala Legislative Assembly on June 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> 1961 respectively, in *EMSinte Sampoorana Kritikal* Vol. 28, pp. 114-23.

The communist defense of the migrant occupant was also pivoted on precisely egalitarian developmentalism. The communist leader N. E. Balaram wrote about Kottiyoor : “[T]ill recently the region was full of wild forests...Today that region as a whole heaves with beautiful agricultural gardens...All the necessities of life except salt are being produced there. Annually, according to one estimate, crops worth more than a crore of rupees are being produced...”<sup>28</sup> The importance of such narratives in mobilizing strong support for ‘illegal’ migrants even among seemingly-implacable political foes cannot be discounted.

Most of the anti-eviction struggles met with a fair degree of success – in each case, the state’s favourable response was a reciprocation to the moral appeal of the ‘industrious peasant’ (Varghese 2007: 521-22). The Hindu rightwing accusations that foregrounded the community affiliations of the peasant were not really successful. This ‘secular outcome’ – it could well be argued that the state’s decision, in this case, was one that based on contextual reasoning. However, the massive alienation of tribal lands was the flip-side of these gains, especially on areas like Wayanad, where lands were taken away by the migrants through a whole range of thoroughly unfair means (Sreekumar and Parayil 2002). M.A. Oommen points out that after the land reforms, tribal populations in areas that were once tribal-majority area declined at alarming rates – in Attappady, for example, 61 per cent of the population was tribal in 1961; this fell to 37 per cent in 1981 (Oommen 1993: 10).

The tribals are of course a minority directly protected by the Indian Constitution – but the reluctance of both the left and the right to create conditions under which this ethnic and developmental minority may assure at least its survival in Kerala is striking indeed (Varghese 2006: 295-97). Certainly, the Syrian Christian migrants could not draw upon

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28. N. E. Balaram, ‘Kottiyoor Kutiyannare N.S.Sinu Vendi Kuruthi Kodukkaruthu’, (Leaflet by Kannur District Karshaka Sangham, published in 1961), p. 1.

Hindu support in this case. In fact in certain struggles like at Pulppally and Shimoga, the Church was vociferous about the role of the Hindu fundamentalist organizations;<sup>29</sup> also, the Christian political elite and even sections of the Church were more than reluctant in extending wholehearted support to the anti-eviction struggles, worried as they were about the impact it would have on the majoritarian alliance that had been created during the Liberation Struggle (Valloppilly 1999: 353-54; Vadakkan 1974: 147-48). However their struggles rode on hegemonic developmentalist ideologies, which seemed to assure that ‘industrious wealth-producers’ deserve greater citizenship than others who do not conform to this ideal. Just how pervasive this ideology was within the community is revealed by a report on development initiatives of the Church published in 1974. The authors, Lemercinier and Houtart notice that the dominant understanding of ‘development’ within Catholic institutions they studies was elitist. To quote them:

The whole model is built up as though a hierarchical structure pre-existed, in which men would stand either on their own merits or those of their ancestors...It also seems to consider the underdeveloped people not as victims of a system, but as a group guilty (with all the weight of the moral judgement implied) of not having been able to integrate themselves in social development, whereas others (including project promoters) were able to achieve this performance by their work.

(Lemercinier and Houtart 1974: 80)

Indeed, this alleged superiority has even prompted self-representations as ‘bringers of civilization’ to tribal areas, who rid the tribal people of ‘superstition’, a claim supported by both the Church

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29. Pazheparambil, 1978: 149; ‘Pulpallyile Kutiyettakkar’, *Girideepam*, Vol.7, Issue. 2, Aug, 1967; Varghese 2006: 245-46,252, 267-68.

and others.<sup>30</sup> On the strength of such ideology, the ‘political society’ of the migrants were able to mobilize a range of political forces to support them and put moral pressure upon successive governments to grant them legal ownership, disempowering in the process a minority which had lawful claims to protection by the state. The fate of the ‘Kerala Scheduled Tribes (Restriction on Transfer of Land and Restoration of Alienated Lands) Act’ of 1975 — legislation that would have brought to the tribals Indian Constitution-guaranteed protection — is indeed revealing of the extent to which equally powerful, if opposing, interests in Malayalee politics have been won over by the migrants (Varghese 2006: 295-98). As far as the tribals (who were peripheral to the hegemonic reach of Malayali developmentalism) are concerned, the victory of the migrant represented nothing less than a majoritarian assault on the very sources of their survival.

### Conclusion

Syrian Christians are undoubtedly one of the most prominent among the success stories of minority groups in South Asia. Here our effort has been to closely follow the specific political-ideological strategies deployed by the community elites at crucial moments of crisis and conflict to secure its interests. What appears striking is the fact that at their successful overcoming of some of the most crucial moments of crisis, their major strategies were not the accessing of minority rights — moral or formal — or religious identity, in any simple sense.

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30 See, Fr. Vadakkan, ‘Mattam Vithacha Van Kutiyettam’, in *St. Joseph’s Church Vayattuparambu, Smaranika*, pp. 54-55; P.C. Balakrishnan Nambiar, ‘Wayanad Kutiyettathinu Sesham’, *Girideepam* special issue, December 1966, pp. 46-47; Fr. Kunnel, ‘Anthar Samsthana Kutiyettam Oru Adiyanthira Avasyam’, *Girideepam*, Vol. 5, Issue. 6, December 1965, pp. 21-23; Jose Kadukayil, ‘Valarunna Colonial—Nadavayal’, *Girideepam*, Vol. 9, Issue. 10, April 1970, pp. 13-15; O.V. Lukose, ‘Keralathinte Nandanodhyanamayi Highrangine Rooppappeduthanam’, 13 December 1956, *Deepika*.

Certainly, the first possibility – the simple accessing of minority rights — was closely explored in the battles of the late 50s; we have argued that for the Church, this was a necessary but not sufficient condition for community flourishing under given circumstances. We also feel that Syrian Christian religiosity should not be lumped with Syrian Christian community politics in any simple sense. It would be absurd to claim that Syrian Christian religiosity was strictly rationalized and instrumentalized to the end of community assertion – witness for instance the devotional cults around St. George and more recently, St. Alphonsa – which in fact happens to be far more hybrid, complex, and syncretistic – indeed quite different from what one may expect in a scenario of deepening community politics (Dempsey 2001). If in the earlier half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were successful efforts to nationalize the upper-caste Hindu festival of Onam (through the successful rewriting of the myth around Onam – through projecting the Asura king Maveli banished by Vishnu as the benevolent welfare state), though it formally became the national festival of Kerala only in 1961, and to secularize Christmas, to some extent, the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen the rise of new forms of religiosity in Kerala, ranging from the massive temple-festival of Attukal in Thiruvananthapuram, to the sprouting of several prayer-groups and new Churches among Christians. While these developments are yet to be studied adequately, it may be premature to conclude that the rise of religiosities has led to rise in tensions between communities. State regulation of major pilgrimages and temples, while under constant criticism of the Hindu rightwing, has survived; the major communal conflagration at Marad, it may be argued, was as much or more about resources, than about religious differences (Zacharias and Devika 2006). Christian new Churches have been under attack not only by the Hindu right wing; the Catholic Church itself has been hostile to them.

Indeed, what is also striking is the manner in which the many fragments – denominations – of the Syrian Christians managed to avoid merger through all these community assertions. It is also interesting to

note that the early 1880s witnessed the formation of an elite association namely *Syrian Christian Jathiaikya Sangham* (initiated by a Syrian Catholic priest and a Jacobite bishop). But ‘Syrian Christian’ as a single and unitary category remained a dream for its founders. However, without having an institutional framework of a single Syrian Christian category, they could imagine themselves as single, especially when it comes to their relationship with the Latin Christians. They could work together for their political ends too as Syrian Christians, still keeping the Latins outside (the Malabar migration was often seen as an opportunity to reclaim the region from the Latin Christians) (Varghese 2006: 168-224). Indeed, popular folklore claims that the motto of the Syrian Christians – and of their political front, the Kerala Congress – is ‘the more we divide, the more we thrive’ (*pilarumthorum valarum*).

However, of recently this dichotomy of Syrian/Latin too is played down for a larger Christian identity. Interestingly, there has been a greater recourse to minority rights in the present context, despite the fact that in the recent contests particularly between the Syrian Catholic Church and the communist government of Kerala (2006-2008), both the ‘anti-atheistic’ stance and the ‘minority-rights-protection’ argument have been evoked (Devika 2008, Krishnakumar 2007), *and successfully*. This is probably because it is being pointed out that the Church’s network now is not so much biopolitical, as more commercial: at the core of the contest with the state are not primary schools but self-financing institutions of higher and technical education (Joseph Pulikkunel, quoted in Krishnakumar 2007). Secondly, prominent dissenting voices raised the issue of the use of the minority community protection-clauses to defend the commercial ventures of individuals connected to the Church – who happen to be priests. And sections of the Latin Catholic laity accused the clergy of cornering minority rights – small but vocal protests, which however helped to undermine the Church’s claims to represent the community. The recourse to minority rights at the present moment of crisis probably hints the loss of moral weight – as modernizers

and producers of 'industry'. Indeed Bishop Mar Powathil, at the height of the crisis argued that resistance to government's alleged efforts at excessive control was a "matter of survival" as a minority (Krishnakumar 2007b).

While avoiding strict homogenizing of community or religious identity, the Syrian Christian elite employed both secular and non-secular, both minoritarian and majoritarian, strategies in their goal, 'to thrive and flourish' (a goal which was itself both religious and secular, and in an indivisible way). Many battles, specifically against Travancore's Hindu-chauvinist Dewan Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, and the anti-eviction struggles of the 1960s by the Syrian Catholic migrant 'political society', both made use of the hegemonic ideology of developmentalism, albeit in distinct ways – of these, the first was a 'lawful' struggle, and the other was an 'unlawful' one. Hegemonic developmentalist moralizing, however, activated the smooth transformation of the 'unlawful' to the 'lawful'. This in fact allowed the destruction of the livelihoods and resources of the tribal people, a 'developmental minority' for who the assertion of the reigning developmentalist logic in redistributive politics was majoritarian assault. Another major conflict was with the communists in the 1950s, over the attempts of the latter to extend the state's infrastructural network which would have destabilized internal hierarchies and control structures of the community. Here, while 'lawful' minority rights were accessed, a strategy that effectively mobilized the force of majoritarian culturalist politics and deployed violent means which slid into the 'unlawful' to secure the specific end.

These strategies probably point back to the uneven socio-political field driven by the imperative to accumulate productive resources in which community politics took shape and made their competitive claims in Kerala – a field that seems to have evolved before Independence and continues to evolve. In such a field, the protection offered to minorities

by the state can at best ensure, perhaps, their survival. But when ‘flourishing’ is understood as the unlimited utilization of resources for the production of wealth and its symbols, other strategies may be found necessary. And this, by no means, has been unique to the Syrian Christians alone in Kerala. As Lemercinier and Houtart remark, the ideas and patterns of community emancipation in the Catholic Church involved three elements: one, the display of external signs of prestige (large buildings, socially prestigious institutions), second, an elitist pattern of social mobility that is also intensely individualist; and third, nothing beyond charity for the really poor. The Church idea of social well being contained the following aspects: “accent on individual promotion, high status of non-manual work, insistence on private property as the basis of economic organization, ideology of development as resulting from individual effort and work.” This, they observe “have been quite similar to those of other communities”. (Lemercinier and Houtart 1974: 333-34). No less a representative of “other [powerful] communities” than Mannath Padmanabhan had endorsed precisely these ideals some two decades back – only that even then, the model that he pointed to for the Nairs to emulate was that of the enterprising Syrian Christian. But as the present crisis reveals this was no permanent self-representation. What we have tried to probe are, indeed, a whole array of intersecting images and affinities, which are invoked according to circumstances; and through diverse performative assertions, consciousness of shared community at different levels are created. And besides, the many levels of Christian/Catholic religious faith and ardour do not seem to be easily reducible to community interests – a theme that requires fresh investigation.



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