



St Thomas Christians through the Ages

A Study in Socio-Religious Life

Editors

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Evangelical Changes in Journalism and St Thomas Christians 165

Sreeja L G

Historical Development of the Liturgy among St Thomas Christians with Particular Reference to the Syro-Malabar Liturgy 180
Peter Kannampuzha

From Malpanate to Pontifical Institutes: Formation of Candidates for Priesthood among St Thomas Christians 209
Thomas Kollampampil

Mar Louis Pazheparampil and Mar Thomas Christians 236
John Kachiramattam

The Discalced Carmelite Missionaries and St Thomas Christians during the Dutch Period 250
Sunny Maniakkunnel

A Treasure House for the Study of Socio-Religious Memory: Reflections and Identification 275
Joseph Chacko Chennattuserry

Formation of Basic Christian Communities in British Malabar 295
Joshy Mathew

Editors and Contributors 331

Bibliography 341

REVOLUTIONARY CHANGES IN JOURNALISM AND ST THOMAS CHRISTIANS

Sreeja L G

The print culture in Kerala is deep-rooted in the efforts of Christian missionaries who ushered modernity in Kerala. The history of print media in Kerala had the background of the works of missionaries, which also led to the emergence of Kerala's renaissance and the genesis of the modern public sphere. The social ecology of pre-modern Kerala as existed in Travancore, Kochi and Malabar was entirely different from that of the other princely states of India. A rigid caste structure with predominant inequalities made the pre-modern Kerala an inhuman social space. Inter-caste communication was restricted, and the subaltern remained speechless victims of social abuse. All kinds of social exclusion and denial of social rights and justice marked the day. The introduction of modern education systems, standardisation of prose language, formation of renaissance discourses and the emergence of new literary forms like the novel and short story, together with the print culture, brought positive changes to the pre-modern Kerala society. Missionary works, the public schooling system and the emergence of caste-based identities led to social and religious transformation. Missionary initiatives set the background, and social reformers further fuelled the renaissance of Kerala. This paper analytically maps the initiatives started by missionaries and continued by St Thomas Christians, particularly in creating and perpetuating the print culture of Kerala.

1. Missionary Activities in Kerala

Kerala's missionary presence in an organised manner could be found since the Portuguese occupation. Missionaries of different groups like Dominicans, Jesuits, Augustinians, etc., began to propagate Christianity and build churches from Kanyakumari to Goa, the land under Portuguese occupation. With the occupation of Cochin in 1663 by the Dutch, we find the commencement of Protestant mission work in Kerala. Further, the Protestant missionary work in Kerala was mainly organised by three societies viz. London Mission Society (LMS) in South Kerala, Church Mission Society (CMS) in Central Kerala and Basel Mission Society (BMS) in Northern Kerala.

The major Christian groups of Kerala include different denominations like the Syrian Catholics, the Jacobites, Marthomites, Latin Catholics and *Knanaya* Christians.

2. Print Culture of Kerala

Malayalam print space emerged in the first half of the 19th century and was primarily shaped by missionary initiatives. The responsibility of leadership, investment and managing the print culture was initially bestowed on the missionaries in Kerala. Protestant missionaries of the Church Mission Society (CMS) and Basel Mission were the main figures in the print world during the initial period with a predominantly Christian religious orientation. In 1576, the Jesuits started the first press in Kochi. The first printed book in Kerala named *Doctrina Christa* was printed there in 1577. However, due to the non-availability of copies, the *Doctrina Christa* printed at Kollam in 1578 is officially recognised as the first printed book in Kerala.

Further, the Jesuits established a press at Vaipincotta, near Chennamangalam in Ernakulam district, in 1602, and it was later shifted to Kodungalloor. The Jesuits established another press at Ambazhakkad in the district of Ernakulam. The press established by

Jesuits stopped being operational after Tippu's attack in 1789. There ended the first phase of printing in Kerala. Printing was restored after a few decades. The efforts of missionaries to transform Malayalam into a print language paved the way for the dawn of modernity in Kerala. One cannot subsidise the role of missionaries in establishing the print medium and leading the State on to a culture of reading, education and progressive thinking.

The first Malayalam printing press in Kerala was established in 1821 by the CMS missionaries in Kottayam under the leadership of Rev Benjamin Bailey.¹ St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a native Christian priest, established the St Joseph's Press in 1846 at Mannanam, Kottayam. It was the third press in Travancore. St Kuriakose Elias Chavara was an Indian Catholic priest and a social reformer. He is the first canonised Catholic male saint of Indian origin. His significant educational activities made him the architect of Kerala's Renaissance. The Thalassery Press was established in 1845 by the Basel Mission. CMS press first published the Malayalam translation of English short stories for children in 1824. It also brought out several editions of the Old and the New Testaments. In 1828, various sections of the Gospel were published.

The first Malayalam periodicals *Malayala panchangam* (1846) and *Rajyasamacharam*² (June 1847) were started by the Basel Mission. They also published a periodical called *Paschimodayam* (Dawn of the West) in October 1847. *Panchangam* or *Almanacs* covered the dates of major festivals of religious significance and other relevant information, and *Rajyasamacharam* carried predominantly Christian religious matters in its forty issues published between June 1847 and November 1850.³ Dr Herman Gundert⁴ is believed to

¹ Chummar Choondal, *The Missionaries, and Malayalam Journalism*, Minerva Books, Trichur, 1975.

² It is believed that *Rajyasamacharam* started the newspaper culture in Kerala.

³ Mohan Vallikkunnu, *Rajyasamacharam Oru Padanam*, Cultural Publications, Trivandrum, 1998, p. 13.

have edited the periodicals. Unlike *Rajyasamacharam*, *Paschimodayam* became unique by publishing a range of secular matters. In its 42 issues published from October 1847 to July 1851, *Paschimodayam* serialised long essays on topics like Astronomy (*jyothishavidya*), Geography (*bhoomishastram*), Kerala History (*Kerala Pazhama*), and a travelogue (*biliathi vishesham*). *Malayalam Panchangam* is the first newspaper in Malayalam though *Rajyasamacharam* is popularly considered as the first. No doubt, in a journalistic sense, *Rajyasamacharam* maintains its status. All these were printed using a hand press or *Kallachu*.

The third periodical *Jnananikshepam* (Treasure of knowledge, 1848), from CMS press, included religious information, news and general knowledge. It carried articles on the human body, language and astronomy. *Jnananikshepam* also published pure religious matters and extracts from the Bible and evangelical literature written by missionaries and carried the declarations, regulations and reports related to the state of Travancore. *Jnananikshepam* was the first to use movable types in printing and contributed to changing the Malayalam journalistic style.⁵ Knowledge and news were contained in it. *Jnananikshepam* has tremendously contributed to the evolution of Malayalam prose. *Vidysamgraham* stands apart from previous publications as it was more modern in style and focused on knowledge dissemination. It was first published in 1864 with Rev George Mathen as its editor. *Sandishtavadi*, started in 1867 from Kottayam, added a critical dimension to Malayalam journalism.

⁴ Herman Gundert was born in 1814 at Stuttgart in Germany and arrived in India in 1836 as a missionary. He reached Kerala in 1838 and made Thalassery his centre of activity. He lived at Illikkunnu in Nettur near Thalassery from April 1839 till he returned to Germany in 1859. He was known to have a particular aptitude to study languages and knew no less than 18 languages. Gundert had made an immense contribution to the development of the Malayalam language, the Malayalam-English dictionary being his most lasting legacy.

⁵ Babu Cheriyan, *Jnananikshepam Oru Padanam, Padavam*, Prabhath Publication, Thiruvananthapuram, 2002, p. 12.

This available evidence suggests that the printing activities during the first half of the 19th century were dominated by missionaries and were initially Christian in orientation and content. Later, the entry of more Christian and non-Christian native players shaped the print space further.

Keralamithram (1881), started by Devji Bhimji, was the first systematic newspaper in Malayalam⁶ and was edited by Kanadathil Varghese Mappila, who later became the founder of Malayala Manorama. Malayala Manorama was started in 1890 as a weekly and became a daily in 1928.

The Protestant press in Kerala criticised the Pope and papal authorities through their articles and editorials. This situation compelled Catholics to defend themselves. Their first venture was *Kerala* started in 1866 by Antony Anavi, a Catholic from Kochi. The Italian Carmelite missionaries Rev Fr Candidus converted the magazine into a weekly. However, the principal catholic mouthpiece was the *Satyanadakahalam* which started publication from Koonanamavu on 12 October 1876, under the auspices of the Italian Carmelite Mission. Though the newspaper was published under the editorship of an Italian priest Rev Fr Candidus, the charge of publication was with Louis Veppichery. T.J. Pailey, a native of Cochin, assisted him. His earlier experience with *Paschimatharaka* helped him. Later he could mark his identity as an editor in *Nazrani Deepika* and *Malayala Manorama*. *Satyanadhakahalam* was the first illustrated weekly in Kerala. The first editorial pledged that the paper would give preference to news and general knowledge. Its publishing centre was shifted to Varappuzha in 1879 and later to Ernakulam. It started as a fortnightly; it was issued thrice a month from 1900 and, later, was converted into a weekly. After its independent existence for nearly a century, it merged with the *Kerala Times* in 1970.

⁶ Perunna, KN Nair, *Malayala Pathrathinte Katha* (Malayalam language), Ernakulam, 1976, p. 15.

Subsequently, the Sunday edition of the *Kerala Times* was renamed *Satyanadam*. The primary focus of *Satyanadakahalam* was the material and spiritual well-being of Catholics; it also contributed to the general progress of the people of Kerala. *Nazrani Deepika*, which was launched in 1887, became a daily in 1927 and is still in circulation as *Deepika*, the oldest Malayalam newspaper in the country.

Here the attempt is to introduce the role of St Thomas Christians in the field of journalism with an objective to clarify their position in society and, at the same time, to exhibit their involvement in the socio-political movements which later shaped Kerala's society. For making this study relevant, two newspapers named *Deepika* and *Malayala Manorama* and two magazines *Bhashaposhini* and *Karmelakusumam*, are selected for a detailed study.

2.1. *Deepika*

Nazrani Deepika started its publication on 15 April 1887 from St Joseph's Press, Mannanam, founded by St Kuriakose Elias Chavara, as an initiative of *Nazrani Jatyaikeya Sangham*.⁷ As the name suggests, *Nazrani Deepika* was a Christian paper. Nidhirikkal Manikkathanar was the first founding editor of the paper. *Deepika* began as a paper of the Syro-Malabar *Nazranis*. From its very beginning, it was run by the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), a religious congregation within the Church. In 1989, its authority was conferred to a Public Limited Company, Rashtra Deepika Limited. From 1895, it was published thrice a month; in 1899, it became a weekly. From 1912, it was published twice a week, and in 1927 it became a daily and is the first daily newspaper in Malayalam. It was the imaginative leadership of Fr Eugene who gave a new direction to the newspaper. *Deepika* played a significant role in safeguarding the rights of the Christian community and of the

⁷ PKK Menon, *History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, vol. II, Trivandrum, The Regional Records Survey Committee, 1966, p. 499.

tenants in Malabar. It always stands for the continuation of the faith in humanity.

Deepika had eminent editors like Nidhirikkal Manikkathanar, Kandathil Varghese Mappilai, EJ John, Fr Gerard Kannampally CMI, Fr Simon CMI, Fr Antony Narithookkil CMI, Fr Columbier CMI, Mr KM Joseph, Fr Jose Panthaplamthottiyil CMI, Fr Victor Narively CMI, Fr Zacharias Nadackal CMI, Fr Alexander Paikada CMI, etc. Nidhirikkal Manikkathanar deserves a special mention as he took the initiative to launch the newspaper. *Deepika* supported all agitations by Christians, other minorities and backward classes for equal rights and status. It began with a mission to protect the rights of the Christian folk. Eventually, it stood for the common causes of the State and particularly for the people of Travancore. It paid attention to the social and literary growth of the people. From the beginning, its commitment was to render journalistic service to the destitute. It continued to support all social reform movements generated as part of the renaissance in Kerala.

Deepika presented the needs of the people to the rulers, protected their inalienable rights and stood against inequality and injustice in the society.⁸ Political reforms of the time meant the increasing association of Indians in the British administration. *Deepika* was an ardent supporter of the Malayali Memorial⁹ and its founder and editor Nidhirikkal Manikathanar gave all his support in presenting the memorandum to the Maharaja.¹⁰ This political agitation was successful to a very great extent. *Deepika* supported the State Congress movement in the erstwhile Travancore State, the Indian National Congress and the Nationalist movements. *Deepika*

⁸ *Journal of Kerala Studies*, vol. XIV March, Department of History, University of Kerala, Trivandrum, 1987, p. 126.

⁹ Malayalee Memorial was a petition signed by 10,028 persons belonging to all castes and creeds, and it was submitted to the Maharaja.

¹⁰ Moorkoth Kunjappa, *Malayalam Journalism*, Kottayam Municipality Silver Jubilee Souvenir, 1917, p. 235.

was also in the vanguard of the Abstention Movement.¹¹ *Deepika* played a significant role in the fight for nationalism, for equity of education in Travancore in 1895. Fr Zacharias Nadackal was an imaginative editor, a pioneer who led the way to modern Malayalam journalism in the late 1960s and 1970s. *Deepika* was the first newspaper to publish a full page for sports and agricultural news in Kerala.

Deepika used its editorials against corruption, social evils, social injustices and in favour of temple-entry movements. It gave voice to raise the problems of the people before the concerned authorities. Political and social movements always found a strong ally in *Deepika*. The contribution of this daily for the enrichment of the Malayalam language and enlightenment of culture is unique. It started publishing novels and series and also was the first press to publish the novels of Muttathu Varkey, who earned the title 'Thomas Hardy of Malayalam'.¹²

Deepika inculcated in children an awareness of the importance of newspapers through its 'Deepika Children's League', which is the pioneer organisation for children in Kerala. In 1958, it published the first children's monthly named "*Kuttikalude Deepika*".¹³ *Deepika* deserves a special mention also as the first online newspaper in Kerala.

The history of *Deepika* remains an integral strand of the history of Malayalam language and literature. Stalwarts of the literary culture of Kerala like Kerala Varma Valiya Koyi Thampuran, AR Rajarajavarma, KC Kesava Pillai, Kodungalloor Kunjikuttan Thampuran, Kattakkayathu Cheriyan Mappila, OM Cheriyan, IC

¹¹ Through the Abstention Movement, the minority and backward communities demanded representation in the Legislature in proportion to their numerical strength.

¹² *Nootandu Pinnitta Deepika*, 1987, p. 19.

¹³ Children's *Deepika* started to engage the talents of children.

Chacko, Muttathu Varkey, etc. were all associated with *Deepika* for extensive periods. *Deepika's* efforts were the first towards the movement to make Malayalam the official language of Kerala, reflecting its people-friendly outlook. A change in the name from *Nasrani Deepika* to *Deepika* was realised, and publishing was shifted to Kottayam from Mannanam.

2.2. *Karmela Kusumam*

Karmela Kusumam (The Flower of Carmel) started its publication in 1903, and it continues its journey to this time without any interruptions. It started with the initiative of CMI priests. It mainly addresses social and secular issues in order to influence changes in the social system. It fought against the then prevailing social evils through editorials, and *Karmela Kusumam* acted as the guiding light for the whole society without discrimination. Since its inception, its primary mission has been to renovate society, followed by media activism through prose and poetry. It acted as a guiding light to people by providing insights into leading a good life on earth. To sum up, *Karmela Kusumam* still stands as a mariner's compass between a person's birth and death.

2.3. *Malayala Manorama*

A short stint in the media industry made Kandathil Varghese Mappilai, the later founder and editor of *Malayala Manorama*, become aware of the impact that a newspaper could generate upon a society.¹⁴ In the beginning, *Malayala Manorama* was published once a week on Saturday. From August 1901, it started as a biweekly (Wednesday and Saturday). From 2 July 1918, it started coming out thrice a week (Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday). On 26 January 1928, it attained the status of a daily newspaper. The publication was reestablished on 29 November 1947, after an intervening nine years of inactivity. For mobilising capital for publication, the method

¹⁴ Paulson Alangadan, *Navakeralashilpikal*, (ed.), Cochin, Kerala History Association, 1989, p. 21.

adopted by Kandathil Varghese Mappilai was a novel idea when he registered *Malayala Manorama* as a Company. The contribution of Kandathil Varghese Mappilai to the progress of Malayalam literature is exemplary. Famous poets and writers like Keralavarma Valiyakoyi Thampuran, AR Raja Rajavarma, Kodungalloor Kunjikuttan Thampuran, Sheevolly Nambuthiri, KC Kesava Pillai, Kottaratil Sangooni, Vengayil Kunji Raman Nair and Swadheshabhimani Ramakrishnapillai and Sahithya Panchanan PK Narayana Pillai were his contemporaries, and they made contributions to *Malayala Manorama*. He studied religions, especially Hindu religious principles. His deep study paved the way for books like *Yadhukularaghavam*, *Yosabhusanam*, *Pattuvritham*, etc. The formation of *Malayala Manorama* Company was the first step to realising his desire. As a person with a literary taste and courage to face socio-cultural issues, he knew that to realise his dreams, he had to uplift the downtrodden and eradicate superstitions from the society.

Kandathil Varghese Mappilai (1857–1904) was the youngest son of Eappen Mappilai. He showed an interest in languages from his childhood which gradually made him proficient in them. He started a *Sadbachara Sahodharasangham* by gathering the Christian Youth of Chengannur and Puthenkavu and engaged in social service. As a result of this effort, they were able to construct a building and start an English school. It was this school that later became Chengannoor English High school.

The Travancore Company Act was passed in the year 1882. Punalur Paper Mill was the first public limited company to be registered in Travancore under this Act. Mappilai's industrial mind decided to utilise the new Act in favour of his long-cherished desire to start a press. The legal regulation of *Malayala Manorama* Company was based on the Regulation of the Punalur Company. They were able to register the company as early as 1888. It was the second company to be registered in Travancore.

After the registration of the *Malayala Manorama* Company the feasibility of starting a printing press was discussed with the then literary elites like Valiya Koyi Thampuran. As a result of such discussions, the title and the working plan of *Malayala Manorama* emerged. The general policy adopted for *Malayala Manorama* was to consider Kerala as a whole and not give importance to social segregations based on caste and religion; instead, they emphasised Kerala's general welfare. He aimed to evoke curiosity among people to know about the happenings in the world. He was well aware of the impact that could be created by news. The first editorial was on the need to uplift the downtrodden *Pulayas* on humanitarian grounds. Since its inception, the emancipation of the subaltern has been given importance.

2.4. *Bhashaposhini*

Out of his experience in *Kerala Mitram*, Varghese Mappilai had announced that a column would be left for poems and poets. The fourth page of *Malayala Manorama* was reserved for this purpose. Within one year, *Malayala Manorama* was able to bring out both famous and obscure poets through its columns.¹⁵ Varghese Mappilai thought it would be suitable for developing language and literature if he could bring all these poets under a single organisation. After his long persuasion, a committee was formed in 1892 to discuss the formation of *Kavisamajam*. The committee meeting was presided over by Valiyakoyi Thampuran at the *Malayala Manorama* offices.¹⁶ He was made the president of the committee. C Krishna Pillai was made the secretary, and Varghese Mappilai was elected as the assistant secretary.¹⁷ Action committee members included

¹⁵ KC Mammen Mappilayude *Tbiranjedutha Lekhanangal*, *Malayala Manorama*, Kottayam, 1986, p. 143.

¹⁶ Kumaramangalathu Neelakandan Namboothiripad, "Malayala Manorama, *Bharathakavisamajam*," *Malayala Manorama*, 1981, p. 3.

¹⁷AD Harisharma, *Kandathil Varghese Mappilai*, Ernakulam, Deepam Press, 1951, p. 49.

Nidhirikkal Manikathanar, Kotayathu Thampuran, etc. The first committee dispersed after deciding to meet after Vaikathu Ashtami and collect at least Rs 1000 for further activities of the committee. Kandathil Varghese Mappilai introduced literature among the public, which was the monopoly of courtiers. He created a group of new writers and spectators with a new vision for society. Later the title *Kavisamajam* was renamed *Bhashaposhini sabha*.¹⁸

The main objective of *Bhashaposhini Sabha* was to give a common form of language for poetry and prose. He collected valuable old books and republished them. Following Varghese Mappilai's vision to create a standardised textbook for grammar, a request was put forth to the university through *Bhashaposhini Sabha* to include *Kerala Panineeyam* by AR Raja Raja Varma Thampuran and *Bhasha Bhooshanam*. Kandathil Varghese Mappilai being a staunch lover of the Malayalam language, desired to elevate the status of Malayalam as the official language of the state.

After the demise of Kandathil Varghese Mappilai, Mammen Mappilai took over the editorship of *Malayala Manorama*.¹⁹ The superstition of being polluted by touch was a notable feature of the caste system, which existed in the 19th century in Travancore, continuing till the early 20th century. As a result, even the public highways were forbidden to outcastes. If anyone dared to violate the caste rule, he was severely punished by high-caste people. Slavery was another characteristic of the society. One of the essential products of this feudal society was forced labour. In such a situation, Mammen Mappilai visualised a humanitarian society. He was highly determined to replace the evil customs and practices of society.

Under his stewardship, the popularity and influence of *Malayala Manorama* increased. His main aim was to make *Malayala*

¹⁸ Moorkoth Kunjappa, "Malayala Manorama Samskaratharangini," *Malayala Manorama*, Kottayam, 1952, p. 239.

¹⁹ MK Sanu, KC Mammen Mappila, *Kerala Sabitya Academy*, Trichur, 2008, p. 11.

Manorama a tool of mass education for the population. He had a unique talent in journalism. He enriched its columns with his encyclopaedic knowledge. He always took care of the challenges faced by the society and believed that it was the media's duty to take initiatives to remove the old feudal social systems. In 1937, the license of *Malayala Manorama* was cancelled by the then Diwan Sir CP Ramaswamy Iyer²⁰ for publishing the news about the struggle at Neyyattinkara for a responsible government. KM Cheriyan, his successor as the newspaper's chief editor, caused the resurrection of *Malayala Manorama* in 1948.

The language used in the dailies must be understandable to all categories of the society. Newspapers should be impartial, truthful and evidence-based. It is the principal duty of the print media to create awareness of the issues that would badly affect society's wellness. As the purpose of media is defined as informative, it has to cover news from regions relevant for the reading public for their information.

3. Conclusion

This study is carried out to map the role of the Thomas Christians of Kerala in perpetuating the journalistic legacy of Kerala. Christian missionaries were highly responsible for the spread of religious choice, mass education, print culture and the energising of the public sphere. Understanding the existing social inequalities, they stood for the abolition of every socially-exclusivist practice. This legacy in print is traceable to the St Thomas Christian population of Kerala.

Nasranis, or the St Thomas Christian population of Kerala, followed the missionary legacy of social empowerment and emancipation of the destitute. This conviction propelled them to fight against social anarchies and display a model of salvation from

²⁰ CS File No. 302/38; 5 September 1938, KSA. (KSA—Kerala State Archives).

them. Two critical observations have to be put forth here. Although the discussed publications were instituted and managed by St Thomas Christians, these were secular at the functional level. Discussing any epoch of Kerala history without valuing these publications is not possible. Malayalam prose and literature have grown hand-in-hand with the growth of these publications. The missionary legacy of social equity is accentuated through these publications managed by St Thomas Christians with the mission of religion for social transformation. This study has attempted to bring to focus the Christian lineage of Malayalam journalism as a process of continuity and technological adaptation. The ethics of the press continued its missionary legacy with contemporary technologies. This study underlines the social process undergone by the Christian press of secularising the social cause by maintaining its Christian legacy. It also marks the trajectory of Christian presence in Malayalam print culture, which turned to be significant for the people of Kerala, in general, and the success story of St Thomas Christian management in perpetuating responsible Malayalam journalism.