

GENDER ROLES IN THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS OF PRE-MODERN KERALA; CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE WARRIOR MASCULINITY AND DEVINE FEMINITY IN SYRIAN CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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Abstract: The traditions and culture of St. Thomas Christians or Syrian Christians in pre-modern Kerala enforced and reinforced many patriarchal norms and customs through multiple manifestations. This paper attempts to provide historical and anthropological evidences of the gender roles enforced on women and men through the development of ideals within the community. It also explores how the projection of men as warriors and women as followers of the piety and obedience of Mother Mary has impacted the styling of gender patterns within the communities. Further, it also tries to address the question of the consequences of 'conversion from a Brahmanic community' and how it impacted gender situations with regard to the Syrian Christian community.

Keywords: St. Thomas Christians, *Kalari*, Synod of Diamper, *penkettu*, *Mariam*.

Introduction: St. Thomas Christians, who are also known as Syrian Christians, trace back their origin to the apostolic work of St. Thomas, who was a disciple of Jesus Christ and who is said to have preached the Christian message in India. The claim of apostolic origin by St. Thomas Christians is a matter of debate, because there is no historical evidence of the coming of St. Thomas into South India. Susan Bayly opines that the term "Syrian" in Syrian Christians refers to the presumed West Asian origin of the group's ancestors and to the use of Syriac as a liturgical language. She also argues that St. Thomas traditions were brought to South India by the West Asian merchants and navigators who had been frequenting the Keralan spice marketing localities since Roman times. The traditions and culture of St. Thomas Christians in pre-modern Kerala enforce and reinforce patriarchal norms and customs in their community through different manifestations.

Male Oriented Warrior Heritage of the Christians: One of the sources which give an idea about the warrior character of the St. Thomas Christians is the Decree of Synod of Diamper in 1599. According to the Decree, all the boys began their training in reading and writing, in the art of fencing in a *Kalari* under *Panikkar* either Hindu or Christian, from eight years of age and continue till they reached twenty five. Regarding this system of education, which prevailed in Kerala, Act iii, Decree 12 of the Decree says that, "sending Christian children to school run by Hindu masters was alien to Catholic tradition". The mentioning of the warrior character of the Christians in the Decree of Synod of Diamper clear that this Christian community followed martial art forms before the coming of the Portuguese.

Jan Kieniewicz put the Christians into two different social classes in Portuguese period; rich and poor. Those Christians who were great traders were rich and the poor include the teachers of martial arts. The

prominent section in the society was "men who controlled the whole of pepper trade in Malabar. The poor Christians included the teachers of martial arts and probably the less prosperous, which formed suicide squads."

The political activities of St. Thomas Christians initially linked to a Christian petty kingdom known as *Villarvattom Swarupam*, which is believed to have had its seat in the vicinity of Kodungallur. This Christian kingdom probably formed after the collapse of the *Kulasekhras* of Mahodayapuram. A document of the eighteenth century from the *Kozhikkodan Grandhavari s*(which says that it was a non- Hindu kingdom) and *Jornada* refer to this Christian kingdom. The sceptre, which the St. Thomas Christians submitted to Vasco Da Gama in 1502, is said to have been used by this Christian king. When *Villarvattom* royal family ceased to exist, the St. Thomas Christians were brought under the protection of the king of Cochin, where they were called "the sons of the king". It is evident that Christians were an important community in Cochin and the army of Cochin had a sizable number of Christian warriors. A Portuguese document of the end of the sixteenth century says that the king of Cochin had 3000 St. Thomas Christians under him. As early as 1547 we find the kin of *Vadakkumkur* mentioning 3000 Christian soldiers serving under him.

Susan Bayly tries to connect the warrior character of the Syrian Christians with a caste group *Nairs*. It is the *Nairs* with whom the old Keralan military life style has usually been associated. What is more relevant here is the fact that although a wide range of occupational and status groups have claimed *Nair* identity, the highest ranking and most powerful of these were *Nair* title holders, who established themselves as elite military service groups in the pre-colonial kingdoms. These were the people who have

come to be thought of as the bearers of Kerala's "traditional" warrior life style and its system of martial preceptorship under which young boys were trained to arms in *kalari* gymnasias under the tuition of master warriors known as *Panikkars*. It is the fact that the St. Thomas Christians also acquired a central place in this martial culture. Their skills were as important to the rulers of the southern Kerala chiefdoms as those of the Nair elite; they were treated by their rulers as members of ritually superior caste group equivalent to in status to the upper *Nair* warrior group.

The Christians also observed the bonds of ritualised fealty and patronage which bound Kerala's client warrior group to their rulers. A 16th century Raja of Cochin said to employ a particularly large unit of Syrian Christian warriors- as many as 50000 according to one account. Both *Nair* and Syrian Christian warriors honoured sworn *Caver* fighters who were bound by a vow or *nercca* to serve their patron to the point of death. Gouvea said that the Christians supplied the Raja of Cochin with an army of fifty thousand guns men. He said further: "The main strength of the rajas consists in the Christians of St. Thomas they have. They are fine guns men and so good shots that they rarely miss fire, and from early age they are brought- up gun in hand and thus turn out splendid hunters. He said that all went about with swords and shields, and some with guns and lances, which they left at home only when going to church, or when moving about in their own lands.

The local rajas of Kerala recognized the early Christian groups not only with the grant of land but also with the concessions and privileges recorded on copper plates. In certain places they were given charge of the collection of revenue for the raja. In the fourteenth century Marignolli found that the Christians were in charge of the public weighing office in the Quilon customs. Under the rulers of Malabar, these Christian warriors were rewarded for their services with royal grants and privileges, and many of the group's churches have foundation accounts which focus on the role of their kings as patrons and benefactors. The church at Purakkad is one of the many Syrian foundations which is said to have been built by a raja after a victory which was won for him by his Christian warriors. In course of time the Christians not only enjoyed some privileges from rajas, but also they were given honorific titles. They shared most of these titles with the *Nayars*. *Taragan* is a word derived from the word for tariff. This title is still used by some Christians and *Nayars*. *Mutalali* is the title of a group of families near Quilon who claim direct descent from ninth century Christian immigrants. The title *panikkar* denotes proficiency in military training and predominantly used by Christians and *Nayars*.

The relative absence of male members of the family engaged in time consuming trade and warfare enabled the Syrian Christian wives and relatives, particularly the brothers of wives, to emerge as the most powerful members in the household. Very often, the processes of decision making, management of property and upbringing of children in the absence of (both temporary and permanent) the husband went in most cases into the hands of the wife and her brothers for all practical purposes, though exceptions were not rare. Consequently, maternal uncles began to play a vital role in the Syrian Christian household. In the celebrations related to baptism and marriage, maternal uncles had larger roles to play. In the marriage celebrations of the Southist segment of Syrian Christians (also known as Thekkumbhagakkar), it was the maternal uncle who used to carry the bride in his arms from the entrance of the church compound up to the main door for presenting her to the bridegroom. Eventually, there evolved the tradition of a 'complex matrilineal succession' in the Syrian Christian world, where the uncle-nephew/niece relationship became pivotal in their households. In fact, in the ecclesiastical domains, Archdeacons and later the indigenous bishops of the Syrian Christians succeeded in office on the basis of the order from uncle to nephew. Thus, when bishop Mar Thoma I from the Pakalomattam family died in 1673, his sister's son succeeded him as bishop and took the name of Mar Thoma II. On his death in 1686, his nephew became the successor and took the name Mar Thoma III. This tradition of succession of bishops from uncle to nephew prevalent in non-Catholic segment of St. Thomas Christians and the attempt to confine episcopacy within one household, but through the female line, was vehemently opposed by many members of that community. This is evident in Varthamanapusthakam written in 1785 C.E.

Dual Representations of Blessed Mother Mary:

The Syrian Christians like any other Christians project Virgin Mary as the role model of women because of her being the mother of Jesus. As per the documents, Syrian Christians had erected about 83 churches before the arrival of the Portuguese, with a large number of churches being dedicated to Blessed Virgin Mary who was called Martha Mariyam in Syriac. Most of the agriculturally oriented settlements of St. Thomas Christians of pre-Portuguese times, located particularly in the low-lying paddy cultivation zones like Kuruvilangadu, Arakuzha, Nediya sala, Nakapuzha, Manarkadu, Enammavu, etc. had St. Mary as their patron saint. At a time when the low-lying rice cultivating space had developed the cult of fertility goddesses and cults, the St. Thomas Christians used the spiritual symbol of St. Mary.

On the ground level, in rural India, the Christian religious landscape continues to take unusual and unorthodox shapes. From Jesuit letters describing their various mission fields in south India until 1773 C.E., we can get glimpse of the process of turning the Virgin Mary into a manifestation of the goddess. Called, for example, Shakti (generic female power), Durga, Kali and Mariyamman, the goddess is one of the most powerful divine beings in south Indian scared landscape. In short, Mother Mary hold dual character, in one side she was the patron of the believers and on the other side she was treated as the role model of the Christian women as she was very humble and obedient and the latter was used by the Christian community for reinforcing patriarchy.

Patriarchal Rituals of “Pollution and Purity”: The St. Thomas Christian traditions make the claim of having been converted from Brahmins directly by St. Thomas, the apostle. All the traditional Christian songs mention about the conversion of Brahmins to Christianity by St. Thomas. These songs and some Portuguese sources say that the families of *Pakalonmattam*, *Sankarapuri*, *Mareipur* and *Panakkamattam* are the important families converted by St. Thomas to Christianity. Apart from this the Christians started borrowing several customs and practices of dominant castes to present themselves as to fitting well into the upper caste socio- cultural order. They used to wear *punnul* (sacred thread), *kudumi* (tuft), but the only difference from that of the Brahmins was that the Christians used to insert a silver cross into their tuft.

Considering themselves as being superior in social standing, the Syrian Christians developed the practice of untouchability. Reference about women as polluting element appears eventually in the primary sources. Marriage which was often referred to as “penkettu” (literally meaning ‘tying women’, but

obviously referring to the practice of tying of a tali around the neck of the bride using the thread taken out of the *mantharakodi* or the sari used for marriage), and the sexual life following it were considered by the Syrian Christians as having a polluting impact on them. As a result couples used to keep themselves away from church for four days after their marriage. On the fourth day, they used to take a solemn bath and go to church. Their notions of pollution related to childbirth were much more complex. The Syrian Christians used to believe that going to the church during the first forty days after having given birth to a boy child would pollute the church and hence the women used to keep themselves away from the church till the completion of the period of pollution. If the child happened to be a girl, then the pollution lasted for eighty days, which give the impression that giving birth to a girl child was much more polluting than that of a boy child.

Conclusion: Traditions, rituals and practices of the Syrian Christians have clear patriarchal elements. One of the important examples of this is the warrior character of the community. Only boys had got training in Kalari and all the teachers (Panikker) of Kalari were males. The cult of Mother Mary was also used to strengthen the male dominance. On the one side, the power of St. Mary, as a patron saint, was celebrated, on the other; the humble, obedient Mother Mary was considered as the role model of Syrian Christian women. The claiming of upper caste status by the Christians and the following of the rituals “purity and pollution” associated with child birth and marital life were also used to control womanhood. In short, the patriarchal elements in the Syrian Christian community intensified when it mingled with male oriented upper caste society of pre-modern Kerala.

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