

**THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS OF KERALA:
DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC
TRANSITION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT

The twentieth century has witnessed a process of significant transition of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala in terms of its demographic and socio-economic status. In this paper, the transition of the demographic structure is discussed in terms of size, composition, geographic distribution and growth rates and the underlying factors of transition comprising fertility, mortality, and migration. Against this background, an attempt is made to present a set of projections of the population of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala till the year 2031. Discussion is made in a comparative setting; the corresponding changes that have come about in the other communities – Hindus, Muslims, and Latin Christians – are also examined.

In the beginning of the 19th century (1801), the Syrian Christians were a small community of about 1 lakh people. Although their number increased eightfold during the century, by the end of the century (1900) they were in the very early stage of demographic transition. Women were a minority. Children constituted nearly half of the total population. The community was characterised by very high death rate, very high birth rate, very early age at marriage, and 10 to 12 children per married woman. The Syrian Christian women of that time had very little control over the number and timing of childbirth. The community was characterised by a high degree of concentration in a small number of taluks of the state. The Syrian Christians of that time were not a very migratory community.

By the beginning of the 21st century, the Syrian Christian community has more or less completed its demographic transition. Women are a majority now; they outnumber men. Children constitute

less than 25 percent of the total population. The community has very low levels of mortality and fertility rates. It has high migration rate and high average age at marriage. Most Syrian Christian women have full control over when and how many children they would like to bear in their lifetime. The Syrian Christians are now spread out, not only all over India, but also all over the globe.

In the coming decades, relatively stable conditions are expected to prevail in their basic demographic parameters- fertility and mortality rates. But the effect of the past trends (of fertility and mortality rate) would become very apparent on the size and structure of the population. There is a very strong possibility that the Syrian Christian community would enter the ZPG regime (Zero Population Growth) or NPG regime (Negative Population Growth) within a matter of a decade or two. With very low fertility and in-breeding habits the Syrian Christians could experience the “Parsi Syndrome”

Efforts to modify the emerging demographic trends in any significant manner are unlikely to meet with much success. This is the lesson which demographers have learned from populations that have made such efforts. Under the circumstances, the community is advised to **cope** with the new situation rather than to **fight** it out.

This paper is aimed at drawing the community’s attention to these emerging demographic trends, their likely impact on the community, and suggesting the need for some introspection on the part of the community on means to cope with the adverse fall out of the emerging trends.

Two major areas for concern are identified in this Working Paper.

The **first** is the concern about the diminishing absolute and relative size of the community. In analysing the options for the community to

cope with the problem of diminishing numbers, an analogy from Physics is used. Momentum is defined as a product of mass and velocity. If the mass becomes less, the momentum can be maintained or increased by increasing the velocity. In the same way, a community's clout in the political economy of the state is determined not only by its relative size but also by the relative level of human and material resources at its disposal. As the share of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala's total population becomes smaller, its clout could still be maintained or even increased by developing its human and material resources. Thus, a policy option open to the Syrian Christian community to cope with the continuing decrease in the share of its population is to invest an increasing share of its resources for the development of its human and material resources.

The Syrian Christian community is known for the emphasis it has been giving to education and health of its members. In the emerging demographic trends, **an extra push** to this direction is warranted. If a part of the resources which the community is spending on wedding feasts, parish halls, and concrete monuments for the dead, is invested in institution-building for education and health, the community can hope to give the needed push to the human resource development of its members. In the emerging era of globalisation with increasing emphasis on private sector under WTO initiative, investments in human resource development could be a critical factor in the community's future prospects.

A second option is to work towards reducing the influence of religion and caste in the political economy of the state. With political independence, adult franchise and representative Government, Keralites, including the Syrian Christians, have become habituated to depend too much on Government help for all their needs, and blame the Government when they did not get what they wanted or if something goes wrong

with what they got. As the relative size of the Syrian Christian community decreases, the share of the Government pie, which the community can expect to receive, would also decrease. The mind-set of depending on Government on each and everything should change. They should cultivate greater self-reliant habits. Such an adjustment on the part of the Syrian Christian community could greatly help them in coping with the emerging adverse demographic trends.

A third option would be to improve the co-operation within the various Christian denominations and between the Christians and the non-Christians, especially those placed in the same demographic situation. Unity is strength. Everybody knows this basic truth. Ecumenism is good and every church dignitary would vouch for it. But the reality is the creation of more and more divisions among the Christian community. Church unity may only be a distant possibility, but Christians could come together and jointly invest more of their resources in areas that matter most; human resources development of the community. This is exactly what they did three quarters of a century ago when they established the Union Christian College in Alwaye. Unfortunately, this good example has remained an isolated event and has never been duplicated. On the other hand, dissension has only increased among the Christians, especially among the Syrian Christians.

A **second** area of concern is the emerging structural changes in the Syrian Christian population- rapid increase in the number and proportion of the elderly and a corresponding decrease in the number and proportion of children and the youth. Traditionally, the Christian churches have been more concerned with children and the youth than their elderly. They have Sunday Schools for the children and Yuvajana Sangoms for the youths. They had until very recently nothing similar to it for the elderly. This situation was understandable when more than 40

percent of their members were children and less than 4 percent only were elderly. In ensuing decades when one in four of the population is likely to be an elderly person, there is a strong case for giving priority to the welfare of the elderly. Like it or not, the elderly are going to be the backbone of, not only the Syrian community, but of all communities in the state, in the coming years.

The Syrians Christians are now in the forefront in the care of the elderly. The same way they lead the other communities in educational development in the first half of the last century, the Syrians are ideally placed to show the way to the other communities in providing succour to the elderly. They should accept the challenge.

Lastly, a broader understanding of the problems ahead could greatly help in the matter of coping with the emerging problems. If the Syrian Christian leadership fully understands the vast changes that have taken place and the more drastic changes that are in store for the demography of their community, they should be able to find appropriate solutions for them. The Syrian Christians are notoriously lethargic in developing and maintaining basic information about the community. For the community to survive in the twenty-first century, the Syrian Christians should endeavour to develop a common statistical system to measure the problems that lie ahead, progress they are making to solve them, and to plan for the future programme of action. The Government has given up collecting “caste wise” data since 1950. It should be the responsibility of the communities themselves to fill this gap. One purpose of this Working Paper is to bring to the attention of the Christian leadership not only about the emerging adverse demographic trends and their implications for the community, but also to establish a case for the community to develop a sound statistical system for their management.

INTRODUCTION

This Working Paper is based on a book* (forthcoming) by the author on the demographic history of the Syrians Christians of Kerala during the 200-year period 1801-2001. The book is a treatise in Demography, demography of the Christians in Kerala State, the Syrian Christians in particular. Much of the data used in the book was taken from the censuses- census of Travancore State, Cochin State, Madras Presidency, Travancore-Cochin State and Kerala. The census data were supplemented with data compilations made by the Christian Church authorities in Kerala and data from the Kerala Migration Survey (CDS, 1998). Information from the census of Kerala, 2001 has also been included.

The paper begins with a short section on the origin of Christianity in Kerala, growth of the Christian and Syrian Christian population in Kerala, classified under several denominations. The demographic characteristics of the Christians in Kerala, and a comparison of the socio-economic profile of the Syrian Christian community with that of the other major communities in the state are presented next. The concluding section gives a projection of the population of the Syrian Christians in the first quarter of the 21st century. Based on past trends and the projection, some points are raised for introspection by the Syrian Christian leadership in the new millennium.

* K. C. Zachariah, *A Demographic History of the Syrian Christians of Kerala*, with a Chapter on the *History of Christianity in Kerala* by Dr. D. Babu Paul (forthcoming)

The Syrian Christians: Definition

The term “Syrian Christian” does not have a precise definition. Some Syrians maintain that the term should be used only for those who came from “Syria” and their descendants. According to them, Syrian Christians are persons born to Syrian Christian parents and following their faith and converts to Christianity do not constitute Syrian Christians. If this definition were followed, the Syrian Christians would form only a very small fraction of the Christian population of Kerala. In fact, most of the present-day Syrian Christians are descendants of converts from among Hindus. There may be some faint traces of Syrian blood in a few Syrian Christian families, but the vast majority of the community of today belongs to one or other of an Indian race, Dravidian or Aryan. In language, dress and other customs, they do not differ from their Hindu counterparts.

A more correct practice would be to define Syrian Christians as those who follow the “Syrian Rite” in their religious services. This is the definition followed in the Indian censuses, and the one used in this Working Paper.

Origin of Christianity in Kerala.

The Syrian Christian Church of Malabar is no doubt the oldest Christian Church in India. It is also one of the oldest churches in the whole world, being part of the Syrian Church under the Patriarch of Antioch appointed by the First General Council of Nice in 325 AD. Bishop Johannes, one of the Bishops who attended the Council, represented not only Persia but also India (possibly the Church in Malabar).

Traditions abound with regard to the introduction of Christianity to Kerala. However, research has not yet established the truth of most of

these traditions. The Syrian Christians, and as a matter of fact, the people of Malabar in general, are notoriously slack in keeping records of their origin and history.

Adding to the absence of historic records is the confusion arising from the existence of anecdotes of several missionaries, connected with the evangelisation of Malabar. Three of them have the same name, THOMAS. Some of the inconsistencies and inaccuracies about the origin of Christianity in Kerala could have arisen because of the existence of three persons with this same name.

The tradition most held by laymen about the origin of Christianity in Malabar is that St Thomas, one of the Apostles (of Christ) himself founded the Malabar Church, in the same way that St Peter founded the Roman Church. There are, however, several variations of the St Thomas story. One story is that St Thomas had started from Syria in 35 AD and after some years in Northern India, reached Mylapore near Madras in 51 AD. He arrived in Malankara near Cranganur in 52 AD. St Thomas built seven churches, [one at Palur (Palayur) near Chavacud, another at Maliankara near Cranganore, a third at Kottaikkal (Kooakayal) near north Parur, a fourth at Kokamangalam or south Pallipuram in north Travancore, a fifth in Kurakkanikulam or Quilon, a sixth at Niranam near Tiruvalla and a seventh at Nellakal near Chayal] and ordained two persons from Namboothiry families. After his labour in Malabar, Apostle Thomas went to Coromandal Coast where he met with martyrdom having been mortally wounded by one of his enemies in 68 AD. The neighbourhood of Mylapore where the Apostle is said to have died is now called St Thomas Mount near Chennai. This place is held in great veneration as a place of pilgrimage even now.

Although the Syrian Christians were very slack in recording their history in the formal way, they had a system of passing on their history

from one generation to another through folk songs and other forms of folk arts. One such folk art was the Margom Kali, which exists in Kerala even today. Much of this folk art is woven around the mission of St Thomas, the Apostle. The original Margom Kali describes the arrival of St. Thomas in Malabar, the miracles he performed, the friendship as well as the hostility of the people among whom he worked, the persecution he suffered, the churches and crosses he put up in various places, etc. These details are incorporated in the various stanzas of the Margom Kali songs. Kerala's Margom Kali is an important element in the age-old and hallowed tradition of St Thomas among the Syrian Christians of Malabar.

The Syrian Christian communities in Kerala strongly believe in this age old and hallowed tradition of St Thomas. Each year, on the 21st of December, they celebrate St Thomas Day.

GROWTH OF THE CHRISTIAN POPULATION OF KERALA

As far as this author is aware, the first estimate of the Christian population of Malabar Coast is by Bartolomeo who gave a figure of 255,000 Christians for the year 1797. However, Ward and Conner gave an estimate of 165,000 for 1820. These two numbers are obviously inconsistent. In our opinion, the latter is likely to be nearer the truth as it is based on a survey, however, imperfect it might have been.

A very rough estimate of the total Christian population of Kerala in the beginning of the 19th century was about 117,000. On an average, the Christian population of Kerala grew by 2 percent per year during the 19th century. A substantial portion of this growth would have been due to conversion, as the natural increase of the Kerala population was much smaller during that period.

The first formal census of the whole region was taken only in 1875. This census enumerated 590,000 Christians within the present boundaries of Kerala. This and those from the censuses of 1881, 1891, and 1901 are presented in Table 1

At the beginning of the new millennium, in 2001, the Christian population of Kerala is estimated to be about 6 million. One hundred years earlier, they numbered less than a million, about 892 thousands. During the hundred years, 1901-2001, their number increased nearly 6.6 times compared with a growth of 4.2 times among the Hindus and 6.9 times among the Muslims. The total population grew 5 times during the same period.

In the early decades of the century, the Christians grew at a little over 2 percent per year. But since then, the rate had accelerated and reached a maximum of 3 percent per annum during 1921-31. After this decade, the rate started declining, slowly at first, but more rapidly later. At present, the growth rate is likely to be really very low, about 5 per 1000 population per year.

The rate of growth of the Christian population was higher than that of the non-Christian population in every decade until about 1961. During 1941-51 all the three communities had more or less the same growth rate. But after 1971, the Christians grew at a rate lower than the average for other communities. By the end of the century, the rate of growth of the Christians was only 60 percent of the Hindu growth rate and less than half the growth rate of the Muslims.

Table 1. Christian Population of Travancore, Cochin, Malabar and Kerala

Year	Travancore	Cochin	Malabar	Total	Kerala
1801	—	—			117,000
1816	112158	—			137,000
1820	—	43535			165,000
1836	176133	64633			221,000
1849	—	78545			237,000
1854	192858	—			243,000
1858	—	88920			408,000
1875	469023	128287	40638	637948	589,593
1881	498542	136361	43196	678099	626,700
1891	526911	173631	47631	748173	691,463
1901	697387	198239	51493	947119	891,676

Source: C.M.Agur, Church History of Travancore, p 3 and 9. Data for 1875-1901 are based on Census Reports. Estimates for Kerala are made by the author

The higher growth rate among the Christians in the earlier decades was a reflection of the higher natural increase among them in that period, and of conversion from other religions to Christianity. Conversion declined considerably after the temple entry proclamation in Travancore State in 1936.

Table 2. Population of Kerala by Community, 1901 – 2001

Year	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Total
1901	4378305	1119473	891767	6396262
1911	4762393	1263602	1101289	7147673
1921	5052039	1360180	1376354	7802127
1931	6021982	1624112	1856024	9507050
1941	6699600	1883786	2263888	11031541
1951	8344351	2374598	2825720	13549118
1961	10282568	3027639	3587365	16903715
1971	12683277	4162718	4494089	21347375
1981	14801347	5409687	5233865	25453680
1991	16668587	6788354	5621518	29098518
2001	18230104	7680140	5928552	31838796
2011	19458965	8466992	6129781	34055738
2021	20300505	9031043	6142344	35473892
2031	20245930	9216134	5891171	35353235

Source: The Christian populations of Kerala for 1911-71 are from Census of India, 1981 Kerala, Final Population Totals, Paper 3 of 1981, Statement 7.4, p 32. The estimate for 1901 was made from the Census figures for Travancore, Cochin and Madras Presidency. The figures for 1981 and 1991 were taken from the respective Census Reports. The figures for 2001 are estimated by the author on the basis of provisional figures from the Census of Kerala, 2001. The figures for 2011 to 2031 are projections made by the author starting with the population by age and sex in 1991.

Christians and Non-Christians

At present (in 2001), the Christians constitute about 18.6 percent of the population of the state. Their share of the total population of the state was much lower at the beginning of the last century, only about 14

percent. However, the relative size of the Christian population increased steadily from 1875 to 1961, in which year the Christians constituted over 21 percent of the total population of the state. After 1961, the proportion of the Christians followed a declining trend.

Kerala was carved out in 1956 from the three distinct administrative areas of; Travancore and Cochin States and the Malabar district of the former Madras Presidency. Travancore (that part of the State which remained in Kerala after state reorganisation) and Cochin States had relatively higher proportions of Christians than the Malabar District. In Travancore, about 32 percent of the population were Christians in 1951. Even fifty years earlier, in 1901, the corresponding proportion had been as high as 24 percent.

A number of factors are associated with the recent decline in the proportion of the Christian population in Kerala: The principal ones are

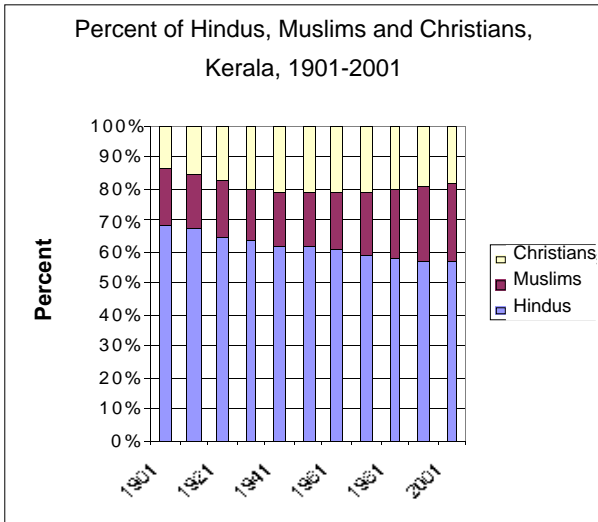
State Reorganisation of 1956

Relatively rapid decline in fertility among the Christians in recent decades.

Higher rate of migration of Christians from Kerala

Absence of any statistically significant conversion to Christianity

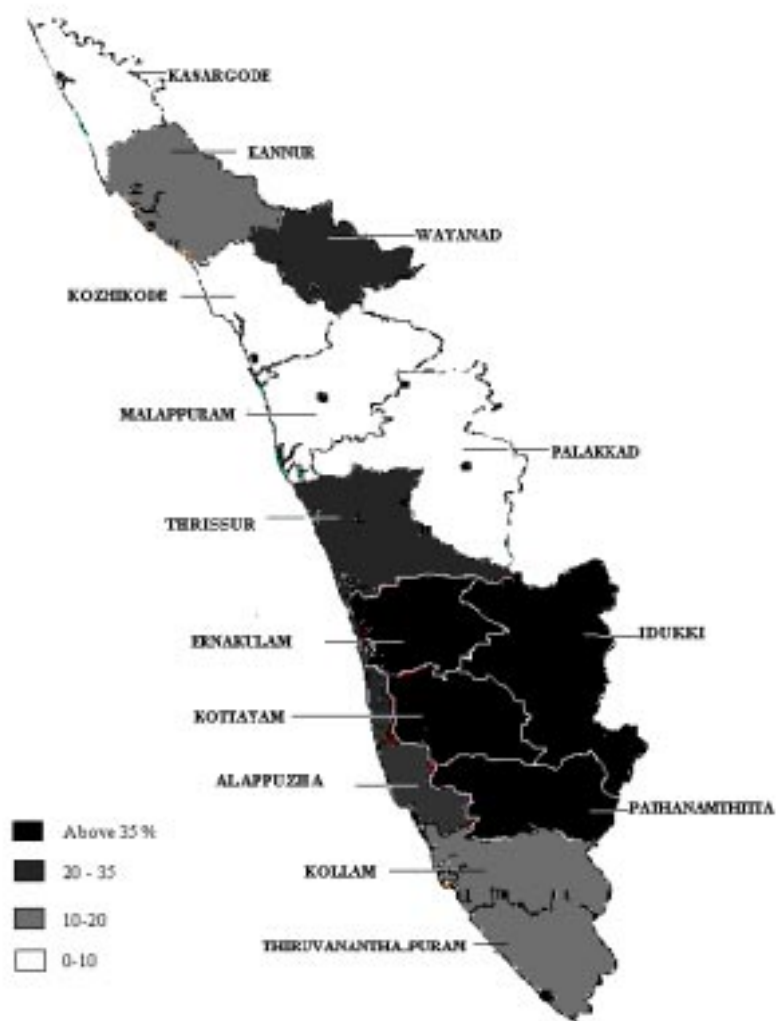
The State re-organisation of 1956 had conceded a predominantly Christian area from the former Travancore State to Tamil Nadu. On the other hand, Malabar District, which was added to Kerala from the Madras Presidency, had a predominantly Muslim population and a very low proportion of Christians (only about 2 percent). As a result, the State re-organisation made a very significant dent on the relative strength of the Christian population of Kerala. The Christian population of Kerala declined from 32 percent in 1951 to 21 in 1961, a decline of 11.1 percentage points.



The Chart given above indicates a continuation of the declining trend from 21.2 percent in 1961 to 21.1 percent in 1971, 20.6 percent in 1981, 19.3 percent in 1991 and 18.6 percent in 2001. The continuing decline of the proportion of the Christians after 1961 may be attributed to a relatively high level of out-migration and emigration from among the Christians and the relatively low rate of natural increase among them.

Regional Distribution of the Christian Population.

According to the 1991 census, the largest number of Christians in Kerala lived in Ernakulam district, nearly a fifth of the total Christian population of the state. The other districts in the order of importance were Kottayam (14.9 percent) and Thrissur (11.9 percent). Thiruvananthapuram had about 9.1 percent of the Christians in the State. Pathanamthitta, which is known to be a major Christian centre, had only about 8.5 of the state's Christian population. It is a relatively small district, population-wise. Malappuram and Kasaragod had the lowest proportion of Christians in 1991, 1.3 percent each.



On the whole, the central districts of Kerala, from Pathanamthitta to Thrissur, which have only 40 percent of the total population of the state, had among them over 70 percent of its Christian population. The districts of Malabar from Kasaragod to Palakkad, which have over 40 percent of the total population, together had only about 14 percent of the Christian population of the State.

An analysis of the trend in the proportion of Christians in the various districts is made difficult by the numerous boundary changes, which took place since the formation of the state in 1956. Some broad comparisons, combining several districts together, are however possible.

In general, there was a northward movement of the Christians in the State. The Southern districts (Trivandrum to Idukki) lost out somewhat and the northern districts (Palakkad to Kasargod) gained. The Central districts experienced some decreases too.

Boundary changes have smaller effect on the proportions of the Christian population in the total population of each district. These proportions have another advantage: they are not affected by differences in the population size of these districts.

In 1991, Kottayam District had the highest proportion of Christians among its population, a little less than one-half (45.8 percent). The other districts with high proportions of Christians among them were Idukki (42.2 percent), Pathanamthitta (40.3 percent), Ernakulam (37.8 percent), Thrissur (24.5) and Wyanad (23.4). Trivandrum and Kollam have more or less the same proportion, about 17 percent each. The lowest proportion of Christians is in Malappuram District.(2.3 percent).

The central districts, from Pathanamthitta to Thrissur have, on an average a Christian population of 34 percent compared with only 6 percent in the northern districts ranging from Palakkad to Kasaragod.

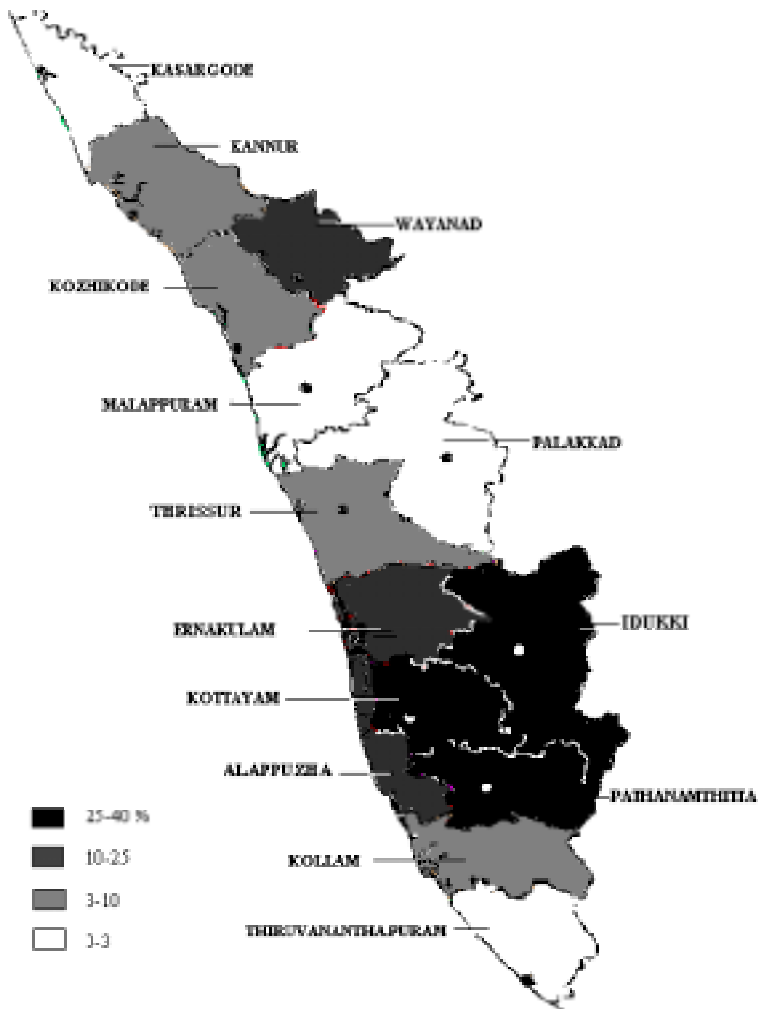
THE GROWTH OF THE SYRIAN CHRISTIAN POPULATION

Syrian Christians, and as a matter of fact Christians of any type, did not exist in Kerala before AD 52, the year St Thomas is said to have landed in Malabar. At the time of his sojourn in Kerala, he was perhaps the only “Syrian Christian” in the state. The number did increase when he converted to Christianity a few Namboothiri families. Their number increased several-fold subsequently with the arrival of new waves of Christians from Syria, Persia, Babylon, etc.

Until the arrival of missionaries such as John of Montecarvino (1288), Friar Jordanus (1330), John De Marignolli (1347), all the Christians in Kerala came under the label “Syrian Christians”. The situation changed partly with the arrival of these missionaries and more dramatically by the beginning of the 16th century when the Synod of Diamper (Udayamperur) was held in 1599 by Archbishop Alexio de Menezies of Goa and Archdeacon George of the Syrian Church. Amidst much opposition, by threat and persuasion, Archbishop Menezies succeeded in making the Syrians acknowledge allegiance to the Pope. The Syrians who acknowledged allegiance to the Pope became Roman Catholics and came to be known as Romo-Syrians. They were a minority in the beginning, but their number increased rapidly until 1653. However, with the oath of the Coonan Kurise of that year, most of the Romo-Syrians turned back to the Syrian fold. In the course of time, however, the Romo Syrians grew in numbers and became a majority. Thus, the Syrian Christians were split into two groups: the Romo Syrians and the Syrian Jacobites. Later, several more denominations became separated from the Jacobite Syrians. At present, the principal denominations included under the label “Syrian Christians” are:

Romo- Syrians (Roman Catholics)

Syrian-Orthodox (Jacobite)



Syrians Reformed (Mar Thoma)

Anglican Syrians (Syrians who joined the Church Mission Society)

In the beginning of the new millennium, the number of Syrian Christians in Kerala was estimated to be about 3 million, nearly half the total number of Christians in the state. At the beginning of the last century, in 1901, their number was only about 672 thousand. Thus, during the 20th century, the number of Syrian Christians had increased 4.5 times. This increase was lower than that of the general population (5 times) or that of all Christians (6.6 times).

Table 3. Syrian Christian Population of Kerala, 1901-2031*.

	Kerala	Christians	Syrians	Non-Syrians
1901	6396262	891767	672124	219643
1911	7147673	1101289	794690	306599
1921	7802127	1376354	950922	425432
1931	9507050	1856024	1227945	628079
1941	11031541	2263888	1434625	829263
1951	13549118	2825720	1715777	1109943
1961	1690371	3587365	2088563	1498802
1971	21347375	4494089	2509948	1984141
1981	25453680	5233865	2806398	2427467
1991	29074052	5620666	2920779	2699886
2001	31838796	5928552	3018272	2910279
2011	34055738	6129781	3021403	3108378
2021	35473892	6142344	3016089	3126254
2031	35353235	5891171	2850793	3040378

* *Figures for the period 1901 to 1941 are estimates based on census data of Travancore, Cochín, Malabar. Data from Kerala Migration Study are used to derive estimates for recent years. Figures for 2001 to 2031 are projections made by the author.*

During the last century the Syrian Christian population grew at more or less the same rate as the non-Christian population of Kerala, 1.5 percent per year. The Latin Christians had, however, a higher growth rate, 2.6 percent per year. In the beginning of the last century the growth rate of the Syrian Christians was about 1.7 percent compared with as much as 3.3 among the non-Syrian Christians. The Syrian Christians always had a lower rate of population growth in the last century. Although the rate had decreased very considerably in the last decade, yet differentials persist: 0.76 percent among the non-Syrians, but only 0.33 percent among the Syrians.

In the beginning of the last century, the Syrian Christians had a growth rate higher than that of the non-Christians, but by 1961 the Syrians lost out, and the non-Christians gained the upper hand. The non-Christians maintained higher growth rates through the rest of the century. In the last decade the growth rate of the Syrian Christians was only one-third that of the non-Christians.

An explanation is called for this persistent difference. Prior to 1961, the Syrian Christians had a higher rate of natural increase (higher birth rate and lower death rate). In addition, their numbers increased partly through conversion from other faiths. After 1951, the conversion factor had more or less disappeared (statistically speaking). Owing to the relatively higher acceptance rate of family planning methods among the Syrian Christians, the natural increase among them decreased more rapidly. An additional factor is the higher out-migration rate among them.

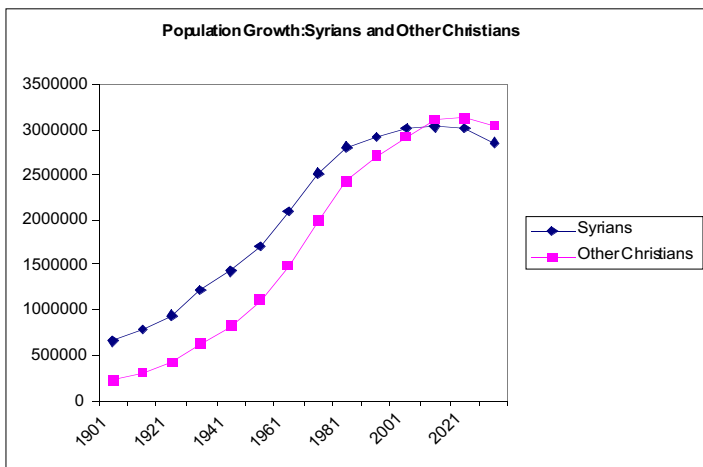
The Syrian Christians versus Other communities

The differential growth rate had its impact on the proportion of the Syrian Christians in the total population as well as in the total Christian

population of the state. In the beginning of the last century, the Syrian Christians had constituted about 10 percent of the total population of the state. By the end of the century, their proportion remained at more or less the same level as in the beginning, 9.5 percent. In between, there were fluctuations. The highest proportion of Syrian Christian population in Kerala was around 1941 when it was about 13 percent of the total population of the state.

The Latin Christians had an entirely different trajectory, their share of the total population of the state increasing consistently from 3.4 percent in 1901 to 9.5 percent in 1981 and declining marginally to 9.1 percent by 2001.

Syrian Christians as a percent of the all Christians had been more than 75 percent in the beginning of the last century. Their share declined steadily and reached just about 50 percent at the end of the century. Corresponding to every hundred Christians, the Syrian Christians had a relative loss of about 25 persons during the century, a very significant loss indeed.



Regional Variation

For recent years the Kerala Migration survey is the only source for an analysis of the regional variation of the number of Syrian Christians. According to this source, in 1998, the largest number of Kerala's Syrian Christians lived in Pathanamthitta District, 21 percent of the total. Nearly the same proportion of the Syrian Christians lived in Kottayam District also, 20.8 percent.

More than 85 percent of the Syrian Christian population live in the six central Kerala districts, from Pathanamthitta to Thrissur. More than half of them lives in the three Travancore districts, Pathanamthitta, Kottayam and Idukki. The Malabar districts, Malappuram to Kasaragod are the abode of only 10 percent of this community.

In four districts, Alappuzha and Pathanamthitta in the south and Wyanad and Kannur in the north, more than 80 percent of the Christians are Syrians. In Kottayam and Idukki in the south and Kozhykode in the north, more than two-thirds of the Christians are Syrians. The district in the extreme south (Thiruvananthapuram) and that in the extreme north (Kasaragod) have relatively few Syrians among their Christians, less than 6 percent.

CHRISTIANS BY DENOMINATIONS

The Syrian Christians in Kerala consists of a number of different denominations: the Romo-Syrians (the Jacobite or Orthodox Christians who became Roman Catholics under Portuguese influence), the Jacobite Syrians (the original Syrian Christians), the Reformed Syrians (Mar Thoma), and Protestant Syrians, etc.

Rome-Syrians

Census data for Christians by denominations are available for the period before 19951. The Romo-Syrians were undoubtedly the

numerically dominant group among the Syrian Christians of Travancore. They constituted a little under 50 percent in 1941. Earlier, in 1901 and 1911, they had accounted for more than half the total. Over the period 1901-41, the proportion of Romo-Syrians had decreased slightly.

In Cochin State, they formed a much larger proportion, constituting 87 percent of the total Syrian population in the state. Unlike the situation in Travancore, the proportion of the Romo-Syrians had kept on increasing in Cochin, from 83 percent in 1901 to 87 percent in 1941.

Over the first four decades of the twentieth century, the Romo-Syrians increased by about 2.4 times. The increase was slightly larger in Cochin than in the Travancore and was of the same order as that of the Jacobites, but much lower than that of the Mar Thoma Syrians.

About 30 percent of the Romo-Syrians in Kerala lived in Cochin State. In the Travancore State, Meenachil Taluk had the largest proportion of the Romo-Syrians. Next in importance was Changanaserry Taluk. Cochin State, Meenachil and Changanaserry together had 56 percent of the total Romo-Syrians. If Kottayam, Thodupuzha Vaikom, Moovattupuzha Kunnathunadu and Ambalapuzha are also included the proportion of Romo-Syrians exceeds 90 percent.

Jacobite Syrians

The Jacobite group ranks second in order of size among the Syrians Christians. As mentioned earlier, before the arrival of European missionaries and bishops in Kerala, almost all the Syrians had belonged to the Jacobite community. With the arrival of the Portuguese, their numbers began decreasing steadily from year to year. In 1901, the Jacobite group formed about 40 percent in Travancore but only 16 percent in Cochin. In Travancore and Cochin taken as a whole, they came to about 36 percent. By 1941, their representation declined from 40 percent

to 36 percent in Travancore, from 16 percent to 12 percent in Cochin and from 36 percent to 31 percent for the combined area. The time trend during 1901-41 among the Jacobites was similar to that of the Romo-Syrians.

Geographically, the Jacobite Syrians were less concentrated than the Romo-Syrians. Twelve takuks included more than 90 percent and four taluks Tiruvalla, Moovattupuzha Kunnathunadu Kottayam more than 50 percent of their total population.

The Mar Thoma Syrians

The Mar Thoma Syrians are the third important group among the Syrian Christian community. Although they constitute only a relatively small group in the community, they showed the largest growth during 1901-1941. In 1901, about 8 percent of the Syrians in Travancore were Mar Thoma Syrian Christians. During 1901-41 their share increased to 15 percent. Cochin state had only very few Mar Thoma Christians, only half of one percent in 1901, and one percent in 1941. Thus, the Mar Thoma Christians of Kerala were essentially a Travancore community during the pre-Independence period. During that period very few of them lived outside the Travancore State, especially outside the central Travancore taluks of Tiruvalla, Chegannoor and Kozenchery.

Tiruvalla taluk had 42 percent of the Mar Thoma Syrian Christians in 1931. Thiruvalla and Pathanamthitta taluks together had 56 percent of the total. The other taluks with high proportions of Mar Thoma Syrians in 1931 were Kottarakara, Mavelikara and Kunnathunadu.

Other Syrian Christians

Besides Romo-Syrians, Jacobite Syrians and Mar Thoma Syrians there are a few other denominations, which also come under the category

of Syrian Christians. The information about them contained in the Travancore and Cochin censuses were found to be not very precise

Some of the protestant communities had been no doubt part of the Syrian Christian community during the period prior to their joining these denominations, but others not. There is no way to separate the two categories. If we strictly follow the definition that Syrian Christians are those who follow the Syrian Rite, they may not strictly come under the group of Syrian Christians.

The Roman Catholics (Latin Rite)

A major Christian community in Kerala, which had a small beginning, but is now one of the largest in the state is the Catholics of the Latin Rite. In the censuses they were called the Roman Catholics. According to the Kerala Migration Survey, the number of Latin Christians (Roman Catholics and Protestants and others) was estimated to be about 3 million in 1998, slightly less than the total of all Syrian Christians.

In 1941, their number was about 584,000 persons in Travancore and Cochin combined showing an increase of 188 percent (2.88 times) during the 40-year period 1901-41. It is equivalent to annual growth rate of 2.64 percent.

Cochin State with about 30 percent of the total is a major centre of the Latin Catholics. In Travancore, Neyattumkara taluk had the largest number accounting for about 10 percent of the total in Travancore-Cochin area. Most of the other centres of Latin Catholics are on the coastal belt of the state.

Geographical Concentration

On the basis of the statistics given above, a notable feature of the Christian communities in Kerala becomes evident: they are very unevenly

distributed over the state. Some taluks have very high proportions of Christians, while others have none at all. There are differences between the various denominations in this respect: some are more evenly distributed than others are.

A measure of the degree of concentration is the Index of concentration. For the Hindus, the index of concentration is 456 compared to 600 for all Christians. Thus, the Hindus are more evenly distributed than the Christians in Kerala are. Within the Christian community, the index varied from 742 for the Romo-Syrians (the most dispersed community) to 958 for the Syrian Mar Thoma community (the most concentrated community in 1931).

Christian Denominations at the turn of the Century.

Much of the preceding discussion is based on data for the period before 1951. As mentioned earlier Indian censuses of recent years do not classify Christians by denominations. The Kerala Migration Study did not classify the Christians beyond the Syrian-non-Syrian classification either. However, most of the Church authorities maintain some sort of records of the members of their parishes. But the quality of their data is not very good and varies from one denomination to another. For the same denomination, the numbers vary from one source to another. On the whole, it seems that the Church authorities tend to overestimate the number of their flock.

Based on the data given by the Church authorities and various other sources, and assuming that the total number of Christians in Kerala in 2001 is about 60 lakh (this estimate is based on the 2001 census) our best estimate of the distribution of Kerala Christians by denominations at the beginning of the new millennium is as given in Table 4.

Table 4. Estimate of Christians in Kerala by Denominations, 2001*

	Number (in Lakh)	Percent
Roman Catholics	33.0	55.0
Jacobite (two factions combined)	16.0	26.7
Syrian Mar Thoma	4.8	8.0
Church of South India	3.5	5.8
Other Episcopal churches	0.5	0.8
Non-Episcopal churches	1.2	2.0
Salvation Army	0.5	0.8
Others	0.5	0.9
Total	60.0	100.0

- *Excluding members living outside Kerala State.*
- *A rough estimate places the number of Kerala Christians living outside the state at about 20- 25 percent of those living within the state (12 to 15 lakh).*

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHRISTIANS

The large-scale increase in the number of members of Christian community as a whole and of Syrian Christians especially (6.6 times and 4.5 times respectively) during the past hundred years, 1901-2001 was accompanied by dramatic changes in its demographic structure. Demographically speaking, the Christian population has transformed itself during the period from a relatively backward community to one of the most advanced communities in the State. Dramatic changes took place in its sex composition, age composition and marital status composition. These changes were caused by equally dramatic changes

in the basic demographic parameters, namely, fertility, mortality and migration.

Fertility Kerala's birth rate in 1900 must have been one of the highest in India, probably around 45 births per 1000 population. The rate had remained fairly stable at this high level during much of the first half of the last century. When it started declining in the 'fifties, the cause was initially the increase in the age at marriage, which used to be very low among them. By the 1960s another more important factor came into operation, which accelerated the decline in the birth rate. This factor was the family planning programme, especially its sterilisation component. Then came legalised abortion. The three factors - age at marriage, sterilisation and legalised abortions - succeeded in reducing the birth rate so much so that by the end of the last century, Kerala's birth rate became the lowest in India. The state's birth rate reached a low level of about 17 per 1000 population with that of the Syrian Christian's birth rate around 16 per 1000 population.

Analysis of the child-woman ratio calculated from censuses in the early decades of the nineteenth century indicated that in the beginning of the last century, the fertility rate among the Syrian Christians had been higher than among most other communities in Kerala. Hindus had the lowest and Muslims came in-between. The average number of children per woman having completed the childbearing period also indicated that, in the past, the Syrian Christians were ahead of the other religious groups with respect to fertility rate

An entirely different picture of fertility differentials emerged by the end of the century. The child-woman ratio among the Syrians was 257 as against 350 among Muslims and 256 among Hindus (KMS 1998). Rough estimates of the birth rates of the major communities in Kerala in the 1980s and the 1990s are given below (Calculated from Kerala Censuses).

Decade	Hindus	Muslims	Christians
1981-1991	22.1	28.3	19.5
1991-2001	17.4	20.5	16.7

Thus, by the end of the century, not only had fertility declined dramatically (from a birth rate of about 40-45 in the beginning of the century to 15-16 by the end of the century) the inter-community differentials themselves have narrowed down significantly.

Two fertility surveys conducted by the author, one in 1980 and the other in 1991, gave fertility measures by community. They showed that Nairs had the lowest and Muslims the highest fertility rates. The fertility level of the Christians was higher than that of the Nairs but only marginally. Additional support to this conclusion comes from a comparison of the proximate determinants of fertility.

The Christian community had the highest rate of sterilisation both in 1980 and 1991. While the proportion of Christian couples who had undergone sterilisation in 1991 was nearly 50 percent, the corresponding figures for Muslim couples was 34 percent and for Nair couples was 34 percent. Christian women who used to have the lowest age at marriage in the beginning of the last century had the highest age at marriage at the end of the century.

Although the statistical evidence given above is somewhat fragmentary, the overall conclusion seems to be robust. The Christian community in Kerala had the lowest age at marriage and the highest fertility rate till the end of the first half of the twentieth century; by the end of the century they have the highest age at marriage (among women), the highest family planning user rate (chiefly sterilisation), and the lowest fertility rate. They must also have had the highest abortion rate; statistical evidence in support of this claim is, however, lacking.

Mortality It is quite likely that at the beginning of the past century, the mortality rate among the Syrian Christians was higher than among of the other communities. The relatively early age at marriage of the Syrian Christian woman and the large number of children born to her in her early ages, as well as the adverse sex ratio of the Syrian Christian population, especially that in the child-bearing ages, indicate that this community had had a higher mortality rate than the non-Christians in Kerala. The Syrian Christians lived in contiguous taluks located in regions with a relatively higher incidence of malaria and lower density of hospitals and other health care facilities. It is difficult, however, to cite specific data to support this conclusion.

By the 1940s this situation seems to have changed. The Travancore census of 1941 showed that, while about 70 percent of children ever born survived among the Syrian Christians as against 66 percent for all the communities together. Several other sources of information on infant mortality also support the conclusion that the Syrian Christians had by the time of Independence of India a lower level of mortality than most other communities of Kerala.

The two fertility surveys mentioned above (1980 and 1991) provided some information on the infant mortality rate among the different communities. According to the 1980 survey, IMR among 1970-80 birth cohorts was 35 among the Syrian Christians, 59 among Ezhavas, 53 among Latin Christians, and 47 among Nairs. The Muslims in this study were from Cochin side and were not a representative of the Muslims of Kerala as a whole. The 1991 Survey also gave similar pattern of differentials. The IMR among Christians was 12 as compared to 42 among Muslims and 34 among Hindus (including Scheduled caste/tribes).

Thus, in the case of mortality also the general conclusion is fairly robust. Mortality rate among the Syrian Christians had been relatively

higher in the past, but it is no longer so. Among the major communities, today Syrian Christians enjoy the lowest mortality rates

The proximate determinants of mortality support this overall conclusion. More than 80 percent of women belonging to the Syrian Christian community take tetanus injection (according to the 1991 study). The corresponding percentage among Muslims was only 61 percent and that among Hindus was 67 percent. A similar pattern was observed in the use of folic acid, haemoglobin test, etc. However Muslims scored higher rank as far as registration with an ANN at the time pregnancy was concerned.

Thus, during the past century, both fertility and mortality rates of the various communities in Kerala underwent transition, not only with respect to levels, but also with respect to differentials. In the past Nairs had lower mortality rates, but in recent years the rates for Christians are lower. The rate of decline of mortality has been higher among the Christians. The reason could be higher utilisation of the medical facilities by the Christians, particularly with respect to maternity care. Among women of the Syrian Christian community, about 86 percent of the deliveries take place in hospitals, Government or private. The corresponding proportion among the Muslims (1991 Survey) is only 49 percent, among Nairs about 59 percent and among Ezhavas 69 percent. Thus medical attention at the time of delivery has been a factor in the more rapid mortality decline among Christians, particularly among the Syrian Christians.

Migration. Censuses do not provide direct information on migration by community. However, indirect estimations show that Christians have the highest net out-migration rate among the communities in Kerala. The average net migration from the state was -2.8 persons per 1000 population during the 10-year period 1991-2001. However the

rate among Christians was as high as -5.2 persons per 1,000 population.

Thus, for Christians, during 1991-2001, the birth rate being 16.7, and the death rate 6.1, the rate of natural increase would be 10.6 per 1000 population. With a net migration of -5.2 , the decade growth rate would be 0.54, the rate given in this paper.

Sex Composition Kerala is known all over the world for its high sex ratio (more females than males). The state is unique in this matter among the Indian states. In 2001, the sex ratio of the total population of Kerala was 1058 compared to 1036 in 1991, an increase of 22 units over the 1991 census. Females constituted 51.4 percent of the total population of the state. The situation was similar in all the previous census years since 1901.

Analysis of the census data of Travancore and Cochin States for the early decades of the century showed, however, that the number of females was actually less than that of males in several years till 1941, although the sex ratios of Travancore and Cochin states were close to 1000.

Among the non-Christian population also, the number of males exceeded the number females in the past, but the excess was a little less than that among Christians. The Census Commissioners of that period had often brought attention to this latter consistent pattern of deficiency of women among the Christians.

“The deficiency of women among the Christians and the Muslims cannot be due to migration, because the large majority of the migrants are Hindus. The explanation must, therefore, be looked for in the higher female mortality among them. ...among Christians and particularly among the Syrian Christians ... child marriage is more prevalent than

among the Hindus. Premature maternity may, therefore, be the primary cause of a higher female mortality among the Syrian Christians. The circumstances may have contributed to the highest sex ratio (females per 100 males) among the Hindus, a lower ratio among the Christians and the lowest among the Muslims". (Travancore Census Report, 1931, p 131).

Two conclusions emerge from the analysis of the sex ratio of the Christian population based on census data.

First, in the beginning of the past century, there had existed a deficit of women among the Syrian Christians, but by the end of the century the deficit has been wiped out, and in fact there was excess. The proportion of women among the Syrian Christians showed an increasing trend through out the century.

Second, the proportion of females was in most cases lower among the Syrian Christians than among Hindus or other communities.

In the early years of the past century, migration was not a major factor affecting the sex composition of Kerala's population. Therefore, the larger deficit of females among the Kerala Christians in the beginning of the past century must be considered as indication of the higher mortality among women than among the men in that community, as surmised by the census commissioners of the states of Travancore and Cochin. The transformation from a deficit of women to excess of women was an integral part of the demographic transformation in the community. This transformation is now largely over, as the expectation of life in Kerala has reached a very high level.

Age Composition The age composition of the Christian population and, as a matter of fact, of all communities in Kerala, in the

beginning of the last century, was typical of a population with high fertility and high mortality. The population included a large number of children and relatively a smaller number of the elderly population.

In 1901, more than 40 percent of the Travancore population had been under 15 years of age. One hundred years later, the proportion came down to 24 percent, a decline of 42 percent. At the other end of the age scale, the proportion of the elderly increased from 3.7 percent to nearly 12 percent, a 222 percent increase during the same period. There was practically no change in the proportion of the young adults (15-34 years); it remained at about a third of the total population. On the other hand, the older adults (35-59 years) experienced an increase of 40 percent, from 21 percent to 29 percent.

Thus, during the hundred years 1900-2000, the Christian population, especially the Syrian Christian population transformed itself from a very young population to a relatively old population, the oldest among the various communities in the state. More than one-eighth of the Syrian Christians is today senior citizens aged 60 years or more.

Marital Status Composition Christian women used to be married at an early age in the beginning of the past century. Their average age at marriage was less than 15 years in 1901. The corresponding averages were slightly higher among Hindus and Muslims.

At ages 10-14 years 85 percent of the Christian girls were unmarried, but by the time they reached ages 15-19 years, only 34 percent of them remained unmarried. By about age 16 years (median age) one half of the Christian girls were married.

The corresponding percentages among Hindu girls were 91 percent for ages 10-14 years, 48 percent for ages 15-19 years and 18 percent for

ages 20-24 years. The median age at marriage among Hindus was 17.3, years, 1.4 years higher than that of the Christians.

At ages 20-24 years, only 10 percent of the Christian women fell in the category of the unmarried as against 18 percent for all Hindu women. Even at ages over 60 years, fewer of Christian women than non-Christian remained unmarried.

Widowhood Dramatic changes took place in the widowhood rate among the Christian women. It was lowest among the Christians compared to that among the other communities. In 1891, at age 60 years and above, 71.4 of the Christian women were found to be widowed. The corresponding figure was higher among both Hindus and Muslims. By 1998, the proportion of widowed among Christian women had decreased to 47.4 percent. High rates of decline were observed among Hindus and Muslims also, but the widowhood rate among the Christian women remained lower than that among the Hindu and the Muslim women.

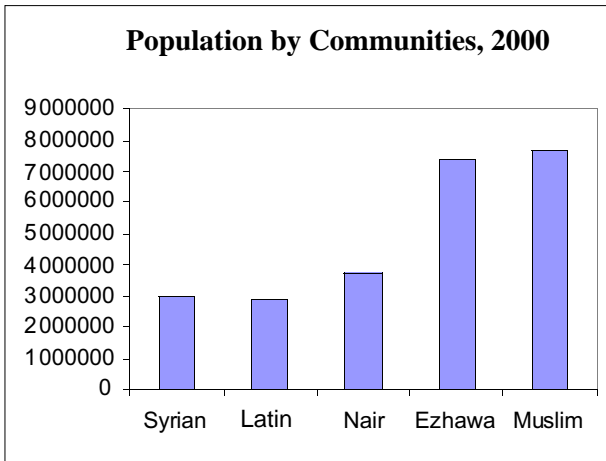
SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE SYRIAN CHRISTIANS BY THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Based on census data, the previous section described the demographic characteristics of the Christians in the past century. The censuses, however, do not give much information on the Syrian Christians as distinct from all other Christians. This information is given here using data from Kerala Migration Study. This section gives the socio-economic profile of the Syrian Christians who live in Kerala as compared to those of the other major communities of the state. *

* The Kerala Migration Study (KMS) was based on a sample survey that collected information from 10,000 households selected at random from all the 14 districts of the state and includes households from all the 61 taluks of the state. The main objective of the study was measurement of migration and its socio-economic

Demographic Characteristics of the Syrian Christians

The size of the population is the most important demographic characteristic of a community. From this point of view, the Syrians Christians come last but one among the five communities included in this comparative analysis. At the end of the past century, there were fewer Syrian Christians living in Kerala than Nairs, Ezhavas, or Muslims. The number of Latin Christians* was slightly smaller. Muslims are the most numerous, a little less than a quarter of the total. Ezhavas come second but they are almost as numerous as Muslims.\



In the past, the Syrian Christians were more numerous than Muslims in both Travancore and Cochin States. For example, in 1941, the Syrian Christians constituted about 32.3 percent in Travancore and

impact on Kerala society. It collected information on most of the usual personal characteristics and household characteristics of the sample population. The total population was classified into 5 communities: Syrian Christians, Latin Christians, Nairs, Ezhavas and Muslims.

*

In this report, Latin Christians include all Christians other than Syrian Christians

28.8.percent in Cochin. On the other hand Muslims were only 7.1 percent in Travancore, and 7.7 percent in Cochin. Malabar had a very high proportion of Muslims with only less than 2 percent Christians

Thus, the Syrian Christians who were accustomed to occupy a dominant position in Travancore and Cochin states were reduced to a relatively lower position numerically among the different communities of Kerala. The principal factor behind the reduction was of course the state re-organisation of 1956. But two other factors were also involved in the relative decline in the proportion of Syrian Christians in Kerala. They are the higher migration rate and the relatively higher rate of fertility decline among them. Precise measurement of the relative contribution of these factors is difficult, as the relevant data are not available. After the state re-organisation in 1956, relatively low birth rate and high internal migration rate have been mainly responsible for the decrease in the proportion of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala

In 2001 there were more females than males in Kerala. This is true for all communities in the state. However, the proportion of females among the Christian community is lower than that among Hindus or Muslims. Among the Christians the Latin community has the lowest proportion of women with a sex ratio (females per 1000 males) of 1030 compared with 1036 among the Syrian Christians.

The ratio of children 0-4 years to women in fertile age group (the Child-Woman Ratio) is a good indicator of the fertility level. Nairs have the lowest child-woman ratio, indicating that they have the lowest fertility rate. The Syrian Christians come second. All the communities, except Muslims have relatively low Child-woman ratios, indicating the relatively low fertility level of Kerala in general. A rough estimate of the birth rate of the Syrian Christians in 2000 was 15.2 births per 1000 population

compared to 17.0 for the state as a whole, 22.5 among Muslims and 14.4 in the Nair Community.

The number of children per 100 adults (the Child-Dependency Ratio) follows the same pattern as that of the birth rate: Nairs have the lowest rate 32.8 percent and the Syrians come next with 35.8 percent. The State average is 40.9 percent. On the other hand, old-age dependency is the highest among the Syrian Christians and the lowest among Muslims. The elderly constitute 13.3 percent among the Syrian Christians, more than one elderly person among 8 persons. In contrast, there are only 9 elderly persons among 100 of the total population of the State and only 6 elderly persons (less than half of the Syrians) among Muslims of Kerala.

As mentioned earlier, Syrian Christian females had historically one of the lowest ages at marriage in Kerala. Several census commissioners attributed this phenomenon to the deficit of women in the Syrian Christian population. The situation at the end of the century is found to be totally different. The Syrian Christians have the highest proportion of unmarried women in ages 15-19 years and 20-24 years. While 58 percent of the Syrian Christian women 20-24 years were single, only 18 percent of the Muslim women in that age group were similarly situated. The State average was 38 percent.

On the basis of its advanced stage of the demographic transition, one should expect a relatively high widowhood rate in the Syrian Christian community. This expected pattern is actually observed among the Syrian Christian males but not among females. While only about 1.3 percent of the men (all ages) were widowed in the state as a whole, the corresponding ratio was 3.5 percent among the Syrian Christians. Similarly at age 60 years and above, 15.2 percent of the Syrian Christian males were widowed, but only 10.4 percent of the Muslim men were widowed.

Among women, however, the pattern was different. Syrian Christians do not have the highest proportion of widowhood rate among their women; in fact at ages 60 and above, they have the lowest widowhood rate: 48.1 compared to 67.4 among Muslims, 66.0 among Nairs, 63.6 among Ezhavas and 61.6 for the state as whole. This is contrary to the expected pattern for the demographically advanced Syrian Christian community. One possible explanation for this situation is the high rate of out-migration rate in the community. Widowed Syrian Christian mothers who have a migrant son or daughter move out of the state and live with their children. It could be the relatively high rate of out-migration among Syrian Christian women, which has resulted in a low widowhood rate among them within the State. Another possible reason could be possible higher re-marriage rate among the Syrian Christian women.

Migration Migration has been a major avenue by which the Syrian Christian Community has adjusted to the demographic pressure, which they experienced after the 1940s. Its out-migration rate was higher than that of any other community in the state. At present, Syrian Christians are only second to Muslims with respect to emigration. In this matter, the Muslim community surpasses all others by a wide margin. However, large-scale emigration is a very recent phenomenon as far as Kerala is concerned, but out-migration to other states in India has a much longer history. In this process the Syrian Christians had the largest share. In earlier years, before large-scale emigration to the Gulf countries began, even emigration could have been higher among the Syrians than among Muslims.

Although, the Syrian Christians come next to Muslims with respect to external migration, they score better than all other communities with

respect to emigration to the USA. Among the emigrants to the United States of American, this community constituted about two-thirds of the total for the state. Together with the Latin Christians, Christians formed more than three-fourths of the emigrants to this destination.

One of the outcomes of emigration from a household is receipt of remittances from abroad. All the communities have received remittance from their people working abroad. The average remittances per household was the highest among the Muslims, about Rs 11,000 compared with only about Rs 7,000 among the Syrian Christians. One reason for the difference is the higher average number of emigrants per households among Muslims. The amount of remittance per emigrant has been highest among the Latin Christians. Emigrants from Syrian Christian households do not seem to have been sending as much money back home as their brethren in the Latin Christian and Nair communities have been doing.

Socio-economic Characteristics of the Syrian Christians

Education The Syrian Christians are well known for their achievements in education. Therefore, we should expect them to compare favourably with the other communities in the state in educational achievements. According to the 1931 census of Travancore, 82 percent of the Christian males and 74 percent of the Christian females in the age group 10-14 were literate. The corresponding rates among the Hindus were 77 percent and 59 percent and for Muslims to 60 and 30 percent respectively. There were similar differences in other groups also.

Within the Syrian Christian group, the Mar Thoma Syrians had the highest literacy rate.

In the Kerala Migration study two measures were used to compare the educational achievement of the communities. The first is an index of educational level, which is a weighted average of the distribution of the population by educational level. A second measure was the proportion of the population who had passed the secondary level (including those who have a degree). These measures for the various communities are given in Table 5

Table 5. Measures of Educational Achievement, by Community

Community	Index of Education			Percent with secondary Education or a degree		
	M	F	T	M	F	T
Syrians	7.96	7.86	7.91	37.98	38.35	38.17
Latin	7.04	6.91	6.97	24.75	25.66	25.21
Nairs	8.22	7.65	7.93	40.58	35.31	37.85
Ezhawas	7.20	6.83	7.01	23.66	23.96	23.81
Muslims	6.38	5.85	6.10	14.62	11.24	12.84

The Syrian Christians are seen to be on the top as far as educational achievements are concerned. About 38.2 percent of them had a secondary school certificate or higher degrees. The nearest in terms of achievement are Nairs with a proportion of 37.8 percent. Muslims are found to be at the bottom with only 12.8 percent.

Employment Status The Syrian Christians is not the community, which enjoys the highest level of employment in the state. While about two-thirds of the Syrian Christian males are gainfully employed the proportions are much larger in the case of Latin Christians, Ezhawas and Muslims. Only among Nairs is the level of employment of males lower than that of the Syrian Christians.

The situation is not altogether different among females. The rate of gainful employment rate among women in the Syrian Christian community is lower than among the Latin Christians, Ezhawas, and Nairs, but higher than among Muslims.

Occupation Majority of the Syrian Christians is self-employed, about 45 percent. No other community had such a high proportion of their workers engaged in self-employment. With respect to employment in the private sector also, the Syrian Christians are ahead of all other communities. About a quarter of the labour force among the Syrians work as labourers in either agriculture or non-agriculture. This is lowest percentage among the five communities. A similar pattern holds among women also.

Nairs have the highest proportion of male workers employed in the Government and the semi-Government sectors. The Syrian Christians come second with a higher proportion in Government services than is the case with the other three communities. Among women, however, Syrian Christian community is at par with Nairs with respect to employment in Government services. The overall index of occupational status places Nairs on the top with 247 points compared with 229 points for the Syrian Christians. Muslims come last with 173 points only. On the whole, the occupational status of the females is much higher than that of the males, but the pattern of community differentials remains the same for both females and males.

Unemployment. The Syrians rank lower than Nairs and Muslims, but higher than Latin Christians and Ezhawas with respect to the male unemployment level. The unemployment rate among Syrian Christian women is about 30 percent. It is only among the women in Latin Christian and Ezhava communities that unemployment levels are significantly lower than that among the Syrian Christians.

Ownership of Land The Syrian Christians lead all other communities with respect to ownership of land, about 123 cents per household. Much of this is garden land comprising tea, rubber, and coconut estates. They are ahead of all other communities with respect to wet land also; 18 cents compared to 10 cents for all the communities together.

Housing and Housing amenities The Syrian Christians have better housing conditions than all the other communities. The proportion of Syrian Christian households possessing “luxurious” or “very good” houses comes to 22 percent compared to 21 percent among Nairs and only 9 among the Latin Christians. The index of housing quality is 323 among the Syrian Christians compared to 293 for all communities together.

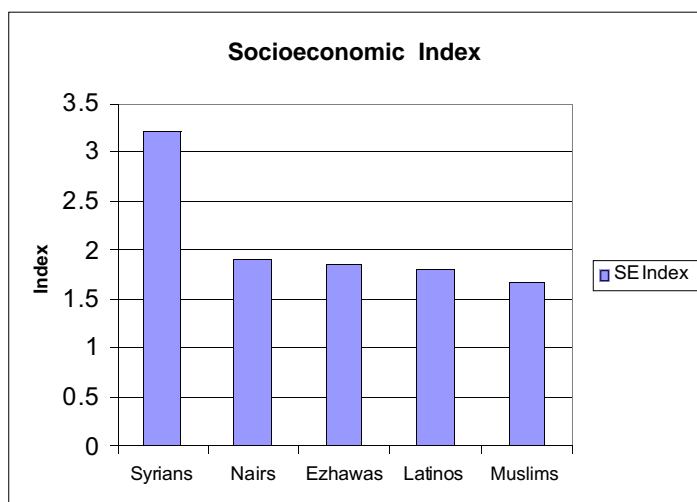
Syrian Christian households are found to possess, on the average, much larger amenities than other communities: electric connection, gas connection for cooking and flush toilets (with or without water closet). The proportion of Syrian Christian households possessing gas connection was 39 percent compared to only 12 percent for the Ezhavas, 18 percent for Muslims, 19 percent for Latin Christians and 26 percent for Nairs.

Possession of Consumer Durable Kerala households have become accustomed to possessing modern household durables such as television, refrigerator, telephone, gas stove for cooking, etc. In the Kerala Migration Study households were asked about the possession of 23 different consumer durable items. Nine of them are given in Table 6, which gives the proportion of households possessing them, belonging to each community. The proportions are the highest among the Syrian Christians. About 56 percent of the Syrian Christian families possess a television, compared to only 31 percent among Muslims, 40 percent among Ezhavas, 43 percent among the Latin Christians. The Nair

households have approximately the same proportion as that of the Syrian Christian community. Nairs come close to the Syrian Christians in consumption habits also, however large differences are observed between the two communities in all items of consumer durables except television. While 38 percent of the Syrian Christian families have refrigerators in their houses only 27 percent of the Nair households had this facility. Thus, the Syrian Christians undoubtedly stand ahead of the other communities with respect to possession of household consumer durables.

Table 6. Percent of Households Possessing Consumer Goods, 1998

Cons. Goods	Syr.	Lat.	Nair	Ezh	Mus
Car	6.4	2.0	3.5	1.7	2.2
Motor Cycle	18.1	10.7	11.7	8.1	7.7
Telephone	29.7	11.9	23.7	11.3	17.9
Television	55.5	42.8	55.0	40.0	31.0
VCR	18.0	10.7	12.8	8.3	10.9
Water Pump	43.2	26.3	35.1	25.2	35.4
Fridge	38.2	17.5	26.6	15.5	24.0
Gas Stove	41.7	20.6	29.9	14.8	21.9
Wash.machine	13.8	7.1	8.1	5.0	7.5



The Syrian Christians *versus* Other communities : an overall comparison

In the foregoing discussions the five major communities of Kerala were ranked from 1 to 5 according to the level of socio-economic indicators. Some were ranked in the descending order (e.g. population size, Index of educational level) while others were ranked in the ascending order. The implied assumption is that rank 5 is the most desirable and rank 1 is the least desirable. Whether an index is to be ranked in ascending or descending order is a decision based on some degree of subjective judgement. Is a large population more desirable than small population? We assumed that the large population is more desirable and is given rank 5. The smallest population is given rank 1. Similarly, is a low fertility rate more desirable than high fertility? . We assumed that a low fertility level is more desirable and is therefore given rank 5. With respect to education or unemployment and similar measures, there is not much of a problem in taking decision. Illiteracy is less desirable than literacy and this in turn is less desirable than higher levels of education. Illiteracy is given rank 1 and University degree is ranked 5.

A logical outcome of such a classification is the conclusion that a community with a large number of “5”s is more advanced in its socio-economic development than a community with a large number of “1”s.

For example the Syrian Christians have 38 rank “5” and only 2 rank “1”. The average rank was 3.20, the highest for any community. The socio-economic index for Syrian Christians is 3.2 Muslims have 12 rank “5” and 19 rank “1”. The average rank is 1.68, the lowest among the five communities. . These indices are shown in the figure above. The Syrian Christians are thus the most advanced community in Kerala from the point of the socio-economic indicators. Nairs come second and the Ezhvawas ranked third. The Latin Christians rank fourth among the five

communities. Muslims come last. The gap between the Syrian Christians and the other communities is found to be very large.

SYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN THE NEW MILLANIAM: SOME POINTS FOR INTROSPECTION

The demographic trends of the Syrian Christians during the last century have had a very considerable impact on their social and economic development. In the same way, their future demographic trends would have a major impact on their socio-economic conditions. A first step in understanding this impact is to spell out the future demographic trend by making a projection of the Syrian Christian population for the coming decades.

Population Projection

Table 2 gives the estimated population of Kerala by religious groups during 1901 - 2001 and a set projection of these populations for the 30 - year period 2001-2031. Table 3 gives population projection of the Syrian Christian community.

The main message of this set of projections is that the Christian population, and the Syrian Christian population in particular, is not likely to increase very much in the first quarter of the new millennium. From about 5.929 million in 2001, the Christian population would increase to a maximum of 6.142 million and then decrease to about 5.891 by 2031. The average annual growth rate during 2001-2031 would be close to zero. The proportion of the Christian population in the total population of Kerala, which was over 21 percent in 1971, would decrease to about 17 percent at the end of the first quarter of the twenty first century.

In about a decade, the number of Syrian Christians in Kerala (excluding the Syrian Christians who live outside the State) could start declining. In the projection given in Table 3, the size of the Syrian

Christians would hit its maximum (3.021 million) in 2011. Afterwards their size would be decreasing to reach 2.851 million by 2031. The net growth rate during 2001-31 would be negative (-0.19 percent per year). The proportion of the Syrian Christians (to the total population) would decrease from 9.5 percent in the beginning of this Century to 8.4 percent by 2031; that is one in every twelve Keralites . They were as much as 1 in 8 during all of the 40-year period 1921- 1961. Among the total Christian population of the State, the Syrian Christians who contributed 51 percent in 2001 would constitute only 48 percent in 2031

The future age distribution of the Christians would be very much different from that at the beginning of the 20th century or at the beginning of the 21st century. The proportion of children below 15 years decreased from about 40 percent in 1901 to 24 percent in 2001; it could decline further to 16 in 2031. In contrast the proportion of the elderly (60+) increased from 4 percent 1901 to 10 percent in 2001; it is likely to go up to 25 percent in 2031. These are dramatic changes that would have considerable consequences for the welfare of the elderly in the State.

Coping with Emerging Demographic Trends

The emerging demographic trends of the Syrian Christians pose some major points for introspection by the community leadership such as the following:

Small Size First, the Syrian Christians are now one of the smallest among the major communities of Kerala. They are only marginally larger than the Latin Christians are (1.04 times) though they had been more than three times as large (3.6 times) in 1901. The Syrian Christian population is smaller than that of Nairs (20 percent fewer); it is much smaller than the community of Ezhawavs (60 percent fewer), and of Muslim (61 percent fewer). The Syrian Christians were not always a

small socio-political entity in the past. The Christians used to constitute a third of the total population of Travancore-Cochin State in the early 1950s, and the Syrian Christians alone accounted for about 23 percent. Now in the beginning of the new millennium, their size has come down to less than one-tenth of total population of Kerala. In another quarter of a century they would only be 1 out of 12 of the Keralites.

In this era of universal adult franchise, when Governments at all levels comprise people's elected representatives, when the Governments have a decisive impact on the economic life of the people, a decrease in the relative size means to some extent decrease in the community's clout in the affairs of the state, in their ability to get their due share of the benefits from the state.

The reduction in the community's clout arising from the reduction in their numbers, would be one of the major issues that the Syrian Christian Community would have to consider in the new century.

Zero Population Growth Secondly, the situation regarding the relative population size of the community is likely to become only worse in the decades ahead. The Syrian Christians have one of the lowest birth rates among the five communities and they have one of the highest migration rates (out-migration and emigration combined). The rate of their natural increase is already below 1 percent per year, the lowest among the five communities. And most of the natural increase is being drained off through migration. The absolute population size of the Syrian Christians would be decreasing after the first decade of this century. Their number at the end of the first quarter of the present century would be smaller than their number in beginning of the millennium. The community would soon enter the Zero Population Growth regime. The proportion of the Syrian Christian community would decline from about

9.5 percent in 2001, to about 8.9 percent by 2011 and to about 8.4 percent by 2025.

The share of the public pie, goods and services provided by the Government and related institutions, which the Syrian Christians are getting now could, on this account, decrease in the coming decades

Before the advent of the Europeans, the Syrian Christians had been the only Christian community in Kerala. After their arrival, the proportion of the Syrian Christians in the Christian community in Kerala began declining, from almost 100 percent to about 50 percent now. Their share would continue to decline to about 48 percent by the end of the quarter century.

Christianity in Kerala could lose much of its uniqueness, as the community of Syrian Christians, which is its hallmark, becomes a minority among the Christians of the state.

Dispersion The Syrian Christians are now a very much more dispersed community than they used to be. In the 19th century and during much of the early 20th century they used to live in contiguous taluks of the Travancore and the Cochin States with a high degree of concentration. Their traditional occupation, (agriculture and petty commerce) did not require them to move out of their ancestral places. Now, with higher education, and occupational diversification, urbanisation and migration have become inevitable. The Syrian Christians are now spread all over the state, all over India, and all over the world. For example, nearly a quarter of the members of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church now live outside Kerala. The situation is more or less similar for the other Syrian Christian denominations too.

An area in which dispersion or de-concentration could affect the community is in elections for public offices. A concentrated community would have a higher clout in elections than a thinly dispersed community.

Swelling Elderly Population The last century began with an elderly population of only 4 percent among the Syrian Christians. The century ended with an elderly population of 10 percent. By the end of the first 25 years of the present century, the proportion of the elderly in this community would increase to nearly 25 percent. They will have the highest growth rate for any age group of the Syrian Christian community (+3 percent per year compared with -0.35 for the total population). At the same time, the proportion of the young working age population among them would decline resulting in an unbearable increase in the old-age-dependency burden of the young workers, a burden larger than that in any other community in the state.

At present in Kerala as whole, there are 350,000 pensioners. In a few years, the number of pensioners would become more than the number of persons in regular service. The adverse ratio would be highest in the Syrian Christian community. Coping with the steeply rising old age dependency would be a major task for the community, which would require considerable long-term planning and investment, and changes in some age-old habits in the community. The Government could at best provide some pension, and that too at a reduced rate, but a real solution would lie in the mindset of the elderly and their families.

The Syrian Christians have done more than any other community in establishing homes for the elderly and in providing financial support for the weaker sections of the community. Of the 126 old age homes in the State, 36 are in Kottayam district and 20 in the Pathanamthitta district. The Syrian Christian community manages 95 percent of these old age homes. Ninety five percent of inmates of these institutions receive charity from the Church. In 2000, there were about 162,000 elderly persons who would like to move into old age homes, but they could not do so for want of sources of charity to finance their maintenance in the old age homes.

Taking care of the rapidly increasing elderly population would be a major problem facing the Syrian Christian community in the coming decades

Demographic Transition and Socio-economic Development

In spite of the small size and the declining proportion of the Syrian Christian community, they are now at the top of the socio-economic ladder in Kerala. A hundred years ago the Syrian Christians were a relatively backward community. According to the census report for Cochin State in 1881, about 42 percent of the adult men of this community were labourers, another 32 percent were cultivators, and 18 percent were traders. Government service employed just one-third of one percent of the males of the Syrian Christian community. Less than half of one percent of the men were employed in the major professions of the time.

The following observations about the Syrian Christians of the 19th century are taken from the Census Report for Travancore, 1891

“The religious establishments are in apostolic poverty. The state of dilapidation in which many of the churches are observed would bespeak the insufficiency of funds for the support of public worship. The religious buildings of the Syrians are observed almost always to be in a worse condition than those of the other sects- a circumstance difficult to say whether arising from a greater poverty or less active zeal. The revenue fluctuates with the condition of the flock arising from voluntary contributions, fees on marriage, christening, internment, etc. and Pandarum on a percentage basis (seven and a half) on all dowries. The priests have no regular salary, but participate in those fees and their income increased by less direct means give them enjoyments greater than most of their parishioners. Real estate cannot be devised or made over to churches; but they may purchase lands. They have no plate or

valuables whatever or indeed in most cases other property than the few tawdry ornaments belonging to them

The clergy are at present generally ignorant; some are taught Syriac or Latin but so imperfectly as scarcely to comprehend what they read. They display but little inclination to enlarge the circle of their accomplishments. They have few books. The Laity none. They require first to be taught to read before their distribution could be useful.

The Syrian priests better educated, and not so turbulent, and either less dissipated or more prudent merits a higher reputation. The influence of the pastor is often in proportion to the ignorance of the flock; that of the Kathanars is infinitely greater than their merits could deserve. The mode of living among the Christians is simple and very much similar to that of their neighbours, the Malayalis, with whom they stand in a footing of social equality. The majority of the Syrians are engaged in agricultural pursuits, and the rest is either traders or Government servants. The social position of the women among the Syrians is not bad. They are treated more as helpmates and companion than as menials. Christians are scrupulous in observing the outward forms of worship; are constant in their attendance of church, where they display a piety at least in attendance and decorum that might teach a lesson to the more enlightened. The women too partake equally in this feeling, and display a similar concern in spiritual matters; yet though interesting, religion sits lightly on them; as with the Hindoos it is in some measure interwoven with the business of life, yet like them also it would appear to have but little influence on their morality”.

This paper gives a different picture about the Syrian Christians of today. They are far ahead of the other major communities of the state from the point of demographic transition, education, possession of land, housing and consumer durables. Was it a mere coincidence that the

smallest community, and the one whose growth rate is the lowest, is on the top, and the largest and the fastest growing community at the bottom? What is the lesson that the Syrian Christians can learn from this past experience?

The basic factor behind the Syrian Christians' success in reaching the top position in the socio-economic ladder was their achievements in the field of education.

In recent years the Syrian Christians have always been ahead of the other communities with respect to education. To some extent this is due to their closer association with the Europeans, especially the ruling English community. But they could not have achieved the level of education they have reached without their own perseverance and initiatives.

We venture to suggest that their differential speed of demographic transition have had a small but important role in the socio-economic transition of the Syrian Christians. The relatively higher rate of migration among them has also been an important factor. But these two factors – speedy demographic transition and higher migration rate- owe a lot to the educational achievement of the community. Thus, education has been the basic factor behind the community's achievement in the socio-economic front.

During a period in which the Government was bearing much of the cost of basic education, basic health and minimum nutrition (through public distribution of food), a large family size was not much of a burden to parents. In fact, a large family size among the Syrian Christians during the 1940-60 period became a significant major asset in the 1970s when opportunities opened up for the educated youths in the Gulf countries. Many of the families with large number of children did much better than

those which had only one or two children. Parents with only one son would like to have him around instead of sending him to Bombay or Dubai.

At present, for attaining the desired levels of education and health, the families themselves would have to meet much of the cost. In this context, a small family size is more conducive to achieving higher standards of living. The Syrians Christians were quick to avail of the opportunities for birth control; as a result, fertility and mortality transition among them was more rapid than among the other communities. From a regime of the highest birth rate and the highest mortality rate at the beginning of the century, the Syrian Christians have now reached a regime of the lowest birth and death rates among the Kerala communities. Their fertility is now below the replacement level.

The Syrian Christians were not much of a migrating community before World War II. But after the War, they became the major migrating community in Kerala. With their level of education and the limited employment opportunities open to them within the state, migration came as a welcome outlet for the crop of young men and women born during the regime of high fertility. Other than the Muslims who migrated to the Islamic countries of the Middle East, no community has had a migration rate higher than that of the Syrian Christians (the Muslims have a very low rate of migration to other states within India). The remittances and other benefits from this migration have played a major role in the uplift of the Syrian community to its present level.

Points for Introspection

What is it that the Syrian Christians may learn from their past experiences? Reduction in the benefits from the Government and other public institution need not be a real obstacle to continued progress. There

are other ways too. The Syrian Christian community is in need of searching new answers more now than at any time in the past. In the coming decades of globalisation, with declining dependence on the public sector and increasing reliance on the private sector, reduction in the power to influence Government decisions need not come as a major obstacle to progress.

In the past, a shift from coastal and mid-land located agriculture (of rice and coconut) to hill area plantation-based agriculture (of rubber, tea and spices) had helped the Syrian Christians very much in their progress. But in the coming decades, under the influence of WTO and other international liberalisation programmes, too much trust cannot be placed on plantation agriculture.

The best bet for the future of the Syrian Christians would be to invest in human resources development. What is being lost in their mass (mass reckoned in terms of the number of people) can be gained by increasing the velocity (in this case human resources). They would do well to invest more in institution building, institutions catering to their education and health. And they should make optimum use of their existing institutions for the welfare of the community.

There are a number of well-run Syrian Christian educational and health related institutions. But there are also several more Syrian Christian institutions, which are mismanaged and not serving the community as well as they could. Their utilisation is far below their optimum capacity. While investing in the establishment of new institutions, it is equally important for the community to direct its energy to revitalise the existing institutions and maximise their utilisation for the welfare of the community.

Parishes all over Kerala compete with one another to build the biggest and the most modern Churches, parish halls, etc. How many of

these parishes set apart funds for building schools, colleges or improving the dilapidated primary schools? How much money is set apart for instituting scholarships to the deserving students from poor families of their own parishes?

“With very least effort we built an auditorium costing nearly Rs 1.25 crore. But next to it, next door to the Sabha (Mar Thoma Sabha) headquarters, there is a primary school where thousands of children, especially girl children, struggle to get the facility of a decent latrine to serve their basic physical needs. ... Which should be our priority: education of the children of the poor, or facilitating sumptuous feasts for the rich?.”*

Unity is strength. Everybody knows this basic truth. Ecumenism is good and every church dignitary would vouch for it. But the reality is increasing divisions among the Christian community. Until 1600 AD there had been only one Christian denomination in Kerala. Then came the Roman Catholics, the Romo-Syrians, the Mar Thoma Syrians, the Jacobites (the Patriarchal side and the Orthodox side), the Malankara Syrian Catholics, the Evanjilical Church of India, St Thomas Evanjalickal Fellowship, and the innumerable verities of Pentacost, Brethren and other Gospel groups originating mostly in Pathanamthitta district.

Church unity may be only a distant possibility, but Christians could come together and jointly invest more of their resources in areas that matter most — in human resources development of the community. This is exactly what they did years ago when they established the Union Christian College.

* *A crude translation from Abraham Karickam. “Educational Policy, A Rethinking Essential” Malankara Sabha Tharaka, February 2001.*

Statistical Base

One essential requirement for sound community planning is information and statistical data related to development. The Syrian Christians are notoriously lethargic in developing and maintaining basic information about the community. Few of the church dignitaries know, even very approximately, the number of families or the number of persons in their dioceses. I tried to get this number from them for this research but not with much success. I got a sort of answer with some difficulty from a few persons. When I added up the numbers, the total number of persons of the Syrian Christian denominations was much higher than the total population of Christians in the state.

For the community to survive in the twenty-first century, the Syrian Christians should endeavour to develop a common statistical system to measure the progress they are making and to plan for the future. The Government has given up collecting “caste wise” data since 1950. It should be the responsibility of the communities themselves to fill this gap.

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