

**MIDDLE-CLASS SYRIAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN,
COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS AND PATRIARCHY:
TRAVANCORE 1890—1920**

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ANNA CHANDY

641221

CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI-110067
INDIA
1992

P. P.
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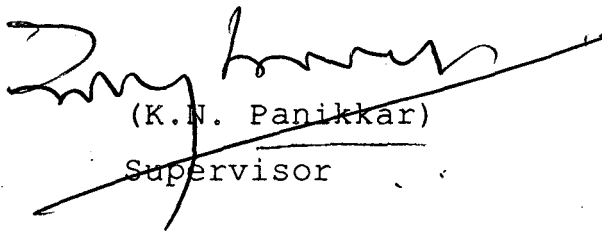
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DECLARATION

Certified that the dissertation entitled "Middle-class Syrian Christian women, community consciousness and Patriarchy : Travancore 1890-1920", submitted by Miss. Anna Chandy is in fulfillment for the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this University and this is her own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the Examiners for evaluation.


(K.N. Panikkar)
Supervisor


(Prof. R. Champaklakshmi)
Chairperson

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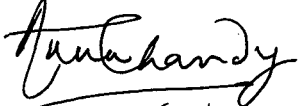
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I wish to acknowledge also the help extended by the Archivists, Librarians and Staff of Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Central Secretariat Library, New Delhi. CMS College Library, Vadavathoor Seminary, Baker Memorial Girl's High School, Kottayam. Mangalappuzha Seminary, Alwaye. P.S.P Memorial People's Library, Kurichithanam Kannammoola Seminary, L.M.S Office Kerala State Archives, Legislative Assembly and Law Library at Government Secretariat, Thiruvanthapuram.

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(ANNA CHANDY).

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INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps not an insignificant matter that the history of Travancore and that of the Syrian Christian community in particular does not pay adequate attention to the lives of women, within the society. This is a paradox since, within the Syrian Christian community we find references to individual women such as Dr. Mary Poonen-Lukose, Justice Anna Chandy, Accamma Cherian, Sr. Mary Beninja. They, while being pioneers among women in the field of medicine, law, politics and literature were products of the social process of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In isolating these women from the larger developments within society and projecting them as exceptions to the rule, existing histories have deprived them and the ordinary middle class women, their part in history.

In this study an attempt is made to examine the impact of the changes that occurred within the Syrian Christian community, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on the lives of Syrian Christian women. The years 1890-1920 is most often referred to as a period of lull for the Syrian Christians. The Malayali memorial had failed to bring in any gains for them in 1891 and till the movement for Equal Civic Rights gathered momentum from the 1920s, not much is known of the Syrian Christians and nothing at all of the women of the community.

However, a close scrutiny of the church and Missionary Records, statistics of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore, Newspaper reports, Chronicles, autobiographies, biographies and fiction reveal that this period was of significance for women - especially the Syrian Christian women of the middle class.

We find that at this juncture in history, Syrian Christian women were pursuing higher education, entering professions, taking part in social affairs through Church, community and Women's Organizations. However, a simultaneous process of marginalizing women was also taking place. An explanation for this process can be traced back to the middle class Syrian Christians efforts to define womanhood in consonance with their emerging consciousness of their selves as a community.

This dissertation comprises of three chapters. In chapter I, I examine the growth of middle-class among the Syrian Christian community and the emergence of a community consciousness in them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter II focuses on the emergence of the middle class Syrian Christian women or the 'new woman' and their consciousness, as a consequence of the ideological concerns of the middle class in this period. In this, I discuss the role of education for women in re-constructing gender and femininity in the changing social context. Through an analysis of the Inheritance

Debate, in Chapter III, I give an illustration of how women were marginalized and confined within the new patriarchal framework of the community.

Sources

It would not be correct to say that there are very few written sources for a study of Syrian Christian women. The problem on the contrary is the nature of the references to Syrian Christian women in early accounts. It is either a reference to their dress or about their jewellery that we find in these sources. However, wherever the decrees of the synod of diampier finds mention we get references to the specific customs relating to women that were sought to be changed by the Portuguese. From early accounts and other works specifically on the Syrian Christian community it has been possible to build an account of the early life of the women of this community. Coming to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries I have used newspapers and journals such as the Malayala Manorama, Bhashaposhini and Church and Missionary Records. These sources have systematically recorded the activities of the Syrian Christians. The print media being a new instrument of communication, the middle-class exploited it to its fullest. The newspapers and journals reflect the middle class consciousness in its columns.

Novels and autobiographies as a genre of writing gained prominence in this period. The representation of

women through novels and plays reflect the middle class perception of society. Autobiographies of women give an insight into their consciousness and is useful in reconstructing the society at the turn of the century, through the eyes of women. Mrs. Lukose has kindly let me read the unpublished autobiography of Dr. Mary Poonen lukose. The Chronicles or nalagamam of the nunnery is a fascinating account of those women who stepped out of the familiar roles of women as mothers and wives. It also provides an insight into the nature and extant of influence of institutions on women.

I have used Government records such as Travncore Administration Reports for the statistics relating to education; the Travancore Law Reports, for the various cases relating to inheritance and property disputes; Sri Mulam Popular Assembly Proceedings for the debates in the Legislative Assembly on the various issues concerning the Syrian Christians.

The Report of the Christian Committee and the Christian Succession Act of 1916 gives details of the various clauses regarding women's inheritance rights. Finally, souvenirs have provided me with information about organization and parish level activities of the Syrian Christians, which I have not been able to find else where. An account of the social customs and

traditions of the Syrian Christians is found in the many songs of this community, which has been compiled in a book from by P.U. Lucas in 1910, Ancient songs of the Syrian Christian of Malabar (Kottayam, 1954, third edition).

CHAPTER 1: GROWTH OF A COMMUNITY AND ITS EMERGING COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS.

It would be proper to begin this study by locating the Syrian Christians in the social milieu of Travancore. The nineteenth century social transformations and the changes undergone by this community would be dealt with subsequently. Located in the south-western tip of the Indian sub-continent, this princely State was characterized by the harmonious co-existence of various religious communities. Within the Hindu religion, the various social groups were assigned specific slots in the social hierarchy. The Nambuthiris or the Malayali Brahmins occupied the highest position. Numerically small, they followed the patrilineal system and controlled and owned a large majority of land in the State. The Nayars who followed the matrilineal system were the next most prominent caste. They belonged to the Sudra caste and were largely warriors. They too controlled large tracts of land. The Ezhavas and Shanars who were lower down in the social hierarchy, came next. They were considered to be untouchables. The slave castes of Parayas and pulayas occupied the lowest rungs within the hierarchy. The Christians were the second largest social group within the state. They were both European and native Christians. The Syrian Christians and the Latin Catholics were the

two main groups within the native Christian Church and of these the Syrian Church was divided into a number of sub-sects in the nineteenth century. These were the Syrian Catholics or the Romo-Syrians, the Jacobite Syrians, the Mar Thoma Syrians and those belonging to the Syro-Malabar sect. Apart from these two communities the Muslims, the Jews, the Animists etc were also part of this society. However for this study only the Syrian Christians are taken into consideration.

A strong local tradition helps us trace the origins of Christianity in Kerala to the arrival of Apostle Thomas at Maliankara, near Cranganore, in AD 52.¹ He is said to have established Seven Churches on the Malabar coast and the first adherents of Christianity were converts from seven nambuthiri families. This small group subsequently grew in size and strength with emigration of Christians from West Asia in the 4th, 8th and the 9th centuries.² The term 'Syrian' was affixed to Christians as the liturgy was in Syriac and much later from the 16th century onwards this helped them to be distinguished from the Latin christians and other converts to Christianity from lower class and castes. The early Christians were largely traders and merchants. A

1 K.J. John (ed), Christian Heritage of Kerala (Cochin, 1981), p3.

2 ibid., p7

privileged group of Church authorities and prominent merchants among them, came to enjoy a very high status within the society as consequence of grants of land and rights bestowed on them by the rulers of medieval Kerala.³ These grants gave the Church and certain merchant families land and the right to collect revenue and occupation taxes from those who worked the land. In the ninth century, the status of the Syrian Christian merchants were consolidated when manigramam or the self governed merchant guilds came to be identified with them. The numerous regional bases they had in South India, became the 'nuclei of its exchange relations with tribal pockets and agrarian hinter lands'.⁴ The Syrian Christian merchants were able to take advantage of the new exchange set up that arose as a consequence of the 'reciprocity of goods and services, a temple centered redistribution and characteristic localisation'.⁵ The 13th century charter of Vira Raghava Cakravarthi conferred upon the merchant Iravi Korttan, seventy two privileges enjoyed only by the chieftains of the time.⁶ Through these grants and privileges and their princely status, the early Syrian

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- 3 M.R. Raghava Variar : Christianity from Kerala inscriptions, in John (ed) ibid, p54
 4 Rajan Gurukkal : The Manigramam Guild : An analysis, in John (ed) ibid, p58.
 5 ibid, p59
 6 Jose Kuriedath, Changing Patterns of Authority and Leadership among Christians of St. Thomas : A sociological analysis of their history, Indian Church History Review., June, 1989, p8.

Christians especially those occupying the upper ranks of the community were assimilated within the society.

Prior to the arrival of the merchant Thomas in AD 345 from Cana, in West Asia, the social organization of the community was an amgalam of early Christian and local traditions. Though the early sources are silent about the social condition and organization of the Syrians there are a few references to a system of family priesthood i.e., priesthood was restricted to a particular family.⁷ However, with the coming of merchant Thomas, the social organization of the community underwent some structural changes. As a consequence of his efforts, the scattered early Christians were united and religious authority was systematized. Moreover the link between the local Christian community and the Persian Church was established around this time. From the latter certain traditions and norms regarding the offices of the Bishops, Archdeacon, priests and several liturgical ceremonies were adopted. From AD 345 to 1653, the Archdeacons were chosen from the Pakalomattam family, whereas the Bishops who occupied the highest position within the Church came from West Asia.⁸ These Bishops were merely titular heads of the church; the real administrative, executive and judicial functions

7 Kuriedath, *ibid.*, p7

8 N.K. Jose, Adima Kerala Sabha (Kerala, Hobby Publishers 1977), p71.

rested with the Archdeacon. Till about the nineteenth century he was given the position of the community leader or Jathikku Thalaivan.⁹ Till about the sixteenth century the most important administrative body was yogam or the assembly. It was a partially decentralized structure and provided a space for peoples' participation in the administration of Church and community. These yogams functioned at three levels. The Idavakayogam or the Parish assembly, which had priests and elderly male members; of the prominent families as its members; the Pradesikayogam or the Regional assembly and the Poduyogam or the General assembly which had representatives of the local yogams as its members. The poduyogam was presided over usually by the Archdeacon.¹⁰ The yogams had the power to decide on the matters pertaining to social and religious life of the Syrian Christians. The poduyogam decided upon matters of the church, issued desakkuri for priesthood candidates, settled intra community disputes, cases and meted out punishments regarding social and religious matters etc. of the community. The Idavakayogam was involved in administering temporal goods of the Church, supported the clerics attached to the Church, maintained and constructed the church, supervised and organized

9 ibid, p69

10 Jose Kuriedath, Authority in the Catholic Community in Kerala (Bangalore, Dharamaram Publications, 1989), p92.

feasts and helped the poor and the widows.¹¹ The yogams were modelled after the administrative bodies of the local Hindu temples such as the Kuttam, Manram, ūranmakar etc., and the hereditary office of the Archdeacon had similarities with the offices of the local princes.¹² It is of significance that the lay representatives of the yogams belonged to the upper classes of the Syrian Christian community. In spite of the changes within the Syrian church and community structure, the indigenous characteristics of the yogam remained the same. The challenge to this indigenous Church and community was posed by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.

The Latinization attempts of the Portuguese and the Synod of Diamper in 1599 effected a total centralization of power in the hands of the Bishop. The Syrian Church was restructured in accordance with the Roman administrative set up of the Western Church. The Diocese became the legal unit and all powers rested with the Bishop. The priests who owed allegiance to the Idavaka yogam was now responsible to the Bishop alone. Their posts were made transferable and were given a fixed

11 Kuriedath, Changing opcit, p10,

12 ibid, p11.

salary. They had power over all Church matters, particularly those pertaining to Church property and administration. The yogam was reduced to a mere consultative body.¹³

This intervention by a foreign power did not go unresisted. The oath at the Coonen cross in 1653 was one of the strongest voice of discontentment against the loss of independence of the Syrian Idavakas. However, neither the oath nor the subsequent split within the Syrian community could prevent the process of centralization. Over the centuries this process became well-entrenched, and the various factions within the Syrian Church, be they the Pazhayacoor and Puthencoor Syrians, Romo-Syrians, Jacobite Syrians or the Mar Thomite Syrians who came up under the influence of the Anglicans, developed a highly centralized church organization by the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The yogam as a forum for lay participation almost ceased to exist till it was revived in the nineteenth century.

Till the nineteenth century the Syrian Christians were preoccupied with resisting European domination

13 P.K. Michael Tharakan, 'Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development : a case of Nineteenth Century Travancore, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XIX, No. 46, 17 November, 1984, p1960; Jose, opcit, p144.

14 Tharakan, opcit, p1960.

of the Syrian church. However, in the nineteenth century, the changes effected as a consequence of British colonial and English missionary intervention in the Travancorean society, shook the edifice of its social structure. For the Syrian Christians, the centralization and hierarchization of the Syrian church was complemented by the structural changes, that occurred simultaneously within society. The socio-economic transformations and introduction of 'Western' Education were the two significant aspects of the reforms introduced within the society. It was significant because this process was part of a larger process i.e., linking the Travancore society to the world economy.

A series of Regulations and Proclamations issued by the Government in this period brought about basic structural changes within the agrarian economy. Land, which was in the pre-nineteenth century inalienable and limited to a few castes (nambuthiris and nayars) and to elite groups of certain communities (Syrian Christian merchants and church), became accessible to those previously denied property ownership. The Government Regulation of 1818 opened up the possibility of converting waste land to agricultural land. The Government exempted these lands from land tax for the first ten years, after this they were subjected to a light taxation. For those willing

to cultivate it, escheated and abandoned lands were given; it was also possible to claim the cost of improvements made on these newly acquired lands. The 1829 order prohibited the Jenmies or the land owners from evicting tenants who were paying their dues regularly. The 1867 Royal Proclamation provided a legal sanction to this order. In 1865, the Pandaravaka Pattom gave full ownership rights over Sirkar lands to the tenant cultivators. They had to pay a land revenue in return. Land now became alienable and could be mortgaged. A class of 'peasants proprietors' came up on the former Sirkar lands with the introduction of the Jenmikudiyam Regulation of 1896. Further, the higher tenants on private jenmom lands now enjoyed full security of tenancy.¹⁵

The commercialization of the economy and beginning of a plantation industry further contributed to the expansion of trade. However, it was in the sphere of education that social tensions become heightened. The introduction of the English system of schooling and the spread of literacy complemented the process of bureaucracy being linked with education. Though new jobs and professions were being created, these were dominated by the non-malayali Brahmins. Those falling outside this social

15 Ibid, p1960; Robin Jeffrey, The Decline of Nayar Dominance : Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908 (New Delhi, Vikas, 1976), pp88-90.

group, in spite of their access to education were denied a place within the now all important bureaucracy. Those who were most affected by this monopoly were the new middle class who were the latest entrants in the society.¹⁶ Perhaps it would be easier if it was made clear as to who constituted the middle class, particularly among the Syrian Christians. Among the Syrian Christians the middle class emerged from those who were engaged in trade at a minimal scale and had links with land as tenant cultivators. They were distinct from the wealthy merchant families of the community who on the basis of their close proximity to the church and the ruling classes, possessed land and enjoyed a high position in the society. The patrilineal family system of the Syrians, and their familiarity with cash transactions and business techniques gave them an advantage over other communities and castes. They were quick to take advantage of the changes taking place and emerged as a 'strong, mobile and profit seeking' class of people. They soon came to monopolize trade, commerce and industry; banking, chitties and kuries as well as the new professions of printing and publishing.¹⁷ In this context, they being denied representation in the Legislature and administration in proportion to

16 Tharakan, *opcit*, p1962.

17 P. Chandramohan, Christian middle class and their fight for civic rights in Travancore, in John ed., *opcit*. p270.

their population became a cause for concern for them. This resentment was made known openly when in 1891, the representative of the middle classes from the Syrian Christian, Nayar and Ezhava communities jointly presented a memorandum signed by 10,028 people to the Maharajah of Travancore. Known as the Malayali Memorial of 1891, this however failed to bring in any gains for the Syrian middle class.¹⁸

Existing literature are silent about the years between 1890-1920. After the Malayali Memorial, it is the struggle for Equal Civic Rights in the 1920s, has been the main interest of the researchers. However for this thesis, these years are crucial as it throws light on the attempts by the middle class Syrians to culturally situate themselves in the social milieu of Travancore.¹⁹ The new centres of influence and rejuvenated old structures, such as community and church association, educational institutions and newspapers and creative writings, combined to produce a newly coalescing ideology of the middle class.

Till the late nineteenth century the Syrian church was involved in the fight for indigenous Bishops to head their church. The Syrian catholic church in

18 Tharakan, * opcit, p1962

19 Chandramohan, opcit, p272

particular was dominated by the Portuguese and later by the Italian priests. The non-Catholic Syrians mainly the Jacobites who had split away from the former in 1653, were able to thwart the threat of an Anglican domination in the mid-nineteenth century. Nevertheless, this paved way for a new denomination to come up, i.e. the Mar Thoma Syrians. These denominations were held together by their adherence to the Syriac rite and a centralized church. This centralization imposed by the Portuguese was well entrenched within Syrian church by the nineteenth century. The Syrian church was able to take advantage of the changes that were taking place in this period, particularly those related to education, because of the hierarchical church organization. The monastic orders for men and women, which emerged in this period such as the 'Servants of the Immaculate Mothers of Mount Carmel' in 1829 and for women in 1866; the 'Franciscan Clarist' congregation in 1888 the 'Visitation' congregation in 1892; were instrumental in directing the resources of the community to school and college building activities, all over the State.²⁰ The struggle against foreign domination; for the unification of the Syrian Church denominations and for Syrian Bishops took place simultaneously. The nineteenth century marked

20 Tharakan, *opcit*, p1960; The Visitation Congregation (Kottayam, 1979), The Franciscan Clarist congregation 1888-1988, Centenary Souvenir (Alwaye, 1988)

a watershed in the struggle over leadership and authority within the Syrian Church, when in 1896 a Prelate of Syrian rites and Travancore nationality was appointed for the Syrian Catholic denomination.²¹

While the struggle for indigenous leadership was realized in this period, the efforts to unify the Syrian Churches proved evasive. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was this latter task, and the Syrian middle class's efforts to locate themselves within the social context and their consciousness as a community is sought to be understood. The educated Syrian middle class took on the task of reforming the community and straighten out denominational differences in their efforts to forge an identity of their selves as a unified and liberal group. The underlying reason of these efforts were the need to make best use of the changes taking place within the society. Rejuvenation of old structures such as the community associations and new centres of influence such as the print media were used to their fullest to serve the above purpose. These two structures became the sites for heated discussions and debates on traditions, customs and practises of the Syrian community.

21 Andrews Thazhath, The Juridical Sources of the Syro-Malabar Church (a historic-Juridicial Study) (Vadavathoor, Kottayam, Institute of Religious Studies 1987), pp 244-50; Kuriedath, Authority... opcit, pp 11-12.

The Idavaka yogams, Desa yogams and Podu yogams which had almost ceased to exist after the Portuguese onslaught and the resultant centralization of the Syrian Church were rejuvenated in the late nineteenth century, as community associations or mahajana sabhas. These associations were distinct from the earlier yogams on three counts. First, they provided a space for a larger number of Syrian people to be involved in the community affairs; secondly, there were various kinds of associations i.e. denominational associations, community associations and associations of particular professions; and third, there was a distinct challenge to the power and importance of the church authorities and the elite groups among the Syrians from the laity as a result of their greater involvement in the community affairs. These associations were able to perform the twin tasks of involving the people in the process of finding a self-identity and in positing themselves as a community as opposed to all the 'others' who stood outside this point of reference. The various associations dealt with the different aspects of the Syrian community. The denominational associations, for instance, till the first few years of this century focused on the spiritual rejuvenation of the community. From elaborate discussions on subjects such as "the Christian community and Christian life", 'Prayer and family life' and so on the focus shifts

by 1905 or so to matters other than spiritual, concerning the community. The topics which merited so much of attention ranged from 'unity within the Syrian community' to social and political problems faced by the Syrians as a whole such as, lack of a law on Christian Inheritance; reaching education to all sections of the community; settling the interdenominational fights of the church authorities; the problem of inadequate representation of the Christians in the state administration, legislature and judiciary and the need for proper infrastructure to aid those Syrians engaged in trade and agriculture etc.

It is specifically within this forum that the need for English education to fight the superstitious practices and beliefs prevalent among the Syrians^{was} emphasized.²² Child marriage, practice of dowry giving, extravagant rituals and ceremonies etc. were some of the other issues taken up in these associations.²³ However, it is important to note that whereas the customs and practices of the community came under close scrutiny and was at times rejected outright, those changes which were brought about or asked for did not ever question the basic structure of the community. And perhaps the only time such a challenge was posed as it was in the case of the

22 Malayala Manorama, 22 May, 1907

23 Malayala Manorama, ibid

inheritance debate, the voice of tradition and age old customs ruled over it (this is elaborated in the third chapter). Simultaneous to this process of discussions were the creation of new committees and panchayats to settle Church property disputes; the efforts to mobilize funds to build youth clubs, libraries, schools and colleges and for scholarships and sponsoring young scholars to pursue higher education in foreign lands.²⁴

A strong appeal was made to the people to preserve old documents relating to the community and church. This, coupled with frequent references to write a history of the Syrian Community was an indication of the fervor with which the Syrian middle class was forging an identity for their selves. All sections of the community particularly the youth were involved in this process.²⁵

The associations of the various professions were successful in both airing the grievances of the profession through their representatives in the Popular Assembly and in bringing to the people the new scientific methods, technologies and information relating to their professions. I shall give two examples of the Agriculturists

24 Malayala Manorama, 15 March 1907, K.K. Kuruvilla's speech at the Malankara Syrian Mahajanasabha.

25 Malayala Manorama, 22 November 1905, Letter of E.M. Philipose.

and Traders associations. The Agriculturists' associations through frequent public meetings and practical demonstrations highlighted new methods in cultivation, provided information about the various diseases of the crop and cattle and their remedies; about good quality manure and fodder for the cattle etc.²⁶ Many agricultural exhibitions were held in various parts of the state. Representations to the state were largely in the nature of providing the infrastructures needed to implement new technology. The Syrian Christian trader's demands to develop the Kottayam town is significant in this context.²⁷ In a letter to the Dewan in 1909, the community representatives drew his attention to the unexplored potentials of the town which needed to be tapped and used to better the state as a whole. These demands were for widening existing bridges, opening new markets, improving irrigation facilities etc. These would boost trading, banking and agricultural activities of the Syrian Christian once they were fulfilled.²⁸

The demand for technical education was equally important to these other demands. At a time when professions were increasing, becoming more defined and

26 Malayala Manorama, 26 August 1905, K.K. Kuruvilla's speech at the Changanachery Agricultural Association.

27 Malayala Manorama, 10 March 1909, 15 May, 1909, 18 September, 1907, and 20 March, 1909.

28 Malayala Manorama, 10 March, 1909

specialized the emphasis on the importance of technical education was not an insignificant matter. The emergence of Agricultural Colleges, Engineering Institutes, Medical Colleges as well as the expansion of the police force, judicial department, educational institutions, postal department etc. had opened up specialized jobs at various levels.

Suggestions to convert inferior paddy lands, to improve communication facilities, extend markets, emphasis on technical education, demand for court facilities, information on trade matters all aimed at expanding and improving the commercial and agricultural interests of the Syrian middle and upper classes, were put forward through these associations, through public petitions, meetings and newspapers.

These were associations like the Jathiya Aikya Sangham later called the Travancore-Cochin Christian Association which cut across denominational differences. This association gave space for all denominations to come together as a unified body under their aegis. Fr. Emmauel Nidhiry one of the strongest voices advocating a unified Syrian community was one of the founding members of this association. Apart from these associations the news papers such as the Malayala Manorama and Nazarani Deepika gave voice to the Syrian middle class' demands. The Malayala

Manorama was perhaps more representative of this section as in the early decades of the present century it had "devoted its attention in those days mainly to social and literary affairs" of the state.²⁹ The Syrian middle class whom these associations represented were conscious of the role played by these in their (middle class's) search for a common ideal. An editorial in the Malayala Manorama highlights the role of forums and stated that.

.....any issue 'thought and decided upon by the people unitedly through an Association undoubtedly carries more weight. These associations are more effective in addressing peoples' problems and needs to the Government than individual attempts... In spite of this awareness the people of this state have not given proper attention to this fact.... If the people would form such associations in each division of the state, and through it send petitions to the Government, there would be a more positive response to their

29 P.K.K. Menon, History of Freedom Movement in Kerala (Trivandrum, 1966), Vol II p.17

problems....³⁰

The potential of these associations to reach out to a wider audience was realized.³¹ The social and political advantage of being a unified group was seen by the Syrian Christian middle class to be vital for their growth. It was to achieve this end that the lay leaders of the community decided to play a greater role in Church matters. Their intervention was most visible in their attempts to settle ecclesiastical differences and property disputes among the church denominations. K.K. Kuruvilla, a lay leader of the Syrian Christian community observed,

.... the cessation of expensive litigation in the public courts will enable the diversion of public funds to useful purposes and create grades of inexpensive ecclesiastical Panchayats for the settlement of minor disputes connected with the Churches in such a manner as to remove several of the existing obstructions to godly life and free social intercourse in

30 Malayala Manorama, 16 September, 1905.

31 K.C. Mathew, Community reforms and Taluq associations, Bhashaposhini masika, Book 16, no. 7 and 8, 1911.

matter of intermarriages.....

He further pointed out that in the event of a compromise,

.....the dignity of the episcopal office and weight of the ecclesiastical opinion and advice will be acknowledged by thegovernment in such a manner as to secure to the community, without the semblance of agitation or contention, its representatives among the highest grades of the civil and Revenue Service, and so ensure the sympathetic encouragement of the Government to..... the steady development of the economical prosperity of the community.... 32 .



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Appeals were also sent to the state regarding the inadequate representation of the Syrians in the bureaucracy, through petitions³³ newspapers, memorandums and in the Assembly. In the early years of this century the editorials in Malayala Manorama dealt with the

32 Malayala Manorama, 24 August, 1901

33 Malayala Manorama, 6 March 1918, memorial of the Christian representatives at the 14th session of the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly.

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discriminations faced by Christians in the administrative, legislative and judicial departments; the plight of the Christian magistrates posted in distant places without any promotions unlike their Hindu counterparts.³⁴ In the year 1903, this problem of inadequate representations was compounded when reports of Christian officers being treated shoddily by the Cochin Dewan Pottabhirama Row, reached Travancore. This agitated the already discontent Syrian Christian middle class.³⁵ Associations, particularly the Travancore-Cochin Christian Association were in the forefront in lodging their protests with the Travancore Maharajah against the discrimination meted out to the Christians.³⁶ In a particular incident the representative of the association Mr. C.P. Thomas reacting to the Dewan's refusal to discuss the question of Christian representation, protested against his attitude and asked for it to be rectified.³⁷

The members of the community frequently highlighted the plight of the educated Christians of Travancore in the Assembly. Of these, K.C. Mammen Mappilla's arguments, illustrated with statistics, the poor repre-

34 Malayala Manorama, 23 October, 1901 and 6 July, 1901.

35 Malayala Manorama, 9 September, 1903

36 Malayala Manorama, 30 March, 1907

37 Malayala Manorama, 27 February, 1907. Earlier in 1905, the representatives of this Association made public statements against the Travancore Government's discriminatory treatment of the Christians.

sentation of Christians in each department of the Administration. He was supported by the strong arguments of Parayil Avuseppu Kunjavira Tharakan and Mr. K.N. Eippa, pensioned first class Magisterate and nominated member of the assembly.³⁸

There was a conscious and consistent attempt, on the part of the middle-class Syrian Christians in this period, to locate themselves culturally in their social context. This was made possible by the coalescing ideology of the middle class aided by the new structures that emerged. The perception of their selves as belonging to the middle class and the nurturing of this consciousness through the interactions within the community and the concerns of the middle classes of the other communities, strengthened the hold of this ideology within the Travancore Society. Perhaps, it was this that K.K. Kuruvilla meant, when he talked of community representing a common ideal.

....community refers to a set of people with common origin or common rights and privileges or common conditions denoted by community of religion, of

38 Proceedings of the SMPA 1916, Malayala Manorama, 8 March, 1916; 5 April, 1916 speech of Parayil Kunjavira Tharakan in SMPA; 15 April, 1916 K.N. Eippa's speech at the SMPA.

language, or of corporate ecclesiastical or political government or common ideal of which last is the essential characteristic, the former distinctions serving to describe the circumstances, which create a natural presumption as to the existence of this essential mark viz. common ideal.³⁹

The transformation of the Syrian Christians into a community by the late nineteenth century had its roots in their struggle against foreign domination since the time of the Portuguese onslaught. In the nineteenth century, the middle-class, who rose as a consequence of the socio-economic changes in the society, furthered this process.⁴⁰ In the following chapter I shall examine the efforts of this middle-class to accommodate the women of the community within the emerging community consciousness. However, there is a need to throwlight on the condition of the Syrian Christian women prior to the

39 Malayala Manorama, 8 February, 1908, K.K. Kuruvilla's speech at the Syrian Student's Conference.

40 Susan Bayly's article on 'Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community : Religion, State and Society in Kerala, 1750-1850, Modern Asian Studies, 18, 2 (1984), pp177-213, argues that 'the rise of community among the St. Thomas Christians was a new departure - not a consequence of economic or social modernization. This while challenging the notion of a modernized economy aiding the rise of the Syrian Christians, locates their rise as a community in the collapse and disintegration of the Keralan kingdoms in the early nineteenth century, in the face of a British challenge.

changes introduced in their lives. It is only then that we can identify the nature of changes and its significance for the Syrian Christian women.

Most of the sources are silent about the condition of women. It is only through stray references in early texts and in works of fiction, autobiographies and memoirs that we get a glimpse of the lives of the ordinary women. Dr. P.J. Thomas points out that girls along with boys attended Kalaris or pallikudams wherever possible.⁴¹ However, the majority of girls received education at home. This education consisted of a training in managing the household, learning traditional songs that were sung by the women of the community on various occasions.⁴² Child marriage was a common practice among the Syrian Christians. Girls were married at the age of twelve or thirteen.⁴³ In the novel Parishkarappathi we find references to girls being married at a very young age as was the custom.⁴⁴ Other references to women were regarding their dress and ornaments. However various texts while quoting the decrees of the Synod of Diamper refer

41 Dr. P.J. Thomas, Malayala Sahityavum Christianikalum (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1989, third edition), p85

42 *ibid*, p85

43 *ibid*,

44 Kunnukuzhiyil Kochuthommen Apothecary, Parishkarappathi (Kottayam : Vidyarthimithram Press, 1977) First edition 1891, p22, p32.

to restrictions placed on women after bearing a child. Mothers could enter the church after forty days if the child was a boy and after eighty days if the child was a girl.⁴⁵ While divorce was unheard of, widows were allowed to remarry though after the one year period of mourning.⁴⁶ Whereas young women did not enjoy many powers within the joint family, women as mothers and mothers-in-law had a say in matters of marriage. Except for women of the lower classes who worked in the fields along with their husbands,⁴⁷ there were few instances of women stepping out into the public sphere. By the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women of the Syrian Christian community began to experience changes. It is the nature of these changes that is dealt with in the next chapter.

45 Andrews Thazhath, op.cit., p52

46 Ibid, p57

47 Kesavadev Ayalkkar (Kottayam, NBS, 19)

CHAPTER II : MIDDLE CLASS SYRIAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN :
EMERGENCE, CONSCIOUSNESS AND PARTICIPATION

In the previous chapter we saw how the middle class of the Syrian Christian community was engaged in situating itself culturally in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This process was intrinsic to the socio-economic transformations they experienced in this period. We also saw how structures, old and new, were helping to produce a newly coalescing ideology of the middle class. In this chapter an attempt is made to understand: a) the middle class Syrian Christian efforts to address the women's question, through the medium of the afore mentioned structures and the impact of this process in the actual lives of Syrian Christians women; b) Syrian women's participation in the public sphere as professionals and through organizations and finally c) middle class Syrian women's perception of their 'selves' within a restrictive frame work of the new middle class consciousness. The crux of the dominant debate about women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the reconstruction of gender and femininity with the help of old and new structures. The crusade for education being an integral part of the social agenda of this period, the spirit of this discourse was encapsulated within the

question of 'Female education'. Within the structures such as the educational institutions the print media, community and women's associations and nunneries, the question of female education was taken up and it was within this that the task of reconstructing gender and femininity was undertaken. The purpose of educating women, the new schooling system, the 'feminine' curriculum for girl scholars, the construction of women within the print media such as the news papers and popular fiction and the debates on family, marriage, motherhood, educated mothers etc carried on through the community and women's associations and within church organizations like the nunnery became the site and means through which the ideology of the 'new woman' was constructed and represented by the middle class Syrian Christians.¹ We argue that, in this period one can trace within the larger process of providing middle class women access to the public sphere, the tendency to essentialize women of the middle class in their roles as mothers and wives and giving them restrictive options within a largely patriarchal framework.

1 This argument is drawn from Kathryn Shevelow's work, where in she deals with the reconstruction of gender and femininity through the eighteenth century periodicals which was in consonance with the new ideology of middle class liberalism in England at that time. Kathryn Shevelow, Women and Print Culture: the Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical (Routledge, 1989), p15.

However, before examining this process, there is a need to understand the nature of these structures that came to play a significant role in the lives of the middle class Syrian Christian women.

I

One section in the Travancore Society that underwent a decisive transformation in course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were the women. While changes within the matrilineal system and the Nayar Regulation altered the lives of Nayar women; the social reform movements such as the Sri Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana movement and those among the Nambuthiri community introduced changes in the lives of the Brahmin and lower caste women. Similarly, the missionary interventions in society that induced the breast cloth agitations focused the alteration on women belonging to the slave castes. The socio-economic transformation that brought forth these movements were also responsible for drawing in women of the peasant and working class into the struggles led by the left forces in the 1930s and 1940s as did the National Movement with women of the middle class among others.

Speaking specifically of the Syrian Christian women, while not much is written about them, it is

significant how the changes that occurred in this period altered their lives.

The first 'modern' school for girls set up in 1818 at Kottayam, operated from the bungalow of the Baker missionaries. Though begun at a modest scale this was soon followed by Mrs. Mead's school at Nagercoil in 1819 and Mrs. Norton's at Alleppey in 1820.² The setting up of these and other schools that came up subsequently, focused attention on the need for 'female education' which came to dominate this period. In the nineteenth century with the missionary, state, church and finally middle class preoccupation with education, the process of educating women changed. This was the first of the changes that altered Syrian women's lives.

The increasing number of school girls at all levels of instruction is a pointer to the spread and success of the new schooling system for women. By the 1890s this process of bringing education to women began to gain a wider acceptance in the Travancore society. These rapid strides are reflected in the statistics on

2 Eira Dalton, The Baker Family (Kottayam, CMS Press 1963), p13; T.K. Velu Pillai, Travancore State Manual, (Trivandrum Government Press 1940), Vol III, p692, The Travancore and Cochin Diocesan Record (from now TCDR) (Kottayam: CMS Press, 1910), Vol XX, No. 2, February 1910, pp10-12

female education. In 1896 the total female population under instructions was 11.8 per cent. This in 1897 increased to 12.4 per cent. From 35,060 girl scholars in 1896 to 36,652 in 1897 i.e. 1,592 girls joined school for education.³ The Administrative Report of Travancore for the years 1896-97 states that among the girls under instruction it was the Syrian Christians along with 'Tamil Brahmin, Kshatriya, Malayali Sudra' etc.. who steadily increased in strength.⁴ What began as a single school for girls in Travancore with six students on its rolls, grew to 179 schools with 35,060 girls scholars by 1896 and 231 and 43,082 in 1911 and 378, and 1,22,444 in 1921 respectively.⁵

Technical training institute that came up simultaneous to the spread of school, provided higher education for women. Mrs. Johnson's Normal School at Kottayam was the first Teachers training school in Kerala. Established sometime before 1848, this school had 43 girls on its rolls in 1850.⁶ Opened in 1891 at Pallom near Kottayam, the Buchanan Institute trained lady teachers for schools

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- 3 Report on the Administration of Travancore 1896-97 (from now The Report) (Trivandrum, Govt. Press, 192), pp169-70)
- 4 ibid, p172
- 5 ibid, p169; The Report 1911-12, p 63; The Report 1921-22, pp98-100; Baker Memorial Girls' High School : 150th Anniversary Souvenir (Kottayam, 1971), pl.
- 6 Rev. Henry Baker Sr's Report on the School in the Missionary Register of 1850 quoted in Dr. K.V. Eapen, Church Missionary Society and Education in Kerala (Kottayam, Kollett Pub, 1985), p149

in the mission. The concept of Boarding school also emerged in this period. Meant mainly for girls belonging to the backward and lower classes, the first such school was set up in 1878 Mrs. Caley at Tiruvalla. In 1878, there were 18 boarders supported by the CMS and its wellwishers.⁷ By 1910 this increased to 96 scholars : 20 boarders and 76 day scholars; and in 1914 to 157 girls of which 27 were boarders.⁸

Whereas these school were run by wives and daughters of the missionaries of CMS in Travancore, the trained missionary women of the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS) worked among the women belonging to the upper classes in their houses. Miss. Augusta Blandford, founder of the Fort school for upper caste Hindu girls at Trivandrum in 1864, was the first trained missionary woman of both the CEZMS and CMS. By the early twentieth century the CEZMS schools for the girls of all castes and communities were also spreading rapidly. From a total of 7 schools and 427 scholars in 1906 in the four station of Trivandrum, Mavelikkara, Kottayam and Olesha, it increased to 8 schools and 825 scholars by 1912.⁹

7 Madras Church Missionary Record 1878, Vol XLV, No. 1, p3 quoted in Eapen, *ibid*, p151
 8 *ibid*, p152
 9 Report of the CEZMS 1909, p26 quoted in *ibid*, p156

Assisting this process of instruction was the newly emergent print media. Set up by Rev. Benjamin Bailey in 1821, the first wooden Press at Kottayam, printed pamphlets, bulletins, translation of scriptures, tracts, literature and text-books both in Malayalam and English. With the formation of an informed and educated class of people the dissemination of ideas was carried out thorough the periodicals first and then the newspapers. The print media was able bring together the middle class as a cohesive group. The periodical and newspapers became the medium through which ideas were exchanged, debates on various issues carried on, thus bringing together people belonging to different professions from farflung areas but of a similar background i.e., of the middle class.

The first periodical was Dr. Herman Gundert's 'Rajyasamacharam'. Begun in June 1847, this was soon followed by the another periodical 'Paschimodayam' in October. While the former was limited to matters of religion, the latter included secular topics such as science and history. Other periodicals soon followed: Gnana Nikshepam (1848), Paschimataraka (1864), Sandish-tavadi (1867), the West Coast Spectator (1879), and Satyanadakahalam (1876) to name a few. Close on heels of the early periodicals were the Newspapers : Kerala Mitram (1881), Kerala Patrika (1884), Malayali (1886),

Nazarani Deepika (1887) and the Malayala Manorama (1890), were some of the prominent ones of this period. Alongside these existed the literary journals such as Vidyavilasini (1881), Vidyavinodini (1890), Bhashaposhini (1896) etc.¹⁰ In a short span of forty two years i.e., from 1847 to 1890 nearly twenty-five periodicals had come into existence.¹¹

One significant development of this period was the emergence of journals for and by women. 'Keraliya Sugunabodhini' the first periodical for women was begun in 1885. Though shut down after six months of publication it was begun once again in July 1892. Others that followed were Maharani (date not known), Bhashasharada (1913), Mahila Rantnam (1914), Sumangala (1914) and Carmela Kusumam (1903) a Catholic periodical for the women of the religious order.

Prior to the emergence of periodicals and newspapers, pamphlets, tracts and bulletins were used to reach out to the new literates and other educated sections within society. These continued to serve their original purpose of eliminating ideas and reaching information to

10 Krishna Chaitanya, A History of Malayalam Literature (New Delhi, Orient Longman 1971), p174

11 G. Priyadarshanan, Masika Padhanangal (Mal) (Sahitya Pravarthaka Cooperative Society, Kerala 1974), p13.

each and every section of people within the society. In Travancore and Cochin diocese of the CMS mission alone, 44,400 handbills were printed and sold in the year 1915 inspite of a paper scarcity due to the first world war.¹² This indicates the success of handbills and pamphlets as an important means of reaching out to people.

The state's role in providing support to the expanding educational network is noteworthy. A Test-Book Committee was set up in 1866 to provide text-books for schools and general reading material for the masses. Under the aegis of this Committee both, original and translated works were published. Between the years 1867 to 1890 the committee was able to bring out approximately twelve titles apart from literature specifically meant for children.¹³ The distribution of books received a boost from 1866 through the efforts of the Government's Book depot. This process was further facilitated with the assistance from the Government Press in Trivandrum, the two Missionary Press' at Kottayam and Nagercoil and with the setting up of branch depots in 1897 at Kottar, Kulithoray, Quilon, Mavelikkara, Alleppey and Parur.¹⁴

- 12 TCDR Annual Report of 1915, Vol XXVI, No. 2 (Kottayam, CMS Press April 1916) p45
- 13 Chaitanya, opcit, p169
- 14 Tharakan, opcit, p1923, 10 November, 1984; P. Govinda Pillai, page V of the appendix of P. Shungoony Menon's, A History of Travancore from the Earliest Times (Kerala, State Institute of Languages 1973, Third edition 1988)

The emergence of biographies, autobiographies, novels and plays as other powerful media of propagating ideas of social transformation was an important development of this period. The first novel 'Kundalata' (1887) by Appu Nedungadi was preceded by 'The Slayar Slain' or 'Ghataka Vadham' (1878) by Mrs Collins, a CMS worker. However, Kundalata as a novel penned by a Malayali retains its unique position. Following O. Chandu Menons 'Indulekha' (1889), the genre of novel writing gained popularity. Two such works are relevant to this study. The first, novel written by Kunnukuzhiyil Kochu- thommen - Apothecary in 1891 called, 'Parishkarappathi' which describes the social life of the Syrian Christian community. The second is a play written by Kocheeppan Tharakan in 1903, called, 'Mariamma'. This is a satirical depiction of the clash of the old traditions of the Syrian community with the new ideas of reform and change.

The community, church and other association or the yogams in its rejuvenated form had emerged in this period to be an important structure, particularly for women. It is in their participation through various associations and groups that Syrian Christian women first entered the public arena. At about the same time professions dominated by men till then were also opened to women. Among the associations, apart from the community

associations and church groups through which women articulated themselves, the Mother's Union is the most relevant for the middle class Syrian women. Established in 1909 this group took the lead in bringing women together to participate in the various aspects of public life. There were other associations too, like the Ladies association and the Scripture unions which provided a forum for Syrian women to articulate themselves on various issues.

Distinct from all these was the Nunnery. A vital part of the church hierarchy, they emerged as a consequence of changes within the organizational structure of the catholic church.¹⁵ Among those following the Syriac rite, it was the Carmelites who began the first women's religious congregation in 1890.¹⁶ In 1892, a second religious congregation for the Syrian women was established, this was the Visitation congregation.¹⁷ Women through these congregations were involved in educational activities of the community, particularly for girls.

15 Tharakan, P.K.M., 17 November 1984. opcit. p1960

16 The 100th year Souvenir of the Third Order of our Lady of Mount Carmel (1866-1966) (Ernakulam, 1966), pp2-3. Though women of both the Latin and Syrian rites were part of this religious congregation set up in 1866; those of the Syrian rite had a congregation of their own only after the split within the Catholic Church on the basis of Rites in 1890.

17 Joseph Chazhikadan, The Syrian Colonisation of Malabar (Kottayam: Catholic Mission Press, 1961), p382

The emergence of new structures in this period contributed in a significant way to the ongoing social transformation in Travancore. They also came to play a decisive role in the lives of the middle class women. The role of these structures and the Syrian Christian middle class community consciousness in attempting to locate women of the class within the new social context is examined next.

II

It is significant that while the changes within the administration, politics and economy as well as within religion did not directly involve women, the ideological changes taking place had significant consequences for women. The middle class ideology on womanhood, which had its roots in the missionary interest in female education, was nurtured in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century within the ambit of the early social reform activities. The argument put forward is that there was a change in the lives of the Syrian middle class women. However, there was also a continuity of the basic framework of the patrilineal family system or the dominant patriarchal ideology. If at all any changes had occurred within this basic framework, it was then the reconstitution of this framework within society in a new form. In

this section we shall first examine the early missionary enterprise in the field of women's education then move to understand the emergence of the middle class ideology on womanhood and the two trends within it i.e. the conservative's and the reformists arguments; and finally analyse two works of fiction which represents the 'new woman' of the Syrian Christian middle class.

The new system of schooling as it emerged in the nineteenth century was in direct contrast to the earlier methods of educating women. Girls were taught, limited to the confine so their homes or at the Kalari (gymnasium) and pallikudam the rudiments of education and trained in matters of the household. In the novel parishkarappathi written in 1891, there is an account of the patriarch of the Poomthottathil family, taking the youngest granddaughter Thankamma under his wings and, teaching her the basics of arithmetic, scriptures, grammar etc.¹⁸ In contrast, the new schooling system introduced by the English missionaries gave women's education an importance which it did not enjoy prior to the nineteenth century. It was successful in creating a separate space outside the precincts of home, for the specific purpose of educating women.

18 Kunnukuzhiyil Kochuthommen Apothecary, Parishkarappathi (1891)
(Kottayam : Vidyarthimitram Press, second edition 1977)

It was against many odds that this process of educating girls was achieved. The early missionaries who pioneered women's education were faced with problems of finding students to teach. They had to offer incentives for the students to attend the schools. The missionary couple Meads who had set up a girls school at Nagercoil in 1819 observed that,

.... with much difficulty a few girls were collected. Parents were quite unwilling to send their girls to school. ... These initial difficulties were somewhat overcome when the advantages of board and clothing were soon provided...¹⁹

Free boarding and dress or a promise of a sum of money by way of dowry to the girls were the incentives offered by the missionaries. As a CMS missionary, Mrs. Mitchalman pointed out that without offering temporal advantages, it was extremely difficult to collect girls.²⁰

However, the perseverance of the missionaries paid huge dividends and schools and scholars began to

19 C.M. Agur, Church History of Travancore (1903) (New Delhi : AES, reprint 1990), p765.

20 Mitchalman, 'Female Education' in Church Missionary Paper, Vol LXVIII, p2, in Eapen, opcit, p158

rapidly increase. There was a change in the indigenous attitude to educating women.

... These difficulties lay in our way for years, and proved a fruitful source of many painful disappointments nevertheless, we determined to persevere, hoping that in time the advantage of instruction would be perceived... We are permitted to realise our hopes, for as the improvement of the children began to manifest itself, prejudices gradually subsided, and those who formerly opposed, now in some instance became friends to the object.²¹

In the face of such difficulties then, it is pertinent to understand the reason for bringing a 'modern' education to women. For most beneficiaries of this education it was a tool, which enlightened their minds. Sr. Anna Benjamin the first non-European principal of the Baker Memorial School at Kottayam, said that the influence of education on woman was akin to 'showing the path of education to those women of Kerala who have neither the

21 Letter of Mrs. Mault dated 2 June 1830 in Agur, opcit, p768

means nor the opportunity to see the light of modern education; and remained immersed in the darkness of ignorance'.²²

A perusal of the source material on early missionary activities highlight, a different reason and purpose for educating women. The missionary, particularly the CMS's, interaction with Syrian church and community was with the intention to reform them and make them accept the tenets of the Anglican Church. By providing education for the Syrian women, the missionaries aimed to influence the Syrian Christian homes; train them as teachers and bible-women who provide manpower for the society's vast educational network and finally, to provide wives for the Christian teachers, clergy and evangelists in the mission. The annual report of the Travancore and Cochin diocese states this aim of educating women clearly;

....to train girls in a Christian atmosphere to provide suitable wives for clergymen, evangelists and teachers in mission schools... to educate girls who may be trained as teachers to bring up Christian girls

22 Sr. Anna Benjamin cited in the 150th Anniversary Souvenir of Baker School, opcit, pl.

in such a way that they may become useful wives and mothers and that they may have a great spiritual influence on the community.²³

The early educational institutions went a long way in inculcating the missionary aims in the minds of the students. These institutions were perceived as places where 'habits of industry' were imparted to the girls along with the emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene. The missionary wives, through these institutions were successful in moulding the girls as models of Victorian femininity. Away from the familiar surroundings of home and the influence of elders who educated and trained them according to customs and traditions of the community, the girls imbibed new habits and appearance and were trained to establish 'better ordered' families according to the western family structure. The onus of reforming the community through a better ordered family rested upon the women of the Syrian Christian community.

In the idealizing of women in their roles as wife / mother, we can see a continuity in women's role within the traditional family system in the new social

23 TCDR the Annual Report of 1912, Vol XXIII, No. 2 April (Kottayam: CMS Press 1913); No. 3, Vol XXIV, 1914, p62.

context. The difference was that while Syrian girls were tutored about their role, of wife/ mother in their homes in the traditional system; these roles were imbibed by them within the confines of the school and boarding houses, in the new social context. This was what a missionary women called the 'boarding-house' influence.

These institution for girls operated to maintain and perpetuate gender relations by reinforcing the socializing values and norms within them.²⁴ To this end, separate institutions for boys and girls were established as was a specific curriculum for girls. This strengthened the attempts to maintain the dichotomy between masculine and feminine roles.²⁵ In this transition from educating women within homes to missionary bungalows, boarding houses and separate school and college for girls, we see a continuity of the assumption that girls have different needs from boys. The demand for separate school for boys and girls was a common one in these years. However, the need for separate school for girls was required at higher levels of education. A letter written by a father, in Malayala Manorama, who was reprimanded by the Bishop of Changanachery for having enrolled his daughters in a Government Boys High School, illustrates this point.

24 Karuna Chanana, ed., Socialisation Education and Women : Explorations in Gender Identity (New Delhi : Orient Longman, 1988), pp9-10

25 ibid, p9

Reacting to the Bishop's suggestion to educate his daughters in a convent instead, he pointed out that it was not at the level of primary classes but at the High School level where there is need for a separate girls school.²⁶

Simultaneous to the growth of school for girls was the process of schooling girls. This task was accomplished with the help of a specific curriculum for girls, distinct from those for the boys. Female education as it developed in nineteenth century Travancore, reinforced the assumption that for girls education should complement their social functions. This assumption was realized in the 'feminine curriculum' that complemented the female education imparted to girls in these schools.

Mrs. Bailey who began one of the first school for girls, taught them in addition to the 'three Rs, sewing and stitching',²⁷ as did Mrs. Norton in her school at Alleppey, in 1820.²⁸ By 1829 she introduced spinning, plain needle work, marking as well as the three Rs and

26 Malayala Manorama, 27 May, 1910, Letter from a resident of Meenachil Taluq cited in article on Travancore and Female EducationT

27 Eapen, opcit, p144

28 Proceedings for the Church Missionary Society for Africa and the East, 1821-22, p156 in Eapen, Opcit p146.

moral and religious truths.²⁹ English, Mathematics and History were classified as 'higher type of education', meant for the 'more intelligent' and for those opting to study further than the primary school level. For those who could not pursue a higher education, 'a simple and thorough' primary education was provided which instilled in them values of the ideal women, as the following example illustrates:

The girls have become real helpmates to their husbands, by being qualified to help them in keeping household accounts, paying the labourers in the paddy fields, teaching the young children, and so forth, according to their circumstances and position in life...³⁰

Regarding their lessons and notes from school and its use later in these girls lives :

.....Some of these girls may perhaps be married to some half educated Syrian husbands, and in consequence will have

29 W.S. Hunt, The Anglican Church in Travancore and Cochin (Kottayam : CMS Press, 1920), Vol II, P. 139

30 Pastor of Olasha, A.T. Thomas's report of Mrs. Baker's School for girls at Kottayam, The Diocesan Gazette, June 1881, p239

no opportunity, after leaving the school to attend a service... or listen to a sermon... To such these notes... will supply matter for meditation and refreshment amidst the cares and anxieties of life. There are several instances of girls taught in this school, who in their capacity as wives, have removed the prejudices of their husbands and have otherwise won them by their good conversation...³¹

For those pursuing higher education, there were specific Institutions. At Mrs. Johnson's Normal school established in 1848, young girls were trained to be teachers. Along with Scriptural History, Geography, Arithmetic and Catechism, Needle Work and Knitting were part of the syllabus.³² Explaining the purpose of special Institutions such as the Teachers training institutes and the teaching of crafts Eira Dalton writes that,

Besides book learning, sewing, knitting and spinning were taught so that

31 ibid, p240

32 Rev. Henry Baker Senior's report on the Normal School for girls, Missionary Register 1850, p54 in Eapen, Opcit, p149.

girls could do something towards earning their living after they left the school...³³

The knowledge imparted to the girl scholars within the scheme of Female education was designed to equip them as model wives and mothers of mission workers, clergymen, teachers and to train them as school mistresses.³⁴

The missionary workers in being pioneers in the field of female education, were simultaneously engaged in reconstructing gender roles and femininity in a changing social order. The middle class ideology on womanhood finds a precursor in the missionary construction of the role of women in society, community and family and in their defining the nature of education for women as 'feminine'.

For those tutored in these institutions (both men and women) to 'perceive the injustice of the sentiments which have ruled the destinies of women', the internalization of this missionary perception of women's condition in Travancore was intrinsic to their education.³⁵ These students, in the late nineteenth century,

33 Dalton, opcit, p13

34 TCDR, Vol XLV, No. 1, January 1878, p33

35 Rev. M.A. Sherring, The History of Protestant Missions in India 1707-1881 (London : Religious Tract Society 1884), p436

went on to constitute the new middle class who were engaged in propounding the ideology on womanhood constructed on the basis of this perception.

The construction and propagation of the dominant discourse on women occurred simultaneously in this period. Within the Syrian Christian Community two distinct trends were visible on the discussion on womanhood. On the one hand were the traditional elite, rich in land wealth and occupying an enviable position within the community. The socio-economic transformations of the nineteenth century brought with it a challenge to their dominance within the society, church and community. Changes in land relations, commerce, introduction of Plantation industry and the new rules of the market brought forth a middle class from within the community, who were quick to gauge the relevance of a 'modern' education and the importance of white collared jobs in the changed social situation. In reaction to these changes, this traditional elite along with the conservative elements within the Church strongly opposed the changes and reforms being introduced within the community.

On the other hand were the reformist sections within the middle class. 'Products of the missionary's 'modern' education and deeply influenced by English liberalism, these men were engaged in reforming their

community, settling ecclesiastical differences in order to bring unity and order within the community, so that they could make best use of the opportunities of the time.

The traditionalist views on womanhood sought to confine women only within the household. The 'stridharnam' or a women's duty lay in looking after her spouse's household; giving him comfort and needs utmost attention and keeping him away from the matters of the household. Further, women being weak by nature and helpers should voluntarily opt out from the manual work and leave such matters to men.³⁶

A writer in Malayala Manorama stated that if women concentrated on household matters and in helping their husbands instead of being involved in state governance and in being the bread winners of the family then it is possible to achieve heaven on the earth.³⁷ Another common agreement of this group was that to carry out household work.³⁸ However for the few among the traditionalists who did not oppose women's education, a specific curriculum constituting Sewing and Stitching, Childcare and a bit of Arithmetic, was considered to be

36 Bhashaposhini , book 4, No. 3 and 4, 1909.

37 Malayala Manorama, 5 June 1909, article Wife and Family life.

38 Malayala Manorama, 13 July 1912, article 'What can women do'?

sufficient for women.³⁹

The middle class ideology on womanhood was carefully constructed in this period. In the arguments of the reformists we can see a reflection of the early missionary attitudes. Moreover, while the former's definition of womanhood differed from that of the traditionalists, we argue that inspite of these differences there was an under lying commonalty which was the essence of their definition of womanhood. The reformists, who were the most vocal and strongest advocates of equal educational opportunities for both men and women simultaneously defined the kind of education that should be given to women. Hence the growing demand for schools was coupled with the demand to provide useful knowledge to women. This constituted an understanding of medicine and hygiene, which helped women to keep her family healthy; home management, to manage the household efficiently while the spouse is left free to pursue higher matters; reading and writing: so that she can care better for the family, improve herself as a mother and wife and; gardening and music to soothe her tired nerves when she is finished with her chores. It is from elder women in a family and

39 Malayala Manorama, 27, May 1910, article Travancore and Female Education'.

through teachers in school that women receive this education which helps them to produce and nurture children and manage a house.⁴⁰

It is of significance that education for women was seen to be vital to the development of either the family or the community, society and God. 'Let not the girls be neglected at the same time', warned Dr. E. Poonam at a Syrian social gathering in 1901, 'work for their amelioration. Let them arise pari passu with you. Otherwise, depend upon it, you will find them a force to drag you down as you advance'.⁴¹ Education for women was never for themselves or for their use. The specific knowledge they received was meant to be used to maintain and preserve the family and community i.e. as men took on the world, women used their education to further the interests of a patrilineal family system.

...Education should equip women to carry out their natural duties as a woman in an efficient manner. These include caring for the children's health and hygiene and bring them up

40 Bhashaposhini, book 1, No. 4, 1897 pp81-84; book 11, 1906, No. 7 & 8, p208; book 27, No. 6 1922, p213

41 Malayala Manorama, 9 October 1901

in the best possible manner, thus doing their duty towards themselves, the society and God,..⁴²

Even in looking for role models for women to emulate, an example of German women's training in household work was preferred to the English suffragette's struggle for equal rights and divorce laws. The latter seen as a sign of asserting themselves over their spouses and challenging the patrilineal family system, which was unacceptable to the middle class reformists.⁴³

For the middle class man to possess an educated wife, of pure character and good manners was similar to having come by invaluable wealth.⁴⁴ However, at the same time Syrian Christian women from among the middle class were gaining acceptancy of their competence to function in the public sphere. A demand for women professionals in the field of medicine and teaching was gaining acceptance now.

.....The well being and health of the people depends on the women.... a

42 Bhashaposhini, book 1 No. 4, 1896 article 'Female Education'

43 Bhashaposhini, book 16, No 11 and 12, 1911, pp363-65

44 Malayala Manorama, 5 June 1909, A Wife and Family life; 29 March, 1, 3, 5, 10, 12, 15, 22, 24, 26 and 29 April, 1919. Eleven part article on Marriage and Family life.

sickly woman would beget a sickly child... only a woman can best care for women and children's health, there is a need for woman doctors...⁴⁵

A similar need for women in the teaching field was expressed,

.....That the present situation of men inspecting girls school has many negative points and hence there is a need for school inspectoresses.....⁴⁶

The Emphasis on women's participation in the public sphere through their activities in the reform movement⁴⁷ and community affairs⁴⁸ tend to paint a picture of a new equality enjoyed by Syrian Christian women. However, treating women on an equal footing meant:

....Women's nature is equal to man's nature. Though it is weak they are neither toys nor the leaders of men, but sisters and friends... Education

45 Malayala Manorama, 15 January, 1920

46 Malayala Manorama, 17 October, 1906

47 Malayala Manorama, 8 June, 1919

48 Malayala Manorama, 12 July, 1919

would enhance their charm...⁴⁹

Towards the end of the second decade of the twentieth century there were many examples which were cited as an example of women and men being on par with each other. However, as the above quotes shows that within the emerging definition of womanhood, the demand for equal rights and educating women were contradictory and could not be accommodated. The need for women in medicine, teaching professions for instance was because they were better equipped as women to handle women and children. While both the professions were demanding and required skill, accolades for women in these professions came in because the qualities of understanding, caring and nurturing which was regarded as intrinsic to their nature could be best used in this field.

The conceptualization of the 'new-women' was a vital aspect of the emerging consciousness of the middle class in this period. Women's selective access to 'knowledge and information' helped in the reconstruction of gender and femininity in this period. Since the content of education for women was 'feminine' the new middle class women entered the public arena in roles that complemented their functions within the family. Thus we find Syrian

49 Bhashaposhini, book 2, No. 11 and 12, 1897, pp278-80

women becoming doctors, nurses and teachers, all of which were professions that required the uxorial and maternal qualities of caring and nurturing. The new women's place within the emerging consciousness of the middle class Syrian Christian men thus resolved, gave women a restrictive space to function within an equally restrictive equality.

I shall now examine the representation of this 'new woman' through the print media, here specifically the genre of creative writing. For this purpose I have chosen two works of fiction, one a novel by Kunnukuzhiyil Kochuthommen Apothecary (1851-1913), 'Parishkarappathi' written in 1891⁵⁰, and the second a play written in 1903 by Kocheeppan Tharakan called 'Mariamma'.⁵¹

Born in 1851 at Puthupalli near Kottayam Kochuthommen Apothecary is said to have received encouragement in the art of novel writing from the western missionaries. In his novel Parishkarappathi he portrays the social life of the Jacobite Syrian community of northern Travancore. In this he gives a satirical description of a Syrian Christian household. An analysis of this novel states that the author has been able to

50 Kunnukuzhiyil Kochuthommen Apothecary, opcite

51 Kocheeppan Tharakan, 'Mariamma' (Kottayam: Manorama Press, 1903).

portray the social aberrations such as a desire for dowry and the harassments from the mother-in-law in a language typical to the community. An example of the influence of the west on the art of novel writing and the emergence of fine novelists according to the analysis, can be gauged from the success of this' novel.⁵²

The novel's title suggests the crux of the story in that single word which means the 'reformed half'. The novelist in the preface elaborates on the title and the purpose of writing such a work. According to him, his attempt was to depict the Syrian Christian community's growing interest in the reforms of the early nineteenth century; the conscious acceptance of these reforms by some sections within the community as well as the unquestioning acceptance of these reforms by some others.⁵³

There are three main trends within the novel that complements the main theme. The main plot of the story revolves around the character of Thankamma, the grand daughter of 'Muppeennu', the old patriarch of the Poomthottam family. She was living with her parents, Mammachen and Kunjandamma in her maternal home. She comes

52 Scaria Zacharia, Malayala Sahityawum Christianikalum: Charchayum Pooranavum, Appendix p523 in Dr. P.J. Thomas, opcit.

53 Kochuthomman ApotheCary, opcit. preface, pviii

to to Poomthottum along with her father. For Thankamma this visit is an introduction to the rules, customs and traditions and lifestyle of a patriarchal Jacobite family. Muppeennu, her grandfather, takes an instant liking to his youngest grandchild and wants her to stay with them. He takes on himself the task of educating her. In course of her stay at Poomthottam she becomes familiar with both the traditional role of women within a Syrian Christian family and with the new ideas of reform. The latter is possible after she comes in contact with Kuriachan of the Chembakassery family whose sister Accamma is married to Kochuvarki of Poomthottam family and a cousin of Thankamma.

Thankamma is portrayed as a clear headed young girl who question some of the marriage customs of the community in her naivety. Her protests against the bride (Accamma) being laden with jewellery is overheard by Kuriachan who supports her views. From this encounter they begin to respect and admire each other. Though Kuriachen soon leaves for Trivandrum to pursue higher education and get a Government job, through Accamma, both these young people, constantly keep in touch with each other. In Kuriachan, Thankamma finds a person to share her ideas, acquires new books to read and discuss many topics.

Accamma who broaches the subject of her brother Kuriachan's marriage to Thankamma with her parents is given evasive replies. The reason being that both Mathechen and Eli, Accamma's parents had hopes of getting a fat sum for their son as dowry, primarily because they had spend huge amounts to educate him. Since Poomthottam family had not demanded any dowry of Accamma's marriage, Mathechan felt that it would be difficult to ask for a dowry for Thankamma. Secondly, Thankamma's mother Kunjandamma who being an only child of her parents and hence the sole heir to their property had a reputation of being a shrew. This, and her attempts to spite her husband Mammachan had led to their property to be nearly taken over by Phillipose, a trouble maker.

Thankamma on hearing that Chembakassery family was not too keen about her marrying Kuriachan falls ill. She is taken to Trivandrum to an English doctor by her mother and Accamma after the many unsuccessful attempts by native doctors and godmen to cure her. While she is unable to meet Kuriachen, she meets two of his friends who express a desire to marry her. After many mishaps and misadventure Kuriachan and Thankamma are united in wedlock at the end.

The three main standards that complement the main plot are as follows:

Firstly, the author's representation of women as the upholders of the community and family values; the harassment of the daughter-in-law by an uneducated sister and mother-in-law; the portrayal of female heiresses, here Kunjandamma, Thankamma's mother as a shrew and an arrogant woman who in insulting her husband is seen to threaten the family system by reversing the traditional roles of man and woman; and finally, in the portrayal of the character of Thankamma, the author ascribes to her the qualities of 'new woman' of the middle class. Thankamma is both educated, well-read and familiar with the rules and custom of the patriarchal Syrian Christian family. We the readers are introduced to Thankamma a young girl who is young and naive. Having lived in a family where her mother a domineering woman was the property holder, Thankamma is shown to be unversed with the ways of a 'normal' Syrian Christian family, according to the author. The author, who is a product of the middle class reformism of the nineteenth century, endows the character of Thankamma with the qualities of womanhood as defined within the middle class consciences. She is educated and at the same time is introduced to the ways of the Syrian Christian patriarchal household which is depicted as an orderly, just and peaceful family as opposed to her maternal home. The few instance of disturbance at Poomthottam are caused mainly by women, here the mother

and sister-in-law of Accamma.

Independent women such as Kunjandamma are portrayed as negative characters, who are shown to be gullible and susceptible to smooth talkers like Philipose. It is only when they are taught a lesson and made to accept their husband's words that they gain respectability.

The second sub-theme is the portrayal of the reformists or those who carry on discussions on the question of reforms. On the one hand is Kuriachen who is shown to be a balanced person, with strong opinions and who disapproves the extravagance and opulence associated with the costumes and rituals of the community. On the other hand are his friends who are what the author refers to in the preface as those who unquestioningly take to reforms. Balancing the reformist zeal of people like Kuriachen are the views of the worldly wise Muppeennu. This forms the third sub-theme of the novel.

Based within the patriarchal traditions of the Syrian Christians, Muppeennu is nevertheless critical of the changes that have crept into the community. These changes are however not those introduced by the reformists, but those which have been introduced within the traditions and customs of the community over the years.

Muppeennu like reformists such as Kuriachen and the foreman Idachandy of Mangalassery family criticizes the wasteful expenditure and extravagance in the customs and rituals of the community, especially in marriage. While the reformists speak out against child marriage, dowry practices etc. it is Muppeennu, who while advocating for the simplicity that was part of the community in earlier times; his criticism of dowry demands and his emphasis on involving the community in all decisions taken by a family, takes on the task of educating Thankamma. Thus in the views of Muppeennu, the elder patriarch of the Poomthottam family we see a critical view of the community. It is this critical view that is adopted by the English educated middle class reformers of the community. In this the author establishes a continuity between the tradition and modernity, which was intrinsic to the reformer's arguments in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This continuity was most visibly carried on in the lives of the emerging middle class women of the Syrian Christian community, represented by Thankamma and to a lesser extent by Accamma in this novel. Thankamma due to the influence of her education, exercises her right to choose her husband. Though her reason and logic are put to test many a times, in her suffering, the novelist portrays the resilience of the 'new woman', who combines within her both traditional and modern values

and remains firmly rooted within the patrilineal family system.

In the second work, the play 'Mariamamma' (1903) written by Kocheeppan Tharakan (1861 - 1940), these qualities are once again reflected. A less complicated story line, in this, Mariamma the protagonist is an educated and married woman. She speaks English, recites poetry and carries on long discussions with her husband Ouseph and his friend Cheriyan. However, her illiterate mother and sister-in-law are envious and suspicious of her and torment her. She is made to do hard household work, punished cruelly and denied food by both of them. Though Mariamma comes from an educated family, her education remains stifled in her husband's house where superstition and blind faith in traditions have denied women liberty.

Her sufferings are increased when her husband and his friend go to Trivandrum to pursue higher studies. She contracts small-pox and is left alone in a house by her in-laws with an old servant. Her repeated messages to Ouseph remain unanswered as Cheriyan his friend thinks that such letters from a wife would disrupt Ouseph's studies. Finally when Cheriyan realizes his mistake, he sends a message to Mariamma's brother, Dr. Stephen and informs Ouseph who rushes back home.

Back home on the instructions of her mother-in-law and an evil relative, an attempt is made to kill Mariamma and the servant, by hired goons and a god-man. However, the timely intervention of Dr. Stephen saves her life and she is put under the care of his wife Saramma. It is from Saramma, that she learns of Dr. Stephen's attempts to get her in-laws arrested and charged with her murder. She rushes back and saves her in-laws. Pleads with the police to release her would be murderers and is reunited with her husband and his family.

The middle class consciousness of womanhood is reflected through the central character Mariamma. In her conversation with her brother's wife Saramma, who curses her in-laws, Mariamma puts forward the essential quality of the 'new woman'. She defends her mother-in-law's harassment and sees it as a mother's attempt to correct her daughter's mistakes. She defined the role of a married woman as a 'Kudumbini' who had to be well versed in dealing with people, looking after the household, caring for her husband and nurturing children.⁵⁴ Pointing out that her tormentors behaved like animals basically due to their ignorance and illiteracy and hence she appealed to the police officer to release them.

The representation of women in both these works of fiction reflects the 'new woman' model of this period. Education is used to uphold the patrilineal family system. Similarly it is also used to stress the 'natural' qualities of patience, love and suffering which enhanced the woman's femininity. Through the educated woman the reformists sought to clean up the ills of a traditional family and at the same time uphold the patriarchal values in a changing social order.

III

In this final section I examine the new structures that emerged in this period and women's participation in the public area through them; the role of these structures in the construction of the 'new woman' and the middle class Syrian Christian woman's consciousness about themselves. The specific structures that I refer to are the Mothers' Union, the community and church associations and the Nunnery.

As a consequence of the social transformation of this period women of the Syrian Christian middle class were entering the public sphere through these structures and through the various professions*. The majority of

* Justice Anna Chandy in her autobiography writes of her mother Sara Jacob (1875-1962) who though widowed at the age of thirty-five, refused suggestions to remarry and took up a job as a primary school teacher. Both her salary and the rent from their house was used by her to educate her two daughters Anna and Sara. (Trivandru, 1971 p191.

these women were those who belonged to families who had taken the lead in introducing reforms within the community or were those who had been influenced by these reforms. Fr. Emmanuel Nidhiry's nieces, for instance, were the first beneficiaries of his views on women's education. Mary, the eldest daughter of his brother Cyriac Nidhiry, was a champion of woman's rights. Aleyamma her sister, joined a convent and became a teacher while Thresiamma the third sister went on to become an Inspector of schools. The youngest Anna Nidhiry, by the end of her career, was the Principal of the women's college at Trivandrum.⁵⁵ Mary Poonen, who was the first woman doctor from the community, was the daughter of Dr. E. Poonen, a Surgeon -General and a leading figure within the community.⁵⁶ Sara Chacko, daughter of the Police Commissioner of Cochin M.A. Chacko, was the Principal of the Isabella Thoburn College at Lucknow.⁵⁷ Sara Poonen, Elizabeth Zachariah, Mary Varkey, Mrs. Chinnamma, Chachi Thomas, Rachel Joseph and Mariam Samuel to name a few were those who worked in their capacity as teachers and school inspectoress in the field of education.⁵⁸ While Elizabeth Mathai became the second woman from the community to study medicine, Mrs. K.P. Abraham took up law and set a precedent

- 55 Abraham Nidhiry, Father Nidhiry 1842-1904 : a history of his times. (Kottayam: Deepika press, 1971), p323.
- 56 Malayala Manorama, 30 October, 1915.
- 57 Malayala Manorama, 60th year Souvenir (Kottayam, 1950), p27.
- 58 TCDR Vol XXVI, No.4 June 1917, pp63-4; Baker School Souvenir, opcit, p35.

for women like Anna Chandy to rise to the level of a High Court Judge.⁵⁹

In contrast to these women and the many others not mentioned here were those educated women, who worked as Bible women, workers of the CEZMS, as nuns within the Syrian catholic church and through association such as the Mothers' Union. Women such as Mrs. P.J. Ittyerah, Akka Mathew Chandy, Susanna Thomas, find mention in the mission records as women who through their work in the church and through prayer unions contributed immensely to the church and community.

The Mothers' Union established in 1909 was successful in bringing together women of the middle class Syrian Christian families. For them the Union provided a space to work together, among women within and outside the community. The centrality of home, family and marriage in woman's life was emphasized within the organization. In its first Annual Report it was stated that,

.....as our members learn the strength of unity and sympathy, the union will become in time a real help to them in their home life and in the training of their children.⁶⁰

59 Malayala Manorama, 7 August 1919

60 TCDR, Vol XX, No. 3, June 1910, pp 36-7.

A monthly magazine called the 'Family Friend' with a special Mothers' union page was used to keep in touch with the Indian members.⁶¹ The Union made considerable progress over the years. By 1913, there were about a thousand Indian members attached to twenty branches in twenty pastorates apart from the fifty European members.⁶² Women were given a higher ideal of marriage; of training the children and strengthen them as mothers⁶³; along with encouraging them to undertake voluntary work among the uneducated and ignorant within the community.⁶⁴

Akka Mathew Chandy, a member of the union, gathered women regularly for prayer meetings and to visit Hindu homes. She worked among women at Pakkil, Pallom and Trichur; and began a Mothers' Union working party at Cochin. In one of her schemes, she encouraged women to rear fowls and donate the profits to the Adur mission.⁶⁵ On her death at the age of twenty eight she was described, in an obituary, as a helpmate to her husband and as a mother who trained her children very carefully.⁶⁶ Educated upto the sixth form at the Buchanon Institute, Pallom and then at Baker School, she was married at the age of

61 *ibid*, p 132

62 *TCDR*, Vol. XXIII, No.6, December 1913, pp131-33

63 *ibid*, p 132

64 *TCDR*, Vol XXXI, No.1, January 1921, p 19. Annual Report for 1920 of the Mothers Union.

65 *TCDR*, Vol.XXVII, No.4, June 1917, p63

66 *ibid*, P63.

eighteen. Akka represented the new middle class woman who sought their identity as mother's and wives within their marriage.

Education occupied a high position in the union's activities. The creation of an ideal home, family and marriage as well as ideal wives and mothers was contingent on the latter being educated.⁶⁷ The curriculum for girls in school such as needle work, home management and music, contributed to the assumption that their social and educational functions were one and the same.⁶⁸ This reiterated the uxorial and motherly qualities of the woman. In keeping with this need, literature, on 'the influence of a wife and mother', 'Home training', 'Character building', 'the welfare of young children', etc.. Written by the educated women of the two states of Travancore and Cochin, were asked for. This was because the missionary women felt that only these women could best express these ideas to a larger audience than them as the conditions of life, character and training were different for both.⁶⁹

In denigrating the Suffragette Movement and demands for divorce laws in England, the missionaries

67 TCDR, Vol XIX, no.1, February 1909, p7.

68 K. Chanana, *opcit*, p10.

69 TCDR, Mothers' Union Report of 1920, Vol XXXI, No.1, January 1921, p20.

through the Mothers'union was successful in reinforcing the centrality of home. Speaking at the Annual Meeting of the Union, the Bishop of London said that while the church recognized the judicial separation and separation by mutual consent, it never sanctioned divorce. Mothers'union, he observed, emphasized love as the basis of marriage and placed motherhood, in which lay a woman's glory and joy, at the centre of marriage. He exhorted the union not to rest until it had restored motherhood to the place which it once occupied i.e. the glory of women.⁷⁰ The Mothers'union condemned the formation of divorce courts which according to them made, 'greater facilities for dividing husbands and wives', and in the process, 'injuring the womanhood' of their country and home life.⁷¹ The union emphasized the influence of education on the spiritual and moral values of women which contributed to the community's progress⁷².

Within the Syrian Christian community, for the large majority of Syrian Catholic women it was the nunnery and the nuns who inculcated within their minds the dominant ideology on womanhood. Nunneries emerged as a consequence of the changes within the organizational structure of the Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century. They came to be a vital part of the church

70 TCDR, Vol. XIX, No.1 February 1909, p6.

71 TCDR, Vol. XX, NO.3 June 1919, p36.

72 TCDR, Vol. IV, No.662, June 1904, p429.

hierarchy from this period. Part of the monastic order and 'recruited on an all Kerala basis', they proved to be an effective instrument for building educational institutions all over Travancore and Cochin.⁷³

The Carmelit Third Order for the Catholic women of Kerala was the first indigenous convent for women in the state. Founded at Koonammavu on 12 February 1866, the first recruits were three women from the Latin Rite. They were Eliswah, widow of Vareed a member of the ancient and rich Vakayil family of Koonammavu, her only daughter Anna and her sister Thresia.⁷⁴ The convent consisted of the immovable property of lands and fields that Anna received as her inheritance from the Vakayil family.⁷⁵ The fourth member who joined the convent a day later was from the Syriac Rite. She was Eliswah a widow, who was the daughter of the Vaidyan of Puthenargady, Vaikom. She took the name of Sr. Clara⁷⁶.

In 1890, following the separation of the Catholic Church according to the Rites, the Sisters of the Latin Rite left the convent and its properties to the Syrian nuns.⁷⁷ The second convent for Syrian women was

73 Tharakan, *opcit*, p 1960

74 100th year Souvenir of the Third Order of our lady of Mount Carmal (1866-1966) (Eranakulam, 1966), p1.

75 *ibid*, p1.

76 *ibid*, p2.

77 *ibid*, p3.

the Visitation congregation established in 1892 at Kaipuzha, Kottayam.⁷⁸ The first women to join this convent were the widows Kunnusseril Eliswah (Sr. Eli) and Muzhuvancheril Mariam (Sr. Margaret). Along with them Tharayil Thekkethil Eliswah; Malayil Anna (Sr. Clara); Tharayil Vadakkethil Anna (Sr. Katrina) and Kunnusseril Mariam, joined as novices.⁷⁹ The convent was built on the land donated by the Vicar General Fr. Makil Mathai, Makil Lukachen, Tharayil Thekkethil Thommi and Kandarapallyil Thommi.

Established specifically for the Syrian catholics also known as the 'Thekkumbagakar', there were two specific purposes for setting up this convent. This was stated in the first set of rules given to the convent by Bishop Makil. According to this,

....In the absence of a monastic order for those women and widows who wished to lead a life of complete asceticism, this convent was built to fulfill their wishes and for their protection... in a community where the spiritual and temporal education of girls and their

78 Joseph Chazhikadan, opcit. p342

79 Visitation Congregation: History, Spirituality and life of the holy women (Kottayam, 1979), p21-22.

proper upbringing is neglected, the nuns are indebted to the community to impart education in reading, writing, crafts and Christian tradition which suites the status and nature of these girls...⁸⁰

These reasons find an echo in the consciousness of their role as nuns. The first entry in the chronicles of the Kaipuzha convent points out that reading and writing were not known to the syrian women of the Thekumbhaga community. They spend most of their time in reciting prayers, and in learning the scriptures. This state of affairs was not because women lacked the intelligence or the inclination but because they were not given the opportunity to equip themselves with an education suitable for them.⁸¹

The Syrian Catholic church, through the nunneries were able to achieve two objectives. The nunneries on the one hand brought 'modern western' education to the women, while on the other hand women were limited to the confines of the patriarchal family and church structures. The convents provided a space for women within community to opt out of the institution of marriage..... We can

80 ibid, p21.

81 Chronicle of the Kaippuzha Convent, Book I, 24 June 1892, p1.

understand the extent of their spiritual wholeness when we see women find their identity only within the vocation of marriage. Our women have been leading a life of foolishness and ignorance....⁸² states the Chronicles. It becomes evident that the nuns internalized the male consciousness about women. It is in this, that their involvement in the programme of educating women, assumes importance. The education imparted to the girls were similar to those of the mission and Sirkar schools. The purpose of educating women too converge with the dominant views on female education. Sewing and crafts were integral to female education. This finds an illustration in the description of the new teacher for the girls school attached to the convent. The eighteen year old Mary Appu is described as a person with a good knowledge of Malayalam, English and Tamil and well versed in the art of tailoring.⁸³

It is also significant that only within the confines of religious institutions that women were allowed to deviate from their normal roles as house wives and mothers. The competency of women to function in public areas and as single women, could gain legitimacy only within the confines of patriarchal framework of the church.

82 ibid, p1.

83 ibid, January 1893, p21.

By the late 19th and early 20th century women's participation in the public areas was steadily increasing. As teachers, school inspectresses, medical women i.e. doctors and midwives, Syrian women had come to constitute a sizeable section of the growing work force of middle class women. The Mothers' Union and convents became the platforms through which those women outside this work force could work for the community. Here then it is of consequence to examine the woman's consciousness.

Through these associations and structures women of the middle class expressed the need for forums through which women of this community could interact with each other. Presenting her paper at the diocesan Conference held at Kottayalm, Mrs. Zachariah advocated the opening of branches of the Mothers' Union in each parish and hold regular women's working meetings in the houses of the members. She spoke for younger women to be involved in the Sundry School work, which she felt would stimulate their interest in community affairs.⁸⁴ Complementing this demand was the call to the Government to encourage women's education and their participation in the field of education. Miss. Eli Abraham pointed out the Government's contribution to women's education.

"...The Separation of the Educational

84 TCDR, VOL. XXII, No.5, October 1912, p102.

Deptt. into two, and the placing of the female section of the Dept under an Inspectorers; the policy pursued of late whereby the Girl's schools have come to be manned by few female teachers, and the establishment of female Training schools - these are the ... reforms effected during his Highness reign ...

and speaking specifically of the Syrian Christian Community,

Our community has met with considerable progress in the matter of female education ...community can boast of ... 3 - 4 lady Graduates, not to speak of the many lady undergraduates... Most of these have substantially been benefited by schools & colleges maintained by the Travancore Durbar... ⁸⁵

Dominant perception of the purpose of educating women came to be reflected within the women's conscious-

85. Malayala Manorama, 3 October 1917.

ness too.

Identifying women's duty as caring for the society a woman opined that, women should enter useful professions such as that of Doctors, nursing and teaching. These professions complemented women's nature.⁸⁶ These views find an echo in another article written on the 'ten commandments' for women. In this, the writer a woman, defined the 'ideal wife' as one who sacrifices her opinions & thinking and gives primacy to those of her husband. She also cared for her husband's family, took care of every one's needs, looked after her children, allowed her husband to have the last word in all matters and read books and newspapers and discussed them with the husband.⁸⁷

The ideal wife was then the 'new woman' who used her education to maintain the status quo within the family. However, when putting the education to use outside the family, it should be in a field that was not very different from her role in the family. Mrs. Annamma Thomas, Sub. Asstt. Surgeon in her article on women and medical education brought out the need for women to opt out for a profession such as medicine and not law. The reason

86 Malayala Manorama, 2 October 1920.

87 Malayala Manorama, 15 January 1916.

being that since women were not involved in trade and other property related activities, which was a male preserve, the need for women to be in that profession was not of much significance.⁸⁸

In contrast to these were the views of the Syrian women on education, family, property rights and equal civic rights. These give evidence that within the dominant discourse, women asserted a consciousness, that stretched against the confines of traditional roles of women. Speaking at the Travancore and Cochin Christian congress, Miss. Zacharia, a teacher of Baker memorial school was critical of the achievements of Education within the Syrian community.

....women have been little more than mere household drudges, and be it said to their credit, faithful and willing drudges, never realising that they can or ought to be anything more. Decades of English Education among men scarcely did anything to alter that position! On the other hand it only served to increase the mental disparity between the sexes...⁸⁹

88 Malayala Manorama, 2 October, 1915

89 Malayala Manorama, 18 May, 1918

However, while questioning the accepted role of women within the confines of home, she located the role of an educated women within the family.

...woman was yet to realise that she has an intellect that can be cultivated and directed to objects outside the narrow confines of her own kitchen... The lack of proper education and culture in the mother is an incalculable loss to the children..⁹⁰

However, it was within the realm of property rights for women that the authority of the patriarchal structure of the Syrian Christian community was questioned. Ms. Zāchariah saw in the opposition to the Christian bill the painful proof of the attitude of men towards women and her rights, which were not honoured by men within the community.

A Syrian woman in her three part article on "Syrian Christian women and dowry in 1911 identified the patriarchal family system as the reason for women being denied an equal place within the community and in the family. She convincingly argued against five excuses given

89 Malayala Manorama, 18 May 1918.

90 ibid,

by men for denying women equal property rights.

1. Countering the argument that women are given some money for their expenses and hence do not need a share in the property, she pointed out that the women if given money was being paid for the work she did within the household. However, men were able to earn more as they were able to take part in cultivation, trading and other activities.

2. Countering the fact that sons had a greater share in the father's property as they helped the father in his work, she said if instead of being married away, women took up jobs, then they too could contribute to the family income. Moreover, through their work in the kitchen and other household work they are doing unpaid work.

3. On sons being a support to parents in their old age she said, that to look after ones parents one must first have the economic means and secondly, should be able to live with them. Both of which she said traditions of the community had denied to women. She also cited the cases of parents with an only daughter who looks after them and said that given the opportunity women could fulfill this task.

4. On the family that will split and be ruined if women

are given equal rights; She pointed out that splitting the property among the sons too would break down the family structure.

5. On if women are given equal rights, there is a fear that the wealth of one family is transferred to another family when they are married. This was countered with the argument that women even when married is not fully merged with her husband's family. That is she retains her identity and hence the property given to her remains with her.⁹¹

This assertion for equal property rights is echoed in women's demand for political representation and voting rights. In formulating policies affecting the home, children and the community and society at large, it is important that woman's opinion be taken into consideration, argued a women writing on women's voting rights.⁹²

Barring few instances of women questioning the patriarchal practices of the community, the broader social changes confined women of the Syrian Christian middle class within a patrilineal family system which was also transposed to into the public arena. The reforms provided a limited space and restrictive options to women in this

91 Malayala Manorama, November 4, 8 and 11, 1911.

92 Malayala Manorama, 7 November, 1919.

period. In the next chapter we shall see how patricarchal ideology was reinstated in society; and the way in which women were confined within its frame work.

CHAPTER - 3 : RECONSTITUTING PATRIARCHY :
THE INHERITANCE DEBATE AS AN ILLUSTRATION

The favourable socioeconomic conditions, the spread of literacy and an organised church paved way for the emergence of a middle class who came into considerable property by the latter half of the nineteenth century. The middle class who were unable to rival the upper class Syrians in terms of land wealth, instead used education to elevate themselves within society and gain access to the bureaucracy which had emerged as the new centre of power and influence.

Inherent in these social transformations was the root of individualism which alarmed many as this marked the beginning of a long trail of litigations. By the late 19th century the demand for a legislation on the property rights of the Christians were on the increase. The Christians Commission set up in 1910 to investigate the practices relating to property within the community presented their report to the Assembly in 1912. A provisional Bill drawn by a select committee appointed by the state was soon submitted:

The oppositions to the Report and the Bill of Mr. P. Cheriyan, President of the Christian Commission

came from certain sections within the Syrian Christian community.

In this chapter, an attempt is made to examine the nature of the Succession Act (1916) and the resultant debates vis-a-vis its significance for the Syrian Christian women.

Reference to the Inheritance Debate are few. L.K. Anantha Krishna Ayyar's An Anthropology of Syrian Christians (1926) and L.W. Brown's, The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: an account of the ancient Syrian Church (1956) mention the Inheritance debate at some length. The Report of the Christian Commission 1910 dwells in detail over early and existing customs of property among the Syrian Christians. Newspapers, particularly Malayala Manorama is useful as it had followed the debate closely and had given space for various oppositions to the Report and the Bill in its pages. The provisional Bill of Mr. P. Cheriyan and the compromise bill of Mr. Kurvilla Varkey, reproduced verbatim are vital to this study as was the Regulation II, the Christian Succession Act 1916. The novel 'Parishkarappathi' by Kochuthommen Apothecary gives an account of the succession practices among the Syrian Christian.

The Chapter has been divided into five sections. The first part looks into the early practices of succession among the Christians of Travancore. Second section details the Property disputes and their judgements in the Travancore law courts. The beginnings of the debate in the late nineteenth century and reactions of the middle class to the law court verdicts constitute the third sections, while the Report, the Bill and the Act is examined in the next part. In the final part, the focus is on the implications of the debate for the Syrian Christian women.

I

The 'Nomo Canon' of Bar Hebraeus compiled by the Catholicos of East was the highest authority of the Jacobite church, both, in the secular and ecclesiastical matters.¹ Also known as the 'Hudya Canon' this, according to Cardinal Tisserant, was not in force in Malabar before the nineteenth century. He points out that, 'Even today certain local characteristics have been preserved, having their origins in either the old laws of the Chaldeans or in the local customs, or even in the legislation imposed

1 Cardinal Eugene Tisserant, Eastern Christianity in India: A History of the Syro-Malabar Church from the Earliest Time to the Present day (Calcutta, Orient Longman, 1957), p172; L. K. Anantha Krishna Ayyar, An Anthropology of the Syrian Christians (Eranakulam, 1926), p120.

by the Portuguese before 1653 .² The main provisions of the canon were as follows:

1. that female heirs of any degree get half the share of the male heirs of the corresponding degree;
2. that a childless widow gets about one-fourth of her deceased husband's estate;
3. that when there are children, the widow gets a share equal to one-eighth of that of a son;
4. that the residue, after deducting from the estate of a childless person, the share of the husband and wife, must go to the father and mother in the ratio of 2:1 and
5. that when the deceased childless persons' father is not alive, his mother should get a share equal to that of a brother.³

Alfonso Ligouri, an Italian scholar's treatise on Moral Theology notes the laws of inheritance; this, while not used by the Syrian community, was referred to by the law courts of Travancore to settle property

2 Tisserant, *ibid* p172.

3 Ayyar, *opit* p120; Report of the Christian Committee 1912, Travancore p9 (from now RCC).

disputes.⁴ According to this both the daughter and son were entitled to an equal share in their father's estate and a sister was entitled to share equally with the brother in a deceased brother's estate.⁵

Mar Mathew Athanasius's, Malayalam book of canon published in 1857 was questioned of its genuinity, inspite of its claims of having been compiled from ancient jottings and writings on the ancient usages of the community. Regarding women it had the following clauses:

- a) that a man's daughter is entitled to get a dowry or streedhanam which is equal to half the share of a son;
- b) that when a man has only a daughter by the first marriage and several sons by the second marriage, the first wife's daughter shall receive a share equal to that of a son; and that the heir of a childless man in his wife (who takes only a life interest);
- c) that the heir of a woman having no child is her husband and
- d) that only after the death of a deceased's widow will

4 ibid p121

5 ibid.

his other heirs become entitled to his estate.⁶

Accounts of early missionaries and references to the decrees of the Synod of Diamper 1653 also throws light on early Inheritance practices. Rev. Samuel Mateer writes of the laws of inheritance among the Christians of Travancore. Regarding women he states that,

..... Property devolves to legitimate children alike by first or second marriage, sons inheriting the bulk of the property in equal shares; daughters can claim only dowry, and are therefore not responsible for debts on the estate. If there are no sons, all goes to the daughters, or brothers, or next heirs... A widow with a family may enjoy her late husband's property till her sons came of age; if she remarries, nothing is given to her.⁷

Tisserant points out that some of the condemnations enacted at Diamper give an indications of the

6 ibid.

7 Rev. Samuel Mateer, Native life in Travancore (London: W.H.Allen & Co. 1883), p165.

Malabar Customs. He points out that 20th decree of the ninth session stated that a daughter was to receive an equal share of the heritage with the son, while, up to that time according to local customs, only males inherited.

The 14th decree recommended the adoption of the custom of giving away to the church a tenth of the dowry which a young married woman hands over to her husband. Punishment for those who denied a share of their heritage to their daughters took the form of excommunications (session VII decree 20).⁸

The early practices regarding the laws of inheritance was an amalgamation of laws drawn from various traditions. As Tisserant points out that though the St. Thomas Christians opposed outside interventions in their social customs, many of the decrees of the Diamper were passed on as the canon law of the Syrians of Malabar and was practically acknowledged to be their special code.⁹ In the nineteenth century, the courts of Travancore and Cochin, on account of hazy customary law interfered through their rulings, in the community affairs.¹⁰ These verdicts seemed to possess a force of law that alarmed

8 Tisserant, opcit p168.

9 ibid p168.

10 ibid p172

the middle class and the upper classes of the Syrian Christian Community.

In the following two sections the rulings of law courts of Travancore and their reason for having caused concern within the community is examined.

II

In the pre-nineteenth century, there existed no separate organ for the judiciary. It was conducted by the 'naduvazhis' or 'desavazhis' in conformity with the 'maryada' or customs. It was in the years 1809-11 that the first few courts known as the Insaff cutcherries were established for the dispensation of justice. Under Col Munro these courts were abolished and the dispensation of justice rested in his hands. Under him a set of rules called the 'Catta Variyolas' were drafted. These were based on the Dharmaśāstras, the regulations common in the company and on the established usage in the country. The rules were promulgated with the sanction of Rani Lakshmi Bai. As part of this formation of an institution of judiciary, he set up a principal court with five subordinate courts in the state. This new scheme known as the 'Munro scheme' placed judiciary on a high

pedestal.¹¹

It was in 1811 that the subordinate zilla courts were introduced in Travancore by the Dewan. They dealt with civil, criminal and police cases and the Dewan had the power to pass orders on each case.

In the same year, the judicial system was once again revamped, making litigations an expensive affair. The jurisdiction of a munsiff was Rs. 500. The Regulation of 1892 was passed to assess pleaders fees for the purpose of taxation of costs and to prescribe the mode of valuing suits for the purpose of determining the jurisdiction of courts. In the first year of the present century, the ordinary jurisdiction of the Munsiff was raised to Rs. 1000.¹²

The phenomenal growth of the judiciary in size and strength as an institution in the nineteenth century was not merely a part of the structural changes in the state administration. It was also the enforcement of the British System of land on the state and an imposition of a western concept of Justice and punishment on a colonized society. It is keeping this in mind that the cases and

11 A. Sreedhara Menon, (ed), Gazetteer of India: Alleppey District (Govt. of Kerala 1975), p448.

12 ibid, p44

their verdicts are examined below.

Two kinds of property litigations came up in the Travancore law courts. The first group of litigations relating to the Syrian Christians, raised the question of ownership rights of male members in an undivided family. Of the myriad litigations of this nature three specific cases are used to illustrate the cases and their verdicts.

In the Varki Chandy Anthraper (Appellant) vs. Varki Sowriar Anthraper & 4 others (respondents) case that came up before WTA. Cosby and A. Govinda Pillai (Judges), the contention was over the ownership rights. The Judges in their ruling held that, since the manager of the undivided family was purely the agent of other members, his powers were based on authority given by them and did not have any legal or natural right nor any power from law. Stating the reason for such a ruling they said that,

....we are aware that there are Christian families in Travancore who have been living for years without dividing their ancestral properties being represented in their management by the senior member, but their ownership is

not joint ownership as in ... Hindu, marumakkthayam or English law. While joint ownership family system, individual ownership is the recognised condition of Christian families....¹³

In the case of Sirkar vs. Parayi Varki Varki Tharagan (respondent) the problem was to ascertain the distinction between law of inheritance among the Syrian Christians. The verdict was that where joint possession among Syrian Christians was proved for many years, then it was the ease of tenancy in common; the entire joint property was in the management of the senior male member by way of analogy to a Hindu family. In arriving at this conclusion, the judges stated that in the absence of a settled personal law governing the succession to and devolution of their properties they followed a recent ruling of a Division Bench of the same court. According to that ruling the Syrian Christians did not follow the concept of joint heirship (coparcenary) since they took property by inheritance on the death of their ancestors. This showed that distribution of an intestates' property was carried out as under the succession Act of 1825, though not in its entirety, since the Act was not extended

13 Travancore Law Reports (from now TLR), Appeal Suit no. 84 of 1073 (20 January 1897) VOL XIV Part II (Travancore Government, 1898), p99.

to them. Moreover, the term 'family' to the Christian family thus constituted was a misnomer as the community of interest that constitutes a family for juridical purposes was absent.¹⁴

In another case the decision of the judges re-emphasized ownership in an undivided Syrian Christians family unlike the Hindu law, was individual ownership. It was only managed by the senior member whose powers were based up on the authority given him by other members of the family.¹⁵

The application of different laws based on early practises of succession to similar cases and the resultant confusion, provoked the Judges themselves to ask for a legislation on the Syrian Christians law of inheritance.¹⁶

The second kind of litigations were those which concerned women in their roles as mother, wife, widow, sister and daughter. Here the litigations raised questions regarding women's' possession of dowry / stridhanam, apart from their rights to inherit ancestral property.

14 TLR VOL XIV, Part I, Criminal Appeal Suit no. 54 of 1073 (19 July 1897) -(Travancore Govt.. 1898), p15.
 15 Appeal Suit no. 84 of 1073, opit p18.
 16 Judge P. Govinda Pillai, ibid p18

The rulings on dowry, in the majority of the cases were in favour of the woman as the following illustrations highlight.

1. Kutticheril Mathu Maria Vs. Ariparathu Mathan Kuruvilla: In this case the daughter-in-law was demanding back her dowry from her father-in-law after the death of her husband. Maria's demands included her dowry (stridhanam) and movable properties worth three thousand seven hundred and fifty rupees. The respondent Kuruvilla argued that since Maria had a daughter, her demands were not valid. the Judges ruled that the appellant Maria being a mother of a child does not hinder her claim on her dowry and movable goods, as stridhanam constituted the woman's wealth.¹⁷

2. Thomman Varki & three others (Appellant) vs. Chacko Anna & five others (respondents).

It was contended that since the grant of a stridhanam gift to a Syrian Christian wife created an estate of inheritance, therefore she was not capable of alienating that property, even for the purpose of securing other property in lieu of it.

17 TLR VOL XVII, Appeal Suit of 1901, (Travancore Govt.), p46; Malayala Manorama, 23 March 1901, Appeal Suit No. 142 at the Alappuzha Zilla Court; a case before K. Ramachandrayar.

It was held that, though according to the prevailing notions among the Syrian Christians, the ~~stridhanam~~ ^{a substitute of a daughter's share in the} patrimony, she was competent to alienate the same without the consent of her issue.¹⁸

3. The summary of a dowry case that came before the Munsiff of the Arippattu Munsiff Court. A Syrian Christian lady filed a case to reclaim her dowry from her husband, with whom she said she had no wish to stay. In a counter petition, the husband stated that the woman had no right to claim back her dowry as long as the husband was alive. He also said that he favoured the woman staying with him. However, the court ruling favouring the woman stated that,

....As dowry is the woman's wealth, the woman should be given back the dowry with the interest accumulated on it and the court fees charged.¹⁹

In contrast to the dowry judgements, inheritance laws on account of there being no one law among the Syrian Christians, proved to be more problematic.

18 TLR VOL XVII, Appeal Suit of Makaram 24, 1077 (1901) (Travancore Govt. 1903)

19 Malayala Manorama, 21 April 1906.

As far as the judiciary's decisions go, there were variations. Regarding the right of the widow of a man the court ruling of 1049 M.E. and 1051 M.E., recognized her right to his entire estate to the exclusion of his sister and son. In 1081 M.E. another decision based on the Indian Succession Act, recognized her right to a share. In stark contrast to these verdicts, the Travancore High Court of 1087 in a Full Bench decision held that the widow of a childless person was entitled to only maintenance.²⁰ However, a 1901 decision of the Thiruvanthancoor High Court held that in case of the demise of the husband, leaving behind no issues from the marriage, the wife becomes the legal heir to his property, to the exclusion of his brother.²¹ On the basis of the statements of 'elderly' and 'competent' witnesses who confirmed the existence of a custom as far as their living memory could go, the Chief Justice of the Travancore High Court and Judge Ramachandra, ^{held that the widow being entitled} to a maintenance out of her husband's properties, his niece was the legal heiress to his properties.²²

20 RCC pp30-2 ; also quoted in Ayyar, opcit., p127.

21 Malayala Manorama, 28 September 1901. The case of: Kollam Kummalucherial Puthenveetil Kunjavareed vs Kizhakkemuriyil Mappilaveetil Kunjandy Elia.

22 Avuseppu Rosa vs Avuseppu Anna case cited in TLR Vol XXVII, Part IV 1912.

In the Geevariethu Vs. Elia case (1902) the claims of the mother of the last owner to his assets was preferred to those of his divided grand-uncle.²³

Nevertheless, in a judgement of 1907 of the Alappuzha Zilla Court it was held that on the basis of the statements of witnesses regarding Syrian Christian customs and English Law, the heir to the property of a deceased person were those belonging to his father's lineage (men & women). Hence a grandson's property goes to his paternal grand-father in the absence of his father or brothers and not to the deceased's mother.²⁴

The quixotic nature of the court verdicts was such that a woman was able to exert her rights as a mother where her rights as a widow was not recognized and vice versa. It was the vague and unsettled customary law of the Syrian Christians and the equally unpredictable decisions that caused concern among the people of the Community.

23 TLR 17, in S. Aiya Durai Aiyar compiled Supplement to the digest of TLRs Vol XIII to XVIII, (Madras, 1906), p94.

24 Malayala Manorama, 6 July 1907, case of Cheriyan Kuruvilla vs his daughter-in-law at the Alappuzha Zilla Court 1904.

We saw in the previous chapter, how in the nineteenth century an economically prosperous middle class rose within the Syrian Christian community. This growth in prosperity brought along with it a challenge to the undivided family system. The position of the patriarch, the eldest male member who managed the property was questioned and the subsequent litigations brought into existence the nuclear family with individual ownership rights.

The rise of a powerful expensive Judiciary in this period aided these family disputes over property. The Judicial System also provided women with a space to claim their share in the ancestral property, husband's property and stridhanam. The vague and unsettled personal law regarding inheritance among the Syrian Christians proved beneficial for many a woman who sought refuge in the Judiciary.

Further, expensive property litigations that favoured individual ownership rights in the ancestral property, hindered the Syrian community representation in the Legislative body of the State. Now fewer people of the community were able to fulfill the property

qualifications criteria, required for gaining representation in the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, with the breaking down of the undivided family structure.²⁵

There was a distinct challenge to the patrilineal system of the Syrian Community, precisely the institution which the middle class was seeking to uphold. The concern this caused among the middle class is reflected in Dr. E. Poonen's statement in 1911. He pointed out that, 'the absence of a settled law of inheritance is at present a fertile source of litigation among the Syrian Christians. During the last two or three decades the community has been rising in importance and wealth which had made the inconvenience of the law to be felt...'²⁶ Raising a note of caution he pointed to the fact that,

....At present affairs are managed in a very unsatisfactory manner. The rich and the powerful are having their own way in all matters. The Courts have to decide the disputed questions on the evidence as to custom

25 Malayala Manorama, 22 March 1916, K.M.Mammen Mappilla's speech at the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly session of 1916.

26 Dr. E. Poonen's Presidential Address at the second session of the Travancore and Cochin Christian Congress, held on 30 May 1911, cited in Ayyar, opcit p121 and Malayala Manorama- May 1911.

followed by the community, and it is no difficult matter for the rich to make customs by evidence. The weaker side thus invariably goes to the wall.²⁷

It was the court verdicts in favour of women to which the Syrian Christian community reacted the most. The two distinct and different reactions that emerged in this period was of those belonging to upper classes and the new middle classes. The former, critical of the verdicts regarding women, questioned the right of women to inherit her paternal or husband's property or reclaim her dowry. These verdicts were considered to upset earlier practises of inheritance settlement.²⁸

The right of judicial system unfamiliar with the customary laws of the community came under scrutiny. The number of articles and letters in the newspaper was an attempt to create a public opinion against the coming into existence of an inheritance law, that contradicted the tradition and customs of the community. To cite an example, a letter from Parvur, criticizing the laxity of the community representatives in countering these ver-

27 Malabar Quarterly Review Vol, 1902, pp116-17 cited in Ayyar opcit, p121.

28 Malayala Manorama, 28 February 1903.

dicts, stated that,

Firstly, the high court has established a law which has no precedent. Secondly, they have established that the wife has a right which the husband does not enjoy. And third, wherever the husband's right have been upheld it has been done in an unjust manner..²⁹

There was a concerted effort from this section of the community to define woman's wealth. The majority veered to the opinion that women's wealth constituted ~~her~~ jewellery and if given cash, a sum not amounting to rupees two thousand given as her stridhanam.

Nevertheless, opinions to the contrary were visible, indicating a section within the middle class who favoured if not equal then a less unequal law for women. The agreement in favour of the widow's rights to her husband's property, just as widower's had a right on his deceased wife's property, was one among the opinion of the Reformists which spoke for equal laws for women and men.³⁰ The Reformists were critical of the unchristian

29 Letter of Parvur Kulangara P. Mathew 31 January 1903, Malayala Manorama.

30 Malayala Manorama 25 April 1903

attitudes as well as the conservative thinking which was seen as unsuitable for a civilized community.

III

In response to the demands of the people of the Syrian Christian community and their representatives in the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, to codify the existing traditions of succession as a law, the Government set up a Christian Commission in the year 1910 to enquire into the existing and early customs of succession among the Christian Community.³¹ P. Cheriyan, a retired Judge and a member of the Assembly, was appointed the President of a Committee of seven members drawn from various professions.³²

The Christian Commission of 1910, set up to enquire among other aspects of the inheritance practices, the rights of women, suffered from a serious lacuna. Of the total population of 3,428,975 in the state, native christians numbered 901,719 in the year 1911. The native Christian women who constituted a little less than 50 per

31 L.W. Brown, The Indian Christians of St. Thomas : An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar (Cambridge University Press, 1956) p182

32 These were Iype Thoma Kattanar, J.M. Kesari, A.S Joseph, D. Francis, Varghese Chandy and K.E Mammen Mapillai, RCC 1912.

cent of the total native Christian population, numbered 441,715.³³ It is noteworthy that, one half of the native Christian population did not have a representative in a Commission set up to decide on laws pertaining to them. Further, of the 985 witnesses examined by the Commission in the course of two years, only 31 of these were women. Of these only 18 belonged to the Syrian Christian community. Stating the reason for fewer women to be examined the Commission's Report says that,

.....considering the natural shyness of the generality of the Christian ladies and their inability to express clearly formulated views on the complex and intricate questions bearing on the law of inheritance and succession, the committee did not think it necessary to make any special effort to examine a large number of ladies....³⁴

Two evidences contradict the reasons given by the Commission. First, the statistics on literacy in the 1911 census points altogether a different picture of the

33 Census of Travancore 1911, Vol XXIII, Part II, Imperial Tables by N. Subramanya Aiyar (Trivandrum 1912).

34 RCC, 1912.

status of the Christian women.

Out of a total number of 118,113 educated Christians, 19,426 were women, in the age group 20 & Plus. Among these 1,031 women had received English education from a total of 6,222 native Christians of the same age group. ³⁵

Secondly, the cases filed and fought out in the courts by women; their participation in discussions on various issues, through the forums of women's, community associations; church organization and print media, as well as the emergence of a workforce among the middle class Syrian Christian women show that women were active in the public sphere contrary to the depiction of women as the Report sought to portray.

Dissensions within the Commission on the Report were related to those clauses pertaining to women. In the final resolution of the Report submitted to the Government of Travancore in 1912, a unanimity could not be reached because of the objections of Koor Iype Thoma Kattanar and K.C. Mammen Mappillai to 6 of the 33 clauses. These concerned the rights of the widow, mother and daughter. The Report had the following points relating to women.

35 Census, 1911, opcit.,

1. In case, a son of a deceased person exists, his widow was entitled absolutely to a share equal to that of a son, however, if only a daughter, ^{then} a share equal to that of a daughter subject to a maximum of one-fourth of the estate. The point of dissension was that a widow only had the 'right of enjoyment' over the share assigned to her ~~title~~ her death or remarriage, whichever happened first;

2. The widow of a man without children was entitled to one-fourth of the estate of her husband, when his father or father's descendents exist; one half, if only his mother or paternal grand father and his descendents are alive. Only in the absence of all such relatives does the widow get the entire property of the deceased absolutely.

The dissent : the widow was given only the right to the income from the entire property if the husband was divided from his family; and to half his income, if belonging to an undivided family, till her marriage or death whichever happened first. In the event of her remarriage, she was entitled to an amount equal to her stridhanom from the deceased husband's estate apart from her stridhanom.

3. That no provision for the widowed daughter- in-law

of any deceased person was needed.

4. Rights of the mother of a deceased person in his property were as follows:

When the father or his own lineal descendants is left by the deceased, then the mother has ~~no~~ right.

In the absence of father or children, but only descendants of father, then a brother's share absolutely, or if only a sister, a sister's share absolutely, not exceeding one-fourth of the entire estate.

If none of the above exist but only his paternal grand-father and his descendants then one-third of the estate absolutely;

If the deceased leaves only a widow, then one half and in all other cases the whole. The dissenters allowed the mother to enjoy either till her remarriage or death a share equal to that which is to given to the nearest surviving kindred as the father's side.

5. The daughters claim on her father's property after his death or on her mother's property was ^ashare equal to one-third of a son's share, this was only in the event

of the daughter having received no dowry.

The dissent: ruled out the daughter's ~~right over~~ her parents estate. The liability to maintain her and to give her a dowry being only a personal obligation of those who inherit the property of the parents, the maximum she could get as her maintenance was a share equal to what a son gets out of his father's estate for his maintenance. The dowry, at the time of her marriage was considered to be an amount, which at the current rate of interest would fetch the above sum of interest.³⁶

The Report along with a provisional Bill was submitted to the Government in 1912. Following its publication in the Government Gazette of August 27th 1912, the members of the Christian community in the Assembly and out side were invited to send their comments on the Bill. On the 5th of June, 1913 the Head Simkar Vakil introduced the Bill in the Assembly, after a period of nine months.

Owing to differences in opinion regarding the Bill drafted by P. Cheriyan, it was handed over to a Select Committee of six members. Of these four were Christian representatives. An alternate bill of Kuruvil-

36 RCC 1912, Final resolutions; Clauses 18, 19, 21, 22, 26 and 27

la Varkey which sought to appease the conservatives opposition and P. Cheriyan's Bill were combined to form an Amended Bill, which was published in the Government Gazette of 16th February 1915. After a year of indecision in the event of strong tirade from sections within the Syrian Christian community, The Bill was passed on 20 December 1916 and the Christian Succession Act of Travancore under Regulation II of the 1092 M.E came into force.³⁷

The opinion of the Syrian Christian community and church were taken at all stages of the making of the Act. 722 of the 985 witnesses examined were Syrian Christians and of the 300 letters sent to the committee, the majority were from this community. Further, of the 4 Christian representatives in the Select Committee, two belonged to the Syrian community.³⁸

Inspite of such a wide representation of Syrian Christians in the making of the Inheritance law, the strongest tirade against the Bill came from within this community.

37 Malayala Manorama 3 January 1917; the 20 December 1916 speech of the Dewan Mr. Krishna Nayar at the SMPA on the occasion of passing the Christian Succession Act pl.

38 ibid, pl.

IV

In this part, the two Bills of P. Cheriyan and Kuruvilla Varkey, the amended Bill and the opposition arguments to the first Bill are examined in the light of its implications for the Syrian Christian women.

The Report of the Christian Committee and P. Cheriyan's Bill, vertically split the community to two opposing view points.

Of the middle class with their interest in the new professions in the state, a section constituted the reformists who advocated equal rights for men and women. They actively supported the Bill mooted by P. Cheriyan. The dissenting sections enjoyed the support of the traditional upper classes among the Syrian Christians who had considerable interests in agriculture and land. They also had the strong support of the Syrian Church. They also had in their midst two of the members of the Christian Commission, Mr. K.C. Mammen Mapillai and Kavour Iype Thoma Kuttanar, both of whom had differed on clauses relating to women's property rights listed in the Report.

Within the Assembly, the Christian repre-

representatives were asked their opinions six months after the Report and the Bill were issued to the public.³⁹ Eight of the thirteen members supported the Bill. The five who opposed, raised objections to the clauses 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 22, 26 and 29, most of which supported the view that women should be given a share in her fathers' and husband's property.⁴⁰

The objections to the Bill were based on two contentions. The first being that, the law as it stood went against the 'traditions' and 'customs' of the community, and the second, was the apprehension of the patrilineal family system declining if the law came into force.

These two contentions raised by many of the critics of the bill, is highlighted clearly in Kovoov Kattanar's arguments.⁴¹ In a letter to the Head Sirkar Vakil, the officer in charge of the Christian Bill he pointed out that,

The Government and the legislature would be acting against all precedent in history and against the general

- 39 Dewan C. Rajagopalachari's opening speech in the ninth session of 1913 SMPA, Malayala Manorama 12 February 1913.
 40 Malayala Manorama 3 March 1913, 9th session of SMPA, day 9.
 41 Malayala Manorama, 12 July 1913, part II of letter

impression created by the Government proceedings appointing the commissions, if a revolution in the family organisation of our community is forcibly brought into operation by the legislation....⁴² He further went on to add,

....Reform or change in social dress for public occasions is on a different footing from change in inheritance law and marital ideals. In matters affecting the internal organisation of a distinctive race or community or nationality, no reformer can say that the saints of former ages of each community were all mistakes or that martyrs of old were all dupes or that old and tried paths can be left for new cuts which lead to social disorder or confusing socialism....⁴³

Anticipating the contents of the Report, K.K. Kuruvilla, pensioned Engineer, cautioned the Government

42 Malayala Manorama, 9 July 1913, part I

43 Malayala Manorama, 12 July 1913, part II

and the reformists in the Assembly in the year 1912. He pointed out that the duty of the Government lay not in imposing laws that went against the community's interests on them but to bring into existence a legislation that conformed to the existing customs and traditions. He added that it was upto the Government to see, that if changes based on an alien culture was introduced as reforms within the Syrian Community, then it should not be imposed on the entire community. Those wishing such reforms were free to apply them in their own lives through the provision of wills.⁴⁴

The noted playwright Kocheeppan Tharakan, in the third annual meeting of the Travancore and Cochin Christian Association in 1913 endorsed these views. His contention was that though over the years, inheritance rules have undergone changes, it was however, not feasible to bring in reforms that questioned the very basis of the community.⁴⁵

That the reforms signified the end of the partilineal family system was time and again pointed out by the critics of the Report and the Bill.⁴⁶

44 Malayala Manorama, 11 May 1912, K.K. Kuruvillas's speech in the Assembly and 16 July 1913 at Karoor.

45 Malayala Manorama, 14 May 1913 Kocheeppan Tharakan's speech

46 Malayala Manorama, 12 July 1913, Letter part II of Kovoor Iype Thoma.

The dissenters, particularly Kovoov Kattanar was severe in his criticism of the attempt of an 'English' educated 'minority' group among the middle class, to impose reforms on a majority people with whose lives they were not familiar. In his own words,

....the conditions of those (of the majority) whose assets are all in land and who have, comparatively little annual saving and the conditions of those (the minority) whose income and emoluments are in ready cash and whose affluence can meet large money demands without any pressure, are so different, that it is difficult for those in one condition to appreciate the attitude of those in the other condition and to estimate the effect of the proposed changes....⁴⁷

Posing the 'Vernacular' educated majority against the 'English' educated minority middle class; traditional culture to westernized modern ideals, Kovoov Kattanar sought to isolate these reformists from the community, and at the same time from the larger mass of

the middle class. His statement,

... It is remarkable that even among those Syrian Christians who had the benefit of European education, those who are in touch with the common people are positive supporters of the religious heads....⁴⁸

stands as evidence for this.

It is from this section of the middle class that the attempts of reaching a compromise was begun. They were joined in their efforts by those among the reformists who favoured the compromise bill of Kuruvilla Varkey.⁴⁹

The Bill in its amended form was an amalgamation of P. Cheriyan's bill based on Indian Succession Act and Kuruvilla Varkey's Bill based on traditions and customs. This was favorably received by the critics within the Community and the ecclesiastical heads of the Syrian Church.⁵⁰ The rights of women according to the Act were as follows:

48 ibid

49 Malayala Manorama, 4 April, 1914, K.M. Mathew Mappillai's speech in Trivandrum and an article by a 'Syrian Christian' on the same day.

50 Malayala Manorama, 3 February, 1915, letters of congratulations published in the newspaper.

- A widow and a mother could only enjoy the property of her husband, till her death or remarriage, she however had a right to her stridhanom.
- A daughter or a wife had a right to her Stridhanom.
- A woman's right in her father's, husband's and son's property came after the claim of the paternal descendants.⁵¹

The debate brought into focus the struggle between traditional culture and modernizing forces. It clearly emerges that "women's inheritance rights" was merely the 'site on which tradition was debated and reformulated'.⁵² In isolating the English educated middle class reformists, the Church representatives were able to retain their hold over the community and the compromise bill appeased the landed sections within the community.

The link between traditions and woman's rights need to be elaborated here. As shown earlier, the sustenance of the patrilineal family system was crucial to the survival of the landed Syrian Christians.

51 Malayala Manorama, 6 January 1917; and in detail in The Regulations and Proclamations of Travancore Vol IV, 1092-96 M.E (Trivandrum 1928) pp 298-329.

52 Lata Mani, Contentious Traditions: The debate on Sati in colonial India in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History (New Delhi, Kali for Women 1989), p118

Similarly the church too had vested interests in perpetuating a system wherein women's property rights was constituted by her stridhanom, held as a trust by her husband's family. The priest and the church received a tenth of the Stridhanom of a woman belonging to that parish, on the occasion of her marriage. Equal share of brothers and sisters in ancestral property would affect this system, thus depriving the church and clergy of a major source of income.⁵³

Moreover, the Syrian Church as an institution being dependent on the community for its existence had then its own reasons for the traditional customs of the community to continue.

The call for providing equal property rights for men and women, given by the reformists, challenged the edifice of these traditions. However the interventions of the moderate reformers and the struggle of the orthodox sections to preserve its hegemony over the community and preserve the patrilineal family structure by thwarting the hegemonizing influence of the western ideals of the reformist middle class, reinstated women within the patrilineal family.

53 Malayala Manorama, 12 July 1913, Fr. Kovoov Iype Thoma letter opcit

Then, as Lata Mani argues in her essay,

....this intimate interlocking of women and tradition... was a discourse of salvation : a recuperation of authenticity and purity, a vigorous protection of the weak and subordinated aspects of culture against their corrupt manipulations by the strong and the dominant...⁵⁴

The inheritance debate highlights the place of women within the new middle class ideology. The consciousness of themselves as a community and the need for reforms as articulated by the new middle class reformists took place within the frame work of patriarchy. There was no challenge to the basic structure of this patrilineal community. In this we see a commonality between the reformists and the traditionalists. And for women this meant a restricted space within the patrilineal community at a time when patriarchy was being reformulated and reconstituted within the society.

54 Lata Mani, *opcit* p118.

CONCLUSION

As a consequence of the socio-economic changes of nineteenth century and the resultant emergence of a community consciousness in the Syrian Christian middle class, the women of this class experienced significant changes in their lives. The two ~~debates~~ on Syrian Christian women, the legal and the broader social, confined them within a patrilineal family system which was also transposed into the public arena. This was largely made possible through the agenda of 'Female' education and through a 'feminine' curriculum. The educational institutions, news papers and fiction along with community, church and women's associations aided this process as is highlighted in chapter II. We see that women too exhibit a consciousness that is not different from the middle class male consciousness.

The reassertion of patrilineal family system is also the crux of what is known as the 'Inheritance Debate', which is discussed in the third chapter. In the garb of debating women's property rights, orthodox and liberal sections within the community were engaged in defining 'tradition'. Based on this 'tradition' the landed upper classes and the orthodox church successfully formulated the inheritance rights of Syrian Christian women in a manner which was firmly located within the

patriarchal ideology. The Christian Succession Act of 1916 thus provided legal sanctions for a new patriarchal tradition.

Perhaps, then, it would not be wrong to suggest that the nature of the social transformation of this period was such that, in the guise of reform, Syrian Christian women were even more hegemonically confined. They now existed in the patrilineal family system of a community within a society which was increasingly being organized along the principles of patriarchy.

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