

In search of an Autonomous Social Identity: Struggles of Syrian Christians through 19th to 21st Centuries

Saji Varghese

Research Scholar, School of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies

Abstract: The Syrian Christian community is proud of their “Indian Christian” identity. Such an autonomous identity is in the process of fulfillment. In fact, the social identity of Syrian Christians is the synthesis of the noble traditions of St. Thomas, the Apostolic and the native cultural traits of India. The colonial period was threat to independence of the church. The colonial domination from Portuguese to the West Syrian has inflicted many scars on the native identity of the Syrian Community. However, the valiant resistance by the church paved the way for the formation of a distinct social identity free from all kinds of control from the foreign agencies. The independent identity of the community has played an important role in shaping the economic prosperity of the people. The administrative system of the church also underwent radical changes reflecting more democratic values instilled in it. The constitution of 1934 was a turning point in which the Syrian Christians proclaimed their sovereignty and autocephalacy. The Syrian Christians also stand unpolluted in the case of receiving foreign fund or Eurocentric influence as far as the church identity is concerned. Thus, the Syrian Christians wish to formulate this distinct social identity based on independence and indigenous values.

Keywords: Distinct Social Identity, Sovereignty, Resistance, Autonomous, Autocephalous, Indian Christian Identity.

Date of Submission: 30-11-2017

Date of acceptance: 16-12-2017

I. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research paper explores a brief historical understanding of the significance of an ‘Autonomous Social Identity’ that the Syrian Christians have gained by resisting the colonial forces. Also investigated is the indigenous nature of this social identity which is based on Indian culture and democratic values. Therefore, this article brings to light the importance of the concept of ‘social identity’ and its being in tandem with the spirit of the land. Moreover, also discussed here are the various facets of the 19th and 20th century Kerala culture that provided impetus to the formation of such a distinct social identity and its present day manifestations on the church. The paper is based on an extensive review of the literature of prior investigations and other related historical sources.

II. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Christian community originated from the apostolic ministry of Thomas incorporated cultural traits of their surroundings in formulating their social identity. They had the methodology of using native practices and cultures for the fruitful sharing of the way of Christ introduced by Thomas the Apostolic. The presence of this native rituals among the Syrian Christians become a prominent reason for the opposition of the missionaries in the 19th century. The social uniqueness which the Syrian Christians developed in relation with the spirit of the land was opposed by the colonial powers as, uncivilized, unchristian etc. The ministry of Thomas was never an attempt for the Palestinisation of the ways of Christ. From the beginning the Syrian Christians shared the ways of Christ through methods intertwined with Indian culture. The traditional art forms, folk tales and architecture related to the traditions of Thomas are its living evidences. The Syrian Christians formed their social identity with the way and tradition of Thomas as their foundation. The foundation of the Seminary in 1815 is the culmination of the efforts to unify and illustrate the Syrian Christian social identity which was aligned with various regional traditions. The scope of the Seminary was envisioned by its founder Pulikottil Mar Dionysius I and the major inspiration behind the venture Col. Munroe in two different ways. While Pulikottil I dreamed of the confirmation of the social identity of Syrian Christians, their community consciousness and an education programme which suits the time, Col. Munroe envisioned a reconstruction of the Syrian Christians social identity and the purpose of protestantisation through it.

Social Identity

Social identity is the possibilities of self-realization which an individual acquires from his/her membership of a valid social group¹. It refers to the characteristic which permeates into an individual or groups with mutual co-operation. The similarities and differences within the group contributes to the progressive growth of social identity. The competence, creativity and the ways of an individual or group also influences the social identity. The self-consciousness that the Syrian Christians acquired through their life helped them to distinguish what is to be accepted and what are to be resisted the 'Syrian' in the title has a foreign flavor, but apart from the liturgical theology their identity was formed through the continuous interaction with the context/surroundings. It is because of its universality that liturgy, mission and faith cannot be defined within the boundaries. But in the attire, language, culture, habits and styles the native culture influenced them more than foreign cultures. It is from this identity consciousness the Syrian Christians always resisted the attempts to reform their life styles, in a way different from the spirit of the Land.

Kerala in the 19th & 20th Centuries

The first half of the 19th century put an end to the feudal landlord (Janmi) system and saw the beginning of local Kings/rulers². With the presence of European powers, Indian spices gained much demand in the foreign market. This provided the Syrian Christians an upper hand in trade e-commerce until the 19th century. But when the British domination in the 19th century concentrated in forest products, tea, cotton and timber. Kerala underwent a new trade culture³. The 19th century witnessed changes like the spread of western education, abolishment of slavery, establishment of judicial system, scientific methods and opportunity in govt. services. The decline of both Brahmin domination in bureaucracy and caste discrimination provided opportunity also influenced the social identity of Syrian Christians. Such progress ensured their unavoidable presence in the spheres of education and trade. The presence of Pulikottil I in the reform movements like 'Malayali Memorial' is ample evidence for the above. Along with the movements for social equality, democratic rights and socio-religious reforms, the century also witnessed the formation of community /caste organizations. The Nair Service Society and the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam are results of that awakening.

The first relation of Syrian Christians to their trade relation was a major influencing factor of their social identity. The progress of Kerala into a developed society owes much to the trade relations of the period⁴. The social identity permeates through the trade relations, initiates with their affinity to the name 'catholicos' which the Syrian Christians used for their spiritual leader. This relation with Persian church has made decisive influences in Church and home architecture and in the aptitudes of Syrian Christians.

During the renaissance of Kerala in the 19th century there were serious changes in cultural, literary, religious and political spheres. The progress of Kerala society we witness today are initiated by the activities of community organizations and their leaders⁵. Along with the whole Kerala society the period witnessed serious changes in the identity formulation of Syrian Christians.

Colonial Influence

The colonial influence changes the social relations and outlook of Kerala in the 19th & 20th centuries. The religious interests of the colonial powers targeted primarily the social identity and self-consciousness of Syrian Christians. They tried to influence the Syrian Christians by propagating the need for a uniformity in the practices which had regional variations. The period witnessed developments like Roads & Railways, printing press and advanced means of communication. These factors influenced the nature of priesthood of the Syrian Christians which existed regionally with peculiar features. The colonial influence in Indian society prompted the relations, which were restricted within the family to explore possibilities of immigration. The occupational culture shifted from rural economy to industrialization, the changes in law of inheritance, the reconstructions in caste system the decline of feudal (Janmi) system and traditional (cottage) industries, the rise of industrial capital, quality education, the opportunity for government employment, the diminishing control of Nair Community over land, litigations, struggles against casteism, the enhanced authority of Syrian Christians over land, religious conversion in the lower strata of society are the salient features of social change in Indian society during the colonial period⁶. The Syrian Christians also underwent various changes during these centuries. The administrative system centered around Pakalomattom family was disintegrated, proper definition of administrative authority, emerged and the decline in the authority of parish priest are important among them. Inquiry for an administrative system that incorporates episcopacy and democracy become stronger. The history of formation of social identity of Syrian Christian's encompasses influences from multiple traditions rather than from a single one. The canonical and native feasts and faiths gave diversity to their liturgical identity⁷.

Thomas Consciousness

In times when the Syrian Christians were not powerful as an organized community or having economic security, it was their Thomas consciousness that helped to resist the colonial powers. They identified it as the

center of social consciousness. In a caste based society where Brahmins formulated their lineage from parasurama⁸. They used it not only to highlight their emotional bond with Thomas the Apostle but also to held the possibilities of an independent theological and ecclesiastical articulation. The Synod of Diamper has at least two references about the way and tradition of Thomas⁹. The Portuguese in the 16th century, the British in the 19th & 20th centuries and Antiochians made their best efforts to demolish the Thomas consciousness of Syrian Christians. It was out of the realization that is long as the Thomas consciousness exists in them it is impossible to impose another tradition.

III. CASTE SYSTEM

The social reformation of Kerala in 19th & 20th centuries with British support severely demolished the caste system. But caste system cannot be separated from the role, it played in the formation of identity consciousness of Syrian Christians, in a society where the clan restrictions and Brahmin hegemony existed. Hindu religious restrictions that held overseas journeys as sins help the Syrian Christians to dominate in the overseas trade including trade of things for temple worship. The privileges that Syrian Christian secured in the caste system includes that for purification with oil¹⁰, Cheppeds/Copper plates that ensured special authority and rights¹¹, the leadership of trade guilds called Manigramam¹², participation in military and martial arts¹³, particular family titles etc.¹⁴, caste system may be a major reason that prevented the Syrian Christians from involving in mass conversion of native people to Christianity. Though caste system do not exists with its splendor, it had a decisive influence in the aptitudes and identity formation of Syrian Christians.

Trade and Agriculture

The affinity of Syrian Christians to trade and agriculture is clearly portrayed in “Niranam Grandhavari”¹⁵. Though the invasions of Tippu Sultan diminished the influence of Syrian Christian in the agrarian sector of Travancore and Cochin, the trade and agriculture were still part and parced of the identity of Syrian Christians. The British influenced the Syrian Christians to shift the focus of their trade solely from pepper to ginger, sugarcane, coffee, etc.¹⁶. The reference of Niranam Grandhavari that the famous Puthencavu Church was built only out of the income from agricultural products reveals the upper hand of Christians in these spheres. The superiority of Syrian Christians got a set back with the establishment of Travancore¹⁷. The outcome of new trade chains/relations caused the breakup of the traditional trade supply chain of Syrian Christians. The war tax imposed in the background of Mysore invasions, uncontrolled increase in taxes, presence of Tamil Brahmins, the continuous changes in the nature of Trade¹⁸ also caused the loss of Syrian Christian influenced in trade and commerce. But the loss of Nair bargaining power over land turns beneficial to the Syrian Christians.

Authority and administrative System/Organization

By the 19th & 20th centuries the Syrian Christians ended the single leadership in church administration and entered into synodal structure of administration. They had the two fold structure of parish council led by the priests and diocesan assemblies led by the Metropolitan. The ascension of Pulikottil I into the leadership of church following the demise of Mar Thoma VIII became a turning point in the administrative consciousness of Syrian Christians. The decentralization of authority from the Pakalomattam family to a more popular phase began there. The Kandanad padiyola of 1809 can be considered as a directive towards an efficient church administration¹⁹. It is also the beginning of growth towards the constitution of 1934. When the Syrian Christians made the draft of their constitution no nations other than Britain and America thought of a written constitution. This itself shows that democratic principles were an integral part of the identity consciousness of the Syrian Christians.

Reformed Clergy Training

The core of liturgical theology of Syrian Christians is the balance of laity-clergy participation. But in practical clergy centered ecclesial life got strengthened among them. 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the drastic shift from Malpan houses to a seminary centred learning process. Before the establishment of the seminary priesthood was family-lineage based and parish centred²⁰. The social identity of the priest was echoed in the popular name “Kathanar” Kerala Historian Padmanabha Menon, has written that ‘Before the 19th century ignorance, lack of an elegant life style, shortage of ample education and changing of prayers without proper understanding of meaning has affected the priests of Syrian Christians²¹. Priestly celibacy was made mandatory due to Portuguese influence but the British authority over the 19th and 20th centuries made it a matter of choice. Persons like Col. Munroe encouraged the marriage of clergy by offering special gifts²². Ittoop writer in plains that the foundation of ‘Padithaveedu’ was multi-dimensional like being a centre of priestly training, of English education, official Head quarters of Malankara Metropolitan, Secretariat of the Church and as a monastery²³. The institution encouraged the Syrian Christians to think of a class of priests with modern education, mastery in languages and visionaries in place of those trained in sacraments alone²⁴. By 19th & 20th centuries the priest

hood of Syrian Christians totally shifted from the parish based system to a completely Church controlled system with fixed salary. The priest hood with a particular parish as its focus was changed. This new training also helped to arose an emotional bonding towards church in general to overcome the regional interests.

Self rule and Auto Cephalacy

The firm convictions of Syrian Christians about self-rule and autocephalacy are integral part of their self consciousness and identity. Whenever these two were questioned the Syrian Christians have formed strong forts of resist the questioning of the autocephalacy and sovereignty of the church, held the offices of Catholicos and Malankara Metropolitan as symbols of that freedom. The office of Catholicos has influenced the identity formation of Syrian Christians from its very beginning²⁵. The office of Malankara Metropolitan which evolved from the title of Arch deacon also reflects the sovereignty and independence in the identity of Syrian Christians. The office of Catholicos which the Syrian Christians familiarize with the Persian Church was absolutely independent. But when it came to be defined in the 19th & 20th centuries in relation with the Antiochian tradition, an interior status was stamped upon it. The conflict between these two identities of the catholicate made the period one of litigations. The Syrian Christians established their autocephalacy in 1653 by ordaining an indigenous bishop after the oath of Coonen Cross²⁶. The West-Syrian patriarch of Antioch through confiscating the administrative powers, by dividing the church into dioceses and by ordaining new bishops tried his best to destroy the independent identity of Syrian Christians. But by the empowerment of Catholicate in 1912, Syrian Christian's efficiently defended such invasions and preserved the independent self-identity beyond any doubt. The Malankara Church did not put an end to the relation with the West Syrian Patriarch of Antioch because of its concern for a universal Christian fellowship and to avoid further legal complexities. But with the constitution of 1934 the Syrian Christians proclaimed their sovereignty and autocephalacy.

Litigations to Preserve Identity Consciousness

The Syrian Christians had to approach courts of justice for the preservation of their independent identity. These long litigations also helped them to grow into a completely independent church. The delay in the courts and complexities of legal procedures also caused fractions within the Church. The Syrian Christians followed a policy of waiting for justice with endurance. Though the Syrian Christians were criticized in the name of these litigations they were aware that these were necessary to preserve their independent social identity. As a result many courts of law including the Supreme Court of India has acknowledged the autocephalacy of Syrian Christians²⁷.

Independent Economic Identity

When many Christian Churches in Kerala faces the accusation of being controlled by foreign funding, the Syrian Churches were always vigilant to develop an independent financial identity through means of Resheesa, offerings and separating a share of their income²⁸ to the Church. The Gandhian principle that "economic independence is the sign of real independence" is reflected in the economic identity of Syrian Christians. They have been successful in centralizing the Catholicate day collection and making it popular. This helped them to find out the income for the growth of the church from its members in India and abroad.

Mission Consciousness

The Christian mission in India is blamed of over influence of Eurocentrism. The missionary identity formulated by Mar Gregorios of Parumala towards the end of 19th century was absolutely indigenous. His successors Pathrose Mar Osthathios, Alvaris Mar Julios, Geevarghese Mar Osthathios, Stephanos Mar Theodosius kept the native flavor in the missionary identity. They gave primary emphasis to social reformation and change of mind. The no. 513 circular/Kalpana send by Mar Gregorios of Parumala to the Parishes of Niranam diocese can be considered as the magna Carta of the Missionary identity of Syrian Christians. In it he wrote "In order to uplift to the low caste Hindus and make them people of God we should advocate the Gospel to them and should remind our who believers. Who are guardians of such people"²⁹. The missionary identity of the Church was formed without the flow of money or conversions. They took their responsibilities in taking care of Lepers, Aids patients and in palliative care as per the demands of the time. The essence of Syrian Christians missionary identity is one which completely avoids foreign funding and runs only by the support of the members of the church.

THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

The theology of Syrian Christians was developed in relation with the history of Malankara Church. The notion that the Antiochian theology of Persian church was completely accepted in Malankara by the fifth century is not correct. Since Malankara church had relation with Persian Church from earlier periods the doctrines formulated in Nicea and Constantinople had already reached Malankara. Did Malankara church knew

about the Nestorian debates concerning the nature of Christ itself is a doubtful matter³⁰. The Roman influence through to Portuguese invasion in the 16th century caused the Western doctrines to be imposed upon the Malankara Church. But the resistance of Malankara Church led to relation with West-Syrian church and eventually to the acceptance of Alexandrine theology. The Chengannur Synod of 1686 accepted the decisions of Ephesus and added it with that of Nicea and Constantinople. This led to the growth of oriental orthodox faith in Malankara³¹.

The movements to propagate the depth and richness of eastern theology and the faith built upon. It became stronger in the 19th & 20th centuries. The theological identity of Syrian Christians is one which developed outside and independent of Roman influence.³² Scholars like Fr. V. C. Samuel explained the theological understanding of Malankara Church and Strengthened the Oriental Orthodox relations. When they realized there are more possibilities of co-operation than differences, their oriental orthodox identity was made solid. Theologians like Paulose Mar Gregorios propagated the Eastern theological identity of Syrian Christians across the world. In spite of the heavy western influences the Syrian Christians preserves their Eastern theological identity.

Ecumenical Identity

The ecumenical identity of Syrian Christians in the formal level began from the participation of its delegates led by H. H. Baselius Geevarghese II Catholicos in the Edin Burgh conference of 1937³³. They followed a policy of co-operating with Ecumenical initiatives without compromising the Orthodox identity. The Ecumenical policies of the Church helped it to introduce Malankara Church in Global stages by preserving the Eastern tradition and to get accepted as the Indian Church. The Ecumenical identity of Malankara Church has grown into such an extent where the Roman Pope receives the primate of Malankara Church as of equal honour.

Political & Community Identity

The Syrian Christian has always been successful in securing acclaiming their communal power. This success also caused many oppositions and adversities. The Marthoman traditions and titles are imitated by many factions. This itself shows that the power of Syrian Christian has grown into an undeniable state. Though the participation at Syrian Christians has become decisive in politics, they did not develop a clear political identity. Though there is an anti-leftist right wing attitude among them, certain changes always occur according to situations. The Syrian Christian are yet to develop an all inclusive political identity and to free themselves from the image of a permanent vote-bank.

The Dream/Vision of an Indian Identity

The Neo-liberal policies of globalization tries to give a monolithic outlook to all traditions and to impose an elite culture. In such a situation the pursuit of identity consciousness of Syrian Christians will be perfected only when they evolve in to an Indian Church with Thomas tradition. The litigations, sentimental /emotional attitudes and foreign vestments are hindrances to the goal of an absolute Indian identity. In order to realize such a dream certain things have to be put off certain other things need to be added. It is our all to be one with the culture of the land like other oriental orthodox churches. The Indian identity of Malankara Church will be what we achieve in the fulfillment of this call.

The Syrian Christians wish to formulate this social identity based on independence and indigenous values. That is the reason why they accepted a lifestyle, rituals and festivals related to the land. As interactions enriches cultures Catholic, Anglican, and West-Syrian influences has their roles in the formulation of social identity of Syrian Christians. Though there is an accusation/argument that Syrian Christians were not able to achieve a pure-Indian identity, we cannot ignore the fact that they worked their best to keep this Indian identity at least from 1815 and became successful in formulating an independent social identity in economic and administrative spheres.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Syrian Christians are in the path of establishing an independent church devoid of any kind of external arm twisting by any foreign agencies in the matters of church administration or ecclesiastical authority. The valiant resistance offered by the community from Coonan Cross Oath to the present day legal suits have been mile stones in marching towards establishing an autonomous church enunciated by gospel of St. Thomas, the Apostle. The history of the Syrian church is a testimony to the sacrifice made by the community and church leaders. The identity of the Syrian church encompasses the theological, ecumenical and economic spheres free of external/foreign control. An Indian identity consciousness of Syrian church is a path way to the ecclesiastical independence and it is strengthening day by day.

- ¹ Tumer, Joh, Oakes, Penny, *The Significance of the Social Identity Concept for Social Psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism and social influence*, British Journal of Social Psychology, 25 (3), 1986, p.237.
- ² Sreedharamenon A, *Kerala Samskaram (Mal)*, DC Books, 2013, p.206
- ³ Sreedharamenon A, *Opcit.*, p. 207
- ⁴ Panickassery, Velayudhan, *Kerala Charithrathinte Ullarakalileekku (Mal)*, Current Books, 2012, p.106
- ⁵ Panickassery, Velayudhan, *Charithrathinte Adiverukal (Mal)*, DC Books, 2012, p.75
- ⁶ Viswanathan, Susan, *Structure and Transformation theory and society in India*, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp.33-55
- ⁷ Viswanathan, Susan, *The Christians of Kerala, history belief and ritual among Yakoba*, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.262
- ⁸ Thomas, Kurian M, *The Indian Way of Christianity*, Lap Lambert Accademy Publishing Co., Germany, p.41.
- ⁹ Zachariah, Skariah, *The Acts and decrees of the Synod of Diamper*, Edamattom Indian Institute of Christian Studies, 1994, pp.120-133
- ¹⁰ Rajeendran P. G, *Kshethra Vinjanakosham (Mal)*, Kottayam, DC Books, 2000, p.43
- ¹¹ Daniel K. N, *The Copper Plates of St. Thomas Christians*, Bombay, 1925, pp.17-30
- ¹² Brown Leslie, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, BI Publications Pvt. Ltd., 1980, pp.78-79
- ¹³ Ayer L.K, Ananthakrishna, *Anthropology of Syrian Christians*, Ernakulam, 1924, pp.54-55
- ¹⁴ Cherian P, *The Malabar Syrians and Church Missionary Society*, Kottayam, CMS Press, 1935, p.380
- ¹⁵ Thomas Kurian M, *Niranam Grandavari (Mal)*, Kottayam, Sophia Books, 2000, pp 98-118
- ¹⁶ Cherian, *Malabar Syrian*, Opcit, pp.373-374
- ¹⁷ Thomas Kurian M, *The Indian Way....* Opcit p 267
- ¹⁸ Sivasankaran Nair K, *Marthandavarma muthal Munro Vare (Mal)*, DC Books, Kottayam, 1988, pp 97-202
- ¹⁹ Cheeran Joseph, *Indian Orthodox Sabha Charithram AD 52-2007*, Kottackal Publisher, 2007, p.183
- ²⁰ Cheeran Dr. Joseph, *Kandanad Grandavari*, Sophia Publications, Kottayam
- ²¹ Ferroli, SJD, *The Jesuits in Malabar Vol. I*, Malabar, Bangalore, 1939, p.156
- ²² Cherian, P, *Malabar Syrian.....*, Opcit, p.98
- ²³ Joseph, Itoop Pukudiyil, *Suriyani Sabha Charithram*, 1906, p.88
- ²⁴ Philip, E. M, *Marthoma Sleehayude Indian Sabha*, 1951, p.195
- ²⁵ Joseph, Itoop, *Suriyani Sabha.....*, p.56
- ²⁶ Thomas, Kurian M, *The Indian Way.....*, p.280
- ²⁷ Supreme Court Judgement of Malankara Sabha Case, 1995
- ²⁸ Cheeran, Joseph, *Indian Orthodox Sabhayum Canon Samhithakalum*, MJD Publication House, 2015, p.268
- ²⁹ Chandanappally, Dr. Samuel, *Malankara Sabha Pithakanmar (Mal)*, 1986, p.66
- ³⁰ Thisarath, Cardial, *Indiyale Pawrasthya Christhavarude Katha*, Kottayam, p.90
- ³¹ Thomas, Kurian M, *Nazrani Margam (Mal)*, Sophia Books, Kottayam, p.926.
- ³² Bondi R.C, "The Spirituality of the Syrian Speaking Christians in Meginn and other", Ed: Christian Spirituality Origins of 12th Century, Newyork, 1988, p.152.
- ³³ Thomas, Dr. Kurian M, *Kurichi Bavayude Moonu Paradesa Yathrakal (Mal)*, MOC Publications, 2015, p.302.

Saji Varghese "In search of an Autonomous Social Identity: Struggles of Syrian Christians through 19th to 21st Centuries." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS). vol. 22 no. 12, 2017, pp. 01-06.