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Amplifying the Dalit Pentecostal Historical Narrative amid the Persistent Syrian Christian ‘Privileged’ Narrative in Kerala

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Abstract: While studies indicate that Pentecostal teachings center the egalitarian move of the Holy Spirit with empowering effects on the social lives of the Dalits in the South Indian Pentecostal landscape, the persistence of ethnocentric behavior from “Syrian Christian” Pentecostals continues. Hence, this paper focuses on exploring the historical development of a Syrian Christian identity marker as a privileged one that became prefixed by the Pentecostals in Kerala, especially in Travancore. In this regard, this paper seeks to answer questions such as: How did caste dynamics structure the formation of Christian communities in Kerala? How did the historical Western missionary interactions deal with local caste-influenced distinctions (especially between the “Syrian Christian” and Dalit communities)? How did Pentecostalism challenge and perpetuate the Syrian Christian caste identity? Through an intersectional (religion and caste) historical analysis, this paper shows that the Syrian Christian community has been integrated into the caste system for the last two thousand years of Christian history in Kerala. At the same time, via a more inclusive historical narrative, the paper highlights Dalit conversions to Christianity since the sixteenth century as a critique against the privileged status of Syrian Christianity, even more so when Pentecostalism arrived at its shores, impacting the emergence of Dalit Pentecostalism.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; Kerala; margins; subaltern; Indian Christianity; Dalit; Syrian Christian; Indian Pentecostalism



Citation: Varghese Meloottu, Allan. 2023. Amplifying the Dalit Pentecostal Historical Narrative amid the Persistent Syrian Christian ‘Privileged’ Narrative in Kerala. *Religions* 14: 175. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020175>

Academic Editor: Tanya Riches

Received: 14 November 2022

Revised: 24 January 2023

Accepted: 25 January 2023

Published: 29 January 2023



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1. Introduction

In the pursuit of arranging their sons’ and daughters’ marriage, the first step for parents in Kerala, India, is to inform the marriage eligibility of their children to their friends and families. Sometimes, the matrimonial section of newspapers and websites becomes a common platform for such announcements. *Online Good News*, a Pentecostal news website, serves as an example. One short profile updated on 11 May 2022, read, “Syrian Christian Pentecostal parents invite proposals for their daughter (DOB: 14-05-1996, 167 cm) BTech Com Sci, currently working in Infosys. Contact at this number”¹ Although such profiles are considered normal for the religious community in Kerala, what caught my attention is the line that starts with identity markers, “Syrian Christian Pentecostal”. The prefix “Syrian Christian” before the word “Pentecostal” stands as a crucial identity marker that communicates the family’s ethnic identity and insinuates the family’s preference in excluding non-Syrian Pentecostal (Dalit) males for their daughter.

From a post-colonial World Christianity disciplinary approach, Indian Pentecostalism can be considered to have a non-western indigenous beginning (Pulikottil 2002; Hedlund 2011). “Indigenous” is used (in this article) in the sense of being “Indian-Initiated” (Joshua 2022), involving both the Indian Syrian Christian and Dalit church leadership as opposed to churches originating in Europe.² In this regard, in Kerala, the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (IPC) is considered the most significant Indian Pentecostal indigenous movement (Varghese 2019). However, as Michael Bergunder (2011) notes, such narrations focus exclusively on the Syrian Christian nature of the indigenization process of the church,

neglecting subaltern realities. Even though at the beginning “the majority of Pentecostals in Kerala were rather from ‘low caste’ or ‘untouchable’ background, people who would call themselves as Dalits today” (Bergunder 2011, p. 171), these people were not given leadership positions, nor were their stories adequately represented in some of the *indigenous* Pentecostal church history accounts. Hence, considering Bergunder’s (2011) concern of indigenous historiography, this paper is set not merely to insert contesting voices into the Syrian Christian story but to rewrite a more integrated version of Kerala Pentecostal history, amplifying its Dalit narratives.

Although scholars like Paulson Pulikottil (2011), Sarbeswar Sahoo (2018), and Nathaniel Roberts (2016) have highlighted the Pentecostal influence among the marginalized (lower caste and women) in Indian society, there has not been much study after V. V. Thomas (2008) work, which shed light on the grassroots Dalit Pentecostal historiography in Kerala. Furthermore, while the studies mentioned above indicate the empowering effects of Pentecostal teachings among Indian Dalits, they have not accounted for the persistence of caste-driven ethnocentric attitudes in the contemporary Pentecostal landscape. Amongst South Indian Pentecostals, such ethnocentric behavior persists, primarily through the preference for endogamy, as indicated above. Therefore, this paper focuses on retelling a more inclusive history of Kerala Pentecostalism while exploring the historical development of the Syrian Christian identity marker as a privileged one that became associated with the Pentecostals in Kerala.

Through an intersectional (religion and caste) historical analysis, the paper begins with description of the Syrian Christian community that has been integrated into the caste system for the last 2000 years in Kerala. Subsequently, to present a more inclusive historical narrative, the paper highlights the Dalit conversion to Christianity since the 16th century as a critique of the privileged status of Syrian Christianity. Even more so when Pentecostalism arrived at its shores, impacting the emergence of Dalit Pentecostalism as the Dalits embraced the Pentecostal faith as liberative, which challenged other caste Christians as well as the Syrian Christian Pentecostals. Pentecostalism in Kerala remains at the intersection of caste-infused dynamics.

2. Caste in Kerala

In speaking of ethnic identity markers in the Indian landscape, it is inevitable not to talk of caste. Although “the very English word *caste*, used generally to indicate a category crucial in all spheres of Indian life, derives from the Portuguese *casta*” (Aranha 2016, p. 175), the concept of categorizing society according to a caste notion was not a Portuguese invention. Often the discourse of South Indian societal stratification traces back to the Vedic period (1500–800 BCE), where the division of society was based on the four caste groups (Brahmin, Kshatriyas, Vaisya, and Sudra), as illustrated in the story of Purusha, the primordial man, from the Hindu scriptures, *Rig Veda*. The rationale for such a caste ranking system is based on purity and pollution, which finds its religious derivation in the Vedic account of the “creation of the world and the sacrifice of the primordial man, Purusha” (Farhadian 2015, p. 71). After Purusha’s sacrifice discourse in *Rig Veda*, the text notes,

What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth became the energy of the universe [i.e., Brahmins]; his two arms were made into the Rajanya [Kshatriyas]; his two thighs the Vaishyas; from his two feet the Shudra were born (*Rig Veda* 10.90, quoted in Farhadian 2015, pp. 71–72).

In Kerala, the localized version of this caste division can be seen with the Nambudiri Brahmins on top and the untouchable castes, such as Pualyas, Parayas, etc., at the lowest rung. The Nayars and Ezhavas each have their levels and subdivisions in the middle. Although such stratification can be understood within the broader conceptualizing of Vedic structuring, it deviates from the traditional mold of four caste layering as “Kshatriyas were rare and Vaisyas nonexistent. The Nayar caste took the place of Kshatriyas.... The Ezhavas

came below the Nayars followed by the slave castes" like Pualyas, Parayas, and Kurvas (Kurien 2002, p. 45).

The historical origins of such localized caste stratification in Kerala are often conceptualized through the Aryan migration theory, where scholars believe that the hierarchical structuring process understood as "Aryanization" began with the Aryan immigration to Kerala (Menon 2008, p. 38; Kurien 2002, p. 44). Thus, Kerala historian A. Sreedhara Menon writes, "Though the Aryan immigration might have commenced by about 1000 B.C., it seems that the first organized batch of Brahmin settlers reached . . . only in the 3rd century B.C. in the wake of the advent of the Jains and the Buddhists" (Menon 2008, pp. 38–39). Thus, Payyannur and Chellur villages (Gramams) in northern Kerala are known to be among the earliest of "the 64 original Brahmin settlements" (Menon 2008, p. 39). Through their knowledge and mastery of the Hindu scriptures and, empowering local chieftains by conferring Aryan titles, the Brahmins obtained royal patronage and local dominance (Kurien 2002, p. 44), especially in acquiring "enormous landed properties which came to them in the form of gifts from their royal patrons" (Menon 2008, p. 41). Consequently, social hierarchy was instituted to serve the Nambudiri cause, with Nairs taking up the occupation of the feudal fighting class below the Nambudiris, with "the toddy-tapping class of Ezhavas, the agricultural laboring class of the pulayas" (Menon 2008, p. 41) and other lower castes carrying out "hard physical tasks" (Kurien 2002, p. 45) constituting the lower strata of the hierarchical caste ladder. Furthermore, with hierarchy also came segregation based on the purity–pollution notion. Consequently, each caste group was "separated not only by endogamy, commensality, dialectical variations, and ritual pollution, but by spatial distance as well" (Hardgrave 1964, p. 1841). Such spatial distancing was based on the notion of "atmospheric pollution—pollution from a distance, and, in the case of the lowest castes, even by sight" (Kurien 2002, p. 45). In summation, by the process of "Aryanization", the Brahmins solidified the Hindu Vedic culture and its social structures over the Southern Dravidian culture.

When the Christians arrived in Kerala, they entered such a stratified social landscape.

2.1. Syrian Christians of Kerala: Making of the Privileged Intermediary Caste Status

Syrian Christianity in Kerala traces its origin to the oral history of Saint Thomas's (disciple of Jesus Christ) arrival. Although Thomas' arrival is not historically verifiable, Kerala's Christians take the arrival as part of their tradition upon which subsequent Christian movements are built. At the same time, verifiable sources validate the arrival of Christian migrants from the Middle East to Kerala since AD 345. As Susan Visvanathan writes,

A Christian, Thomas of Cana, set out in AD 345 with the permission of the Catholicos of the East, taking with him a number of Christians, both lay and ecclesiastical, from Jerusalem, Baghdad and Nineveh, to provide succour to the spiritually impoverished Thomas Christians of Kerala (Visvanathan 1993, p. 13).

Although the newly arrived Christians provided much-needed spiritual and ecclesiastical leadership to the existing Thomas Christians, they referred to themselves as the Canaanites (locally came to be known as Southists or *Thekumbhagar*) and maintained separation from the existing Thomas Christians, the Northists or *Vadakumbhagar*. However, for the local Hindus, such factions meant little; both groups continued to be considered as Syrian Christians. Eventually, "Syriac became the ecclesiastical language, and the local clergy were ordained according to the Syrian Church Tradition, making the ecclesiastical and liturgical beginning of the Kerala Syrian Christian community" (Varghese 2019, p. 3). The Syrian Christianity of Kerala survived over a century unchallenged until the arrival of the Portuguese towards the end of the 15th century. During this period, the term "Syrian" became localized with the local caste status quo and was less associated with the "inhabitants of Syria". Nevertheless, it still refers to using the Syriac language in liturgical services. More importantly, "the term has come to denote a caste-like community with claims to Brahmins, Nair, or 'pure' Syrian origins" (Philips 2004, p. 257).

Syrian Christian integration meant assimilation into the existing caste system and to the local community that was already structured by caste. Traditionally, it has been understood that the first converts of Saint Thomas were the High Caste Nambudiris. Although there is less to nil historical evidence to prove this, in accordance with local tradition, it is appropriate to state, as C. J. Fuller notes, “they were accorded Nambudiri status by the Nambudiris themselves” (Fuller 1976, p. 56). Therefore, the Syrian Christians eventually became known as the protectors of artisans with land ownership who practiced the local purity-pollution rules. Consequently, Syrians came to be “ranked above or equal to Nayar” but in some cases lower (Fuller 1976, p. 56). Some scholars understood Syrian Christians to have occupied an “intermediary caste” role between the higher and lower caste (S. Thomas 2018, p. 22). To this extent, Syrian Christians were considered “purifiers”, where “one touch from a Syrian Christian male was considered to have purifying effects on caste-polluted objects, making Syrian Christians, quite literally, a community stood between upper- and lower-caste Hindus” (S. Thomas 2018, p. 22). Although the role of being the “purifiers” evolved to be non-existent, Syrian Christians’ privileged caste position is often attributed through the traditional association with the Nambudiris, their artisan role, and their land ownership.

When the Catholic Portuguese arrived in the early 16th century, they were surprised to see a thriving Syrian Christian community held at an upper-caste level. By this point, the local Syrian Christians “were a powerful community, fairly prosperous, with a good part of the pepper trade in their hands, and enjoying a considerable status in society” (Mathew and Thomas 2005, p. 29). As the Portuguese established forts at Cochin and Cannanore, “they and the local Christians sought each other’s alliances” (Mathew and Thomas 2005, p. 29). However, the Syrian Christian identity was threatened when the newly arrived Archbishop of Goa, Alexis de Menezes, attempted to take control of the local Christian community through various ecclesiastical decisions. Consequently, the local Syrian Christians protested against the Catholics in the form of a “Coonen Cross Resolution” (Varghese 2019, p. 4), where the local Christians gathered around a cross that was outside the Mattancherry Church in Cochin on 3 January 1653, taking “a solemn oath, renouncing all obedience” to the Archbishop of Goa (Mackenzie [1901] 2001, p. 27). As a result, some left the Roman church (known as the *Puthenkur*- New Party), and the rest remained with the Roman Catholic church (known as the *Pazhayakur*- Old Party). Eventually, when the Portuguese power waned with the emergence of the Dutch, the “new party” re-connected with the Syrian Patriarch establishing themselves as the Syrian Jacobite Church. At the dawn of the arrival of protestant missionaries, the local Kerala Syrian Christians were members of either the Catholic or Syrian Jacobite congregations “and proudly held onto their respective versions of historic Syrian Thomas Traditions” (Varghese 2019, p. 5).

Nonetheless, the deep-seated caste pride of the Syrian Christian caste hierarchy continued to exist despite these ecclesiastical divisions. The Syrian Christians remained an honorable, landowning merchant community within the caste-stratified South Indian society. Therefore, when the British missionaries arrived, they soon recognized that their task was not to establish a new church but to revive the existing Syrian Christianity (McKee 2018, p. 118).³ In this regard, two of the main contributions of the British missionaries were in establishing educational institutions, especially the Kottayam Seminary in 1815, and, most notably, translating the Bible to the vernacular language, Malayalam. As A. C. George puts it, the availability of the Bible in the Malayalam language “breathed new life” (A. C. George 2001, p. 221), especially to the reform-minded Syrian Christians. Such a vernacularization brought waves of reformation, giving rise to two reform-minded groups from the Syrian Jacobite denomination; one joined the Anglican Church, and the other became the reformatory arm of the Syrian Christian community by establishing the Mar Thoma Church in 1888. Such a reformatory wave also set the stage in Kerala for the arrival of Pentecostalism.

Although the discussion so far has emphasized and illustrated the historical identity-making of the Syrian Christians in Kerala, it is vital to note that, since the Portuguese arrival,

there has also been a growing Christian community among the lower caste. However, the growth of Christianity among the lower castes was exclusively due to the Western missionary engagement. The Syrian Christians continued to keep the non-Syrian Christians at arm's length due to their local caste hierarchy.

2.2. Lower Caste Christians in Kerala

The *Mukkuvars* in Kerala were the first lower caste group to convert to Christianity.⁴ When St. Francis-Xavier arrived in Goa in 1542, he was commissioned to teach the Catholic faith to the *Paravars* and *Mukkuvars* (fishers' caste) who lived along the Southern coasts. As Jona Halfdanardottir notes,

Traditionally, Kerala's fisherfolk belonged to the lowest segment in the Hindu caste system, and their occupation was regarded as polluting to people of higher castes (and communities like the high-ranking Syrian Christians) (Halfdanardottir 1993, p. 141).

However, by the end of the 16th century, through Xavier's mission, as Cecilia Busby notes, "the coastal regions of Kerala and Tamil Nadu contained some 45,000 baptized Roman Catholics" (Busby 2006, p. 79). Even though, such a large number of the fisherfolk were converted to Christianity, and contextualized their Catholic faith in their given socio, religious, and cultural context, "they did not escape the 'untouchable' status ascribed to their occupation" (Halfdanardottir 1993, p. 141).⁵

In the meantime, in central Kerala, the Portuguese occupation further perpetuated abuse against the lower castes (namely the *Pulaya* slave castes) as they converted them. As Vinil Paul notes, conversion was an "important consequence of the Portuguese era when many domestic slaves were baptized with Portuguese names" (Paul 2021, p. 52). Although slave castes and slavery existed even before the colonial rule in Kerala, "with the arrival of the Portuguese (1498) and the Dutch (1603), slave trading networks got strengthened in Kerala, as they also exported and imported slaves" (Paul 2021, p. 52). Ironically, the Syrian Christians who "had a minimal role in spreading the gospel among the lower-castes" were major slaveholders working with the Portuguese and the Dutch, maintaining "a strict caste hierarchy" and oppressing the lower castes (Paul 2021, p. 53).

However, a significant transformation began to happen to the lower castes of central Kerala when the British missionaries pioneered "the lower-caste conversion movement" (Paul 2021, p. 53). Still, it only occurred as the missionaries' parted ways with the Syrian Christians, with whom they initially preferred to work. One of the early Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries, Henry Baker, writing in the *Missionary Register* of 1829, mentioned the primary goal of their work among the Syrian Christians as "advisors and helpers, and instructors to such as are willing to hear" (Baker quoted in McKee 2018, p. 118). One of the primary motivations of such endeavor was the missionary conviction that Syrian Christianity in Travancore⁶ had "declined into the mere formality of religion, & I [missionary Benjamin Bailey] fear very little, if anything but the name of Christianity remains amongst them" (Bailey quoted in McKee 2018, p. 119). Establishing the Kottayam Seminary, which became a primer institution for the Syrian Christians, was one of the major ways the missionaries facilitated this faith rejuvenation. However, by 1836 conflict began to emerge between the local Syrian Christian leadership and the CMS missionaries following their objections to the reform ideas that the missionaries proposed.⁷ Consequently, the CMS missionaries' broke ties, leaving the Kottayam seminary in the hands of Syrian Christians and focusing on another college, CMS college. Such parting of ways between Syrian Christians and the missionaries provided more leverage for them to educate, preach, and convert the lower caste people.

In addition to CMS college, as part of the missionary plan, "they started village schools in different parts of Kottayam, even though only very few slave caste children joined" (Paul 2021, p. 56).⁸ Working against the structural hierarchy, the missionaries also made systemic changes influencing the local and colonial rulers to institute laws to abolish slavery and

protect the lower castes. The 1847 memorandum by twelve missionaries submitted to the rulers of the state of Travancore was one such step (Mohan 2019, p. 102).⁹ Although the memorandum did not bring about an immediate abolition of slavery in Travancore, its presence pressured the local rulers. Missionaries continued in their anti-slavery campaign, and consequently, on 24 June 1855, it was declared that owning slaves was illegal (Oommen 1996).¹⁰

Yet another social reform brought in by the missionaries was the breast covering movement for the lower caste women who were not allowed to cover the “upper half of their bodies in front of upper-caste males and females or in the presence of a deity” (S. Thomas 2018, p. 46). The 1813 orders from the British Colonel James Munro and the 1829 proclamation from the local ruler Maharani Gowri Parvati Bai were products of such social reform. Following these proclamations, the missionaries published circulars informing the lower caste converts to cover their upper bodies with the Syrian Christian jacket, the *kuppayam*. However, the new Nadar converts “overwhelmingly preferred the Hindu [upper caste] Nayar women’s breast cloth to the Syrian Christian jacket” (S. Thomas 2018, p. 49). While such a resolute decision to adopt upper-caste clothing “signaled caste reform within the Hindu religion”, as Sonja Thomas rightly notes (S. Thomas 2018, p. 50), the refusal to wear Syrian clothing also indicates the lower-caste Christian resistance against Syrian Christian hegemony.

Although various missionary involvements led to the progressive emancipation of the lower caste, specifically for the slave castes in Travancore (Mohan 2015; Paul 2021), it is also important to note that such involvement was not always with an egalitarian attitude. In fact, as Mohan (2015, p. 29) notes, the missionaries were “paternalistic” and, at times, “informed by colonial world views” (Mohan 2015, p. 24). As a result, not all the missionaries were ready to challenge the existing caste system in Travancore. P. T. George highlights discriminatory attitude through the way they opposed a fellow missionary’s (Charles Mead) marriage to a lower caste woman (P. T. George 2021, p. 3). Reports to the mission about the “Marriage of Mr. Mead to a young woman, the daughter of a catechist and of the Pariah caste”, stated that “a young Pariah woman however connected by marriage or however high her qualifications may be, cannot gain the esteem and command” (Quoted in P. T. George 2021, pp. 3–4).

Despite these colonial mindsets, “the missionary labor among the slave castes led to fundamental transformation of [their] . . . social world” (Mohan 2015, p. 34). Furthermore, through missionary engagement and biblical literacy a new “religious imagination” was birthed (Mohan 2015, p. 83) with the recognition that Dalits were human beings “attributed with inalienable rights by their creator” (Mohan 2015, p. 103).

These steps of empowering the Dalit community in central Kerala set the stage for the Pentecostal movement to emerge as a liberating force against the caste oppression of the Hindus and the Syrian Christians.

3. Pentecostalism in Kerala: The Syrian Christian and the Dalit Pentecostal Communities

When Pentecostalism began spreading in Kerala during the late 19th century, its emphasis on the egalitarian working of the Holy Spirit made it a local movement irrespective of caste differences. Although still socially segregated by caste norms, the Syrian Christians and the Dalits adopted the Pentecostal Christian faith as various revival gatherings emerged in Travancore. Such Indian-initiated revivals towards the end of the 19th century became pivotal in revitalizing the Syrian Christian faith and empowering the lower caste. It also contributed to the recent polycentric understanding of Global Pentecostal historiography.

Although the origin of Pentecostalism is often attributed to Los Angeles’ Azusa Street revival, which took place in 1906 (Synan 1997, p. 105), such a single origin point of the Pentecostal movement is contested among Pentecostal scholars with the recent shift towards a “polycentric approach” (Anderson 2010, p. 25). Such a pivotal shift occurred with the recognition that Pentecostalism “not only [had] antecedents in Western awakenings and

the holiness movement but also a number of Pentecostal precursors elsewhere" (Bauman 2015, p. 25).¹¹

Concerning India, scholars have recognized Pentecostal antecedents in local revivals (Bauman 2015, pp. 25–26; Abraham 2021, pp. 28–50; Joshua 2022, pp. 44–65). In south India, the revivals of 1860, 1873, and 1895 in Tirunelveli and Travancore (A. C. George 2001; P. T. George 2021); in north India, the Sialkot revival of 1904, the Dholka revival of 1905, and the Mukti revival of 1905; in the northeast, the revival of 1905 in Khasi Hills, are all important antecedents of Indian Pentecostalism. These were characterized as Pentecostal-like or "Holy Spirit revivals" (Hedlund 2016, p. 115). They also precede the Azusa Street revival of America. Especially in South India, historian Gary McGee noted that these "Pentecostal and Pentecostal-like movements in India preceded the development of 20th century Pentecostalism in North America and Europe by at least 40 years" (McGee quoted in A. C. George 2001, p. 220).

3.1. Syrian Christian Pentecostals:

At the beginning of Pentecostal revivals among the Syrian Christians of Travancore, the believers who decided to break away from the traditional Syrian Christian denominations received heavy persecution and were even ostracized from their churches and families. For the Syrian Christians who chose to join the Pentecostal movement, such was part of the continual reformation of Christianity that began in 1889 with the establishment of the Mar Thoma Church.

Some traits among the newer Syrian Christian Pentecostals that set them apart from the older Syrian Christians were first, the emphasis on the Bible, and the negation of Syriac liturgies. Second, "separation from worldliness", which was socially marked by their non-expensive clothing (often white) and their "women not wearing jewelry" (Varghese 2019, p. 15). Third, the practice of adult baptism, which was common among the Brethren who were also attempting to reform the Syrian Jacobite and Mar Thoma traditions. Fourth, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit baptism as necessary as the water immersion baptism. Fifth, the acknowledgment of lay leadership based on the teachings of "apostleship of all believers". These theological factors set the Syrian Christian Pentecostals apart from their non-Pentecostal counterparts who used Syriac or Latin liturgies (in addition to the Bible), adorned gold jewelry signifying their social higher status and embraced child baptisms, refused to acknowledge the doctrine of Spirit baptism and more notably continued to be under the ecclesiastical leadership of Bishops and Archbishops.

Therefore, when members of a Syrian Christian household accepted the Pentecostal way of Christianity, they were often ostracized and, in some cases, treated similarly to the lower castes; in fact, the budding Pentecostal movement first came to known as the "movement of the Dalits" (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 191). Indian Theologian V. V. Thomas writes of such a pattern. For example, Thomas writes,

Puthen Kulangara Skariah, a Syrian Christian, from Karickode, Kottayam District, Kerala, adopted the Pentecostal faith and as a result, he was alienated from his family, and they nicknamed him "Pulayan Skariah". Another example is Pastor E. V. Joseph, who left the Jacobite Church and accepted the Pentecostal faith, was called "Pulayan Avatha" (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 188).

The prefix *Pulayan* added to their name indicates how the Syrian Christian communities saw their community members converting to Pentecostalism, akin to denouncing the higher caste position to a lower caste. *Pulaya* is one of the lower caste groups in South India. K. C. Alexander writes, "The word '*Pulaya*' originates from *pela* which means birth and death pollution. The Pulayas are, therefore, considered as concrete symbols of pollution" (Alexander 1968, p. 1071). Hence, by labeling the new Pentecostal Syrian Christians as "*Pulaya*", the wider Syrian Christian community expressed their indignation toward the new reformatory faith and the public display of denouncing them from the Syrian Christian

caste privileges.¹² In addition to social humiliation, some Syrian Christians were ostracized from their homes.

Although Pentecostalism in Kerala was locally known as the Dalit movement, the ongoing revivalist wave within Syrian Christianity led the reform-minded Syrian Christians to join Pentecostalism, promoting the belief that the move of the Holy Spirit is equally available to all (Varghese 2019). Therefore, the new Syrian Christian Pentecostal believers saw any caste-related slurs as part of the call to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Such a call entailed leaving behind all “worldliness” and trusting the egalitarian nature of the Holy Spirit, who revives and empowers anyone irrespective of social hierarchy. Furthermore, such pneumatological understanding influenced their insistence on anti-liturgical worship and anti-structural ecclesial congregations. For example, early Pentecostal leaders demonstrated this egalitarian-ness by referring to each other as “brothers”—e.g., “‘Brothers at Kumbanad’, ‘Brothers at Vettiyar’, or ‘Brothers at Mulakkuzha’”, based on the geographical location of their church locality (Abraham 2013, p. 35), instead of any hierarchical ecclesial titles. In this way, the centuries-old symbols of the Syrian Christian community—the Syriac liturgies, ecclesiastical leadership, and adornments—were rejected by the Pentecostals.¹³ This indicated the subversion of the Syrian Christian privileged status. Therefore, it is reasonable to state that there was a sense of caste-lessness (at least in the early days of Kerala Pentecostalism). For the lower castes of Kerala in the early 20th century, such embrace of Pentecostalism demonstrated a socially liberative and egalitarian version of Christianity contrasting other Syrian Christian traditions.

3.2. Dalit Pentecostals

For the Dalits who decided to join the Pentecostal movement, Pentecostalism represented an evolving Christianity since the British intervention in Travancore. As seen in the case of British missionaries, it was the western Pentecostal missionaries who fought for the conversion and liberation of the low castes while the Syrian Christians stood on the sideline.

One of the early American Pentecostal Missionaries, Robert F. Cook, wrote of his experience starting in 1914. He explains the caste dynamics encountered among the Christians in Travancore and describes his efforts to minister to the lower caste.¹⁴ He writes,

Travancore is a Hindu state or kingdom, Here the Hindus are divided into many castes or classes, Our main work here is mostly among the low castes, those called the untouchables or the neglected; such respond readily to the Gospel and become sincere worshippers of the supernatural (Cook 1955, pp. 27–28).

Cook’s account illustrates the trend of western missionaries working with the low caste. Furthermore, Cook’s reflections also indicate an effort to build a relationship with two local Dalit leaders, Poykayil Yohannan and Vellikara Chodi (or Choti) (Cook 1955, pp. 120–24). Cook (1955, p. 120) referred to Poykayil Yohannan (1879–1939) as the “Great Christian Leader among the pulaya and paraya castes” but he did not mention of Yohannan’s religious affiliation. By 1910, Yohannan had founded an independent religious group called the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiyva Sabha* (PRDS), (The Church of God for visible salvation).

Yohannan was born to “slave caste parents who were labourers attached to Syrian Christian landlords” attending the Mar Thoma Church (Mohan 2016, p. 51). Yohannan became a Christian, affiliating briefly with Mar Thoma and Brethren churches, before becoming an itinerant preacher. Growing up with Syrian Christian landlords, Yohannan learned to read and write, enabling him to read the Bible. He was moved by the Christian message leading him to join the Mar Thoma Church. However, as P. Sanal Mohan notes, he was

highly critical of its discrimination against Dalit Christians, arguing on theological grounds that after baptism, followers become one in Christ, and thus there was no justification for referring to them as Pulaya/Paraya Christians (Mohan 2015, p. 156).

Unfortunately, two notable incidents prompted his departure from the Mar Thoma Church. “One was the forced disinterment of a Dalit Christian; the other was the Church’s opposition to the proposed marriage of a Syrian Christian women to a Dalit Christian man” (Mohan 2015, p. 156). Although Yohannan joined the CMS missionaries for a short time, their colonial paternalistic treatment led him to join the Brethren church. Undoubtedly Syrian Christian caste prejudices prevailed within the newly formed Brethren churches, resulting in Yohannan stepping out of the reform-minded churches to become an independent itinerant preacher.

Yohannan soon shifted his position on Christianity and the upcoming Pentecostal movement, by instituting his own religious organization based on a “combination of his teachings that were rooted in aspects of Christian theology and ideas drawn from the Dalit life-world” (Mohan 2015, p. 158). Through PRDS, Yohannan not only mobilized the Dalit caste group in central Travancore but also started to challenge Syrian Christians about their biases by emphasizing the “present day relevance of salvation in the here and now” in light of the Dalit oppression (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 175). He soon became a popular Dalit religious leader, which was also partly due to his claim of having a personal revelation from God for the Pulayas of Travancore. In doing so, Yohannan also critiqued the Bible, stating,

There was not one [epistle] written to the Pulayas of Travancore. Therefore, there is no revelation in those Epistles for you . . . The revelation to you Pulayas of Travancore is through me (quoted in Mohan 2015, p. 160).

Consequently, for the missionaries and the Syrian Christians, Yohannan became a “Paraya Christian heretical teacher” who teaches “blasphemy” (Mohan 2015, p. 162). However, through his teachings and PRDS, Yohannan, as Mohan puts it, “imaginatively created a hybrid religion by combining several elements of the Christian discourses and practises infusing them with the elements drawn from the Dalit life-world” (Mohan 2016, p. 51).

The shift in Yohannan’s spirituality and his decision to move away from the Christian faith is predominantly due to the Syrian Christian prejudice against the lower castes (Mathew 2011, pp. 75–77). During his early days, even before constructing a more amalgamated spirituality, Yohannan was willing to associate with the Pentecostal missionary, Cook. However, no Syrian Christian Pentecostal leaders were willing to work with Yohannan to lead the Pentecostal movement in Kerala. Nonetheless, as V.V. Thomas rightly notes,

It is rather disappointing that people like Yohannan who could have made a deep impact among his people could not flourish in Pentecostalism. In fact, Pentecostals lost eminent Dalit leaders like Yohannan who had great influence on their community (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 189).

At the same time, it is essential to note that not all the Dalits in Travancore decided to join Yohannan’s movement. Instead, they found a new way of understanding Christianity in Pentecostalism, without relying on Syrian Christians or foreign missionaries.

One such early Dalit Pentecostal movement in South India began through the person Ramankutty (1881–1945), who founded the Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (later renamed The Pentecostal Mission). Ramankutty was born to Hindu parents in the village of Engadiyur in Trichur District, Kerala. In 1895, when he was fourteen, Ramankutty went to Sri Lanka (then called Ceylon) in the employ of a wealthy Christian, Asarappa, who was a Hindu convert. This was Ramankutty’s first contact with Christianity. In the two subsequent notable instances (in 1899 and 1902), Ramankutty had visions of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁵ This prompted him to confess Jesus as Lord, accept baptism and adopt the Christian name ‘Paul’ (Hedlund 2000, p. 137). Ramankutty Paul’s ministry gradually attracted people to join as physical healing became common in their gatherings. Although it started as a small ministry in Colombo, Paul, along with the help of Alwin R.de Alwis (a new convert to Paul’s church), the ministry spread to Tamil Nadu and Kerala as a new establishment in 1923 by the name of Ceylon Pentecostal Mission (CPM).

One of the key principles of CPM was to remain indigenous in leadership and teaching. Consequently, as Roger Hedlund writes,

From the beginning, indigenous forms of worship were incorporated. Worshipers were seated on mats on the floor—similar to Buddhist and Hindu worship procedures. Domestic musical instruments for worship, singing of indigenous tunes, and other local cultural practises were common features, all of which have the CPM an identity of its own (Hedlund 2000, p. 138).

Therefore, early on, Paul and Alwis intentionally broke ties with the missionaries; most nobly at the time with the ministry of Walter Clifford, who arrived as an Assemblies of God Missionary. As a Dalit leader, Paul was also influenced by the notable South Indian social reformer Sri Narayana Guru and became set on creating a unique pathway for his fellow Dalits in the South Indian Christian landscape (Pulikottil 2011). Therefore, as Ronnevik states,

What Guru did for Kerala's Hindu community (fighting for temple access for Dalits, bringing "high caste" deities into Dalit religious spaces), Paul did for Pentecostalism, as he established a self-sustaining and self-governing ecclesial organization (Ronnevik 2021, p. 12).

Paul's indigenous principles were so powerful that they even influenced the Syrian Christian Pentecostals like K. E. Abraham when they set out to establish the earliest Pentecostal denomination in Kerala (Varghese 2019, p. 17).

3.3. "Syrianisation" of the Kerala Pentecostal Movement and the Dalit Resistance

As has been demonstrated, Pentecostalism did not exclusively begin as a Syrian Christian movement. However, the looming nationalistic spirit gave way to the "syrianisation" of the Kerala Pentecostal movement (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 204). In the pursuit of maintaining Indian identity in opposition to British colonialism, the local Syrian Pentecostal leaders forgot to maintain equality with their fellow Pentecostals resulting in the evident omission of lower caste from the early Kerala Pentecostal leadership. Although numerous pioneers spread the Pentecostal faith in Kerala, K. E. Abraham's leadership formed an indigenous Pentecostal denomination that parted ways with western missionaries like Cook and Mary Chapman.¹⁶ Consequently, the South Indian Pentecostal Church of God (SIPCG) was formed in 1930 and later renamed as the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (IPC) in 1935.

Although IPC set out as a pioneering Indian-initiated indigenous Pentecostal establishment, the Syrian Christian ethnic consciousness was evident at its helm. Abraham belonged to the Syrian Christian community but left his traditional church for the more reformatory teachings of the Brethren church. He received adult baptism from K. V. Simon, a prominent Syrian Christian poet-preacher leading a Brethren church. Soon, he was also exposed to Pentecostal teaching through the missionary George Berg, but his experience of speaking in tongues came about through the ministry of C. Manneke, a Dalit Pentecostal preacher (Das 2001, p. 83). Later on, Ramankutty Paul's (another Dalit Pentecostal leader) commitment to financial self-sufficiency prompted Abraham to lead IPC on a similarly indigenous path. Even so, Pentecostals from the Syrian Christian traditions dominated the leadership of the newly founded indigenous Pentecostal movement, sidelining Dalit Pentecostal leaders. As Paulson Pulikottil notes, the "Syrian historical consciousness" was at play among the early Syrian Christian Pentecostals (Pulikottil 2002, p. 13), resulting in almost all the local Syrian Christian Pentecostal leaders to join Abraham, leaving the Dalit leaders with Robert Cook (V. V. Thomas 2008, pp. 270–71). Such a split led the churches under Cook's leadership to join the American Pentecostal denomination, Church of God, in 1936 while the churches that became associated with Abraham joined the Syrian-led indigenous Pentecostal movement, IPC.¹⁷

Therefore, in the 1950s, with the departure of almost all of the early western Pentecostal missionaries, all the prominent Pentecostal denominations (Assemblies of God, Church of God, and IPC) ended up under Syrian Christian Pentecostal leadership. Most notably, the departure of Cook left the Dalit Pentecostals, who were part of the Church of God (COG),

essentially without a leader to advocate for their cause. At the same time, as V.V. Thomas puts it,

the departure of Cook can be seen as a ‘blessing in disguise’ as far as the Dalits were concerned. It made them come out of their ‘protected shell’ and find alternative ways to survive. They began to assert their rights and privileges depending on their own strength (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 281).

Consequently, the Dalit faction of the Church of God petitioned the top leadership in Kerala and USA to divide the denomination as an act of protest against the Syrian Christian section. Thus, in 1972,

the Church of God was virtually divided into two factions namely Church of God in India (State) which was the Syrian faction, and Church of God in India (Division), the Dalit faction (V. V. Thomas 2008, p. 314).

Such a split in COG is a prime example of “the exclusion of Dalit Pentecostals” in the Syrian Christian-dominated Kerala Pentecostalism (John 2021, p. 287). However, the bold step taken by the Dalit Pentecostal leadership in Kerala served as a public statement giving other Dalits an impetus to establish independent Pentecostal establishments. The formation of the World Missionary Evangelism Church of God (WME) is another example of an exclusively Dalit-led Pentecostal denomination that has seen growth in Kerala since 1975. Every year, the annual convention of WME is held at the church headquarter at Kariamplavu, Ranni, which P. Sanal Mohan sees as a “subaltern counter public” that testifies to the “anti-caste nature of Dalit Christianity” (Mohan 2019, p. 105). Most notably, WME has also been diligent in publishing Christian literature authored by Dalits which once again testifies to the “creation of an alternative public sphere” where Dalits are equal share with Syrian Christians and upper-caste Hindus in discussing religious ideas (Mohan 2019, p. 105).

As this shows, the caste system had been integrated into Pentecostalism, and the marginalization of Dalit Pentecostals was from this point on entrenched in Kerala’s Pentecostalism. The ‘alternative public spheres’ established by Dalit leaders within Kerala’s Pentecostalism indicates the vital theological characteristic, which Nimi Wariboko termed the “Pentecostal Principle” that depicts Pentecostal spirituality as providing “the power of emergent creativity that disrupts social existence, generates infinite restlessness, and issues in novelty” (Wariboko 2012, p. 44). The Dalit leadership embodies such Pentecostal creativity and generates a restlessness in the Kerala Pentecostalism that has fallen back into the fold of privileged Syrian Christian social structure. In doing so, the Dalit Pentecostal resistance has not only carved out the new religious movement of “Dalit Pentecostalism” (V. V. Thomas 2008), but it also stands as a prophetic challenge to Syrian Christian Pentecostalism to re-consider its Pentecostal principle, which gave birth to Kerala Pentecostalism as a reformatory revivalist phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁸

Furthermore, this alternative Dalit initiative also contributes to the “progressive . . . diffusion of the Pentecostal movement” (Bauman 2015, p. 27) among the lower caste throughout India. Here, the Pentecostal principle of creativity progresses beyond the hegemonic social structures embedded in its missionary trajectory. On one end of the spectrum, an exclusively Dalit-led Pentecostal denomination, World Missionary Evangelism Church of God (WME) has been unapologetically “missionary” and evangelistic in propagating Pentecostal faith. On the other end, Syrian Christian Pentecostal missionaries who are impacted by the Kerala Dalit initiatives are further empowered to bear a holistic Pentecostal spirituality among the lower caste people inside and outside side Kerala.¹⁹

4. Conclusions: The Persistence of Syrian Christian Privilege in Seeking Endogamy

In the way of concluding, let me recall the objective of this paper to explore the prefix “Syrian Christian”, which is often used by some of Kerala’s Pentecostals to communicate their religious identity. Through a historical analysis, this paper demonstrated that the Kerala’s Syrian Christians were integrated into the caste system throughout its Christian

history over the last two thousand years. In other words, this paper is a testament to Duncan B. Forrester's statement that

the caste system seems to have made it possible for [Syrian Christian] Christianity to survive in Kerala, but on condition that it observed the norms of the system, in particular the prohibition on recruitment from 'other castes', and the acceptance of the rules of a radically hierarchical society (Forrester 1980, pp. 99–100).

Consequently, scholars speak of Syrian Christians as a caste rank when discussing the Indian caste system (Fuller 1976, pp. 55–56; Forrester 1980, pp. 97–117). Most recently, Sonja Thomas has referred to Syrian Christians as the "Privileged Minorities" of Kerala society (S. Thomas 2018). Although, towards the end of the 19th century, this privileged status was challenged as Syrian Christians, along with Dalits, adopted Pentecostalism,²⁰ by the mid-twentieth century, the ethnocentric nature of Syrian Christian castism began to creep into the Pentecostal movement. As Bergunder puts it, as the leadership of Indian Pentecostal Churches was dominated by Syrian Christians, "the perpetuation of an oppressive structure by the exclusion of subaltern groups from leadership positions took place despite" its non-western Indigenous leadership (Bergunder 2011, p. 171).

Nonetheless, the prevalence of Dalit Christianity since the 16th century in Kerala presents itself as a critique against the privileged status of Syrian Christianity, and even more so in the form of Dalit Pentecostalism as the ethnocentric biases of Syrian Christian castism keep peaking their head even among the most reformed and revitalized Pentecostals.

Returning to the introduction of this paper, the insistence of the Syrian Christian Pentecostal parents seeking an endogamous marriage alliance for their children is an apt example of the continuous privileged biases. Although this paper did not delve into endogamy and its relations to the persistence of Syrian Christian ethnocentrism, scholarship is ample regarding the existence of endogamy among Syrian Christians. Scholars like Amali Philips (2004) and S. Thomas (2018) highlight the caste-based racialization narrative that historically segregated the Aryans and the Dravidians and its influence on the Syrian Christian communities insisting on endogamy.²¹ Therefore, it is no surprise that some matrimony advertisements explicitly mention the racial attribute of their daughter as "fair" or "wheatish",²² along with their Syrian Christian ethnic status. Such racialization discourse would be a fascinating inquiry for future research in understanding the contemporary Syrian Pentecostal community; it could also assist in grappling with the marginality of Dalit Christians in the region.

For the Kerala Syrian Christian Pentecostal community, the challenge presented in the form of Dalit Pentecostalism is to reconsider the egalitarian Pentecostal principle which is noted globally in revitalizing Christianity. The question is how Syrian Christian Pentecostals use the "Syrian Christian" ethnic marker in light of their "Pentecostal" religious identity, which is also shared by their Dalit counterparts. Will the "Pentecostal" marker qualify the "Syrian Christian" identity? Or will it be the other way around? This paper has intentionally raised questions on the persistence of the Syrian Christian hierarchy and the exclusion of Dalits.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ Good News Weekly Online. <https://onlinegoodnews.com/category/matrimony/>. (accessed on 11 May 2022).

² Here, "Indigenous" denotes the diverse local "indigenous discovery of Christianity" (Sanneh 2003, p. 10). The phrase "indigenous" is often broadly used considering various indigenous people groups and is primarily understood as a socio-ethnic marker. While

such a definition is applicable in this paper, especially considering the different Indian socio-ethnic groups discovering Christianity (as opposed to a Western impartation), when referring to Syrian Christians as “indigenous”, it also indicates the religiously influenced nature of the socio-ethnic group formation.

³ This was indicated by Henry Baker, a CMS missionary to Travancore, in his correspondence in the Missionary Register of 1829. Baker writes, “The business of the society’s missionaries is not to pull down the ancient Syrian church and to build another on some plan of their own out of the materials; our object is to remove the rubbish and to repair the decayed places of the existing church” (Baker quoted in [McKee 2018](#), p. 118).

⁴ Conceptualizing conversion is a complex matter, especially considering the Indian inter-religious context. Most recently, scholars have highlighted multiple types of conversions ([Berger and Sahoo 2020](#)) and readers may recognize various kinds of conversion discourses intersecting in this paper. However, more specifically considering Pentecostalism, in this paper, “conversion” is assumed to also indicate “rupture”, as in, acknowledging how the new converts decide to reform “their lives by effecting a series of ruptures with the ways in which they have lived up to the time of their conversion” ([Robbins 2010](#), p. 159). In this paper, two historical instances of conversion to Christianity are highlighted; (1) the local Syrian Christian claim of being converts of the Nambudiri and (2) the Dalit conversion. Due to less historical evidence pointing to the early conversion of Nambudiris and their subsequent assimilation with the Syrian Christians, it is challenging to conceptualize conversion as “rupture” in the first instant. However, the latter example of the lower-caste conversion is certainly understood as a “rupture” (from old religious to Christian ways), especially under the guidance of the western missionary and later with Pentecostalism. At the same time, this is not to negate the cultural “continuity” between the old religion and Christianity, often demonstrated in linguistic reference to religious concepts and contextualization into their socio-cultural contexts. Nonetheless, “rupture” characterizes the nature of conversion in Kerala Pentecostal history. For a broader discussion on conversion from the Indian religious landscape, see [Berger and Sahoo \(2020\)](#), especially the introductory chapter.

⁵ It is important to note that the conversion of fisherfolk to Christianity provided a unique communal identity that helped them establish among the wider agricultural community. Conversion have been, as Cecilia [Busby \(2006\)](#) writes, “so phenomenally successful because it was a way of articulating a pervasive sense of difference between the fishing community and the majority agricultural community . . . [they continue to] maintain a sense of separation, of identity outside the hierarchy of caste and as far as possible independent from it” ([Busby 2006](#), p. 79).

⁶ Kerala is the contemporary name of the Southern state of India. During the late 18th century, the state incorporated the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, as well as Malabar, to the north. Most missionary reports mention the state by the old name “Travancore”. Hence the paper uses Travancore interchangeably with central Kerala.

⁷ In 1836, the CMS missionaries called a synod to resolve the issues between the Syrian Christians and the missionaries. However, after the meeting, the Syrian Jacobite Christians passed a resolution, “we, being the Jacobite Syrians, subject to the Patriarch of Antioch, and observing the church rites and rules established by the prelates sent by his command, cannot, therefore, deviate from them, and as no one possesses the authority to preach and teach the doctrine of our religion in the church of another without the sanction of their respective patriarchs, we cannot permit the same” (quoted in [Paul 2021](#), p. 55).

⁸ The report of Henry Baker Sr., on July 1845, read: “The schools are going on well. The school for slave children is an exception. The owners of the slaves are much opposed to having them taught and are constantly calling them away to their work and sometimes beating them” (quoted in [Paul 2021](#), p. 56).

⁹ As George Oommen notes, the missionaries “demanded the emancipation of all the slaves in Travancore as an act of ‘humanity and kindness’”. Their petition read: “With the condition of the slaves we have had many opportunities of becoming acquainted, and have been distressed to find in reference to these people, employed in the most laborious and unhealthy services, . . . they are often subjected to very cruel treatment from their masters, and that, owing to their degradation, they are in a great measure, deprived of the benefit of the lower courts, and entirely cut off from all access to their prince” (Quoted in [Oommen 1996](#)).

¹⁰ It should also be noted that this abolition did not bring about change immediately. One of the key reasons for these dynamics is due to lack of awareness among the lower castes. Therefore, “many of them continued to be slaves” ([Paul 2019](#), p. 147). Hence the protestant missionaries also took over the role of creating “awareness among the slave castes about the abolition of the slavery”. The missionaries wrote “many papers, tracts, and reports on anti-slavery . . . and widely distributed in the public” ([Paul 2019](#), p. 147).

¹¹ If the early Pentecostal historians (from a single origin perspective) approached Azusa Street as the ‘American Jerusalem’ from which the Pentecostal gospel reached the ‘ends of the earth’, within a polycentric framework, that could be revised as “many Jerusalems” considering the multiple origins of Pentecostalism” ([Anderson 2014](#), p. 205). Furthermore, considering the various revivals worldwide, along with the rapid movement of Pentecostal missionaries from Azusa Street to different parts of the world, led Michael Bergunder to conceptualize Global Pentecostalism in terms of an “international Pentecostal network” ([Bergunder 2008](#), p. 10; [Bergunder 2010](#)).

¹² This example of labelling a Syrian Christian with a lower caste reference as insult adds to the scholarly understanding of the use of caste names. In a recent article, Paolo Aranha refers to Sumit Guha’s observation that “many caste names, especially those of Dalit castes, sometimes were and are used as insults” (Guha quoted in [Aranha 2016](#), p. 172).

- Historically, lower caste women were restricted from wearing gold jewelry, and so it came to be accepted socially that those who do not wear jewelry, or any such adornments were lower castes. Such restriction of wearing was abolished by “the Royal Proclamation of 1818, issued by Rani Parvathibhayi, to remove the ‘adiyara’, a kind of tax remitted to the royal treasury for acquiring the sanction for wearing gold and expensive ornaments” (Valsa 2018, p. 584). However, this proclamation did not necessarily abolish such notions in the local social imaginary; which could also be at play here when Syrian Christians Pentecostals denounced jewelry.
- “When I first came to Travancore and saw the condition of the depressed classes (untouchables), my sympathy and interest were drawn to them . . . Such persons were attentive hearers and were looking for both spiritual and temporal help” (Cook 1955, p. 98).
- About his vision, Paul C. Martin wrote, “As a little boy, Raman suddenly woke up from his sleep one night when he heard someone calling him, as on the previous night. As advised by his mother, Raman asked, ‘Who is that?’ What do you want?’ He heard the reply in the same tender and sweet voice clearly, ‘I am Jesus.’ Raman’s heart repeated in a soft voice, ‘JESUS’, till he drifted off to sleep once again” (Martin quoted in Hedlund 2000, p. 137).
- The local leaders did not hesitate to criticize the western missionaries. They described their experience of missionaries, “as ‘being under the yoke of slavery’, and ‘surrendering the freedom’, . . . Their denial of financial support was described as refusing to drink ‘the milk of the white cow’. In clarifying their position, expressions like ‘autonomy of native churches’ and ‘independence’ etc were common” (Pulikottil 2002, p. 11).
- Michael Bergunder challenged the indigenous nature of IPC. Bergunder writes, “The subaltern studies project has shown that the anti-colonial national movement was mainly in the interest of the largely Hindu high-caste elites whereas the subalterns (untouchables, tribals and so on) did not benefit to the same extent. In the same way, as the leadership of the Indian Pentecostal Church of God was dominated by Syrian Christians . . . the perpetuation of an oppressive structure by the exclusion of subaltern groups from leadership positions took place despite indigenous leadership” (Bergunder 2011, p. 171).
- Almost parallel to the Dalit resistance against Syrian Christian Pentecostal institutionalization came the emergence of “New-generation churches”, which represent, as Stanley John notes “a wave of revitalization” (John 2021, p. 287). These are independent charismatic churches standing in contrast with denominational Pentecostal churches (that have gone through institutionalization), especially in not insisting its believers’ wearing jewelry, nor strict church membership, but centering around healing evangelists “preaching a message of revival and healing” (John 2021, p. 284). Yet they espouse the importance of the believer’s baptism and emphasize the gifts of the Spirit, including speaking in tongues, healing, and deliverance from evil spirits, finding its Pentecostal resemblance.
- Although there has not been a comprehensive study of Kerala Pentecostal missionaries to North India, the emergence of Pentecostalism in Rajasthan demonstrates one example of Syrian Christian Pentecostals working with the local leaders to serve the lower caste. For Pentecostalism in Rajasthan, see (Lukose 2013; Sahoo 2018). For a theological discussion on how subaltern discourse is informing Pentecostal evangelistic theology in India, see (Wilson 2019).
- By the mid of twentieth century, it was widely noted that, “there are several other independent Christian sects [in Kerala], most of them pentecostalist, which are composed of depressed-class Christians, vigorously attack caste as unchristian, and are highly suspicious of the Syrians and their dominance in most of the main-line denominations” (Forrester 1980, p. 114). Scholars like Forrester (1980) and even S. Thomas (2018) in the recent study expressed optimism in the power of Pentecostal expression of Christianity to uproot the Syrian Christian castism.
- It is understood that the early “migrating Aryans were racially differentiated from the native population of India, the Dravidians” (S. Thomas 2018, p. 73), consequently leading to the association of fair skin with the upper caste and dark skin with the lower castes. Such an Aryan tradition solidified the Syrian Christian privileges in a racialized manner. Today, Syrian Christians who claim to be the converts of Nambudiris “take pride in their supposed fair skin because it is seen as a status marker of their caste and religion” (S. Thomas 2018, p. 79).
- However, the racialization of the Syrian endogamy is at display in the ritual of *pennukannal* or Syrian Christian bride viewing. As Sonja Thomas writes, “In the *pennukannal* ritual, the prospective groom and his family visit the prospective bride’s parents. Sometime during the visit, the prospective bride serves the prospective groom and his family tea and sweets, thus allowing her beauty and the fairness of her skin to be viewed. Her skin color can be the basis for proposal of marriage—or for rejection” (S. Thomas 2018, pp. 85–86).

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