



How the *Kuladharm* System Affected the Life of St. Thomas Christians of Ancient Kerala

Thomas Vargheese

Research Scholar, Madhyanchal Professional University, Bhopal (M.P.)

ABSTRACT

The Caste system or *Chaturvarnya* was introduced in Kerala Society by the Brahmin settlers. With this, the old society based on social equality and harmonious social life disappeared. The Brahmins became the most superior community in the society wielding great influence and authority. The existing local communities lost their respectable position in society, and they were pushed back to an inferior position. Only those among them who distinguished themselves by their scholarship and learning were accommodated within the Brahmin fold, but the vast majority came to be treated as outcastes and thereby untouchables. They were denied almost all social rights enjoyed by the forward communities, especially the Brahmins. By the introduction of the *Kuladharm* (community duty) each caste or community was expected to perform their assigned duty only. Since there was no Vaisyas in Kerala, the Christians who were basically traders were assigned to perform the *dharma* of the Vaisya community. By accepting the status of Vaishya, the Christians had to undergo drastic changes in their life. This paper presents the effect of *Kuladharm* in the life of the St. Thomas Christians of Kerala, under the following sub-heads: 1) What is *Kuladharm*, 2) *Kuladharm* Implemented in Kerala Society, 3) Christians as Vaisyas, 4) The Social Status of the Christians as Vaisyas 5) Further Benefits, and 6) St. Thomas Christians as Pollution Neutralizers.

INTRODUCTION

During the reign of the Sangha or before, Kerala had not experienced any type of discriminations that separated one community from the other based on caste. In those days the Kerala locals were “*Aayar, Kuravar, Vellalar, Paravar* etc. But they were not differentiated according to caste system but according to the region where they lived.”¹ Only after the migration of the Aryans in the later periods did the old system undergo changes.

“The new Brahmin settlers had among them quite a few scholars and men of letters who distinguished themselves by their intellectual ability and depth of erudition. They exercised profound influence over the rulers. The Brahmins eventually came to be looked upon as a superior class of citizens entitled to special privileges. A situation soon emerged in which the Brahmin oligarchy could even dictate to the rulers on how they would conduct the administration.”² The Namboothiris, the most prominent group among the Brahmins in Kerala, who were the intellectuals, became the advisors of the king, and priests to perform pujas in the temples. According to Britannica the “Nambudiri, (is) one of the dominant Brahman castes of the Indian state of Kerala. Orthodox in the extreme, its members regard themselves as the true repositories of the ancient Vedic religion and of the traditional Hindu code.”³ It was this Nambudiri community who was instrumental for the formation of caste system in Kerala. They first granted the Kshatriya status to the ruling class, who were happy to be advised and guided by this intellectual and learned scholars of the Vedic philosophies.

Among the subcastes of the Nair community the most prominent group was also awarded the status of Kshatriya who were expected to be below the Brahmins in social status and were bound to serve them, the Namboodiris. The rest of the Nair community were considered as Shudras, and all the rest of the communities were considered as *avarnar* (outcastes). Each caste or subcaste was expected to perform their *Kuladharm*, the assigned duty of their community.

What is *Kuladharm*: *Kuladharm* is interrelated with Kerala’s caste system, which is entangled with 4 main castes, several subcastes and many outcastes or *avarnars*. According to this system each caste or subcaste has an assigned duty to perform for the society. This assigned duty or trade of the caste, known as *kulathozhil*, became the deciding factor as to which caste or subcaste the community belonged. Whoever is born in a particular caste, automatically becomes a member of the trade fellowship of that caste, obliged to do the trade assigned to them by the *Kuladharm* system. They have no right to do any other trade. Nobody in the society has the right to get the trade service from any other community other than from the community assigned

¹കേരളത്തിലെ ജാതി സമ്പ്രദായം (Keralathile Jyathi Sampradayam [The Caste System of Kerala]), Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia: https://ml.wikipedia.org/wiki/കേരളത്തിലെ_ജാതി_സമ്പ്രദായം

² Menon, A Sreedhara, Kerala History and its Makers, D.C. Books, Kottayam, January 2019, p. 40.

³ Nambudiri, Britannica, Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nambudiri>

to do the job. Thus, the social status of an individual or group of individuals (caste or community) was designed according to the profession that they are bound to undertake. This means that a particular caste or subcaste could do a specific profession only, and there was no choice for them to choose any profession other than what was assigned to them. This system was known as *Kuladharm* system, which means that each *kulam* (community) had a particular *dharma* (duty) to perform.

Kuladharm Implemented in Kerala Society: The Aryan invasion of Kerala made it a Brahmin-centered society with several castes and sub-castes under them, as mentioned above. The scholars and intellectuals among the new Brahmin settlers could influence the rulers, who accepted their superior intelligence and depth of knowledge, thereby granting them special privileges over all other communities. They (the ruling class) even allowed them (the Brahmins) to even interfere in the affairs of the State as advisors to conduct the administration of the State effectively and systematically.

According to the *Kuladharm* based *Jyathi* system, the Namboothiri Brahmins who were the royal priests and advisors of the ruling class, were on top of the ladder of social acceptability and respectability, as already indicated. To implement the *Kuladharm* system in Kerala, the Brahmins first of all won over the ruling class by awarding them the Kshatriya status, as there were no Kshatriyas in Kerala. Since the Brahmins were the intellectual class and learned scholars in the society, the rulers readily agreed to their proposal. The common laborers were incorporated into the system as Sudras. Thus, the three upper castes, the Namboothiri Brahmins (the priestly class), the Kshatriyas (ruling class), and the Sudras (the working class), were formed without any problem, but the *jyathy* of *vaisyas* (merchants and traders), who was absent in Kerala, could not be decided, as there was no trading community among the locals. Since the *vaisyas* were most essential to discharge their *kuladharm* to society, especially in the temples and the Namboothiri *illams* (houses), they could not be done away with, which means the *kuladharm* system would not be completed without the inclusion of the Vaisyas.

The Christians as Vaisyas: Since there was no trading community among the locals, it became inevitable for the Brahmins to choose the Vaisyas from the migrant communities of traders, that included the Jews, Arabs, and the Christians. Out of these, the best option was the Christians as the rest two groups were smaller in number which was not sufficient to take care of the need of the society. The Christians were not only comparatively a larger community, but they were also expert traders as well. So, the *Namboothiris* approached the Christian leaders to join the *Jyathi* system as the Vaisyas. Dr. Meledath Kurian Thomas says, "According to the *Kuladharm* the Namboothiri's duties were temple based, not merchandising or trading. But the Nasranis were traders, and so quite naturally when they became a part of the *Jathivyavastha* (conditions of casteism) they came under the Vaisyas."⁴

However, the Christians were reluctant to take up the status of Vaisyas as they thought it would hamper their faith in Christianity, their cherished religion. So, they declined the offer to start with. Since the *kuladharm* system was highly essential for the Namboothiris for their dominance in the society, they indulged in persuasion and even persecution to force the Christians to join the system. But the Christians preferred to flee from their settlements rather than joining a system which was stumbling block for them to exist as a unique religious group. This, of course, adversely affected the trade and thus the economy of society, especially the royal treasury. "Under the Namboothiri centred social system most of the agricultural land went into the control of temples, hence under the Namboothiris. The rulers had virtually no income from the land or agriculture. But in the case of trade and commerce the tax went directly into the royal treasury."⁵ Since the treasury was mostly dependent on trade and commerce for the taxes, the flight of the trading community adversely affected it. As the royal treasury had immensely benefitted by the Christian traders, the rulers had encouraged them lavishly assigning several privileges. "The Chera rulers were very much interested in the economic development of their kingdom and particularly in the development of Quilon harbour as a rival to Vizhinjam which had come into the possession of the Pandyas by the time. As the Christian community was in the forefront of all commercial activities the rulers granted them special privileges and concessions with a view to promoting trade through Quilon port."⁶ Finally, when the Christian traders were under threat from the dominant Namboothiri community and that they fled from their trading centres, the rulers came up with a compromising solution. The Namboothiris had no other option but to accept the compromise formula as the rulers were the backbone of the Namboothiri centered *Jyathi* system. According to the compromise formula the Christians accepted the trade name as Vaisyas and the Namboothiris allowed them to retain their Christianity. As for the Christians, even though they were not fully satisfied with the agreement, because they would get protection for their trade and they could continue to have a high status in the society while continuing with their Christianity, they agreed to the compromise formula.

The Social Status of the Christians as Vaisyas: Under the *kuladharm* system, the St. Thomas Christians enjoyed high social status. Their social position was next to that of the Brahmins. "When the Portuguese landed at Kozhikode, Christians in Malabar had already been spread over the whole land and were known as *Nasranis*. Their social status, according to the Portuguese accounts of the sixteenth century, was the same as that of the Brahmins."⁷

Another advantage of the system for the Christians was that their trade and commerce flourished as the *kuladharm* system created by the Brahmins was a protection for their trade as no other community was permitted to carry out any mercantile activities. But it also posed a threat to their traditional Christian beliefs and practices to some extent. They had to accept certain cultural traits of the Namboothiris such as *kudumi* (a tuft of hair kept at the back of the head), *kadukkan* (ear ornament), and the *poonool* (sacred thread), which were not advisable to Christianity. However, they willingly agreed to accept the purity concept of *theendal* and *thodeel* (unapproachability and untouchability) followed by the other forward castes, as it would boost their status in society, though it is totally unacceptable to Christianity. Z. M. Parret observes, "The Nasranis of Malabar, like the other higher castes, would

⁴ Thomas, Dr. Meledath. Kurian, Nasrani Samskaram Desheeyatha, (Nasrani Culture, Nationalism) Sahithya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, Kottayam, 2018, p. 108.

⁵ Thomas, Dr. Meledath Kurian, The way of St. Thomas, Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, Devalokam, Kottayam, October 2012, p. 26.

⁶ Menon, A Sreedhara, p. 64.

⁷ Cheriyan, C.V., Orthodox Christianity in India, A History of the Malankara Orthodox Church A.D. 52-2002, Academic Publishers, College Rd., Kottayam - 1, July 2003.8

not touch the lower castes. By chance if they touch, they will have to take bath.”⁸ Placid J Podippara observes, “Like the high caste Hindus, the Thomas Christians would not touch or go near those of the lower castes. In case they happened to do this, they would purify themselves by a bath. In public roads, the lower castes had to give way to them, and they had the right to kill anyone, who would deny them this mark of distinction.”⁹ The Christians had never greeted anyone below their rank, as it would be considered a humiliation for them.

Further Benefits:

They (the Christians) were granted permission to build *padippura* (a small house built outside the main housebuilding for the guests), a privilege enjoyed only by the Brahmins. Also, they were given seats along with kings and the nobles and were given the special privilege of sitting on the carpet, a privilege enjoyed by the emissaries of the king. Because of these privileges granted to the Christians, their metropolitans enjoyed a very honored position among all the communities.

Since the Christians were allowed to follow their own religion, the Namboothiris could not formulate rules and regulations over them as they had been doing over all other religions. So, the Christians eventually formed their own alternative system of management and administration for their religious and social activities. Their head, *Jathikku thalavan*, (the leader of the *iyathi*) who was later ordained as the *Arkkadiyakon* (archdeacon) under the East Syrian rite, became the virtual authority over the St. Thomas Christians. Since he monitored the activities of the local church as well as the social activities of the community, he has become a well-respected personality for the whole society.

St. Thomas Christians as Pollution Neutralizers: “For the high caste Hindus, the touch of a Thomas Christian was sufficient to purify articles defiled by the touch or near approach of the low caste people. Hence the non-Christian kings often made the Thomas Christian families live near their royal residence in order to profit by their service to purify defiled articles.”¹⁰

The forward castes would not touch anything that was handled by the low castes or untouchables, as they believe they would be polluted. However, they believed that if such items were touched by a Christian those items would become pollution free. For example, the polluted oil, jaggery etc. meant for the temples or palaces, when touched by a Christian, became purified. “There are traditions about the Hindu temples that had Nasrani families for them to start to serve oil (*thottu koduppu*) to the devotees before the temple priests carry on with the service.”¹¹ This is because, according to Dr. Meledath Kurian Thomas, that the Christian being a Vaisya, his trade is business. So, when he gives something, it is considered as selling, and since selling is his assigned trade, it is pure. However, “the Namboothiris have no objection in receiving from the sudras such commodities as coconut, sugarcane etc. as they are their own products. But the process of making copra out of coconuts after being dried and then crushed to get oil, and the process of boiling sugarcane and then making balls of jaggery out of it, are both part of trade. According to caste system, trading is the *kuladharm* of Vaisya. That is why they (oil and jaggery) are purified when touched by a Christian.”¹² Because of this, prominent Christian families were invited to live near the temples as well as palaces.

However, the general notion is that in Christianity since there was no caste barriers, the Christians could get anything from anybody and give anything to anybody. Even though they had observed untouchability and unapproachability to maintain their social status, they were beyond the caste barriers designed by the Brahmins. In this respect they became pollution neutralizers. Some of the forward castes even believed that the consequences of the impurity would fall upon the Nazranis, and they would be free from them. However, as for the Christians, since they did not believe in any of these rituals, they were least bothered about the consequences. On the other hand, they were quite happy to harvest the benefits of the ritual. This phenomenon (neutralization) paved the tradition of allowing Christian families with reputation to live near the temples or palaces. Such families are identified by the *Ooralans* (the caretakers of the temple properties), and in many cases the rulers themselves had invited them and granted them land for construction of houses near their palaces, besides granting other properties. Besides, this led to the monopoly for the Christians to trade these goods. They collected oil and jaggery from the farmers directly and sold them in the markets. It was vested with such Christians families who lived near the palaces and temples to purify by dipping the finger in the oil and jaggery for centuries together.

Conclusion:

Thus, we find that the Christianity in Kerala, founded by St. Thomas, one of the disciples of Jesus Christ, which had survived for centuries in its pure Apostolic tradition, spreading the gospel of universal love and brotherhood, gave way to corrupt practices such as *theendal* and *thodeel*, (unapproachability and untouchability), out of fear or selfish motives. It should be noted in this respect that the apostles and other pioneers of the Christian Faith had suffered brutal persecutions including death penalties for the sake of their cherished religion. The traits of several of those unchristian practices are visible in some of the Christian denominations even today.

Bibliography

⁸ Paret, Z. M., Malankara Nasranikal, Padaviyum Jyathicharithrangalum (The Nasranis of Malankara, Status and cast-based rituals), Printed at Aruna press, Kottayam, and published by Jacob Mathew Chemmarappally, Manganam, Kottayam, July 1966, p. 219.

⁹ Podippara, Placid J., The Thomas Christians, Society of St. Paul, St. Paulo Press, Bandra, Bombay - 50, 1970, p. 83.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 83.

¹¹ Thomas, Dr. Meledath. Kurian, Nasrani Samskaram Desheeyatha, p. 108.

¹² Ibid, p. 111.

Cheriyam, C.V., Orthodox Christianity in India, A History of the Malankara Orthodox Church A.D. 52-2002, Academic Publishers, College Rd., Kottayam - 1, July 2003.

Menon, A Sreedhara, Kerala History and its Makers, D.C. Books, Kottayam, January 2019, p. 40.

Paret, Z. M., Malankara Nasranikal, Padaviyum Jyathicharithrangalum (The Nasranis of Malankara, Status and cast-based rituals), Printed at Aruna press, Kottayam, and published by Jacob Mathew Chemmarappally, Manganam, Kottayam, July 1966, p. 219.

Podippara, Placid J., The Thomas Christians, Society of St. Paul, St. Paulo Press, Bandra, Bombay - 50, 1970, p. 83.

Thomas, Dr. Meledath Kurian, Nasrani Samskaram Desheeyatha, (Nasrani Culture, Nationalism) Sahithya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, Kottayam, 2018, p. 108.

Thomas, Dr. Meledath Kurian, The way of St. Thomas, Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, Devalokam, Kottayam, October 2012, p. 26.

Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia: കേരളത്തിലെ ജാതി സമ്പ്രദായം (Keralathile Jyathi Sampradayam [The Caste System of Kerala]), https://ml.wikipedia.org/wiki/കേരളത്തിലെ_ജാതി_സമ്പ്രദായം

Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia: Nambudiri, Britanica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nambudiri>