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GOSPEL ENCOUNTER WITH SUBALTERN INDIA  
INDIA EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH CHRISTIANS OF TRAVANCORE 1911–  
1956

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A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Historical Theology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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By  
Stanish Stanley  
May, 2016

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Rev. Dr. Timothy Dost      Reader

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To my father

I am following a [Confirmation] course covering approximately two years of instruction. I despair of ever being able to make some of them intelligent Lutheran Christians.

Rev. W. A. Luedtke, *Lutheran missionary Report about work in the Luthergiri area*, Trivandrum, 31 March, 1933.

Comes a little voice from the bed, merely a mat on the floor, “Weep not, Mother, but pray...Mother, Father, Brother, pray, because I am going to Jesus, of whom I learnt in school and church.”

Rev. Eric Knoernschild, *Seven year old boy's dying words quoted in Report of work in the Luthergiri area*, Trivandrum, 29 April, 1931.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CHI	Concordia Historical Institute
CSI	Church of South India
IELC	India Evangelical Lutheran Church
LCMS	Lutheran Church Missouri Synod
LMS	London Missionary Society
MELIM	Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission
NDC	Nagercoil District Conference
RSS	Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SNDP	Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana
TDC	Trivandrum District Conference
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

## CHRONOLOGY

Commissioning of first Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod missionaries Naether and Mohn for service in India	October 14, 1894
Arrival of Naether in Tuticorin	January 20, 1895
Beginning of work in Nagercoil, South India	1907
First visit of Arulanandam and Canchanam with other Subaltern leaders to invite Nagercoil Lutheran missionaries	1908
Missionary Nau takes over Sambavar congregations of Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puth-Kulangara (Chalaikonam) and beginning of work in Kuttichel-Kattakada, Trivandrum	December, 1911
Missionary Henry Nau moves from Nagercoil to Nandencode, Trivandrum (Malayalam field)	January, 1912
Ordination of Rev. G. Jesudason as first native pastor of the Lutheran mission in India	1921
Move into the Vedar field, Trivandrum	1923–1924
Move into the Ponvilla field, Trivandrum, among Nadars	1924
Move into the Shertalley-Allepey field among Malayalee Ezhavas	1927
Ordination of Rev. M. Paulose as first native Malayalam pastor of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum	1932
Move into the Malayalam Malabar field, among the hill tribes	1947
Formation of Ambur District Synod	1949
Outreach to the Mappila Muslims of Malabar	1950
Formation of the Nagercoil District Synod	1956
Formation of the Trivandrum District Synod	1956
Formation of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church	1958

## GLOSSARY

**Dalit:** people of India belonging to previously untouchable castes

**Ezhava:** caste of coconut climbers, formerly called “Chovan” and “Tiyan.”

**Jati:** endogamous community group

**Jemie:** landlords, mostly from the Nair caste.

**Kuravar:** a hilly tribe that were a slave community in Travancore

**Lutheran Church:** a protestant Christian denomination following the views of Dr. Martin Luther.

**Mission:** an organization of believers constituted for the purpose of spreading the Christian faith

**Nadar:** caste of palmyra climbers and land laborers. Formerly were called Shanars.

**Pey:** evil spirits

**Sambavar:** one of the slave castes of Travancore. They were formerly called Parayas, Paraiyars, Paraiyan, Pariah, Untouchable, Outcaste. Also called Panchama, Harijan and Scheduled caste.

**Shudra:** servant caste according to the four-fold Hindu caste system. However, they were the influential land-owning warrior caste of Travancore belonging to the Nair community.

**Subaltern:** those of inferior rank.

**Thullal:** act of exorcising spirits in a condition of spiritual ecstasy.

**Vedar:** one of the tribal slave communities in Travancore.

## ABSTRACT

Stanley, Stanish. “Gospel Encounter with Subaltern India: India Evangelical Lutheran Church Christians of Travancore 1911–1956.” Ph.D. diss., Concordia Seminary, 2016. 269 pp.

This work examines the role of religio-cultural resources in enabling the transformation of a broken community and people.

In the context of nineteenth and twentieth century British India, an oppressed community in India set out to explore the possibility of challenging and re-defining their own destiny. This oppressed section of Indians who lived in the margins of Indian caste defined society were considered socially and ritually polluting people and were subservient to various socio-economic and religio-cultural biases. The daily life routine of this oppressed community, called the Sambavars (Pariahs) of the Malayalam speaking princely State of Travancore in South India, involved a despair and inferiority instilling encounter against hegemonic and fearful social and religio-cultural forces. However, in the churning socio-political period of twentieth century British India, a group of Malayalee Sambavars driven by their own critical consciousness took the initiative of approaching and inviting Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod missionaries working among their Tamil speaking kinsmen in Nagercoil on the southern tip of India. The ensuing chain of events ultimately culminated in the formation of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church in the state of Kerala, along the southwestern coast of India.

By looking into the mission phase of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (called Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission [MELIM] at that time) through the lens of gospel-culture interaction, this dissertation attempts to unveil the mission story from the perspective of the oppressed people who initiated and formed the majority converts in the mission. This dissertation argues that the MELIM period saw an interesting cross-cultural interaction between the American Lutheran missionaries and the native converts. In the midst of enthusiasm, misunderstandings, disillusionment and suffering on both sides; the gospel was preached and the Lutheran Church established in the Malayalam lands. More importantly, this gospel-culture engagement triggered a latent native Lutheran theological reflection that resourcefully spoke to the concerns of native believers, providing them with hope and strength for a meaningful present and a blessed future.





## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

This research project is an attempt to investigate how religion becomes a source of transformation for oppressed communities in India. It is mainly concerned with how the Christian message and practice, its theological categories and value system, contributed to the emancipation of a marginalized group of people living in the southern part of India. Set within a historical context of socio-political change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this study seeks to analyze the gospel proclamation efforts of a Christianizing mission from America and its interactions with native converts who mainly came from the lowest strata of Indian society. Consequently, this study tries to document how the marginalized native converts re-imagine and re-configure their own life as a result of the gospel penetrating their community living, which is many times not fully understood and appreciated by the missionary and mission institutions.

#### **Christian Conversion and Concerned Indians**

Christianity in India, even though a minority religion with just 2.3 percent of the total 1.21 billion people, has been seen as a subversive, de-stabilizing and de-nationalizing agent by many.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Indian Christianity has been identified with colonial British rule and especially with

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<sup>1</sup> According to the census conducted in 2011, India with a population of 1.21 billion and a growth rate of 1.41% is supposed to overtake China as the most populous country in the world by 2025. According to the 2001 census information, the religious affiliation of the people in India is listed as: Hindus (80.5%); Muslims (13.4%); Christians (2.3%); Sikh (1.85%); Buddhists (0.8%); Jains (0.4%); others (0.7%) and unspecified (0.1%). See, "Demographics of India," Wikipedia, accessed October 21, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_India). Also, see "India Releases Latest Census Results, Showing Population Catching up to China," Population Reference Bureau, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2011/india-census-results.aspx>.

Western Christian mission<sup>2</sup> driven mass conversion movements from the “untouchable”<sup>3</sup> castes.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of fundamentalist Hindu<sup>5</sup> nationalism that attempts to define being “Indian” with being “Hindu,”<sup>6</sup> Christians in India are seen as vestiges of Western imperialism and colonialism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Christianity has survived in India at least from the fourth century after a group of Nestorian Christians led by Thomas of Cana from Syria settled in Kerala, India. At the same time, these Syrian Christians from Kerala on the south-west tip of India claim that their ancestors were converted by the Apostle Thomas who proclaimed the gospel to their people around AD 52. However, this Christian community remained “inward looking” and over time adapted to the socio-religious culture of Kerala, and thrived as one of the many caste groups in Hindu society. The arrival of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century, and later the Spanish, Dutch, French and British, brought Christianity with European and Western paradigms to the Indian shores. Since the European missions connected to European presence and later rule in India, actively sought converts from native Indians, in popular perception Christianity in India came to be seen as representing Western and European ideals and way of life. See Paul M. Collins, *Christian Inculturation in India* (England: Ashgate, 2007), 13–19. Also, see Robert Eric Frykenberg, ed., *Christians and Missionaries in India. Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500 with Special Reference to Caste, Conversion and Colonialism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 34–61.

<sup>3</sup> The “untouchable” castes were those groups of people who lived in the margins of Indian society mainly doing menial and manual labor within the village life system. They experienced systematic religious, social and economic oppression for millennia and during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many converted to Christianity. They have been called by different names: Dasu, Raksasa, Avarna (no-caste), Untouchable, Harijans, Protestant Hindus, Scheduled castes, Outcastes, Depressed classes, Exterior castes, Chandalas, Panchamas (fifth caste) and Dalits. See Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity. Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 18.

<sup>4</sup> The word “caste” is a Portuguese derivative from “casta” or “breed” for the Sanskrit equivalent term “jat” or “jati” meaning “birth” or “birth-group” or “birth-community.” See Frykenberg, *Christians and Missionaries*, 10. For some scholars like Frederick G. Bailey, caste is a peculiarly rigid and extreme form of social stratification that is exclusive, exhaustive and ranked, which are recruited by birth only and which co-operate but do not compete. For other scholars like Louis Dumont, Mary Douglas and Celestin Bouglé, the notions of “purity and pollution” constitute the foundations of the caste system in India, which addressed collective tendencies of “repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization,” or the desire to keep “pure” exclusive category, or to renegotiate one’s social status over against others. See Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity. Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London: Curzon, 1980), 2–3. Also, see Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation. Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 7–14.

<sup>5</sup> “Hindu” is a Persian variant of the Sanskrit word “Sindhu” meant to describe all people who lived in the vicinity and beyond the river Indus (Sindu, now in Pakistan). As the people of India came to be known as “Hindus” the outsiders assumed that they must have characteristics including religious ideas in common. However, it was only in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in comparing themselves with the Islamic intruders that the natives of the land started articulating themselves as Hindus to differentiate from the Muslim “others.” In due course, as a result of Indian interaction with missionary perception of India’s religious traditions and also Colonial British attempts to understand the native religions, the perception of Hindus belonging to a common religious framework called “Hinduism” seems to have developed. See Geoffrey A. Oddie, “Constructing Hinduism: The Impact of the Protestant missionary Movement on Hindu Self-Understanding,” in Frykenberg, *Christians and Missionaries*, 155–82. Also, see Brian Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indian, and the Colonial Construction of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> The intertwining of concepts such as “Indian” and “Hindu” finds its genesis in the national struggle for independence from colonial British rule. Today it has become an instrument in the hands of Hindu fundamentalist to denote every non-Hindu as the “other”. To understand the development of such an understanding, see Judith M. Brown “Who is an Indian? Dilemmas of National Identity at the End of the British Raj in India,” in *Missions, Nationalism and the End of Empire*, ed. Brian Stanley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 111–32. Furthermore, such

The resulting negativity towards Christian conversion attains hysterical proportions especially when Dalits<sup>8</sup> and Adivasis<sup>9</sup> are involved. Historically, both the Dalits and Adivasis, traditionally marginalized in the Hindu worldview and system of living, have been open to Christian conversion. However, Dalit converts who have survived centuries of slavery, oppression and exploitation under caste Hindu society; have also experienced discrimination and bias within the church because of the belief that they would serve as an impediment for the expansion of the gospel among the elite castes of India.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, given the fact that they were historically

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propaganda is executed through Hindu fundamentalist organizations like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), Bajrang Dal etc. All these organizations feed into its political wing—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu nationalist party that is presently ruling India since the May of 2014. The agenda of groups such as the RSS and BJP are rooted in the conviction that Brahmanical paradigms are superior. Accordingly, all those groups that do not adhere to the Brahmanical paradigm of Hinduism are slowly co-opted and indoctrinated to follow this ideological brand of Hinduism. In this, the primary agenda is to stop conversions from the margins of Indian society and to encourage the marginalized groups like the Dalits and Adivasis (tribals) to “come back” to Hinduism as it is the only true Indian faith. See Collins, *Christian Inculturation*, 18–19.

<sup>7</sup> Colonialism from the Latin “colonia” was a settlement of Roman citizens in hostile or newly conquered country. Like the Greek “apoika,” it is a settlement of people far from home, an independent and self-governing “polis” or city-state. In short, Colonialism denotes oppression by an “alien” or “foreign” force or rulers. Colonialism in its modern sense has become synonymous with coercion, domination, and exploitation especially of peoples everywhere by peoples and institutions of the West. Its meaning has been further expanded to imply oppressive acts of ruling elites upon a subjugated people. The term has today become more of a rhetorical device for labeling, demonizing and assigning collective guilt, especially within a South Asian (or Indian) context for all things British, American or European (or Western). In relation to Christianity, “colonialism” is articulated as a manifest form of oppression of the weak (East and South) by the strong (West and North). See Frykenberg, *Christians and Missionaries*, 4–8.

<sup>8</sup> “Dalit” from the Sanskrit root “dal” means burst, split, scattered, dispersed, broken, torn asunder, destroyed or crushed. The previously untouchable (slave) castes of India, have taken the collective name “Dalit” for themselves to express their collective experience as an oppressed and marginalized community and also to collectively fight for their rights. Around 160 million Dalits live a precarious existence at the bottom of India’s caste system, shunned by much of society. They are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and higher-caste groups that enjoy the State’s protection. Entire villages of Dalits in many Indian states are completely segregated by caste and this has come to denote the “hidden apartheid” in India. National legislations and constitutional protections only serve to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the “pollution line.” See Smita Narula, *Broken People: Caste Violence against India’s “Untouchables”* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), 1–2. Also, see James Massey, *Dalits in India. Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 15–16.

<sup>9</sup> Adivasis, “original dwellers,” are those who are people who have traditionally lived in the forest areas of India. During the mission period of the nineteenth and twentieth century, many Adivasis in the central and north-eastern parts of India converted to Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Given the tradition ascription of “pollution” to the Dalit communities and resulting derision towards them, the missionaries also strategically attempted to contain the enthusiasm of Dalit Christians to be seen on equal terms with higher caste natives. See George Oommen, “The Emerging Dalit Theology: A Historical Appraisal,” in *Preach*

denied education and access to knowledge; their conversion and ability to comprehend the “truths” of the Christian faith were also constantly under suspect. Thus traditionally, Dalit Christians have been perceived as “passive” recipients of the gospel who have been allured and coerced into converting to a non-Indian way of life.<sup>11</sup> This is a common perception about conversion from the margins of Indian society, held by both Hindus and higher-caste Christians in India.<sup>12</sup> This perception has in part also contributed to an uncritical acceptance in certain Indian church circles about the church being a product of strenuous Western missionary labor, which came into an alien Indian culture, established the church and laid down proper church theology and doctrine for believers to follow.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence, apart from playing into the

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*and Heal. A History of the Missionaries in India*, ed. Sandeep Sinha (Kolkata: Readers Service, 2008), 216–33. Also, see V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp: Biblical Studies in Dalit Perspective* (Madras: Gurukul, 1992), 37–38.

<sup>11</sup> A prominent criticism and propaganda from Hindu fundamentalist groups about Christian conversions especially during the Colonial period was that subaltern Dalit converts to Christianity were coaxed or coerced into the faith by use of force or granting of material benefits such as rice, food, money etc. The implied propaganda is that on establishing the Church, these Indians have been taught to adhere to Western thoughts, standards and way of life that is un-Indian in character which subsequently poses a grave challenge to the Hindu culture of India. Since this was the case, these groups need to be re-converted back to their “true” Hindu faith by using similar “benefit” strategies such as giving government reservations in jobs and education, or by active Hindu missionary re-conversion projects. In fact, several states in India (and especially those run by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party)—like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Arunachal Pradesh—have introduced legislation that prohibits or impedes religious conversion, and some of the laws stipulate harsher punishment if Dalits, tribals, female or a minor are converted. At the same time, mass reconversions by Hindu fundamentalist organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) are continuing even under these laws. Other examples of Hindu missionary organizations converting communities on the fringes of Hindu societies or reconverting from Christian and Muslim converts through “*Shuddi*” (purifying) or “*Ghar Vapasi*” (homecoming) ceremonies include the Arya Samaj formed in 1875. See Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke (eds.), *Religious Conversion in India. Modes, Motivations and Meanings* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 99–118. Also see, Thomas Schirrmacher, “When Indian Dalits convert to Christianity or Islam, they lose Social Welfare Benefits and Rights they are guaranteed under the Constitution,” in *International Institute for Religious Freedom Reports 2*, no. 6 (Bonn: March 2013), 1–10.

<sup>12</sup> Even Mahatma Gandhi, considered as the “Father of the Indian Nation,” argued that Dalits were incapable of taking a healthy decision for the betterment of their own life, and was against the evangelizing activities of the Christian missionaries. In one such instance, he called the Indian Bishop Vedanayagam Azariah and his conversion activities in South India as “anti-national.” Cited in Frykenberg, *Christians and Missionaries*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> LCMS missionary Luther Meinzen observes that the theology of pastors and congregation members in the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC) reflects the strengths and weaknesses of its missionaries who established the church. Also, he points out that in one sense the members of the IELC were the “objects” of mission as the missionaries had brought the gospel to them. See Luther W. Meinzen, *A Church in Mission: Identity and Purpose in India* (Vaniyambadi: IELC Concordia Press and Training Institute, 1981), 76–80.

hands of a negative portrayal of the church by Hindu right-wingers, such a perception of the church and its Christian community have contributed to a disregard of the role played by local converts in the calling and gathering of the Christian community in India.

### **Historiography and its Significance for the India Evangelical Lutheran Church**

A good example of the disregarded role of local converts in establishing the church in India can be found in the mission histories written thus far about the India Evangelical Lutheran Church<sup>14</sup> (IELC). This Lutheran Church body in South India came into administrative existence in 1958 as a result of the coming together of three South Indian districts where the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM)<sup>15</sup> undertook evangelizing activity. The three districts, namely—Tamil language speaking Ambur (started 1895) and Nagercoil (started 1907), and Malayalam language speaking Trivandrum (started 1911)—were formed into Synods (coming together of various congregations) before finally becoming a single entity under the administrative framework of IELC. Thus till 1956, the IELC was known by its mission name, namely—MELIM. In fact, a reading of the different mission histories written about this period provide adequate evidence about the efforts put in by the missionary in establishing MELIM among the people of the land. However, the problem with such an articulation of history as mentioned before is that, the converted believers are silent, leading one to interpret that they

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<sup>14</sup> The India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC) is a church body with presence mainly in South India. It claims to have a membership between 70,000 to 100,000 believers, and is concentrated mainly in the Malayalam and Tamil speaking parts of India. It has mission stations in the western Indian city of Mumbai among the Hindi and Marathi speaking people and also among the Kanada speaking people around Bangalore and the Kolar Gold fields. IELC also has congregations among some Telugu speaking people along the borders of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh on the south-eastern side of India.

<sup>15</sup> Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission was the evangelizing organization in India for the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) from America. The LCMS, a confessional Lutheran Church body in America, during the period under consideration for this research operated under the name—the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States. The LCMS has traditionally been defined by its conservative adherence to the doctrines of Lutheran theology.

were passive recipients of the gospel message who subscribed and adhered perfectly with missionary teaching and practice. Such renderings of mission histories have been criticized by historians and theologians for its one-sided view of gospel-culture engagement.<sup>16</sup> For instance, Ogbu Kalu writing from his context of African Christianity contends that “missionary historiography” is the histories of mission written by the missionaries and their protégés suffused with missionary ideology designed to tell the story of how a particular missionary or group crossed the cultural barrier with the gospel. According to him, histories written under this genre serve motives such as preserving records, boosting material and moral support, providing entertainment and building author’s ego, and carrying agendas like the White Man’s burden and manifest destiny.<sup>17</sup>

A brief survey of IELC mission history written till now also highlights the above mentioned problems. For instance, Elmer Griesse’s unpublished Master’s Thesis, *Lutheran India Missions* gives a historical survey of the fifty year work of MELIM missionaries in South India from 1895 up to World War II. He notes that the missionaries taught doctrine with typical German bluntness, worked doggedly at their arduous tasks, used ox-carts, bicycles and horses to reach places for routine preaching, undertook visitation of schools and members, and took the lead in the distribution of religious literature; while also pointing out that the MELIM native congregations grew even during times of decrease in missionary numbers due to the wars.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A frequent criticism of missionary historiography in India was been the fact that mission history has been written from the colonizer’s point of view by Europeans, who were visitors, missionaries, spectators, or supporters of Western hegemonic policies of colonial rule. One example is Stephen Neill, *The Cross over Asia* (London: The Canterbury Press, 1948) which is quoted in Jacob S. Dharmaraj, *Colonialism and Christian Mission: Postcolonial Reflections* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1993), 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ogbu Kalu contends that missionary ideology shared the scientific racism of the nineteenth century and explains missionary historiography as “often hagiographic, triumphalist and disdainful of indigenous non-European cultures.” See Ogbu U. Kalu, “Introduction: the Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography,” in *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 9, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Elmer Edward Griesse, “Lutheran India Missions” (Master’s Thesis, Washington University, 1945), 8–9,

However, the work of native converts is not the concern of his study and their contributions are visible only in the statistics that show growth in church membership. Likewise, other historical accounts of MELIM work, like Rev. D. Christudas' *Tranquebar to Travancore*; Rev. Herbert M. Zorn's *Much Cause for Joy and Some for Learning—A Report on 75 years of Mission in India*, and his Master's Thesis work *The Background and the First Twenty-Five years of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission, 1894–1919*; do not focus on the contributions made by native converts from South Travancore in establishing the Lutheran church in India. While Rev. Christudas's pressing concern is to capture the mission work of LCMS missionaries in the Travancore area by socio-historically tracing the varying factors behind Sambavar<sup>19</sup> conversion to Christianity and their intention in joining the Lutheran church; Herbert Zorn's two research projects engage the missionary work in MELIM as a whole and give an account of the different strategies used to spread the gospel—such as preaching, use of schools for teaching and sharing the gospel, literacy and theological learning, medical mission, Muslim outreach etc.<sup>20</sup>

Both Christudas and Zorn, while appreciating the work done by the missionaries also critically evaluate MELIM work and its resultant consequences for the Lutheran church. Christudas notes that the MELIM missionaries provided tireless and selfless services to uplift the oppressed Sambavar community from their hopeless situation through education mission, financial uplift, medical work, literary work, theological education; and were able to establish the IELC in 1958 in spite of caste conflicts, inadequate pastoral care, and “missionary bungalow”

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18–23, 34, 40.

<sup>19</sup> The untouchable slave caste in Travancore, who were also called “Pariahs,” “Parayas,” “Paraiyar,” “Adi-Dravidar,” “Scheduled Caste,” or “Dalit.”

<sup>20</sup> D. Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), xxxi. Also see Herbert M. Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy and Some for Learning. A Report on 75 Years of Mission in India* (Malappuram: A 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Publication of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission, 1970), 59–64.



centered dependence mentality of local converts.<sup>21</sup> However, attitudes of high-handedness and control on the part of the missionaries; the attitude of the mission and the converted Sambavars to social realities like “caste;” and inability to organize the church for self-support weakened the growth and mission of the Lutheran Christians in South Travancore.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Zorn too concludes that MELIM was founded on strict confessional principles, and that the missionaries alongside ever increasing native workers coupled with invitations from relatives of members of MELIM congregations continued the growth of the mission.<sup>23</sup> However it had to deal with the issue of “caste” especially while moving to the Trivandrum area and relations between missionaries and their Indian colleagues were paternalistic (though well-meant) and left a lot to be desired.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, he observes that

This study, admittedly, has a serious deficiency inherent in the nature of the case—and of the writer. It is written by one who has missionary experience in India. Of tremendous value would be a parallel study written by an Indian, preferably one who has grown up in the climate of the MELIM and the India Evangelical Lutheran Church. It is probably that many of the items considered important by the present writer would be of less import to him; an Indian’s interests would properly center in the Indian community and the pressures which moved them toward or away from the Gospel. Only an Indian would be able to interpret much of this thinking.<sup>25</sup>

Zorn’s appeal to hear the MELIM story from the Indian side has been taken up in a book written in the Malayalam language by Rev. Manuel Gomez, a pastor of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church in Trivandrum—*Oru Thullalpurayil Ninnu Oru Thudakum (A Beginning from an Occultist’s Shed)*. This book is an insider historical account of a believer who grew up in the environment of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum and who later served in its clergy. Based on

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<sup>21</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 63–86.

<sup>22</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, xxx–xxxii, 97–100.

<sup>23</sup> Herbert M. Zorn, “The Background and the First Twenty Five Years of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission: 1894–1919” (Master’s Thesis, Concordia Seminary St. Louis, 1969), 70–83, 102–4.

<sup>24</sup> Zorn, “The Background,” 115–18.

<sup>25</sup> Zorn, “The Background,” 118–19.

available published materials, personal diaries and oral memories of IELC converts, Rev. Gomez presents a socio-historical and political depiction, of how the “Sambavar Lutheran Mission” as it was known in its initial days among the people was firmly established in Travancore as the India Evangelical Lutheran Church. Attributing the initial Sambavar conversion of the exorcist “Madan”<sup>26</sup> to local initiative and evangelists, the book highlights the Sambavar invitation to the Lutheran missionaries in Nagercoil; the establishing of the church in Sambavar areas through the efforts of the missionary and Sambavar workers; the establishing of the church among other communities; the education and medical mission of the church; fight for Dalit rights within the Lutheran church and outside; a list of missionaries and the congregations established; and the constitution, administrators and problems in the IELC.<sup>27</sup> The book ends with the plea that the Lutheran church in Travancore should shed its destructive tendencies and fulfil its potential of providing hope to the suffering and marginalized. Even though the book tends to be a monologue, it does have the benefit of being an insider voice looking into the mission and church phase of the IELC. Nevertheless, this rendering of history does not look at the mission phase in terms of a gospel-culture encounter, and neither is there a focus on unveiling the “pressures” that led the converts into the IELC. Moreover, theological insights are not considered important for discussion in Rev. Gomez’s account.

As we have seen, these gaps still exist in the understanding of the IELC as a church body that needs to engage its larger context with insights that are relevant to its people, and which speaks to the context in which they are called to witness in India. In this regard, the observation of missionary Rev. H. M. Zorn is worth noting here, as he envisions the IELC of being a Church

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<sup>26</sup> After converting to Christianity, the exorcist Madan, who was an influential Sambavar leader around Kuttichel in Trivandrum, was baptized into the faith as “Markose” (Malayalam for “Mark”).

<sup>27</sup> Rev. Manuel Gomez, *Oru Thullalpurayil Ninnu Oru Thudakum. A Beginning from an Occultist’s Shed* (Kalparapotta: Calvary Lutheran Church, 2011), 59–308.

in mission that is firmly entrenched in the grace of forgiveness and of the word, ready to take the gospel to India with sound financial independence, fellowship with other churches, and with an Indian theology of its own.<sup>28</sup>

Indian theologians look for ways to express the Gospel more adequately in the Indian context. In the freedom of the Gospel, the Indian theologians will find ways in which Christ will speak to the heart of the Hindu who grew up on pantheistic religion and to the Muslim of strict monotheism. Mistakes will be made, cries of syncretism and false doctrine heard. But just as the early Christian theologians explained the Trinity and the deity of Jesus Christ in categories of Greek and Latin thought, so categories from Indian thought and philosophy will be used to communicate these and other central truths.<sup>29</sup>

Central to this above observation of Rev. Zorn is the acknowledgment that the gospel proclaimed to the believers of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church has to be expressed in relation to the unique Indian cultural context in which the gospel is proclaimed and received by the people. More importantly, the above statement at the very least assumes that the mission phase of the Lutheran mission did not see any theological reflection from the native converts who came into the mission. Such perceptions have been challenged in many recent studies about conversion especially in relation to the Christian missions in India during the British period.

### **Christianizing Missions and Reasons for Conversion in India**

As mentioned earlier, Christian conversions in India is a hot button topic that whip up emotions on different sides of the debate. Traditionally conversion to Christianity has been linked to associations with colonial modernity. For instance, Khoji Kawashima's *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858–1936* argues that during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, a self-declared Hindu State of Travancore, indirectly under British rule, changed itself into a modern state by actively seeking the help of Christian

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<sup>28</sup> Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy*, 59–64.

<sup>29</sup> Zorn, *Much Cause for Joy*, 64.

missionaries who had a completely different religious position from itself.<sup>30</sup> In this, the missionaries and the Travancore State maintained cordial and a mutually beneficial relationship as the state was modernized through improvements in education and medicine. However, as the missionaries turned to societal transformation, the cordial relationship came under severe strain and by the 1890s had become problematic as the missionaries raised questions about caste and oppressive social customs, supported inheritance rights for Christian converts, and opened schools to educate the lower castes. Even though the Travancore government saw these as missionary interference in societal living and not as consequences of the modernizing process, the relationship continued because the missionaries were valuable allies in bringing resources to meet the aspirations of the people and in also keeping low caste mission converts under control by influencing them to maintain obedience to the social, political and economic order of the state.<sup>31</sup> What Kawashima's study also reveals is that the opportunity to gain access to the "modernization" process was especially possible for marginalized communities in Hindu society because of the Christian missionary; as in the system prior to Christianity, access to resources of modernization was unthinkable. However, the modernization of natives has also been critically problematized by many scholars. For instance, Paul G. Hiebert evaluating the work of missionaries during the modern era observes:

Another positive side of this era was the affirmation of the unity of humanity it provided. In missionary circles there was no doubt that all humans are created in the image of God, are fallen and lost, and are in need of salvation and the opportunity to become followers of Jesus Christ. It was this deep conviction that drove missionaries to give their lives for the salvation of people they did not know. It was this that led them to build schools, hospitals, and agricultural training centers; to call for justice and moral rectitude; to strive to end infanticide, widow burning, and inter-tribal wars; and to identify with the poor and oppressed. Their interest in helping people stood in

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<sup>30</sup> Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State. Travancore 1858–1936* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 162–66.

sharp contrast to the colonial rulers who sought mainly to exploit people and the lands they occupied . . . On the negative side, the theory of cultural evolution affirmed Western arrogance, ethnocentrism, racism, and colonialism. It also led to a separation (even segregation) between missionaries (Westerners) and church leaders (natives). The result was the domination of young churches by Western influences and the inability of young churches to mature into full equals . . . many missionaries saw little good in the Other's culture on which the church could be built. Every aspect of traditional culture had to be destroyed so that Christianity could be built up according to Western understandings.<sup>32</sup>

There is no doubt that mission during the colonial period was built upon “modern” rational foundations of the enlightenment, which along with scientific and technological advances had put Western culture far ahead of other societies around the world. This confidence had rubbed off on the missionaries and there was a pervasive feeling that progress brought by Western Christian missions would prepare the nations for the reception of the gospel.<sup>33</sup> Accordingly, during this period the “advance of the gospel” was measured by counting tangible things such as the number of baptisms, confessions, and communicants, and the opening of new mission stations or outposts.<sup>34</sup> Believing in the assured victory of progress, there was widespread and practically unchallengeable confidence in the ability of Western Christians to offer a cure-all for the ills of the world and guarantee progress to all through the spread of the “gospel” or “knowledge.”<sup>35</sup>

The missionaries through modern institutions such as schools, hospitals and churches, disseminated their values and vision to society. However, one of the serious obstacles that they faced in this dissemination process was the fact that most of the people who flocked the missions were the “marginalized” who adhered to a pre-modern socio-religious context. The missionary

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<sup>32</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts. Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 84–85.

<sup>33</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 291–98.

<sup>34</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 332.

<sup>35</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 342–43.

armed with a modern worldview could not sufficiently deal with this situation:

The missions exported the Enlightenment split between supernatural and natural realities to other parts of the world and the missionaries for the most part denied the native's animistic<sup>36</sup> belief in spirit possession, witchcraft, divination and magic, and assumed that Christianity would automatically displace it . . . as a result many of these old beliefs went underground for lack of proper Christian solutions and they are resurfacing around the world in younger churches leading to varieties of syncretism and split-level Christianity that looks to theology for ultimate salvation and to traditional beliefs to solve the everyday problems of life.<sup>37</sup>

Heibert's criticism gives credence to the fact that the Christian gospel was explained in modern terms of propositional truths that was alien to those converts seeped in a pre-modern culture.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it did serve an important purpose of preparing converts enter into a modern era of living. However, by sweeping under the carpet various issues, such as the presence of "evil spirits" and its influences on people's lives; the missionaries did not seriously address the pre-modern religiosity of their subaltern converts and chose to dismiss it as "Hindu superstition and devilish practice."

Recent studies in religious conversion have rightly turned to understanding the socio-economic and religio-cultural context of the people and have highlighted the underlying concerns and aspirations of people converting to particular religious faiths. In fact, understanding the motivations of communities or individuals for their conversion to Christianity opens the window into acknowledging the meanings that the converts drew from their conversion process. For instance, the importance of sociological concerns in analyzing conversion in India and its

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<sup>36</sup> Animism is a belief that the world is full of spirits, witchcraft and magical powers. See, Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 83.

<sup>37</sup> Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 83–84.

<sup>38</sup> In popular Hinduism especially among Dalits and Adivasis, illness, untimely death, infertility, strife in the family, failure in professional career, material deprivation etc. are attributed to evil spirits. To safeguard one from its harmful effects the people depend on an exorcist who through "mantras" compels such spirits to leave. Michael Bergunder's study of Pentecostalism in South India points to its contextual approximations with elements of Hindu and Indian Christian popular spirituality. See, Michael Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 121–90.

resultant conversation with theological perspectives can be seen in *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations and Meanings* edited by Sathianathan Clarke and Rowena Robinson.<sup>39</sup>

In these essays, Clarke argues that speaking of ideas of God also involves a re-turning to notions about the world and human beings, and proposes that,

Religious conversion then entails dealing with three interlocking and interdependent dominant symbols: God, world and human beings; and their various inter-relationships are reconstituted in a manner that is optimally acceptable to the converts themselves. . . Thus, while religious conversion may start with a compelling vision of God in some contexts, it may also emanate from a more attractive notion of the world or human beings in other situations.<sup>40</sup>

Taking the interplay of the dominant symbols in religious conversion, namely—God, world and human beings—the book captures the various conversion movements that have taken place in India among the Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. The articles found in the book display how the Indian social reality of “caste” identities, and especially the desire of lower caste Dalits and tribal Adivasis to enter a new way of life in contrast to their present life situation, have contributed to the story of conversion. Modes such as individual conversion, mass conversion, coercion and co-option, or resistance, dissent and rebellion, were ways in which depending upon the context the individual or community would convert.<sup>41</sup> For instance, “Sanskritization” was a strategy by which certain castes and tribes low in the ritual hierarchy could improve their status by emulating the rituals, values and practices of the higher castes.<sup>42</sup> Another strategy Clarke notes is that of social mobilization of various Dalit castes in the conversion process through a “conscious” and “collective” mobilization actively initiated by the converts themselves who were in the search of a different symbolic world vision within the

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<sup>39</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 1–2.

<sup>40</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 3, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 5–18.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 10.

larger Hindu framework. As a result of their search, conversion to Christianity was a conscious choice for a more inclusive symbolic worldview, in contrast to their imagined and geographical designation as peripheral entities within the previous Temple-centered caste community devoid of economic, civil, legal and political rights.<sup>43</sup> Importantly, the articles demonstrate that Religion in its integrative propensity offers to its adherents an orientation of meaning and framework for collective living; while in its subversive inclination offers them a framework for resistance.<sup>44</sup>

Robinson and Clarke's edited essays point to the fact that in the history of conversions in India the converts were actively engaged in the conversion process and that they were not passive recipients who dumbly duplicated imposed values. Likewise, in instances of Christian conversions, many of the converts who came from marginalized societies had their own issues which they addressed through the dialogical exchange between the missionary who brought the gospel message and the culture/community in which they were placed. Undoubtedly, their theological understanding was shaped by the message that came through the missionary, but it was also shaped by their own socio-cultural location, context and struggles.

One such ethnographic study of an Indian Christian Dalit community can be found in Chad Bauman's *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947*. Bauman points out that the conversion of Satnami<sup>45</sup> Dalits into Christianity entailed a dynamic exchange wherein the locals evaluated and selectively assimilated Western missionary notions of the Christian message and formed their own Satnami Christian identity.<sup>46</sup> Through an interdisciplinary work informed

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<sup>43</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 332–37.

<sup>44</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 289.

<sup>45</sup> Satnami people were members of the untouchable “Chamar” caste who following the teachings of their Guru Ghasidas in the early nineteenth century avoided eating meat, rejected the use of Brahman priests, abandoned the worship of images and devoted themselves to the one and only deity “Satnam” (meaning True Name). See Chad M. Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868–1947* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 6, 15–20.



by the methodologies in the study of religion, history and anthropology, Bauman focuses upon the experiences and beliefs of Chhattisgarhis<sup>47</sup> and argues that, the transformations brought into the Satnami-Christian community that came into being as a result of the Evangelical and American “Disciples of Christ” mission effort was, “conditioned in appreciable and significant ways by pre-existing Satnami structures of thought, belief, and behavior, by the community’s unique set of hopes and dreams, its methods of determining ‘truth’ and ‘falsity,’ its ‘history’ and ‘tradition.’”<sup>48</sup>

Also Christianity was not “imposed” upon the Satnamis by external factors but was adopted by them as one of the possible strategies for the resolution of dissonance between the world as imagined and the world as experienced.<sup>49</sup> Bauman notes that while social circumstances caused by forces beyond their control did contribute to the conversion of some Satnamis to Christianity, the Satnami converts actively searched for ways to alter, domesticate and control them. In addition, the Chhattisgarhis embraced Christianity because it embodied a compelling vision of the “good life” that involved both indigenous values and values imported by missionaries.<sup>50</sup> In fact, this was not the embrace of a new cosmology or theological dogma as much as it was the acceptance of a new social ideal and a new identity. Therefore, Bauman asserts that the Satnami encounter with evangelical Christians in the late colonial period involved a cultural transaction where they did not simply duplicate the values and behaviors of evangelical missionaries; rather in their transformation they altered, metabolized, and indigenized the religion and culture introduced by the American missionaries while appropriating them for their

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<sup>47</sup> Chhattisgarh is the state in Central India where Bauman’s study is situated. It was formed as a state of the Indian Union in November 2000. Chattisgarh has a significant Dalit and Adivasi (Tribal) population.

<sup>48</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 96.

<sup>50</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 17.

own use.<sup>51</sup> From this Bauman's study concludes:

[N]o religion can simply move from one cultural context to another without being affected by the culture of the new context. Transplantation is therefore an inadequate metaphor for what happens in such a case, unless one keeps in mind that a transplanted organism will be considerably altered by the constitution of the soil and the climate into which it is transplanted.<sup>52</sup>

Bauman's observations validate the fact that mission work in India has been a complex interaction between gospel and the engaged culture. In this all the major players have been challenged. The missionaries as the bearer of the "Gospel" had to many times change their approach and strategy depending upon the context they were engaging, while the engaged "culture" was challenged and transformed through the modernizing influence of the mission. However, what Bauman's study reveals is that this modernizing influence has to be seen in terms of the ability of the local converts to actively appropriate such changes from their own socio-cultural location. The indigenizing of the gospel message and values was not a blind duplication of Western Christian notions rather they were co-opted and internalized by the native converts along similar patterns that included a re-configuration of their existence in dialogue with their own tradition, the missionary teaching, and the dominant traditions of their Hindu neighbors.

Accordingly, the author of this study believes that an effort should be made at uncovering the native agency and appropriation of the gospel message by the natives into the local culture when establishing the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC). For this reason, I move away from a "missionary historiographical" approach which was written with either home boards or supportive western audience in mind; and approach the mission phase of the IELC work in the Malayalam speaking lands through the lens of gospel-culture<sup>53</sup> encounter, with the aim of a better

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<sup>51</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 18–19, 227.

<sup>52</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 243.

<sup>53</sup> In Richard Niebuhr's book on Christ and Culture, he puts forth five positions through which the imperfect

evaluative and mutually appreciative account. Hence, this study acknowledges the necessity pointed out by Rev. Zorn for MELIM to bring forth the voices of Indian Christians who were converted to the Lutheran faith in Trivandrum during the MELIM mission phase of 1911–1956. It should be mentioned here that the Lutheran mission, initially through invitation and focus, concentrated among the slave castes of Travancore, and subsequently it ventured to gather converts from various other castes and communities in Travancore. Undoubtedly, everyone joining the Lutheran mission either individually or community-wise, had their own reasons and pressures. However, to investigate the intentions of different communities joining the Lutheran Mission in Trivandrum would be difficult within the scope of this dissertation and therefore is not the objective of this research. The concern then is primarily with unveiling the “pressures” that brought the subalterns into the Lutheran Church, and to document their gospel response.

### **Methodology**

This research of the MELIM work among Malayalam speaking Sambavars in South Travancore seen through the lens of gospel-culture interaction will be based upon an interdisciplinary study informed by both theological and historical discussions. The “Gospel” here is seen as the message of Jesus Christ brought by the American missionary who was convinced and strongly influenced by his Confessional Lutheran background. I approach “culture” from the understanding of Clifford Geertz, who outlined culture as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop

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man-made culture engages the perfect sinless Christ whose totality cannot be fully captured (because our definitions of Jesus are culturally conditioned). Accordingly, he posits: (1) Christ against culture—where separation of the world and faith is maintained and the sole authority of Christ over culture is affirmed; (2) Christ of Culture—where aspects of culture most like Jesus are appreciated, and Christ’s teachings that are in sync with the culture are put into practice; (3) Christ above culture—Christ is a part of culture yet is outside culture; (4) Christ and Culture in paradox—where in the dealing of Christ with culture there is both sin and grace; and (5) Christ transforms culture—God works through human creativity to redeem sinful creation in Christ. See, Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).

their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”<sup>54</sup> In continuation, Geertz understands religion to be a “cultural” system where religion is (1) a dynamic, diverse and contested system of symbols which acts to (2) condition a person’s experience of the world by (3) placing that experience within a larger, more consequential and ostensibly unalterable framework of meaning (a worldview), while at the same time (4) rendering the framework of meaning believable and persuasive by (5) invoking the very same conditioned experience of the world as evidence of its appropriateness.<sup>55</sup>

The Travancore area where MELIM work took place is now divided into two synods of the IELC, namely, the Malayalam language speaking “Trivandrum Synod” and the Tamil language speaking “Nagercoil Synod.” Since the history of IELC formation is a large one, for the purposes of this investigation I will focus upon the cross-cultural gospel encounter that took place in the Malayalam speaking Trivandrum synod of the IELC from 1911 till the formation of the synod in 1956. Also, the study will primarily focus upon the interaction of the Lutheran mission with the Dalit Sambavar community who initiated the mission’s entry into the Malayalam speaking area of Travancore by visiting and inviting the Lutheran missionaries in Nagercoil around the year 1909 to come and work among them. Accordingly, this research is investigated through the perspective of the “subaltern,” because the Sambavars as a Dalit group lived in the margins of Hindu caste society shunned by dominant castes and overburdened with socio-economic and religio-cultural disabilities.

I will discuss the category of “subaltern” later in this study, but at this point the term “subaltern” used by the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci stands for a person of “inferior rank” who lives a subordinated life experiencing exploitation under powerful socio-

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<sup>54</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

<sup>55</sup> See Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 7–8.

economic, religious and political forces.<sup>56</sup> In India, the Dalits, the Tribals, the Adivasis, the backward classes, women and children, and endless varieties of workers who are involved in cheap and bonded labor, make up the subalterns of society.<sup>57</sup> Especially in the early twentieth century, where this research investigation is placed, the Dalits were oppressed in all aspects of their life. The Sambavar community was one among the many Dalit castes in Travancore who lived as a slave caste. Till 1855 according to the rule in Travancore, they could be bought and sold as cattle and were attached to some local landlord or to the government.<sup>58</sup> Even though this inhuman practice of bonded slavery was banned by the Travancore government proclamation of 1855, for all practical purposes the Sambavars were under the yoke of the effects of a social, religious and cultural system that subjugated their existence in all aspects of their life.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, from this environment of subalternity the story of Sambavar conversion to Christianity needs to be viewed, and this dissertation seeks to interpret their gathering into the Body of Christ through the eyes of their subaltern experience.

Here it is to be noted that the subaltern Sambavars were not the most educated lot in Travancore, because education was banned for them according to rules of caste Hindu society and even in the early twentieth century there were very few Sambavars getting education in the government schools.<sup>60</sup> For this reason, there are very few writings from their side about their own experience as a community accepting the Christian faith. This means that in most cases we have to depend upon the writings of missionaries to gather a picture of what this community coming

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<sup>56</sup> Gnana Patrick, "Subaltern Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics: Multicultural Perspectives*, ed. E. P. Mathew, (Chennai: Satya Nilayam, 2009), 246–48.

<sup>57</sup> Patrick, "Subaltern Hermeneutics," 250.

<sup>58</sup> Kakkaraveetil. K. Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore* (Kerala Historical Society, 1973), 53, 112–13.

<sup>59</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 55–57, 153–55.

<sup>60</sup> There were almost no children of the Parayas (Sambavars) and the Pulayas (Cherumars) in the government schools of Travancore at least until 1909. See Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 108.

into the Christian faith experienced as their main concerns and challenges in approaching and seeking help from the Lutheran missionaries. No doubt missionary writings are full of their own struggles, sacrifices and challenges, in proclaiming the gospel and building the community of Christ in an alien Indian culture. At the same time it should be borne in mind that it was mostly the Christian missionaries who, driven by their calling to share the gospel of Christ, lived among the marginalized of Indian society, provided basic services of human care, and interacted and wrote about their experiences with them. As such their writings about the subalterns of India offer an important resource that can reveal the needs and aspirations of the marginalized people of India. However, as John Webster points out, accessing missionary writings brings with it at least two serious problems that affect the conclusion reached: (1) the study of Christian-Dalit cultural interactions will of necessity be filtered through missionary perceptions that were themselves part of the interaction; and (2) there would be gaps at key points leading to resorting of circumstantial evidence because the missionaries who produced the sources available for study many times do not provide direct evidence of the cultural interaction in which they and their “native agents” were involved.<sup>61</sup> Also, with particular reference to missionary materials accessed for this study, the problem of “naming” of the native converts involved in the cultural interaction with the missionary is also a lack that poses issues for this study. Nevertheless, even with these above mentioned issues, a closer look at the missionary sources provide the best available opportunity to understand missionary interaction with the subaltern converts during the mission period of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church that can significantly reveal voices of subaltern Sambavars speaking of their own concerns, aspirations and beliefs in the Christian

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<sup>61</sup> See John B. Webster, “Dalits and Christianity in Colonial Punjab: Cultural Interactions” in *Christians, Cultural Interactions, and India’s Religious Traditions*, eds. Judith M. Brown and Robert E. Frykenberg (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 93. Also, issues concerning use of missionary records for general history of events in modern India, see Frykenberg, *Christians and Missionaries*, 8.

message that was being brought to them through the Lutheran missionaries.

Accordingly, sources for research consist of missionary writings like—books, articles, letters, reports, diaries etc.—that portray the work of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum. The Concordia Historical Institute Archives at St. Louis, USA, houses much of the correspondence between the MELIM missionaries in Trivandrum and their LCMS Home Board in the United States through the period 1911–1956. These documents contain a wealth of information on how the MELIM missionaries viewed their role as proclaimers of the gospel in an alien culture much different from their very own. Also, their observations provide a picture of their perception of the culture to which they were carrying the gospel message. Since the research method would consist of reading the missionary documents with an ear to hear the voices of the subalterns, such reports of the missionaries will be investigated to highlight the Sambavars trying to speak of their own concerns and perspectives on how the gospel was perceived in their own life situation. Looking into the materials with such sharp focus will reveal that the subalterns do speak in the missionary writings about them, and it takes careful listening to hear the whispers beneath the din of western voices that framed, filtered, and interpreted them.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to the original writings of the missionaries from the Trivandrum field, published materials like books, journals, articles, meeting reports, and missionary Conference reports will be surveyed. Further, from the local side any available resource such as personal writings of believers or mission workers, materials such as songs written by subaltern converts, their personal diaries, sermons, articles etc. will be accessed. Reminiscence of the mission phase from on-field interview will also be used to engage available source materials. Use of oral histories and interviews do bring problems along with it. Issues such as contradictory versions of “what

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<sup>62</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 23.

really happened” need to be understood from the perspective that convert testimonials tend to become refined, embellished, and stylized over time.<sup>63</sup> This problem can be best addressed by cross-checking oral memories with other personal accounts and written documents available for the mentioned time period. Further, it should be pointed here that as pointed out by John Webster, articulations of faith expressed through songs serve as the best native resource available to help us enter into the psycho-social world of the subaltern converts to Christianity.<sup>64</sup> This is also because; poets play an important role in capturing the soul of a community by employing those symbols and metaphors which give the best expression to the experience of a community.<sup>65</sup> As Stanley Fish reminds us in his “reader-response” hermeneutics—meaning exists within the reader and the author of the text is not an independent agent rather represents the interpretive community of which he/she is a part, wherein the interpretive communities produce meanings and constitute the properties of the text.<sup>66</sup>

### Chapter Outlines

As mentioned before in this introduction, this study examines the work of the Lutheran mission among the subalterns of South Travancore, especially to the Sambavars, and the resulting “gospel-culture” encounter between the American Lutheran missionary and the subaltern Sambavar Lutheran convert. It seeks to explicate the “pressures” that brought the subaltern Sambavars into the Lutheran mission and also the over-riding concerns and objectives

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion*, 23.

<sup>64</sup> John C. B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2009), 265.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 18–19.

<sup>66</sup> Stanley Fish observes that “an interpretive community” is not objective because as a bundle of interests, of particular purposes and goals, its perspective is interested rather than neutral; but by the very same reasoning, the meanings and texts produced by an interpretive community are not subjective because they do not proceed from an isolated individual but from a public and conventional point of view. See, Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in This Class. The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13–14, 158.



of the missionary. Therefore this study pays attention to the subaltern culture in which the gospel message was proclaimed, the engagement between the missionary and the subaltern converts, and the faith articulations of the Sambavars.

In chapter two, I introduce the context of the socio-economic and religio-cultural life of the Sambavars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Through this chapter, I exhibit the various disabilities and struggles that the Sambavars as a “slave community” faced in the hegemonic Hindu setting of the early twentieth century. In addition, this chapter will also provide the background for Sambavar religiosity and also point out their challenges, struggles, and over-riding concerns that contributed to their desire to seek emancipation and a new life in Christ.

Chapter three traces the historical beginnings of the MELIM mission in Trivandrum and provides a brief picture of how the mission work proceeded to finally establish the Lutheran church in the Malayalam lands in the year 1956. In this chapter, the initiative of Sambavar leaders to invite the MELIM missionaries and also to work alongside them and the locals of other communities, for the establishment of the Church is highlighted. Missionary strategy to expand Lutheran work in the Malayalam areas and special features of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum will also form part of this chapter.

In chapter four, I analyze MELIM work in the Malayalam lands. A central focus in this chapter is to point out the differing goals, emphases and concerns of both the missionaries and also the native Sambavar converts. This chapter will argue that these aspects did not always converge, and there were moments of awe, gratefulness, contestation, resistance, and assertion from the subaltern side towards their new benevolent patron—the missionary. This chapter will emphasize the cross-cultural aspect of this research.

Chapter five takes a look into the theological adaptation/appropriation taking place among the subaltern Sambavar converts who ground the Lutheran faith in their own life situation. Based on an analysis of the songs written by Lutheran Sambavar pastors, catechists and poets, the contextualization and locating of the gospel message in native village life and “lived reality” of the people will be demonstrated. This chapter exhibits how the subaltern internalized the gospel message by re-imagining their place in the real and spiritual world by bringing Lutheran theological resources to dialogue with their experiences and concerns of real life.

In chapter six, I draw general conclusions from this study of the Malayalee Sambavar conversion to the Lutheran Christian faith in South Travancore. The study exhibits the significance of history for the Sambavars in MELIM as it encourages the construction of their subaltern subject-hood and places responsibility upon them to carry forward the vision of their forefathers. In addition, the study reveals subaltern ability to speak within the dominant discourse, by employing theological resources to imagine a new “life and hope-instilling” socio-religious vision that helps them negotiate and live in the dismal present while providing optimism for the future. The subalterns of MELIM also display their active agency in not only seeking socio-economic emancipation by seeking an alliance with the missionary, but also actively re-constructing their social being by personalizing the gospel message in their “lived reality.”

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE LIFE OF SUBALTERN MALAYALEE SAMBAVARS OF SOUTH TRAVANCORE IN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the Christianizing mission of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod<sup>1</sup> in the alien culture of Travancore, South India, one needs to first understand the context of the land and its people to whom the Christian missionaries proclaimed the gospel. Accordingly, in this chapter we will look at the larger context of Travancore life and culture in which the gospel was preached by American Lutheran missionaries resulting in the establishment of the Lutheran Church in Kerala<sup>2</sup>. By the nineteenth and twentieth century, the princely State of Travancore<sup>3</sup> was indirectly under the rule of the British—the foreign rulers who were ruling directly over a major part of India. The Sambavar<sup>4</sup> community to whom the gospel

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<sup>1</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) is a conservative Confessional Lutheran church body in the United States of America. During the period of its mission work in India (1895–1956), the LCMS was known under its previous name the “Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States.” Also, during this time the mission organization arm of the LCMS in India through which the gospel was proclaimed was called the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM).

<sup>2</sup> Kerala is presently a state in the country of India that was organized into the Indian Union along linguistic and cultural lines. In the twentieth century, the present day state of Kerala in South India was divided into mainly three administrative units by the British. The southern princely State of Travancore, the central portion of Cochin politically controlled by the British, and the northern part of Malabar directly under the British Madras State since 1800, made up the larger Malayalam speaking Kerala country. See A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1967), 315, 344, 366.

<sup>3</sup> Travancore State in the southern part of India was one of the larger of India’s many princely states ruled by a Hindu Maharaja but indirectly ruled by the British. He legitimized his rule by defining himself as ruling on behalf of the deity Sri Padmanabha who was the real ruler of the State. Sri Padmanabha was understood as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The State of Travancore was made up of Malayalam speaking and Tamil speaking people and in 1956 the Malayalam speaking part was included into the larger Malayalam speaking state of Kerala. See, Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 4–5

<sup>4</sup> The Sambavars were also called “paraiyan,” “paraiyars,” “parayas,” “pariah,” “avarna,” “chandala,” “panchama,” “untouchable,” “depressed classes,” “harijan,” “Adi-Dravida,” and “scheduled castes” in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The Paraiyans used these nomenclatures to articulate their political and social standing. In the later part of the twentieth century, the term “Dalit” has been used by Sambavars and other ex-untouchable communities (jatis) to collectively refer to themselves and their oppressed experience. The term Dalit is today a well-established scholarly usage for previously oppressed communities. In colonial India, names of specific

was first taken by the Lutheran mission in Travancore was a subaltern community living in the midst of people belonging to different castes and religions. For this reason, the socio-economic and religio-cultural mosaic of Travancore and especially of the Malayalam<sup>5</sup> language speaking Sambavars needs to be highlighted in order to fully appreciate the Christianizing work done among this target group by the Lutheran missionaries. Accordingly, in this chapter we look into the life context of the Sambavars in South Travancore (where this study is located) within the larger socio-political and religio-cultural setting of early twentieth century Travancore, to understand their life and culture as subalterns of the land. It is against this backdrop that we would be able to envisage possible reasons for their openness to the gospel message preached by the American Lutheran missionaries.

### **The Subalterns**

In this study, the Malayalam speaking Sambavars of South Travancore, who were primary targets of the Lutheran mission, are seen through the lens of “subalternity.” The term “subaltern” was used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci while addressing the non-capitalist, non-bourgeoisie subordinate classes or groups—the proletariat, peasants, lumpen masses etc.—that were “non-Hegemonic” in nature prior to the stage of emergence of their critical consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Gramsci argued that in the field of Marxist analysis and given its economic reductionism, a lot

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jatis (communities) like “Pariah” were used to both refer to the collective problems of untouchables and also specific problems faced by the particular untouchable community. See Rupa Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem. Caste, Religion, and the Social in Modern India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 20–22. Also see Raj Sekhar Basu, *Nandanar’s Children. The Paraiyans’ Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850–1956* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2011), xx, liii.

<sup>5</sup> The origin of the Malayalam language, the last of the four Dravidian languages—Tamil, Kannada and Telugu being the others, is traced to the ninth century AD when primitive Tamil spoken in the land came under the influence of Sanskrit and Prakrit, and consequently had a literature of its own. See Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 395. Also see, V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual* (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), 2:421–24.

<sup>6</sup> Gnana Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency. A Case-Study of Ayya Vali. A Subaltern Religious Phenomenon in South Tiruvitankur* (Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2003), 5.

more analysis had to be undertaken in the field of culture and consciousness as part of human agency's desire to aid class struggle and socialist transformation. According to him, a subaltern person had two theoretical consciousnesses or one contradictory consciousness. The two consciousnesses are: the critical conscious—"one which is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and the imposed consciousness—one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed."<sup>7</sup> The presence of these two consciousnesses in the subaltern results in his/her exhibiting a "contradictory consciousness" that needs to be addressed, so that his/her critical consciousness can be aroused and engaged in the task of societal transformation. This is the case with the subalterns because they are primarily subjects who have historically experienced socio-cultural subordination along with economic exploitation; but who at the same time are capable of active agency in resisting and asserting their own distinct identities.<sup>8</sup>

More significantly, the study of subalterns as people who have experienced various aspects of subordination, exploitation and oppression, has also contributed to the understanding of the religion and culture of the subaltern masses. Various studies emanating from an investigation of the subalterns has contributed to understanding subaltern religion or religiosity. For instance, Felix Wilfred explains subaltern religiosity as a religious experience and its expression "deriving from a condition of being marginalized" or "being subjugated, and dominated," that includes folk religious features such as belief in "the world of spirits" and the "emergence of gods and

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<sup>7</sup> David Forgacs, ed., *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916–1935* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988), 333.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 6–7, 13.

goddesses from the context of life” during the actual performance of religious worship.<sup>9</sup> Another important scholar in this field, Sathianathan Clarke understands subaltern religion as the (1) “site of contestation in which the subaltern communities reconfigure their own subjectivity, (2) as characterized by the interweaving of at least the following factors: copious, though judicious, borrowing from the dominant religious tradition; calculating, though provisional, piecing together of all available symbolic resources; and creative, though alternate-mode, imagining of their own collective religious experiences.”<sup>10</sup> Thus in understanding subaltern religion, Felix Wilfred characterizes subaltern religiosity as grounded in the dimension of contradictory consciousness; while Clarke emphasizes the active dimension of subaltern agency that constructs a subjecthood through contestation, appropriation etc.<sup>11</sup> Both these aspects are important for our understanding of the subalterns and their religiosity, because as Gnana Patrick contends, the subaltern religious phenomenon can be understood as (a) emerging out of a subordinated condition of a group of people, (b) characterized by contradictory consciousness and (c) serving as active agency in constructing subjecthood for a people.<sup>12</sup> This understanding of the subalterns and their religiosity is important as we analyze the life of the Malayalam speaking Sambavars of South Travancore who as a subaltern community lived in an atmosphere of oppression, exploitation, and fear for centuries well into the twentieth century.

### **The Location and Geographical Features of South Travancore**

Travancore, an abbreviated English form of the once capital of the kingdom—“Tiruvithan-Kodu”—, has been known with many names like “Venad,” “Vanchidesam,” “Thiru Adi

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<sup>9</sup> Felix Wilfred, “Subaltern Religious Experience,” *Journal of Dharma* 27, no. 1, (1998): 58–59.

<sup>10</sup> Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 126–27.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 8.

Desam”, “Mala Nadu”, “Malayalam”, “Parasurama-Kshetram”, “Karma-bhumi”, “Cheram”, “Keralam”, “Malavaram” and “Malabar.”<sup>13</sup> During the Sangam age (the first five centuries of the Christian era), the area under consideration for this study—present Trivandrum District—and parts of its neighboring Quilon District constituted Venad (land of the Vels[chieftains]). Over the course of time, the map of Travancore underwent various changes connected to its political rule. By the early twentieth century the princely State of Travancore had an area of 7091 square miles, situated between 8° 4′ and 10° 22′ North latitude; and between 76° 14′ and 77° 38′ East longitude. This long narrow strip of territory measuring 174 miles in length and from 30 to 75 miles in breadth lay between the Malabar Coast and the Western Ghats which ran parallel to the Western Coast of India, and which divided Travancore from British districts of Tinnevely and Madurai that were part of the British East India Company administered State of Madras<sup>14</sup> that lay to the east of Travancore.<sup>15</sup> Travancore’s climate was tropical with warm humidity and an average rainfall ranging between 67.6 inches to 110.1 inches in different parts of the State.<sup>16</sup> Agriculture was the main occupation because of the availability of fertile soil and numerous water sources like rivers, lakes, streams etc. Accordingly, paddy, cereals, coconuts, pulses, betel vine, tamarind, tea, arecanuts, tapioca, mangoes, jackfruit, bananas, pineapple, and spices like pepper, ginger, cardamom, cinnamon etc. were grown in Travancore. Travancore was also known as “*Mala Nadu*” (land of Hills) for its numerous mountain ranges, rivers, and forests that added to its scenic beauty.<sup>17</sup> The hills were known for their dense jungles and evergreen

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<sup>13</sup> Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, 1:1–2. Also see footnote of Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 15–16.

<sup>14</sup> The State of Madras is presently the Indian state of “Tamil Nadu,” which lies to the east of the Indian state of “Kerala” of which Travancore (this research’s area of study) is a part.

<sup>15</sup> Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, 1:3.

<sup>16</sup> Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, 1:65.

<sup>17</sup> Aiya, *Travancore State Manual*, 3:8, 32–78.

deciduous forests, rich in valuable timber yielding trees like ebony, mahogany, red-cedar and rosewood. Also in these jungles could be found elephants, tigers, bison, leopard, bear, monkeys, and birds of numerous varieties.<sup>18</sup>

### **Society and Life in South Travancore in the Early Twentieth Century**

During the Sangam age, Kerala, the entire Malayalam speaking area of which, Travancore—the area under consideration in this research—was a part<sup>19</sup>; belonged to the larger unit of Tamilakam.<sup>20</sup> This period experienced a great deal of social freedom and equality, with dignity accorded to labor and women enjoying freedom of movement and education. Caste and community divisions were conspicuous by its absence and communities such as the Panas, Kuravas, Parayas, Vetas and others were held in high esteem by kings and nobles.<sup>21</sup> In this period, the four canonical castes viz., the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and the Sudras had not taken clear shape and evils such as untouchability and unapproachability were unknown.<sup>22</sup> In a predominantly Barter system of economic transaction, agriculture was the main occupation of the people alongside others such as fishing, hunting, spinning, weaving, carpentry, leather work etc. This age was also known for its beliefs in omens and astrology, and ancestor worship was popular. Thus for the most part of the first millennia, life in Kerala country had not come under the influence of Brahmanical Hinduism<sup>23</sup> and many of the later social evils had still not

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<sup>18</sup> Joy Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History. The Story of the Missionary Movement and the Liberation of People in South Travancore* (Madras: Gurukul, 1996), 14–15.

<sup>19</sup> The areas of South Travancore taken up for this present research include 8 taluks, viz., Thovalai, Agastivaram, Kalkulam, Vilavankode, Neyyattinkara, Nedumangad, Trivandrum (present Thiruvananthapuram) and Chirayankil. See Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Tamilakam during the Sangam age consisted of the entire southern part of India that today is divided into the states of Malayalam speaking Kerala and Tamil speaking Tamil Nadu.

<sup>21</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 80–81.

<sup>22</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 81.

<sup>23</sup> Hinduism is the term used to denote all religious traditions and practices that were held by the people living



entrenched itself in society.

By the eleventh century, as a result of the exigencies of the Chola-Chera<sup>24</sup> war the Namboothiri Brahmins were able to establish themselves as landlords (Jemmies) of extensive properties and thus the oppressive “Jemie” system originated in the State.<sup>25</sup> At the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498, there were a number of Nair<sup>26</sup> chieftains alongside a few Namboothiri chieftains who exercised effective authority over their respective domains.<sup>27</sup> In short, by this time the larger Kerala territory presented a tragic picture of a feudal polity with the Jemie and Devadasi (temple prostitutes) system at their worst.<sup>28</sup> Further, by the sixteenth and seventeenth century, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Nairs etc. had established a privileged status in the larger Kerala society and they were all expected to observe caste rules most scrupulously.<sup>29</sup> During this time selling of abducted slave children to foreigners engaged in such trade, and also agrestic slavery of people attached to the soil and treated as marketable property prevailed over the land.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, during the Varma dynasty rule in the eighteenth century and the subsequent indirect British rule over Travancore in the nineteenth century, the separation

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across the Indus (Sindhu river). The word “Hindu” itself is a Persian variant of the “Sindhu” and began to appear in texts written by Indians only in the sixteenth century to distinguish themselves as natives over against their Muslim invaders. It was only in the eighteenth century that the term began to refer not to Indians themselves but their religion. See Oddie “Constructing Hinduism,” 155–61.

<sup>24</sup> By 999 AD, the Chola Empire in South India started an aggressive 100 year war with the ruling Chera dynasty of Kerala that continued through the eleventh century leading to major economic and social changes in the way of life of the Kerala country. The conditions created by this war in the twelfth century resulted in the weakening of central authority and the rise of several petty principalities and chiefdoms all over Kerala. See Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 155–58.

<sup>25</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 156.

<sup>26</sup> The Nairs, a major land owning caste by the twentieth century, were considered to belong to the Shudra division of the Hindu caste system. However, they were also the major “warrior-caste” in Kerala and held enormous power in Travancore and all over the Kerala country. Their control over land holdings, military, and access to all socio-political and religio-cultural corridors of power, made them a very strong and powerful community.

<sup>27</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 188, 231.

<sup>29</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 267.

<sup>30</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 269.

between the high land owning castes and the low castes increased with the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Nairs continuing to enjoy several privileges and immunities. As the British solicited active support and co-operation to sustain their own authority, the power of native rulers, chiefs, and Jemmes increased.<sup>31</sup> Thus by the turn of the twentieth century, the socio-political polity of Travancore consisted of indirect rule by the British through a Hindu Rajah with a well-entrenched caste system wherein those at the bottom of society had to face severe oppression and exploitation.

### Political Context of the Early Twentieth Century

According to the legend of Parasurama (an avatar of the Hindu Lord Vishnu<sup>32</sup>) the land of Travancore was reclaimed from the sea by the Brahmin warrior sage Parasurama. In course of time, Parasurama brought Brahmins from the banks of the Narmada, the Krishna, the Cauvery, from Mysore<sup>33</sup> and Maharashtra<sup>34</sup> and settled them in the land of his creation.<sup>35</sup> The authenticity of such legends notwithstanding, the legend of Parasurama indicates how vested interests popularized the theory of Brahmanical power and predominance in Kerala that was ubiquitous in its effects in the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, Kerala country well into the nineteenth century was a fertile ground for competing chieftains and power brokers. By the time Vasco Da Gama the Portuguese explorer had landed in Calicut, India in 1498, four major kingdoms had

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<sup>31</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 373.

<sup>32</sup> In Hindu religion and mythology, Lord Vishnu is seen as the preserver of life. Whenever values of order, righteousness and truth were under threat, Lord Vishnu is believed to have incarnated (Avatar) to destroy evil and establish dharma (moral order). Parasurama (warrior-priest) is traditionally seen as the sixth avatar of Vishnu.

<sup>33</sup> The State of Mysore forms part of the present day Kannada speaking state of Karnataka along the western coast to the north of Kerala.

<sup>34</sup> Maharashtra is the Marathi language speaking state of Indian along the western coast above the state of Karnataka.

<sup>35</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 2–5.

<sup>36</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 10.

emerged on the political landscape of Kerala: Venad (Travancore), Cochin (Perumpadapu Swarupum), Calicut and Kolathunad. When Raja Marthanda Varma (1729–1758) ascended the throne of Venad in 1729, he established dominion over Travancore by bringing in territories from the north and the south into Travancore and modernized the kingdom through a process of subjugation, annexation, amalgamation, appeasement and reform.<sup>37</sup> With the help of a captured Flemish Officer D’Lannoy from a war with the Dutch (Battle of Colachel in 1741), Marthanda Varma built several forts, enlarged the army and trained them on a European model, with a more efficient cavalry, artillery and infantry.

King Marthanda Varma, who came to be known as the “maker of modern Travancore” also appointed a Prime Minister called “Delawa” to run an efficient administration, and re-organized the state administration for the welfare of the people. The Raja’s loyal Dewan (Prime Minister) Rama Iyan Dalawa reorganized the administration of the State by conducting a survey of the land in 1750, building large depots where pepper, tapioca, and arecanuts brought from the people would be stored, with chowkeys (custom houses) built to collect duties on articles exported and imported at the frontiers, which improved and stabilized the economy of the State.<sup>38</sup> In a diplomatic masterstroke that consolidated his power and made his rule and house safe from internal disturbances and enemies, Raja Marthanda Varma dedicated his kingdom of Travancore to Lord Padmanabha (Lord Vishnu) on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1750, and assumed management of the State as the vassal of the Lord Padmanabha taking the title “Sri Padmanabhadasa” (servant of Sri Padmanabha).<sup>39</sup> Henceforth the Rajas of Travancore were considered the representatives of Sri Padmanabha and even to speak against the King was considered as “*Swamidrohham*” (injuring or

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<sup>37</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 8–10

<sup>38</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 9–11.

<sup>39</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 12–13.

blaspheming the deity).<sup>40</sup>

Even as successive Kings consolidated their power in Travancore, internal rebellions and external aggression, especially led by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan from the State of Mysore, kept the political situation in Travancore unstable through the nineteenth century. Taking advantage of the need of Travancore for support against threats to its kingdom, the East India Company (which ruled India before the British Crown took over in 1857) through the treaties of 1795 and 1805 extracted a treaty of subsidiary alliance from Travancore by which the Company offered military support in return for a tribute called “subsidy.”<sup>41</sup> Internal rebellions<sup>42</sup> finally led to the Nair battalions and the Travancore army being disbanded in the early 1800s, and subsequently a British Resident<sup>43</sup> was placed at the Travancore Court who later played an important advisory role in the government policy of Travancore. As a consequence of all this, Travancore effectively lost its political freedom and continued through the nineteenth and early twentieth century as a Hindu princely state under indirect British control. Successive native rulers in Travancore reduced to being vassals pursued their personal interests leaving administration to the uncaring native bureaucracy and the domineering control of British colonizers. This political situation led to Travancore paying twenty to twenty-five percent of its income to the Company as subsidy during the nineteenth century which severely depleted the State Treasury. For the common

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<sup>40</sup> Shungoony Menon, *A History of Travancore from the Earliest Times* (Madras: Higginbotham, 1878), 171.

<sup>41</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 4. Also see Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 315.

<sup>42</sup> In 1805 a rebellion broke out in Travancore against the Prime Minister Velu Thampi Dalawa who sought the help of the British East India Company forces to crush the mutiny. Later in 1808, Velu Thampi Dalawa and the Cochin Kingdom Prime Minister Paliath Achan Govindan Menon formed a common front against the East India Company who were demanding payment of compensation for their involvement in the Travancore-Mysore war. After initial success, the forces of Velu Thampi and Paliath Achan were defeated by the British. Velu Thampi committed suicide and Paliath Achan was exiled to Madras and later to Benaras.

<sup>43</sup> From 1758 to 1948 there were ten rulers who ruled Travancore. In 1795, the Rajah of Travancore fearing Tipu Sultan of Mysore entered into a Treaty of Subsidy with the British who were represented in the Rajah’s court by a “Resident.” The first British Resident was Col. MaCaulay. See, Moses Swamidas, *Conversion and Reconversion in India: A Study of the Experience of Dalit Christians in the Context of the Ministry of the Bible Faith Mission* (Kerala: Bible Faith Mission, 2001), 48. Also, see Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 315.

people, the oppressive realities of colonial rule was manifested on the ground through the intermediary revenue collecting power wielders who derived their power from being owners of land, agrestic slaves and agricultural laborers; and from their association with political power centers well into the twentieth century.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, in the second half of the 1800s Travancore witnessed many administrative measures that brought a humane element especially into the life of the subalterns in society. In 1855, Maharajah Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma (1847–1860) abolished slavery in the kingdom, which was followed by the abolishment of dress restrictions imposed on the lower castes in 1859. Also a Postal system (1857) and School for girls (1859) was started during his reign. Continuing with the modernization and transformation of Travancore society; re-organizing of the police force and abolishing of many oppressive taxes took place during the reign of Rama Varma Visakhram Thirunal (1880–1885). More importantly, with the formation of political parties and communal organizations in the early part of the twentieth century, the people of Travancore, as in other parts of India, started fighting for their political and civil rights which culminated with India's independence from British rule in 1947. The political and communal mobilization of the 1900s also saw the agitation for an "*Aikya Kerala*" (United Kerala) along linguistic lines that finally culminated on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1956, with the State of Kerala coming into existence as a part of the Union of India. In this arrangement the State of Travancore ceased to exist, with four of its Tamil speaking taluks—Vilavancode, Kalkulam, Thovala and Agasteeswaram—forming the Kanyakumari District of the State of Tamil Nadu, and the rest of Travancore becoming part of the Malayalam speaking State of Kerala.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 52.

<sup>45</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 15.

## Religious, Social and Economic Context in the Early Twentieth Century

Travancore, as in other parts of India, saw a curious mix of religion, social engagement and economics, which mutually fed and influenced each other. The religio-cultural universe of Travancore in this period mainly consisted of the Sanskrit<sup>46</sup> Brahmanical Hindu traditions of the high castes that was supported and privileged by the State. Nevertheless, the Brahmanical system at this time had to interact with two other religio-cultural sub-systems with distinctive features of its own, which often influenced each other in varying degrees. They were the Christian tradition brought by westerners and adopted by a section of the native people, and the indigenous subaltern and folk traditions of the local people characterized by shamanistic tendencies.<sup>47</sup>

Speaking of the dominant Hindu religious tradition in Travancore, scholars contend that the Hindu religion established itself in Kerala by way of synthesis of Aryan ideas from the North and Dravidian ideas from the South.<sup>48</sup> Through a gradual process of social assimilation and cultural synthesis the Dravidian population of Kerala was absorbed into Hinduism.<sup>49</sup> In this absorption process, that reached its climax with the settling of many Brahmins in the tenth century, society eventually followed the four-fold division of the Hindu social order where the priests or Brahmins held the dominant place followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaisyas (merchants) and Shudras (servants). However, traditionally the Kshatriya and Vaisya communities were not to be found in Travancore providing room for various “*Jatis*” (caste

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<sup>46</sup> Sanskrit is the language of the Hindu scriptures (Vedas) and also used in Brahmanical Hindu rituals and Hindu epics.

<sup>47</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 32–34.

<sup>48</sup> According to one of the many theories about the populating of India, Aryan tribes from Central Asia attacked the previous Dravidian inhabitants of the Indus valley and settled in India. Gradually they pushed southwards and eastwards, resulting in the existing Dravidian population moving further south and east in India.

<sup>49</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 96–99.

communities) to later on lay claim to higher social status through processes such as “sanskritization.”<sup>50</sup>

In Travancore, the diversity of religious beliefs was a significant feature of its society during the early twentieth century. Even while the majority of its people were adherents of Hinduism, there was a significant Christian and minor Muslim presence in Travancore.<sup>51</sup> More importantly, the Brahmanical (Sanskritic) way of life co-existed and also co-opted various folk traditions that were mainly the religious domain of the subalterns of Travancore. The numerous folk traditions included the many variants of the male deity “*Madan*” and the female deity “*Amman*” to whom temples were built, generally without idols but containing ritual artifacts like sword, spear, trident, dresses of the shaman etc.<sup>52</sup> The subalterns adhering to these folk religious practices were led by the Shaman (male or female) performing religious duties during popular festivals such as “*kotai*,” which would see “possession” dances or trances, animal sacrifices, “*villu-pattu*” (songs on a bow-string instrument), fairs, sports and folk cultural performances. In addition, worship of ancestors and also belief in malevolent spirits called “*Bhutam*,” “*Pey*,” “*Pishaju*” etc. who were considered to be inhabiting trees, breeze, waters, roads, hills etc. were part of the religiosity of the subaltern people. Witchcraft and sorcery were widespread and even the Brahmins feared the existence of such evil spirits and employed shaman-doctors (mantravadis<sup>53</sup>) to exorcise these spirits. Interestingly, Brahmanical Hinduism found an

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<sup>50</sup> M. N. Srinivas terms “Sanskritization” as the process of social mobility through which certain caste communities that were deemed “low” by the dominant castes in Indian society would attempt to raise their social and ritual status by adopting the habits of Brahminical Hindus. For instance, abstinence from eating beef and the adoption of certain living habits of the High castes was one way to laying claim to a higher status in the caste hierarchy. Such claims made over a period of time would not be conceded immediately, rather, over the course of a generation or two. See M. N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 6.

<sup>51</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 189.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 33.

<sup>53</sup> “Mantravada” was practiced mostly by the Brahmins but there were many subaltern individuals among the

ingenious way of including these gods of fear and death of the folk religious tradition into the Hindu fold by using the numerous “avatars” (incarnations) of Vishnu as the vehicle for this process of co-option.<sup>54</sup>

The multiplicity in religious affiliation was also emulated in the different caste groups that co-existed in Travancore. The total population of the State according to the census of India in 1931 was 5,095,973, with minor communities like the Jains, Zoroastrians, Buddhists and Sikhs co-existing alongside Hindu communities like the Nambuthiri Brahmins, Nairs, Ezhavas, Nadars, Pariahs, Pulayas, Vedars, Kuravars, Kannikkars, Malayarayan, Mannan, Muthuvan, Vishavans etc., and the Syrian Christians. Among the nearly five hundred “jatis,”<sup>55</sup> the land owning groups like the “Nambuthiris” (priests) and the “Nairs” (Shudras who formed the military) were very powerful. The Namboothiri Brahmins had become very powerful because of their ritual role in society and for their extraordinary control over the kings and influence over the policies of the State. They also had struck a beneficial social arrangement with the Nairs whereby the Brahmin men and Nair women would enter into a “*Sambandam*” (conjugal relationship) that was practiced within the “*Marumakkathayam*” (matrilineal) system of inheritance that came into Kerala society by the eleventh century AD. In this social arrangement, the landowning Nairs benefited by exerting complete dominance over the other castes in Travancore especially in the villages and country-side of Travancore. Naturally, they did not like the British nor the Christian missionaries because they challenged their age-old customs and social norms, which had helped

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Parayas and Pulayas who had also mastered this art. “Mantravada” did not only propitiate the evil spirits, but it also was performed to control the spirits through spells, incantations, and penances. See Selvester Ponnunmuthan, *The Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities in the Socio-Religious Context of Trivandrum/Kerala, India* (Rome: Editrice Pontifica Universita Gregoriana, 1996), 93.

<sup>54</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 32–34.

<sup>55</sup> “Jati” are endogamous communities that are an equivalent term used for “caste” while understanding India’s Caste system. According to the 1931 Travancore Census, there were nearly 500 castes (jatis) listed as part of Travancore’s Hindu society. See, Sadasyatilaka T. K. Velu Pillai, *The Travancore State Manual* (Trivandrum: The Government of Travancore, 1940), 1:831.



establish their dominance over the lower classes. In the Tamil speaking parts of the Travancore State another Sudra caste called the “Vellalas” and known by the title “Pillai” occupied a position of social prestige and ritual rank, second only to the Brahmins.<sup>56</sup>

The lower classes in Travancore State primarily consisted of the subalterns (lowest castes) and certain intermediate castes that experienced oppression but at the same time were beginning to mobilize and win certain societal benefits for themselves. Among these intermediate castes were the Nadars (also called Shanars) and the Ezhavas (also called Chogans, Iravas, Chovans and Tiyas) who were considered “half-polluting” castes, but who through their aroused critical consciousness were mobilizing themselves to acquire their share of Travancore’s socio-political and economic space during this period.<sup>57</sup> The Nadars were an agricultural caste and claimed to have “Shaivite”<sup>58</sup> religious beliefs, but at the same time worshipped folk deities such as a form of *Madan, Amman, Badrakali, Murugan, and Perumal* (Vishnu).<sup>59</sup> They also suffered tyranny under the higher castes and were not allowed to use foot-wear, use balance to weigh tobacco and other articles, build houses above one storey or tile them, and their women were forbidden from wearing anything above their waist.<sup>60</sup> Exploitative measures such as the levying of poll-tax and also forced labor (*Uriyam*) for the Government and the temple were put in place to keep the Nadars subservient to the hegemonic elites of society. Likewise, the Ezhavas were also one of the lower castes who socially suffered the same harassment as their Nadar counterparts, from the government and higher castes. Following these intermediate communities in the caste hierarchy,

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<sup>56</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 24–28.

<sup>58</sup> “Shaivites” are Hindus who worship the Hindu ultimate reality—“Brahman”—through the mediation of Lord Shiva.

<sup>59</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 25–26.

were the next group of castes in the southern part of South Travancore, namely, the slave groups or the “nicha” or “polluted” communities—the Pulayas, the Pariahs, the Vedars, Kuravas, Hill Arrians etc. These people were agricultural laborers who became agrestic slaves attached to the land and sold like chattels.<sup>61</sup>

The position of the lower castes and subalterns of Travancore society could also be gauged from their status and role within a Temple centered culture. Apart from regular monthly festivals in the temples, there were three grand annual festivals sponsored by the State—a ten day “*Makhotsavam*”—in the seasons of “Chittirai” (March-April), “Aavani” (September-October), and “Markali” (December-January). During these days, the images of “Shiva” and his consort “Parvati” would be carried around and on the last day a grand car procession with huge crowds for the deities would conclude the festival. In addition, there were festivals throughout the year such as—“*Kalapam*” (a thirteen day celebration anointing the images in the outer precincts of the temple), “*Tirukalyanam*” (marriage of deities), “*Kartikai Deepam*” (festival of lights), “*Sri Jeyanti*” (festival of Krishna), and “*Maha Shiva Ratri*” (night of Shiva). These festivals and related temple rituals symbolically reflected prototypical miniature societies that represented the feudal social structure and ideologies of the time in Travancore.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the privileges and restrictions ascribed to temple precincts corresponded to the social distance and place that various social groups were to maintain with one another in Travancore. The Nambudiri Brahmin could go to the innermost part of the Temple (*Garbhagraha*) and offer worship, while the Nairs, Vellalas, Cettis etc. could not enter this “sanctum sanctorum” but had to remain just outside of it at the “*Ardhamandapa*” and “*Tirucurra Mandapa*.” The next group in the social hierarchy like the Vairavas, Caliyas, Potters and Oil mongers could not go beyond the “*Dhvajastambha*,” while

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<sup>61</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 38.

the “avarnas”<sup>63</sup> like the Ezhavas, Nadars, Pariahs, Pulayas, and the Kuluvans had to retire one furlong from the outer walls of the temple.<sup>64</sup> More importantly, the temples were the places where cultural indoctrination and social learning of the upper castes took place and various rituals and ceremonies performed here contributed to maintaining the socio-cultural superiority of the Brahmanical order. The priority of the State could be seen from the fact that State money was used to feed the poor Brahmins in forty-two “*Uttuparas*” (free inns) and also to maintain high-caste pagodas, while the subalterns of society were made subservient to religious, social and economic measures that maintained the status quo of hegemonic community domination in Travancore.<sup>65</sup>

Influencing and dependent on the religious and social structure of Travancore was its economic infrastructure and interaction. The economy of Travancore was centered on agriculture and slave labor, and the high castes were the sole custodians of all arable as well as waste lands.<sup>66</sup> The differential distribution of resources corresponded to the discriminative social structure that gave the caste at the apex, such as the Nambudiris conclusive monopoly over the scarce resource of land.<sup>67</sup> However, since the Nambudiris, being Brahmins would not work on the land, the next castes in the hierarchy like the Nairs and Vellalars eventually became the “*jemie*” of the land in South Travancore through a process of sub-feudalisation that included land-holdings through “lease,” and transfer entitlements like “*pattam*.” The State collected revenues from government held lands (called “*pantaravaka*” lands); from trading done on

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<sup>63</sup> “Avarna” stands for those without “varna” or “birth” and is used to signify those belonging to the low castes of Hindu society.

<sup>64</sup> Cited in Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 38–39.

<sup>65</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 35–39.

<sup>66</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 36.

<sup>67</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 25.

pepper, tobacco, cardamom, and salt; and various other levies and taxes like those on palm trees, growing of moustache and breast tax. Alongside these taxes that were collected from the people, other ways of exploiting labor and supporting the economy of the State included—extraction of forced labor from the low castes without any remuneration called “*Uriyam*” (gratuitous service) for the State, temples and influential families; and forced cultivation on “*Virutti*” lands granted for crops that were to be supplied to the palace and temples. More importantly, tax collection in Travancore by the twentieth century had powerfully entrenched the intermediary revenue collecting power wielders coming from Nair and Vellalar families like the “Provertikar,” “Karyakar,” “Carvatikaryakar,” “Valia Carvatikaryakar,” “Madampimar,” “Prabhukkanmar” etc. Such power wielding tax collectors meted out punishments such as, confining people in cages with spikes, chaining to trees, whippings and floggings, wearing of fire locks etc., to extract revenues and labor from the people.<sup>68</sup> Given the fact that the socio-religious system playing out in the daily life of Travancore reinforced the idea that these elite communities were fully justified to carry out such atrocities on those at the bottom of the social structure, it was very difficult for the lower castes to contest and overcome their own oppression. As a result the “slave castes”<sup>69</sup> of Travancore, who were a source of cheap labor for agriculture and also other free services for the State and landlords, were reduced to poverty and a broken human existence.

#### Caste Practice and the Resultant Oppression in South Travancore

Society and life in South Travancore in the early twentieth century cannot be sufficiently understood without comprehending the “caste dynamic” that was the primary socio-cultural framework within which the people of Travancore operated during this time. In fact, Kerala

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<sup>68</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 43–52. Also, see Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> By the nineteenth century castes like the Pulayas, Parayas and Vettuvans had been living as slaves for centuries within the socio-cultural context of Travancore. See Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 28.

society was known for its in-severable link between caste, untouchability and slavery.<sup>70</sup> By the eighth century, with the increasing Aryanization of Kerala, caste system became an integral part of Travancore society like other parts of India.<sup>71</sup> As in other parts of the country, in Travancore too, “caste,” which collapses the complex Indian concepts of “varna” (color) and “jati” (birth) into it, was heavily loaded with religious significance and sanction.<sup>72</sup> While “varna” represented the four-fold division of society based on social function and was dynamic and flexible; “jati” represented the smaller endogamous group that was fixed by birth and therefore rigid.

Accordingly, in Travancore the “Savarna” Hindus i.e. ones with “varna,” included the Namboothiri or Malayali Brahmins, non-Malayali Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Nairs of Malayali Shudras. On the other hand, the “Avarnas” i.e. ones without “varna,” included the Nadars, Ezhavas, and non-Hindus like the Christians and Muslims. Banished out of these groupings and at the periphery of caste society were the “outcastes” that included the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas and the hill Arrians.

As in other parts of India, caste observance and its rules were at the center of social life in Travancore. Scholars have tried to comprehend this unique life practice among Indians and have come up with explanations that capture the multi-faceted and highly complex practice of caste especially with relation to the observance of “untouchability.”<sup>73</sup> One of the theories put forward

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<sup>70</sup> S. N. Sadasivan, *A Social History of India* (New Delhi: APH, 2000), 397.

<sup>71</sup> Sreedhara Menon points out that in the eighth century AD a major batch of Brahmins came to Kerala, defeated the dominant Buddhists in arguments and firmly established Hinduism. This Aryan influence increased and entrenched itself considerably during the rule of the Kulasekharas of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chera Empire (AD 800–1102). See, Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 96.

<sup>72</sup> Frykenberg explains “caste” as coming from the Portuguese derivative of “casta” for “breed” which in the Indic or Sanskrit term “jat” or “jati” meaning “birth” (anything that is born) or “birth-group” or “birth-community.” Too often it is compounded and confused with the term “varna” (color). In Brahmanical sociological thinking, “varna” is an abstract concept that might best be translated as “category” or “class”. See Frykenberg, *Christians and Missionaries*, 10.

<sup>73</sup> For a detailed study of the Caste system, see Robert Deliege, *The Untouchables of India* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 27–50.

by Louis Dumont deserves special mention in light of the observance of caste rules and that of “untouchability” by high castes over the “slave castes” in nineteenth and twentieth century Travancore. Dumont emphasized that the maintenance of ritual purity lay at the center of the caste system and contended that “caste” represented the institutionalizing of hierarchical values, where in a graded system of social living the extremes were the Brahmins (the most pure people) and the untouchable (the least pure) that were unequal but complementary to each other. Accordingly, since concerns of ritual purity and pollution formed the foundation of the caste system, social and religious separation pervaded and the untouchable castes were not admitted into society because their bodies and minds were considered impure, dull or unfit for initiation.<sup>74</sup> However, Dumont has been criticized for not adequately capturing the dynamic nature of the “varna-jati” ideology that operates in the caste system. For instance, the role of “power relations” and the possibility for a “jati” to attain certain degree of numerical, economic and political power leading to a move up the “varna” ladder of caste Hinduism are important in understanding the various political, status and economic dynamics that perpetuated and kept the caste system alive and kicking.<sup>75</sup>

More importantly for our study, caste and its actual life practice in Travancore led to *severe disabilities* being imposed upon the subaltern people. The severity of subjugation and oppression was such that even the Hindu Reformer Swami Vivekananda who, like many other Hindu reform movements of that time, was seeking to revive Hinduism from within by attacking the evil aspects of untouchability and privileges accrued by the dominants of society; called the rigid

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<sup>74</sup> Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus. The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 34–64.

<sup>75</sup> Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion* 32–33.

caste system of Kerala as “a veritable lunatic asylum of India.”<sup>76</sup> Such an observation was based upon the way in which the numerous low-castes were treated in society and also due to societal rules and practices that had severely impeding a humanistic perception and approach to its people. The dominant communities had through the caste system in Travancore put in place many disabilities that enveloped the life of subalterns over centuries. These could be classified under four categories: (1) restrictions caused by “tindal” or caste pollution, (2) other restrictions including the breast-cloth restriction on low castes, which probably were not directly related to tindal, (3) forced labor or “uriyam services” for government works like repairing roads and public buildings; for acquiring provisions for temples during festivals; and work for rich landlords, and (4) slavery. However, the most severe disability directly related to “tindal”—the notion of unapproachability or distance pollution—was that “tindal” was transmitted not only by touching but also by the approach of a lower caste person within a certain distance.<sup>77</sup> This notion led to the practice of “untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability” by the higher castes on the lower caste people in Travancore and its effects were still prevalent in the twentieth century.<sup>78</sup> Thus, a Mukkuvar (fisherman) had to remain 24 feet away from Nambuthiri Brahmin, an Ezhava 36 feet, a Pulaya 64 feet and a Nayadi 72 feet. The ideological belief relating to “tindal” was scrupulously maintained and enforced by the societal and administrative powers in Travancore, by making sure that if a high caste Nair failed to punish an offender who broke the “unapproachability” rules, the Nair would be put to death by the order of the King.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, the polluting slave castes like the Parayas and Pulayas had to shout out their

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<sup>76</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 155–56.

<sup>77</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 150.

<sup>78</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 29–31.

<sup>79</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 38.

presence or get out of the way of approaching high caste pedestrians so that proper decorum could be maintained in the everyday life of Travancore.<sup>80</sup> However, by the late nineteenth century largely due to pressure from the missionaries, the British Madras government, and agitations by the people; many of these disabilities were abolished. Nevertheless, the accrued consequences of these disabilities continued well into the twentieth century and remain a major concern for Dalit activists and Indian society even today.

Caste rules and regulations in Travancore played an important role in the *placement of restrictions* upon the subalterns and in *impeding their access to resources* of the State. For example, ornaments worn by the Pulayas had to be “no more valuable than brass or beads,” and umbrellas and shoes were not permitted to them. Also, lower castes were debarred from the use of any but coarse clothes; could not keep milch cows; and banned from using oil mills. There were also restrictions on house sizes and several houses of native Christians (ex-slaves) were pulled down by the government on the ground that they were “too good for such people to live in.”<sup>81</sup> Due to the notion of “tindal,” the lower castes were not able to use public roads freely; they were not permitted to enter market places and courts; and they were excluded from most schools and government jobs.<sup>82</sup> Education, which in the context of colonial modernity was understood by the elites as a powerful cultural resource that could change people, was systematically denied to the Dalit<sup>83</sup> communities by the upper classes of Travancore. Even the rendering of justice in Travancore had turned into a farce by this time, because if a low-caste man happened to be a

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<sup>80</sup> See Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 152.

<sup>81</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 150.

<sup>82</sup> In 1910 the Dewan of Travancore issued a circular to do away with this unjust practice and to make the justice system more open to the low castes. See Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 6–67. Also see, Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 151.

<sup>83</sup> Dalit is the preferred collective name used by the previously “untouchable” classes of India. Therefore in this study, the term “Dalit” will also be used to signify the Pariah (Sambavar), Pulaya (Cheramar), Vedar, Kuravar communities that were the “slave castes” of Kerala.



witness, his evidence had to be taken by a “*Gumastha*” (agent) deputed for the purpose with the aid of an intermediate peon, since neither the question nor the reply would be audible or intelligible due to maintaining of distance pollution rules.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, the court system in the nineteenth and twentieth century were used by the elite through their “upper caste” court functionaries to mete out punishments to the Dalit communities, which subsequently served to discourage subaltern attempts from seeking redressal in the judicial system.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, the casteist bureaucracy of Travancore also made sure that land reforms initiated by the State for the subalterns, like the “*Poduval*” (fallow land) for the Pulayars, never materialized in real life as they used methods of intervention and hindrance to delay and dismantle the process.<sup>86</sup> Thus, through the practice of proper societal caste rules the subalterns were successfully kept in a state of dependence and servility well into the twentieth century, with no recourse to any relief from even the judicial branch of the State.

Caste oppression and the resultant imposition of *strict punishments* and establishment of a *psyche of fear* in the hearts of the oppressed communities helped the dominant castes maintain their supremacy and vested interests in Travancore. As slaves, when the subalterns were found guilty of breaking the “*jati maryada*”<sup>87</sup> or indulging in crime of any degree, severe punishments were imposed upon them, such as thrusting of pins below the nails, branding with hot iron, scalding with hot oil or boiling water, placing in stocks, beating with steel wire wound canes,

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<sup>84</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 151.

<sup>85</sup> M. Nisar and Meena Kandasamy, *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007), 74.

<sup>86</sup> Nisar and Kandasamy, *Ayyankali*, 82–83.

<sup>87</sup> “Jati Maryada” meaning “caste code” signifies the accepted caste rules, regulations and practices of society where especially the slave castes were forced to internalize and adhere to values and practices imposed upon them by the dominant elite.

spraying ants from nest and inflicting bleeding wounds etc.<sup>88</sup> One of the ways in which the subaltern communities would resist, negotiate or escape their unbearable existence was through pilfering, individual runaways or community migrations.<sup>89</sup> The landlords in such instances would chase and bring back those who escaped and severely torture them so that it would serve as an example for others likely to escape.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, while members of the dominant castes had several immunities from punishments, the members of the backward communities were treated in the most in-human way with severe penal code imposed upon them alongside handing out of death penalty even for ordinary offences like theft, killing of cows etc. Other common forms of punishment included trampling to death under an elephant, blowing from the mouth of a cannon, hanging spread over three days, mutilation, impalement etc.<sup>91</sup> Apart from these fear instilling acts, stories and accounts of human sacrifice by the kings and temple elites created deep seated fear in the hearts of the subalterns. A London Missionary Society (LMS) report by Rev. C. Yesudian of 1866 points to this cruel practice:

High caste masters undervalued their slaves so much that during times of repeated and destructive breeches of banks of rivers and tanks, ascribing the catastrophe to the anger or displeasure of some deity or devil, they attempted to propitiate his anger by throwing a slave quickly in the breach and heaping sand on him, offering him as a sacrifice.<sup>92</sup>

Naturally with such atrocities being practiced on the subalterns, they feared their high caste

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<sup>88</sup> Sadasivan, *A Social History of India*, 398.

<sup>89</sup> See George Oomen, "Dalit Conversion and Social Protest in Travancore, 1854–1890," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 27, nos. 3 & 4 (Sept.-Dec. 1996): 72–73. Also see Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 66.

<sup>90</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 43–44.

<sup>91</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 373–74. Also see accounts of punishment and impalement meted out to slaves in A. Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social Transformation. The Kerala Story* (Trivandrum: ICRO, 2002), 47–48.

<sup>92</sup> Cited in Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 64. Also Joy Gnanadason notes that in AD 1746 Raja Marthanda Varma sacrificed 15 infants belonging to the Nadar, Mukkuvar and Ezhava community to overcome some unexpected obstacle that prevented him from further advance to a conquest. See Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 33.

masters and dreaded their punishments. Even though many of these in-human practices were banned by law during the early twentieth century, still there was widespread fear and awe of the “*Jemie*” and higher castes among the subaltern people.

Thus as Joy Gnanadason in her study of the missionary movement in South Travancore observes, the socio-economic and religious context of Travancore in the nineteenth and early part of twentieth century saw the co-existence of extreme contrasts—power and bondage, purity and pollution, over-lordship and subservience, landedness and landlessness, prosperity and poverty, knowledge and ignorance, the power of women and the degradation of women, immunities and slavery.<sup>93</sup> It is in such a context of extremes that the subaltern Sambavars survived in South Travancore.

### **The Sambavars of South Travancore**

The Sambavars were also called Paraiyars, Pariah, Paraya, Parayas, Adi-Dravidar. They were to be found in the southern part of India and spoke the languages of Tamil or Malayalam. In the Tamil country, the Sambavars called “Pariah” or “Adi-Dravida” lived in similar conditions of poverty in the early twentieth century like their counterparts in the Malayalam country. The American Lutheran mission—MELIM<sup>94</sup>, which in the late nineteenth and twentieth century worked among these groups and won most of its converts from them, were frequently exposed to the life and struggles of the Pariahs. In a report to the Home Board in St. Louis, the Lutheran missionary Rev. George Kuechle draws conclusions about the socio-economic conditions of the

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<sup>93</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 36.

<sup>94</sup> MELIM stands for the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission, which was the Christian mission organization working in India on behalf of the American Lutheran Church Body—the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States. Today this Lutheran Church in the United States of America goes by the name—The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. From 1895 till 1956, MELIM worked in the Tamil language speaking areas of Tamil Nadu (southeast tip of India) and in the Malayalam language speaking areas (southwest tip of India) among mainly Sambavars (Pariah), Cheramar (Pulaya), Nadar, Ezhava, Vedar, Kuravar, and other communities.

Pariahs from a Pariah village at Yerigutti, about sixteen miles northwest of Ambur, Tamil Nadu:

They are not of the great ones of the earth, but of the poor, ah, even the untouchable, the out-caste, the “depressed” class, of those whom the Jews in their time dubbed “sinners.” ...It is an ordinary Pariah village, consisting of about half a hundred houses, I mean, huts, mud-huts with thatched roofs, with a temple, the most respectable of the buildings of the village, in the center. Like all other Pariah villages this one, too, is situated at a respectable distance say one or two furlongs, from the caste (i.e. the Sudra) village, where the landowners, the “master,” live. Very few of these Pariahs own their own land. They till the fields for these Sudras, they herd their cattle, they drive their bullock-carts; in short, for their maintenance these Pariahs are altogether dependent upon the Sudras, getting their remuneration mostly in grain, seldom in cash, at harvest-time. Thus it has been for hundreds of years. ...Thus the out-caste manages to eke out a hand-to-mouth existence, and, by the aid of petty pilfering, by borrowing etc. he keeps himself alive. Quite often these people are forced to go with but one meal a day; sometimes they will not despise a chunk of meat from a fallen cow, goat, or from a lower animal. But should he ever happen to make a good “haul,” then he will go idle for a few days and “celebrate,” instead of saving up for a rainy day. Thus you will see that the poor Pariah’s chief concern is: What shall I eat, what shall I drink, wherewithal shall I be clothed?<sup>95</sup>

The above conditions of the Pariahs noted by missionary Kuechle living in Tamil speaking areas of South India was no different from those faced by their counterparts in the Malayalam speaking areas of Travancore, on the adjacent western strip of South India. The Sambavars (or Pariahs) in Travancore along with the Pulayas were the hereditary agricultural “slave caste” of the State, and were objects of ridicule and “pollution” in society. A geographical and statistical survey of Travancore and Cochin States conducted by Lieutants Ward and Conner, and published in 1863 put forward the following observation about the Pariahs:

They form a considerable number of slaves ...They are inferior to those of the other coast and reckoned so very vile that their contact will entail the most alarming contamination. Their taste for carrion has doubtless caused this prejudice which goes so far as to suppose that they exhale a foetid odour. The death of a cow or bullock is with the Parriyars a season of jubilee.<sup>96</sup>

The Sambavars along with the Pulayas formed the backbone of agriculture in Travancore,

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<sup>95</sup> Ludwig Fuerbringer, “Our India Mission,” *Lutheran Witness* 35, no. 12 (June 13, 1916): 178.

<sup>96</sup> Cited in L. A. Krishna Iyer, *Travancore Tribes and Castes* (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1939), 2:82.

and their landlords belonged to the Nair, Syrian Christian, and Muslim communities.<sup>97</sup> Since they were legally a “slave caste” till 1855, the Sambavars were completely under the mercy of dominant communities in Travancore living a life of submission and fighting for survival. This was the life reality of the slaves in Travancore during this time, with the slave pool being drawn from hereditary slaves to whom would be added people condemned to slavery for reasons such as—being captured in wars, inability to pay off debts, women criminals, women of higher castes associating with low caste men, women abducted during the period of “*pula pedi*”<sup>98</sup> etc. Over course of time, the out-casted additions to the slave pool would probably settle into the slave communities thereby becoming a part of that particular “*jati*.” As a result, like other slave castes, the Pariah community probably was made up of people expelled from every caste.<sup>99</sup>

#### Sambavar Socio-Economic Situation

The Sambavar caste was split into several sub-divisions which had different customs. Krishna Iyer, a Travancore anthropologist, notes six endogamous divisions: “Champa Parayar”, “Pola Parayar”, “Podi Parayar”, “Jintalla Parayar”, “Tinta Parayar,” and “Vem Parayar” to be existing within the Sambavar community.<sup>100</sup> Damodar Christudas on the other hand notes out that they were divided into four endogamous subgroups namely—Melakkaran (drummers), Pettipottupavar (box makers), Samsari (agriculturist), and Ur Paraiyan (village paraiyan).<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 59.

<sup>98</sup> “Pula Pedi” was the practice of abduction of upper caste women and children by slave castes such as the Pulayas and Parayas . During an assigned period in February-March and July-August, the slave Pulayas (and also Parayas in February) would break into the houses of the Nairs or throw stones at women after sunset, as a result of which they would lose caste. This curious practice probably served as an opportunity for the subalterns living under severely exploited conditions to release their pent up anger and frustration, but also could have served as a way for the dominant elites to keep their women under control. See Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 28–29.

<sup>99</sup> Iyer, *Travancore Tribes*, 2:84.

<sup>100</sup> Iyer, *Travancore Tribes*, 2:86–87.

<sup>101</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 29.

Furthermore, in the early part of the twentieth century, these endogamous Sambavar groups would not inter-marry. They were divided into exogamous Illams (clans)—“*aini kudi*” illam, “*munu kudi*” illam, “*koranda kudi*” illam, and “*puli kudi*” illam—with each “illam” people deriving their descent through females, and considering those within as siblings would keep away from marriage. According to Rev. Gomez, as a result of all these divisions it was common practice that the Sambavars would never come together and be united for a common cause.<sup>102</sup>

The difficulty faced by the Sambavars to collectively come together and unite for a common cause was also because of the societal dynamics that was prevalent in Travancore for centuries. By the twentieth century the Sambavars had found themselves as one of the major slave castes in South Travancore, who were caught in a world of social living that promoted a *non-egalitarian social vision*. In the daily social life of the Sambavars they had to encounter and adhere to norms that reinforced their inferiority especially while dealing with members of the higher castes. In fact, even though legally released from the yoke of slavery, they were still not emancipated economically or socially from many ills associated with their previous slave existence. Much like their fellow Dalits<sup>103</sup>, the Sambavars in Malayalam speaking lands were daily reminded of their inadequacy and made to maintain and remember ideas of caste purity and pollution. For instance, if anyone of them happened to enter the Brahmin quarter or street, they would be greeted with cow-dung water.<sup>104</sup> Also, the MELIM missionary Martin J. Lutz in his report to the Mission Board in St. Louis in 1942 notes the popular memory about caste laws in Travancore, when he observes that the rules were much stricter than in other parts of India with

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<sup>102</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 40–41.

<sup>103</sup> Dalit is the collective name today given to represent the previous untouchable “jatis” of Indian caste society. In the British period various names were used to refer to all these exploited communities. Some of the other names were—Pariah, Chamars, Untouchables, Panchama, Depressed Classes, Harijan etc.

<sup>104</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 28–29.

the Pariahs having to keep a distance of 90 feet<sup>105</sup> away from Brahmins compared to outcaste Nadars who were allowed to be quite intimate and approach up to 30 feet.<sup>106</sup> He further mentions that even after the government proclamation of Temple entry (1928) and other measures to alleviate their social degradation, the low caste pariahs

would still hesitate to enter a restaurant in a locality where he is known. The low caste must still have their food in a shed outside the restaurant and coffee and tea is served in a coconut shell instead of a glass.<sup>107</sup>

The above observation of missionary Lutz and the fact that castes higher than the Sambavars would not eat food from them provides a window into the non-egalitarian social vision that was still in force in Travancore in the twentieth century. Public spaces like restaurants, roads, etc. and also common human consumption materials like food and drinks were the domains through which the “inferiority” of the previous slave castes like the Sambavars were reminded and perpetuated. Thus, in the perception and daily practice of social life established and enforced by the high castes of Travancore, the Sambavars were still seen as a community that lacked in their humanity; who had to uphold “*jati maryada*” and assent to their subservience and inferiority in society.

The Sambavar socio-economic struggle was also due to a climate of *exclusion, burden and fear*. As slaves of the Jenmie they were herded into a far off corner of the farm land, and the landlord held complete control over allotment of their work. In addition, as a result of their slave past they had lost all senses of an able individual, and employed themselves with a one dimensional objective of incessantly working to satisfy their god and lord (“*Tampuran*”— the

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<sup>105</sup> Edgar Thurston notes that the Paraiyas had to keep a distance of 128 feet from the Brahmins. See Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 6:134.

<sup>106</sup> Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Letter, 20 October, 1942, Martin J. Lutz 1935–1946 file, Foreign Mission Board, Supplement III, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, 20 October, 1942, 2.

Jennie) who could physically and mentally harm them according to his capricious will.<sup>108</sup> Further, all that the slave castes could wear was a coarse cloth below the waist and above the knee, and they could not draw water from public wells and tanks. Also they were not to move in conveyances, live in tiled houses, or use metallic utensils etc. At the same time as they were victimized through imposed restrictions, the Sambavars were unable to comprehend and raise voice against their own exploitation due to their ignorance and superstition. The only way to address this lack of awareness and knowledge—namely, “education”—was discouraged and even banned for them, and until 1909 there were very few Sambavars and Cheramars (Pulaya) slave caste children who were allowed education in the public schools of Travancore.<sup>109</sup> Even after a 1910 government order that opened education for Dalits in public schools, it was left to charismatic Dalit leaders like Ayyankali (socio-political reformer from the Pulaya community) to forcibly seek admission of subaltern children into schools.<sup>110</sup> Even access to local healthcare facilities through the native village physicians called as “*Vaidyan*,” who treated patients from different castes, was not accessible to the Pulayas and Parayas. For their treatment when they fell ill the “devil dancer” would be called in for cure.<sup>111</sup> Also these communities were not admitted to the General or other Government hospitals until the early twentieth century, and it took a petition from the slave castes Pulayas in 1905 for a disused kitchen to be converted into a ward for them. Even after this the Pariahs and Pulayas had great difficulty in receiving treatment, and this can be determined from the report of a Salvation Army officer about the Pulayas:

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<sup>108</sup> Sadasivan, *A Social History of India*, 397.

<sup>109</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 108, 110–11.

<sup>110</sup> In one incident Ayyankali, went to Uruttambalam School in Balaramapuram area of Trivandrum to admit a Panchama (Dalit) girl to the school. The headmaster resisted, and the tensions caused led to ensuing riots among the Pulayas and Nair high castes. These riots then escalated and spread to the adjoining Marayamuttom, Venganoor, Perumbazhathur, Kunnathukal areas, and are commonly referred to as the “Pulaya riots.” See Nisar and Kandasamy, *Ayyankali*, 76–77.

<sup>111</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 142.



They are not allowed to approach a Government hospital; instead they had to huddle under a tree some distance from the dispensary until the doctor, after having attended to all other patients and about to leave, would ask what the “others” were suffering from. He would then give verbal instructions to the compounders to dispense medicines, or permit serious cases to be admitted to the Pulaya ward, a shed built some distance from the main hospital.<sup>112</sup>

To add to this exclusion from healthcare, the Sambavars, like the other slave castes, were also heavily burdened with occupational taxes and also taxed for solemnizing marriages, for their huts, for growing moustaches etc.; and also with payments made to the landlord on all ceremonial occasions (“*Kazhcha vaikuka*”) and on the death of a person. The cumulative consequence of imposing such burdens on the powerless Sambavars was that they were caught in the despairing world of hand-to-mouth existence. Furthermore, the use of public highways or walking on roads leading to temples, and also using umbrellas during the heat of day or the pouring of rains was not allowed to them.<sup>113</sup> For instance, even in the early decades of the twentieth century, Dalits were not allowed entry into the “Nedumangadu”<sup>114</sup> market place, and subalterns like the Sambavars faced exclusions in these public spheres of society where the dominant upper castes exhibited their power and hegemonic authority. Consequently, the terror let loose by the landlords and higher castes, especially relating to the observance of pollution rules, contributed immensely to the psyche of the slave castes like the Sambavars to be conditioned by fear.<sup>115</sup>

The Sambavars also had to encounter and overcome a socio-economic context of *subversion and denial of opportunities* employed by the caste forces of Travancore society to

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<sup>112</sup> Cited in Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 120–21.

<sup>113</sup> Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 376–77.

<sup>114</sup> “Nedumangadu” is one of the counties of Trivandrum, the seat of the King of Travancore. Nedumangadu county has a high concentration of subaltern communities belonging to the Sambavar (Pariah), Cherumar (Pulaya), Vedar, Kuravar, communities. The initial MELIM outreach was to villages in this county.

<sup>115</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 63.

control and minimize the emancipation of the subalterns that was underway during this period of time. Fearing that the conferring of freedom and granting authority to the slaves to acquire property would result in gradual displacement of their own position in society, the slave owners and caste people effectively used their control and influence over the bureaucracy, judicial system, education and land, to subvert and deny emancipation of the subalterns.<sup>116</sup> As the subaltern communities were immersed in contradictory consciousness, the higher castes found it easy to sow seeds of dissension among the Sambavars and also between the various slave castes.<sup>117</sup> Also, driven by the desire to keep the social and economic order stable, the Travancore government, especially led by Diwan P. Rajagopalachari (1907–1914) advised the Parayas to “take care not to come into collision with any of their employers” and also preferred Hindu Pulayas over their Christian converts; calling upon the slave castes to follow and choose their leaders wisely.<sup>118</sup> More importantly, with the lack of accompanying economic and land reforms the emancipatory attempts for the subalterns did not consist of any tangible opportunities for them to escape from the clutches of their socio-economic and caste malice.

With emancipatory reforms for the subalterns being thwarted from within by the dominant elites of society, the Sambavars of Travancore were caught in a vicious cycle of economic conditions that naturally exhibited a reality of *subsistence and survival*. Many among the Sambavars were expert craftsmen and manufactured wickerwork, drums, bamboo mats, baskets,

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<sup>116</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 53, 56–69, 153–55.

<sup>117</sup> A good example of this practice of driving a wedge between different subaltern communities to maintain upper caste hegemony in Travancore can be seen in the socio-political struggle of the Pulayas led by their charismatic leader reformer Ayyankali. As a result of his struggles for emancipation and rights of the Pulayas and other slave castes, Ayyankali was nominated to the Travancore State Assembly (SriMoolam Praja Sabha) as a representative of the Pulayas. Very soon other Dalit leaders were also nominated to represent their people in the Assembly and Ayyankali from thereon could not form a collective opinion among the Dalits. Towards the end of his career, he started expressing a soft corner for Brahmanical organizations and also expressed complete loyalty to the State. See Nisar and Kandasamy, *Ayyankali*, 79–83, 87–89.

<sup>118</sup> See Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 162–66.

and caddie umbrellas; and also worked as gravediggers, scavengers, watchmen, sweepers and manual laborers. They irrigated their master's field and also tended horses, cattle and elephants.<sup>119</sup> Since they had almost no land of their own, the Sambavars worked as agricultural laborers for their *Jenmies* (Nair landlords) and *Routers* (Muslim landlords). Along with their wives who would make threads and bamboo mats, the family would make a total of rupees 3 in a month by working a total of 12–15 hours in a day. This income would barely help them lead a “hand to mouth” existence and there would be nothing left as savings for the future of the family. To make matters worse, they had also fallen into the habits of drunkenness and other vices. Thus, their financial struggles combined with various immoral habits contributed and exacerbated their servile existence. At the same time, some of them had accessed new avenues for work by the nineteenth and twentieth century by getting themselves employed as domestic servants of the Europeans in South India.<sup>120</sup>

In spite of the modern colonial economy of British India opening up new avenues for the Sambavars, most of them were still living a *pathetic existence of dependency*. As slaves, just like their Pulaya counterparts the Pariahs were to take permission from their landlord masters for their marriage and all children from the co-habitation belonged to the master.<sup>121</sup> Thus the dependence mentality was ingrained in the Pariah slaves from the time of their birth and continued as a part of their life till death. Also, just coming out of slavery, the Sambavars were still exhibiting a “slave mentality” that stunted their own growth and created much heart burn even among the Christian missionaries who worked amongst them. For instance, even after many years since the abolishing of slavery in Travancore, the Sambavars, just like other slave castes,

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<sup>119</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 28.

<sup>120</sup> Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual*, 1:403.

<sup>121</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 33–34.

could not imagine a life bereft of their master's control and guidance; and with servitude and submission being of second nature to them they always sought to put themselves under the protection of some higher authority.<sup>122</sup> This was also because, very few Sambavars at the turn of the twentieth century possessed ancestral property and titles, and were basically "dependents" of their landlords who controlled various aspects of their religious and social life. Their dwelling places were mostly in the land of their landlords that was leased out to them as cultivation laborers ("*kudiyans*") who could be evicted at will.<sup>123</sup> Most of them worked from day to evening in the swampy rice fields that took a toll on their mental and physical health. This along with unhygienic aspects such as living near swamps and waste led to the Sambavars frequently falling fatally ill and with mortality rates being high, the community was always at the mercy of their provider "landlords."

Further, Sambavar socio-economic existence was lived under the shadow of the various *internalized aspects of degradation* related to their slave past. In fact, the slave experience and psyche had passed on from generation to generation and by the nineteenth and twentieth century the Sambavars had been tamed to live in sub-human conditions of poverty and squalor.<sup>124</sup> They were known for wearing dirty soiled brown clothes, telling lies, having adulterous relationships, exhibiting jungle manners and for not taking bath regularly.<sup>125</sup> Untouchability was such a deeply rooted ancient superstition that there was intense caste feeling among the subalterns and they even took it as a symbol of pride and predominance to observe some form of pollution rules

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<sup>122</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 36–37, 55–56. Also, see Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, 20 October, 1942, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 29.

<sup>124</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 26.

<sup>125</sup> LCMS missionary F. R. Zucker makes these observations in the context of the MELIM work in Travancore since 1911 among the Pariahs. See F. Zucker to Home Board, Quarterly Report, 1 July, 1916, Folder India Missionaries 1916, Box No. 92, Foreign Mission Board, Supplement III, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

among themselves.<sup>126</sup> Such mirroring of the perceptions and practices of the dominant elite combined with various socio-political and economic self-interests, contributed to constant bickering among “Parayas”, “Pulayas” and other slave castes as to who was higher than the other in the caste hierarchy. This was a blessing in disguise to the slave-owners who benefited from this split and bickering within the subaltern camp. Also, according to Hindu belief the Dalit was impure because of sins committed in a previous life and so their occupations were dirty in themselves.<sup>127</sup> Such beliefs directly combined with societal caste practices had been badly internalized, such that the Pariahs who mostly lived far away on the hill-side would on the approach of a member of some high caste run way into the forest.<sup>128</sup> In spite of attempts to resist the oppression of elites, there also reigned a sense of resignation among the slave castes that they were doomed to a life of suffering and slavery. For instance, in a society where having one’s own land was necessary for personal independence, if the Sambavars possessed some economic background to purchase land; which itself was a remote possibility; it was viewed as unbecoming and impermissible on his part to act on his dream. This was also because a sense of resignation prevailed among the Sambavars as it was clear that the higher castes would not allow the previous slave castes to gain access to land by selling it to them.<sup>129</sup>

Nevertheless, the social existence of Sambavars in Travancore involved a *daily negotiation* between attempts to *resist oppression* and the lived reality of *exploitation and suffering*. The attempt to resist their oppression can be perceived from the fact that even in such an oppressed

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<sup>126</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 37.

<sup>127</sup> Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social Transformation*, 19.

<sup>128</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:120.

<sup>129</sup> This is a common practice to be found in Trivandrum even today where High castes first would try to sell their land, if they wanted to do so, to somebody within the family. If this does not happen then it is sold to somebody within the caste community or to somebody who is from another High caste community.

state the Sambavars were known for robbing, and especially killing of cows through poisoning.<sup>130</sup>

The American Lutheran missionary working among the Sambavars of Chalaikonam in the Nedumangadu district of Trivandrum mentions in his 1913 report to the Home Board in St. Louis, USA:

The heathen of higher castes take extreme offence of the Pariahs and Pulayas because they eat beef and some of the Pariahs also eat “carrion.” Now we have the Pariahs in Chalaikonam<sup>131</sup> who poisoned the cows of the Shudra farmers and then they eat the meat. The majority of the Shudras have no meat at all therefore the meat of the fallen cow is disgusting. Therefore, they leave this kind of meat to the Pariahs who work their land and they make a feast of it... However, we don’t have a concrete case or any evidence (of this thing).<sup>132</sup>

Thus even though the Lutheran missionary does not have a real incident to report on, it seems he is communicating a popular rumor afloat among the people at Chalaikonam during that time, which is also prevalent among the Sambavars even to this day.<sup>133</sup> However, at the heart of this account is the fact that even in an environment presided with fear of the Shudra landlords the subaltern Sambavars found ways to release their societal pressure by taking recourse to stealthily causing damage to their hegemonic masters. More importantly, the Sambavars tried to contest the hegemonic imposition of them being an inferior and excluded community by claiming that in their ancient past, they were either related to the Brahmins or held positions of importance and were probably even masters of the land before the arrival of the Brahmanical races.<sup>134</sup> To justify

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<sup>130</sup> Samuel Nellimukal, *Keralathile Samuhyaparivarthanam: A Study of Social History* (Kottayam: K S Books, 2003), 25–27. Further, George Oomen in his study of the subaltern Pulayas of Travancore lists “stealing and escaping” as traditional forms through which the Pulayas resisted their oppression. See Oomen, “Dalit Conversion and Social Protest,” 73.

<sup>131</sup> Chalaikonam is a Pariah village in the Nedumangadu county of Trivandrum. The American Lutheran mission started work in this place among the Pariahs in 1912.

<sup>132</sup> See Rev. F. Zucker to Home Board, Quarterly Report, October-December 1913, India Missionaries 1913 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

<sup>133</sup> Such observations can be found in the oral traditions of the Sambavar people in Trivandrum. This fact was brought to the attention of the author by Rev. Gomez who also makes a mention of this in his book. Rev. M. Gomez, interview by author, Antiyoorkonam, June 24, 2013.

<sup>134</sup> Krishna Iyer notes that the Sambavars claimed to be the “elder” brother of Brahmins, while the Brahmins

their claim, they even pointed to their sub-caste the “*Valluvans*” of Tamil Nadu being priests of the Pallava kings before and a little after the introduction of the Brahmins.<sup>135</sup> They upheld accounts of them having famous poets and saints<sup>136</sup>, and contended that they were probably the original inhabitants of the land who lost their land and ended up as slaves over course of time. For the Sambavars, this memory of the past was juxtaposed in their daily social existence with their reality of suffering and oppression, as is captured in the study of the Pariahs of Travancore in 1884 by the well-known missionary Samuel Mateer:

[T]he actual condition of the Pariahs in Travancore was and still is lamentably low. They were formerly bought and sold like cattle, starved, flogged “like buffaloes,” made to work all day for a little rice, and kept at a distance as polluted; and they still are in a position of subservience and deep degradation, not vitally differing from that of the Pulayars and Vedars. Rarely possessed any property but a small clearing, to which their rights have never been legally secured, they are employed principally in field labor, with wretched dress, dwellings, and food, no manufactures of any value, suffering from ignorance and evil habits of drunkenness and vice, and devoted to demonism and sorcery.<sup>137</sup>

Without doubt, the socio-economic struggles of the Sambavars had placed them badly in need of support and help. This aspect of the Sambavar psyche in the early twentieth century is clearly visible in the complaints of missionaries working during this period among the Dalits. For instance, the missionary Lutz observes that formerly the Pariahs and Pulayans had to put themselves abjectly under the protection of their caste master and rues the fact that even in 1942 this situation had not changed. He notes that though the degree of social degradation among the

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dismissed them as having originated from connection of Brahmin women with low caste men. See, Iyer, *Travancore Tribes*, 2:84. Also see, J. W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala: A Study of Christian Mass Movements in Relation to Neo-Hindu Socio-Religious Movements in Kerala 1850–1936* (Kerala United Theological Seminary, Trivandrum: 1984), 37. Similar observations are also made in, Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:82–85.

<sup>135</sup> J. Manickam, *Studies in Missionary History* (Madras: CLS, 1988), 156.

<sup>136</sup> The well-known poet Thiruvalluvar and poetess Auvaiyar were Sambavars. Also the Saivite saint Nandanar belonged to the Sambavar community. See Iyer, *Travancore Tribes*, 2:85.

<sup>137</sup> Samuel Mateer, “The Pariah Caste in Travancore,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (new series) 16, no. 02 (April 1884): 184.

Pariahs and Pulayans is still unbelievably oppressive, the low castes have also not helped matters because of their still lingering tendency to put themselves under someone's protection, which in the case of out-caste Christians was the "Mission"—their guardian.<sup>138</sup>

Thus, the Sambavars were a broken people dehumanized in their own land and considered as "inferior people." Moreover they were completely at the mercy of their land lords and high castes towards whom they held a highly reverential attitude to the point of fearing them and being loyal to them completely. Even by the early twentieth century, when slavery had been legally abolished for over fifty years, most of the Sambavars like other slave castes held personal affection and sentimental attachment to the landlords and higher castes that impeded their emancipation and progress.<sup>139</sup> It is to such people that the Gospel of Christ's grace and love was preached by the MELIM workers.

#### Sambavar Religio-Cultural Situation

In contrast to Brahmanical Hinduism of the hegemonic communities in Travancore, the Sambavars in the twentieth century lived and operated in their own religio-cultural universe. Sambavars, were also known as "Paraiyan" or "Pariah" probably derived from the Tamil name "*Parai*" for drum. The "drum" played an important role for the Sambavars in Travancore, as they also worked as drummers for marriages, village festivals, funerals of high caste people and when government or commercial pronouncements were made.<sup>140</sup> Furthermore, communitarian bonds were very strong among the Sambavar kinsmen as they would gather together in their villages for marriages, community concerns, festivals, and death.<sup>141</sup> Probably, before the coming of

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<sup>138</sup> Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, 20 October, 1942, 1.

<sup>139</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 56–57.

<sup>140</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:77. Also see Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 36–37.

<sup>141</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 66–68.



Brahmins into Kerala the Pariahs held a high status in society and were possibly priests to the kings. In many of their own community recollections they talked about their glorious past as original natives and rulers of the land who were tricked by their enemies into eating beef and later ostracized as beef-eaters.<sup>142</sup> Consequently, by the twentieth century their community name “Pariah” was used to signify their shameful and unchaste existence, which was frequently used derisively by the higher castes to remind the Pariahs of their inferiority in society. As a result of such cultural markers being associated with the name “Pariah,” in the nineteenth century, the Pariahs petitioned the Travancore government to refer them with the term “Sambavars”; where the term “*Sambava*” meant the worshipper of the Hindu god Shiva.<sup>143</sup> However, the Sambavars were neither “Saivites” (worshippers of Lord Shiva) nor “Vaishnavites” (worshippers of Lord Vishnu), but it seems they were ascribed the sectarian epithet of being “Saivites” because of their connection to the worship of female village deities and spirits, that were identified by Hindus with the feminine energy of Shiva.<sup>144</sup>

Even though the religious affiliation of the Sambavars and many other subaltern communities became a hot political topic especially as a result of the Census politics of the late nineteenth and twentieth century British India<sup>145</sup>, there is no denying that the Sambavars had their

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<sup>142</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 38–39. Edgar Thurston also points to this memory among the Paraiyans and notes the importance given to the Paraiyans in certain Hindu festivals. He also quotes an exalted account among the Paraiyans in Tamil country, which recounts the story of Paraiyans having descended from the Brahmin priest Sala Sambavan who conceals a portion of beef meat for his pregnant wife, instead of doing his job of offering it to Lord Shiva. As a result Sala Sambavan incurs the wrath of god and his brother is appointed in his place. Therefore the Paraiyans claim that the Brahmins are their cousins. See Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:82–85.

<sup>143</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 26.

<sup>144</sup> Thruston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:103–4.

<sup>145</sup> In the late nineteenth century census of British India the Hindus mostly did not want to include the untouchables as part of Hindu society. However, by the early twentieth century (especially 1911 census) the Hindu leaders were adamant that the untouchables were part of Hindu society. A probable reason was the arithmetic of parliamentary representation begun under the Morely-Minto Reforms of 1909–1910, wherein the Muslims complained that the Hindus grabbed more representation for themselves by including the untouchables and thereby inflating their numbers. See Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables. Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27–29.

own religious worldview and practices. In fact, the *religious practices of the Sambavars* were *markedly different from the Brahmanical form of Hinduism* that was subscribed and practiced by the dominant castes of Travancore. The American Lutheran missionary George Kuechle, talking about the religious practices of their Pariah counterparts at Yerigutti, Ambur in 1916 stated:

Though tinged with pantheism, their religion is quite different from that of the Brahmins. They care very little about the Supreme Being; their concern is to keep the village deities, thought to be females mostly, in a good mood, so they won't harm their families, cows, crops etc. it is a religion of fear through and through, and of works. They have altogether forgotten the relation God bears to them, and that religion means to open the mouth (Psalm 81) of faith wide to receive God's gift, and then to walk gratefully and humbly before that God as His children. No sunshine of love and respect is in their hearts; there is indifference in prosperity and fear in adversity; in the latter event they must bring offerings, and vow to pacify the offended goddess.<sup>146</sup>

Thus the Pariahs of Tamil country adhered to a folk religious observance that was driven mainly out of their necessity and fear. Likewise, their Sambavar kinsmen in the Malayalam speaking parts of Travancore were also entrenched in similar religio-cultural practices that were borne out of their instinctive fear, urge for safety, and existential life necessities.<sup>147</sup> Living in the “jungles of Travancore” and exposed to tough life realities, the Sambavar religio-cultural matrix was constructed and lived out in shamanistic beliefs and practices. Witchcraft, sorcery, black magic, and exorcism through demon possession were the religious beliefs and worldview of Sambavar existence.<sup>148</sup> In contrast to the Hindu gods of Padmanabha (Vishnu), Shiva, Parvathi etc., the Sambavars zealously worshipped demons like *Madan* (the cow one), *Rathachamandy Mallan* (the giant) and *Muvaratta Mallan*, *Karunkali* (black kali), *Chavus* (departed spirits), *Bhutam*, *Mantramurti*, and other *Murtis* (ghosts) being their chief demons to whom “*Kavu*”

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<sup>146</sup> Fuerbringer, “Our India Mission,” 178–79.

<sup>147</sup> Ponnuthan, *Spirituality of Basic Ecclesial Communities*, 94–96.

<sup>148</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 40.

(sacred groves) and altars were dedicated.<sup>149</sup> Even there was a difference in the Brahmanical temple as compared to the Sambavar “*Kavu*” (shrine). For if the caste Hindu temple could be visited anytime with its edifice of order exhibited in its well-spruced court yard, fine-carved and installed idols, and systemic performance of rituals; the *Paraiyan Kavu* could not be visited alone in the afternoon or evening as it bore a wild and fear-instilling look, housed around groves infested with poisonous snakes, stones and trees, that were believed to contain multitudinous spirits. Also the Sambavar religious worldview included beliefs in omens; and removing of the “evil eye” during the wedding of Paraiyan girls was common. Also, Tamil Paraiyans would wear charms procured from an exorcist to protect children and adults from harm.<sup>150</sup> Paraya devil-dancers and sorcerers were frequently employed by the Sudras and Shanars to exorcise demons; search for and dig out magical charms dug in the earth by enemies and to counteract their enchantments; and to beat the drum and discover what demon had caused affliction and find a remedy to remove it.<sup>151</sup> Also, in a divergence from the Brahmanical practice of cremating their dead, the Sambavars would bury their dead by covering the body in mats.<sup>152</sup>

An important member of the Sambavar religio-clutural world and especially their spiritual life was the *Pariah exorcist* who as their priest and guide could venture into the world of malevolent evil spirits, tame and drive them away, and thereby *provide relief and stability to their troubled fear-filled existence*.<sup>153</sup> The belief among the Sambavar community was that sickness, tragedies, loss in agriculture etc., were the handiwork of evil spirits or demons.

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<sup>149</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:135.

<sup>150</sup> Edgar Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* (London: Adelphi Terrace, 1912), 57, 117–18, 194.

<sup>151</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:135.

<sup>152</sup> Iyer, *Travancore Tribes*, 2:108–9.

<sup>153</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 70.

According to their belief, these evil spirits or forces called “*Dushta Shaktikal*” (wicked powers) were constantly interfering in human affairs and had to be propitiated or driven out.<sup>154</sup> Probably the origins for such a view of their religio-cultural reality arose from the fact that the Sambavars like the other slave castes of Travancore were exposed to pestilence and epidemics that ravaged their life and families. They were exposed to diseases like cholera, smallpox, leprosy, ulcers, venereal diseases etc. All these contributed to an increased psyche of fear that was transferred into the religious realm and articulated as the mischief played upon them by malevolent evil spirits. Therefore in order to solve these problems the people always approached the Pariah exorcist for relief and redemption from these spirits, who in turn exercised considerable influence over the people.<sup>155</sup> In the occultist shed, before the rituals were performed upon the person who was brought for his/her spirit to be exorcised; rice, coconut, bananas, flowers, chicken and arrack (drinks) would be placed. The Diviner would then place these offerings on three plantain leaves and with the client seated before him, invoke the presence of demons and repeat mantras (magical words) looking towards the east. At this time, the exorcist himself would shiver and dance in possession (“*Thullal*”), and beat the possessed person with sticks crying out “go away, go away” to drive the demon out of the possessed person. Questions would be asked to ascertain the inner details of the demon that has possessed the person, like—“Where have you come from? Who are you? Who has sent you? What do you want?” etc.<sup>156</sup> This ritual would carry

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<sup>154</sup> Sundareshan Pujari, Sambavar exorcist/pujari, interview by author, Paraiyan Kavu, Nedumangadu, July 15, 2013.

<sup>155</sup> The American Lutheran missionary Rev. Otto A. Ehlers in a report to the Home Board in St. Louis in 1918 shares the story of a Pariah congregation member Satyanesan who enters into a fight with a Sudra shopkeeper. He expects help from the missionary to solve the case, which does not materialize and then keeps away from the Lutheran Church at Tumerichel in Trivandrum. Rev. Ehlers believes that Satyanesan’s uncle an “Old would-be magician” who “still has a great deal of influence over his relatives” is responsible for this, and expects the members to come back once the uncle passes away. See Otto A. Ehlers to Home Board, Quarterly Report, 18 November, 1918, India Missionaries 1918 file, Box No. 92, Foreign Mission Board, Supplement III, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>156</sup> Sundareshan Pujari, Sambavar exorcist/pujari, interview by author, Paraiyan Kavu, Nedumangadu, July

on for hours till the possessed person would fall unconscious before the exorcist. This would be seen as a sign that the person has been healed and the demon driven out of the possessed person. This demon or evil spirit was now caught by the exorcist and carried into the jungle where after further mantras, a fowl was sacrificed.<sup>157</sup> On completion of the ritual, the exorcist would receive all the things placed for the ritual and also a “*dakshina*” (material remuneration) for his valuable service in driving away the evil spirit that was afflicting his client and for providing the person relief.<sup>158</sup>

Pariah religiosity and life also prioritized *veneration of their dead ancestors* who were remembered and invoked for “protection.” During festivals such as Onam<sup>159</sup> and also other important family occasions the family would lay a banana leaf with food served in it for the departed ancestor. This offering in memory of the ancestor —“*Thekkathu*”—would be placed and a lamp would be lighted (“*Thiri Kathikuka*”) outside the house on the occasion to remember the dead ancestral spirit. The lighted lamp also served as a warning for evil spirits trying to enter the household of the dead ancestor that its inhabitants are under the protection of a “strong spirit.”<sup>160</sup> In addition, the souls of ancestors called “*Marutha*” would be worshipped by tying young cocoa-leaves to the bottom of a tree where a small shed would be erected on poles and

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15, 2013. Mr. Sundareshan comes from a family of Sambavar exorcists who have been rendering service at the “Paraiyan Kavu” for decades.

<sup>157</sup> Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions*, 136.

<sup>158</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 70.

<sup>159</sup> Onam is the Hindu harvest festival in Kerala that is celebrated by all the people belonging to different religious groups in Kerala. It is celebrated in the month of “Chingam” (August-September) and is connected to the mythical native king “Mahabali” visiting his people every year.

<sup>160</sup> Mr. Wilson and Mrs. Usha, interview by author, Antiyoorkonam, Trivandrum, July 5, 2013. Both Mr. Wilson and Mrs. Usha are members of the Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) that was established by the Sambavar leader Poikayil Yohannan. The Sabha is a syncretistic mix of Christian and subaltern folk religious traditions. Mrs. Usha grew up in a home that adhered to the Paraya religious tradition of “Thullal” and veneration of ancestors.

decorated with garlands of flowers.<sup>161</sup> The ceremony would be performed on behalf of the spirits of the departed by placing fish, cooked meat, rice, parched grain, plantain fruits, coconuts, toddy and other things on a leaf and a lamp would be lighted in front of it. Then the officiating priest of this feeding ceremony would invoke the ancestor spirit saying,

You have run your life without trouble.

We are in difficulties.

Be gracious to us, as other deities are.<sup>162</sup>

In such worship of the ancestor-spirit, the belief was that the ancestor would partake of the food which has been procured for them with much difficulty, allowing them to rest in peace and also provide protection to members of the family. On such occasions one of the men, becoming inspired would act part of an oracle and address those assembled.<sup>163</sup> Thus the eschatology of an ordinary Paraiyan and his/her conception of life after death was a vague belief that the departed soul continued in its existence somewhere after death. Such an understanding of departed spirits developed the belief in Sambavars that whenever calamity befalls a village or individual through pestilence, famine, or cattle disease, it was due to malevolent spirits that needed appeasing and propitiation. Samuel Mateer captures this fear factor among the Pariahs even after they became Christians, and observes:

Even after commencing attendance on Christian worship they are easily alarmed by the occurrence of sickness, which is attributed by their relatives remaining in heathenism to the attacks of the demons whom they have deserted.<sup>164</sup>

Thus, Sambavar religiosity was based on their real life experience of suffering and fear, and the need for protection. In their daily living there was no doubt that the forces of evil were

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<sup>161</sup> Mateer, "The Pariah Caste," 185.

<sup>162</sup> Iyer, *Travancore Tribes*, 2:95

<sup>163</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:129.

<sup>164</sup> Mateer, "The Pariah Caste," 186.

the ones with power; as they could testify from their social, political and economic context. Likewise they also found that these powerful forces were at work in their religio-cultural world and they called upon and trusted the departed spirits of ancestors to protect them from the onslaught of evil forces.

Even as the Sambavars were harassed by the malevolent spirit world, their religious practices also served as a tool of *resistance* which *instilled fear in others*. For instance, as a part of their belief and practice of sorcery and black magic, the “*Odi*” cult (breaking the human body) was a known black magic practice in which Sambavars were believed to be proficient. In the nineteenth century, the Odiyan was feared because he was contracted by men to get rid of enemies. The “*Odiyan*” (paraiyan magician) was believed to have special bewitching powers through which he could compel pregnant women to come to him, and from whom then he would proceed to extract the female foetus, and from it the “*pilla thilum*” (oil of infant). On use of this “*pilla thilum*” the Odiyan was believed to gain special powers of invisibility or transform themselves into any shape or form, through which he would cause harm or murder victims.<sup>165</sup> In fact, stories of the presence of such Black magicians made sure that when the first born male child died, since his body was supposed to possess special virtues, he was buried close to or inside the house in order to guard the corpse from being carried off by a witch or sorcerer.<sup>166</sup>

Also the efficacy of Paraiyan black magic was dreaded and to some extent it probably served as

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<sup>165</sup> Thurston quotes a particular incident in 1834 when inhabitants of several villages in Malabar attacked a village of Paraiyans by allegedly attributing the death of people and cattle, and the protracted labor of a woman in childhood, to their practice of sorcery. The Paraiyans were beaten and many died, as the villagers were driven bound into a river and immersed under water and their own children were forced to rub sand into their wounds. Their settlement was razed to the ground and they were banished from their place of living. Also another incident in 1829 relating to practice of Odi cult is mentioned. See Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:130. Also see, Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions*, 226. More importantly, even today in popular perception among Sambavars in the villages of Trivandrum where MELIM churches are established, one can hear the talk of Odiyans and their work.

<sup>166</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:108–9. Even today many Sambavars (including Christian Sambavars) hold on to this practice of burying their dead first child, especially males, within the house.

a social control to the excesses of higher caste oppressive tendencies.<sup>167</sup> However, at times it also provided the grounds for other communities to attack Paraiyars and their villages allegedly on grounds of sorcery and black magic being used to target their communities.<sup>168</sup>

Even in the cultural sphere of life in Travancore, the Sambavars were degraded and a sense of inferiority was inculcated in them. For instance, the Sambavars lived in a society where *language and culture were used as internalizing tools to degrade and dehumanize* them. During the slave period, the Sambavars could not speak the language of the ordinary people and were forced to use degrading words such as “*Adiyan*” (servant) to refer to themselves and their families; while his children had to be addressed as “monkeys” and “*Kidaqals*” (calves). Their dwelling places were to be called “*Chalas*” (huts) and money for them was “*Chembukakkasu*” (copper coin). If they were to violate any orders of the landlords then the same was considered “*Swajnavirodham*” (enmity with their own caste) and “*Desavirodham*” (enmity with residents of the village) and anybody aiding or sympathizing with such people were punished or fined.<sup>169</sup> These cultural and linguistic elements of subaltern life in Travancore had worked itself into the very core of the individual and communitarian life of the subalterns, such that even after abolishing slavery in 1855 the use of language such as—“*Tampuran*” (god and Lord) or “*Yeman*” (master) for the landlord, and “*Adiyan*” (slave) for the low-caste agricultural and landless laborers—was invariably in use even for young male members of the master.<sup>170</sup> Also, the Pariahs had developed a secret slave language amongst themselves to communicate among themselves, especially when oppressive forces represented by the landlords were around them.

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<sup>167</sup> Thurston, *Castes and Tribes*, 6:122–23. Also see, Mateer, “The Pariah Caste,” 186. Similar observation can be seen about Pulaya Black magicians. See Oomen, “Dalit Conversion and Social Protest,” 72.

<sup>168</sup> See Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions*, 232.

<sup>169</sup> “Social Situation: The Caste System in Travancore,” *Blessed Devasahayam Pillai, Martyr*, accessed October 14, 2015, <http://www.martyrdevasahayam.org/Social-Situation3.php>.

<sup>170</sup> Sadasivan, *A Social History of India*, 400.



This secret language, probably a “resistance” element to safeguard them against landlord oppression<sup>171</sup>, was a corrupt form of the local language that when combined with the illiteracy of the Sambavars contributed to perceptions about the un-civilized ways and language of the Pariahs. Further, while conversing, the house of the master was to be called “*Illam*” (mansion) while his own hut was “*Madam*.” Even going for a meal had to be mentioned as “*Vella kudi*” (to drink water) and his rice was referred as “*Kari-Kadi*” (dirty gruel). Furthermore, his resting time of sleep was to be mentioned as “*Nilampotthi*” (covered the ground).<sup>172</sup> With little or no education, these forms of speech continued well into the early twentieth century and contributed to the shaping of an inferior mindset and lack of self-confidence among the Sambavars in their daily interactions with the higher castes in Travancore.

Thus we see that the religio-cultural world of the Sambavars consisted of a worldview where the evil spirits and demons had to be appeased in order to maintain some stability and peace in their lives. Undoubtedly, the Sambavars lived in a *world of fear* religio-culturally where evil spirits and demons were out to destroy their already troubled existence in the world. It is to such a worldview that the gospel of Christ, who healed the “demon possessed” and overcame the “evil of the world,” was shared by MELIM workers.

### **Subaltern Awakening in Travancore in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century**

As in other parts of India, Travancore also witnessed a spurt of subaltern awakening in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Protestant Christianity introduced values of equality, rationality, individuality and liberalism, in an environment of colonial British rule. Colonialism

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<sup>171</sup> One could argue that the use of secret language by the Pariah laborers was a way of resisting and safeguarding their interests to the best of their ability against the oppressive landlord and their goons. See Dileep V., “Communication through Secret Language: A Case Study based on Parayas’ Secret Language,” *Then and Now Blog*, accessed July 10, 2015, <http://pazhayathu.blogspot.com/2011/12/parayas-secret-language-study-by.html>.

<sup>172</sup> Gnanadason, *A Forgotten History*, 31–32.

also ushered in the era of modernity through English education, civil administration, emphasis on science and technology, and the rationalization of the social, economic and civil spheres.<sup>173</sup> All this, and especially the work of Christian missions in the villages of India, contributed to the emergence of the emancipatory ideation and praxis among the subaltern people.<sup>174</sup> The low caste Nadars of Travancore and Tamil country could be singled out as one such success story of a subaltern community, which through protest, conversion, mobilization and self-assertion, were able to overcome oppression and their caste disabilities.<sup>175</sup> Another low caste community that benefited from the subaltern awakening of the nineteenth and twentieth century were the Ezhavas of Travancore. They too followed a similar strategy like the Nadars for self-emancipation and even caught the attention of Christian missionaries for conversion. Through their caste organization called Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) established in 1903 they were able to achieve identity and self-respect, and also became a powerful political force. However, through the intervention of Indian nationalistic leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and the Hindu administration of Travancore,<sup>176</sup> the Ezhavas under their leader Sri Narayana Guru won the right for Temple entry through the proclamation of 1936 and remained within the Hindu fold.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 65.

<sup>174</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 65.

<sup>175</sup> The Nadars (during the nineteenth and early twentieth century called Shanars) of Travancore collectively protested against the “poll tax” levied on them and also against the practice of their women having to uncover their bosoms before the High castes. Emboldened by their association with British missionaries and officials they also refused to easily give in to “uzhiyam” services. These protests and struggle by the Nadars bore fruit as the Travancore Government abolished the practice of uncovering the bosoms through the proclamation of 1859. See Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 65–73.

<sup>176</sup> Mahatma Gandhi visited and supported the Vaikom Satyagraha which was aimed at opening up of the approach roads to the temple for all communities including low caste communities for whom it was banned. Gandhi’s plea to the Hindu administration in Travancore and the High castes brought this Satyagraha and its related issue to national attention. See Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 175–79.

<sup>177</sup> Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 381–86.

Even other powerful communities were able to mobilize their people living in the lower rungs of their society and became increasingly assertive. For instance the Syrian Christian community at this time was able to educate themselves and economically improve their position over against many others. Consequently, through their many newspapers they started challenging the high-caste Hindu monopoly over government institutions and started demanding more opportunities for their people. Likewise, the Nairs also became politically active by forming the Nair Service Society (NSS) in 1914 to secure and maintain their position and monopoly in society. Even the Muslims in Travancore became assertive and fought for better education, and jobs in the government, through their newspaper publications and representatives in the Travancore Assembly. At the same time, the subaltern awakening also resulted in the slave castes like the Pulayas and Parayas becoming more emboldened and aggressive in seeking their rights and better opportunities from society. Led by Ayyankali, the Pulaya Reformer, the Pulayas forced their way into the roads, market places and public sphere, from which they were virtually excluded despite the government circular of 1884.<sup>178</sup> In a direct challenge, unthinkable for the previous slave castes even in the twentieth century, Ayyankali led his Pulaya members to refuse working for the Nair landlords until they permitted their children to enter schools. Through his Sadu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS—Association for the Welfare of the Poor) he sought to educate the Dalits of their rights and duties, fought for opening up of hospitals for the Dalits, and were even able to fight back the Nairs in the ensuing “Pulaya” riots of 1914–1915. Even though the Parayas and low-caste Christians joined the SJPS they soon felt neglected and formed their own associations. The Parayas formed the Brahma Pratyaksha Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham under the leadership of Kandan Kumaran Parayan and fought for school openings for their

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<sup>178</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 158–60.

children and jobs in the government. On the other hand, low-caste Christians formed the Christian Sadhu Jana Sangham to fight for improved social position through education and also to represent their grievances to the Government.<sup>179</sup>

The subaltern awakening of the nineteenth and twentieth century resulted in the Travancore administration taking steps or being forced to keep itself in line with the aspirations of the majority. Accordingly, reform measure were initiated that included the abolition of slavery (1855), the re-organization of judiciary, introduction of English education, abolition of Devadasi (temple prostitution) system, and Temple entry proclamation for people of all castes (1936).<sup>180</sup> Further, a number of reforms in all areas of the administration were introduced, that included creation of many educational and medical institutions, building of public roads and buildings, and granting of full ownership of “sirkar pattam land” to the holders.<sup>181</sup>

While the subaltern awakening was taking place in Travancore in the nineteenth and twentieth century, the higher castes had started employing new strategies to minimize and impede the winds of change. However, in the twentieth century the subalterns attempted to challenge these strategies by leveraging their collective strength and making appeals to alternative power structures that exerted influence in Travancore. This can be seen in their Memorandum submitted to the British Resident C. P. Shrine of Travancore in 1937.

The Depressed classes of Travancore consisting of the members of the Pulaya, Paraya and other communities representing about eight lakhs of the population, all laboring under untold disabilities. From time immemorial we are the agricultural laboring classes, and our profession and the social oppression have reduced us to the position of agricultural serfs, tied down to the landlords whose interest it is that we should not develop either mentally or morally and become free citizens of the State . . . we are lying in the clutches of the land owners, and live in miserable hovels exposed to the severities of sun, rain and frost, huddled up like cattle, forced to toil for increasing the

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<sup>179</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 160–61.

<sup>180</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 18.

<sup>181</sup> Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, 35–36.

wealth of our masters, half-starved and clad in dirty rags . . . with the result that we are absolutely illiterate and ignorant. Owing to abject poverty we are not in a position to take advantage of the existing educational facilities which accounts for the absence of our pupils in most of the existing schools. As a community we are landless people and in spite of the orders of the Government, repeated obstacles were placed in the way of the assignment of the Government waste lands to us by the caste Hindu Revenue officers . . . during the last six years, the uplift work has not reached most of the Taluks of the State . . . we submit that our stomachs are still empty and starving and are still sunk in illiteracy and crushed as serfs under the heels of the tyrannous landlords and other vested interests. We know and feel that His Imperial Majesty the King Emperor is the one and the ultimate Protector which the depressed class men has to fall back upon as the last resort in the whole world, and it is our fervent hope that you, as the Representative of His Majesty will be graciously pleased to plead our cause with the Government of Travancore.<sup>182</sup>

From the above Memorandum of the subalterns in Travancore it is clear that even in the twentieth century the subaltern communities like the Sambavars continued to fight a difficult battle for their emancipation and survival. Thus, it was in such a background of weakened Indian monarchy, overpowering British colonizers and oppressive power wielding intermediary high castes of Travancore, that the subaltern people experienced subordination and exploitation; against which they had now started showing signs of resistance and a willingness to pro-actively work for emancipation.<sup>183</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen how the Malayalam speaking Sambavars of Travancore lived and survived as a subaltern community in the midst of tremendous disabilities. Even though slavery was abolished legally in 1855 the existing socio-economic and religio-cultural power structures were still intact. More importantly, the dominant caste communities had succeeded in maintaining their hegemony over societal life in Travancore by taking advantage of the socio-economic and religio-cultural benefits they accrued over centuries. It is in such a context of

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<sup>182</sup> Kusuman, *Slavery in Travancore*, 153–55.

<sup>183</sup> Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 53.

political and socio-cultural churning that the subaltern Sambavars, driven by their own critical consciousness in an environment of subaltern awakening in Travancore, turned to the Lutheran Christian missionaries for new life and actualizing of their aspirations.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **GOSPEL WORK AMONG THE SUBALTERNS OF TRIVANDRUM: THE MISSOURI EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN INDIA MISSION (MELIM) COMMUNITY, 1911–1956.**

Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has taken believers from different parts of the world into new areas and cultures. This has been the history of Christian missions and in the 1900s one such Christian mission from America made its way to the Malayalam speaking natives of South Travancore to bring the gospel message to them. In this time period, the American Lutheran mission's interaction with the natives was set within the context of aspirations for socio-economic and religio-cultural change. In the last chapter, we have been introduced to the contextual milieu of South Travancore and the severe disabilities that pervaded the life of the subaltern natives. In this subsequent chapter we take a look at the history of the American Lutheran mission in the Malayalam speaking lands of South Travancore to see how this Christianizing mission carried out its task of engaging an alien culture and proclaiming the gospel to it.

#### **MELIM in India**

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Ohio, Missouri and Other States (Missouri Synod) since its organization in 1847 had kept a mission focus and worked among the immigrant Lutherans coming to America and had also initiated work among the American Indians.<sup>1</sup> By the late 1850s they were supporting the efforts of the Leipzig Lutheran Mission in India which was gradually terminated by 1876 under grounds of liberal doctrinal positions infiltrating this

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<sup>1</sup> Griesse, "Lutheran Indian Missions," 4.

mission. Subsequently, by the 1890s the Missouri Synod started planning for its own foreign mission outreach for proclaiming the gospel grounded in its conservative Lutheran confessions and interpretation. After initially settling for Japan as its first mission station, the Missouri Synod had to make its move to India due to the conditions in Japan not being conducive for mission work. As a result, urged on by missionaries Prof. F. Zucker and Rev. C. M. Zorn, who had previously worked in India under Leipzig and were now members of the Missouri Synod, the Missouri Synod decided to start work in India. To send its initial missionaries, the Missouri Synod established contact with missionaries Theodore Naether and Franz Mohn who in 1893 had resigned from the Indian Leipzig Mission based on their position of “verbal inspiration of scripture,” and interviewed them in America. On determining that their doctrinal beliefs coincided with conservative Lutheran teaching, Naether and Mohn were commissioned to work in India for the Missouri Synod on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1894 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, St. Charles, in the mid-western American state of Missouri. Consequently, Rev. Theodore Naether and Rev. Franz Mohn came to South India on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1895 and started work at Krishnagiri, 163 miles west of Madras<sup>2</sup> in the Salem district of the “State of Madras<sup>3</sup>,” ruled directly by the British.

The arrival of Naether and Mohn for gospel proclamation in South India gave birth to the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM) that slowly established itself through the work of its missionaries. In the first 10 years the Missouri missionaries of Naether, Mohn, Kellerbauer, and Freche (all German nationals who had resigned from the Leipzig mission), and missionaries A. Huebener, F. Forster and G. Naumann from America, worked around

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<sup>2</sup> Today the city of Madras is called as “Chennai.”

<sup>3</sup> Today the State of Madras, as it was called during the British period of Indian rule, is called the Indian state of “Tamil Nadu” where the Tamil language is the native language.



Krishnagiri, Ambur, Bargur and Vaniyambadi. In these mission stations, all within a 50–60 mile radius, the missionaries went about teaching and preaching in most of the neighborhood villages and outposts. During this period of work even though most of the converts were from the out-caste groups and the number of converts not very encouraging, the missionaries stood firm in doctrine and at the same time displayed sacrificing leadership to the natives. In one such incident in 1904 that had a significant impact on the missionaries and the people they reached, Rev. Theodore Naether lost his children and himself became a victim to the bubonic plague that hit the native population whom he served during this time. Even in the midst of such tragic circumstances, Missouri missionaries carried on work in their areas regularly meeting for Conferences, reporting to the Home Board the progress of their work, and preaching and serving the natives.<sup>4</sup> As a result of their efforts and their attempts to proclaim the gospel to others, the Missouri Mission in South India had by the latter part of the 1900s caught the attention of other subaltern groups in seeking its services.

### **Subaltern Sambavars<sup>5</sup> of South Travancore and MELIM Work in the Region**

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the subaltern Sambavars of South Travancore lived under the yoke of severe social and religious disabilities for several centuries. By the turn of the twentieth century, many of the subaltern communities in South Travancore were actively seeking and agitating for a better future.

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<sup>4</sup> Griesse, “Lutheran Indian Missions,” 5–8.

<sup>5</sup> As we have seen in the last chapter, the Sambavars were the agrestic laborer caste in South Travancore who worked for the landlords mainly in the paddy fields. They were called with different names—mainly “Pariahs.” Other variants of the name included, Parayas, Paraiyar, and Parayan. The Sambavars were also included in generic categories like—Panchama, Untouchables, Low-caste, Depressed classes, Harijan, Dalit etc. during this period. In this paper, “Pariah” (which the MELIM missionaries used) and “Sambavar” (the new name used by the community) will be used interchangeably.

## Gnanamuthu Jesudason and the Tamil<sup>6</sup> Sambavar Initiative for Christianization

The Sambavars were just one of the many subaltern groups who badly wanted to escape centuries of degradation through leadership provided by enlightened leaders<sup>7</sup> of their community. For the Sambavars of Nagercoil<sup>8</sup> this role was played by Gnanamuthu Jesudason. Having grown as a member of the London Mission Society<sup>9</sup> (LMS), G. Jesudason had also participated in helping the Salvation Army Mission establish a presence in Nanjil Nadu<sup>10</sup> during his youth. However, he was disillusioned about the lack of interest in either of these missions to take up serious work among the Sambavars of South Travancore. Actively encouraged by his community men, Jesudason who was working as a clerk in the office of the British Resident in Trivandrum then took it upon himself to search for a suitable Christian mission that would work among his people. After initial attempts to get the American Baptist Mission, and also after reaching out to the Baptist “Ceylon and India General Mission” and the American Presbyterian Mission; Jesudason succeeded in establishing contact with Rev. Heinrich (Henry) Nau (1905–1914) of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission (MELIM). In his initial request to missionary Nau in the December of 1906 he invited the missionary to preach the gospel in five Panchama<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Even though Travancore State was ruled by a Maharajah who mainly administered through the “Malayalam” language, the areas beyond Marthandam and around Nagercoil were mainly “Tamil” speaking.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, around this time other subaltern community groups were led by charismatic leaders like—Ayyankali, the leader and reformer for the Cheramars (Pulayas); Narayana Guru—the spiritual leader and Kumaran Asan—reformer of the Ezhava community etc.

<sup>8</sup> Nagercoil is a city about 12 miles from the southern tip of India. During the period under consideration for our research (the late nineteenth and early twentieth century), Nagercoil was part of the princely state of Travancore. The people and Sambavars in this part of Travancore were Tamil speaking.

<sup>9</sup> London Mission Society (LMS) was a non-denominational Christian missionary society formed in England in 1795 to take the gospel message around the world. It mainly consisted of the evangelical Anglicans and non-Conformists, and was Congregational in its theological approach.

<sup>10</sup> Nanjil Nadu was one of the Taluks (county) of South Travancore that had a sizeable presence of agrestic laborers involved in rice farming.

<sup>11</sup> During British times, the untouchable castes were addressed with different categories and names. Some of the names included—Panchamas, Outcastes, Depressed classes, Low-castes, Pariahs etc.

villages in Nagercoil, who he believed were ready to embrace the Christian faith.

While making his request Jesudason noticed that MELIM was working in the Northern Tamil country of Salem and North Arcot districts around Ambur and Krishnagiri, and appealed for spiritual help for the thirty thousand Panchamas who according to the census of 1901 were living in the six taluks (counties) that constituted the southern division of Travancore.<sup>12</sup>

According to Jesudason, this active seeking of spiritual help by contacting different Christian missions was born out of the desire to seek Christian work among his Sambavar people who were neglected by the hundred year work of the London Mission, and who remained in darkness still worshipping devils and evil spirits.<sup>13</sup> Missionary Nau on his part wanted Jesudason to reply to some of his questions:

(1) Are these people of the 5 villages Hindus from the beginning or whether they were Christians of other missions who turned back later on? (2) Why do they desire to join our mission? What is their aim? (3) Why should they not join the missions which are already working there? (4) To which mission do you belong? (5) What connection do you have with them?"<sup>14</sup>

Jesudason provided answers to Nau's questions and consequently his request was presented and discussed in the missionary Conference at Ambur, where it was decided that Rev. Albert A. Huebner (1900–1919) and Rev. George A. Naumann (1902–1917) would visit the five villages in Travancore and report back to the Conference.<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, Rev. Huebener and Rev. Naumann visited Nagercoil and toured the possible village stations on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 1907, where they were invited by the independent Pariah congregation in Vadaseri, led by Mr. Isaac

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<sup>12</sup> G. Jesudason, "Extension of Work of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in India," *Lutheran Witness* 36, no. 21 (Pittsburgh, 1907): 157.

<sup>13</sup> G. Jesudason, "Early History of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Nagercoil District," Madras, 24 August, 1948, India Missionaries 1913 File, Foreign Mission Board, Supplement III, CHI Archives, St. Louis, MO, 4–12. This document was submitted by MELIM missionaries to the Home Board in St. Louis in 1952.

<sup>14</sup> Jesudason, "Early History," 12.

<sup>15</sup> Jesudason, "Extension of Work," 157.

Nathaniel and whose members had seceded from the Salvation Army Mission around twelve years back, to take up work among them.<sup>16</sup>

#### MELIM's Acceptance of the "Call" and Beginnings of Work in South Travancore

Accepting the call for gospel proclamation involved careful consideration and visionary judgment on the part of MELIM. In their independent explorations of this possible mission site in Travancore the MELIM missionaries found that this was a native princely State under the jurisdiction of a Maharajah<sup>17</sup> with differences in law, administration, currency and climate, from that of Salem and North Arcot districts which were under the British administered Madras Presidency. Also they found that the caste laws here were much stricter than in many other sections of India and that the out-caste Pariahs and Pulayas were virtual slaves whose condition had not ameliorated to any great extent due to lack of political and social privileges.<sup>18</sup> Taking all this into consideration and also the fact that many Panchamas and other castes had not been touched by the gospel, the MELIM missionaries resolved to go down to Travancore and work in the southern Tamil field around Nagercoil. While taking this decision they also had to take into account the objections that were raised by the London Missionary Society (LMS) missionaries and that of the Salvation Army who had previously been working in these areas. However, their objections were over-ruled in favor of working among the Sambavars of Nagercoil, and consequently the MELIM missionary Rev. A. Huebener and Rev. Theodore Gutknecht (1907–1916, 1922–1928) came down to Nagercoil, the southernmost part of the princely State of Travancore on the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 1907 to work among Tamil speaking Sambavars led by G.

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<sup>16</sup> Jesudason, "Extension of Work," 157. Also see, G. Jesudason, "Our Work in Travancore, South India," *Lutheran Witness* 28, no. 9 (Pittsburg: 1909), 275–76.

<sup>17</sup> Maharajah was the title used to address the local native King.

<sup>18</sup> Griesse, "Lutheran Indian Missions," 10.

Jesudason. Their initial outreach was based from the independent congregation at Vadaseri which expanded to preaching in five Panchama villages of Thattiarkulam cheri, Ootumadam, Kulathucheri, Vadaseri-Puliadi and Kannanpudur.<sup>19</sup>

With the beginning of the new work in South Travancore, Rev. Henry Nau also joined the other two missionaries in 1908 and Rev. G. Huebener (1909–1917) joined in 1909 to reach new villages around Nagercoil.<sup>20</sup> G. Jesudason became active in the mission as a teacher and started receiving theological education from the missionaries with the expectation of becoming the mission’s first native preacher to the congregations that were drawn from the Panchama community—one living from hand to mouth, the degraded and the down-trodden.<sup>21</sup>

#### MELIM Entry into Malayalam Areas

With the start of Lutheran work among the Sambavars of Nagercoil the message started reaching others that a new Christian mission had made its entry in the territory of South Travancore. This was not difficult given the fact that MELIM used to advertise its work in the local newspapers and magazines, which resulted in many individuals and communities writing about possibilities for mission work. Very soon it would also dawn upon the MELIM missionaries that this was a time when many communities were competing for opportunities to have a Christian mission in their midst.

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<sup>19</sup> Jesudason, “Early History,” 23. Also see, Jesudason, “Our Work in Travancore,” 275–76.

<sup>20</sup> See Minutes of *Conference of Missionaries in Nagercoil*, 31 Aug., 1909, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also, *Minutes of Travancore Conference*, 13 Nov., 1909, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>21</sup> See L. Fuerbringer, “Mission Stations of the Missouri Synod in Travancore, India,” *Lutheran Witness* 30, No. 17, (Pittsburgh: 1911), 131. Also see, Jesudason, “Our Work in Travancore,” 260.

## **LMS<sup>22</sup> Congregation at Paruthipally and the Malayalee Sambavar Invitation to MELIM**

As we saw in the last chapter, the Sambavars in South Travancore held strong kinship bonds among themselves. Given this strong sense of relationship, it was not before long that the message of the Lutheran mission working among the Tamil Sambavars in South Travancore traveled fifty miles and reached the Malayalam speaking Sambavars in Trivandrum. This was possible because G. Jesudason himself worked in Trivandrum for the British Resident's Office, and there were other people from Nagercoil working, studying and traveling back and forth to Trivandrum and vice versa.<sup>23</sup> In any case, in the context of an aspirational subaltern awakening the Malayalee Sambavars of South Travancore by the turn of the twentieth century were also looking out for new opportunities to actualize emancipation from their own existential struggles. Among them too there were disillusioned leaders who were seeking a Christian mission who would work exclusively among them. One such Sambavar leader was Arulanandam, a local LMS believer at Paruthipally near Kuttichel, who had left the LMS along with his colleague Canchanam who was from a mixed caste.

The LMS congregation at Paruthipally was organized in the 1840s through the work of LMS missionary John Cox and other native workers. In course of time missionary Cox bought a three hundred acre Coffee estate in the nearby jungles to provide employment and support to the congregation members who on account of their association with the European missionary had to

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<sup>22</sup> London Missionary Society church adhered to the congregational outlook and stood within the larger Calvinist tradition. Today this congregation near Kuttichel is called the Church of South India (CSI), Paruthipally.

<sup>23</sup> During this time not only was there mobility among the people between Nagercoil and Trivandrum on account of government jobs, but because of the Boarding schools and other institutions of the London Mission Society (LMS) and other Christian missions. For instance, G. Jesudason reports of the LMS catechist Lalas trying to caution the people against the work of the Lutheran mission led by Arulanandam and Canchanam, who himself turns out to be a student colleague of Jesudason during youth. See, Jesudason, "Early History," 28–29. Also, catechist Lalas is mentioned as one of the native workers of missionary John Cox in, P. Huebert, "Church History of Paruthipally CSI Church" in Tatchenkodu Vijayan (ed.), *A Memory Bowl—170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Paruthipally CSI* ed. Tatchenkodu Vijayan (Trivandrum: CSI Paruthipally, 2010), 21.

face terrible miseries at the hands of the local “Jemmies” (landlords).<sup>24</sup> The area of this Coffee estate, which ceased to exist in course of time, later came to be known as “Mykkadu Mala”<sup>25</sup> and was possibly a place where other LMS Christians would have been employed. In the years between 1905 and 1907, Travancore saw social tensions and conflicts between the higher castes led by the Nair landlords against the lower castes and communities like the Ezhavas and the Pulayas.<sup>26</sup> The ensuing social upheaval affected and also triggered responsive desires among other community groups in Travancore to stand up and fight for their rights.

Probably, in a societal atmosphere of the subaltern desire for protection from violent upper caste goons coupled with subaltern aspiration for better facilities and rights, the LMS congregation at Paruthipally (Kuttichel) underwent a split in 1905–1906, with a sizeable section of the Sambavar members leaving the LMS congregation to start an independent congregation near Paruthipally.<sup>27</sup> In course of time, led by Arulanandam and Canchanam,<sup>28</sup> this group extended their presence in at least four Sambavar villages in the vicinity and started seeking the presence of a Christian missionary to work among them.<sup>29</sup> Probably the impetus for this work came from the conversion of the local Sambavar exorcist “Madan” who as a result of the work of

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<sup>24</sup> See Huebert, “Church History of Paruthipally,” 19.

<sup>25</sup> “Mykkadu” Mala (hills) is remembered in popular memory around Kuttichel as a local vernacular aberration of what missionary John Cox referred to as “My God” on seeing the beauty of the Coffee estate’s hills and its surroundings. See Huebert, “Church History of Paruthipally,” 20.

<sup>26</sup> During the 1905–1907 time period there were conflicts between the Ezhavas and the Nairs, and also especially between the Pulayas (another subaltern low caste like the Sambavars) and the higher caste Nairs. In fact, around the 1900s, the Pulayas agitated for admission of their children into schools which was strongly resisted by the higher castes leading to clashes in many places. Also under their charismatic reformer and leader Ayyankali, the Pulayas had started challenging the age old customs prohibiting access to the “public space” of Travancore. See Nisar and Kandasamy, *Ayyankali*, 66–69.

<sup>27</sup> Rev. Knoernschild in his report to the Home Board in 1933, while talking about the pensioned Catechist P. J. Canchanam talks about his work in starting work at Kuttichel independently in 1905. Further he mentions about a “coworker in these first efforts was buried last year.” See Rev. E. H. Knoernschild to Home Board, Quarterly Report, 13 June, 1933, St. Louis, 4. Also, see Huebert, “Church History of Paruthipally,” 21, 23.

<sup>28</sup> Canchanam Upadeshi’s father in law was the LMS catechist Lalas who has been mentioned in the memoirs of Rev. G. Jesudason. Lalas did not belong to the Ezhava caste to which Canchanam partly belonged.

<sup>29</sup> Jesudason, “Our Work in Travancore,” 277.

Arulanandam and Canchanam had converted to “Markose.”<sup>30</sup> As pointed out by Indian Church historian Dr. George Oomen, in most cases of conversion to Christianity among the subalterns of Travancore, the conversion of the community leader (mostly the “exorcists”) acted as a trigger to generate interest for Gospel work.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the work of Arulanandam and Canchanam took off in the Sambavar villages around Kuttichel and Puliyoorkonam<sup>32</sup> (near Kattakada) after the conversion of the Sambavar exorcist Madan.

By 1908, news had reached the Malayalee Sambavars in Kuttichel (Paruthipally) that MELIM was working among their Tamil Sambavar kinsmen in Nagercoil. Probably this information was shared by one of the Lutheran congregation member from Vadasery who was working in the Coffee estate at Mykkadu Mala, near Kuttichel.<sup>33</sup> On knowing of the Lutheran mission work in Nagercoil, Arulanandam and Canchanam had somewhere in 1908 started contacting the Lutheran missionaries in Nagercoil through Mr. Jesudason with an invitation to work among them, but their request was denied due to lack of missionaries and resources to take

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<sup>30</sup> Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 70–71. Also, “Markose” is a Malayalam equivalent for “Mark.”

<sup>31</sup> Oomen, “Dalit Conversion and Social Protest,” 77–78.

<sup>32</sup> According to the oral remembrance of the people, the villagers of Puliyoorkonam near the town of Kattakada were members of the LMS Church at Kattakada. Somewhere around this same time period (1904–1907), the Sambavar Christians from Puliyoorkonam split from the church on feeling neglected and oppressed by the other dominant communities within the church. Mr. Vincent Paul, interview by author, Puliyoorkonam, Kattakada, July 3, 2013. Mr. Vincent Paul is a member of Puliyoorkonam Lutheran Church, whose father M. Paulose (lefty) grew up in the MELIM period and was a MELIM worker. Mr. Vincent Paul recollects from his memory that his grandfather was one of the Sambavar members who left the LMS Church at Kattakada over a dispute over seating arrangements in the Church.

<sup>33</sup> This information is based on the oral tradition of the beginnings of the MELIM work around Kuttichel and Puliyoorkonam. The employment of the un-named Nagercoil believer varies in oral accounts. Some claim that he worked in the “Elachi farm” near Kuttichel, while other accounts suggest that he was a “Cashew farm” worker. In any case, it seems highly probable that the Independent Sambavar group in Kuttichel came to know of the Lutheran Nagercoil mission from this believer. In fact, a native Lutheran member’s unpublished document in response to an article about the beginnings of Lutheran work in Trivandrum that was published in the 1976 edition of the *Christiani Magazine* also alludes to this fact. See M. Joseph, unpublished private memoir in Malayalam about beginnings of MELIM. Mr. M. Joseph (Fitter Joseph) was a product of the MELIM mission, selected and sent by the missionaries to study “Mechanical Fitting” course in Madras during the MELIM period. His personal recollection was in response to an Article written about the “Beginnings of the IELC” by Rev. T. Joy in the 1976 edition of the MELIM “*Christiani*” magazine, or the article “First five years” by N. C. George in the “*Christiani—21<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum Convention Special* of 1977.



up work in their area. Mr. Jesudason in an article printed in the American home church magazine—the Lutheran Witness in April 1909, writes:

From near Paruthipally, four independent congregations, entirely recruited from heathen, have appealed to our missionary for spiritual help. Unfortunately they are forty-two miles away from Nagercoil. We are at present only a small force. The leaders of these far-away congregations repeatedly came to see the missionary. I visited three of these congregations in August last and what a reception they gave me! We want a separate missionary for this work, as it cannot be supervised from a distance.<sup>34</sup>

From the above it is clear that the MELIM missionaries in Nagercoil were persistently courted by a group from Paruthipally near Kuttichel and that Jesudason made an initial visit to these sites in August 1908 to ascertain the possibility of working among them. In this persistent approaching for mission admission, as Jesudason recollects in his personal memories submitted to the Mission Board in St. Louis, Arulanandam played an important role as he repeatedly “came again and again” to see the missionary with his request.<sup>35</sup>

### **MELIM Missionary’s Enthusiasm to Expand into Malayalam territory**

In their move to the southern field in Nagercoil, the MELIM missionaries had envisioned proclaiming the gospel among many other people and castes in South Travancore. Also, by late 1910 the Lutheran missionaries in Nagercoil came to realize that since Malayalam was the

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<sup>34</sup> Jesudason, “Our Work in Travancore,” 277.

<sup>35</sup> According to oral accounts, Arulanandam and Canchanam went to see the Lutheran missionaries at Nagercoil and were able to gain access to the missionaries because of Arulanandam’s kinsman G. Jesudason who was by now a worker in MELIM. Rev. G. Jesudason took Arulanandam and his companion Canchanam to the missionary Nau, but their request was not accepted for lack of mission workers and resources. However, subsequent visits followed, and in these visits Arulanandam and Canchanam were accompanied by other Sambavar kinsmen from the Kuttichel-Kattakada area. Some of them were Puliyoorkonam Jacob Deacon and M. Paulose (son-in law of Arulanandam) who had left the LMS after being a teacher in that mission. More importantly, G. Jesudason in his memoirs submitted to the Home Board in 1952 mentions that Arulanandam was the prime Sambavar community leader who approached Jesudason and “came again and again” to request the missionaries to take up work among them. Also, see Jesudason, “Early History,” 27–28.

official language of the State, it was necessary to gain a basic working knowledge of it.<sup>36</sup>

Probably this was also a preparation for their plans in the immediate future to take up work in the Malayalam areas of Travancore. This can be gauged from the Report prepared on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1911 and submitted by the Nagercoil missionaries to the Home Board in St. Louis:

One week ago Gutknecht, Zucker and Nau went towards Neyatinkarai to look up some people who have been asking us for work and requesting teaching for the last two years. About a year and a half ago Nau and Gutneckt met with some of these people at Paruthipally. At this time our people believed we should not promise anything since some obstacles were known about their leaders. Today the situation is different as far as the difficulties against those people have been rectified. We should and could therefore use all necessary strengths to work with those people. There are about 300–400 people in 4 main places and about an additional 200 in the nearby villages. We saw two of the main villages last time.<sup>37</sup> At one of them approximately 100 people were there at the other place even though it was about 10 at night about 70 people. No kids or women, they had gone to sleep. The places are from Neyatinkarai 7–14 miles northern direction and from Nagercoil 37–44 miles and the people are Pariahs and their mother tongue is Malayalam...The people are very willing to educate their kids. They gather already for one and a half years every Sunday in somebody's home and he is reading to them verses from the Malayalam Bible and says a prayer. The people are like sheep without a shepherd. However they can in a very short time with a faithful shepherd be a small herd of Christ. Should we decide to work with those people and be faithful to our work we will need to establish another station in the middle of them. Best would be Vellanadu. It is a place where other Europeans already reside and are working in Lead mines which approximately employs a thousand people...In the meantime we are aware of the fact that we want to help them and if possible with the beginning of the next school year which is end of May we would love to have talented young men from there mixed in a preparatory school to secure the beginning of our work with a couple of these people who will be our helpers. The people were so excited about our answer and were willing to send us some young people...Furthermore, we have repeatedly received letters from North Travancore in which we were asked to do mission work there. We have not paid any

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<sup>36</sup> *Minutes of Travancore Conference*, 14–15 December, 1910, CHI Archives, St. Louis. *Protokoll der VI Versammlung der Travancore Konferenz*, CHI Archives, St.Louis, 10.

<sup>37</sup> According to oral history of the Sambavar people around Puliyoorkonam, the coming of the white Lutheran missionary to visit their villages was a much anticipated event. The people at Puliyoorkonam, who were also represented in the repeated attempts to get the Lutheran missionaries from Nagercoil to take work among the Sambavar people in the Kuttichel-Puliyoorkonam area, waited eagerly to meet this missionary who was coming to Kuttichel. During those days the passage to Kuttichel was through Kattakada, and the people stopped the Bandy (bullock cart) carrying the missionaries to Kuttichel and escorted them to their place in Puliyoorkonam before they made their visit to Kuttichel. This story was shared with the researcher by Mr. Vincent Paul, son of M. Paulose (lefty) who was associated with the Trivandrum MELIM mission from its very beginnings and was a worker in the MELIM mission in Trivandrum. Mr. Vincent Paul, interview by author, July 3, 2013.

attention to such letters so far. Based upon the just stated mission possibilities we are asking the Synod to immediately send the necessary people and supplies to open two stations simultaneously one in the midst of Tamil Shanars in Kulithurai-Marthandam and the other one among the Malayalam Pariahs in the vicinity of Vellanadu. At this time we need at least four (4) new workers and want to make the Synod aware of the fact that it was totally unexpected to find a wide field of possibilities here.<sup>38</sup>

From the above it is clear that by late 1909, missionaries Rev. Henry Nau and Rev.

Theodore Gutknecht visited the independent congregation near Paruthipally and that in February of 1911 another visit to the same place and probably Puliyoorkonam (1st village mentioned) was made by Rev. Gutknecht, Rev. Zucker and Rev. Nau. Thus, by 1911 the MELIM missionaries in Nagercoil had concluded that Lutheran work was to be expanded in the direction of Trivandrum, and had envisioned opening up mission stations in “Kulithurai-Marthandam” among the Tamil Shanar community and around “Kuttichel” among the Malayalee Pariahs with the station base at “Vellanadu.” In preparation and continuation to this expansion plan, fourteen Malayalee youths (11 Pariahs and 3 Ezhavas) from Puliyoorkonam and Kurungalloor (37 and 42 miles respectively)<sup>39</sup>, and nine Tamil Shanar youths from the surroundings of Marthandam were admitted to the Boarding school in Nagercoil in May 1911.<sup>40</sup>

This admission of students at Nagercoil from the Malayalam speaking areas generated much excitement in the Sambavar villages in and around Kuttichel and Puliyoorkonam. Rev. Henry Nau turned out to be the prime mover generating momentum for this outreach into a new field amongst a new language group. In fact, by 1911 Rev. Henry Nau was conversant with

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<sup>38</sup> “Bericht: Der Sudl Missionare uber den Stand der Arbeit in dem Gebiet, uber Notwendigkeit der Aufnahme der Arbeit unter den Malayalen, und Bitte um Zusendung von 4 Missionsarbeitern, Dated: 28 February 1911.” (Report of the Southern missionaries About the Situation of the Work in their Area and the Necessity to Start Work among the Malayalam Area and the Request of Additional Four Workers on 28<sup>th</sup> February, 1911), CHI Archives, St. Louis, 6–8.

<sup>39</sup> Probably students were also taken from Kuttichel too as suggested by G. Jesudason in his memoirs. Jesudason mentions that he brought 12 youths from Kuttichel to the Nagercoil Boarding school in 1910. See, Jesudason, “Early History,” 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Neunte Versammlung Der Travancore Konferenz*, 7–8 June, 1911, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4, 6.

workable Malayalam and was teaching the Malayali students in the Institute at Nagercoil and also working on a project with these students to translate and print Luther's Small Catechism into Malayalam.<sup>41</sup> Also, on 27<sup>th</sup> October 1911 the Home Board in St. Louis accepted the Travancore Conference request to station Rev. Nau in a new place outside Nagercoil.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, after taking over work in the "Kuttichel-Kattakada" area in the end of 1911; in the January of 1912 Rev. Nau shifted his residence from Nagercoil to a rented house in Nandencode, Trivandrum city and made visits to Kattakadai to oversee work in the new Malayalam centers.<sup>43</sup> Also, the Home Board in St. Louis on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1912 sanctioned a grant of \$2,000/- (Two thousand dollars) to buy land and build a house in Kattakada<sup>44</sup> for Nau and missionary Gutknecht to work in the Malayalam field.<sup>45</sup> However, in a change of plans, on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1912, the Home Board approved of the Travancore Conference's recommendation to appoint Rev. F. R. Zucker (1910–1930) instead of Rev. Gutknecht in Trivandrum; and on January 15<sup>th</sup> 1913 Trivandrum city (Vatiyoorkavu) was approved as the chief Malayalam Station instead of Kattakada, for Lutheran work to be carried forward.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Neunte Versammlung Travancore Konferenz*, 5. Also see *Zehnte Versammlung Der Travancore Konferenz*, 29–30 Nov, 1911, 8. Also see *Elfte Versammlung Der Travancore Konferenz*, 6 Dec., 1911, 4.

<sup>42</sup> "History of the Board of Foreign Missions, 1893–1913" file, Supplement X, Box 13, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 65.

<sup>43</sup> "Bericht der Travancore-Konferenz Station Kattakadei," 1 January, 1912, India Missionaries 1911–1912 File, Box 91, CHI Archives, St. Louis, MO. Also see, Henry Nau to Home Board, Report from Nandencode, Trivandrum, India Missionaries 1911–1912 file, Box 91, CHI Archives, St. Louis, MO, 4. Also see, Home Board to Rev. Henry Nau, Letter, April 10, 1912, India Missionaries 1911–1912 file, CHI Archives, Box 91, St. Louis, MO. In this letter, the Board talks about positively supporting Rev. Nau's enthusiasm for work in the Malayalam areas, even though he did not wait for the Board's decision on starting work among the Malayalam people.

<sup>44</sup> Kattakada is an important junction after Neyattinkara and is on the way to Kuttichel. The Puliyoorkonam congregation is near Kattakada.

<sup>45</sup> This request was placed by the Travancore Conference to the Home Board in the Report document sent on 1 Jan., 1912. See, India Missionaries 1911–1912 file, Box 91, CHI Archives, St. Louis, MO.

<sup>46</sup> See "History of the Board of Foreign Missions, 1893–1913," 68, 74, 78.

## Establishing MELIM among the Malayalee Subalterns of South Travancore

With MELIM entry into the Malayalam areas around Trivandrum a new work among a new language group had been inaugurated. However, the immediate challenge was to continue the momentum created by the Malayalee Sambavar invitation and to establish a Lutheran presence in the Malayalam lands. For this, the missionaries first concentrated on securing their already existing villages of work and then expanded into new areas depending upon the availability of resources and workers.

### **MELIM Work in Trivandrum from 1911–1916**

From mission records it is clear that the Nagercoil MELIM missionaries saw the work in the Malayalam areas as an extension of their work in Nagercoil. Accordingly, during this period MELIM was divided into broadly two fields—the Tamil speaking “Northern Mission Field” consisting of sites around North Arcot and Salem districts which met together for the “Northern District Conference;” and the Tamil speaking “Southern Mission field” consisting of sites in the princely state of Travancore including the newly formed Malayalam field which met together for the “Travancore District Conference.”<sup>47</sup> In the Malayalam areas, after work in the four initial mission sites—Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puthu-Kulangara,<sup>48</sup> were taken over by Rev. Nau in late 1911; Rev. John C. W. Harms (1912–1918; 1920–1928) joined the Trivandrum field followed by Rev. Frederick K. R. Zucker (1910–1930) in the June of 1913.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> See *Minutes of the 59<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 19–22 August, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 11.

<sup>48</sup> Rev. F. R. Zucker who joined the MELIM work in Trivandrum in 1913 and worked alongside missionary Nau points to Kurungaloor and Puthu-Kulangara being places where Nau worked in the 1912 period. He also mentions that these sites are earlier to the ones at Chalaikonam and Chullimanoor where Zucker worked in 1913. See F. Zucker to Home Board, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Report, Oct.-Dec., 1913, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1, 5. This means that the four (4) independent villages mentioned by G. Jesudason in his report to the Home Board published in the *Lutheran Witness* of 1909, must have been Kuttichel (Paruthipally), Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puthu-Kulangara. See Jesudason, “Our Work in Travancore,” 277.

<sup>49</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, Oct.-Dec., 1913, 1, 5. Also see, F. R. Zucker to Home Board, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarterly

From 1912 up till early 1913, in addition to the initial four sites, work was also taken up in the villages of Kanakodu, Aryanadu, Kattaikal (Luthergiri), Chalaikonam, and Chullimanoor. In a significant event for MELIM work, in the later part of 1912 Missouri Synod Foreign Missions Board Director Julius A. Friedrich visited India from St. Louis and toured the various mission sites, which went a long way in establishing better relations among the Indian missionaries and also with the Home Board. In his report from the Indian field, he pointed to the recently started mission sites in Trivandrum and the number of “souls” that were present to “welcome him and thank the Synod”—Puliurkonam (120); Kanakodu (85); Kuddizel (87); Puthukulankarei (90); Kurungalur (117); Kaddeikal (35) and Arianadu (45).<sup>50</sup>

In July 1913, missionary Rev. Zucker started work in the new mission site of “Antiyoorkonam.” This mission site was organized and handed over to Rev. Zucker by a student called Massilamani<sup>51</sup> who was among the earlier students taken to the Boarding School at Nagercoil by the missionaries. Massilamani organized around forty (40) Pariahs to come and attend classes during his summer holidays and thereby a new mission site was formed.<sup>52</sup> After three months of work here, Zucker handed over the Antiyoorkonam site to Rev. J. Harms.<sup>53</sup>

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Report, July-Oct., 1913, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

<sup>50</sup> See, Richard Kretzchmar, “Our Mission Field in India White to Harvest,” *Lutheran Witness* 32, no. 9 (1913): 67–68. Also in another article about the work in India by Rev. Julius A. Friedrich in 1913, he points to the “Palli” (church) being built and dedicated by the converts on July 19, 1913 at Chullimanur and work continuing at Chalaikonam. See Julius A. Friedrich, “Brief Items from our Mission-Fields in India,” *Lutheran Witness* 32, no. 26, (1913): 206.

<sup>51</sup> The Boarding school student Massilamani, as recounted by Rev. Zucker, belonged to one of the neighboring villages and during his school vacation organized this congregation of about 40 pariahs and handed it over to missionary Zucker before he left for the resumption of school. See F. Zucker to Home Board, July- Oct. 1913, 3. It seems the Massilamani that is mentioned by Rev. Zucker is A. S. Massilamani who belonged either to Puliyoorkonam or Kanakodu village, and who later became an ordained pastor in the Trivandrum Mission. The other Massilamani mentioned during this period is K. P. Massilamani who belonged to the Ponvila District and who during this initial period was an Assistant Catechist in the Trivandrum Mission. K. P. Massilamani later became an ordained pastor in the Trivandrum Lutheran Mission.

<sup>52</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, July-Oct. 1913, 2.

<sup>53</sup> F. Zucker to Home Board, July-Oct. 1913, 5.

Thus, based on the report of the missionaries the statistics for the mission stations in Trivandrum put out by the St. Louis Home Board in 1913 point to work in ten (10) villages and highlights the number of members receiving instruction in the mission: under the supervision of F. R. Zucker—Chullimanur (114), Chalaikonam (80), Puthukulankara (86), Kurungalloor (133); under the supervision of J. Harms—Antikonam (60), Kanakodu (100), Kuddizzel (96), Puliurkonam (134); and under H. Nau—Ariyanaad (31) and Kaddaikal (51).<sup>54</sup> During this year a missionary bungalow was also built in the Vattiyoorkavu compound of Trivandrum city to house the missionaries working in the Malayalam areas.

In 1914 Rev. Henry Nau had to leave the MELIM field as a result of the First World War<sup>55</sup> and by now the missionary Rev. Otto A. Ehlers (1913–1923) had joined the work in Trivandrum. As the work progressed in 1914, the mission statistics put out by the Home Board showed addition of four (4) new villages—Madathikonam, Nadukani, Tumerichel, and Vattiyoorkavu.<sup>56</sup> Up till now all the mission sites were mainly in Sambavar villages but slowly MELIM was establishing contact with other communities in Trivandrum—with the work in “Nadukani” mainly among the Shanar<sup>57</sup> (Nadar) community and “Vattiyoorkavu” mainly among the Pulaya community. Thus Nadukani was the first mission site that MELIM had among the Nadar community in Trivandrum and this contact was established as a result of the children from Nadukani coming to the school at Puliyoorkonam,<sup>58</sup> while the Pulaya group at Vattiyoorkavu

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<sup>54</sup> See “Statistik der Heiden Missouri fur 1913,” in Statistics 1913 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>55</sup> Rev. Nau carried a German passport which made his stay in India untenable at that time.

<sup>56</sup> See “Statistik der Heiden Missouri fur 1914,” in Statistics 1914 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>57</sup> The Shanars or Nadar community was also one of the subaltern low-caste communities in South Travancore at this period of time that had been able to gain access to political, social and economic power through mobilization, agitation, and hard work. They were members in the London Mission and also in the Roman Catholic community and had taken the benefits of education to uplift themselves from their low-caste condition. Also, they were traditional “palmyra” climbers who had by this time gained access to land and other resources.

<sup>58</sup> See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Report, Oct.-Dec. 1914, 23 February, 1915, 1. In this report

came about as a result of the establishment of the missionary bungalow and the presence of the missionary at the compound in Trivandrum.

Furthermore, till the beginning of 1915 the MELIM missionaries had carried on work around the “Kuttichel-Kattakada” area with the help of native workers like—one Catechist, M. Paulose; five assistant Catechists—Canchanam, Arulanandam, Massillamani, Jonah and Charles; and nine teachers—James, Jacob, Marcos, Podiappi, Appavo, I. Arulanandam, J. K. Moses, Gnanakan, and Zacharias; and two women.<sup>59</sup> During this time MELIM missionaries work in the Trivandrum field consisted of preparing the catechists and teachers to take up “instruction” in the villages among the catechumens, conducting supervisory visits of the catechumens in the villages, and preaching during worship services. In this regard, F. R. Zucker reports in 1914,

Every Saturday morning all of the catechists and teachers who work under the brothers Harms, Ehlers and myself come together in our so-called Office in Katakade...the fifteen men are the students in the Saturday study hours. Their main subject is the explanation of the Small Catechism. Next to that they are during most study hours assigned a Bible Story (by Br. Harms), a couple of Church hymns are practiced. The entire instruction is given in the Malayali language...Our goal in these studies is to offer the catechists and teachers that which they have to teach the catechumens and school children from week to week... Also we do not have to limit ourselves strictly to the exact sequence of the curriculum: particular sins and events require a particular admonition and instruction. After the end of a large section we have the catechists and teachers complete a written examination... For the purpose of checking and judging their work (besides the above mentioned exams) they have to give catechetical instruction in front of a class of children in Katakade, tell a Bible story, and to instruct the catechumens in the villages in the presence of a missionary.<sup>60</sup>

With the above mentioned emphasis on Catechetical instruction and systematic study of the Bible, the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum came to be known for its dissemination of proper

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Ehlers mentions that the Nadars at Nadukani are requesting the missionary to start a school in Nadukani because they do not like to send their children to the Pariah school in Puliyoorkonam.

<sup>59</sup> F. Zucker to Home Board, Quarterly Report, Oct.–Dec. 1914. Also, see list of native workers in the *Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 9–10 January 1919, 11, 12.

<sup>60</sup> F. Zucker to Home Board, Quaterly Report, Oct.-Dec. 1914, CHI Archives, St. Louis.



doctrinal understanding of scriptures. Furthermore, for proper religious teaching of the native converts MELIM opened schools in the villages, also keeping in mind the interest of the native converts for secular education. This generated interest among the other communities in Trivandrum to approach MELIM for admission.

### **MELIM Contact with Other Communities in the 1917–1925 Period**

As MELIM work in Trivandrum came to be known for its educational emphasis more and more requests for work started pouring in from the neighboring villages where work was already in progress. In 1917 work was taken up by Rev. O. A. Ehlers in the village of “Mylakara” mainly among Nadars and a few Pariahs (Sambavars), and the Travancore Conference also approved of the work taken up among the Pulayas in the village of “Konni.”<sup>61</sup> Also in the beginning of 1918, missionary J. Harms who worked in Trivandrum from 1912 left the field on furlough,<sup>62</sup> and also work at the mission site of “Nadukani” was stopped due to lack of interest among the people.<sup>63</sup> As a result, by 1919 MELIM Statistics from India listed the field in Trivandrum as having the following sites: under Rev. Ehlers—Tumarichel,<sup>64</sup> Antikonam, Kanakodu, Kuttichel, Kattaikal, Madathikonam, and Mylakara; and under Rev. Zucker—Chullimanoor, Chalaikonam, Puthukulangara, Arianadu, Kurungaloor, Puliyoorkonam, Konni, Karakulam,<sup>65</sup> and Trivandrum

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<sup>61</sup> See *Minutes of 36<sup>th</sup> Travancore Conference*, Nagercoil, 6–8 March 1917, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3. Also see, “Statistics for the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in India, Congregational—Travancore Conference,” Trivandrum District, 1917.

<sup>62</sup> Rev. J. Harms returned back in 1920 to India for MELIM work and rendered service in the Northern Tamil field of the MELIM Ambur district from 1920–1928.

<sup>63</sup> *Minutes of 39<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, Trivandrum, 19–21 February, 1918, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Tumarichel was a Pariah congregation, and an extension of the work done in the Kattakada area.

<sup>65</sup> Karakulam site was started in 1919 and did not take off. Later in 1924 the site was organized among the Ezhavas and work was taken up by Rev. Zucker. See *Minutes of the 26<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 6 October, 1924, 1. Again it seems this site was stopped for some reason and re-started in 1932. See “Statistics of MELIM for 1934,” Trivandrum district, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

(Vattiyookavu).<sup>66</sup>

In the 1920s, Rev. P. M. Kauffeld (1920–1938), Rev. A. C. Fritze (1921–1943), Rev. Robert M. Jank (1921–1937), Rev. Herbert E. F. Levihn (1921–1928), and Rev. Gerhard Oberheu (1921–1944) joined the MELIM work in Trivandrum. The arrival of more missionaries led to an expansion effort and MELIM work now included areas in the direction of “Trivandrum-Kattakadai” and “Trivandrum-Kuttichel.” In addition, the Travancore Conference for better functioning and review of the work in the Nagercoil and Trivandrum areas decided to delegate the management of their work to the Local Conferences of Trivandrum and Nagercoil in 1922.<sup>67</sup> The missionaries had their jobs cut out as, in addition to regular Reports and Conferences, they had to supervise their mission sites and native workers, and at the same time look into the applications for work that were coming in from different villages of Trivandrum. For instance, applications for instruction came up from Vellanadu in the Kuttichel area, and Tamil members of Ponnambi in the Marthandam area in 1921, which were both initially declined due to LMS connection of its members.<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, after requesting the Nagercoil missionaries to take up work in Ponnambi, missionary A. C. Fritze himself started working at Ponnambi in 1923 and later dropped it due to the people still maintaining LMS membership.<sup>69</sup> Such cases of natives from other denominations maintaining affiliations in their previous congregations and still seeking admission into MELIM were a regular feature during the mission period. Undoubtedly the native converts joining the Lutheran mission were looking for an alliance with the Christian

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<sup>66</sup> See “Statistics of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in India for 1919,” in Statistics 1919 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>67</sup> See *Minutes of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Travancore Conference*, 17–20 October, 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4.

<sup>68</sup> *Minutes of the 47<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 26–28 July, 1921, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4.

<sup>69</sup> The Ponnambi site was started in 1923 and later dropped the same year after missionary Fritze on investigation found that the members still maintained LMS affiliation. See *Minutes of the 7<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 5 Jan, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 6. Also see “Extra Session of the Trivandrum Local Conference,” Trivandrum, 12 June, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1.

mission and missionary for spiritual instruction and care, but at the same time there were also strong undertones of socio-economic and socio-political aspirations.

In one such significant development that captured the aspirations and hopes of the subaltern Sambavar leadership in the 1922–1923 period; a “Sambavar Sankham” (Sambavar Organization) was formed in 1922 with attempts to organize the Sambavars socio-politically across religious and Christian denominational lines in their fight for rights and emancipation. As the Sambavar leadership led by a Christian politician Gnana Joshua and others like Daniel Vadhyar of Kanacode Lutheran Church requested and invited the Lutheran Pariahs to join this movement; the MELIM missionaries led by the Director of the Trivandrum Mission—Rev. Zucker, worked to strongly discourage such mobilization. The decision on the part of the Trivandrum and Nagercoil Lutheran missionaries to strongly act against the “Sambavar Sankham” was attributed to the belief that it was attempting to gather all the Pariahs together so that they could be converted to the worship of Sambhan i.e. “Shiva.”<sup>70</sup> It seems the efforts of the Lutheran missionaries bore fruit as the Lutheran Pariahs remained faithful to the call of the MELIM missionaries put out through its Pariah workers especially led by Rev. M. Paulose, and seemingly the movement fizzled out even at the social level.<sup>71</sup>

In the midst of such native attempts to mobilize the Lutheran Mission for social, economic and political emancipation of the Sambavar community, MELIM missionaries continued responding to invitations for work to be taken up in new villages of Trivandrum. Accordingly, upon invitation work started at Kallathukal (1921); among the Pariahs at Antiyoor (1922) and

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<sup>70</sup> See *Minutes of 6<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 18 Dec., 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–2. Also see *Minutes of 7<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1.

<sup>71</sup> M. Paulose Upadeshi, et. al., “An Appeal to the Paraya Lutheran Brothers,” Handwritten Letter. Also it seems M. Paulose presented a paper at the Prathinidhi Sangham on 14–15 August, 1924 on “Why cannot a Lutheran Christian be a member of the Sambhavar Sangham.” See *Minutes of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 7 July 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2.

Thumbodekonam (1922) by Bro. Fritze; among the Shanars at Podukkara (1922) near Kuttichel by Bro. Zucker; and at Tholikodu<sup>72</sup> (1922) among the Vem-Pariahs.<sup>73</sup> Also, in 1923 the initial mission site of “Puthu-Kulangara” was merged with the congregation at “Chalaikonam” and it was resolved to sell the three acre property in the area.<sup>74</sup> Mission sites also were opened among Pariahs at “Tholloor”<sup>75</sup> and at “Kavadithala” in 1923. In another significant move, MELIM missionaries in 1923 started working in the area of Nilamel in response to a request for instruction among a new group of people—namely the tribal “Vedar” community. Invitation to work among this subaltern community of Vedars, who like the Sambavars were also previously agrestic slaves, came through an invitation from G. John, a Syrian Christian who previously belonged to the Salvation Army and had worked among them. By 1924, missionary Robert Jank was in charge of the outreach to this subaltern tribal community and along with native workers like Mr. John, MELIM was able to evangelize the Vedars and other subaltern communities like the Pulayas and the hilly “Korovar” tribes in the Nilamel area.<sup>76</sup>

Work in the Nilamel area was in-keeping with the MELIM drive to establish the Lutheran mission in the Malayalam lands among communities that were not reached by the gospel. Some of the main stations that came up as a result of the work at Nilamel were: Arivarukuri (1923),

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<sup>72</sup> The mission site at Tholikodu was started among the Vem-Pariahs, another sub-caste within the Pariah caste group. It seems this site was later closed down and re-started in 1934 with another community group. See *Minutes of the 19<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1 April 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 23. Also see, “Statistics of MELIM for 1934,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>73</sup> *Minutes of the 50<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 13–16 June, 1922, 15. Also see, *Minutes of 51<sup>st</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 22–25 Aug., 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 11; and *Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 7 August, 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3. Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1927–28,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see, “Statistics of MELIM for 1934.”

<sup>74</sup> *Minutes of the 56<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the Travancore District Conference*, 16–19 Oct., 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 9.

<sup>75</sup> It seems the Mission site of “Tholloor” grew out of the work at the initial site of “Arianadu” that was started in the 1912–13 period.

<sup>76</sup> See “Extra Session of the Travancore District Conference (Veda Conference),” Trivandrum, 13–14 March, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–3.

Venkatukuri (1924), Melporuntaman (1924), Attinpuram (1924), Kurumbayam (1925), Karekardu (1925).<sup>77</sup> These expansions in the Nilamel area were in addition to the sites listed by MELIM in the statistics put out by the Trivandrum district for 1924: Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor, Kanakodu, Chalaikonam, Chullimanoor, Luthergiri (Kattaikal), Arianadu, Antiyoorkonam, Tumerichel, Konni, Maddathikonam, Mylakara, Vattiyookavu, Tholikodu, Parantodu, Chettachel, Kavaditalakal, Kallatukal, Institute in Trivandrum and the Vedar field with missionary Jank.<sup>78</sup> Also work started among the Nadars at “Ponvilla” (1924) and at Manoorkonam (1925), and among Vedars and Pulayars at “Chenankodu” (1925) and “Thatchenkodu”<sup>79</sup> in 1925.<sup>80</sup> Also in the same year (1925) the Travancore District Conference of Nagercoil and the Malayalam areas was partitioned into the Tamil speaking “Nagercoil District Conference” and the Malayalam speaking “Trivandrum District Conference.”<sup>81</sup>

From the mission history and statistics that we have seen until 1925, it is clear that MELIM work in Trivandrum primarily was organized among the subaltern Sambavars in Trivandrum, mainly around villages in the “Neyattinkara-Kattakada -Kuttichel-Trivandrum” areas. Also

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<sup>77</sup> See “Statistics of MELIM for 1927–28.” Also see places of work listed in the, *Minutes of the 39<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 27–28 December, 1925 and 6 January, 1926, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

<sup>78</sup> *Minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1 May, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–2.

<sup>79</sup> Canchanam, one of the local initiators of the Lutheran Mission in Trivandrum started work among the Vedas of Thatchenkodu in 1925. When work started here, there were problems at the first Lutheran mission site of Kuttichel, which is near Thatchenkodu. Due to problems at Kuttichel, the missionary in charge Rev. Kauffeld had closed down the site for a few months and the remaining members from Kuttichel were asked to worship at Thatchenkodu. After some months the Kuttichel site re-started its worship services. At Thatchenkodu, the congregation continued receiving “instruction” from mission agents. However, the Vedars of Thatchenkodu due to persecution of the Nair landlords had to flee Thatchenkodu and settle in the place of Kannankonam where they eventually re-started their congregation. Thatchenkodu site was then abandoned and later was re-started among the relatives of the MELIM catechist T. Charles who came from the Nadar community. See *Minutes of the 39<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 1–2. For Vedars from Thatchenkodu seeking application for Kannankonam see, *Minutes of the 50<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 11–19 December, 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 51. For T. Charles relatives’ application see, *Minutes of the 54<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 5–10 January, 1931, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 19.

<sup>80</sup> See *Minutes of the 35<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 6–8 October, 1925, CHI Archives, 2–5. Also for beginnings of Ponvila site, see “Statistics of MELIM for 1927–28.”

<sup>81</sup> *Minutes of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 28–31 July, 1925, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 10.

during this period, other subaltern communities living in the periphery of socio-economic and political existence in Travancore such as the Pulayas, the Vedars, and the Koravars were being reached around the “Kuttichel-Trivandrum-Nilamel-Attingal” areas by MELIM. Nevertheless, MELIM had also established themselves among the higher castes like the Nadars of Mylakara, and had made beginnings among them at Ponvilla and at Manoorkonam. Also, there were some Nadar and Ezhava families who were worshipping at the Lutheran sites of Vattiyoorkavu, Kuttichel, Arianadu, Luthergiri (Kattaikal), Kavadithala etc. However, given the fewer number of congregations from the higher castes, this period of MELIM conformed to the societal perception that the Lutheran mission was a “Pariah Mission,” which was a perception that the MELIM missionaries strove to dismantle.<sup>82</sup>

#### MELIM Consolidation and Expansion among High Caste Communities

Even though the MELIM missionaries were invited to work in the Malayalam areas by the Sambavars of Kuttichel and Puliyoorkonam, the Lutheran missionaries from the very beginning envisaged establishing the Lutheran Church among the various castes of the Malayalam speaking areas. The early 1900s was a time when there was a perception in Christian circles that people from the higher castes were willing and open to embracing Christianity.<sup>83</sup> Given the fact that MELIM was seen as a “Pariah mission” and a “New Tribes mission,”<sup>84</sup> the missionaries looked

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<sup>82</sup> See “Bericht: Der Sudl Missionare,” 5. Also similar concerns can be seen in the reports of Trivandrum Mission Director Rev. Zucker for the 1916–1925 period. For instance, see F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July 1916, 4.

<sup>83</sup> Such a perception can be deduced from the missionary literature put out during this period. For instance, in the Missouri Synod magazine the Lutheran Witness, in 1913 an article “The Sudras Are Coming!” was published pointing to the desire of the higher castes to be influenced by the Christian message. The hope expressed was that these higher castes who were “far better situated economically” with “more intelligent men and women” could be trained for “work among their countrymen and women.” See, “The Sudras Are Coming!” *Lutheran Witness* 32, no. 7 (1913): 56.

<sup>84</sup> The 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference makes the observation, in a discussion concerning the Lutheran school at “Kariam” which is mainly benefiting the higher castes, that the Lutheran mission is seen in popular conversations as a “New Tribes Mission” mainly because the Lutheran Church in the Malayalam lands is

out for opportunities and planned to make a concerted effort to gain converts from higher caste communities who were willing to join the Lutheran fold.

### **MELIM Outreach into Nadar and Ezhava Communities**

MELIM missionaries had made their preference known from the very time of their work in Nagercoil that it had to gain converts from the higher castes of Travancore in order to establish a Church that would evangelize the natives. Especially the MELIM missionaries believed that this was the best way to strengthen and stabilize the Lutheran Church in Travancore. In their initial report of February 1911 about extending from Nagercoil into Trivandrum Malayalam field, they had alluded to this point of view:

18 miles north west of Nagecoil, Marthandam was suggested to have the second mission station and we wrote to you a couple of months ago ...there are large hamlets where there are a hundred houses where they could start schools...starting of mission here seems to be rather good. Until now we are working exclusively under the Pariahs. However those castes have developed themselves into slaves because of thousand years of oppression and they were oppressed both externally and internally and their character is not able for the necessary strengths. They are like reed waving in every direction with a small wind. Based on experience this situation cannot be rectified quickly not even through Christian teachings and upbringing. It is well known that Christendom and growing character makes slow progress. Therefore the work of the mission which solely recruits Pariahs will always lack the stability because these people are of weak character. Unfortunately we have already among many the name of being a pure Pariah mission which makes the work with those people of higher castes distinctively difficult and sometimes impossible. The start of the work in Kulithurai will result in a change. As far as we can see the work there will mainly see Shanars. We see this as extreme fortune for our mission. These people are very dependable, excellent material for good mission workers, and hard working.<sup>85</sup>

Even though this was the perception upon which the MELIM missionaries envisioned the future course of the church, till 1924 it seems that in the Malayalam areas with the exception of a

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“predominantly low caste.” As a result the Conference expresses the fear that the high caste Lutherans who have been contacted up till this point may not be welcome into a Lutheran Church that is dominated by the low-castes and this “must not happen.” See *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 28–30 June, 1954, 46–47.

<sup>85</sup> “Bericht: Der Sudl Missionare,” 5.

few mission sites, the MELIM missionaries did not have much success in establishing their work in Nadar villages mainly because of opposition from the London Missionary Society who were primarily working amongst them.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, MELIM during the initial 10–15 years had started work in some Nadar villages and also most of their teaching and catechist staff came from “Nadar” and other higher caste communities like the “Ezhavas,”<sup>87</sup> the “Nairs,”<sup>88</sup> and some “Syrian Christians.” In fact, in 1914 missionary F. R. Zucker had submitted a report to the Home Board in St. Louis of about hundred (100) Syrian Christians from Chenganur ready to join the Lutheran mission and their leader Kattanar (preacher) C. A. Abraham having visited Nagercoil for the missionaries to take up work among them. In this document, as Zucker requests for more workers he notes:

In November 1913, Brother Nau visited me in Trivandrum with a Syrian Christian, by name C. A. Abraham “Kattanar”—Syrian word for preacher... Abraham told him at this visit that the number of souls who would be interested to join them would be a hundred but without doubt there will be more as soon as we start out with them. Until this first step is taken they will not leave the present church. Besides these Syrian Christians in the vicinity of Chenganur there are several Pariahs and Pulayas who would also like to become Christian and would like to be served by us... The main reason for the start of this work besides the poverty and the distinct request, is the reason that these people have naturally more intelligence (more capable to be educated) than the Pariahs and Puleyas. Even more than some of the Shanars which we presently have. After my talks with these people I can conclude that it must be a

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<sup>86</sup> For instance in 1922 the MELIM missionaries had to take into cognizance the complaint of the London Mission Church Council that took objection to the admission of its members into the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum. It also criticized the Lutheran missionaries for not allowing Lutheran members to worship with their church members and also for not allowing marriage of Lutheran girls with men from the LMS. See *Minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Trivandrum Local Conference*, 10 July, 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. In another case, the mission site of Ponnambi in the Kulithurai area had to be dropped because, in addition to other reasons, it was found that many were still holding membership in the LMS. See *Minutes of the Extra Session of the Trivandrum Local Conference*, 12 June, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Another complaint by the LMS missionaries stating that many LMS members were seeking membership in the Lutheran mission by breaking their churches was also the subject of debate in the *Meeting of the Travancore Joint Conference*, 16–18 September, 1929, 1.

<sup>87</sup> The “Ezhava” caste was another subaltern low-caste community like the Nadars who had by this period gained access to social, economic and political power through sheer force of their number, mobilization, and agitation. They were traditional “coconut climbers” by occupation and by this period had gained access to land and other resources.

<sup>88</sup> The “Nairs” were the landlords of South Travancore and had been the “fighting force” of the Hindu Rajahs. They were a very dominant caste in South Travancore for a long time.



joy to have boys with this caliber and educate them as teachers and catechists. Therefore I would take a step to overcome the misrepresentation that our mission is a pure Pariah mission... We cannot forfeit even one more man from Trivandrum for this work. We immediately need more people to take over this work.<sup>89</sup>

Even in the above passage we see how the MELIM missionaries were concerned about the lack of good catechists and teachers in the mission and wanted to gain converts from the higher caste communities who in their perception were more “intelligent” and of better “caliber” than their Pariah and Pulaya converts. However, in spite of this feeler being sent to the Home Board for taking up work among the Syrian Christians, it seems no progress was made and the missionary hopes suffered for a while. Nevertheless, MELIM continued their work with the people that they had, and at the same time kept an eye on opportunities to gather converts from the higher castes. In one such opening which they believed beheld huge prospects, the MELIM missionaries from 1924 onwards reported with enthusiasm and excitement to the Home Board about taking the gospel message to the “Ezhava” community in Travancore. The MELIM missionaries were convinced that this community which according to the Census of 1901 was around 25% of the population, and the second largest in Travancore, were ready to accept Christianity and even enter the Lutheran faith. They also believed that the future of the Lutheran Church especially in getting quality native workers for the mission lay in Ezhava converts.<sup>90</sup> In order to facilitate this outreach and bring this group into the church the MELIM missionaries made frequent appeals to the Home Board in St. Louis:

Iravan community is ready to join Christianity and they are 24.2 percent of the population, the second largest in Travancore... then the Shanars are also coming (7.7

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<sup>89</sup> F. Zucker, “Aufnahme Der Missionsarbeit Unter den Syrischen Christen,” Report to Home Board, June 5, 1914, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4–5, 8.

<sup>90</sup> See *Minutes of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 12–20 December, 1927, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4. Also see *Minutes of the 45<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 8 October, 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

percent of entire population, third largest in Travancore)...so we need more workers.<sup>91</sup>

The Ezhavas who were socially and politically mobilizing themselves, and agitating at this time for better socio-religious and political power had opened channels of conversation with various Christian missions and they seemingly caught the imagination of the MELIM missionaries:

The Iravan Opportunity...the name is also perhaps usually spelt “Ezhava”... their organization is strong and their leaders are men of ability. We are in touch with some of them...a few families and a few individuals of this caste have already become converts to our mission and the impression they create is a distinctly favorable one. Though not a great many degrees higher in caste status than our Pariahs and Puleyas, they are far superior in mentality and character. While our experience with Pariahs and Puleyas compels us to praise God for every convert made among them, we have also come up against their limitations with a thud. The Iravan caste is far more progressive and aggressive, intelligent and independent...we ought not to wait for them to come to us one by one, as we have been doing until now. Instead now is the time to go after them aggressively. The iron is hot for the hammer... the belief is that if we write through the Kristiani<sup>92</sup> and give a series of well-planned and comprehensive treatises on Christianity, there is the possibility according to their leaders like Dr. Pannikar that it may become a ‘gigantic’ movement almost overnight... we need a systematic 5 year plan to reach the Iravans and bring them into MELIM...for this work we appeal for new workers.<sup>93</sup>

Consequently, following this enthusiasm for work among the Ezhavas in the 1924–25 period an outreach effort was undertaken officially in 1927 to move northwards from Trivandrum towards “Shertalley” and “Allepey.”<sup>94</sup> As work started in these towns which were along the fishing coast, the outreach involved mainly the Ezhavas and the Pulayas and mission sites were opened among the Pulaya agrestic laborers at “Thiruvambardi” (1928) and the

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<sup>91</sup> See, “An Appeal for Six New Men for the Trivandrum District this year,” Travancore Conference MELIM to Home Board, 2 September, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1. Also see F. Zucker, letter to Professor W. Arndt, Secretary—Board for Foreign Mission, 11 May, 1927, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>92</sup> “Christiani” (The Christian) was the MELIM journal published in Malayalam for the benefit of Lutherans in Travancore and also to serve as a witnessing medium for new converts.

<sup>93</sup> *Minutes of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Travancore Joint Conference*, Nagercoil, 9 December, 1925, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–3.

<sup>94</sup> Griesse, “Lutheran Indian Missions,” 32.

Ezhavas at “Ariarde” (1928).<sup>95</sup>

### **MELIM Expansion around Earlier Areas of Work**

Even as new areas and castes were being reached to bring the gospel, from 1924 a move was also made to take the Lutheran message into the “Balaramapuram-Parasalla” area in the direction of “Marthandam-Kulithurai” from Kattakada, which initially was the focus of the MELIM missionary’s expansion effort from Nagercoil in 1911. As a result, following invitation from the locals mission sites came up at Ponvilla (1924), Amburlikonam (1926), Murakolkunnu (1926), Nediakala (1926), Varliavilla (1926), Chengavila (1927), Karlikavilla (1928), Vanyoor (1928), Kaivankala (1928), Ponnunmangalam (1928), Venganoor (1928), Perunmana (1928), Nellimurdu (1928), Kotukal (1929), Kolayil or Kolla (1929), Thanivirla (1929), Thiruvellam (1929), and Chovara or Muloor (1929).<sup>96</sup> Also, the MELIM missionaries seem to have placed high hopes on another interesting outreach, namely among the Brahmins in “Kotaikal,” Trivandrum in 1927. The native initiative came through the engagement of a local Brahmin man Harihar Iyer with the MELIM missionaries who seem to have been very excited about this possibility. Rev. P. M. Kauffeld was assigned by the Missionary Conference to work among the Brahmins and later Rev. Eckert (1926–1932) worked among them and the mission started a Reading Center, and a lot of money was spent on this outreach. However, there was no success and later this outreach initiative was stopped.<sup>97</sup>

As work took off in new areas and new communities of Trivandrum, work also expanded

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<sup>95</sup> Kurt Zorn to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, 6 April, 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see, Kurt Zorn to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, 27 September, 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>96</sup> See “Statistics of MELIM for 1927–28.” Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1928–1929,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1930,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1931,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>97</sup> *Minutes of the 41<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 11–12 July 1927, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2, 5. Also see, Kurt Zorn to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, 16 March, 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

in the initial “Trivandrum-Kattakadai-Kuttichel” areas among the subaltern and high caste communities. As a result of invitations from new villages, MELIM started work at Karodu (1926), Viranughavoo (1928), Vazhuthakadu or Thycaud (1928), Chembakkuri (1928), Ooloor or Srikariam (1928), Kannankonam (1929), Mannanthala (1929), and Kasuvarkal (1929). Also, mission sites came up in the Nilamel area at Canoor (1926), Modayil (1926), Nilamel (1928), Meenkulam (1928), Pulli Panam (1928), Anapara (1929), Kulatupura (1929), Velanalur (1930) and Karyam (1930).<sup>98</sup> These outreach efforts were made possible to a large extent due to the entry of more missionaries into the Trivandrum field in this period coupled with more native workers graduating from the Catechist class. Some of the missionaries joining the Trivandrum mission work during the period of 1926–1929 were, Rev. Paul G. Eckert (1926–1932), Rev. A. R. Rasch (1926–1953), Rev. G. R. Stelter (1926–1958), Rev. E. H. Knoernschild (1927–1944), Rev. Alvin J. Mueller ((1927–1934), Miss Clara Mueller (1927–1928), Rev. K. M. Zorn (1927–1965), Rev. A. J. Buehner (1928–1951), Rev. W. A. Luedke (1928–1945), Rev. M. L. Wyneken (1928–1954), Rev. D. S. Chuvala (1929–1953), Rev. L. M. Wetsel (1929–1946), and Rev. R. M. Zorn (1929–1970).

With new missionaries joining work in Trivandrum, during the period of the 1930s mission work was started at Aroor (1930), Ayoor (1930), Chadamangulam (1930), Vellanaloor (1930), Killimanoor (1930), Kalavangodu-Kunninpuram (1930), Kariam (1930), Concordia Compound School (1930), Thatchenkodu (restarted 1931), Karuvallam (1931), Shertalay North (1931), Kanjikuzhi (1931), Muhamma (1931), Kalparapotta (1932), Vardakal (1932), Karakulam (1932), Chettigard (1933), Kalavangorda (1930), Srikandamangalam (1932), Puthenangardi (1932), Tykal (1933), Chenkottakonam (1933), Trivandrum Compound No. II (1933), Thycaud (1933),

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<sup>98</sup> Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1928–1929.” Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1930.” Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1931.” Also see Griesse, “Lutheran Indian Missions,” 31.

Venpakal (1933), Kayanickara (1933), Tholikodu (re-started 1934), Poolampara (1934), Kuripamkulangara (1934), Shertalay Office (1937), Karekonam (1938), Pakodu (1939), Kirakkedikku or Veyanam (1939), Panayankodu (1939), Kuttara (1939), and Varuthukonam (1939).<sup>99</sup> These mission sites came up as a result of the expansion of work in the already existing centers around the Nilamel area, Ponvilla area, Alleppey-Shertallay area, Trivandrum area, Balaramapuram area and Luthergiri District. In the midst of this mission expansion, a committee of missionaries—Buehner, R. M. Zorn and B. P. Hahn, were elected in 1935 to celebrate the 25 year anniversary of MELIM work in Trivandrum,<sup>100</sup> and on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 1936 special Worship Services were held to commemorate the silver anniversary of MELIM outreach in Trivandrum.<sup>101</sup>

Through this 25 years of work and during the 1930s, requests for “instruction” continued from former members of the London Mission Society, Roman Catholics, Salvation Army and Bible Faith Mission who wanted MELIM to take up work in their villages. In most of these villages applications from these Christians of other denominations also included some Hindu members seeking conversion. Also, requests were made by MELIM members for schools to be built in their villages, and churches to be started for particular caste communities who wanted to join the mission.<sup>102</sup> These requests were mainly because MELIM ran schools and boarding

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<sup>99</sup> See “Statistics of MELIM for 1930.” Also see “Statistics of MELIM for 1931.” Also, “Statistics of MELIM for 1934.” Also see “Statistics of MELIM 1940,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see, *Minutes of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 2–10, Sept., 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 33. Also, *Minutes of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 11–14 March, 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 9–10, 14–15.

<sup>100</sup> See *Minutes of the 67<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 18–26 March, 1935, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 24.

<sup>101</sup> See E. H. Meinzen, *Lutheran Witness* 56, no. 5 (St. Louis: 1937): 83.

<sup>102</sup> For instance, Trivandrum Conference of 1931 notes that the congregation at Muralkolkunnu was petitioning the mission to start a school in their village, and one was being built for the congregation at Valiavilla. Also, there was a request from the Subaltern Cheramar Society at Balaramapuram to take up work among them for the following: (1) establish a Lutheran Church in addition to the already existing Sambava Church, (2) A school affiliated with that Church, (3) A free hospital, (4) Some domestic industry befitting the present economic conditions, (5) Employment of some of their teachers in the school. See *Minutes of 55<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District*

schools, employed catechists and teachers, and also provided charity to the poor; thereby capturing the attention of many people across caste lines in Trivandrum. However, in such situations it was difficult for MELIM missionaries to determine which invitation was genuinely for spiritual care, because the people had learned to present applications under the pretext of false doctrines and wrong practices in previously affiliated congregations, which provided sound grounds for MELIM to positively pursue their request.<sup>103</sup> Another important dynamic adding to the increasing number of mission stations in Trivandrum was the fact that these invitations mostly came through relatives of MELIM members who lived in the neighboring villages.<sup>104</sup>

### **Subaltern Rumblings in the Midst of Continued MELIM Advances**

The arrival of more missionaries for MELIM work in Trivandrum continued to facilitate the taking up of work in new villages and exploratory move into new Malayalam lands. Thus, in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, the arrival missionaries like B. P. Hahn (1930–1947), Rev. William

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*Conference*, 17–23 March, 1931, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 9, 16, 19. Also see *52<sup>nd</sup> Minutes of Trivandrum District Conference*, 11, 14. Also, *53<sup>rd</sup> Minutes of the Trivandrum District Conference*, 5. Also, *58<sup>th</sup> Minutes of the Trivandrum District Conference*, March 22–24, 1932, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4, 20, 23. See *Minutes of 60<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 2–7 Jan, 1933, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 8, 12, 14. See *Minutes of the 67<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 18–26 March, 1935, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 14, 17. See *Minutes of the 70<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 16–21 March, 1936, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 6, 11, 12. See *Minutes of the 79<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 12–16 December, 1938, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 9. Also, see *Minutes of the 80<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 20–25 March, 1939, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 12.

<sup>103</sup> This was a common “invitation” strategy during this time that was used by the natives to seek admission into MELIM. Sometimes the invitations were rejected while in some cases they were pursued and the villages accepted for instruction. For instance, the villagers of ‘Chembarandi’ and ‘Ponnankulam’ in 1930 presented similar reasons to invite MELIM, which were rejected by the missionaries on knowing of their LMS and other previous church connections. See *Minutes of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 11, 14. In another case, work was taken up among former LMS and Roman Catholic members of ‘Varuthoorkonam’ who also had applied under similar circumstances. See *Minutes of the 86<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 17–22 March, 1941, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 20. Also see, Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 61.

<sup>104</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 65. For instance, in 1931, the mission site of ‘Tatchenkodu’ which was disbanded because the Vedars among whom the work was undertaken had migrated to Kanankonam to escape persecution from the landlords, requested to be restarted again among the relatives of Catechist T. Charles. See *Minutes of the 54<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 5–10 January, 1931, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 19. This dynamic of invitation through kinship relations was also the reason for the initial mission sites of MELIM in the Kuttichel-Puliyurkonam area of Trivandrum, in 1911–1912.

E. Reiser (1931–1943), Rev. M. J. Lutz (1935–1957), Miss Margarete Lutz<sup>105</sup> (1935–1937), R. P. Seiving (1937–1945), Rev. Elmer E. Griesse (1945–1964), Rev. R. T. Koepke (1946–1973), Ms. Rose Zimke (1947–1978) for women’s work, Rev. H. M. Zorn (1947–1971), Rev. H. E. Heinlein (1948–1968), Rev. Wilbur T. May (1948–1960), and Rev. John Gall (1950), Rev. H. J. Otten (1950–1980), Rev. H. T. Smith (1950–1956), Ms. A. Rinku (1952–1957), R. E. Miller (1953–1977), added impetus to MELIM outreach efforts. In 1941, in a departure from its customary practice MELIM granted permission to the “Lutheran Ezhava” members to start a society called the “Ezhava Lutheran Society” so that the Ezhavas could reach their own caste people with the gospel and bring them into the Lutheran mission.<sup>106</sup> Also in the year 1942, both the Trivandrum District and the Nagercoil District jointly decided to set up a “Three-year” Secondary Training School at Nagercoil called the “Concordia Training School” to prepare teachers for its schools of higher education.<sup>107</sup> Alongside these developments, in the 1940s work was inaugurated and “instruction” carried out at: Charamangalam (1940), Manencheri (1943), North Ariade (1948), Vandanam (1947) in the Alleppey-Shertallay field; Kirdarakuri (1941), Edagramam (1947), Parachel (1947) in the Balaramapuram field; Puvachel (1941), Vallimangalam (1940), Parantode (1946), Churakuzhi (1949) in the Luthergiri district; Madavoor (1941) in the Nilamel Field; Pappardu (1942), Concordia (1944), Trivandrum City (1945), Pulayankodu (1946), Srikaryam (restarted in 1948) in the Trivandrum district; and Karumaram (1940), Piranivilla (1947),

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<sup>105</sup> Miss Margarete Lutz who came in as a “medical” and missionary for “women work” later married the missionary Rev. William E. Reiser in the Indian mission field.

<sup>106</sup> See *Minutes of the 85<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 2–3 January, 1941, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. Also, in the early part of this chapter it has been pointed out that the Sambavars in 1922 had started a society called the “Sambavar Sankham” and had invited the Lutheran Sambavars to participate in it. The MELIM missionaries had strongly discouraged and worked against Lutheran members joining such caste organizations and made sure that the “Sambavar Sankham” did not succeed in establishing itself amongst its members.

<sup>107</sup> See Rev. G. Hattendorf to Nagercoil District Conference, “Report of the TDC-NDC Joint Secondary Training School,” 1 May, 1942, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

Karavakuri (1948), Karumanoor (1948), Tirtakudi (1948) in the Ponvilla field.<sup>108</sup>

During this time there were also rumblings for more attention to be given to the subaltern converts in MELIM who were beginning to feel insecure due to the disproportionate acquisition of mission benefits by the higher castes and due to the perceived neglect of them by the missionaries. For instance, in 1941 Sambavar kinsmen in the Tamil part of Travancore (Nagercoil) had through the prime native mover of the Lutheran mission in Travancore, Rev. G. Jesudason, put up a petition in the Nagercoil Conference complaining against more educational opportunities being appropriated by the Nadars and other higher castes at the expense of the subalterns, and proceeded to threaten the MELIM missionaries of the Sambavar Lutheran Christians having the right to “adjust their attitude towards the changing conditions in the Mission policy.”<sup>109</sup> Likewise, the subaltern push for better share in the mission pie was also resonating in the Malayalam speaking lands causing headaches for the missionaries in Trivandrum. In 1944, the Pariahs of the Luthergiri district approached the Executive Secretary of the Home Board—Rev. O. H. Schmidt—with a petition that the number of Pariah workers was too small in the mission and that “lower secular educational requirements,” “leniency,” and “patience in training,” be shown to their students for becoming Catechists and Teachers in the mission.<sup>110</sup> In another instance, in 1948 a petition was placed before the MELIM missionaries in Trivandrum by the subaltern Sambavars stating that they were being “neglected in the distribution of loaves and fishes in the mission, namely scholarships for the High School and

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<sup>108</sup> See “Statistics of MELIM for 1944,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see, “Statistics of MELIM for 1946,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also, “Statistics of MELIM for 1952,” Trivandrum District, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>109</sup> See *Minutes of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Nagercoil District Conference*, 24–27 March, 1942, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 11–13.

<sup>110</sup> See *Minutes of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 13–21 March, 1944, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 8.



College.”<sup>111</sup> Again, they were asking for special consideration towards their children for fee concessions for higher studies and also for the mission schools to be lenient in judging their children academically so that they could complete their school education. All these petitions and similar ones made by Lutherans from the Cherumar (pulaya) community, were either rejected or viewed with sympathetic promise of appropriate action by the missionaries.<sup>112</sup> However, by 1953 these rumblings had given way to clear subaltern worry about their place in the church as the Sambavar Lutheran community again petitioned the Conference expressing fears that they would be discriminated against in the Central “Prathinithi Sankham’s” plan to ask the Government to list Lutherans under “Other Christians” for the sake of government employment.<sup>113</sup> The dissatisfaction visible in these subaltern rumblings by 1954 reached its peak during the debate on Synod formation for an Indian administered Lutheran Church, as the Sambavars, Cheramars (Pulayas), Vedars and Korovars together; reflecting a deep seated fear of eventual displacement and subordination; put forward various demands to the Trivandrum Conference including that of either putting off Synod formation for ten years or having a separate Synod for the backward classes.<sup>114</sup>

True to their style of operation, the MELIM missionaries engaged these deep seated fears of the subalterns through “Missionary-Native representative”<sup>115</sup> meetings, and at the same time

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<sup>111</sup> See *Minutes of the 110<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 27 September–1 October, 1948, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 40.

<sup>112</sup> See *Minutes of the 120<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 29 January–2 February, 1951, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3. Also, see *Minutes of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 8.

<sup>113</sup> See *Minutes of the 129<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 12–14 October, 1953, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 71.

<sup>114</sup> See *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 28–30 June, 1954, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 27–32. Also see, Herbert M. Zorn to Home Board, Letter, 3 May 1954, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2–3.

<sup>115</sup> During the MELIM period for important negotiations and investigations into matters affecting the mission, the Conferences would assign a missionary committee to deal with the issue at hand. For instance, in this case of subalterns wanting a separate Synod for the backward classes, a Committee of missionaries Herbert M. Zorn, Rev. Kurt M. Zorn, Rev. Elmer Griesse and Rev. Stelter, were appointed by the Conference to meet the native subaltern

continued working in the already established areas through their native workers and also continued exploring new opportunities for gospel proclamation in the Malayalam areas. Consequently, in 1947 MELIM decided to explore the possibility of moving upwards into the territory of “Malabar,” north of Travancore state. Accordingly, a committee of missionaries Buehner and Wyneken explored the station and prepared a report following which Rev. M. J. Lutz was posted at Wynaadu for mission work among the hill tribes of “Panniyar” and “Kurumbar,” and also among the “Thiyers” (Ezhavas of Malabar) and “Pulayars.”<sup>116</sup> Consequently, mission sites in the Wynaadu area came up at Mangavayal (1947), Ambaleri (1950), Sultan Battery (1950), Kottatara (1951), Minangadi (1951), and Ambalavayal (1952).<sup>117</sup> In 1952 another survey of Valluvanad in Malabar was conducted to look into the possibility of expanding work in the Malabar area.<sup>118</sup> Also, from 1949 the MELIM missionaries recognized the importance of women’s work among the Lutheran community in Trivandrum. Given the low literacy of women, need for improvement in their cleanliness and social life, and enhancement of skills for economic stability, the mission through the 1950s worked on preparing local women workers through a Bible Women’s Course that was specifically constituted to address these needs. Alongside American women missionaries Rose Ziemke and Ms. Rink, seven native women workers were trained and sent out to the respective districts in the Trivandrum field for work among women.<sup>119</sup>

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representatives led by Mr. A. Johnson (son of Arulanandam Upadeshi) and address their concerns. See Herbert M. Zorn to Home Board, 3 May 1954, 1. Also see, *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 27–32.

<sup>116</sup> See *Minutes of the 105<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 11–17 August, 1947, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 38. Also see, *Minutes of the 115<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 12–13 October, 1949, 58, 66–68. Also see *Minutes of the 118<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 7–10 August, 1950, 59.

<sup>117</sup> See “Statistics of MELIM for 1952.”

<sup>118</sup> See *Minutes of the 126<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 29 September–2 October, 1952, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 51.

<sup>119</sup> See *Minutes of the 114<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 1–5 August, 1949, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 52.

Furthermore, in 1950 Rev. Dr. Henry Nau the pioneering missionary of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum came back to the Trivandrum area after working as a missionary in Nigeria to explore new possibilities in the Trivandrum Mission. Since he had worked in reaching out to the Muslims in Nigeria, MELIM also planned a gospel outreach among the Muslims in India. For this purpose a committee of Rev. M. Wyneken, Rev. M. J. Lutz, and Rev. Dr. H. Nau was constituted in 1950 to explore the possibilities of sharing the gospel among the Muslims in the Malabar area, and “Malapuram” was recommended as the center of activities for work among the Mappilas of Malabar.<sup>120</sup> Thus MELIM work into the 1950s showed a commitment to taking the gospel message to different communities and areas in the Malayalam speaking land with the active participation of native workers who were put through Catechist and later the Pastoral Seminary in Nagercoil. The MELIM missionaries during this period were the main driving force for mission policy, financial support and management, congregational supervision, administration and theological understanding. However, with the political change in India in 1947 the MELIM missionaries had to make changes in their approach towards the MELIM community that they helped create in the Malayalam areas of South Travancore.

#### Preparing the Natives for Administration of the Lutheran Church in the Malayalam Areas: 1950–1956

World War II (1939–1944) and India’s independence from British rule in 1947 contributed to many Christian mission agencies reviewing their strategy and methods of evangelizing Indians. MELIM too was caught in the midst of this upheaval and tried to keep in touch with the

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Also see *Minutes of the 115<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 71. See *Minutes of the 117<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 20–24 March, 1950, CHI Archives, 31. See *Minutes of the 122<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 23–26 July, 1951, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 44. See *Minutes of the 123<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 1–3 October, 1951, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 67. See *Minutes of 133<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 14–18 February, 1955, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 15.

<sup>120</sup> See Trivandrum District to Home Board, “Report on the Selection of a Muslim Mission Field in Malabar,” Report, 9 February, 1950, CHI Archives, 1–2.

rapid change taking place in the country. In fact, there were enough signs early on that MELIM had to involve the native converts in decision making for the future, but it seems they were not followed up adequately or probably the native converts were not up to the task. For instance, in 1936 the Home Board in St. Louis had informed the missionaries in India that with reduction in finances and the Missouri Synod's focus on sending missionaries and resources to spreading the gospel in Africa and New Guinea, more responsibilities were to be given to native workers in order to prepare them take the church ahead.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, enabling the natives to take over congregational administration was not prioritized by the missionaries until the late 1940s. Probably as a result of the Indian freedom struggle and the possibility of missionaries being asked to leave India once India became free,<sup>122</sup> by the mid-1940s it dawned upon the missionaries that it was imperative to prepare the natives to take over the running of MELIM congregations in the Malayalam areas. The first "northern field" of MELIM had already organized itself into the "Ambur Synod" by 1948 and the Trivandrum missionaries also started preparing the native converts for administrative responsibilities. The intention now was to build a truly indigenous church that was governed, financed, and extended by Indian Christians and leaders.<sup>123</sup>

In fact, preparing the framework for the Lutheran Church in Trivandrum and the enabling of natives for administrative responsibilities was also heavily supervised and navigated by the MELIM missionaries. The congregations were first gathered into various districts and later a Constitution was formulated and the organizational functioning of the church was structured.

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<sup>121</sup> Home Board to MELIM, Letter, 25 March, 1936, CHI Archives, St. Louis. See *Minutes of the 71<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 5–7 May, 1936, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2.

<sup>122</sup> India became free from British rule on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1947.

<sup>123</sup> James Arthur Fergin, "History of the India Mission of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod 1945–1957," (B.D. Thesis, Concordia Seminary St. Louis, June 1958), in *Foreign Mission Histories—China, Japan, New Guinea, Phillipines*, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 65.

Accordingly, in 1950 “Circuits” were formed from the Malayalam mission sites and their representatives were picked for an “Indian Allocation Committee” that would advise the Missionary Conference<sup>124</sup> for placement of native workers in the Trivandrum Mission. The Circuits were as follows: *Shertallay Circuit*—congregations in and around Shertallay; *Alleppey Circuit*—congregations in and around Alleppey; *Balaramapuram Circuit I*—Venganoor, Antiyoor, Kidarakuzhi, Muloor, Kottukal, Venpakal, Kaivengala, Muzakolkunnu, Valiavilla; *Balaramapuram Circuit II*—Idagramam or Tiruvellam, Ponnunangalam, Thumbode, Perumana, Kynikara, Tumerichel, Vazhuthoorkonam, Antiyoorkonam, Panayankodu; *Ponvilla Circuit I*—Marayamuttom, Malakulangara, Kollayil, Karekonam, Ponvilla, Parasuwaikal, Karavakuri; *Ponvilla Circuit II*—Chenkavilla, Karemaram, Kalparapottam, Tittukuzhi, Pakode, Kaliyikavilla, Vanyoor, Prahnivilla; *Luthergiri Circuit I*—Madathikonam, Mylakara, Kanakode, Parachel, Poovachel, Puliyoorkonam, Kuttara; *Luthergiri Circuit II*—Kuttichel, Kannankonam, Mandikulam, Tatchenkodu, Vallimangalam, Mylamudu, Luthergiri, Tholloor, Aryanad; *Luthergiri Circuit III*—Kurungalloor, Konni, Chulimanoor, Chalaikonam, Manoorkonam, Chettachel, Schoolenkuzhi; *Nilamel Circuit I*—Kulathupura, Meenkulam, Madavoor, Nilamel, Karekardu, Vayaanam, Madatara; *Nilamel Circuit II*—Karyam, Melporandaman, Arivarikuzhi, Kurumbayam, Venkatakuzhi, Kanoor, Motha, Anapara; *Trivandrum Circuit*—Chenankodu, Kalathukal, Karavulam, Kavarditalakal, Concordia, Vattiyookavu, Karode, Chenkottakonam, SriKaryam, Pulayankodu, Mannanthala, Kuzuvarkal.<sup>125</sup> Furthermore, in order to prepare the Trivandrum District Lutherans in conducting administrative meetings and conferences, a missionary and a native representative would attend the MELIM—“Ambur Synod”

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<sup>124</sup> Missionary Conference was the Trivandrum District Conference. Prior to this the Travancore Conference served as the primary missionary conference deciding business for the Malayalam areas.

<sup>125</sup> See, *Minutes of the 118<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 53.

Conference—that was already being administered by native Lutherans.<sup>126</sup>

MELIM by now had shifted its focus to prioritizing the ordained ministry of “Word and Sacrament” centered on the autonomous Lutheran congregations in Trivandrum that had to be self-supporting, self-edifying and self-propagating. Accordingly, in-keeping with the demand for pastors in local congregations in 1951 twenty (20) Malayali workers who had been catechists and graduates of the pastoral seminary at Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil were ordained and installed as pastors in the local congregations. Pastors W. Frederick, T. Mannasse, J. Jesudasan, J. C. Gamaliel, R. Benjamin, J. Markose, G. Chellayan, B. Enose, K.P. Massilamani, P. Silvanus, W. Ferdinand, C.M. Jacob, O. Johannan, M. Nallathampi, J. Paul, K. Alexander, G. Tennyson, N. A. Ponnann, A. Enose, and P. Joseph joined a few other pastors who were ordained earlier and working in the Trivandrum field.<sup>127</sup> In 1952, the General Conference recommended starting of a mission station in Bombay (Mumbai) about a thousand miles north-west of Chennai. Native pastors Rev. P. K. George and Rev. James Selvaraj started work among the Malayalee and Tamil diaspora respectively, and later in 1956 Rev. J. C. Gamaliel replaced Rev. George.<sup>128</sup>

Likewise sharing the gospel with the Muslims of Malabar gained impetus with the coming of native workers and pastors like Mr. K. Lukose and Mr. Susheelan (1951), Rev. P. V. David (1953), Mr. K. Satyanesan (1954), Rev. P. Chellayyan and Rev. R. Devadoss (1954), A. Asirvadam and R. Frederick. All of these native workers were supervised by missionary John Gall (came and resigned in 1950), Henry Otten (who came with wife in 1950) and Rev. Roland

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<sup>126</sup> *Minutes of the 121<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 12–15 March, 1951, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 25.

<sup>127</sup> *Minutes of the 122<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 23–26 July, 1951, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 39–40. Some of the other pastors already present in the Trivandrum field included the first pastor—Rev. M. Paulose, and Rev. A. S. Massillamani.

<sup>128</sup> Fergin, “History of the India Mission,” 79.

Miller (who came in 1953).<sup>129</sup> Consequently with the active involvement of Mrs. Otten, medical work took off in this area with a dispensary at Wandoor and a branch dispensary at the nearby village of Pandikad; while a “Child Welfare and Maternity Guidance Center” was opened at Malappuram in 1956.<sup>130</sup> In order to implement self-support in the future and to reduce dependence on funds from America, by the end of 1954 MELIM mission was working on enforcing a “Subsidy” system wherein the local congregations for purchase of land or construction of buildings would gather twenty percent of the cost, with the other twenty percent granted as gift from America, and the rest available as “loan” from the mission fund.<sup>131</sup> Also, to maintain and strengthen its Lutheran members and on realizing that the future of the church lay in its youth, a “Youth League Program” was started in the end of 1955 acting upon the recommendations of the “Central Prathinithi Sankham Steering Committee.”<sup>132</sup>

Even as the mission prepared natives to take over church administration, the MELIM missionaries continued expanding and also accepting invitations from new villages for “instruction.” Thus, as a consequence of the survey of the southern part of the Ponvila field by seminarian K. Samuel work started in Murdode (1952) and Konathuvilla (1952); while Perumbarathoor (1952) on the Neyatinkara-Kattakada road and Oothivilla (1952) were opened through the work of native pastors.<sup>133</sup> Other mission sites that came up during the 1950s were— Madattara (1950), Chippenchira (1951), Varodu (1952), Pappala (1952), Yeroor or Aroor (1952), and Kiraikonam (1952) in the Nilamel area; Tottapalli (1950) and Valavanad (1950) and

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<sup>129</sup> Fergin, “History of the India Mission,” 80–84.

<sup>130</sup> Fergin, “History of the India Mission,” 84–86.

<sup>131</sup> See *Minutes of the 132<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 15–18 Nov., 1954, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 62–65. Also see Fergin, “History of the India Mission,” 91.

<sup>132</sup> See *Minutes of the 135<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 10–13 October, 1955, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 66.

<sup>133</sup> See *Minutes of the 125<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 4–8 August, 1952, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 47.

Ernakulam (1951) in the Alleppey area; Puravurkonam (1950) in the Trivandrum area; Devankode (1951), Kottur (1951), Mayam (1952), Panikonam (1952), and Ziongiri (1951) in the Luthergiri area; Kanyampuram (1951) in the Ponvilla area; and Karumam (1951) in the Balaramapuram area.<sup>134</sup> Likewise, work was also taken up in Cherpalcheri (1953), Kadayalmudu (1955), Paranthalamudu (1955), Kuttimala (1955), and Anchel-Kulutupuzha (1956), Deviyode (1956), and Kulithurai (1956).<sup>135</sup>

As the above mission sites were being taken up, the missionary phase of gospel proclamation in the Malayalam speaking areas was now reaching its conclusion as the congregations were now being gathered together to form an indigenous Lutheran Church in Kerala,<sup>136</sup> the Indian State that combined all the Malayalam speaking areas. As a culmination of this process, in the November of 1956 the “India Evangelical Lutheran Church—Trivandrum Synod” was formed and the MELIM period of missionary supervised congregational growth in Trivandrum came to an end with the 138<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference, in the October of 1956.<sup>137</sup>

### **Features of MELIM Work in South Travancore**

As we have seen, the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum was a rather late entrant into the Malayalam areas of South Travancore. However, once it made its entry through the Sambavar

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<sup>134</sup> See “Statistics of MELIM for 1952.”

<sup>135</sup> See *Minutes of the 127<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 24–27 February, 1953, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 24. Also see *Minutes of the 133<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 18. Also, see *Minutes of the 135<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 65. Also see *Minutes of the 136<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 20–24 February, 1956, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4. See *Minutes of the 137<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 18–20 June, 1956, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 29, 33.

<sup>136</sup> The State of Kerala was organized as the territory of all Malayalam speaking areas in the Country of India, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of November, 1956. This state is situated along the Malabar coast on the South West end of India. “The Movement for a United (Aikya) Kerala,” *Official Web Portal Government of Kerala*, accessed 08/26/15, [http://www.kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=2852&Itemid=2291](http://www.kerala.gov.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2852&Itemid=2291).

<sup>137</sup> See *Minutes of the 138<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 3–10 October, 1956, CHI Archives, St. Louis.



community invitation of 1909–1910, MELIM gradually established itself among different communities and areas of the Malayalam speaking population. From mission reports it is clear that many new communities and people wanted to be taken in by MELIM. Probably some of the characteristics of MELIM contributed to this interest among the native population.

### American Lutheran Missionaries

The work in the Trivandrum district started as a result of the decisive action taken by Henry Nau in following up on the Sambavar invitation from “Kuttichel-Kattakada” and subsequently locating residence at Nandencode, Trivandrum in the January of 1912.<sup>138</sup> Thus from the very beginnings of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum it was the missionaries who held control over the management of work in the Malayalam areas. The Lutheran missionaries were basically supervisors and final decision makers with regards to work in the villages, employment of native workers, disbursement of charity, admitting of new areas and communities into MELIM etc.<sup>139</sup> In their approach they were paternalistic even though well-meaning, controlled the church organization completely, and caste difficulties that were a reality of Travancore life were submerged.<sup>140</sup> The Lutheran missionaries were known for their no-nonsense approach when it came to matters of ethics and church discipline, but at the same time they were also pragmatic

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<sup>138</sup> In the October of 1911, the Southern missionaries resolved to station Brother Nau outside of Nagercoil at a new place (Kattakadai), which was accepted by the Home Board in St. Louis. Even as conveyance from Nagercoil to Trivandrum was not easy, it seems that around this time Nau took up work in the four Sambavar villages from Nagercoil because the work in the Malayalam field was seen as an extension of their work in Nagercoil. Later in the first week of January 1912, Nau took up residence at Nandencode Trivandrum and the Home Board was informed, who positively confirmed this move. See “Report of the Sub-Committee on Foreign Missions,” 27 October, 1911, History of the Board of Foreign Missions 1893–1913 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 65. Also see “Report of the Sub-Committee on Foreign Missions,” 8 March, 1912, History of the Board of Foreign Missions 1893–1913 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 68.

<sup>139</sup> A look at the Minutes of the 138 Trivandrum District Conferences, 62 Travancore Conferences, 2 Joint Travancore Conferences and other Extraordinary Meetings of the Travancore Conferences, make it sufficiently clear that the missionaries were the primary managers who decided policy and practical performance on the field.

<sup>140</sup> Zorn, “The Background,” 82, 118.

and sympathetic to native concerns, individuals and communities.<sup>141</sup> A huge problem with the centralization of power with the missionaries during this period was that in the later period when administration passed on into the hands of the natives, they were under-prepared and overwhelmed by personal and community agendas in handling the work of the church.

Another significant quality of the MELIM missionaries was their emphasis on catechetical instruction and dissemination of Lutheran doctrine. When the mission took over work in the four villages around Kuttichel and Kattakada, the major concern of the missionaries was to “instruct” the village Christians in proper Lutheran beliefs. In most cases the “instruction” attempted by the missionaries did not meet with the success that was expected, mainly due to lack of literacy, attendance and perceived “dullness” of the catechumens.<sup>142</sup> Nevertheless, with the help of native teachers and catechists the MELIM missionaries were able to propagate the gospel message, teach Christian values and also attempt changes in the lifestyle of the people.<sup>143</sup> Undoubtedly, the

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<sup>141</sup> Numerous cases to prove this point can be found in the Conference Minutes from 1911 to 1956. For instance, in a case of infringement of ethical standards set for catechists in the mission, the prime mover of the subaltern Sambavar invitation to the “Kattakada-Kuttichel” area Assistant Catechist Arulanandam was dismissed from the mission by Rev. Ehlers in 1920. Even after repeated advice from Rev. Ehlers, Arulanandam claimed sole heir to property when there were claim from others also, and as a result he perjured himself in Court. Catechist Arulanandam repeatedly pleaded with subsequent Conferences and missionaries for re-admission by expressing regret and seeking forgiveness, but he was not re-instated. See *Minutes of the 45<sup>th</sup> Travancore Conference*, 14–17 December, 1920, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 8. Also see *Minutes of the 50<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 48. At the same time in another case, catechist K. P. Massilamani—who also worked from the initial period of the mission—resigned from the mission due to dispute over him not given a village of his choice for work in 1945. After expressing regret, catechist Massilamani was re-instated in 1946 and went on to become an ordained pastor in MELIM. See *Minutes of the 98<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 9–12 July, 1945, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 27. Also see *Minutes of the 100<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 28 January–1 February, 1946, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2.

<sup>142</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, July-October 1913, 3–4. Also see, Otto Ehlers to Home Board, Quarterly Report, 19 July, 1915, India Missionaries 1914–1918 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–2.

<sup>143</sup> Mission reports from the villages point to many marital disputes and problems that the MELIM missionaries were called upon to adjudicate. Telling lies, adultery, abandoning of spouses, conflicts between individuals and families, fights with higher caste people were all brought to the attention of the missionaries. The MELIM missionary in most cases adjudicated and advised on these disputes and life practices, but at the same time saw this as a “waste of time” and hindrance to their primary work of spreading the gospel. See, Otto Ehlers to Home Board, Report for 1917–1918, Trivandrum, 8 July, 1918, India Missionaries 1914–1918 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see, Otto Ehlers to Home Board, Report for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1917–1918, Trivandrum, 18 November, 1918, India Missionaries 1914–1918 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see the observations of missionary Rev. G. Oberheu in 1926 where he mentions that the people expect him to “help them out a lot in sicknesses, court cases,

work of the MELIM missionaries contributed a great deal to the grudging acceptance of higher communities that subaltern communities in Trivandrum could also behave and live as normal human beings.<sup>144</sup>

A significant perception of the MELIM missionary among the subaltern converts of Trivandrum was that of a benevolent patron who was a pillar of strength for the needy and the oppressed. Throughout the mission period, the missionaries found themselves amongst villagers who were enmeshed in poverty and sickness. Disbursing financial help and compassionate support for the sick and the dying was a regular feature of their work.<sup>145</sup> In addition, the MELIM missionaries probably benefited from perceived association with the British Raj wherein the presence of the White missionary was strength to the subaltern converts and a severe hindrance to elite native dominance and attempted subjugation of the subalterns.<sup>146</sup> A look into the very beginnings of MELIM work in Nagercoil and later in the Kuttichel-Kattakada area reveals the overwhelming desire of the Sambavars to align themselves with missionaries and to be under the protection of a Christian mission. This aspect was very strong among the subalterns during the mission period of MELIM, as is alluded to by the missionary Rev. M. J. Lutz in his Report to the Home Board in 1942 where he observes that the Pariahs of the Luthergiri district “would make

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quarrels, etc. etc.” See G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, Trivandrum, 6 July, 1926, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>144</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July 1916, 1–2.

<sup>145</sup> See F. Zucker to Director Rev. Brand, 8 October, 1931, CHI Archives, St. Louis. See Otto A. Ehlers to Home Board, Quarterly Report for 1915, 23 February 1915, India Missionaries 1914–1918 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. MELIM missionaries in the “Northern Field” around Tamil country also gave an account of their work among the Pariahs and their struggles in handling the poverty and loss of lives among them. See the report of Rev. George Kuechle in, Fuerbringer, “Our India Mission,” 178–79.

<sup>146</sup> Incidents of arson and destruction of low caste Christian’s places of worship can be seen mentioned in mission reports and Conferences. In one such incident from the Sambavar mission site of Veerankavu, the missionary Kauffeld was surrounded by Nair (landlords) goons who were objecting to his gathering the Sambavar converts for worship, when they were supposed to be in the fields for work. Missionary Kauffeld pulled out his gun and fired in the air to frighten the Nairs, and to assure the Sambavar converts to come for worship. See Gomez, *Thullal Purayilninnu*, 114–15.

the missionary a Chieftain to look after their affairs.”<sup>147</sup> Presence of the “Saippu”<sup>148</sup> for the subalterns meant that there was protection, emancipation and access to resources which in any other case would be not available to them. However, when the patronizing presence of the American “Saippu” was professed with pride by the subaltern converts, it was severely disliked by the native elites who derogatorily dismissed many as “Pariah Saippu”<sup>149</sup> (missionary of the Pariahs).

### Native Workers

From the very beginning of the Lutheran mission efforts in the “Kuttichel-Kattkada” area, the proclamation of the gospel to the subaltern culture in Trivandrum included the agency of schools and the active involvement of native workers. Dr. Henry Nau while taking over the work in the villages of Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puthu-Kulangara (Chalaikonam) had employed many of the initial leaders who had invited the Lutheran mission to come and work among them. Accordingly, M. Paulose who was known as a “teacher-poet” was appointed as Catechist,<sup>150</sup> while the prime native movers for this mission invitation—Arulanandam and Canchanam—were appointed as Assistant Catechists in the mission. In addition, other native workers like assistant catechists—Massilamani, Jonah and Charles; and nine teachers—J. C.

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<sup>147</sup> See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, 20 October, 1942, 1–3.

<sup>148</sup> The local version of “Sahib”—meaning “Master.”

<sup>149</sup> In the oral remembrance of the subaltern Lutheran community in Trivandrum, the usage of “Pariah Saippu” is meant to express a personal attachment and affection for the Lutheran missionary. Also, the Lutheran mission came to be known among the people as the “Pariah Mission.” At the same time, the term also came to signify the association of the missionary with something detestable, given the perception of the Pariahs being a “low-caste” and “polluting” people. It seems that even the MELIM missionaries were aware of this and wanted to get away from this expression that defined them and their work. See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July 1916, 3–4.

<sup>150</sup> The work of a catechist in MELIM was similar to the work of a student-vicar back home in the Lutheran Church in America. He taught at the Lutheran school, particularly the religious branches, assisted the missionary in preparing the people for baptism, confirmation, and the Lord’s Supper, and conducted worship services. The more advanced among them would also preach on the outline provided by the missionary during regular Saturday native worker meetings. See, H. E. Levihn, “The Boy’s Boarding School, Nagercoil, India,” *Lutheran Witness* 44, no. 25 (December 1925): 420.

James, A. Jacob, Markose, Podiappi, Appavoo, I. Arulanandam, Moses, Gnanakan, and Zacharias—were the ones who took the Lutheran message on a daily basis to the subaltern villages and schools.<sup>151</sup> During this time, the native workers would walk miles, or use bullock carts and bicycles to access the villages where they were working.<sup>152</sup> Also, some of the earlier students who had been taken to the Boarding school in Nagercoil in 1910 from Puliyoorkonam, Kuttichel, and Kurungaloor also joined the Lutheran mission as workers. Some of these were catechists V. M. Markose, A. S. Massilamani, J. K. Moses (who had to leave the Boarding school in 1912 to take care of his bereaved mother and was appointed as teacher in 1913),<sup>153</sup> and P. Joseph. From Conference reports and letters available during this period, other native workers who helped establish the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum by the 1930s included catechists—J. David, Ephraim, A. Manasseh, Harris, N. C. John, P. Manassu, M. Thomas, M. M. Mark, A. Johanan, P. Samuel, S. Marcos, U. Daniel, M. A. Joseph, A. Samuel, M. Paul, Theophilus, M. Paulose (lefty), S. Ponnu, P. Kunyan, P. Silvanus, Matthew, T. James, G. Madhavan, K. Johannan, K. Velayudhan; and women workers—Victoria, K. Priscilla, and Girls Boarding school Matron Mrs. Emma Paulose (wife of Rev. M. Paulose).<sup>154</sup>

In course of time, the missionaries grew satisfied with the indoctrination of the native

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<sup>151</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, Quarterly Report, October-December 1914, Trivandrum, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1.

<sup>152</sup> A Conference Report of 1918 points to Assistant Catechist Arulanandam using his personal bicycle for mission work in villages that are 5 miles apart, and the mission remunerating him for the same. See *Minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 5–9 August, 1918, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 21. In the same minutes on page 20, mention is also found of Catechist M. Paulose being remunerated for bandy allowance for the three congregations that he is serving miles apart from his home. Also mention of women workers not able to come to Saturday study hours due to great walking distance can be found in the initial mission reports sent to the Home Board. See F. R. Zucker to Home Board, October-December 1914, 1.

<sup>153</sup> See J. K. Moses to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 4 June, 1938, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1.

<sup>154</sup> See *Minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1–2. Also see *Minutes of the 37<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 19–21 November, 1925, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 11. Also see *Minutes of the 41<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 11–12 July 1927, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3. Also see, *Minutes of the 56<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 24–28 August, 1931, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 17, 21, 23. Also see *Minutes of the 59<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 5–9 September, 1932, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 21.

helpers and believed that it was time to prepare them on a Seminary style curriculum so that the next step of handing them church related responsibilities could materialize.<sup>155</sup> Accordingly, apart from regular weekly catechetical instructions for the native workers in the initial period of the mission, a framework was also put in place for quarterly meetings of all the native workers (catechists and teachers) and delegates who were “Elders” from the respective congregations. This quarterly gathering called the “Prathinidhi Sankham” was first held on the May 31–June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1923 at Perurkada, Trivandrum and included native workers presenting theological papers to the audience after being coached by the missionaries.<sup>156</sup> Also as a part of the systematic theological training of native workers, the Trivandrum Conference decided to send workers—Ephraim, V. M. Markose, T. Charles, M. Paul, K. P. Massilamani, M. A. Joseph, and Theophilus to the Seminary at Nagercoil in 1926.<sup>157</sup> To this group was added Catechist M. Paulose, who was directly trained by the missionaries earlier and was also the music teacher of the catechist class at the Kattakada Institute during the initial 1913–1918 period. Later in 1932 M. Paulose was ordained as the first pastor of the Malayalam speaking areas.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Andrew C. Fritze, “Our India Mission Takes Forward Strides in the Jubilee Year,” *Lutheran Witness* 41, no. 10 (May 1922): 158–59.

<sup>156</sup> See *Minutes of the 10<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 4 June, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. Also see *Minutes of the 13<sup>th</sup> General Conference held at Nagercoil*, 29 November–8 December, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 45. The 11<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference assigned the following papers for the next Delegate Meeting—“Giving Offence to Children” by M. A. Joseph coached by Rev. Fritze; “Prayer” by J. K. Moses coached by Rev. Oberheu; “Divine Healing” by Ephraim coached by Rev. Fritze; “Drink-Evil” by P. Joseph coached by Rev. Jank. See *Minutes of the 11<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 23 July, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4.

<sup>157</sup> See *Minutes of 39<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Rev. M. Paulose was known as Paulose Nather meaning “Paulose the village pastor” and was the music faculty at the Kattakada Institute where the Lutheran missionaries would meet the native workers on Saturday every week for review and catechetical instruction. Later, he was also giving singing lessons to the boys at the Boarding School in Trivandrum. See, *Protokoll der Travancore Konferenz-Siebzehndr Konferenz*, 25–27 February 1913, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 6. Also see, *Minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1 May, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. Rev. Paulose was trained by the initial MELIM missionaries like Nau, Zucker, Ehlers, Fritze and also Robert Jank. See *Minutes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 6 November, 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. Also see *Minutes of the 13<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 8 October, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1. For Rev. Paulose’ admission into the Catechist seminary at Nagercoil, see *Minutes of the 40<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 14, 16–17 May, 1927, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4. Also see the sanction for the ordination of Vicar M.

Thus the work of sharing the gospel among subaltern villagers was primarily entrusted to the native workers who had to surmount various difficulties. Lack of proper roads, hilly terrain, stones on roads, rivers between places with no bridges, disinterested church members, and lack of properly educated catechists and teachers made the teaching process a tedious and challenging one. Nevertheless, progress was made by the few missionaries and the native church workers who were supposed to visit each house member once in a week, provide catechetical instructions, teach religious lessons to students in the Boarding school, and also report back on work and possibilities in the villages of Trivandrum.<sup>159</sup> By the early 1930s the Lutheran mission started reaping the benefits of its Boys Boarding school students on a larger scale as more select pupils were now being employed by the mission for work in the villages of Trivandrum.<sup>160</sup> By the late 1930s this arrangement was firmly in place as most of the native workers came from the congregational and Boarding schools network. Also to secure the retired life of native workers the mission started a Workers Provident Fund in the late 1930s and also organized a Workers Medical Fund in the early 1940s.<sup>161</sup> Finally, it fell upon the native workers to take over the responsibility of MELIM work when it became abundantly clear that the missionaries could no longer continue as overseers of the church. Accordingly from the mid-1940s through the organizing of the “Trivandrum Pastoral Conference” and representative advisory bodies like the “Prathinidhi Sankham” from the early 1950s, the native workers were provided with opportunities to learn and run the administration of the church that led to the formation of the

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Paulose in the *Minutes of the 57<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 4–9 January, 1932, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 8.

<sup>159</sup> See G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, Trivandrum, 13 September, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also see G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, Trivandrum, 28 April, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>160</sup> See list of natives admitted to the catechist classes at Nagercoil. See *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Trivandrum District Conference*, 19 March, 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. See *Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Trivandrum District Conference*, 27 June, 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1. Also, see *Minutes of the 52<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 9.

<sup>161</sup> See *Minutes of the 86<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 10.

## Education

Most of the MELIM converts came from the subaltern outcaste communities like the Sambavars (Pariahs), Cheramars (Pulayas), Vedars, and the Kuravars, and MELIM had to work with them in building the Lutheran Church in South Travancore. Also, a significant membership came from higher caste communities like the Nadars and Ezhavas who were also not so long ago subaltern communities with limited access to power and resources. Since most of the invitations from these groups for work among them included the starting of a school and congregation, the missionaries were able to gauge that the aspirational mood of the natives was for education. This fitted well with the MELIM “instruction” pattern of teaching and making new Christian converts. Accordingly, for the upliftment of such communities and for gathering church workers from this newly formed Lutheran community, the MELIM missionaries started schools in the subaltern villages of South Travancore. However, this model was also found to be insufficient because most of the subaltern communities were steeped in superstitions, bad life practices, terrible health conditions and basically lived a hand to mouth existence. To address these issues and to make a dent in the vicious “survival” cycle of the local culture, the missionaries worked towards starting Boarding homes for boys in 1916 and also girls by 1919, where, through education a new community could be formed.<sup>163</sup>

As the MELIM education effort took root in the villages and the Boarding schools, secular education was intertwined with sharing the gospel message and instilling the truths of Christianity into students. In this approach MELIM was un-compromising to the extent that,

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<sup>162</sup> For Trivandrum Pastoral Conferences, see the *Minutes of the 96<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 29 January–2 February, 1945, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 8.

<sup>163</sup> See *Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 9–10 January, 1919, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4–5. Also see, H. E. Levihn, “The Boys Boarding School,” 420.



when a “conscience clause” was introduced by the Travancore government that dissuaded Christian mission schools like MELIM from indoctrinating caste Hindus while compelling Christian schools to provide secular education to all, MELIM decided to dismiss such interference by rejecting future Government grants from 1924.<sup>164</sup> Thus for the MELIM missionaries, education was not only a pathway to secular knowledge and benefits, rather it was also an instrument to inculcate Christian values in both the individual and the community at large. In short, from the beginning MELIM considered schools as valid vehicles for the Gospel.<sup>165</sup> Accordingly, while establishing the Lutheran school system in South Travancore the missionaries concentrated on providing education in the vernacular language of “Malayalam.” The education framework consisted of classes from nursery to high school that focused on inculcating literacy and ascertaining the aptitude levels of students for gospel work among the native population.<sup>166</sup>

Since in most cases the establishing of school and congregation went together and given the pre-eminence for religious education, the church community and its pastor were entrusted with the responsibility of managing these schools.<sup>167</sup> In fact, during the phase from 1911 to the mid-1920s the MELIM missionaries supervised and ran the schools by employing native workers who were subject to constant review. However, by the mid-1920s partly due to the increase in gospel work and also the number of schools, the missionaries concluded that the day to day running of the schools was taking over much of their limited time and resources. Consequently, in 1926 a native worker belonging to the affluent Syrian Christian community—Mr. P. O.

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<sup>164</sup> E. H. Meinzen, “Fifty Years—Being a Brief Record of the Beginnings of the Work of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the so-called Nagercoil District Conference,” in *Foreign Mission Histories—China, Indian, Japan, New Guinea, Phillipines*, (St. Louis: Board for Foreign Missions, 1977), 24.

<sup>165</sup> Zorn, “The Background,” 117.

<sup>166</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 67.

<sup>167</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 68.

Samuel—was appointed as the Supervisor and Correspondent of the MELIM Vernacular Schools in the Trivandrum District.<sup>168</sup> Mr. Samuel was contracted to work under the supervision of the mission to improve the efficiency of schools and to keep the education standards according to the Government approved criteria. Also, missionary A. C. Fritze had by the 1930s realized the importance for English medium schools to be established in Trivandrum, and started an English Medium Middle School at Trivandrum with a curriculum that included the Boarding students learning gardening and animal husbandry skills.<sup>169</sup> In continuation, a three year Joint “Trivandrum District-Nagercoil District” Secondary Training School was started in 1942 with an emphasis placed also on religious education that provided trained higher grade teachers for the Lutheran schools in both districts.<sup>170</sup> This was followed up with the Trivandrum District’s own Secondary Teacher’s Training School in 1952.<sup>171</sup>

Realizing that the success of the Lutheran education effort depended upon addressing the low literacy levels of its adult Lutheran converts, in 1951 MELIM decided to initiate an “Adult Literacy” program that targeted the improvement of literacy levels of its subaltern communities that were still struggling to take the benefits of education.<sup>172</sup> Much earlier, the missionaries had also concluded that along with improvement in literacy levels the natives also needed to be taught proper Christian beliefs and ethics. Constant missionary exhortation for “better church workers” well trained in theological understanding finally led to the opening of the Concordia Seminary at Nagercoil on September 8, 1924, to serve the three MELIM districts of Ambur,

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<sup>168</sup> See *Minutes of the 38<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 26–30 July, 1926, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 8.

<sup>169</sup> See *Minutes of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 31 August–4 September, 1936, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1.

<sup>170</sup> See *Minutes of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 8–11 November, 1939, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 5. Also see Rev. G. Hattendorf, “Report of the TDC-NDC Joint Secondary Training School,” 1.

<sup>171</sup> See *Minutes of the 125<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 4–8 August, 1952, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 41.

<sup>172</sup> See *Minutes of the 122<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 44.

Nagercoil, and Trivandrum.<sup>173</sup> Later in 1934 the Seminary was structured under two separate “two-year units” called the Catechist’s seminary and the Pastoral seminary that was affiliated to the Senate of Serampore College in 1959.<sup>174</sup>

### Literature and Gospel Work

Alongside dissemination of proper biblical teachings through the medium of schools and native teachers, MELIM also used printed materials for evangelism and the edification of the congregations under their care. When the Lutheran mission began in the Kuttichel-Kattakada area in 1911, Rev. Henry Nau established a Malayalam translation of the Luther’s Small Catechism based off the one published by the Basel Mission and 500 copies were printed for the benefit of Malayalam students at the Boarding school in Nagercoil and for work in the Malayalam areas.<sup>175</sup> Later in 1921 another version of Luther’s Small Catechism along with Schwan’s exposition of Luther’s Catechism was translated into Malayalam by Rev. Zucker and Rev. Ehlers and copies were printed for the benefit of workers and church members.<sup>176</sup> In 1922–1923, MELIM made its initial attempts to print a Malayalam Lutheran hymnal with an Order of Worship based on the Evangelical Lutheran Hymnal and also printed a Malayalam Agenda. For this purpose, Rev. Zucker who was assigned this responsibility had collected around 80 songs and had translated certain parts of the Lutheran Agenda into Malayalam.<sup>177</sup> Later in 1931 this

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<sup>173</sup> G. C. Schroeder, “Our Concordia Seminary in India,” *Lutheran Witness* 43, no. 24 (St. Louis: 1924): 426–27.

<sup>174</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 69–70.

<sup>175</sup> See *Minutes of the 11<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 6 December, 1911, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4.

<sup>176</sup> See *Minutes of 47<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 26–28 July, 1921, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 6.

<sup>177</sup> See *Minutes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 6 November, 1922, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2–3. Also see *Minutes of the 7<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 2. Also see *Minutes of the 56<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 16–19 October, 1923, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 13.

hymnal was revised under a committee led by Rev. K. M. Zorn and Rev. Stelter.<sup>178</sup>

As the Lutheran Church became more established in course of time, MELIM ventured into printing theological materials addressing native concerns and for reaching out to non-Christians in the Malayalam areas. Accordingly, MELIM printed a Malayalam prayer book for family devotion and thought of using the Radio to propagate the gospel in the Malayalam and Tamil areas in 1926.<sup>179</sup> Other materials included a Malayalam monthly “Christiani” (the Christian) in 1925, a revision of Luther’s Catechism in Malayalam (1925), an Order of Service and Hymnal in 1940, and a Theological Quarterly published by the Faculty of Concordia Seminary Nagercoil called “Christava Siddhantha Deepika” (The light of Christian thought) from 1948. Some of the printed tracts for gospel proclamation were—“Pambu Kadikku Oushatham,” translation of Stoeckhardt’s Old Testament “Biblische Geschichte” by Rev. K. M. Zorn, “Manucherude Raksha and Vishwasikka”—two follow-up tracts to the films “Crucifixion and Burial” and the “Resurrection”—, Malayalam versions of “God prepares Salvation,” “What is your Aim?,” “The Unclosing Eye,” “Are all Religions the Same?,” and “The Key to Joy.”<sup>180</sup> In addition, Metzger’s Catechism, Luther’s Large Catechism, the Augusburg Confession, Matthew’s Commentary translated by Rev. Oberheu, 100 Bible Stories, Bible History, Liturgy and Agenda, Passion Story, Family Altar, Christian dramas in Malayalam, printed Christmas programs, Diaspora sermons, Reformation pamphlet, Lenten devotions, Topical Concordance, Enchiridion, translation of Schlatter’s Commentary on James, Church account and baptismal forms, and

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<sup>178</sup> See *Minutes of the 55<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 17–23 March, 1931, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

<sup>179</sup> See *Minutes of the 17<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 13 February, 1924, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2. Also see, *Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Travancore Joint Conference*, 22–24 September, 1926, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 7.

<sup>180</sup> See *Minutes of the 125<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 41. Also see, *Minutes of the 127<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 24–27 February, 1953, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 22.

school forms were important materials published in the Malayalam language.<sup>181</sup> Also again in 1951 the Malayalam Lutheran Hymnal was revised under the chairmanship of Rev. R. M. Zorn who also worked on setting music to the Malayalam Liturgy.<sup>182</sup>

### Lutheran Worshipping Community

From the very beginning the objective of the Lutheran mission was to establish the church in the Malayalam speaking areas of Trivandrum. Thus an enduring Lutheran congregation that would in the future evangelize other communities in Trivandrum was the vision on which MELIM moved forward. The 12<sup>th</sup> General Conference of MELIM held at Trivandrum points out this fact:

Our work in India is to reach souls with the Gospel, to make sinners acquainted with their Savior Jesus Christ, in order that they may be saved from eternal ruin. Our aim naturally includes the hope that those who accept their Savior will sooner or later organize active, well-instructed Christian congregations, which, in their turn, will preach the Gospel to others... (there) was also the proposal to organize district conferences of the Indian mission workers and elders of congregations, led by missionaries. By these it is hoped to establish great cooperation between our mission workers and the congregations, to encourage our congregations to become self-supporting, and to create a live interest in matters pertaining to the Church.<sup>183</sup>

Thus from the very beginning congregations were started in the local villages where

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<sup>181</sup> For printing of Bible History stories translated into Malayalam from “Stoeckhardt”, see *Minutes of 43<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 7–8 May, 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1. For printing of “Christiani”, Metzger’s Catechism, Luther’s Large Catechism, 100 Bible Stories, Malayalam Hymnal, Church and School Forms, and tracts, see *Minutes of 44<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 20 August, 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 6. For printing of Matthew’s Commentary translated by Rev. Oberheu, see *Minutes of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 4. For printing of Matthew’s Commentary and Large Catechism, see *Minutes of the 86<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 7. For printing of Malayalam Agenda and Large Catechism, see *Minutes of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 13–15 December, 1943, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 48. For printing of the Liturgy and Agenda, see *Minutes of the 101<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 19–23 March, 1946, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 11. For printing of the “Family Altar” see *Minutes of the 114<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 54. For printing of passion story and the re-printing of the Malayalam Hymnal, see *Minutes of the 123<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 65. For printing of Christian dramas, see *Minutes of the 126<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 29 September–2 October, 1952, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 63. For printed Christmas programs, Diaspora sermons, Reformation pamphlets, Lenten devotions, Topical Concordance, see *Minutes of the 127<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 22. For printing of the Enchiridion and Commentary on James, see *Minutes of the 129<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 54.

<sup>182</sup> See *Minutes of the 123<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 65.

<sup>183</sup> Paul F. Heckel, “General Conference in India,” in *Lutheran Witness* 42, no. 4 (February 1923): 58.

MELIM workers were instructing catechumens. In due course invitations came from the relatives of fellow caste members in these Lutheran congregations and MELIM work expanded into new villages and people.<sup>184</sup> As work took off, the missionaries understood the need for underscoring the uniqueness of being a Lutheran community given the fact that other Christian missions already had preceded it and had an advantage in furthering their denominational heritage in the Malayalam areas.<sup>185</sup> So in order to secure their Lutheran flock and also to exhibit their unique Lutheran heritage, the Lutheran missionaries worked towards having joint worships immediately after the Harvest season (in the August-September season). These gatherings were called “Sankams” where people from the nearby Lutheran villages would gather together at a mutually accessible Lutheran village for giving thanks and praise to God.<sup>186</sup> In these gatherings the missionary as well as the native catechist would preach and the collective worship would send the message that they all belonged together in the Christian church having the same goal, namely—“eternal life.”<sup>187</sup>

This worshipping community was also slowly learning to be aware of their own potential and responsibilities in spreading the Lutheran message. For instance, the “Quadricentennial of the Reformation” was celebrated in Trivandrum in 1917 and almost six hundred (600) native converts came together for this historic event. Building upon the potential of the Sambavar converts to write contextual poems, a native composition of the “Battle-hymn” of the

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<sup>184</sup> Zorn, “The Background,” 104.

<sup>185</sup> Much before the Lutheran mission started work in the Trivandrum District in 1911, the Roman Catholics, the London Mission Society, the Salvation Army, the Bible Faith Mission, and certain Pentecostal missions had been working in Trivandrum.

<sup>186</sup> See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, Quarterly Report July–September 1915, Trivandrum, 5 October, 1915, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

<sup>187</sup> Report of Nagercoil missionary R. Goerss on the 7<sup>th</sup> General Conference of MELIM missionaries in India in which he talks about all the missionaries and their wives going to Kuttichel for a Joint worship gathering of all 13 congregations with an attendance of between 500–600 people. See, R. Goerss “Conference of Our Missionaries in India,” in *Lutheran Witness* 36, no. 8 (1917): 114–116.

Reformation along with two original poetic compositions by Catechist Arulanandam and Teacher J. K. Moses were included as part of the worship experience.<sup>188</sup> Also, the early worship chapels used to be “Pandals” (sheds) made out of “Ola roofs” (palm leaves) held upon bamboo poles. The missionaries encouraged and motivated the worshipping community to pool their resources together and build “permanent structures” for worship purposes. When the community would succeed in such constructions with mission’s help, the event was celebrated and ideas of “self-government and self-support” emphasized among the people.<sup>189</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have mapped out the beginnings, gradual establishment, and eventual transition of the Lutheran mission in the Malayalam areas, to becoming the Lutheran Church in Kerala. We have seen how MELIM started work in Trivandrum among the subaltern low-caste people through invitation from the Sambavar community and then proceeded to establish congregations among various castes and villages in the Malayalam areas. Even though this period was heavily controlled and supervised by the MELIM missionaries, the contributions of native workers in catechizing and grounding the church in Lutheran doctrines and practices cannot be overlooked. At the same time, it should also be noted that most of the MELIM congregations sprang up as a result of local invitations of Malayalee people from the villages of South Travancore that suggest the presence of a strong desire for acceptance and participation in the Lutheran community. The native converts coming into the mission did bring in their own

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<sup>188</sup> Report of F. R. Zucker about the 400 year Reformation Celebration from Trivandrum. See F. Zucker, “Our East India Mission,” *Lutheran Witness* 37, no. 3 (1918): 40–41.

<sup>189</sup> The emphasis on self-support was a dominant theme well until the end of the mission period in 1956. At the same time there were successes where the natives did contribute to the building of their “mud-brick” chapels. For instance, when the initial mission site of Puliyoorkonam (Kattakada) was able to build a Chapel with the help of local contributions and mission support, it was a much celebrated event. See, G. Oberheu, “Progress at Puliyoorkonam, Travancore, India,” in *Lutheran Witness* 43, no. 17 (August 1924): 303–4.

concerns and desires which had to encounter the concerns and concepts of the MELIM missionaries. We will turn our attention to this clash of perspectives, concerns and yearnings of both parties in the next chapter.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **AMERICAN LUTHERAN MISSIONARY AND NATIVE SUBALTERN CONVERTS: A GOSPEL-CULTURE ENCOUNTER**

In the last chapter we traced the history of the MELIM's evangelizing efforts in the Malayalam speaking lands. In this history it was obvious that there was considerable interest among the natives to invite the MELIM missionary amongst them and to join the Lutheran mission. Nevertheless, as in all mission efforts through history, this Christianizing outreach to the subaltern communities of Travancore and into other Malayalam speaking territories was embedded within various social, economic and religious dynamics especially in the larger context of British colonial rule over India. In short, MELIM work in the Malayalam speaking lands can be seen through the lens of a gospel-culture encounter between the American Lutheran missionary and Native converts that probably entailed a mutual give and take on the part of both parties.

#### **AN ANALYSIS OF MELIM WORK IN THE MALAYALAM LANDS**

As seen in the previous chapter, MELIM work started in the Malayalam speaking lands of southern India in the later part of 1911 through the invitation of subaltern Sambavars who were seeking a Christian mission to work amongst them. In entering work in these new areas among a new language group, the MELIM missionaries brought their own unique understanding of the gospel that they sought to share and teach the locals. A look into the history of this period suggests that the missionaries were singularly focused on aspects that they firmly believed in and kept complete control over most aspects of the mission. At the same time they had to surmount

various challenges in proclaiming the gospel as the local culture and its people were very different and complicated for the missionary. Nevertheless, what unfolds in this gospel-culture interaction between the MELIM missionaries and the subaltern native converts is a world of competing goals and challenges that had to be negotiated going forward.

### MELIM Missionaries

Apart from Rev. Henry Nau, the prime missionary mover of Malayalam work in Trivandrum, all other MELIM missionaries who came to the “Kuttichel-Kattakada”<sup>1</sup> area and later to other parts of the state of Kerala, were nationals from America belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and Other States. They saw mission work as “carrying the gospel of Christ to the ends of the world” so that others would know of the “glad tidings in Him,” and viewed their own role of “missionary” as the “person sent out by a church or individuals as their representative to spread the message concerning Christ.”<sup>2</sup> MELIM held on to confessional Lutheran principles such as verbal inspiration of scripture; belief in Sola Gratia, Sola Scriptura, and Sola Fide; the two Sacraments—Baptism and Lord’s Supper, as “means of Salvation”; and the purity of Lutheran doctrine.

### MELIM Missionary Goals

MELIM work in the Malayalam speaking areas began without waiting for prior approval

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<sup>1</sup> As explained in the last chapter, in late 1911 Rev. Henry Nau responded to the Sambavar invitation from Arulanandam Upadeshi, Canchanam Upadeshi, M. Paulose Upadeshi, Jacob Deacon etc., and took over the four (4) Sambavar villages of Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puthu-Kulangara. All these villages were served by these native Christians who were previously London Mission believers. Also, these villages were in the radius of the “Kuttichel-Kattakada” area. The Kuttichel area brought in other Sambavar villages into the Lutheran fold such as—Kurungaloor, Puthu-Kulangara, Chalaikonam, Chullimanoor, Luthergiri (Kattaikal), Aryanadu (Tholloor); while the Lutheran work in the Kattakada area was centered around the Puliyoorkonam congregation. Consequently, the Kattakada (Puliyoorkonam) area brought in other Sambavar villages into the Lutheran fold such as—Kanakodu, Antiyoorkonam, Tumerichel and Madathikonam, in the initial 1911–1916 period. See, “Statistik der Missouriischen Heidenmission in Indien fur 1916,” Statistics 1916 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>2</sup> See *Minutes of the Travancore Joint Conference*, Trivandrum, 21–22 August, 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2.

from the Home Board in St. Louis. Rev. Henry Nau, was known as an aggressive worker for the Lord and with frequent appeals coming from the Sambavars coupled with slow response from the Board, Rev. Nau decided to act.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently as work started in the “Kuttichel-Kattakada” area, this work in the Malayalam areas was seen as an extension of the work in Nagercoil, because both these areas, about 50 miles apart, were part of the princely state of Travancore.<sup>4</sup> Undoubtedly, reaching out to a new language group and people brought with it its own challenges and possibilities; but as Mission Conferences and missionary Reports indicate, MELIM approached their task firmly with certain goals in mind.

### Saving Souls

As David Bosch points out, an important aspect of the Modern missionary paradigm of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was its highly individualistic focus that emanated out from its “enlightenment” roots. The belief during this period of colonial expansion and Christian mission was that the “poor heathen” had to be saved from his “depth of fallen humanity’s pitiable state” because of the love of Christ being open for all people.<sup>5</sup> Observations similar to this could also be seen from MELIM and the Home Board in St. Louis, and in one such account

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<sup>3</sup> The report from the Home Mission Board in St. Louis points to the fact that Rev. Henry Nau had taken over work in the Trivandrum area and had even shifted to the Travancore area around Kattakada, even before they had approved of such a move. See, “Report of the Sub-Committee on Foreign Mission,” 27 Oct., 1911 and 8 March, 1912, 65–68. Also, in response to a letter from Rev. Henry Nau from Trivandrum the Home Board mentions its enthusiasm for the Trivandrum expansion even though Rev. Nau thinks that immediate and adequate support was not extended by the Board in St. Louis. See Home Board to Henry Nau, Letter, St. Louis, 10 April, 1912, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>4</sup> Till 1922 the Trivandrum District was seen as an extension of the work from the Nagercoil District, with regular meetings of the Travancore Conference containing reports and concerns from the Malayalam field. To some extent, the Trivandrum Mission started functioning on its own, when the Trivandrum Local Conference first met in July 10, 1922 and continued till the 34<sup>th</sup> Local Conference in 1925. Complete autonomy in functioning for the Trivandrum Conference came in the July of 1925 with the 35<sup>th</sup> Local Conference being converted into the 35<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference, held from 6–8 October, 1925 at Balaramapuram. See *Minutes of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 287–90.

of Rev. Julius A. Friedrich—Director of Foreign Missions published in the *Lutheran Witness* in 1913 after his visit to then Lutheran sites of Puliyoorkonam, Kanakodu, Kuddizel, Puthukulankarei, Kurungalloor, Kaddeikal and Arianadu in 1912–1913, he recollects the work of Rev. Nau from Nandencode in Trivandrum and calls to attention the people back at Home:

And still they come in large numbers and beseech him, beseech him earnestly, to take care of them and give them instruction in the Word of God...A week ago 200 people sent a request to him...He had to send them away. Yesterday, a man stood at the door; he brought a request from 120 Puleyas...with a heavy heart he had to send them away! About fourteen miles off there are nine families of the Shanar caste (palm-growers), nice people, who positively expect Brother Nau to instruct them and their children...But up to this time the missionary has not been able to take care of them...Is it not a pity? If it is painful when one cannot give bread for the body to one who is starving, how many thousand times more painful is it when one must send away poor heathen who desire the Bread of Life and actually beg us to instruct them in the Word of God! ...Missionary work among the heathen is, indeed, your cause...and behold, here the heathen themselves and in such numbers, too, are coming to the missionaries and earnestly entreat them, “Come and help us!”<sup>6</sup>

From a theological perspective, this desire to save people was seen through the soteriological lens of “saving of souls” that turned out to a big motivator for missionary work during this period.

The missionary purpose, or the missionary object, which we should have in view, is to bring the sinner to Christ and keep him with Christ...The missionary purpose is identical with the Church’s duty to evangelize the world. It is not the church’s duty to entertain, to furnish amusement and pastimes, to give a secular education, to engage in politics, to teach the arts and sciences; these things are foreign to the work of the church as such, though all these things may and should be made subservient to it...These things follow when the church is wide-awake to its missionary purpose which is solely to save souls...And if we would remain true to our calling—and God grant that we may—our missionary purpose ever must be “by all means to save some,” save them from sin and everlasting perdition, save them for Christ and His heavenly Kingdom. And, lest we forget this can be done only by preaching the Gospel.<sup>7</sup>

This then was precisely the goal of MELIM missionaries in Trivandrum—“wining souls

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<sup>6</sup> See Richard Kretzschmar, “Our Mission Field in India White to Harvest,” *Lutheran Witness* 32, no. 9 (1913): 67.

<sup>7</sup> John H. C. Fritz, “The Missionary Purpose,” *Lutheran Witness* 30, no. 17 (Pittsburgh, 1911): 132.

for Christ” and “to instruct the converts in Christendom.”<sup>8</sup> For the American missionary, informed with western ideas of philosophy and religion and completely convinced of their societal progress and “enlightened” life; an important goal during this period was to proclaim salvation in Christ to “piteously lost souls in the thrall of the Devil and his ingenious system.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, very much in line with the modern view of the MELIM missionaries, the subaltern Lutheran converts were perceived to be of “lowest intelligence” and “infants” to whom the “highest form of religion was devil worship, a system of bribing the evil one so that he will be lenient with them.”<sup>10</sup>

More importantly, from a missionary stand point and based on his firm conviction in Lutheran theology, the Pariah, Pulaya, Nadar, Ezhava, Vedar or Kurava convert were all “sinful human beings” in need of salvation. For him the religiosity of particularly the subaltern people, who lived in a pre-modern agrarian culture based on spirit worship and appeasement, was tantamount to “devil worship” and the great calling was to save them from it. Accordingly, MELIM preferred and worked towards the “gradual winning of soul after soul.”<sup>11</sup>

### Establishing the Church and Securing a Lutheran Presence in Malayalam lands

From the very beginning of MELIM work in Trivandrum, it was very clear that the primary goal for the missionaries was to establish the Lutheran Church in Malayalam speaking lands.

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<sup>8</sup> See, F. Zucker to Home Board, Quarterly Report, Trivandrum, Jan-March 1914, Statistics 1914 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 290.

<sup>10</sup> See Martin L. Wyneken to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 8 April, 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Director Frederick Brand from the Home Board in St. Louis wrote along these lines to Rev. Kurt Zorn, who was working among the Ezhavas of Alleppey and Shertallay. Reflecting a common refrain from the Home Board to its workers on the field, Brand calls Kurt Zorn to persevere in his work and also recorded his views about the slow progress of Ezhava converts joining the Lutheran mission in spite of the huge enthusiasm shown by the missionaries for work among them. See Director Rev. Brand to Kurt Zorn, Letter, St. Louis, 23 November 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

Since MELIM began rather late in the Malayalam lands compared to other denominational missions like the London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Salvation Army, Bible Faith Mission etc.; the missionaries were conscious to the fact that they wanted their converts to have proper Lutheran faith. Also since most of the converts joining the Lutheran mission either previously belonged to the Roman Catholic, London Mission or other churches, it was important to firmly establish Lutheran teaching and secure the Lutheran faith among them. Accordingly, when Rev. Nau took over the four Sambavar independent congregations under Arulanandam Upadeshi and Canjanam Upadeshi, many of these previous London Mission converts and those coming from subaltern religiosity were immediately subjected to regular and intensive catechization in Lutheran beliefs.<sup>12</sup>

Every Saturday morning all of the catechists and teachers who work under the brothers Harms, Ehlers, and myself come together in our so-called Office in Katakade... Their main subject is the explanation of the Small Catechism... Of course, it does not suffice for our catechumens to teach a certain portion of the catechism once... Most of the time a part will be gone through three or four times. Of course we have not been able to cover all the material which Magger's draft provide, but rather we limit ourselves to the most essential... Despite all their weaknesses, a certain progress among the catechetes and teachers, both in their knowledge and ability to share their knowledge with others, cannot be overlooked... Moreover, it would be a mistake to think that all or even the majority of our catechumens are converted Christians in their hearts, who love God's Word and hunger in the souls for spiritual sustenance. We do have such; thanks be to God! However, they are in the minority and they are often precisely those who speak the least. In the year 1914 our mission work in the Malayali area has gone forward, that cannot be denied... However, no one ought to think that the hundreds of souls, that we count, have all been won and brought in secure, certainly not even half, perhaps not even one fourth and none of them is secure in the faith. When we daily hear it and see it with our own eyes, how these people are bound and chained in certain unchaste customs and grave sins against the sixth commandment, how they stand in service as slaves to the father of lies, how so many of them are mentally dull and spiritually dead, so I hope that it

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<sup>12</sup> Most of the personal letters and reports during the initial period from Trivandrum point to the missionaries teaching and "instructing" their native converts in the catechism. Mostly instruction is done with the help of native workers. For example, see Henry Nau to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 23 December 1912, India Missionaries 1911-1912 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also, see F. Zucker to Home Board, July-October 1913. Also see, J. Harms to Home Board, Quarterly Report, July-September, 1913, India Missionaries 1913 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

will not be falsely interpreted or that someone would be taken amiss when I say we do not always do our work with courage and joy, but rather that there are times when hope completely disappears and we want to give up the work...God then comforts us again and strengthens us.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the securing of the newly formed Lutheran community in Trivandrum was an important goal for the MELIM missionaries even in the midst of challenging and difficult conditions. MELIM undertook regular “instruction” in Lutheran biblical materials as the way forward for its work in the villages of Travancore and it definitely led to the perception of the Lutheran mission being a “teaching” mission. The culmination of the catechization process was baptisms and confirmations of individuals in the Lutheran faith. Thus the objective of “saving souls” was seen alongside the reality of entering the Body of Christ, which according to MELIM was a congregation that was self-supporting and self-propagating the Gospel message to others.

Prof. M. Sommer and Rev. H. M. Zorn from the Foreign Mission Board are visiting the various stations at which our India Missions are carrying on work. They also participated in the 19<sup>th</sup> General Conference that took place in Nagercoil, Travancore, November, 12–22, 1930...Mission effort aims not only to convert the sinner to his God and Savior, but also to establish a self-supporting and self-propagating church in the mission field. To this end, pastors, preachers and teachers from among the people must be trained...in Trivandrum our missionaries are giving intensive instruction to about 40 men in so-called catechist classes.<sup>14</sup>

Thus missionary emphasis on “saving souls” and bringing them into the Christian faith was tied to the preaching and teaching of the church. Based on the Lutheran dialectic of “Law and Gospel,” the missionaries set out to both engage and critique the local culture and at the same time proclaim new life in Christ.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, establishing the Lutheran Church grounded in strict Lutheran doctrine and practice was definitely no easy task. This was more challenging because the people who were entering MELIM in Trivandrum mainly came from the subaltern

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<sup>13</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, Oct.-Dec. 1914.

<sup>14</sup> See, Paul F. Heckel, *Lutheran Witness* 50, no. 5 (March 1931): 85–86.

<sup>15</sup> Henry Hamann, “Sixth General Conference at Krishnagiri, India,” *Lutheran Witness* 35, no. 11 (1916): 165.

communities like the Sambavars and Pulayas who were not so long ago the “slave castes” of Travancore. Even though the missionary emphasis on saving these souls was tied to the preaching and teaching of the church, from practical experience a “stern command” was invariably used to get things done.<sup>16</sup>

### **MELIM Missionary Emphasis**

Singularly focused on the twin objectives to “save souls” and establish the Lutheran Church in Kerala, the MELIM missionaries set out with their gospel proclamation efforts in Trivandrum. However, it was very clear from the very beginning that the native culture with its peculiar practices such as “caste” and different ethical standards would have to be engaged, and certain key ideals emphasized, for MELIM to firmly establish itself in Travancore. Accordingly, the missionaries in their work stressed certain aspects which for them were vital for gospel proclamation to succeed in the Malayalam lands.

### **Church for all Communities (Castes)**

The mission experience of MELIM missionaries from 1895 in the Northern field around Ambur, Tamil Nadu, and also in the Southern field around Nagercoil, Tamil Nadu, had introduced them to the ground realities of “caste” in India. In fact, in their expressed desire to enter the Malayalam speaking territory in the February of 1911, the southern missionaries had intimated the Home Board in St. Louis of the possibility of reaching various other castes, apart from the Pariahs, that were unreached by the mission thus far.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, even though all the villages where the work started in 1911 were among the Sambavars, most of the native workers employed by the mission belonged to non-Sambavar castes. Furthermore, by 1916 the Director

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<sup>16</sup> Hamann, “Sixth General Conference at Krishnagiri, India,” 165.

<sup>17</sup> See, “Bericht: Der Sudl Missionare,” 6–8.



in Trivandrum Rev. F. Zucker in a report about opening the Boarding School of boys to all castes and to even those who were not part of the mission, was pointing out that the “Mission here in Travancore has already gone far on the road toward being definitely known as an exclusively Pariah Mission, and every measure that we can take to correct this decidedly mistaken idea of our principles is of distinct value.”<sup>18</sup> This apprehension that the Lutheran mission would be dismissed away as a “Pariah Mission” with all its insulting connotations probably seems to have weighed very heavily with the Trivandrum missionaries at that time. The mission appears to have for this reason and also various other reasons, taken extra efforts to establish the Lutheran Church among the higher castes.

Accordingly, after the missionary attempts to work among the Syrian Christians of Chenganur fell apart, they gradually were able to establish themselves in higher caste villages among the Nadars and Ezhavas.<sup>19</sup> Most of these forays into Pariah and other communities came through the kinship relations of native MELIM workers and Lutheran members, which in turn generated more interest among other natives for the Lutheran mission to work among them. Thus, by 1956 when the Lutheran Church was organized for administration by the native people, it had members and workers from at least eighteen (18) different castes of Travancore.<sup>20</sup> This success in gaining converts from many different castes in the Malayalam lands could also be attributed to the MELIM approach of opening schools alongside proclaiming the gospel. This sphere of MELIM activity appealed to the higher castes in Travancore to enter the Lutheran

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<sup>18</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July 1916.

<sup>19</sup> For MELIM’s desire to engage in work among the Syrian Christians, see F. Zucker, “Aufnahme Der Missionsarbeit,” 4–5, 8. Also, in the last chapter we have seen how MELIM made entry into the Nadar village of Mylakara and were taken into the Ezhava conversion movement of the mid-1920s.

<sup>20</sup> A look at the “June 1955-May 1956” Roster of Workers and Congregations of the Trivandrum Conference shows the following castes being represented: Pariah, Pulayar, Nadar, Iravan, Thiyar, Koravar, Vedar, Pannayar, Vellar, Kurumbar, Comorannan, Muslim, Syrian, Mannan, Ganakah, Nayar, Asari, Barber. See “Roster of Workers of Trivandrum District Conference, June 1955 to May 1956,” India Minutes file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

mission and become a part of its community. The missionaries on their part were more than happy to have high caste believers enter the mission through the agency of schools. This interest can be seen in the missionary concern for expanding the school at Kariam that was attracting higher caste students:

Since this school proves to be a benefit to the higher castes, we should do something to exploit all possibilities for effective work among them more especially so since the Lutheran mission has gotten a reputation as a sort of New-Tribes Mission. This reputation is a detriment to work among the higher castes. We must prove by our activity that the Christian way and gospel is for all having promise of eternal life for all...low caste opposition to high castes is already crystallizing in the Nilamel District. It is quite possible that in a few years high caste folk will not be welcomed into the predominantly low caste Lutheran Church. This must not happen; we must give particular attention to those who all these years have been contacted with a little less than full earnestness and regularity.<sup>21</sup>

From the above quote we get a glimpse of the MELIM objective to establish the Lutheran church among all communities. The missionaries were convinced that the Christian way and the gospel was for all communities and were even concerned that the higher caste converts in its mission would be targeted by the majority subalterns if a mobilization ever took place on its side. This was unacceptable to the missionaries who held on to an idealistic vision of the church far removed from the real life politicking of a caste entrenched society.

#### Dissemination of Pure Lutheran Doctrine

Historically the majority of Christian missions in India had more of its converts from the depressed lower castes, but by the early twentieth century as the MELIM work began in Travancore, more and more higher castes had begun to see the benefits of having a missionary among them especially for purposes of education. MELIM followed a “bottom-up” approach in

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<sup>21</sup> This observation was made in the context of a discussion about the expansion of the middle school at Kariam, which was drawing in the higher caste Nadars and Ezhavas into the school and also into the Lutheran Church. See *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 28–31 June, 1954, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 46–47.

teaching and baptizing the lower castes until the higher castes approached them for admission.<sup>22</sup> In this mission approach, the MELIM missionaries prioritized proper teaching of God's word to their converts and they were known for their firm doctrinal stand. Even the Church magazine "Christiani" was started in 1925 with the double fold purpose of "instructing church membership and acquainting outsiders with the Lutheran doctrine."<sup>23</sup> It was important that the converts knew not only stories from the Bible but also were well versed in proper Lutheran precepts. Such an approach bore out from the understanding that for a Christian's personal faith and conviction, and for an intelligent profession and practice of the Christian religion, a real and definite understanding of doctrines and principles was absolutely essential.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, the missionary emphasis in their work consisted of grounding Lutheran converts in the cognitive aspect of "what one believes," and this was proudly reported to the American home audience supporting the mission in India:

Our missionaries must not only diligently serve these people with preaching and pastoral care; they must also supervise the teachers and catechists and advance them by systematic instruction. For instance, the morning of every Saturday is given to the instruction of these helpers in the catechism, Bible History and Bible Reading. The instruction in preparation for baptism is, of course, imparted by our missionaries themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Thus MELIM missionaries were very clear about building up converts and also native mission workers in pure Lutheran doctrine. From the very beginnings of the Trivandrum Mission in 1911 in the "Kuttichel-Kattakada" area, the missionary enterprise in the villages involved gathering of catechumens for proper study of the word of God. This study was mainly based on

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<sup>22</sup> Griesse, "Lutheran Indian Missions," 11–13.

<sup>23</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, Letter, 3 March, 1925, F. R. Zucker 1913–1943 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>24</sup> Henry Hamann, "Our Mission-Schools in India-II," *Lutheran Witness* 41, no. 21 (1922): 331–32.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. Geo. A. Romoser, "Mission Stations of the Missouri Synod in Travancore, India," *Lutheran Witness* 30, no. 17 (Pittsburgh, 1911): 131.

instilling Lutheran teachings within the catechumens as can be seen from the Report of the missionary Rev. O. A. Ehlers about his work in 1917–1918:

The time I put in at the congregation centers was spent in making the rounds in one or more of the scattered settlements of our catechumens, trying to stir up the slackers and gather them together with the others in the Palli,<sup>26</sup> in giving the lesson, devoting a few minutes to prayer and singing, a few more to drilling Luther's Small Catechism and then a longer time to the explanation of Luther's Small Catechism according to Schwan's Exposition.<sup>27</sup>

Also in another mention of the process of catechization, Rev. Goerss in the Nagercoil field explains his process as:

On alternate Saturdays I conduct a class for all of our catechists and assistant catechists. I give them lesson on the Lord's Prayer according to Prof. Megger "Enterurfe" and they must then give catechization in what I have taught them. Besides I require of them that they memorize and recite all the proof texts contained in the explanation to our catechism. After finishing the Lord's Prayer I intend to study with them the Passion History according to Dr. Stockhardt's *Biblische Geschichte*—Mr. Jesudasan teaches them Isagogics, also on alternate Saturdays.<sup>28</sup>

The above observations of Rev. Ehlers and Rev. Goerss point to the missionary emphasis in their work. In spite of subaltern "dis-interest" in undergoing regular "instruction," the MELIM missionary sticks to his task of properly gathering his converts in the "Palli" (place of worship) or "Office," teaching his catechumens lessons from Luther's Small Catechism and also explaining meanings from Schwan's exposition of Luther's Catechism and Prof. Megger's "Enterurfe." Learning scriptural truths through rote memorization of Lutheran catechetical material was paramount to the MELIM missionary and the lack of proper desire from the native converts was seen in terms of "laziness and idleness" that was a defining portrayal of the

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<sup>26</sup> "Palli" is the Malayalam vernacular for "church" or place of worship.

<sup>27</sup> See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 8 July, 1918. In this report Rev. Ehlers mentions that his week is full with visits to each of his village sites: Tuesday—Mylakara; Wednesday—Madathikonam; Thursday—Antikonam, Kuttichel and Kattakal; Friday—Tumerichel; Saturday—Kanakodu; Sunday—visit to 5 of the 7 centers; Monday—business trips to Neyyattinkara and Nedumangadu.

<sup>28</sup> R. Goerss to Secretary Rev. Richard Kretzschmar, Quarterly Report for 1918, 17 July 1917, Nagercoil, India Missionaries 1917–1918 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

subalterns during this period.

### Education as a Valid Tool for Proclamation of the Gospel

One of the strategies used from the very beginning of MELIM work in the Malayalam speaking lands was the opening of schools in the “Pandals” (bamboo sheds) used for worship. As missionary H. M. Zorn points out, for MELIM “schools were considered valid vehicles for the Gospel” but they were “opened, operated, or closed without estimating potential resources and careful planning.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, from the beginnings of MELIM in 1911 schools and places of worship were simultaneously present in the initial four sites of—Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puthu-kulangara. After Nau settled in Trivandrum in January 1912 and the work expanded in the following months to include—Kanakodu, Kattaikal (Luthergiri) and Arianadu (later, Tholoor)—schools were also part of this expansion. Subsequent invitations from other villages throughout the MELIM period also point to the fact that all invitations for “instruction” also included the request to start schools. Since, government schools were not open to the subalterns like the Sambavars and Pulayas even as late as 1910, the MELIM missionaries realized the undercurrent of desire among the subalterns to educate themselves and accordingly started schools for those entering the mission. However, emphasis from the missionary side was different as can be seen in this report to audience back home:

The statistics of 1921 enumerate 71 schools...in which 3,644 pupils (855 of them girls) were taught by 167 teachers...when compared with the total baptized membership, the number of pupils in the schools will seem disproportionately high...It is hoped that the reader will welcome this attempt to set forth the “why” of missionary education... Our mission-schools are maintained for the purpose of educating our Indian Christians...The school follows the Gospel—except where the school is itself the first agency through which Gospel-teachings are spread...Heathenism can get along with tradition, hearsay, custom—it is often nothing but that. But Christianity needs more; and as surely as definitely knowledge

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<sup>29</sup> Zorn, “The Background,” 117.

and a real understanding of doctrines and principles are the basis for personal faith and conviction, for intelligent profession and practice of the Christian religion, so surely is it not only a sound missionary policy, but a missionary duty to provide schools in which the young are taught the word of God and where they are trained in the common branches of knowledge which enable them to read the word and to grasp its teachings. In order to prove that the missions have recognized that duty and labored to discharge it, one needs but to point to a single fact, viz., the fact that in point of literacy and education the Indian Christians, though drawn largely from the ranks of the ignorant, despised, downtrodden outcastes, occupy the place next to the Brahmins, who have had a monopoly of education for thousands of years.<sup>30</sup>

As indicated in the above observation, in many villages the Gospel could be shared only by means of the MELIM school and teachers who became the representatives of the “mission of Christianity” where young and old would gather together to learn “the rudiments of writing and reading” and also hear Bible stories and Christian teachings.<sup>31</sup> Teaching the word of God and preparing the young generation to be sustained in the church and to take the church forward was the primary emphasis of the MELIM education enterprise in India. At the same time, it did not take long for the missionaries to realize that in order to establish the Lutheran Church in the Malayalam areas, they had to address the issues bearing out of illiteracy of its members if they wanted to have a real shot at organizing a dynamic community that took personal responsibility for its affairs and also shared the gospel message with others around them:

Details about the Frazer Village Education Report that pointed out that our converts from the depressed classes are at present both financially and intellectually lagging behind...that an illiterate community cannot make a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating Lutheran congregation...(so) to realize our purpose of building up efficient Lutheran congregations, we must try to have at least a majority of our future members of our churches—both male and female—literate...so resolved to provide all congregations an elementary Malayalam schooling up till class four...“with the full supervision, guidance, instruction and constant pushing” of the missionary.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hamann, “Our Mission-Schools in India-II,” 331–32.

<sup>31</sup> See, Hamann, “Our Mission-Schools in India-II,” 345.

<sup>32</sup> See *Minutes of the 36<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 23–26, 30 Nov., 1925, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 7–8.

Thus an important MELIM emphasis during this period was to “instruct” the native converts through means of secular and religious education, whereby a “literate community” of Lutherans could be established in the Malayalam lands that would in turn manage their own affairs and also take the gospel message to others in the larger society.

#### Managing Affairs of the Mission and Disengagement in the Public Sphere

Just like other missions during this time, the management of mission institutions was definitely one of the important goals of MELIM. The smooth functioning of the christianizing enterprise included a good functional relationship between the Home Board and its mission body MELIM on the ground in India. Regular meetings of missionaries, quarterly Reports from the missionaries, Conferences in the respective fields and a General Conference of missionaries from the three districts were put in place to aid better communication within the mission and on both sides of the oceans. In addition, providing proper accounts and reports on time, answering and writing to donors back home, sending write-ups for articles in the *Der Lutheraner* (The Lutheran), *Lutheran Witness* and other Synod Magazines were a part of the missionary’s task. Furthermore, in the Indian mission station of Travancore MELIM had to also take into account the fact that the law enforcing ruler was the Hindu Rajah, and the mission had to work within these constraints. From a look at Conference reports, it seems MELIM took a general stance of maintaining the Lutheran “Two Kingdom” dichotomy while dealing with problems in the public sphere. For instance, when the Sambavars in 1922 tried to mobilize themselves for better socio-political rights irrespective of religious and denominational lines, and sought the Lutheran Sambavars to join in the “Sambavar Sankham”; MELIM missionaries discouraged it and actively worked to ensure its failure. This “Two Kingdom” approach in ensuring status quo and affirming the dominance to God appointed rulers and office-bearers can be seen in a note put out by the

Travancore Conference of 1917 congratulating the Hindu King Sir Rama Varma Kulasekhara on the occasion of his “Shashtiabdhapurtti”:<sup>33</sup>

In these days of rejoicing throughout the whole kingdom of Travancore we, the missionaries in Travancore of the Missouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission, take occasion to extend to your highness our respectful congratulations. We join in the general rejoicing and in the festivities, and with heartfelt thanks to God Almighty for the innumerable blessings which He has showered upon this Kingdom in the years of Your Highness reign, we pray to Him that He may in the future even more than in the past bless Your Highness and the whole State; that He may grant to Your Highness for many years to come health and strength; that He may ever vouchsafe to Your Highness enlightenment and courage for the just and wise administration of this State, that in it we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. And in accordance with our general practice of endeavoring to make our catechumens and Christians not only fellow—citizens in the Kingdom of heaven, but also loyal subjects of the power that be, these being ordained to God, we improve this opportunity to ground and confirm them in the understanding of, and obedience to, the Biblical precepts that they must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. We teach our hearers that temporal authorities are God’s ministers and that we must therefore render to all their dues, tribute, to whom tribute is due; custom, to whom custom; fear, to whom fear; honor, to whom honor; that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, especially for Kings and all that are in authority; in short, loyalty and honesty to submit themselves to Kings, governors, and magistrates, for the Lord’s sake.<sup>34</sup>

A similar desire to keep the social status-quo can also be seen in the caste controversy of Vadakkangulam in the Nagercoil field, which probably was the bitterest controversy that created serious rift among the MELIM missionaries.<sup>35</sup> In the ensuing debate about admitting a Boarding

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<sup>33</sup> “Shashtiabdhapurtti” is a Hindu ceremony celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of the male in the family. In this ceremony “marital vows” are also renewed.

<sup>34</sup> This Letter of Congratulations sent to the King of Travancore was recorded in the Travancore Conference of 1917 and was signed by the MELIM missionaries—G. Huebener, A. J. Lutz, R. W. Goerss, J. Harms, Otto A. Ehlers, and F. R. Zucker. See, *Protokoll der 38 Travancore Konferenz*, 18–20 September, 1917, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 7–8.

<sup>35</sup> The Vadakkangulam caste controversy was a major incident in MELIM history that split missionaries in the Indian field into different camps. The incident was of a Pariah boy “Ponniah” being admitted to the Boarding school at Vadakkangulam that was mainly catering to the needs of the high caste “Vellalar” community. When Ponniah one day came for church service and sat with the other boys, the Vellalars objected and complained to the missionary that the boy should be immediately removed. The action of the missionary in asking the boy “not to attend” services for the time being till the majority community were corrected of the “error” did not go down well with other missionaries in the field. The incident was hotly debated in MELIM General and Nagercoil Conferences and many reports were submitted to the Home Board in this regard. For a clear understanding of this incident see, *Minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Nagercoil District Conference*, 10–11 August, 1925, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1. Also, see Zorn,



school Pariah boy for worship services in a predominantly high caste Vellalar congregation, the missionaries called upon the subalterns such as the Pariahs to exercise restraint in seeking to remain within a higher caste congregation; attacked “caste spirit” while taking a lenient view towards “caste” itself, and believed that through proper “preaching and teaching” the evils of caste would be eliminated.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the general impression that one gets while reading the Conference reports and the extensive debates that took place on this issue and other caste related controversies, is the fact that the MELIM missionaries saw the evils of caste in “individualistic” terms that could be eradicated by appealing to pure Evangelistic beliefs and practices. MELIM did not see “caste” as a systemic evil and assiduously kept away from engaging and challenging its perpetuation and effects in the public sphere of life in Travancore.

### **MELIM Missionary Challenges and Concerns**

Seen through the lens of a cross-cultural perspective, there is no doubt that the MELIM missionary experienced several challenges during their mission work in the Malayalam lands of South India. From the side of the missionaries—language, health, climate, internal missionary and mission dynamics etc. contributed to the struggles of working in a totally different place. Add to this, the alien cultural environment of people, caste, illiteracy, superstition, poverty, indifference etc., and the missionary felt like an outsider to the culture and its people. Especially while dealing with the subaltern converts the missionaries had to deal with “initial show of excitement and initiative” that would soon give way to “dis-interest and dependency.” Personal missionary reports portray incidents of quarrels, fights, negligent moral attitudes etc. among the subalterns, providing us with a glimpse of their surrender to the “imposed consciousness”

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*Much Cause for Joy*, 32–33.

<sup>36</sup> Griesse, “Lutheran Indian Missions,” 37–38.

prevailing over them for many centuries. In such an environment of evangelizing a people immersed in their “contradictory consciousness,” the MELIM missionary remained committed to his calling to spread the gospel.

### Dealing with a New Language and Translation of Christian Concepts

As Lamin Sanneh points out, the strength of the Christian message has been its ability to translate itself into an alien culture and speak to its context. Nevertheless, this task of Christian translation is no easy task as it placed huge demands upon the translator. Likewise, in the case of MELIM work in Travancore, the difficulties faced by the missionaries in translating the gospel message were no different. Coming from an American culture into the subaltern culture of India brought along with it the dynamics of dealing with people in their vernacular. This transition was not an easy one for the MELIM missionaries. Part of their preparation to take up work in the Malayalam or Tamil areas included displaying a certain amount of proficiency in the vernacular language of the local people. For a new missionary, the initial year of assignment included the employment of a language “Munshi” who would tutor him and later an exam would be held which the missionary had to pass before taking full time village work. This emphasis on studying the new language can be seen in the MELIM discussion of work in the Malayalam areas:

Daily people are perishing who will not hear the Gospel unless it is brought to them, and at times a younger man<sup>37</sup> will be called upon to give the benighted souls this message of salvation. He is not able to speak the language fluently, but he can perhaps tell the simplest Gospel truth, tell the hearer that the Savior died for him. The simple Gospel, though spoken in an imperfect manner, is the Word of God and as such it is the Power of God unto salvation. Is it not, however, necessary to know the language to express the simple truths?<sup>38</sup>

Knowing the vernacular language to reach the lost natives with the simple truths of the

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<sup>37</sup> “Younger man” over here points to the newly arrived MELIM missionary who is undergoing language training so that he can take up work.

<sup>38</sup> See *Minutes of the Travancore Joint Conference*, 21–22 August, 1928, 1.

gospel was an important priority for the MELIM mission, much like other missions during this period. The use of the vernacular language was to both communicate with the locals and also preach the finer points of the Christian faith to locals, which was especially challenging if many of its concepts were alien to the translated “culture.”

It is hard enough to master a language like Tamil. The chief difficulty, however, lies in expressing and explaining Christian fact, ideas and doctrines in a language which has no words and expressions of these ideas, which are altogether new to the people speaking that language.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise in the Malayalam field too, there were problems associated with the “many vowels and consonants” of the language, and the translation of concepts and meanings.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside, another concern was the acceptance of “proper translation” by the missionary, which could lead to unnecessary stress and conflict among missionaries as noted by Rev. P. M.

Kauffeld working in the Trivandrum field:

Since we are discussing translations permit me to point to one great drawback in translating and publishing the Confessions especially. Being the Confessions I agree that the utmost care should be taken to put out a faithful and exact translation. However, if the manuscript must be gone through by a Committee, as was the case with the Augsburg Confession, it is most difficult to put out the book, as the committee cannot work together...I am speaking from several years of experience, missionaries learn the language in about as many ways as there are missionaries. So often we differ on the constructions and meanings and usages so that revision by a Committee is, to say the least often very hard on one’s Christianity. All members of the committee want to be most conscientious, all feel their responsibility, all have “learned” the language, now who is to give in and sanction a translation he considers wrong! I wish to be excused from all further revision work.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, translating Christian concepts and doctrines into the Tamil and Malayalam language was a major challenge for the MELIM missionaries who were coming in from a different culture.

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<sup>39</sup> Hamann, “Sixth General Conference at Krishnagiri, India,” 166.

<sup>40</sup> Rev. F. R. Zucker mentions this difficulty on entering the Malayalam field in 1913. See, F. Zucker to Home Board, July–October, 1913.

<sup>41</sup> See P. M. Kauffeld to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 29 Nov., 1937, P. M. Kauffeld 1928–1930 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

A corollary to the linguistic work of the missionaries was the fact that, the local natives who would help the missionaries learn the vernacular were able to establish closer relations with the missionaries than others. In missionary perception such individuals and communities were more able and smarter compared to the subaltern communities who formed the majority membership in the Lutheran Church.

#### Issues of Health, Climate and Infrequent Social Interaction with Family and Fellow People

MELIM missionaries coming from the colder climate of America were not well-adjusted to the tropical monsoon climate of Travancore. Naturally it took time for them to get acclimatized to the changes in weather that affected their health and moods severely. Missionary letters during this period to the Home Board in St. Louis carried a lot of complaints about the struggles with the “heat and dust” of the summer, and personal struggles for maintenance of proper health. Malaria, typhoid, gall bladder infection, influenza, cholera, weak heart, tooth problems, intestine and bowel problems, headaches and dizziness, rheumatic heart and joint pains etc., affected both the missionary and his family members. Cholera seems to have been particularly bad in Travancore with the missionary Robert Jank working among the Vedars making a special mention of it in mission reports. In certain fatal cases, Rev. Goerss—missionary in the Nagercoil area of Travancore lost their two year old son Edgar, while in the Northern field young missionary Ludwig died of reason attributed to bad heart, malaria and typhoid from the tropics.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Many missionary reports and letters list the personal health struggles of various MELIM missionaries working in India. For a litany of health issues afflicting Rev. Zucker and his family see, F. Zucker to Home Board, Letters, 22 Nov. 1927, 2 May 1927, 12 Sept. 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Robert Jank points out that the heat of Trivandrum is unbearable and that it is affecting his health, and that the Kauffeld family is in dread of Cholera. See, Robert Jank to Home Board, Letters, 25 Feb. 1924, 4 Dec. 1928, Robert Jank 1923–1930 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Missionary Oberheu and his family also face many health issues during their stay and work in Trivandrum. See G. Oberheu to Home Board, Letters, 29 May 1933, 19 July 1934, 1 July 1936, Oberheu file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. For news concerning the death of Rev. Goerss’ son, see William Arndt, “Mission briefs from India,” in *Lutheran Witness* 41, no. 7 (March, 1922): 108–9. For news concerning sickness and death of Bro. Ludwig see, Henry Hamann to Secretary Rev. Richard Kretzschmar, Letter, 2 April, 1919, India Missionaries 1919–1950 file,

Nevertheless, in the midst of such physical struggles, the missionaries devised ways to keep themselves and their family members safe so that they could carry on their gospel outreach. Regular exercises, proper diet, frequent visits to the doctor, and also the establishment of a hill retreat at Kodaikanal<sup>43</sup> to beat the summer heat of the plains, were some of the approaches that helped missionaries and their families.

Apart from physical health concerns, the missionaries were also exposed to bouts of loneliness and yearning for more social interaction with their family members and fellow Euro-American nationals. Even though they had come from America with the desire to share the word of God with people who were ethnically unlike them, soon realities of life in Travancore would catch up with them, affecting their mental and subsequently overall health. Missionary families, especially wives were hard hit by separation from their children who had to be sent to Kodaikanal for proper American education or back to America, creating considerable stress in the missionary family unit.<sup>44</sup> In addition, a persistent complaint among the missionaries and their families during this period was the feeling that lack of social interaction with fellow people was hurting their attitude and health and also hampering their work among the natives. Kurt Zorn working in the newly expanded “Alleppey-Shertallay” field brings this to light in one of his letters to the Home Board.

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CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>43</sup> The MELIM missionary “Mountain Retreat” at Kodaikanal, in the Palni Hills of South India was about 36 hours journey from Travancore. The 6.5 acre property was bought in 1912 and two large houses and a cottage was built. Here the MELIM missionary spent six weeks every year with other fellow missionaries to rest and renew themselves for the work in the plains. For a MELIM missionary account on this Retreat Home, see Otto Ehlers, “Kodaikanal Home,” in *Lutheran Witness* 41, no. 5 (February 28, 1922): 76–77.

<sup>44</sup> In one such instance Rev. Jank writes to the Home Board about the struggles that his wife is going through on being separated from her children who are studying at Kodaikanal. The Home Board in its reply, while trying to assuage their feelings, reminds the missionary of the “Heavenly Father’s sacrifice of His son” and about his greater calling to “sacrifice the love towards his children for the extension of God’s kingdom.” See Robert Jank to Home Board, Letter, 7 Oct., 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also, see reply from the Home Board to Rev. Jank, 3 Nov., 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

In this connection I would like to say that I, and I believe many other missionaries in India—though they may not know it, suffer more from lonesomeness and isolation, lack of association with people of one's own kind, than from the climate or from any disabilities that arise from the climate. I have had ample opportunity first of all to note its effect on myself and to observe its effects on others. I am convinced that many of the flare-ups in temper and other idiosyncrasies that we developed in the course of our stay in India can be traced directly to the evils of isolation. I of course suffer more from that because I am not married, but married people are not excluded from this trouble, especially not the women. Isolation has a deadening effect. It produces a physical want and emptiness. I have been almost sick in bed at times, so that I had to throw up my food, and yet I knew that physically there was nothing wrong with me. And having observed its effect upon myself I can see just how it works in others. This is something which I believe the members of the Board at home find it hard to realize. The members of the Board are to a large extent pastors who are if anything bothered by too many visitors. We too have many visitors, but all of a different color than ours. It takes a long time to get used to that. Now, through the efforts of the Lord, there are more missionaries out here than ever before. That means, especially for the large compounds, that missionaries can see each other more. That is a good thing and necessary. One often hears of strange quarrels and idiosyncrasies that the old missionaries developed. That is hard to understand unless one realizes that their comparative isolation had to produce something of that sort.<sup>45</sup>

From the above opinion of Rev. Zorn it is clear that the missionary coming from the far-away lands of the West experienced the problem of alienation from their own land and people, which in turn had significant personal, family, and work implications. More importantly, it did affect their attitude and moods while dealing with the native people, who did not make it easy for them, with their frequent dependency and visits attributable to their communitarian and comparatively un-organized lifestyle. Naturally, the American missionaries had to take this in his stride while moving forward with his life and work in the villages of Travancore.

#### Poverty, Bad Spiritual and Ethical Lives of Native Catechumens, and Dependency

MELIM work started among the poverty stricken subaltern Sambavars in Trivandrum and for the most part its majority members came from subaltern communities living with similar socio-economic and religio-cultural conditions. The missionaries were seeking responsible

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<sup>45</sup> See Kurt Zorn to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, 21 Dec., 1932, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

natives who would be self-sufficient, and ready to lead ethical lives in response to the gospel. In contrast, the MELIM missionaries were left to negotiate frequent requests for financial help from the subaltern converts causing considerable headache to them. In fact, the MELIM missionaries were exposed to the utter poverty and “hand to mouth” survival existence of the subalterns like the Pariahs, Pulayas and Vedars. In many instances, the missionaries paid the local converts from their own pockets to help them with their life needs which were sometimes not reimbursed by the Conference or the Home Board.<sup>46</sup>

A consequent socio-cultural problem in the context of poverty was the existence of unethical life practices among such people. In fact, a common complaint of the MELIM missionaries about the natives especially during the initial 1911–1925 period in Trivandrum concerned their spiritual and ethical malpractices in daily life. For instance, Rev. Zucker who served as the Director of the Trivandrum field in the initial period after Rev. Nau, points to the native converts being “bound and chained in unchaste customs and committing grave sins against the sixth commandment.” Also, Zucker contended that with the Pariah converts being “slaves to the father of lies” with many “being mentally dull and spiritually dead,” hope disappears and the missionary entertains thoughts of giving up the work.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, another missionary working among the Pariahs in Trivandrum during this period, Rev. O. A. Ehlers, wondered whether “the broom of the Word of God has had an effect on them.” He complained against the “perpetual lying,” “lack of love for neighbor,” “fights over slightest matters,” “great

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<sup>46</sup> In one instance in 1913, Rev. Zucker mentions that he paid his personal money to support children of local converts pay for textbooks because if he did not then they would remove children out of the school. He later requests for reimbursement from the Home Board. See F. Zucker to Home Board, 8 October, 1931. Another more significant example was that of the missionary Martin J. Lutz who bought lands for the Sambavar and Pulaya converts in the Luthergiri area (Vallimangalam, Poovachal, Kuttara etc.) believing that the Local Trivandrum Conference would repay him for his visionary decision. In this case the Conference debated which property could be taken into the mission and some of the payment was left for missionary Lutz to bear on his own. See *Minutes of the 118<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, Oct.-Dec., 1914.

sins like fornication and un-chastity creating no great stir at all,” and “laziness to go to church.”<sup>48</sup>

In another scathing report on MELIM work among the subaltern villages, Rev. O. A. Ehlers observes:

And what has been the fruit of our labor? There are times when I would have given the same answer to this question as a certain one of our Christian teachers to whom I put it: “the people have learned a little by memory. That’s all. As to their natures, their hearts and lives, they are unchanged.” And that is the only conclusion one is capable of drawing, if one thinks only of the facts that the attendances at the lessons has fallen off; that the numbers of those whose names one feels justified in retaining in the registers of catechumens are dwindling; that it is evidently only material help, not spiritual help, that many are seeking; that the majority of the people who come to the lessons learn very slowly and forget so quickly as to leave one in doubt whether Christian ideas are gripping them at all; that notwithstanding their protestations that they love their “Palli,” many will not raise a hand or part with half a chuckram when that “Palli” has to be thatched or otherwise repaired, that promises to do good or to refrain from doing evil are broken with such great regularity as to make one skeptical of every one of their promises; that the monthly contribution promised seldom exceed from 1 to 1.5 chuckrams for a family and yet are not paid in by for the majority of cases; that the most trivial causes eg: a dispute over the payment of debt of 8 cash, lead to the bitterest quarrels and enmity, bodily violence and court cases with false charges, false witness and perjury, while flagrant violations of, for instance, the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment, fornication and adultery are viewed with absolute indifference, spouses being exchanged or shared without a word of protest being heard until perhaps a quarrel about something else arises and muck-raking and dirt-flinging begins; that envy, spite, and revenge are so much in evidence and the missionary is appealed to lend himself to them as their tool while appeals of the missionary that they should help one or another of their sick or needy fellows falls on deaf ears, that one’s endeavors to settle differences frequently come to nothing because one is unable to thread one’s way through the maze of lies and deceit that is spread before one; that it is ever so often a thankless as well as a fruitless undertaking to try to settle a dispute about money and other property, because the participants would as it seems often rather yield their souls to the devil than six chuckrams to their opponents.<sup>49</sup>

The above observations of Rev. Ehlers present us with a glimpse of the turbulent world of the MELIM missionary vis-à-vis his gospel work among the people. The missionary finds his efforts not yielding any positive results and is completely disillusioned with the people among whom he is proclaiming the gospel.

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<sup>48</sup> See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 19 July, 1915, 1–2.

<sup>49</sup> See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 8 July, 1918.



## Disease, Utter Disregard for Personal Hygiene and Physical Well-Being

Reports of the MELIM missionaries are replete with observations about the utter physical despair of the subaltern people. With the subalterns living in poverty and basic healthcare facilities being denied to them for centuries, the people were left at the mercy of the Divine for safety and life. To make matters worse, lack of food and proper nourishment coupled with unhygienic life practices severely curtailed the health and life of the subalterns. Missionary Zucker reporting on his work in 1916 portrayed the subaltern boys in the mission as presenting themselves with “well known stamp of dirt,” wearing “brown clothes” with unwashed bodies and uncombed hair, and exhibiting “jungle manners” that were now being changed through their Christian education in the Boarding school.<sup>50</sup> In addition, the subalterns were not well informed about good hygienic practices as they frequently were victims to scabies itch and related skin troubles due to unclean home surroundings, bedding and clothes. Also frequent cuts and bodily scars becoming serious for physical well-being due to improper and delayed treatment were a reality of their daily labor related lifestyle.<sup>51</sup>

Alongside the problems of disregard for personal hygiene was also the issue of rampant diseases afflicting the subalterns leading to frequent deaths and high infant mortality. Rev. Kurt Zorn writing about the Pulayas of Alleppey in 1937 talks about drinking water being taken from “little pools dug out of the sand” that “come full of germs” leading to deaths due to typhoid and influenza in the congregation. Even burial of people had become a problem because there were no burial grounds available since the people did not have land of their own. Also, as the people lived close to the swamps and backwaters, usually it was impossible to find a place “where one

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<sup>50</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July 1916.

<sup>51</sup> The observations are made by Rev. Martin J. Lutz while reporting about his dispensary work in the Luthergiri District in 1938. See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 6 Nov., 1938, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

could dig even two feet without striking water.”<sup>52</sup> Even though the medical mission of MELIM did not take off in a big way in the Trivandrum Lutheran villages, the missionaries did express their anguish at the utter disregard for personal hygiene and lack of awareness for proper and timely treatment of bodily wounds.

My wife and I also devote a small part of our time to running the dispensary at Luthergiri. The place of medical work in our mission has never been defined, so that my work always comes up for discussion without anything ever being settled. Almost every budget committee takes my 40 or 50 rupees out of the budget and places it under charity. The simple treatments I use have already spread through the neighborhood, so that many people can take care of cuts, ulcers, etc. themselves. Formerly they would grind up some leaves and herbs—hopelessly septic and leave this on the wound until it developed into a nice, big, juicy ulcer; then they’d dress it with coconut oil—just the thing for the germs to thrive in. Now they buy themselves a little Lysol or Merchurochrome and have much happier results. We have been uniformly successful in clearing up the worst ulcers, a job which people really appreciate. Some show their appreciation by bringing gifts or eggs, chickens, fruit, etc., which gives us a small income to write on the credit side. Even after we go, our work will continue itself.<sup>53</sup>

The above observation of missionary Lutz probably points to one of the serious challenges that the missionaries faced in their work in Trivandrum. Diseases, lack of personal hygiene and knowledge on physical well-being, were severe handicaps that affected MELIM work in the Trivandrum villages. At the same time, noting the struggles faced by the subalterns coming into MELIM, one wonders if the mission missed a promising strategy in taking up Medical work in the villages of Trivandrum as a way to share the gospel.

### Illiteracy, Superstition and Indifference of Subaltern converts

An important catalyst that severely thwarted the attempts of the MELIM missionaries to help the native converts was the lack of literacy and the presence of superstitious beliefs among

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<sup>52</sup> See Kurt Zorn to Home Board, Letter, Alleppey, 20 Nov., 1937, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1.

<sup>53</sup> See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Quarterly Report from Luthergiri Station, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1942, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

the subaltern population in Travancore.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the native elites exploited these elements to make sure that the subalterns did not escape the vicious cycle of societal degradation into which they had fallen; which helped them maintain their supremacy over life in Travancore. Such observations were a regular feature of MELIM missionary reports during this period:

Vedar is the name of a crude tribe in the hills of Travancore, India, among which our Malayalam-speaking missionaries have taken up work. Rev. Robert Jank is intensely interested in this huge hill parish...No “churches” have been built as yet, and so Brother Jank tries to meet the tribesmen in their huts. (The huts are about 72 inches high, and the missionary 76 inches.)...The heathen tribesmen to whom he brings the hope of Christianity are simply full of fear and superstition. It is the devil who causes every ill and woe among them, and they dread going to a medical dispensary where European medicine is distributed. So missionary Jank gives them a note to one of the accessible dispensaries, agreeing to pay for their medicine if they will only take and use them. But the fear of their multitudinous devils is very deeply rooted in them.<sup>55</sup>

In order to tackle issues of superstition and the illiteracy that bred it, MELIM opened schools believing that education was the best instrument that could bring about a change in the life of the people. However, even here MELIM found the subaltern participation discouraging as their attempts at popularizing education through schools and night-schools met with limited success:

(There is) high level of illiteracy in our villages... as a result there is a real shortage of Christian workers of real character. Another cause...is the indifference of the parents...interest shown at the beginning quickly passes away. To rouse and maintain proper interest is one of the great problems on our hands... Conference asked: What percentage of literacy shall be our immediate objective. If a Pariah has a debt of Rs. 200 he has no ambition to make even a start toward paying it off, but if he makes an effort to pay off Rs. 5 a year both ambition and ability are apt to be created...even with regard to the youth we find parental indifference a very discouraging obstruction toward a high percentage of literacy. The night-schools where they can be successfully conducted are a real help. We should get these night schools to the point where they can read Mark...in order to get the women literate, that Bible women are

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<sup>54</sup> Otto A. Ehlers mentions illiteracy and indifference of the Pariahs at Kuttichel, Madathikonam, Kattaikal (Luthergiri), Antikonam, and Tumerichel, as a “great handicap” in his report of 1918. See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 18 Nov., 1918.

<sup>55</sup> E. H. Meinzen, “Notes from the India Field,” *Lutheran Witness* 43, no. 20 (September, 1924): 351.

the counterpart of the high school for them; and Bible women should be gotten and trained.<sup>56</sup>

Even as the missionaries lamented the lack of subaltern interest in improving their own future, they were also becoming increasingly aware of the possible reasons for this fact:

Child labor is widespread in India. We see children of all ages helping their parents at times of sowing; weeding, reaping, tending cattle, etc. ...school attendance is very poor. Even part-time schools and night-schools have not succeeded as the interest dwindles and the value of the school is also not seen.<sup>57</sup>

To be fair to the MELIM missionaries it must be pointed out that they were fighting an uphill battle in trying to inculcate within the subalterns an interest and commitment for proper academic and religious education. Not only were the children not properly mentored by the parents to take their education seriously, but more importantly, the need to use them as “bread-winners” at an early age severely hindered their vision and their own emancipation. In such a situation, an opportunity lay in probably creating awareness among the adults and younger people of the subaltern communities to the wide possibilities and bright future available through modern education and knowledge. However, even the younger men and women among the Pariahs were noted by the missionaries for their lack of attendance, commitment and forgetfulness of their Catechism study.<sup>58</sup>

#### Obstacles Put Up by Native Elites

MELIM missionaries had to tread carefully in their mission work because they wanted to carry out mission work within the confines of the legal framework of Travancore. However, the native elites felt threatened by the missionaries educating and converting the low-castes who according to them were “inferior” and lived under their control. For this reason, the native elites

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<sup>56</sup> See *Minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Travancore Joint Conference*, 5–7 Jan., 1926, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2–3.

<sup>57</sup> See *Minutes of the 1<sup>st</sup> Travancore Joint Conference*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> See, L. Fuerbringer, “Our East India Mission,” *Lutheran Witness* 38, no. 4 (1919): 55.

used various methods to subvert this subaltern mobilization in favor of the Christianizing mission. One strategy was the issuing of threats to both the converts and the missionaries, as can be seen in this report from Rev. Jank working among the Vedars:

The workers among the Vedars must walk long distances, have very much patience, and must use very simple language. But things have a bright future... right near the place of my future bungalow are a number of Vedars...the Mohammedans and Shudras, the masters of the Vedars make it very difficult for our people to come for instruction. Our catechists are afraid to talk to those masters, for they threaten to kill them and me. So I must go whenever such trouble arises. So far no one ever laid hand on me.<sup>59</sup>

The above observation points to the native land-owning elites for whom the subalterns worked as laborers, such as the Muslim “Routers” and the Nair “Jemmies,” issuing threats to dissuade both the native converts and the mission agents from spreading Christian influence in their area. There were also instances when the missionaries reported burning down of chapels, attacks on subaltern Lutheran converts causing them to flee, and also theft and vandalizing of church property.<sup>60</sup> At the heart of these attempts by the landed elite was the fear that an emancipated, aware and educated community of subalterns would subvert the centuries old order of higher caste hegemony and control. For this reason the landlords also used the crucial and immediate need of the subalterns for work and livelihood as another strategy to continuously pester the subaltern Lutheran converts working under them to leave the mission. Many times the MELIM missionaries heard complaints from the subaltern Pariahs but whether they fully understood the motives of these obstructions and also the effect that it had on the native converts

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Jank to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 20 Oct., 1924, Robert Jank 1923–1930 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>60</sup> Thatchenkodu site, started in 1925, was among a group of subaltern Vedars who were attacked by the high-castes leading them to flee the area and settle in Kannankonam. The Vedars, in spite of their flight, approached MELIM to start a new mission station in Kannankonam. The Thatchenkodu site was later re-started among the Nadar relatives of catechist T. Charles. Also, Ehlers reports in 1918 of the Pandal at the site at Antiyoorkonam (started in 1913) being subjected to frequent vandalization and theft, only to be re-built by the people again. In another instance Rev. Jank reports about the burning down of the Pandals of the Vedars by the Mohammedans. Also see *Minutes of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 5.

is not clear. For instance, the missionary Ehlers in his report of 1915 to the Home Board complains about the learning disabilities of the Pariah catechumens and their excuse of landlord oppression:

We were able to only deal with the questions 104–107 of the explanation of the catechism (Schwan) in the whole quarter. The people can only take a small bite at a time. Of course, Nau admonishes the people again and again to please also come on the week days to instruction. He also punishes them with words, but there is little success. Arguably it is true, that it is harder for the people to attend the lessons on the week days around this time of the year. They mostly work for the Sudras<sup>61</sup> and assert that they do not allow them to go to the “Palli” on week days. If one responds to that that the Sudras say they would not hinder them, they assert that the Sudras pay them no or only very little wage if they went to the “Palli” first and only after that to work, and they assert that they cannot survive without the daily wage. If one explains: “God’s blessing gained, all is obtained. God can and will compensate you richly if you go to Palli, hear the Word of God and be fed spiritually instead of working for the Sudras to gain a few Chuckrams,” then they indeed say: “The Sahib is right,” but they do not act accordingly.<sup>62</sup>

In the above observations of Rev. Ehlers one finds the strategy of the landed elite at play. Worried about their subservient subaltern peasants being emancipated through the Church with the possibility of them moving out of the religio-cultural sphere where the native elites had a decisive advantage and superiority over the subalterns, the Sudra higher caste elites leverage their access to the livelihood of the subalterns to dissuade them from attending scriptural lessons. However, as the entire game plays out, the missionary, whose patience is tested beyond limits because of already dis-interested catechumens, reads the complaints of the Pariahs as lack of spiritual inclination and faith in God’s promises. In short, the native elite successfully sabotage the missionary-native convert relationship and builds a negative perception of the subaltern in the mind of the American missionary. If such strategies did not work, there were others that were

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<sup>61</sup> The Sudras are the land-owning Nair caste of landlords that employed the Pariahs and Pulayas in their rice fields and land for daily labor.

<sup>62</sup> Rev. Ehlers was in charge of the Pariah village sites of Madathikonam, Kanakodu, Antikonam and Tumerichel when he makes these observations. See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, Quarterly Report, Trivandrum, 5 October 1915, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–2.

tried out. Another strategy was the use of rumor to strike confusion and fear among the subalterns and to break their hope placed upon the MELIM missionaries for support and protection. In one such instance, the missionary Rev. Ehlers residing in Kattakada is forced to return to Trivandrum due to the heat and unsanitary conditions prevailing there, which is portrayed in popular rumor by the native elites as an instance of the missionary outsider being incapable of withstanding the powerful elites and their gods:

Last Wednesday I had nearly all my belongings carted from Kattakada to Trivandrum...The heat was getting too oppressive at the 'Office' in Kattakada. ...Some of the Sudras [a higher caste of Hindus], I am told, know of a different reason for my departure. There is a temple sacred to the goddess Bhadrakali near our 'office,' and they say Bhadrakali had sent numbers of snakes to molest me, particularly when I would sit down to take a meal (I suppose that is the time at which they would least like to be disturbed themselves). And whenever I would try to kill the snakes, they say, the snakes would become invisible...Recently there was a festival at the temple. One night I could not sleep on account of the noise of the tom-toms, the explosions, the shouting, etc., and at midnight, when the image was unchained from its place in the temple, and taken out and carried around the building, Mr. Harms, who was with me at the time, and I got up and 'took in' the sight. A few days later I was told that people were saying the devil had thrown me out of bed. I left Kattakada before the festival was over. What is more natural, therefore, to the Sudras than to construe my departure as a victory for Bhadrakali! They say Kali put me to flight. And some simple-minded people, some of our Pariahs [the lowest caste of Hindus] among them, no doubt will probably believe this.<sup>63</sup>

Thus as missionary Jank working among the Vedars also reports, rumors to confuse and to demoralize the subalterns dependent upon the Lutheran mission was an often used strategy by the caste-people to impede the success of missionary work.<sup>64</sup> Some of the other strategies included the use of "nuisance charge" brought up by the locals against construction of churches and cemeteries for the subaltern people.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> L. Fuerbringer, "Our India Mission-II," *Lutheran Witness* 35, no. 22 (1916): 338.

<sup>64</sup> See Robert Jank to Home Board, Quarterly Report, 10 Aug., 1925, Robert Jank 1923–1930 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>65</sup> Rev. Kurt Zorn makes a mention of the "nuisance charge" by local landlords who were not ready to sell their land to the subalterns of Alleppey so that they can have a "place of worship" or "cemetery" for burial of their

## Internal Mission Dynamics—Missionaries, Native Workers and Caste

MELIM missionaries had to tread carefully in their mission work because of various dynamics connected within the mission. From the very beginning, the MELIM missionaries had employed people from various castes to work in the Lutheran villages and gradually they came to the conclusion that proper “instruction” and work could be carried out only by the higher caste workers. Accordingly, they were always on the lookout for Nadar, Ezhava, Syrian Christians and other high caste converts who could be used as catechists and teachers in the mission. This yearning for high caste converts was also forced upon the missionaries by the societal dynamics of Travancore that was operational during this time. For instance missionary Robert Jank points out in his letter to the Home Board that the Shanars<sup>66</sup> could work in Ezhava congregation and vice-versa but the same could not be done by the Pariah and Pulaya catechists.<sup>67</sup> Alongside this, the missionaries believed that the higher castes spoke much better Malayalam than their Pariah converts and were more able in sharing the gospel with those of the higher castes.<sup>68</sup> Such attitudes from the missionary side probably contributed to a feeling of resentment among the subalterns, especially the Sambavars, which was reflected in problems among MELIM congregations and also in the catechist training classes.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the missionary was left to adjudicate such problematic disputes that erupted from time to time due to the heartburn and competition among the various communities and workers that were entering the Lutheran

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dead. In addition, he mentions that when he was away at a Trivandrum District Conference an anonymous complaint was registered with the Magistrate at Shertallay by the local elites against the MELIM catechist stating that public worship was being conducted on MELIM property without appropriate permission. See Kurt Zorn to Home Board, 20 Nov., 1937.

<sup>66</sup> Earlier name used for Nadars.

<sup>67</sup> See Robert Jank to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 19 Aug. 1929, Jank 1923–1930 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>68</sup> See Kurt Zorn to Home Board, 4 March, 1929, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>69</sup> See Robert Jank to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 4 Oct., 1933, CHI Archives, St. Louis.



mission. In one instance the Rev. Walter Luedtke working in the Luthergiri district in 1933 reports to the Home Board:

At Kurungaloor there are problems with the newly appointed Nadar teacher...they are not ready to accept it as they are a Pariah congregation...I suppose a white congregation at home would not take a Negro pastor. Still they pay the salary from their own pockets. There the color is different. Here our congregation is offered a teacher of the same color and language. I think our Lutherans at home do not harbor bitter feelings against the Negro. Out here my Pariah congregations, I believe, do resent Nadars being in our mission. This particular teacher is well fitted to teach their children. They will not listen to the Word of God unless its' one of their own people.<sup>70</sup>

The internal mission dynamics of handling workers and congregations from various castes in Travancore now left the MELIM missionary with a difficult and unique problem. On the one side the missionary emphasis was to establish the Lutheran Church among all communities in Travancore, while on the other hand, the Sambavar congregations believed and hoped that the Lutheran mission would always remain a Pariah Mission. MELIM work was thus caught in the socio-political world of subaltern awakening and aspiration that spiraled into other communities and groups also demanding catechists and workers of their community to work among them. The MELIM missionaries worked to sort out this problem by “patient instruction” and by appealing to scripture to “show the will of God on this caste matter.”<sup>71</sup> However, MELIM reports show that this problem remained a persistent issue, but given the fact that MELIM was the provider of finances and infrastructure, alongside being the employer of workers, and teacher of “proper Lutheran theology,” it was possible for the missionaries to have the final word in such disputes.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> See W. A. Luedtke to Home Board, Quarterly Report, undated but replied by Board on 23 October, 1933, W. A. Luedtke 1930–1945 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>71</sup> See Robert Jank to Home Board, October 4, 1933.

<sup>72</sup> Missionary Herbert M. Zorn concedes in his report to the Home Board in 1954 that the problem of lesser low caste workers and consequent feeling of abandonment among the subalterns have come about due to “missionary mistakes.” See Herbert M. Zorn to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 3 May, 1954, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2–4.

## Perception of the Work Being “Foreign” with no Native Investment in It

During the MELIM period, the missionaries exercised total control over work in the respective villages, schools and administrative facilities. With the General Conference, Trivandrum Local Conference, Travancore Conference and the Trivandrum District Conferences, not being open to native participation and deciding on all matters concerning the activities of the mission, it was but natural for the natives to conclude that the work was mainly an “outside” work done for them. In all this, the most damaging aspect was the perception that there was no native capital that was invested in the Lutheran mission and that the natives were mere “objects” of mission charity than real “subjects” who played an active part in their entry into the Body of Christ. This perception had severe consequences in the post-MELIM period unto this day, and the Home Board Director Frederick Brand’s observation in 1930 sounds significantly prophetic when one looks back at it today:

I have an impression which dates from my visit to India that our Christians look upon the work among them as foreign, as something that belongs to the missionaries. They should be brought to see that this work is done for them, in order to enlist them into fellowship of service. If they learn that the little Pandals and school huts (chapels), the teachers and the catechists are altogether their own and they have a real living interest in all of these things they will be more willing to give their personal service and their small gifts. People are not interested so much in building and improving the estates of others as they are in building their own. Our people in India will never become real missionaries until we have first developed in them a real living interest in their little village and home work. Am I wrong when I feel that too many of our people believe the mission to be rich and that therefore, they can enjoy all the benefits of the mission without participating personally by labor and by donations in the work of the Lord?<sup>73</sup>

Director Brand’s critique of the mission and the perception of its native converts point to what was missing in MELIM, and also how MELIM was being run. The subaltern perception of the mission can be adequately summed up in a statement in a 1977 article written by Mr. P. J.

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<sup>73</sup> See Director Rev. Frederick Brand to G. Oberheu, Letter, St. Louis, 24 April, 1930, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

Martin, who grew up in MELIM and was the first college graduate from the subaltern community in Travancore—“because of the Lutheran mission, the Adivasi<sup>74</sup> Sambavars graduated from slavery under the Jenmie to slavery under the missionaries.”<sup>75</sup> Such a critique from an educated subaltern product of MELIM provokes us to look into their world and imagined hopes while entering MELIM.

### SUBALTERN NATIVE CONVERTS

The subaltern native converts of the Malayalam speaking lands of Travancore approached MELIM from 1908 and by the end of 1911 Rev. Henry Nau took over the initial mission sites in the “Kuttichel-Kattakada” area. Thus from the very beginning of MELIM work the subalterns of Trivandrum formed the foundational target group which helped locate the Lutheran Church in Kerala, that also led to the societal perception of it being a “Pariah Mission” or a “New Tribes Mission.” However, such perception was not acceptable to the missionaries who made every effort to take the gospel message to higher caste communities, eventually establishing congregations among higher caste Nadar, and Ezhava communities. Nevertheless, subaltern enthusiasm to enter MELIM never faded and there were regular requests made to MELIM for work to be taken up among them. Undoubtedly this desire to become a part of MELIM involved the subaltern native’s aspiration and related goals that during this period were probably not always fulfilled.

#### **Goals of Subaltern Native Converts**

From reports and conferences during this period one can deduce that just like the MELIM

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<sup>74</sup> “Adi-vasis,” meaning “first-dwellers” are the tribal people living in the forest areas of India.

<sup>75</sup> See P. D. Martin, “Durbala Vibhagangalkku Pratyeka Pariraksha Nalganam,” *Christiani. Twenty-First Trivandrum Synod Convention Special* (Trivandrum: 1977), 31–32.

missionaries, the subaltern native converts of MELIM in the Malayalam speaking areas were also focused on certain goals for their benefit and future. In fact, one can safely conclude that in the act of joining the Lutheran mission they were primarily following their “critical consciousness” in mobilizing their fellow people to aspire for a different and better life. Even though one could question their method, commitment and patience in staying the course and being catechized into the Lutheran faith, there is no doubt that the seed of an “urge to practically transform their real and imagined world” was present in the Malayalee Sambavar invitation to the Lutheran missionaries in Nagercoil. In a socio-economic environment where the Pariahs could, easily slide and were constantly pressurized to, come under the tutelage of the local “Jemmies;” the Pariahs of “Kuttichel-Kattakada,” led by Arulanandam Upadeshi and Canchanam Upadeshi assiduously made efforts through G. Jesudason to get Rev. Nau and the Lutheran mission to admit them into their care. In a sense, as noted by G. Jesudason about Arulanandam’s return again and again to the missionary, we see an assertion of the subaltern Sambavar agency to decide and construct their own future in opposition to hegemonic elites who controlled significant aspects of their daily life. In addition, such an initiative seen through the lens of the subalterns was also a resistance to forces of “power and control” that were at work to keep the Sambavars where they were in society. Accordingly, looking into the observations of the MELIM missionaries through this lens of subaltern agency, one is invited into the world of the subalterns that reveals their motives and goals for entering the Lutheran faith.

#### An Exclusive Mission for Themselves

When the subaltern Sambavars leaders like Arulanandam, M. Paulose, Jacob Deacon etc. invited MELIM to work among them, it was with the objective of establishing an exclusive Christianizing mission among their people. In fact, a similar desire can also be seen in the

Sambavar invitation of 1907 by Rev. G. Jesudason and the Panchamas of Nagercoil. Mission reports do not suggest that any such promise was granted by the MELIM missionaries to the Sambavars that they would work only among them, and even when the congregation at Konni started among the Pulayas in 1914 and among Nadars at Mylakara in 1917 it was not seen as digressing from MELIM work among the Sambavars. Most of the MELIM sites still being in the Sambavar villages and “awe of the missionary” must have probably contributed to this feeling of acceptance. However, during this period the Director of the Trivandrum Mission Rev. F. R. Zucker was writing to the Home Board that the mission was “definitely known as an exclusively Pariah Mission, and every measure that we can take to correct this decidedly mistaken idea of our principles is of distinct value.”<sup>76</sup> Consequently, issues with catechists belonging to other castes, MELIM disapproval of the “Sambavar Sankham” in 1922–1923, enthusiasm to work among the Nadars and Ezhavas etc., probably contributed to a feeling of abandonment among the Sambavars, which soon became visible on the ground. For instance, Rev. Knoernschild working in the Luthergiri district in 1933 notes simmering tensions in the Pariah congregation at Kuttichel that was assigned a Nadar Catechist:

As the result of a widespread agitation in the L.M.S.<sup>77</sup> among the “Pariahs,” they (Kuttichel) have come to the agreement that they will not accept teachers or catechists of the “Nadar” community, unless the “Nadars” accept teachers and catechists of the “Pariah” community on equal standing. On the other hand, the fact that the “Nadars” are on a higher plane, materially and intellectually, induces them to keep unnecessarily far aloof from the “Pariahs.” Jealousy also plays a big part in the matter. The “Pariahs” hoped that our mission would remain a Pariah Mission. When work was begun among the Nadars this was looked on with disfavor, I am told. The higher intellectual qualities of the “Nadars” yielded better material for training, and

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<sup>76</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July 1916.

<sup>77</sup> The London Missionary Society (LMS) was invited to work among the Tamil language speaking people of Travancore by a Sambavar religious seeker called “Mahaarasan” who was converted by the Tranquebar Lutheran missionaries. Mahaarasan took the name “Vethamanickam” on conversion and helped establish the LMS community in Mylaudy in Southern Travancore. One of Vethamanickam’s relatives of a later generation, G. Jesudason was the chief initiator of the Lutheran mission in South Travancore.

so the number of “Nadar” teachers and Catechists has increased disproportionately to the “Pariahs.”<sup>78</sup>

In a sense, the above observation of Rev. Knoernschild provides us with an insight into one of the goals of the subaltern Sambavars in entering the Lutheran faith. In the saturated religious world of the twentieth century in Travancore with different communities claiming Christian Missions unto themselves, the Sambavars hoped that the Lutheran Mission would be their own and this would be their unique denominational identity.

### Securing a Benevolent Patron, and a Counter-Balance to Oppressive Native Elites

As we saw in the last chapter, the independent mission around “Kuttichel-Kattakada” was started by Arulanandam Upadeshi and Canchanam Upadeshi after a split in the LMS congregation at Paruthipally around 1905–1906. In fact, while they were in the LMS the Sambavars were under the patronage of the LMS missionary and his Mission, which provided them security from the excesses of native elites. However, after separation from the LMS church at Paruthipally, the Sambavars were left with no patronage and were exposed to the control and oppression of hegemonic forces around them. The need for security from a benevolent patron was a huge need for the subalterns, when one fully appreciates the societal context from 1905 and especially during 1910–1912 when the Pulaya leader Ayyankali invaded the public sphere previously denied to them around the Nedumangadu and Balaramapuram area very near to Kuttichel and Kattakada, resulting in a backlash from the higher caste communities. This, combined with the servile attitude of the Sambavars naturally made a good reason for the Sambavars who were already exposed to a Christian Mission, to opt for another Christian missionary patron who in their perception was “benevolent” in comparison to the oppressive

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<sup>78</sup> E. Knoernschild to Home Board, Quarterly Report, Aryanadu, Trivandrum, 13 June, 1933, Knoernschild 1927 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 3.

native “Jennie.” This perception can be deduced from the observation of the missionary Martin J. Lutz who in 1936 started his work with MELIM in the initial Trivandrum field of the Luthergiri district that predominantly consisted of the initial Sambavar villages of MELIM:

At two places I am conducting classes myself twice a week to help combat the efforts of the Hindu Mission which have become especially keen there. Besides following the methods of Christian missions—schools, hospitals, industries, etc. the Hindu Mission also exerts pressure on the government of Travancore, local officials, and landlords. Since Travancore has just recently come out of a priestly-feudal system, the Brahmins and Nairs still exert an influence like that of the English Squires in the country places. The presence of the white missionary helps to counterbalance this influence of the Hindu upper castes. Soon, we hope, our people will learn to stand on their own feet. A big disadvantage of being the white man is that a large part of your time is spent listening to the complaints of the whole district. Usually some kind of help is wanted, either against someone who is oppressing them, or money to help in sickness or some other trouble.<sup>79</sup>

Thus some twenty six years after the mission started in the Malayalam lands one can still see the desire of the Sambavars for a benevolent patron who would counterbalance the oppressive tendencies of the native elites living daily in their midst.

#### Access to Resources and Education

MELIM work started among the subaltern Sambavars at a time of upheaval and social change in Travancore. As we have seen in the first chapter, the Sambavars much like their other slave caste groups, were systemically denied access to basic resources that could enable them live a normal life of human dignity. During the early twentieth century, just having been released from slavery fifty five years back, the Sambavars were still unable to make use of their new found freedom to educate themselves and achieve any sense of independence. Definitely the emancipation of the Nadars through the London Missionary Society working from the 1800s and also the social action activities of the slave caste Pulaya leader Ayyankali in opening the thus far

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<sup>79</sup> See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Letter, 5 Dec., 1937, Martin Lutz 1935–1946 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

denied “public sphere” to the subalterns, must have also contributed to the general sense of awakening among the Sambavars of Kuttichel and Kattakada. From this one can conclude that while these Sambavar leaders approached their kinsman G. Jesudason in Nagercoil and sought admission into the Lutheran Mission, a priority and hope would have been to gain access to crucial “life instilling” resources that were up till then limited and mostly unavailable to them. Finances, entry into the public sphere such as roads and market places, land and even the Christian temple (Palli) were some of the resources to which the subalterns sought access. The MELIM missionaries provided financial support to the Sambavar and other subaltern converts who were caught in personal debts, and also took up their cause with officials and landlords whenever they felt that their intervention was necessary.<sup>80</sup> MELIM work also made it possible for the Sambavars to move out into the public sphere with the belief that they had the backing of a white colonial master, even though the missionaries did not probably support such perceptions. However, their emphasizing of these social and economic opportunities to the display of disinterest in systematic Christian spiritual learning, seemingly led the missionaries to conclude that the Sambavars came into the Mission for “the love of money.”<sup>81</sup>

Education was another important area into which the Sambavars hoped to gain access through their entry into MELIM. In the general socio-political environment of South Travancore during this period, the desire for education was a common and significant theme running through all communities. However, neither the Government in Travancore nor the native elites were providers of education for the subalterns, and the subaltern’s only option was the quality education provided by the various Christianizing missions at work during this period.

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<sup>80</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 76–77.

<sup>81</sup> Rev. Ehlers mirrors the observation of his catechist who is working at the Pariah village of Madathikonam. See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, Quarterly Report for 1915, Trivandrum, 23 Feb., 1915, CHI Archives, St. Louis.



Undoubtedly, MELIM saw the aspirational desires of the Sambavars during this period that probably was a significant motivation for them to join the Lutheran Mission:

In all three districts of our mission field—the Nagercoil district, the Trivandrum district, the Northern district—our missionaries frequently receive petitions for the opening of schools in villages, often with the assurance that our Christian teaching will not be objected to, but will be gladly received... These petitions do not necessarily indicate a desire for Christian teachings or a leaning toward the Christian faith. The motives of the petitioners are, at best, decidedly mixed: for even the outcaste, the Pariah has learned in these latter days that knowledge is power and may be translated into Rupees. Hence such petitions are examined very carefully; and a new school is opened only after investigation has shown that the Gospel will have free course in that community—if, indeed, a good Christian teacher is available for the post.<sup>82</sup>

The arousal of the “critical consciousness” of the subalterns in Travancore had consequently awakened the Sambavars also to realize that it was important to gain access to education if they wanted to earn a livelihood and enable their children have a better life.

Accordingly, almost all the initial Sambavar sites had the Pandal (Palli) and the school existing together, which was something that was un-imaginable not too long ago.

### Securing Protection through a Powerful Representative Voice

Set within the subaltern struggle for emancipation and better opportunities for social living, the Sambavars found themselves severely handicapped by lack of knowledge and powerful advocates especially at the micro-levels of their village life to help them withstand the onslaught of hegemonic forces that wanted to keep them subservient with minimal opportunities to escape dependency and control. Also the MELIM period coincided with the granting of “Poduval” lands to the subaltern communities due to the protests led by Pulaya leader Ayyankali; but the transfer of these lands to communities like the Pulayas and Pariahs was hindered by the casteist

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<sup>82</sup> Henry Hamann, “Our Mission-Schools in India-III,” *Lutheran Witness* 41, no. 23 (1922): 362.

bureaucracy of Travancore.<sup>83</sup> This led to many instances of conflict between the native elites and the subalterns, with the slave castes such as the Sambavars, Pulayas and Vedars, having to face police cases and denial of land registrations in their name. MELIM missionary reports during this period point to many instances where the reluctant missionary was called upon by the subalterns to not only provide protection from victimizing forces but also represent their cause powerfully before the powers that be. Such instances caused much trouble to the missionaries, who saw their role in strictly spiritual terms of “saving souls.” Consequently, the missionaries ended up questioning the motives of their subaltern converts and frequently introspected upon their subaltern assigned role as the “representative voice” of the subaltern converts:

Had several disheartening experiences within the last one week. Went to one place where I heard all was up-side down, a new place taken over by Bro. Zucker. The people were not coming to church and I heard reports that the trouble was that the people expected us to help them out a lot in sicknesses, court cases, quarrels, etc. etc. Of course this was not done, where necessary help was given, but in several cases I felt that I should not mix up in, as for instance getting their land registered. I know nothing of the details, they lie, I go to court, and then stand there as a liar. Besides Jesus himself says to the man who came and asked him to settle a land dispute between himself and his brother: Who has placed me as judge over you? This they do not like, they say: Why then come to church if the Sahib is not going to help us.<sup>84</sup>

Missionary Oberheu who is recollecting his experience with this group of subaltern villagers who have recently joined the mission, then continues in this letter to explain how he gathers the congregation together and preaches from Matthew chapter six about Mary and Martha, explaining to his people that the “one thing needful was the Word.”<sup>85</sup> However, the attitude of the subaltern congregants persists, leading Rev. Oberheu to conclude:

All they want to join the mission for is to have other people know that they have a Sahib in back of them and then they fool themselves into thinking that everyone will get frightened and leave them alone, which however does not happen. I finally told

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<sup>83</sup> Nisar and Kandasamy, *Ayyankali*, 83.

<sup>84</sup> See G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, 6 July, 1926, 1–2.

<sup>85</sup> See G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, 6 July, 1926, 2–3.

them that I would stand by the word of God, if they wanted to do so, I would be more than glad to see them in church, if not, they might stay at home.<sup>86</sup>

From the above observations of Rev. Oberheu we can deduce the fact that the subaltern converts entering the mission were seeking a powerful representative voice that would speak on their behalf and get them justice. Soon the reluctance of the missionary and his impression of the subalterns as “liars” contribute to the breakdown of hope among the subalterns.

### New Identity in Christ

Even though the MELIM missionaries frequently questioned the conversion and faith of their subaltern converts, it is very clear from their own reports and also Conferences that these converts never wanted to leave their Christian faith. Almost all instances where there was breakdown of communication between the mission agents and the subaltern converts, the threat issued by the converts would indicate a desire to join some other Christian mission and not about going back to their previous Sambavar religious practices. Furthermore, in most cases of quarrels and separation from the village congregations, the subaltern converts would bide their time and gradually come back into the mission. Such an approach from the subaltern converts leads one to question whether their motive to remain within the Christian fold was really based only on socio-economic considerations or also inherently included transformed religio-cultural convictions. In fact, Christian Sambavar worship life was known for its emphasis on communal singing to Christ and chanting of the traditional Lutheran Worship Liturgy, provoking missionary Martin Lutz to comment that, “I am always edified when I attend their services, so hearty and loyal is their participation.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> See G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, 6 July, 1926, 3.

<sup>87</sup> Rev. Martin J. Lutz was in charge of the Sambavar congregations of Kurungalloor, Tholloor, Kanakodu and Luthergiri, and the Pulaya congregation of Konni, when he made this comment in a report. See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 4 April, 1945, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

There is no doubt that from the perspective of the American Lutheran missionary, the subaltern Sambavar converts were not fully competent in sufficiently exhibiting their proper Lutheran faith and practice. However, to expect such high standards from a community that had just recently received the right to education probably did not fully acknowledge the centuries long debilitating effects of oppression and exploitation. In one such instance, Rev. W. A. Luedtke working among the Sambavars in the Luthergiri district laid out a two year Confirmation course for his converts, which did not yield positive results, leading him to report to the Home Board that even though “it is not all their fault,” he “despairs of ever being able to make some of them intelligent Lutheran Christians.”<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, the missionaries at the same time constantly reported stories of subaltern converts holding on to their new found identity in Christ and the hope of the resurrection even in the midst of despair and death. In one such moving testimony recorded by Rev. Knoernschild working in the Luthergiri district in 1931, a dying son consoles his desperate and despairing mother:

We enter the poverty stricken home of a low-caste family in one of our congregations. The second oldest son, a boy of seven years, is on his death-bed. The parents and brothers and sisters are standing around the bed, crying. Comes a little voice from the bed, merely a mat on the floor, “Weep not, Mother, but pray.” The Mother answer, “Son, I do not know how to pray under these circumstances.” “At least you can pray the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed, which we pray every Sunday in church.” “Yes, I can do that.” “Mother, Father, Brother, pray, because I am going to Jesus, of whom I learnt in school and church.” Thus the angels brought another immortal soul to heaven. Mission work is not in vain.<sup>89</sup>

The above incident witnessed by the missionary provides a deep insight into the new religio-cultural belief system and commitment of the subaltern converts. The subalterns entering MELIM were not merely seeking socio-economic opportunity and refuge in the mission. Rather

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<sup>88</sup> See W. A. Luedtke to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 31 March, 1933, W. A. Luedtke 1930–1945 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>89</sup> See E. Knoernschild to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 29 April, 1931, Knoernschild 1927 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

the new goal of the subaltern convert was to remain steadfast in their new identity in Christ. This new identity embraced through the agency of the Lutheran mission was proudly proclaimed in their worship experience, daily living and also taken all the way to their grave. Nevertheless, even with this new identity in Christ, the subalterns within MELIM were exposed to challenges that soon spiraled into deeper concerns about the mission and their place in it.

### **Concerns of the Subaltern Native Converts**

By the mid-1920s the subalterns within the Lutheran mission were worried about the MELIM outreach to other communities that was now affecting their future in the mission. Naturally, this caused considerable heartburn among them whose manifestations made its way into disputes in accepting other caste catechists and teachers, petitions about being denied opportunities in the mission, complaints about their students being purposely failed at school etc. From such reports of the missionaries and also from Conference debates we can infer the following concerns that seem to have grabbed the attention of the subalterns.

#### **Fear against Tale-Bearing and Losing Influence to the Higher Castes**

By the late 1920s the subalterns probably felt that they had lost their influence in the Lutheran mission to higher caste workers and congregations. This perception was captured in an article published in “The Christian Patriot” published in 1928, which severely criticized the Lutheran mission for “making the support of caste the very basis of their missionary method.” Censuring its preference for higher caste converts the article noted that “the Sambavar Christians with twenty years of association with the mission and indoctrination with Lutheran truths are not regarded as privileged to anything more than a little education in Tamil.”<sup>90</sup> Thus alongside the

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<sup>90</sup> See Janaka, “The Introduction of Untouchability into Christianity,” *The Christian Patriot* 37, no. 13

growing perception that the subalterns were gradually being sidelined in the Lutheran mission; was the growing opinion that the higher castes, especially the catechists and teachers, had to some extent vital influence over the missionary and the mission. Consequently, in many instances, the subaltern converts concluded that these favorites of the missionaries were involved in “tale-bearing” about subaltern workers in the mission leading to missionary dissatisfaction about their work and consequent dismissal from the mission.<sup>91</sup> This concern was brought to the notice of the Trivandrum Conference in the subaltern petition of 1954:

Other caste members should not have the right to have anything to do with dismissing our workers. That is to say, none of our workers should ever be dismissed on the basis of tale-bearing or persuasion on the part of the workers of other castes. If this should ever happen, an Ad Hoc committee of our caste fellows should be formed to discuss the matter.<sup>92</sup>

Interestingly the Conference in its answer to this demand from the subalterns assured them by stating that it “agrees to disregard tale-bearing” and “to appoint a committee of low caste workers to deal with complaints regarding low caste workers.”<sup>93</sup> Thus both the demand from the subalterns and the subsequent assurance given by the missionaries, reveal that at the very least this was a dominant concern that persisted in popular discussions during the MELIM period.

### Feeling of Abandonment among the Subalterns within the Mission

When the subaltern Sambavars leaders like Arulanandam, M. Paulose, Jacob Deacon etc. invited MELIM to work among them, it was with the objective of establishing an exclusive Christianizing mission among their people. Nevertheless, a look at the work force of catechists

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(Madras, 1928): 6–10.

<sup>91</sup> Mr. Ruban Benjamin, interview by author, Malayinkeezhu, July 3, 2013. Mr. Ruban Benjamin studied and grew up in the mission and is the son of the native Lutheran mission Bible woman, Mrs. Snehapoo. Mr. Ruban also studied his One Year Bible Course at Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil and worked alongside Rev. Martin J. Lutz for some time.

<sup>92</sup> See *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 30.

<sup>93</sup> See *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 32.

and teachers in the Lutheran mission from the very beginnings in 1911 clearly point out that the mission employed people from many higher caste communities to work among the subaltern people. Given the fact that the Lutheran mission was high on education and “individual conversion” of natives, it was but natural for the mission to employ quality educated people who would carry forward the Lutheran message to the people. Accordingly, most of the Lutheran employees working among the subaltern villagers were from the higher castes like the Ezhavas and Nadars, and the dominant Nair and Syrian Christian community. Gradually MELIM was able to start working among the Ezhava and Nadar communities through the kin and relatives of these workers. Furthermore, with the move into the Ponvilla area in 1924 and the enthusiasm to reach out among the Ezhavas in the 1924–1925 period and beyond, the subalterns probably perceived MELIM as gradually projecting an emphasis towards working among the higher castes. Accordingly, conflicts between the subaltern congregations and higher caste workers employed in them, which was already present, intensified during the 1930s and afterwards.<sup>94</sup>

Probably at the heart of this animosity between the subalterns and higher castes intensifying was the feeling of abandonment that was playing into the fear of the subalterns. Subsequently, in 1944 the low-caste Pariah community approached the visiting Executive Secretary of the Home Board Rev. O. H. Schmidt with a petition of grievances about their number of workers being too small to meet their needs.<sup>95</sup> In this petition they further appealed to the mission to “lower secular educational requirements for the four or five lower castes among whom MELIM worked” so that they could get catechetical training. Alongside, they applied “for

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<sup>94</sup> For instance, Rev. Ehlers points to the conflict between the higher caste catechist and the Pariah congregation at Tumerichel in 1918. See, Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 18 Nov., 1918. In another case, catechist M. A. Joseph, a Pariah is not accepted by a Vedar congregation initially, who later then decide to accept him. See *Minutes of 39<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 1. Also, Rev. Luedtke mentions the problems between the Nadar catechist and the Pariah congregation at Kurungaloor. See W. A. Luedtke to Home Board, undated but replied by Home Board on 23 Oct., 1933.

<sup>95</sup> See *Minutes of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 8.

leniency in the number of their students who fail classes;” and for the mission to consider their boys and “bear their weaknesses and other faults with a bit more patience.” The petition approach adopted by the Sambavars continued as they put forward another one in 1948 where they complained that their students were neglected in fees and scholarships for High school and College education in preference to the higher castes.<sup>96</sup> Undoubtedly, the subalterns were feeling increasingly insecure of their place and influence in the mission and were seeking assurance from the missionaries of their importance within the MELIM community.

During the missionary period such feelings were managed and suppressed under the charismatic missionary figure, but this feeling of abandonment caught up with the mission when it became clear that the administration was going to pass on to native hands. Subaltern disillusionment that was building up came out to fore in a moment of subaltern awareness and mobilization when the background for the Constitution of the indigenous church was being set in the 1950–1956 period. In an act that provide glimpses of their collective “critical consciousness,” the Luthergiri district where the Sambavars were in the majority and where the Lutheran mission had started in 1911 put forward a petition seeking postponement of Synod formation for a period of ten years. In the petition submitted by Mr. A. Johnson, son of Arulanandam Upadeshi, the subalterns listed their grievances and placed specific demands to protect their interests in the mission while at the same time seeking access to more opportunities for education and work in the mission.<sup>97</sup>

#### Fear of the Loss of Opportunities and of the “Post-Missionary” era Church

By the 1930s the MELIM missionaries were reporting many cases of caste animosity and

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<sup>96</sup> See *Minutes of the 110<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 40.

<sup>97</sup> For more details of the Memorandum submitted by Mr. A. Johnson, and the ensuing discussion and response of the missionaries, see *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 26–32.



conflicts within the congregations and workers of MELIM. Also, with the indigenous Lutheran Church nearing a reality in the 1950–1956 period, subaltern anxiety increased about the loss of opportunities and influence in the post-missionary Church. In the 1954 petition before the Trivandrum Conference, the subalterns led by A. Johnson demanded—“two thirds of the teachers in the High school and Middle school should be members of the backward classes;” that the “Nilamel Boarding school dare not be closed;” “four out of six Standing committee members were to be from the backward classes;” and the “few members of subaltern castes who were qualified should not be transferred from the job positions.”<sup>98</sup> As a precursor to the 1954 petition, discussions around this period appealed for two synods to be established along caste lines in the Malayalam Lutheran areas because of “the difficulty of the depressed classes in the Lutheran mission.”<sup>99</sup> Pointing to the complications faced by the missionaries in negotiating and finding a solution to the fears of the subalterns, and the “atmosphere of mistrust” that was prevalent while discussing this matter; Rev. Herbert Zorn traced the history of the problem in his Report to the Home Board that gives us an insight into the subaltern concerns about the post-missionary church:

[This is] the problem at the heart of the petitions and demands. The London Missionary Society (LMS) began its work among the Parians and Pullians; now it is run completely by Nadars and many of the low castes have left for other missions including our own. The Salvation Army also started out with the low castes; but the Syrian Christians got in and they are running it now. That is what is happening to the Lutheran Mission: so runs the fear of the low caste members of our mission... The problem as it comes into our mission comes as follows: When we began our mission work here, we needed workers. We had a few of the low caste men, like old Pastor Paulose. But we needed more, particularly as we started schools. Low caste men with any education were not available so we took Nadars and Izhavans, many of them

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<sup>98</sup> See *Minutes of the 131<sup>st</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 29.

<sup>99</sup> See Herbert Zorn to Home Board, 3 May, 1954, 2. Also, in an earlier letter written by Herbert Zorn to the Board he points out that a petition has been brought by the Parians to establish two Synods—one for Parians, Pullians, Vedars, Kannikars, etc., the other for Nadars, Izhavans etc. See Herbert M. Zorn to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 17 Oct., 1953, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 2.

members of the LMS. That is a sad history, I fear, but there was little else to do. Now we have men of the lower castes who have some education, but we have more of the Nadar and Izhavan castes; it seems that they have stepped up a step ahead of the rest of the communities, those that we call depressed classes. The staff of the High school is completely staffed by Nadars and Izhavans; the training school Headmaster is an Izhavan, one teacher is a Parian. All the middle school headmasters are either Nadars or Izhavans. The percentage of congregations and members is about 67 or 75% low caste, the rest 25–33% high caste, i.e. Nadar, Izhavan, and a few other individuals. But the percentage of workers is almost reversed, perhaps about 40 to 60%...when this argument has arisen, we have asked them, “Yes, this is a situation that has come about through missionary mistakes; aren’t you eager to have your own church, with proportionate representation, so that you can correct them?” they answer, to paraphrase Scripture: “If these things happen in a Missionary green tree, what will happen in an Indian dry?” Even in those Sankhams where the low castes have commanded a resounding majority, they have elected Izhavans and Nadars as their officers. If they argue that this is because the Teachers and other workers have a vote, we answer that that will not be the case in Synod. But it does not satisfy.<sup>100</sup>

Thus a serious concern to the subaltern converts while entering into the post-missionary era of MELIM was the fear of loss of opportunities in the Lutheran Church. In their psyche, they believed that when under their “benevolent patron” they could not assert themselves conclusively in the mission, then in an Indian-led church they would stand no chance. Also, by this time, with independence from British rule, the Indian government was also making extra efforts to get the Dalits to remain within the Hindu fold by providing them job and education reservations. Naturally within a context of disillusionment and fear of their future within the mission, such opportunities opening up for the subaltern converts to take advantage of their educational qualifications led many of the Lutheran subaltern converts to re-convert to Hinduism and thereby dissociate themselves from the church.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of the subalterns during this period of change to the indigenous church remained faithful to their calling as Lutheran Christians. Undoubtedly, for many, the heritage of MELIM work among their people and their entry into a new socio-economic and religio-cultural reality had left a deep mark that could not

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<sup>100</sup> See Herbert M. Zorn to Home Board, 3 May, 1954, 2–3.

<sup>101</sup> Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 88–91.

be forgotten and summarily terminated.

### **ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE MISSIONARY AND SUBALTERN CONVERTS**

The subaltern native converts of the Malayalam speaking lands of Travancore that entered MELIM from 1911 onwards were products of a pre-modern culture with belief in appeasement of evil spirits as their primary religiosity. On the other hand the MELIM missionary represented modern “enlightened” Christianity firmly entrenched in the Lutheran confessional tradition. Various scholars have pointed out how the Christian missions of the nineteenth and twentieth century, contributed in a revolutionary manner to the formation of a modern worldview and society, through its emphasis on education, ethics, critique of traditional Indian socio-religious systems and certain inhuman practices, and reaching the villages of India with a new message of humanity.<sup>102</sup> As a consequence of their efforts they also were able to transform the worldviews and lifestyle of the people amongst whom they worked. Even in MELIM’s work in the Malayalam areas, we can see this cross-cultural encounter between the western worldview grounded MELIM missionary and the pre-modern subalterns who together go through the chores of “de-learning” presumed and uncontested aspects of life and faith, which ultimately unveils a new “learning” experience for both the missionary and the subaltern converts.

#### **Cross-Cultural Encounter at the Margins of Village Life and in Mission Constructed Spaces**

An important characteristic of MELIM work in the Malayalam lands was its evangelizing involvement among the various subaltern villages to which it was invited. It is in these village sites that the cross-cultural encounter of the American Lutheran missionary and the subaltern natives of South Travancore were primarily played out. Alongside, these natural encounter sites

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<sup>102</sup> M. D. David, *Missions: Cross-Cultural Encounter and Change in Western India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 14–26.

were the ones constructed by the mission—the missionary compound and bungalow, the schools, boarding homes, reading rooms, and “Palli.” In many of these interactions documented by the missionaries in their reports to the Home Board, one finds that the MELIM missionary found the “jungles of Travancore”<sup>103</sup> quite difficult to handle and many of their experiences with the natives questioned their own perceptions and pre-suppositions about life, people and faith.

### **Personal Village Experiences: Subaltern Life and Conversion of the Missionary**

As seen in the earlier part of this chapter, the MELIM missionaries concluded that their subaltern converts were not sufficiently capable of maintaining the Lutheran Church and also expanding it among other high caste communities in Kerala. In arriving at such a conclusion, based on their experiences and pre-suppositions, the subalterns were seen as individuals incapable of grasping and upholding Lutheran doctrine due to limited intellectual abilities, and also due to the inability to lead model Christian lives for reasons of ethical laxity, poverty, dependency and servile mentality. As a consequence, missionary experiences of his interaction with subaltern congregations projected inferences such as—“Pariahs of weak character,” “den of adultery,” “poor heathen Pariah,” “ignorant devil-worshipping Pariahs,” “ignorant and superstitious Vedars,” “mentally dull and incompetent, Pariahs and Pulliahs,” “dependable, excellent material and hardworking Shanars,” “higher type and superior mentality of Iravans,” etc.—that probably defined missionary perception of the subaltern and high-caste individuals during this period.<sup>104</sup> In addition to this, Sambavar conversion was also suspect and seen more in

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<sup>103</sup> This phraseology “jungles of Nilamel,” or “jungles of Travancore,” is a common occurrence in many mission letters written by MELIM missionaries to the Home Board. See Martin Wyneken to Home Board, 8 April, 1930. Also most of Director F. R. Zucker’s letters use this term to signify the tough life conditions in the area and the difficulty faced by the missionary working in this part of India.

<sup>104</sup> “Pariahs of weak character,” was used to describe the work of the Lutheran mission in Nagercoil and the need to move into the Marthandam area among the higher caste Nadars in 1911. In the same document, the Nadars are mentioned as “dependable, excellent material, hard-working, and a good fortune for the Mission.” See “Bericht:

terms of the need for material benefits with no or very little concern for “eternal blessings and life in Christ.”

In spite of such opinions forming missionary perceptions of the subalterns, there were moments when the MELIM missionary in his visits to the subaltern villages would encounter their world and life, and return away questioning his own perceptions about them and his own faith and practice:

Very many of the Parayans live in extreme poverty. Sometimes they ask for money, or beg. When that first happened to me I lost my temper and said what I thought with hard words. What surprised me was that they did not seem to hold that against me. In one place, for example, a man came after services and asked for money. I told the catechist and people present that since the congregation was on subsidy they should have in their budget an item for poor relief and should take care of these things themselves and not have individuals come and bother me after service. So they let me go. Since that was a congregation where communion is administered by one of their own pastors I had no occasion to go there often. The next time I did go I wanted to visit some of their homes before leaving. The catechist was more than willing to assist me in that purpose. And the first thing he pointed out to me was a freshly dug grave and explained to me that there the man was buried who had come to me for help. He had died, a day or two before. The grave was next to his house. But the house constituted of not much more than four sticks holding up what was supposed to be a thatched roof but which was in such a state of decomposition that I could see the sky through it. The mud floor was practically bare of any utensils. On it was sitting the wife of the man who had died, as thin as a rail, the whole thing a picture of bleak poverty, misery, and want. No one asked me for money. But the catechist explained that the congregation had given some help. So I also contributed something, certainly not much. But for a long time whenever I passed that place in my trips back and forth I wondered whether I should not help more. The picture of that fresh grave remained in my mind. This was not an isolated instance. There were other and similar cases.

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Der Sudl Missionare,” 5. “Den of adultery” and “ignorant devil-worshippers” was the term used by Rev. F. Zucker to point out the un-ethical sexual practices and religiosity of the Pariahs of Kuttichel. See F. Zucker to Home Board, Report of Meeting of Missionaries of Trivandrum, 7 Feb., 1919, CHI Archives, St. Louis. “Ignorant and Superstitious Vedars” was the term used by Rev. Robert Jank to explain the lack of education and fear of devils in the worldly life of the Vedars. See Robert Jank to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, Trivandrum, 5 Nov., 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis. “Higher type and superior mentality of Irvans,” can be found in the context of the larger discussion about the MELIM need to reach out to the Ezhavas and to establish congregations among them. See, *Minutes of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 2–4. “Mentally dull, incompetent Pariahs and Pulliahs” was commonly used by Rev. Zucker and also can be found in a paper prepared by Rev. E. H. Meinzen. See, E. H. Meinzen, “Unhealthy Mission Expansion,” at the *Nagercoil District Conference*, 1 June, 1928, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

Always I seemed to help too little or too late. Never did they seem to hold anything against me for the inadequacy of the efforts I made or complain.<sup>105</sup>

For the missionary who perceives the Pariah to be of “weak character” and “dependent,” this experience is a perception changing one. Not only does the Pariah convert not pester, but only later does the missionary realize that his immediate need was “genuine” leading to a serious questioning of whether he “helped too little or too late.” Such deep interactions with converts in their life situation also led MELIM missionaries like Rev. Martin Lutz to question the dismissal of the religious motive in the subalterns conversion and was led to conclude—“while casual observers often remark that the mission’s chief asset is not the Gospel, but rice, even the few months I have spent getting to know our members intimately convinced me that a very large number if not the majority of them are sincere believers in Christ as their Savior.”<sup>106</sup> More importantly, getting one’s hands dirty and entering into the life of the subalterns led the missionaries to question their own prejudices, ethnocentrism, and celebrate the power of the gospel:

Now that I’m getting used to the life and people here, there are many new and pleasant experiences. Although the people here are far “below” us in education, wealth, culture, I am finding among them friends whom I value as highly as those I had at home. While I know that many white people do look down upon the natives, this is a disease that can be cured. True, the humble circumstances in which most of the people live, the oppression and humiliations which they daily suffer, make them “servile,” when one throws aside all show of superiority and deals with them on an equal footing, this servile spirit gradually drops off until they seem like just ordinary human beings. Of course, then you have to treat them as such.<sup>107</sup>

In short, the missionary-subaltern encounter at the margins of village life is a two-way

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<sup>105</sup> See Kurt Zorn to Home Board, 21 May, 1954, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1–2.

<sup>106</sup> Rev. Martin Lutz was at this time in charge of congregations in the Luthergeri District—Kannankonam, Kuttichel, Tatchenkodu, Mylakara, Kanakodu, Kynakara, Mardattikonam, Puliyoorkonam. See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Quarterly Report, Jan.-March, 1938, Martin J. Lutz 1935–1946 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>107</sup> See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Letter, Trivandrum, 5 April, 1938, Martin J. Lutz 1935–1946 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

encounter where, even as the subalterns are exposed to a new vision and life in Christ, the agent bringing the gospel message is shorn out of his own prejudices to celebrate the common humanity in Christ.

### **The “Palli”: Subaltern Sphere of Collective Identity and Performance**

Beginnings of MELIM work in the “Kuttichel-Kattakada” area undoubtedly generated unimaginable enthusiasm and interest among the subaltern population in these areas. This ripple effect created by the presence of Rev. Nau as he first took up work in the initial Sambavar independent church sites of Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor and Puthu-Kulangara; immediately opened the Sambavar villages of Kanakodu, Chalaikonam Chullimanoor, Kattaikal (Luthergiri), and Arianadu for Lutheran work in the period of 1912–1913 when Rev. J. Harms and Rev. Zucker arrived. Subsequently, the location of systematic gospel proclamation and “instruction” then became the bamboo and palm leaf roofed pandal (temporary shed) that the subalterns proudly claimed to be the “Palli.”<sup>108</sup> This mission created space became the place for the Sambavars to come together and congregate, study the word of God and also learn lessons in literacy. Thus, the sacred “Palli” also was the educating “Palli-kudam” (school) where religious instruction and secular academic learning took place. At the same time, this was also the site for the subalterns to learn lessons of decorum and solemn behavior when residing in the “sacred space.” A report to the Home Board by the missionary Rev. Zucker in 1913 about the work at Kanakodu helps us capture a glimpse of the missionary attempt to instill new attitudes into the

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<sup>108</sup> Most of the letters of Rev. Harms, Rev. Zucker and Rev. Ehlers uses the local vernacular “Palli” to point to the make shift church building of the Sambavars, portraying their enthusiasm when a “Palli” was put up in the village. For instance Rev. J. Harms reports about the inauguration of the “Palli” in Chullimanoor on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1913, where 119 people attended with a total Worship Service collection of “1 Fanam, 1 Chuckram and 4 Cas.” See J. Harms to Home Board, Quarterly Report, July-September 1913, India Missionaries 1913 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Also, Rev. Ehlers in his report of 1918 to the Home Board talks about the people and the Palli at Kuttichel and Madathikonam, and how the re-thatching of roofs and repairs to the Pandals are important community events there. See Otto Ehlers to the Home Board, 18 Nov., 1918.

Sambavars who can't contain their new found enthusiasm:

I have an assistant there and his name is Jonah, and he also works in Kanakodu...and people meet at the Palli there...One difficult part of the beginning of this missionary work was to make them sit still for study...they are always talking...and one starts and then the others go in to talk...it is also difficult to let the women know to laugh and chatter is not a good thing...they should have more respect of the missionary. As an example you would not have this experience in front of a policeman, and the missionary is a lot higher than a policeman.<sup>109</sup>

Zucker's observations reveal the informal approach of the Sambavars to religious "instruction" that is rebuked by the missionary who sees "learning and faith" in very serious and formal terms. The "Palli" then becomes the site of learning not only of religious truths but also of learning to acknowledge and celebrate a specifically created sacred space and time. The earlier Sambavar religiosity and worldview, much like other subaltern religious practices did not prioritize a particular place or time for religious engagement, and mainly dealt with "exorcism" (Thullal) and sacrifices for "appeasement of malevolent spirits." In this religio-cultural shift, the "Palli" for the subaltern convert stood as the symbol of a new personal and communal identity, which was heavily resented and derided by the native elites. Rev. O. A. Ehlers reporting to the Home Board about his work in Antiyoorkonam in 1918 provides us with an opportunity to comprehend this internalization and the disruption attempted by the native elites:

For a long time the building presented a sorry spectacle in deed. For being pretty far from the habitation of any of our people but very near the public road, thieves made it a practice to cut down some of the rafters and steal the palm leaves etc. The people naturally were not very eager to make good the damage. They even threatened: We'll repair the "Palli" only once more and then come to the lessons as long as the building stands. When it breaks down, we'll cease to come. But I am glad to be in a position to say that they have thought better of it and that they have also since then repaired and re-thatched the building.<sup>110</sup>

The Antiyoorkonam experience points to the way in which the native elites repeatedly

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<sup>109</sup> See F. Zucker to the Home Board, July-October 1913, 3-5.

<sup>110</sup> See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 18 Nov., 1918.



attempt to dismantle the “Palli” that is symbolic of the Sambavars new religio-cultural world and identity. Even though the initial Sambavar response is of frustrated disinterest, they soon come around to reclaim and rebuilt their new sacred learning space. Furthermore, the “Palli” becomes the new sphere for the subalterns to gather together, learn together, and even bring community and personal disputes for adjudication that sometimes end up in violence.<sup>111</sup>

### **Theological Dialogue: Missionary-Native Worker Interaction and Contextualization of the Gospel**

The MELIM period of gospel proclamation in the subaltern villages of Travancore also provided many opportunities for theological reflection. There were instances when the “modern” American missionary in his encounter with the pre-modern subaltern culture that attributed diseases to attacks of the evil spirits, comes away appreciating “Jesus the healer” who “healed the body and soul alike” because in the subaltern pre-modern culture the religious man should be able to do exactly this.<sup>112</sup> Further, even though MELIM work in the Malayalam lands was primarily controlled by the American Lutheran missionary, the major work of christianization was done by the native catechists, teachers and mission workers. With limited number of missionaries available in the field, the mission naturally had to depend upon native catechists and mission workers to take the gospel message to the villages on a daily basis. Furthermore, the personal contacts established by native agents through their friends and relatives were vital for securing Lutheran work in the Malayalam areas. Regular weekly visits to congregation members,

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<sup>111</sup> Many reports of the initial missionaries point to the community gathering and learning of the Sambavars in the “Palli.” Many of these reports also share stories of quarrels between members, and within families that are brought to the notice and adjudication of the missionary who is mostly unhappy about it. A particular incident reported by Rev. Ehlers in 1918 from the Tumerichel congregation has half of the congregation involved in a physical fight that end up with many people getting injured. See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 18 Nov., 1918.

<sup>112</sup> Missionary Martin J. Lutz makes this observation when he is working among the subaltern tribal communities in Wynaad, North Kerala. See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, Letter, Wynaad, 15 April, 1956, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

conducting prayer meetings and praying for the people, preaching, teaching catechumens, etc.

were all the duty of the native workers. Missionary Martin J. Lutz in charge of twelve (12)

villages and the dispensary at Luthergiri in 1942 made the following observation with regards to native catechists and workers:

Officially, I alone am Pastor to all these people. Communion, baptisms, funerals, marriages, alone would tax a man's capacity. Since all the workers are just catechists, the burden of this work is theoretically the missionary's. Actually, the catechists are pastors in their congregations, and take care of all the above. The physical giving of communion has been reserved for the missionary, but practically preparing for communion and announcement is in the hands of the catechist. Hardly any missionary has ever been long enough at a place to be personally acquainted with all the affairs of the congregation. Although I have myself been in the homes of all my members of congregations (8 of them), I still know many of them only by sight and not by name...thus, we have to rely mainly on the judgment of the local catechist. Fortunately, the relation of the catechist and their missionary is close and sincere. Loyalty, to an institution or to an individual comes natural to the Asiatic. I have never heard an Indian worker cast aspersions on a foreign missionary, even though he might be in disagreement with him. Thus the missionary and the local catechist are sort of associate pastors, with the former occupying the chief place. The catechist also makes most of the sick visits...on Sundays I usually, get to two places for services, communion, and baptism...Besides congregational work, the schools need much attention...Once a week, I get together with all my workers for a sermon study and general discussion of work problems...the workers study the text, parallel passages, lessons for the Sunday, and prepare the chief thoughts.<sup>113</sup>

Since the catechists were trained by the Catechist seminary before being employed as catechists in the mission, the missionaries naturally trusted their workers to proclaim the gospel according to Lutheran confessional principles. However, a dominant refrain during this period in the writings of missionaries was the lack of quality catechists and workers.<sup>114</sup> At the heart of this complaint was the opinion of the missionaries that the native workers were not administering the

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<sup>113</sup> See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, 3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter Report, received 30 March 1943, Martin Lutz 1935–1946 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

<sup>114</sup> As pointed out at various points in this and the earlier chapters, in the earliest document of 1911 one of the reasons mentioned to enter the Marthandam field on the way to Kuttichel-Kattakada was to reach the Nadars for better workers in the mission. Similar reasons dominated the discussions of working among the Syrian Christians of Chenganur in 1914 and also among the Ezhavas in the 1924–1928 period.

Lutheran message according to the “ideas” and standards conceived by the mission.<sup>115</sup> For instance the missionary G. Oberheu working in the subaltern villages of Chullimanoor, Tholikodu, Chettachel, and Attinpuram in 1926 recounts a particular account of an un-named catechist who is having difficulty getting his people to come to church because the villagers conclude that the missionary is not helping them with their police cases and land registration issues. In the ensuing recollection to the Home Board of his account with the catechist, one can see the underlying concerns of the native catechumens which the catechist takes as an opportunity to contextualize the gospel message and speak to their life concerns:

I made the rounds up into the hills before services last Sunday morning, called the people and asked them all to come as I would like to instruct them on the point from the word. They all promised...I was there from nine, or rather even before nine, till almost twelve and no one there but two women, one man, and two or three children. So we had no services. I took the catechist home with me and spoke to him. He is always complaining that the people don't listen, they don't do what I tell them. I call them to come to church but they don't. Well, I said give me an example of how you talk to a man whom you want to come to church. He says: Indirect translation of his words: “You are having lots of trouble, are very poor, sick, etc. But we have a God who has created us and who protects us, if we come to church and worship him, all these troubles will leave and he will give us many earthly and spiritual blessings.” Is it any wonder that they don't come? He tells them in the first place that if they come and worship the God who has created them all these troubles will leave, they will no longer be poor, etc. they come and ask the missionary to help them. The missionary says: You must have that done by the Government, the registration of your land...so why come? What he said is correct after a fashion, but he got it all out of balance. Instead of stressing the spiritual blessings which are greatest and of which the people do not know, he stressed the others which they are only too anxious for. When I spoke to him about the thing he says, Yes, Sahib, I know I am rather young at it. I am a young Christian and have had only a little training, hence these mistakes come. And I had to hang my head in shame and confess to him that really he should not be sent

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<sup>115</sup> The missionary Martin J. Lutz in a Report to the Home Board makes the observation that in his training of his local catechists in the Luthergiri district, he provides a Sermon outline on which the workers preach. He then tries to judge them on their ability to use the material and the extent to which the Indian mind is receptive to “our idea.” He goes further to explain that “our ideas” means that “very often when we think we are teaching the Word of God, we are interpreting it according to our background.” See Martin J. Lutz to Home Board, 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter Report of 1939, 16 Jan., 1940, Martin Lutz 1935–1946 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

out, not fit for it, needs more training, but still, I have no one else to take care of the place, you go and continue making your mistakes.<sup>116</sup>

In this above report of missionary Oberheu about the native catechist one can recognize the undertones of the existential life concerns of the subalterns living in the Lutheran villages of Travancore. The subalterns in this period of Travancore's socio-political history were seeking protection and an alliance with the Lutheran missionary to secure their basic human right of "life, dignity and land" which was severely repressed by the native elites who collectively worked to subvert any such emancipation from happening. Religio-culturally, the "pre-modern" worldview of the subalterns like the Sambavars, Pulayars, Vedars etc. ascribed their existential life struggles of sickness, poverty, disease, and death to the supremacy of "evil" forces that caused survival problems in their life. In a way, Rev. Oberheu's description of the native catechist's preaching in a nutshell enlightens us to the creative way in which the native catechist contextualizes the gospel message to reveal the Christian God as one who is the "Creator and the Protector," the omnipotent God who is in control and to whom all sorrows and pains of the subaltern could be taken for redressal of grievances. However, the MELIM missionary who is theologically formed along strict Lutheran confessional and doctrinal lines misses the message of God's "grace and protection" being contextualized within an environment of struggle and suffering that is home to the subalterns in Travancore. In short, even though the missionary concedes that the catechist is probably connecting the gospel to the context of the people, he nevertheless, with a sense of resignation believes that the catechist's "lack of proper training" is a severe hindrance to the proper proclamation of the gospel.

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<sup>116</sup> See G. Oberheu to Director Rev. Brand, 6 July, 1926, 2.

## **Contesting Missionary Authority: Instances of Subaltern Assertion**

The MELIM period of gospel-culture encounter between the American Lutheran missionary and the subaltern native convert saw a lot of turmoil and action, even as the gospel message was shared with the locals. Even though the subalterns, like the Sambavars, Pulayas, Vedars etc., were very much under the influence of the mission and the missionary, they nevertheless contested this influence and authority in their own way and within the boundaries of the MELIM community. The reports of initial missionaries like Rev. Zucker and Rev. Ehlers point to numerous instances of individual and familial conflicts with the missionaries within the confines of the village congregation. In one instance, Rev. Ehlers sharing the story of a Pariah congregation member Satyanesan at Tumerichel who is beaten up by the Shudras for not paying off his personal debt, provides a description of the subalterns registering their displeasure and asserting themselves against the missionary. In the ensuing conflict and court cases between Satyanesan's family members and the Shudra, the local catechist is suspected of being friendly to the Shudra, while the missionary's reluctance to support Satyanesan and his appeal on the "Christian virtue of forgiveness" is construed as "impartiality towards the Shudra instead of them." As a consequence, Ehlers notes that many members of the congregation become disgruntled and decide not to come to the "Palli," and even threaten the missionary that they are either going to rejoin the London Mission Church or return back to the influence of Satyanesan's old "would-be magician" uncle. The missionary does not budge and the "Palli" with 130 members is mostly "empty at times," provoking Rev. Ehlers to complain to the Home Board that the "missionary among the depressed classes at Tumerichel is the most depressed individual at times."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> In subsequent reports Ehlers mentions that things have "cooled off" at Tumerichel and that gradually the people are coming back. See Otto Ehlers to Home Board, 18 Nov., 1918.

Such cases like Satyanesan's infuriated and disinclined the missionaries from what they called "police work," even as their subaltern catechumens were consistently caught in such controversies contributing to several instances of stand-off between the missionary and the subaltern congregations. Missionary conflicts were not limited to subaltern congregation members alone. Nevertheless, a more significant case probably for the Sambavars was the dismissal of the primary subaltern mover of the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum—Mr. Arulanandam, who was dismissed by Rev. Ehlers in 1920. Arulanandam, according to the missionary went against his advice, and "claimed sole heir to property when there were claim along with others and so perjured himself in court," and was consequently dismissed from Assistant Catechist work for being a bad Christian example to others.<sup>118</sup> Arulanandam in subsequent Conferences from 1921 apologized to the mission and also put re-instatement petitions, which were rejected.<sup>119</sup> In 1923, Arulanandam proceeded to organize a "great deal of agitating" in his congregation at Kuttichel, where he had worked as catechist in 1914, and tried to "persuade the people not to come to church." As the people listened to him and stayed away from church, Rev. Zucker tried "diligently and patiently" to win a "promise" from the people by "going from house to house" that they would come back to church. However, the missionary reports that Arulanandam "threatened the faithful few" and was able to keep them from coming, resulting in the missionary deciding against making any further efforts to get back the people. Even in this case, Arulanandam did not leave the Lutheran mission, but after holding back for a while eventually returned as a congregation member at Kuttichel and kept petitioning for re-

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<sup>118</sup> See *Minutes of the 45<sup>th</sup> Travancore Conference*, 8.

<sup>119</sup> For Arulanandam's "reinstatement petition," see *Minutes of 46<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 18–21 April, 1921, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 4. For subsequent apologies and requests for work see, *Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 3. Also see, Arulanandam "repeatedly asking" Rev. Zucker for re-admission into Catechist class, in *Minutes of 51<sup>st</sup> Travancore Conference*, 11.

instatement till in 1929 he unsuccessfully sought “work of some kind or other” in the mission.<sup>120</sup> He finally died as a Lutheran member at Kuttichel in 1932 and was probably buried there by Rev. Eric Knoernschild.<sup>121</sup>

In the stories of Satyanesan and assistant catechist Arulanandam, one sees the subaltern urge to contest missionary authority but within the confines of the MELIM community. Even though the missionary is the “beloved patron” under whom the subalterns are willing to live the new life in Christ, there were also moments when they put on show of “defiance” against somebody who was more powerful and on whom they were dependent. In this case, the MELIM created-spaces of the “congregation” and the “Palli” became the new sites for the Lutheran subalterns to collectively mobilize themselves, assert their views, and contest hegemonic authority.

### **Arousal of Subaltern Critical Consciousness and the Missionary Headache**

Instances of individual subaltern assertion also gave way to a more communitarian and collective form of mobilization among the subalterns within MELIM. From a sociological perspective, if one takes a close look at the subaltern Sambavar invitation for the MELIM missionaries to work among them, we see seeds of subaltern critical consciousness at work as those joining the mission took the initiative in actively participating in their own transformation and also that of changing their society. In fact, the very beginning of the Sambavar independent congregation at Paruthipally led by Arulanandam Upadeshi (pastor-advisor) and Canchanam

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<sup>120</sup> For Arulanandam’s request of “work of some kind or other,” see *Minutes of 50<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum District Conference*, 48.

<sup>121</sup> Rev. Knoernschild in his report to the Home Board in 1933, while talking about the pensioned catechist P. J. Canchanam mentions his role in starting work at Kuttichel independently in 1905. Further he mentions that Canchanam got in touch with the Nagercoil missionaries and was directly instrumental in bringing Rev. Nau to Trivandrum and “his coworker in these first efforts was buried last year.” See E. Knoernschild to Home Board, 13 June, 1933, 4.

Upadeshi in 1905–1906, and the subsequent pursuing of the Lutheran missionary Rev. Nau from 1908 to 1911, reveals to us this fact. During this time, it seems that the Sambavars had demanded that the missionary should work only among them, and mostly Lutheran work was concentrated among the subaltern communities like the Sambavars, Pulayars and Vedars during the first fifteen years. Through the starting of village churches and schools, boarding homes for boys and girls, regular “instruction” to the catechumens, being a representative voice for oppressed subalterns in need of help etc., the subaltern Sambavars probably believed that the Lutheran Mission was primarily representing them. With this misplaced confidence, the Sambavars sought to mobilize themselves cutting across religious and denominational lines through the formation of the “Sambavar Sankham” in 1922, which listed many Sambavar catechists and congregation members of MELIM in its advertising pamphlets.<sup>122</sup> The MELIM missionaries taking a very serious view of this development to mobilize the Pariahs of Travancore, concluded that this unionistic body—uniting Pariahs of the Salvation Army, London Mission, Lutheran Mission, with Hindu Pariahs—and led by politician Nyana Joshua, was an attempt to wean them back to the worship of Sivan.<sup>123</sup>

Bro. Zucker took action at once, explaining to the catechists what all this implied, that in case they insisted on joining this body they could no longer be members of the Lutheran mission; that they would thereby deny their Savior and revert back to heathenism; and that they would express gross ingratitude towards God, who had enlightened them by the preaching of the Gospel and thereby certainly had raised them far above their former low position. To this they replied that they had thought of

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<sup>122</sup> The issue of the “Sambavar Sankham” came up before the Trivandrum Local Conference for discussion with Rev. Zucker taking the lead in explaining and cautioning the catechists against it. See *Minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1.

<sup>123</sup> Nyana Joshua (or Gnana Joshua) was the brother of Rev. G. Jesudason, the prime native mover of the Lutheran mission in Nagercoil, Travancore. See Nagercoil District Conference to Home Board, Letter, 4 Dec., 1928, London Mission Society 1928–1929 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis, 1. Also see *Minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1. Also, see *Minutes of the 7<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1. For another discussion on the “Sambavar Sankham” see report in the Travancore Conference of 1923 where it was decided to ask the mission workers of Pariah descent to come out publicly against this organization and also to publish articles against it in the Tamil “Satya Sattchi” Mission magazine. See *Minutes of the 56<sup>th</sup> Travancore District Conference*, 5–6.



none of these implications, but had joined merely for...the progress of the Pariahs. They had never thought of denying their Savior or reverting back to heathenism...Another said that such a union would be beneficial in the obtaining of Government land for the poor, and this in turn would enable them to improve greatly in the matter of self-support. To this Bro. Zucker replied, that although they should now bear a great part of the expenses and in later years take over the entire management of the church, it is not necessary to join such a body to obtain land for the poor, in fact the Government had set aside quite a strip of land in various places for this very purpose and it could be had for only the registration fee, not however by any organization working along caste lines, but could be had through a missionary. The men saw the gross sin they had committed and showed themselves repentant.<sup>124</sup>

From the above, we see that the arousal of the Sambavars critical consciousness to mobilize together across religious and denominational lines was an attempt to further the “progress of the Pariahs,” and “obtain government land” so that they could escape their servile and dependent existence. However, the MELIM missionary misses this motive and seeing it in terms of “faith commitment” promises the Sambavars that the entire management of the Lutheran church is to be theirs in the future. On the contrary, from this point onwards in Trivandrum MELIM history, the Sambavars gradually lose priority in the mission. Subsequently, even though the Sambavars especially saw MELIM as their own mission they had gradually started to resent the domination of higher caste Christians in appropriating more benefits of the mission like catechist and teacher positions, student scholarships, financial support etc. At the same time, set within the context of the great subaltern awakening taking place in Travancore during the early twentieth century and their comparatively increased literacy and awareness levels, the Sambavars also started asserting their right to be seen on par with higher castes in the mission. Interestingly the missionaries saw the awakening of critical consciousness and community mobilization of the Sambavars within the mission with disapproval, as this part of Rev. Knoernschild’s report about problems at Kuttichel reveal:

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<sup>124</sup> See *Minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1–2.

My hopes of confirming quite a number of adults in the village congregations has gone on the rocks, due to a revival of the age-old prejudices of “caste,” especially between people of the “Pariah” and “Nadar” communities...The Kuttichel congregation is comprised of members of the “Pariah” community...Historically we may point out the following: Pariahs have always been considered as outcastes, the Nadars as low-castes...Nadars could be employed by high caste people for ordinary service, and the high caste would not become defiled thereby, as they would have been if served by an out-caste. Now Christianity comes along and says that there is no caste, all people being equally sinful before God and all brothers in Christ. That is good news for the outcastes. They see their new liberty and they abuse it. Instead of being satisfied with the station of life in which they are and being thankful for the uplift which they have experienced they demand equality in all things.<sup>125</sup>

The above observation not only reveals the underlying animosity of different castes within the mission, but also provides us with an example of how the Lutheran mission saw the communitarian assertion of its subaltern converts. Set within a context of a generally negative perception of the Sambavars about their in-capabilities the missionary sees the subaltern aspiration for “equality” as an example of abusing their new found liberty, which at the very least is not the proper desirable attitude to be exhibited by the inept Sambavars.

### **Conclusion**

A closer analysis of MELIM history in the Malayalam speaking lands reveals the fact that the missionaries were seeking “individuals” and “communities” that could thoroughly comprehend Lutheran doctrines and practices, and also carry this message to mainly the higher castes in Travancore. In a way, much like their congregations in the United States of America, their search reflected a desire for a community of “modern” upper middle-class Christians who could be torch bearers for the evangelistic task of establishing the Lutheran Church in Kerala. Naturally this meant that they found their primary converts, who had initially invited them and had gained admission in the mission, namely the Sambavars and other subaltern communities

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<sup>125</sup> See E. Knoernschild to Home Board, 13 June, 1933, 3.

like the Pulayas, the Vedars, Kuravars etc. to be incapable partners in this futuristic task. However to be fair to the MELIM missionaries, they alone could not be blamed for such a perception because there was no doubt that when the mission started among the subalterns; communities like the Sambavars, Pulayars and Vedars were just being released from centuries-old reality of “slavery” that had severely crippled and distorted their worldview, thinking, and life practice. The MELIM missionaries through their cross-cultural interactions with the subalterns in the villages and mission created-spaces like the “Palli,” schools, boarding schools, mission compounds and bungalows etc., did try to bring about a change in the life of the subalterns of Travancore. Even as the subalterns used these opportunities to the best of their abilities, it was not enough to catch up with those of the higher castes who progressed faster and much further than them. Nevertheless, the MELIM period did open avenues for the subalterns to learn, grow, resist, assert, and engage themselves within MELIM and in their wider society. More importantly, the subalterns of MELIM had ventured into the future entrenched in a new community and embraced by a new worldview, where “dependency releasing” socio-economic opportunities and “life instilling” religio-cultural resources could be accessed by them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **NATIVE LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION: SUBALTERN SAMBAVAR RESPONSE TO THE GOSPEL**

In the last chapter we have seen how the Lutheran mission in the Malayalam lands was established within an environment of divergent goals and concerns that defined its main protagonists—the American Lutheran missionary and the subaltern native converts. This definitely made the work of MELIM a very challenging and arduous task as has been the case with almost all mission enterprises that sought to bring the gospel to alien cultures. In the midst of missionary supervision and control, and subaltern awe and defiance; we find, that the Lutheran proclamation of the gospel message did firmly establish a called community of Christ that responded to the message and also creatively imagined their own role and place in the new community. In this chapter, we will try to find this vibrant thread of interaction by examining available sources of native theological reflection that will give us a glimpse of the subaltern attempts to actively engage with the gospel message and thereby enter the Body of Christ as a new creation.

#### **Cross-Cultural Gospel Proclamation and Conversion Stories from the Native Side**

The Missouri Evangelical Lutheran India Mission community in Travancore from 1911 to 1956 was gathered together through the preaching and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ under the supervision of American Lutheran missionaries. This outreach effort in Travancore led to the gospel being shared, taught and inculcated in the daily life and practices of the subaltern natives, who though entrenched in a pre-modern culture were still negotiating their own place in

the new modern world of colonial Travancore. However, the recipients of the gospel were not passive in their appropriation of the message as can be attested by the many personal letters and mission reports written by disillusioned missionaries from the field. At times, the missionaries found the native converts and their faith to be an example of the gospel penetrating “the dark lives of natives,” while in most cases they seriously doubted whether the subaltern converts could comprehend catechetical material adequately and become “intelligent Lutherans.”<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as we have seen in the last chapter, in the continuous process of religious “instruction” and worship life one can safely claim that there was an internalization of the gospel message among the subaltern converts of the Malayalam speaking areas that probably did not exactly fit the perception of Christianity adhered to by the American Lutheran missionary. For the Lutheran missionaries a primary yardstick of successful conversion was the ability of their converts to adequately comprehend the Lutheran message and internalize doctrinal teachings that would be significantly applied by them in their daily life and practice. With this purpose in mind, the Lutheran missionaries earnestly involved in religious education and catechetical indoctrination of their subaltern Lutheran converts. However, this indoctrination effort was carried out mainly through native agents who would visit the villages and converts on a regular basis to teach and guide the people. The missionary in charge of his particular district of work in Travancore would supervise this work by holding regular meetings and classes for native workers and evaluating their work.

Even as the missionaries supervised their work, the native agents engaged in locating the gospel in the daily life concerns of the people, so that they could bring the subaltern natives living in the villages of Travancore to Christ. Even though the conversion of locals by native

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<sup>1</sup> Observations made by Rev. Luedtke about his subaltern catechumens at Luthergiri (Kattaikal), Konni, Chalaikonam, and Kurungalloor. See, W. A. Luedtke to Home Board, 31 March, 1933.

Lutheran agents has been rarely documented in mission history, we find stories mentioned in oral traditions and also in some secondary literature belonging to the India Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>2</sup> For instance, N. C. George in his authored tribute to important native church workers of MELIM in Trivandrum, shares certain conversion stories of Rev. M. Paulose' work among the native population. In one such recollection of his work in Chalaikonam,<sup>3</sup> Rev. Paulose, the first native catechist and later the first Malayalee pastor of the Trivandrum Lutheran mission, leads us to the conversion of a ninety-two year old lady. The un-named lady lived near the church and worshipped the "devil in a special worship place" dedicated for it in her house, but was now on death-bed:

She had a very bad sickness and was unable to move her body and lay in her worship room for months. After 4–5 days a small girl would bring some "cold water"<sup>4</sup> as her food and nothing else. After 4 months I went to see the lady. I tried to comfort her as she was on her death bed. In my dialogue with her, I requested her to leave devil worship and worship the Living God. When she showed signs of interest in hearing my point of view, I explained to her the seriousness of sin, the cruel judgment that follows sin, and the forgiveness that one who believes in Christ receives. After one or two hours I visited other houses and returned back to her. She was now ready to accept Christ. With the help of a Stick she went to the nearest lake and took a bath, and then ate some good food, and she in due course became well. She again lived for two and a half years and entered the eternal kingdom as a believer in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The above incident in which the native catechist-pastor Rev. M. Paulose was involved provides us with a glimpse of how subaltern conversion takes place. The old lady who represents the religio-cultural tradition of the subalterns of Travancore is introduced to the notion of sin, its effects and judgment, and also the possibility of forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ. As the

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<sup>2</sup> The India Evangelical Lutheran Church is the indigenous church body that was formed by bringing together the MELIM stations in the three districts of Ambur (Northern Tamil Nadu), Nagercoil (Southern Tamil Nadu) and Trivandrum (Kerala), in 1958.

<sup>3</sup> The Chalaikonam congregation was established after the mission site was opened between late 1912–early 1913.

<sup>4</sup> Probably "cold water" over here means "kanjhi" or "rice gruel."

<sup>5</sup> Cited in N. C. George, *Phalanganal Mundarivalliyil* (Trivandrum, IELC: Sahitya Samithi, April 1975), 76–77.

woman undergoes a change of heart, she gingerly makes her way to the nearest water-body to take a bath signifying her washing away of her past and her willingness to embrace the new future grounded in the hope of entering the “eternal kingdom in Christ.” In this leap of faith for the subaltern convert, the native Lutheran agent performs the role of being the chief initiator of new life in Christ. Further, the incident also reveals to us the work of native agents in the conversion of their people into the Christian faith in Travancore. Subaltern Sambavar conversion was constantly challenged from within culture due to the presence of people among them who still believed in the presence and power of evil spirits over their lives. In such a context the role of the native agent was extremely vital in bringing about a transformation in both the “lived reality” and the “attitudes” of the people. Probably, unknown to the missionaries the native agents were constantly entering the pre-Christian religio-cultural world of the subaltern converts and proclaiming the power of Christ over it. An instance of this can be found in a letter that Rev. Paulose writes to a friend recollecting his experience in his first congregation as an ordained Lutheran pastor:

When I was at my parish at Thumbode,<sup>6</sup> before I started my serious work there, I happened to visit the house of a pregnant lady who was suffering with severe pains due to Rheumatism. People charged that she was possessed with “pishachu” (evil spirit) and that because I went to her house the spirit was doing “behlam” (causing mayhem). But my faithful and merciful God strengthened me. When I pleaded before God for Jesus’ glorious power, this pain suffering and exhausted lady, jumped up with “nilavilli” (a huge shout of agony). Within minutes the entire atmosphere became calm. That very moment the entire family became Christian.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, in popular oral memory of the Lutheran members in Trivandrum, many of the native Lutheran pastors were known for their ability to drive out evil spirits through the power of

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<sup>6</sup> Thumbode is also known as Thumbodekonam and was started as a mission station in 1922 by Rev. A. C. Fritze.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in N. C. George, *Phalangal Mundarivalliyil*, 72.

Jesus and prayer.<sup>8</sup> This was mainly because many of the believers were constantly seeking the intervention of the native Lutheran agents in soothing their fears and addressing family and individual distress. Addressing individual and family needs through prayer and advocacy before the missionary was a regular feature of the work carried out by the native Lutheran agents in the villages of Travancore. In many of these house visits, as we see in the case of Rev. Paulose's stories, a dominant theme of conversation and Christian mentoring would revolve around the topic of suffering and fear of their previously worshipped spirits causing them harm.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the fear of evil spirits was a reality in the daily living of the subalterns of Travancore, and the native agents of the Lutheran mission were caught right in the middle of their calling to remain faithful to a very "modern" Lutheran message that dismissed all talk of "pey" and "evil spirits" as Hindu superstition and engage their pre-modern subaltern converts and their non-Christian kinsmen, who still lived under the sway of their beliefs in the power and destructive tendency of evil spirits.

The above mentioned concern can be seen in yet another example from the Tamil speaking part of Travancore where Rev. G. Jesudason, the first native pastor of the Lutheran mission, reporting to the Home Board about his work in the Pariah congregation at Ganeshpuram in

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<sup>8</sup> From interviews conducted by the researcher, it is concluded that during the mission phase of the Lutheran Church in Kerala, the spirit religiosity of the Sambavars was consistently either dismissed as Hindu superstition or left un-addressed. Especially since, the Luthergiri and Balaramapuram districts where the Sambavars and other subaltern castes were primarily concentrated in the Lutheran mission, mostly suffered from lack of consistent and adequate missionary care, it was mostly left to the native catechists to continue with their contextualization of the gospel to meet the needs and demands of their subaltern converts. See, Andrew Buehner to Director Rev. Brand, Letter, Balaramapuram, 2 Nov., 1938, CHI Archives, St. Louis. In this letter, Rev. Buehner calls Balaramapuram district as a place where effective work has not been carried out and as the "temporary home" of the missionaries Rasch, Reiser, Stelter, Knoernschild, and Buehner. Further, it should be mentioned here that most of the early Sambavar catechist and pastors were well-known for their ability to drive out evil spirits and bring peace and comfort to families. Some of the popular pastors in this regard were Rev. M. Paulose and Rev. E. Mannasseh who have written and translated many songs in the IELC hymnal.

<sup>9</sup> Even many of the missionaries point to this belief system and understanding of the subaltern people. For instance, Rev. R. P. Sieving working among the Vedars in 1941 mentions the fear among them that their previously worshipped evil spirits would cause harm to family members when they entered the Christian faith, by sending them sickness. See R. P. Sieving to Home Board, Letter, 25 Oct., 1941, Trivandrum, CHI Archives, St. Louis.



Nagercoil complains about the uphill task of getting his converts to be “hospital-minded” even after 10 years of work among them. As he expresses concern for backsliders in his congregation he notes that when “an illness fastens upon them, they wonder if that is not the devil’s mischief, and there are a few of the devil’s sons in the village, who hasten to confirm them in their suspicions.” He then proceeds to recount his experience years ago when a young man suffering from pneumonia was delirious; who even after Jesudason’s recommendation to take him to the hospital, was not taken due to “a devil’s son who was a relation of the boy” visiting the patient and solemnly pronouncing that the boy was possessed with the devil. As the exorcist was brought in the boy became more delirious and finally expired before Jesudason could reach the village to force the issue of the boy being taken to the nearest hospital. Building on this experience in his daily pastoral work with his congregation members he recounts:

Another man had an attack of pneumonia some time later, one of our leaders in the village. I made his people understand that his was a clear case of pneumonia, and that he should be treated by a physician, and not by an exorcist, as the other man had been treated by an exorcist. I made arrangements to bring in a physician, and he recovered under God’s blessing. Ever since, people have learnt to have faith in allopathic physicians, and to appreciate hospital treatment and they now rush to hospital for relief at the first sign of any ailment! When the womenfolk suffer, their husbands become callous, and consider their ailments are not worth being attended to. They leave their wives and go to their field work. Very often the pastor has to conduct them to the hospital for treatment, and back to their homes.<sup>10</sup>

Again, this recollection of Rev. Jesudason from 1942 points to the truth of the subaltern Sambavars being deeply ingrained with the fear of spirits that had to be contested by the native agents of the Lutheran mission on a daily basis. Even in a context of modernity with the availability of allopathic medicine, it was left to the local catechists and Bible women to address the fears of the converts and to instill confidence in them to take the leap of faith in trusting new

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<sup>10</sup> G. Jesudason to Home Board, Report of 1942, Ganeshpuram, Nagercoil, 5 Jan., 1943, 2–3.

medicines and the word of God.<sup>11</sup> Thus the battle against the sway of evil spirits in the life of the subalterns and over their previous religio-cultural habits and views was a significant fight carried out by the native MELIM agents in this moment of gospel initiated religio-cultural change.

### **Cross-Cultural Gospel Response and Theological Reflections from the Target Domain**

One of the greatest strengths of the gospel message is that it can contextualize itself in a different culture to answer questions raised by those living in that culture. The MELIM period saw contextualization of the gospel in local categories of the Malayalam lands, through the agency of native catechists, teachers, church work and works of mercy tailored to local needs, and the use of the local vernacular to preach and teach the values and doctrines of the Christian faith. This was the case inspite the fact that Lutheran doctrines were considered non-negotiable in the dissemination of the Gospel. Nevertheless, as Lamin Sanneh reminds us, the missionary adoption of the vernacular to spread the gospel made sure that the indigenous cultural criteria for the gospel message would be embraced, thereby making Christianity a pluralistic dispensation of enormous complexity, because the hearers on hearing the message not only were transformed but also deepened the message through their own experience and interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, in Travancore, once the Lutheran message encountered the lives of the people, it also won an engaging response from its target converts. In one such recorded instance of gospel

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<sup>11</sup> The role of the initial Lutheran Bible women especially in the Luthergiri district to teach subaltern women lessons in hygiene, child care, taking hospital visits seriously, and teaching biblical truths to women and children, formed an important part of their oral memory about the Lutheran mission. The Bible woman Snehapoo came across as a popular figure in the researcher's interviews with subaltern Lutheran converts. Mr. Suresh Joseph and family, interview by author, Tholloor, Aryanadu, June 10, 2012, CHI Archives, St. Louis. Mr. Suresh is the son of Lutheran member Kunjan Vaidyar, who was a native physician and also a writer of songs for "Kambadikali" (a folk dance art). Also, Rev. Gomez, Mohan and Ruban Benjamin, group interview by author, Antiyoorkonam, June 24, 2013. Rev. Gomez, Mohan and Ruban Benjamin, have all been associated in various ways with the Lutheran mission in Trivandrum since their birth and have nostalgic memories of their growth and life in the Lutheran subaltern community in Trivandrum.

<sup>12</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 1–8.

contextualization and visible response from the target domain of gospel-culture encounter in Travancore, the Lutheran missionary Rev. F. R. Zucker writing in 1917 to the Home Board records the enthusiasm of the subaltern Lutheran villagers in celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in Trivandrum.<sup>13</sup> He writes:

Last Wednesday, October 31<sup>st</sup>, we had our celebration of the Reformation Festival here on the compound... We had erected a “pandal,” or shed of bamboo poles and leaves of cocoanut palm, measuring 70x35 feet, and 20 feet high, with a raised platform at one end. The building was surmounted by a flag-pole bearing the Union Jack and the United States flag to signify the external blessings that have come to the members of our mission through the British government, as peace and deliverance from slavery, and through the mission sent from America, viz., education. The morning service was devoted to a grateful remembrance of the spiritual blessings we have received through Luther’s Reformation. Rev. Harms showed how Luther has given us back the Bible, and I preached on the doctrine of salvation by grace triumphing over the false doctrines of Rome... in the afternoon service Rev. Ehlers dwelt on important events in the life of Luther. Of these events two had been allotted to two of our native agents. Our assistant catechist Masillamani explained the sale of indulgences and the ninety-five theses, and our Catechist Paulose gave a spirited account of Luther’s brave and faithful confession at Worms. From four to six o’clock we had games for the children, and after dark magic lantern pictures for all that were not too tired. That was the program of our Sabhanaveekaranachathussathabdsmarakaghoshanam, or the “memorial celebration after four hundred years of the renovation of the Church.” True, that was quite a mouthful of Sanskrit for our poor, illiterate people,—and it pleased them not a little,—but we could not send them away with nothing more, for fear they might faint on the way, because many had come from far. So rice and curry was also provided. The boiled rice covered about 42 square feet of mats well over two feet high. All were satisfied... I must say it was worth a few years of one’s life to hear a large gathering of outcastes in the southern extremity of India sing with so much vigor the Battle-hymn of the Reformation; to see some six hundred brown people, mostly illiterate, from the rice fields and jungles of Travancore, follow with understanding and evident interest preaching on spiritual matters, for over two hours, and to realize that at least one of the natives in this far-away corner of the globe had caught enough

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<sup>13</sup> The mission sites in 1917 were almost all Sambavar villages with the exception of the Trivandrum mission compound that had a mix of students from different communities at the Boarding school there. The only other communities in the Lutheran mission at this time were the Nadar believers who had just entered the Lutheran mission from the work started in 1917 at Mylakara and the Pulaya villagers of Konni. Thus the 600 villagers attending the 400<sup>th</sup> Reformation celebration were mostly Sambavars from the mission sites of—Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungaloor, Puthu-kulungara, Kanakodu, Antiyoorkonam, Chalaikonam, Chullimanoor, Tumerichel, Kattaikal (Luthergiri), Arianadu, Madathikonam, Vattiyookavu (Trivandrum Mission compound), Mylakara and Konni. See “Statistics for the Missiouri Evangelical Lutheran Mission in India, Congregational—Travancore Conference,” Trivandrum District, 1917.

of the spirit of the Reformation to speak with enthusiasm of, and arouse admiration for, the solitary monk of the sixteenth century who dared to face unflinchingly all the powers of earth and hell in order not to violate his conscience.<sup>14</sup>

From the above we see that the proclamation of the gospel and its contextualization of the message through the medium of native catechists, preaching and language, invoked enthusiasm among the subaltern converts who came from far away mission sites to be a part of the celebration. Their enthusiastic response comes across in their singing and their interest to listen to the gospel preaching for over two hours that satisfy the Lutheran missionaries. Also the use of “pandals,” “rice and curry,” etc. that represented native representations of celebration, stood side-by-side the memory of “peace and deliverance from slavery” (British Union Jack) and access to education (American flag). At this same celebration, the message was also contextualized as Rev. Zucker mentions the printing of two original poetic compositions by Catechist Arulanandam and Teacher J. K. Moses;<sup>15</sup> and also a native translation of Luther’s battle-hymn that was paraphrased and sent to the Home Board. Today, as the mentioned original poetic compositions are lost; Luther’s battle-hymn sung and paraphrased under the title “Fight the Good Fight of Faith,” and printed in the Home magazine the Lutheran Witness, serves as a valuable source that sheds light on the attempts to locate the gospel message among the people of the target domain.

It is often said that the great war now raging in Europe is the greatest in the history of the world. But there is a greater war than this; and that, too is now raging. In this war no man can be neutral; all must take part in it. This is the war that the devil is waging against God. Some men, without knowing it, are ranged on the devil’s side, and are fighting against God. Whether we consider the will of God or our own good, it is our duty to be arrayed on God’s side, and fight against the devil. In this war our weapon

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<sup>14</sup> See L. Fuerbringer, “Our East India Mission,” *Lutheran Witness* 37, no. 3, (February 5, 1918): 40.

<sup>15</sup> Assistant catechist Arulanandam from Kuttichel was the Sambavar leader who according to Rev. G. Jesudason “went again and again” to meet Rev. Nau to bring the Lutheran mission to the Malayalee people of Travancore. Teacher and later catechist J. K. Moses from Puliyoorkonam was among the fourteen students taken to the Boarding school in Nagercoil in 1910–1911 by Rev. Nau. He later returned in 1913 to become a teacher and later a catechist in the Trivandrum area. Both these leaders belonged to the Sambavar community.

and our strong fortress is God Himself. From all our trouble He will deliver us if we pray to Him. The devil, our arch enemy, knowing that he has but a short time, has great wrath. There is none like him on earth. But though the devil is strong and cunning, our God has more than enough power to overcome him—If we expect to be victorious in this war by our own strength, we shall utterly fail. God’s arm and God’s Word will help us. Our Savior Jesus Christ is our Leader in the fight. We have no help beside Him; he will conduct our war—The devils go about in this world seeking to devour us. But we need not fear. We shall win. Though Satan attempt many cunning attacks, since Jesus Christ has vanquished him for us, we, too, can with the help of the Word of God withstand and overcome him—If our enemy is strong enough to frustrate the sure promises of God, we challenge him to do it. In the gifts of grace of the Holy Spirit we have all the help that we need. If all that we have, even the life of this mortal body, be lost, such loss cannot really harm us. How is that? The kingdom of heaven, and, together with it, all that we have lost in this world, will be given us in yonder blessed home.<sup>16</sup>

The above paraphrase of Luther’s battle hymn sung during this celebration points to the creative way in which popular discussions about World War I, in whose midst the 400<sup>th</sup> Reformation celebration was taking place, was used as the starting point for talking about the spiritual warfare raging in the life of Christian believers. More significant is the fact that the song speaks effectively to the subaltern animistic religiosity of devilish forces pestering their life on a daily basis; and of Jesus Christ leading them to victory over Satan who attempts many cunning attacks. Furthermore, the song calls upon believers not to fear, and eases the subaltern hunger for blessings lost in this world by assuring that it awaits them in the futuristic kingdom of heaven. Thus this translated song, which looks like a free translation of the famous Luther’s Battle Hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our Lord;” speaks to the unique occasion and people of the Trivandrum Lutheran community. It also points to the fact that the gospel message was speaking to the culture with which it was interacting, and that both the native agents and their supervising Lutheran missionaries realized the need to localize the gospel message in the metaphors and vocabulary that made sense to the native people. However, as the history of MELIM shows, it

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<sup>16</sup> See Fuerbringer, “Our East India Mission,” *Lutheran Witness* 37, 40–41.

has been difficult to bring to the fore this response of the people to the gospel, mainly because very few natives documented their experiences and theological insights for public consumption. If at all they did, such documents have not withstood the test of posterity and the challenge still remains to bring to expression the native community's own experience of Christ in its concrete local situation.

It is in this regard, that Robert Schreiter's insights on local theology carry significance. In his book "Constructing Local theologies" Schreiter talks about the people of the local community being the site of theology as the Holy Spirit working in and through the believing community gives shape and expression to their Christian understanding by reflecting upon their experience and the scriptures.<sup>17</sup> This experience of the community is not simply any experience, but one which arises out of the believer's encounter with scriptures and dialogue with the authentic experiences of other believing communities. Over time, such theological reflection is articulated into words as the response in faith by gifted individuals like the poets, prophet, and teacher who are essentially capturing the spirit of the community. Thus, in this exercise both the prophet and poet play an important role. Schreiter construes that prophecy often plays the role of being the beginning of theology while also exercising judgment over it; while the poet engages in the task of capturing those symbols and metaphors which best give expression to the experience of the community.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, in this process of bringing local theological reflection to the larger arena of theological dialogue, both the "outsider" and the "insider" play a vital role. While the cultural "insider" brings in a rootedness to the community experience; the "outsider" to the culture, even though burdened with problems like paternalism and colonialism, is valuable as the one who enriches the local community with his/her lived experience of other

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<sup>17</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 16.

<sup>18</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 16–19.

communities and having the ability to hear and challenge aspects of culture that are not heard by its native members.

Robert Schreiter's observations about the presence of local theological reflection when the gospel interacts with local culture is significant for our attempts to look at the gospel-culture interaction taking place in the MELIM period in the Malayalam lands. There is no doubt that the outsider—in this case the American Lutheran mission and missionary, both made it possible for the insider—in this case the subalterns like the Pariahs, Pulayas, Vedars, Kuravars etc., to enter the Christian faith and participate in a new religio-cultural sphere from which they could reflect upon their entry and role in the Body of Christ. As seen from the previous chapter, an important part of this “insider” subaltern reflection definitely included being seen on equal terms with other higher castes in the mission and outside of it; but a significant part also contained their own perception and response to the gospel message. At the same time, the subaltern Lutheran community also was challenged by the “outsider” agents to engage in theological reflection that aligned with the experience of the “other believing community”—in this case, the confessional Lutheran Christian tradition to which the missionaries belonged. Additionally, the “outsider” agents challenged various aspects of subaltern cultural life through their emphasis on the gospel for all communities, and introduction of new religious and ethical ideas.

Here it should be remembered that the MELIM phase of gospel proclamation was heavily controlled and supervised by the American Lutheran missionaries. As we have seen in the last chapter, the personal reports and recollections of missionaries caught in the gospel-culture encounter of MELIM, project significant disillusionment and lack of confidence in their subaltern agents and converts. Interestingly, a look at the causes for missionary disillusionment with subaltern converts probably provides an opportunity for us to understand the vantage point

from which the subaltern Lutheran theological reflection was taking place in Travancore. For instance, the missionaries probably did not assign much significance to the fact that much of subaltern life in Travancore was still lived within the traditional societal structure with many of its socio-economic and religio-cultural practices firmly intact; even though these domains of life were being contested and attacked by various interest groups including the subalterns especially in the context of the larger struggle against colonial British rule. Thus, one vantage point on which subaltern theological reflection was grounded was that of their oppressed and exploited existence in the villages of Travancore. Another vantage point for subaltern theological reflection can be deduced from MELIM missionary reports about the work of subaltern workers during this period. With the Lutheran mission constantly expanding to new areas in Travancore it became difficult for the missionaries to micro-manage every mission site and as a result depended completely on their native catechists to faithfully disseminate Lutheran doctrine. As missionary reporting of the period makes adequately clear, the missionaries were in many instances not happy with the work done by subaltern native catechists and were constantly searching for higher caste converts who could faithfully and effectively do the job. Probably, apart from the societal injunction against the subalterns that made it difficult for them to preach among higher castes, another reason could be that the catechizing work of subaltern workers incorporated a contextualization of the gospel to answer their existential life concerns which in turn was perceived as reflecting their limited knowledge and worldview. This, in the eyes of the American Lutheran missionary betrayed an inability on the part of the subaltern workers to measure up to the doctrinal principles of the Lutheran church; but when seen from the vantage point of subaltern theological reflection, was an attempt to bring the gospel to dialogue with their socio-economic and perceived religio-cultural world of living. Here, it should be noted that the



Lutheran missionaries probably did not give enough attention to the worldview of the subaltern converts that was in considerable flux at this time due to the Lutheran faith actively engaging, challenging and transforming its pre-modern roots, through the agents of the Lutheran mission.

Importantly, the Lutheran mission in South Travancore and its native Christian community provided a platform for subaltern organic poets from within the subaltern Lutheran community to reflect and articulate the gospel's permeation into their community's life. For instance, native catechists like Rev. M. Paulose, Arulanandam, J. K. Moses, P. Joseph, P. Lazar, Manuel Upadeshi and E. Manasseh, were some of the known organic poets of the subaltern Sambavar community who wrote many native songs for the Lutheran community in the Malayalam lands.<sup>19</sup> In fact, many of these songs were written for festive occasions such as “Kambadikali,”<sup>20</sup> “Kathaprasangam,”<sup>21</sup> dramas, Christmas carols, Reformation and Harvest festivals, congregational worship, MELIM sankham gatherings etc.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, most of these song remembrances remain in oral traditions; and even though many of these songs might be present in the Malayalam Lutheran Hymnal of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church, the exact author source is still ambiguous. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this chapter, I build on the work of Rev. M. Gomez and mainly employ the native Lutheran songs attributed to Rev. M. Paulose and Rev. E. Manasseh, to capture the theological response of subaltern Lutheran converts.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rev. M. Gomez, interview by author, Antiyoorkonam, June 24, 2013. Rev. M. M. Jacob, interview by author, Vilapilshala, Trivandrum, June 7, 2012. Rev. Subin Raj, interview by author, Malayinkil, Trivandrum, July 1, 2012. Vincent Paul, interview by author, Puliyoorkonam, Trivandrum, July 3, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Kambadikali is a form of dance and singing routine with sticks that formed part of traditional Sambavar festive expressions.

<sup>21</sup> Kathaprasangam is a special genre of story-telling interlaced with songs that add to the emotive and expressive aspects of presenting a story to a captive audience.

<sup>22</sup> Rev. M. Gomez, interview by author, Antiyoorkonam, June 24, 2013. Also, Vincent Paul, interview by author, Puliyoorkonam, Trivandrum, July 3, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> The researcher is grateful to the original attempt by Rev. Manuel Gomez of the IELC—Trivandrum Synod who through his compilation of the native Lutheran hymns of Rev. M. Paulose has listed the first pastor of the Trivandrum Synod as having written 28 original compositions and 85 translated works. Rev. Gomez gathers his

## Subaltern Sambavar Response to the Gospel: Theological Reflections from Daily Life

As pointed out in chapter two, the subaltern Sambavar converts who flocked MELIM were in a transitory phase of social and religious living. In the context of modernity that was being introduced through colonial British rule, the British system of education, electoral representations etc. cracks had emerged in the subaltern's age-old pre-modern religio-cultural beliefs. An important facilitator and mentor in this transition for the Sambavars and other subaltern communities were the Christianizing missions and the missionaries, who with their emphasis on an enlightened way of life were contributing to dismantling the edifice of subaltern pre-modern worldview and beliefs. In the Malayalam lands, the Sambavar contact with colonial modernity mediated through the presence of the Lutheran mission among them, and their sharing of daily life concerns with the missionaries and their native agents; helped them reflect on their own social and religious life. This was initiated and facilitated by the subaltern access to secular and religious education in the subaltern "Palli" which also doubled up as "Pallikudam."<sup>24</sup> As a result of this engagement, as we have seen from the earlier chapters, the Sambavars displayed a desire for equality, and equal or majority access to mission resources, which was derived directly out of the missionary's gospel proclamation.<sup>25</sup> Also Lutheran catechetical training introduced the

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information based on oral traditions and interviews with relatives and IELC workers. It is however quite possible that among the songs attributed to Rev. Paulose there could be songs that were probably authored by subaltern Lutheran believers like Assistant catechist Arulanandam, Catechist J. K. Moses and Catechist P. Lazar. Likewise, Rev. Gomez also lists out the songs that were translated by Rev. E. Manasseh, and by subaltern Lutheran believers Appu Kottur and Gyanadas. It has to be mentioned here that Rev. M. Paulose was the first native faculty in the Lutheran Institute at Kattakada where he himself, though a catechist student, taught other students music. For his poetic ability, Rev. Paulose was known as Paulose Nater in the local vernacular meaning Paulose the village pastor-teacher. See Rev. M. Gomez, *Lutheran Gayagan* (Kalparapotta: 2003), 10.

<sup>24</sup> As pointed out in the previous chapter, the subaltern chapel called "Palli" in the vernacular Malayalam also was the site of daily secular and religious instruction. Thus the "Pallikudam" (school) and the "Palli" co-existed in the "Ola Pandal" (Palm thatched shed) that was the sacred and education site for the subaltern villagers.

<sup>25</sup> The missionary proclamation of the gospel projected an egalitarian perspective of life that was "good news" to the Sambavars. Naturally, the Sambavar Lutheran Christians used this argument as a tool to contest missionary control when they felt that injustice was being meted out to them in the mission. See E. Knoernschild to Home Board, 13 June, 1933, 3.

Sambavars and other subaltern converts to doctrinal concepts and ideas that had to be learnt by-heart and confessed publicly during baptisms and confirmation services. This was a complete new world and way of religiosity for the Sambavars who now learned to confess God by-heart and also systematically confess it in a worshiping and catechetical environment that soon infiltrated into other aspects of their daily life as a community. Even though living in the midst of oppressive and inferiority reinforcing village socio-cultural structures, the missionaries through their proclamation and “instruction” had provided the subaltern Lutheran converts with a new religious resource and ethical system that engaged their consciousness and reflected their calling into a new community.

In fact, from a careful reading of the MELIM missionary literature during this period, one can sufficiently conclude that the Sambavar converts lived in a liminal world caught between their pre-modern beliefs and their modern Christian beliefs introduced and taught through catechetical “instruction.” New religious vocabulary like “creation,” “fall,” “sin,” “forgiveness,” “repentance,” “eternal life,” entered the discourse of the subalterns that helped them perceive their own place in the world as called people in Christ. In due course, the subaltern Sambavar leadership who were poets and teachers articulated the experiences of the Sambavar Lutheran community by resourcefully contextualizing and building on this new socio-religious vision from the vantage point of their daily living, pre-modern worldview and life practice. As they reflected on their daily existence and all those who pervaded that existence; their existential crises and life struggles formed the foundations from which they saw Jesus Christ, His love, and the Biblical promises for them.

Here, it should also be pointed out that most of the Sambavars did not speak the best Malayalam as education was systematically denied to them up till the end of the nineteenth

century. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, very few subalterns had gained a proper education and in any case their cultural surrounding and daily life practices promoted the use of coarse vernacular vocabulary that was looked down upon by the elites of society. However, after their exposure to Christianity and mission education efforts, most of the Sambavars who went through this education system exhibited better Malayalam usage than was the case previously. This difference can be particularly seen when one compares the language of the songs written by Rev. M. Paulose (1875–1956) and those translated by Rev. E. Manasseh (1917–1988). The language and tone of Rev. Paulose’s songs, who grew up in an era immediately succeeding the legal ban on slavery in Travancore, reflects a more feudal slave language and imagery than those of Rev. Manasseh who was born and brought up through the MELIM education system, especially through its Boy’s boarding school. Nevertheless, as a previous slave caste, the effects of their slave past were reflected in their use of words that betrayed their internalization of the feudal socio-cultural setting that had penetrated their linguistic articulation. For instance, the use of words like “Kadavu” (calf, for Dalit child); “Kudi” (slave hut); “Chumathi” (carrying burden); “Kenjuka” (beg for mercy); “Shabam” (curse); “Adiyan,” “Adima,” “Adiyar,” “Adiyarkku,” that signify slave/slavery memory; can be seen used in the hymns composed by Sambavar Lutheran believers. Such usages provide internal evidence to the subaltern authorship of the songs, even though the subaltern poet in the context of colonial modernity was himself articulating with a better grasp of the Malayalam language that exhibited his new emancipated identity in Christ. Given a general societal context where the subalterns were derided for their lack of proper language and ability to express proper faith, the subaltern songs stand testimony to the fact that the Lutheran mission did provide them with a platform to articulate their theological reflection albeit under the watchful eye of missionary supervision.

Here, words of introduction about the Sambavar Lutheran pastor-poets whose songs are being critically examined and interpreted will be in order. Rev. M. Paulose was the first ordained pastor in the Malayalam speaking Trivandrum district of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELC). Born on October 31, 1875 he belonged to an era where the popular memory of slavery and its effects, probably colored his perception of the gospel and its impact upon the Sambavar Christians amongst whom he mainly worked. Given the fact that he was a Sambavar Christian (Pariah Christian) himself, Rev. Paulose was probably in a good position to see the subaltern condition and relate the gospel to address its needs. N. C. George in his tribute to Rev. Paulose notes that Paulose was taken as teacher to the Boarding school at Nagercoil with the fourteen Malayalee students in the 1910–1911 period.<sup>26</sup> Subsequently, he served as MELIM catechist in the subaltern Sambavar congregations of Chullimanoor, Kurungaloor, and Chalaikonam (1913–1924) and then as Boys boarding school master, singing teacher and pastor at the Trivandrum compound in Vatiyoorkavu from 1924–1932.<sup>27</sup> More importantly, Rev. M. Paulose was the first native faculty at the Kattakada Bible Institute from 1913–1917, where he taught music to his fellow catechetical students even when he himself was a student in the Catechist class.<sup>28</sup> A natural poet and song writer, he is said to have written twenty-nine (29) original songs and translated eighty-five (85) songs from the Lutheran Hymnal. Furthermore, having worked alongside Rev. Nau from the very beginnings in 1911 at Trivandrum, he was personally tutored in Lutheran doctrines by the missionaries Rev. Jank, Rev. Fritze and Rev. Levihn.<sup>29</sup> Later, he was ordained as the first native Lutheran pastor in the Malayalam lands and ministered to the

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in N. C. George, *Phalangal Mundarivalliyil*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> See *Minutes of the 20<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> See *Protokoll der Travancore Konferenz-Siebzehndr Konferenz*, Trivandrum, 25–27 February, 1913, 6.

<sup>29</sup> See *Minutes of the 5<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 2. Also see, *Minutes of the 13<sup>th</sup> Trivandrum Local Conference*, 1.

subaltern Sambavar congregation at Thumbode (1932–1951). He retired in 1952 and died in 1956 because of old age.

Rev. E. Mannasseh, on the other hand, was a product of the MELIM work in Trivandrum. He was born on November 6, 1917 to Mr. Esrael and Mrs. Lysal at Pappanam, Trivandrum.<sup>30</sup> After studying at Kattakada, he finished schooling at the Concordia School at Vattiyoorkavu and at Kudappanakkunnu (Trivandrum). Later, Rev. Mannasseh worked with MELIM as a catechist and school teacher and finished his theological studies at Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil. He was ordained as Lutheran pastor in MELIM by the missionary Rev. Oberheu and served as catechist-pastor in the subaltern congregations of Luthergiri, Kurumbayam, Vattiyoorkavu, Peroorkada and Madathikkonam. He also worked as teacher at the Malayalam school in Luthergiri, and catechism teacher at the Concordia High School. He too like Paulose was a song writer, and was known for his writing of carol songs during the Christmas season. He translated around thirty (30) songs from English and Tamil into Malayalam, of which twenty two (22) songs are found in the Malayalam Lutheran Hymn book. He was also known for his role as pastor during the construction of the Central Lutheran Church in Perurkada, Trivandrum and retired from there in 1982. He died on May 5, 1988 because of old age.

Thus, the above short introductions into the careers of Rev. Paulose and Rev. Manasseh within MELIM point to their subaltern roots and their embeddedness within the Sambavar community. This places them in a unique position to reflect upon and articulate the gospel-culture interaction taking place among the subaltern people. In the words of Robert Schreiter, Rev. Paulose and Rev. Manasseh are poets who through their songs capture those symbols and metaphors which best give expression to the experience of their community.

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<sup>30</sup> The author is thankful to information about Rev. Esrael Manasseh provided by his grandson Rev. Subin Raj who is an ordained minister of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church—Trivandrum Synod.

## Imagined Socio-Religious World Revealed in the Subaltern Lutheran Songs

The native Lutheran songs written and translated by subaltern Sambavar believers Rev. Paulose and Rev. Manasseh have Jesus Christ as the central figure—the Son of God in whom salvation is to be found for all sinners.<sup>31</sup> The songs mostly convey themes of sadness, suffering and strife; alongside a craving for protection, acceptance and presence of God in subaltern life. Emphasis on the Holy word, personalization of sin, persistent warfare with internal and outside evil forces, personal affection for Jesus and His work, awe and submission before the risen Christ, and the seeking of God’s blessings; form some of the other highlights of these songs. Importantly, most of the songs project the subaltern subject bringing his/her existential life concerns into conversation with the new religious belief system of Christianity.

Accordingly, in the songs the subaltern is portrayed as living in a continuous struggle between good and evil, in a world that is already “judged” due to the wrath of God and His curse falling upon the world.<sup>32</sup> In this struggle the subaltern has to negotiate obstacles that are put up by various socio-economic and religio-cultural forces. In the social realm of subaltern living the manifestations of good probably are the Christian agents—like the Lutheran mission, missionaries and their native workers,—who provide support and protection from hegemonic elite forces of society. Manifestations of evil in the social realm are mentioned as “enemies” and “satanic forces” that are out to destroy and create obstacles in subaltern life; probably alluding to the dominant forces of societal life in Travancore who subvert opportunities and make life

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<sup>31</sup> In this section even though I mainly work with the songs of Rev. M. Paulose, the translated songs of Rev. Manasseh that belong to the late MELIM period also predominantly cover concerns of suffering, sin, need for justice and protection, and salvation available in Jesus Christ.

<sup>32</sup> See, song 198, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010). Paulose writes in verse 2—“Jesus son of God bears the burden of sins of the world, He is remover of all fate of this judged world, the only holy sacrifice Lamb of God.” Also, in song 289 of the IELC hymnal, verse 1 Paulose writes—“The world has sunk down into the mud of sin, wrath of God and His curse fell on the world.” See, song 289, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

difficult for the subaltern. More importantly, this social realm of subaltern living is seen as being permeated by evil forces operating in the religio-cultural world, from where malevolent evil forces infiltrate daily living as “pey,”<sup>33</sup> “dusta atmavu”<sup>34</sup> “dusta shaktikal,”<sup>35</sup> etc. and continuously cause havoc in daily living through sickness, sadness, and suffering. To make matters worse, these outside forces have also made inroads within the subaltern as the flesh becomes a slave to sin.<sup>36</sup> What ensues in the daily life of the subaltern is a continuous fight for victory even as the subaltern is “trapped in the web of death.” This continuous conflict and struggle makes daily living, “hell” for the subalterns of Travancore, and in the midst of such realities the subalterns constantly seek protection, comfort and peace. As the subaltern attempts to buy peace and stability by appeasing the evil forces come to naught; unknown to the subaltern, God acts. In the fullness of time, His love in human shape “shoots unto the earth” and works to “pull out human kind from hell and to protect” them.<sup>37</sup>

This act of God in incarnating as savior child, however is hidden from the “smart” people of the world, and is revealed to only those subalterns who are “watchmen” in the night.<sup>38</sup> These

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<sup>33</sup> “Pey” are the malevolent spirits of people who have met a tragic and unjust end, and whose spirits do not rest in peace.

<sup>34</sup> “Dusta Atmavu” are the wicked spirits that also cause harm to people.

<sup>35</sup> “Dusta Shaktikal” are the wicked powers that infest the world.

<sup>36</sup> In song 328 of the IELC hymnal Paulose writes in verse 1—“Destructive evil spirit world (and) flesh is trying to destroy me from many sides, You dwell within me your servant so that I am not completely destroyed (but live) in eternal luxury.” See, song 328, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>37</sup> In the Christmas song, verses 6 and 7 of No. 89 in the IELC hymnal, Paulose writes—“from above God’s love in appropriate human shape; shoots unto the earth! How beautiful it is to see. To pull out human kind from hell and to protect; the arms of a man is stretching from the manger in Bethlehem, it is good.” The expression “shoots unto the earth” seems to be an exaggeration of the normal Jenmie (landlord) practice of throwing money to the pleading slaves when approached for assistance. Probably working with this popular imagery, the subaltern poet captures the urgency of the granted gift and portrays the sending of Jesus, as the throwing of gift by the benevolent master God. See, song 89, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Rev. M. Paulose’s Christmas song 88 in the IELC hymnal portrays the birth of Jesus as being sighted by the watchmen when the “smart” people of the world were snoring away. Verse 10 of song 88 says—“when smart people closing eyes and snoring; the watchmen were seeing the Lord.” In fact, watching and guarding the fields of the landlords from thieves and destructive agents was a job associated with the subalterns of the village.



special people who by God's grace have been revealed the gospel, are now to go and wake up the others who are asleep so that the birth of the "obstacle remover" can be celebrated. Thus in this imagined socio-religious world of the subaltern converts, the urge for protection and removal of obstacles in life is of vital importance. This is mainly because life is articulated in transient terms highlighting a sense of resignation about the instability and impermanence of a normal life for the subaltern people. For this reason, the grace of God is paramount for the subaltern to live. Furthermore, with the coming of the Christian message, the subalterns now understand their daily reality of sadness, disease, death and eternal destruction as having come into the world because of sin that pervades all human existence. Added to these are the many sins committed by the subaltern for which he/she is unable to "settle accounts" before the Creator Lord.<sup>39</sup> The subaltern now realizes that even good works (*Kriya Margam*) cannot take away sins and that it is God Himself who conceptualizes the remedy by giving Jesus up for sinners. Because God loves the sinner but hates the sin, Jesus suffers eternal curse and punishment as He offers Himself for sin and thereby humans are saved. Interestingly, this sacrificial offering of Jesus has a two-fold purpose. Sin is foisted on Jesus's head to destroy the power of "pey" (evil spirits) and to "sanctify the sinner," which results in God lifting and adopting the sinking sinner as His own.<sup>40</sup> However, this is not the end, as Jesus resurrects back to life as true God and Lord, and thereby proves Himself to be the able leader who is son of God. More importantly, through Jesus' resurrection, the "head of the King of death" is destroyed, and as a result "pey" and "death" have

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<sup>39</sup> In song 294 of the IELC hymnal, verse 2, Paulose writes—"The Creator will ask to quickly settle the accounts, (but) my heart breaks dear Lord remembering my accrued debt." This song pictures the pleading of a slave before his master who is asking for his accounts to be cleared, which the slave is unable to do, provoking fear of punishment within the slave. See, song 294, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>40</sup> In song 355 of the IELC hymnal, verse 2, Paulose writes—"To destroy the power of evil spirits (pey) and to turn and sanctify the sinner, curse of sin and punishment of sinners was foisted on the head of Holy son." Also in verse 4—" (God) quickly lifts the falling children and leads (them) through holy path, (He) adopts the sinking sinner as own son and supports and embrace." See, song 355, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

no hold over those who believe in Jesus, the Savior.<sup>41</sup>

For the subalterns, Jesus' resurrection is a "lucky" event, because as Immanuel God He destroys all enemies of the subaltern Christian community and enriches peace on the earth.<sup>42</sup> Now salvation is surely for sinners as they are invited to eternal salvation and commanded by Lord Jesus to be born again through baptism in water and spirit.<sup>43</sup> This victory of Jesus for the subalterns is seen as salvation not only from sin but also from all evil forces out to destroy the life of the subaltern convert and divert him/her from life in Christ.<sup>44</sup> More significantly, a consequence of Jesus' victorious resurrection and his gospel spreading is that Satan now changes his abode.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the Sambavar obsession with evil spirits still infesting the world is challenged here by positing that with the presence of Immanuel God in their life, Satan is forced to move his dwelling place away from the subalterns who believe in Christ. Further, as the message of the resurrection of Christ spreads, the gospel echoes all over the world and the church is established because of the shining light of the good news. Importantly, in this imagined socio-religious world of subaltern living it is the introduction of Jesus Christ and His work that leads to a break from the "web of death" as He is the "remover of all fate of this judged world" and the instigator

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<sup>41</sup> In song 159 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose writes in verse 5—"He broke the tomb and resurrected Himself, and proved He is son of God; able and good He is leader for all, Lord Jesus is true God." See, song 159, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010). Also, in song 332 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose writes in verse 3—"To destroy the head of the King of death Jesus died and rose again, O God who redeemed this slave from the fear of death." See, song 332, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>42</sup> In song 159 of the IELC hymnal, verse 9 Paulose writes—"Glory in the highest, let peace increase over the earth; Let our enemy be destroyed! Victory! Immanuel has resurrected." See, song 159.

<sup>43</sup> In song 289 of the IELC hymnal, verse 8 Paulose writes—"Take baptism by faith, surely salvation is your own now; immediately through water and spirit you baptize in Jesus and (be) born again." See, song 289.

<sup>44</sup> In song 466 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 1 and 2 writes—"The lamb of God who tied the strong one with his strong arms will guard without fear. On the (travelled) road to make us fall down world, flesh and Satan create obstacles." See, song 466, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>45</sup> In song 198 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 4 writes—"With fear Satan trembles, changes his abode and goes halleluiah." See, song 198.

of a change that leads to a life of hope in the midst of challenges.<sup>46</sup> As a result for the subaltern, the Lord Jesus Christ is the “good” that permeates his religio-cultural existence, something that was unheard of and lacking in his/her previous religiosity.

Inspired by the goodness that has entered his/her life, the subaltern believer is now challenged and called to live his/her life in this struggle filled world completely trusting and strengthened by his/her faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is now the relative of the subaltern covert who dwells with him/her, who also advocates for the subaltern sinner by sitting at the right hand of God the Father.<sup>47</sup> He is now the merciful protector of the subaltern believer over whom he reigns, leads and will admit into the “land of heaven.”<sup>48</sup> With this belief in Christ even death for the subaltern becomes a “vehicle of comfort to reach salvation.”<sup>49</sup> So the subaltern believer is to devote himself/herself to the study of the Bible (True Veda) and preserve the “holy words in their heart daily.”<sup>50</sup> Importantly, even though the reality of suffering and sadness has not quite left the subaltern believer, he/she can prayerfully submit all burdens before Jesus and seek refuge. Drawing upon God given strength and leadership the subaltern believer prays for “casting away of all miseries,” but nevertheless knows that prayers will be answered according to “divine will and goodness at the right time.”<sup>51</sup> As Jesus is the Lord of life, the subaltern believer is

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<sup>46</sup> In song 198 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 2 writes—“Jesus son of God bears the burdens of sins of the world; He is remover of all fate of this judged world.” See, song 198.

<sup>47</sup> In song 426 of the IELC hymnal, verse 2, Paulose writes—“If you stand as my relative surely whatever may happen no calamity (will befall me).” See, song 426, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010). Also in song 332 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 4 writes—“Advocating for me by sitting at the right side of God the Father, dear Savior to know your eternal love.” See, song 332.

<sup>48</sup> In song 332 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in the chorus and verse 6 writes—“O Ocean of compassion show mercy and protect me (a) slave, ...reign over me (and) lead me (and) admit me into the land of heaven.” See, song 332.

<sup>49</sup> In song 445 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 6 writes—“(if we) believe in glorious Jesus then death is a vehicle of comfort to reach salvation.” See, song 445, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>50</sup> In song 466 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 4 writes—“O travelers on the holy path we preserve the holy words in our heart daily and study and contemplate.” See, song 466.

<sup>51</sup> In song 371 of the IELC hymnal, Paulose in verse 5 writes—“God I am praying (to you) to cast away my

through His word provided light that enables appropriate victory in daily struggle which makes it possible for him/her to live always.

Thus, the imagined socio-religious world of subaltern Lutheran believers as revealed in their songs present a dynamic picture of the believer circumventing his/her path through the maze of upheaval in life. The presence of Jesus Christ in subaltern life presents him/her with a conversational partner to whom the believer can bring existential life concerns in prayer, and seek intervention and comfort in the present and future. Even though Christ is the King who presides in glory in the transcendent heaven, the subaltern convert yearns for the immanent Jesus who is always present by his/her side. It is in such a socio-religious imagined world that the Sambavar Lutheran convert sought to live his/her life of faith by clenching on to various religio-cultural resources that was made available to the believer through his/her admission into the Body of Christ.

### **Sin and Salvation by Faith: Levelling the Playing Field of Socio-Cultural Daily Life in Travancore**

The Lutheran gospel-culture interaction in Travancore did lead to the shaping of a new religio-cultural imagination in the hearts and minds of the subalterns of Travancore. This contributed and formed an important part of their new social being as created human beings whom God calls to renewal and new life every day. In forming the new Sambavar social being, an important theological resource was the prevalence of Lutheran theological categories of “sin” and “salvation by faith.” In fact, the theological category of “sin” not only invoked questions and a desire to evaluate the Sambavar life condition, but it also emphasized the need to repent, seek forgiveness, and aspire for a renewed existence. These aspects can be seen highlighted in Rev.

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miseries, but Lord it is your child’s will but give divine will and goodness at the right time.” See, song 371, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

Paulose's song:

**Chorus:** My sin, my sin, my sin, my God, forgive me Immanuel

At your feet I am falling down and crying, (please) turn around look at me and you give me pardon.

I cannot think of any words to utter Lord, I have become slave to all sins.

I have no comfort loving Jesus, Savior please hear my complaint.

Lord Jesus who gave life to the dead, Savior your power has not decreased.

Lord Jesus who said don't cry, give me grace I am coming to your cross.

You command to your slave, I have forgiven you your sins.

The holy mouth which said "it is finished," remove the sins of this hopeless person.<sup>52</sup>

In the above song, the subaltern poet captures the emotional and ethical upheaval that the believer undergoes as he/she comes before Lord Jesus begging for forgiveness and mercy. What we also see is the internalization of the new metaphor of "sin" to refer to the terrible life condition of the subaltern believer. More significantly, the language and tone of the song mirrors the collective memory of a slave falling at the feet of his master begging for mercy. Furthermore, the song exhibits how the subaltern conscience is filled with remorse and guilt as the "sinner" slave approaches the "powerful" Lord Jesus pleading for forgiveness and comfort. In another mirroring of the "slave-master" dynamic, the subaltern confesses to his/her belief that a simple command from the Master is enough to remove the sins of the hopeless subaltern believer. These aspects can again be seen in yet another song from Rev. Paulose

Me a wicked sinner who was sentenced to punishment, O Jesus I came hearing the Holy word that invites me for eternal salvation

The creator will ask to quickly settle the accounts, (but) my heart breaks dear Lord remembering my accrued debt.

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<sup>52</sup> See, song 236, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

With fear that the God of justice will scold and throw me out I apologize, who can stand before (Him).

God (I) did countless sins in front of your eyes, even prostrating and weeping (before you) are fruitless.

Where can I hide O omniscient God, your anger on me increases and sadness within me overwhelms me.

Even then hope within me lightens up, (my) dear Jesus shed blood from His heart and gave up His life.

The Lamb of God bore God's wrath and punishment for sin upon Himself and earned forgiveness from sin, and I the sinner has salvation.

Gospel says "in Jesus, God is my Father," I place my refuge only in Jesus' blood.<sup>53</sup>

Also in Manasseh's translated song:

Your will all over the earth—let it be as in heaven

To bear sadness—obedience in sorrow

One which opposes your will—change my liking for sin.<sup>54</sup>

In Rev. Manasseh's translated work, we see the poet making it sufficiently clear that "sin" is something that comes naturally to the subaltern. However, as the subaltern believer submits to Christ, he/she seeks God's help to change from this normal desire to sin. This change now comes, in the form of a questioning of his present unethical lifestyle. As we see in the above song of Paulose, feelings of guilt are invoked as a result of hearing the word of God which forms the basis for the subaltern submission before God out of fear. The poet contends that the subaltern believer is a wicked sinner who was sentenced to punishment as his/her countless sins left the believer with a sense of hopelessness. However, even as the subaltern believer realizes

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<sup>53</sup> See, song 294, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>54</sup> See, song 369, verse 4, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010). This song is a Malayalam translation of the English hymn in the Lutheran Hymnal—"Our Father thou in Heaven Above." In the English, verse 4 sings—"Thy gracious will on earth be done, as it's in Heaven before thy throne; Obedience in our weal and woe, and patience in all grief bestow; curb flesh and blood and every ill, that sets itself against thy will." See, song 458, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, (Concordia: 1941).

that he/she has no way of paying back the accrued debt of sin before the God of justice, he/she is lightened up with hope because of the salvation received through the shed blood of Jesus. Now, out of gratefulness the subaltern believer acknowledges God as his/her Father and places his/her refuge only in Jesus's blood.

The emphasis of the subaltern believer upon his/her sinful condition can be seen from the fact that almost all the songs of Rev. Paulose and the translated songs of Rev. Manasseh have themes of "sin," "suffering" and "sadness" running through them. In all probability this shows that the subaltern poets were organic theologians capturing the spirit of the degraded condition of subaltern life in Travancore during this period. Undoubtedly, the introduction of the notion of "sin" did evoke a significant reflection in the Sambavar community, who saw a path out of their malice in the work of Christ on the cross. This was in stark contrast to their previous world of socio-religious living in Travancore, where the Sambavars like their other slave caste compatriots, were seen as "polluting" people whose very existence was attributed to their "bad karma" of their previous life. As their past came to bear upon their present existence, there was no hope of a better life in the present and a fatalistic sense of resignation of their practical condition with no recourse to improving their life was the dominant theme that had defined and informed their existence. However, in the missionary proclamation of the gospel, "sin" was responsible for the fall of all human beings and this provided the subalterns with a new way of perceiving their broken existence. It was no longer that their existence alone was "sinful," rather the existence of every human being was tainted with sin because "original sin" was present in not only the slave castes but also in the elites of society.

More importantly, with the introduction of the Christian religio-cultural category of "sin," also followed behavioral changes and cultural improvements set along ethical standards taught

by the Lutheran mission and its missionaries. Proper usage of Malayalam language, “disappearance of the well-known stamp of dirt and ignorance,” regular washing of bodies, “elimination of the stupid stare to the illuminating of human intelligence and smile of gratitude,” “lying being gradually replaced by truth-telling,” wearing of good clothes that were regularly washed of its brown stain, healing of long standing sores, proper presentation of the body with well combed hair, respectful engagement during conversations and study, dropping of “jungle manners;” were some of the personality changes that the missionaries were able to instill in their subaltern Lutheran converts.<sup>55</sup> Such manifestations of a transformed existence was again in contrast to the previous hegemonic religio-cultural world imposed upon the subaltern Sambavars, where they were assigned a “polluted” existence from which they had no way of escape and change. With the new change brought about by the gospel, the subalterns were now living examples of a new creation involved in a slow but steady conversion from their previously disparaged and filthy existence to that of the modern emancipated individual. In short, the practical manifestations of the subaltern converts transformation went hand in hand with the gospel message of Christ setting the sinner free from his/her sin and being saved.

In this process of change, the Lutheran emphasis on “sinner and saint,” probably gave the subaltern Sambavars the necessary religio-cultural resource that could help them seek a new life in Christ through a transformed way of ethical conduct and living. So, where in the earlier system the Sambavars had no avenue to improve their socio-ethical conduct and living; in the new socio-religious system the Sambavars were invited and in most cases challenged to live a different standard of life that was unthinkable and in most cases unimaginable for them. For the Sambavars who had internalized most of these un-ethical life practices it was an uphill task to

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<sup>55</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July, 1916, 1–2.



change and the missionaries and their agents who worked among the subalterns were constantly complaining about the slow progress and in many cases the lack of interest and follow-up action from them. For instance, Rev. Zucker writing about the visible outward changes in his Boarding school boys in 1916, while still awaiting change in the inward behavior of low-caste converts comments:

There are people at home who believe that there is a devil and people who believe the Doctrine of the total depravity of man. With us these things in a sense have ceased to be matters of belief: we have seen so often and so unmistakably that people are held in the bonds of Satan and do not get out, and that others who have gotten out are brought back again, and that the imagination of man's and woman's heart, and their words and deeds, too, are evil from their youth, that it is an encouragement to be thankful for indeed if we are in some instances permitted to see Satan go down in defeat.<sup>56</sup>

Such reports from the mission field suggest that, at the very least, the Sambavars and other subaltern communities in the Lutheran mission were engaging their own socio-cultural malice and its manifestations through the lens of "sin," that were now challenged and targeted for improvement by the missionaries and the Lutheran community. More importantly by making it amply clear that the "non-polluting" elites of Travancore society and even the missionary himself, were sinners, and in need of a Savior in Jesus Christ; the subaltern was led to a new perception of the social order around him/her, where "sin" levelled the playing field of socio-cultural life for all. At least at an imagined level, no longer were the elites of society "pure" and the product of "good karma," rather all were sinners just like them and in need of forgiveness and salvation that was possible only through Christ. This perception can be seen in another song of Rev. Paulose:

**Chorus:** Sinner you have to be born again, commands King Jesus who redeemed the world.

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<sup>56</sup> See F. Zucker to Home Board, 1 July, 1916, 2.

Jesus told so, the human beings who is not born again will surely never see the kingdom of heaven.

The world has sunk down into the mud of sin, wrath of God and His curse fell on the world

Sadness, disease, death and eternal destruction comes into the world because of sin, so (Sinner you...).

Punishment for sin is severe, that will not extinguish the fire of anger

Cursed peys [evil spirits] and angry men immediately will surely join in the well of fire, so Sinner...

See and realize the burden of sin, which will show the law like a mirror

Having seen, be afraid, be sad, and with repentance give up your sins.

There is nobody without sin, but good works are unfruitful for removing sin

Sinners conceptualize the way of works, sin will increase through own (action) ways.

The only way to finish sin, in the beginning God conceptualized for sinners

That is Jesus Christ His own son as remedy for sins, He gave for sinners.

Jesus took the sin of men to suffer eternal curse and punishment

(He) lived a righteous life offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin and humans were saved.

Jesus is the only true way, it is the way of grace which is apt for all

One will be saved if faith is kept in Jesus, this Gospel is unbelievable love.

Take baptism by faith, surely salvation is your own now

Immediately through water and spirit you baptize in Jesus and (be) born again.<sup>57</sup>

The song while calling upon the sinner to be born again in Christ, initially makes use of the imagery of daily subaltern manual labor in the fields and contends that everybody is a sinner in this world that has sunk into the mud of sin. Thus the world where the subaltern and others live is seen as cursed with God's wrath, and the presence of "sin" provides the reason for sadness,

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<sup>57</sup> See, song 289, translated from original Malayalam.

sickness, death and eternal destruction. Moreover, in a veiled attack on the trouble makers of subaltern life, the poet envisions severe punishment for sin awaiting such agents as even “peys” and angry men are sure to meet a cruel end. However, holding out hope, the song calls upon people to realize their sin, repent, give up their sins, and seek forgiveness in Christ. More important is the reminder that there is no one without sin and that as sinners conceptualize the way of works (karma marga) for salvation, the poet contends that this only leads to an increase of sin. At this point, the subaltern poet is challenging and subverting the elite caste Hindu idea that the subaltern condition is due to their previous bad karma; while at the same time contesting the higher caste understanding that their good karmic acts will finally help them attain salvation.

The poet continues to note that God Himself finds the solution to this problem of “sin” that pervades all people, and sends His son as remedy by taking upon Himself the sins of men and suffering their eternal curse and punishment. As Jesus saved human beings he now calls upon sinners to repent and be born again, as He is the only true way that is suitable for all people. As the subaltern poet asserts that one can be saved only if faith is kept in Jesus, one is led to the questioning of the dominant religio-cultural themes in Travancore. The subalterns now exhibit a realization and a confidence that in Jesus Christ they are just like the others in Travancore—namely sinners—who however, have been saved by faith in Jesus Christ because of His sacrifice and through His grace. As the Sambavars internalized this message and exhibited it in their expressions of social and religious engagements, even the missionaries had to caution them to temper their desire to be seen on equal terms with the higher castes of Travancore.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> As pointed out in an earlier chapter of this dissertation, an instance of the missionary attempts to temper the Sambavar assertion of equality can be found in the observations of Rev. Knoernschild while trying to control the Pariah rebellion against the assigned Nadar catechist at Kuttichel. In his report to the Home Board he complains: “Now Christianity comes along and says that there is no caste, all people being equally sinful before God and all brothers in Christ. That is good news for the outcastes. They see their new liberty and they abuse it.” See, E. Knoernschild to Home Board, 13 June, 1933.

## **Bible and the Subaltern Convert: The True Veda That is Easy to Understand**

Even as the subalterns displayed their new found confidence and their new social being, they were also showcasing their access to sacred resources that were hitherto inaccessible to them. Since the subaltern Sambavars were considered to be ritually polluting people, they were kept away from access to the “temple-centered” ritual life of the elites of Travancore society even though as drummers in temple festivals and community gatherings they did perform a marginal role in the caste Hindu socio-religious life. Access to the sacred Sanskrit language, and sacred Sanskritic Hindu texts, were out of reach for the subalterns of Travancore. Moreover, the subaltern inferiority in the religio-cultural world of Travancore was reinforced through the popular perception of the subalterns indulging in “spirit and devil worship,” of their unworthiness and non-existence of any sacred texts. However, with the coming of various Christian missions into subaltern culture, the Bible was introduced as “Scripture” that now allowed the subaltern converts access to a written and oral religious resource that was till now denied to them.

Of special significance was the fact that for subalterns like the Sambavars, who were brought up and continued to live in an oral culture and tradition, the gaining of access to written scripture was a shift from pre-modernity to modernity. Up till now, the subalterns were dismissed off as people who did not have the inherent ability to comprehend and even worship God, which essentially made them inferior people. The elites of Travancore society with their Sanskritic “Vedas” had not only established the notion of their religio-cultural superiority but also had grounded the belief that they were “pure” and were the only ones who could worship God. However, with Christianizing work, the subaltern slave castes like the Sambavars contested this imposed notion prevalent in Travancore Society. Even the name for Malayalam Bible as “*Sathya Veda Pusthakam*” meaning True Vedas assumes significance, because then at least

perceptually the idea that gained traction among the subaltern Christians was that they were now bearers of the “Truth” in comparison to the scriptures followed by the so-called Travancore elites. More importantly, this True Veda was not only accessible but also easily understandable to the common subaltern who was now invited to enter its world of light and devote himself/herself to its truth for eternal salvation.

**Chorus:** True Veda<sup>59</sup> is light of eternal salvation

Praised Jesus Christ is essence of Bible,

(He is) eternal way of life and salvation of the world

The first light which pushes away darkness, always burns in the Bible...

Over-flowing with happiness I will devote to Holy.

Similar to milk but sweeter than honey, true gospel is greater than diamond

Great joy for one who thinks always...

How wonderful! Bible is easy for anybody to understand, word is eternal God’s power and will give salvation,

Even if all this world and sky pass away this wonder word will stand forever.

Proclaim everywhere only way of salvation, Jesus told already to tell this to everybody

Bible is God’s truth without obstacles, will always brighten Jesus’ Holy name.<sup>60</sup>

This subaltern song written by Rev. M. Paulose contends that the Bible is the “light of eternal salvation” which always “burns” in the Bible. The imagery of the lamp that is lighted comes across in this song, which in fact draws from the daily life experience of village Travancore where earthen lamps would be lighted in the evening to cast away the darkness of the

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<sup>59</sup> In this song the Bible is mentioned as the “Veda.”

<sup>60</sup> See, song 199, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

subaltern home situated in the “jungles of Travancore.”<sup>61</sup> More significantly, this imagery was of particular value to the Sambvars who would light lamps attributed to their ancestral spirits who according to pre-Christian belief protected them from evil spirits (pey, dusta atmavu etc.) operating under the cover of darkness. Thus the poet portrays the subaltern believer as having access to this sacred truth without any obstacles coming in the way, which was contrary to the hegemonic caste Hindu religious world where the subalterns were impeded from access to divine power because of the degraded subaltern condition. However, now because of Jesus Christ the subaltern with access to the Divine is over-flowing with happiness and in response submits to God as a loyal devotee.

Thus, the subaltern poet captures the significance of the Bible in the life of the subaltern convert. The Bible is seen as essentially praising Jesus Christ, containing the word as eternal God’s power and as giving salvation. Such an understanding of the subalterns in Travancore fit well with their pre-Christian tradition that had a long history of iconizing material objects that preserved and manifested magical and mysterious sacred power.<sup>62</sup> As Sathianathan Clarke notes, the Bible for the subalterns functioned as native talisman to avert evil, impart healing, and invoke fortune; as colonial fetish to identify with the colonialists’ culture of literacy; and as alternative canon where the Bible on the one hand supplies the subalterns with a frame of knowledge they did not have to start with, and on the other hand challenges and supplants the Hindu Vedas as a subversive agent.<sup>63</sup> Accordingly, the Bible in the subaltern Lutheran community was viewed as object of enormous power to ward away attacks of evil spirits, evil

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<sup>61</sup> The expression “jungles of Travancore” can be frequently seen in the mission reports of the Trivandrum Lutheran mission Director Rev. F. R. Zucker who worked in Travancore from 1910 onwards and specifically in Trivandrum from 1913–1930.

<sup>62</sup> Sathianathan Clarke, “Viewing the Bible through the eyes and ears of Subalterns in India,” *Religion-Online*, 5, accessed November 15, 2015, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2444>.

<sup>63</sup> Clarke, “Viewing the Bible,” 5–10.

dreams, and fear.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, as the song reminds the believer of Jesus' command, the Bible is not only the easily understandable True Veda for the subaltern alone, but it is the "message" that needs to be proclaimed by the subalterns to others. In a sense, there is subversion and an active agency that is being appropriated for the subaltern believer in this message, as he/she is no longer to be a passive recipient of the gospel message but is to be actively involved in the evangelization process. This is a major shift envisioned for the subaltern role in Travancore society because as gospel bearers they are aspiring to be educators and proclaimers of spiritual truths that until now was deprived to them as "polluting" dehumanized people assigned to ignominious existence. All this truly makes the Bible "wonderful" because it has in it the "wonder Word" which proclaims the "light" that brushes aside the darkness troubling subaltern life, and enables the subaltern to actively contest and subvert hegemonic religio-cultural ideas, and leads him/her to salvation and the active proclamation of it to others.

### **Subaltern Identification with the Person of Christ: Jesus as Savior Slave Child, Crucified Slave, and Victorious King**

Another indicator of the subaltern contextualization of their Christian faith lies in the way in which they perceived and identified with the central theme and figure of their new faith—namely, Jesus Christ. In fact, a look at the language used by the subalterns to express and articulate Jesus Christ makes for an interesting association between the received gospel and its

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<sup>64</sup> This is a common feature of subaltern Christian experience that the author has been exposed to in his own pastoral experience and faith journey. Also in interviews conducted in the Trivandrum area, the researcher was invited to hear the stories of subaltern Lutheran believers even today keeping the Bible under their pillows for protection from attacks of evil spirits and fear-instilling bad dreams. Mrs. Lalitha Jayaraj, interview by author, Antiyoorkonam, July 2, 2012. Mrs. Lalitha who is a member at Antiyoorkonam Lutheran Church is the daughter of Rev. Stevenson who grew up in the environment of MELIM and later became a school teacher in the mission. Mrs. Lalitha shared various stories of how her father would share "dreams" and even pray for subaltern converts affected by "evil spirits" in his ministry as a "Catechist-pastor" at Antiyoorkonam after the MELIM period. Similar stories were shared with the researcher during interviews conducted with subaltern converts at Tholloor, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungalloor, Trivandrum and Tumerichel Lutheran sites.

interpreted perception of the target subaltern community. For instance, in the Christmas song of Rev. Paulose, the baby Jesus is verbalized as “kdavu” (calf), the language assigned for the slave children in Travancore, and articulated as being dressed in “rags.”

Messenger continued his message with shepherds

You go there and see the one who is laid in the manger covered with rags

See the “*kdavu*”<sup>65</sup> Savior...

a cute baby extends for us

his small arms full of Salvation nectar.<sup>66</sup>

The use of slave language in expressing Jesus as the savior of the world probably invites us to see the effect that the gospel message had on the Lutheran subaltern converts of Travancore. Jesus, in their popular perception, was born into the world just like one among them. The Savior of the whole world incarnated as a slave child to extend the “nectar of salvation” to all. For the much maligned subaltern slave castes, this truly was a watershed moment when God chose to become one just like them to save the entire world.

More significantly, the path chosen by God for this salvation effort was also imagined by the subaltern slave communities in Travancore from the vantage point of their own lived reality and popular memory. This aspect particular comes to light in the Good Friday song written by Rev. Paulose, which seems more of the picture of a punished and impaled Travancore slave embossed onto Jesus. In the below quoted song verses we see the subaltern poet as visualizing Jesus the Messiah suffering crucifixion by “standing nailed” in contrast to the popular rendition of the Son of God lying or hanging on the cross. In a further creative imagining of the experience of crucifixion the subaltern poet leads the believing community to see the crucified body as

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<sup>65</sup> Slave language for “child.”

<sup>66</sup> See, song 88, translated from the Malayalam.



being exhausted, shivering and sweating with extreme thirst under the severe sun. As this happens Jesus is envisioned as “standing with sadness bottled up,” tolerating suffering for the poet/believer. The wicked onlookers participate by reviling Him even as Lord Jesus prays for their forgiveness. As this creative imagining of the crucifixion scene of Jesus scene plays out along lines of the popular memory of punishment meted out to the Travancore slaves, the poet/believer sees the severity of sin which leads the Father to abandon His son to die on the cross for life and salvation to the sinner.

I saw on the calvary cross my Messiah,  
I saw toleration of suffering for me.  
Stretching the arms and crossing the legs,  
Beloved Jesus standing nailed.  
The body exhausted under the severe sun,  
With extreme thirst, the tongue dried.  
Nailed and beaten with sticks,  
Bleeding blood on the earth for me.  
The body shivering, sweating and exhausted,  
Beloved Jesus standing with sadness bottled up.  
While tolerating all this suffering,  
I also saw the wicked reviling him.  
But Lord at that time for them,  
Prayed to His father to forgive them.  
Father left His son on the cross,  
I saw the severity of sin on the cross.  
On the cross Jesus died and I lived,

This is the gospel for salvation.<sup>67</sup>

Punishment meted out to slaves remained an important part of the memory of the slave castes in Travancore well into the twentieth century. Stories of slave women being forced to work for hours after childbirth only to return from the fields to see her baby eaten up by ants; erring low caste slaves being taken to the wilderness and implanted neck deep in pits to be eaten up by black ants as the slave, his wife and children plead for him to be set free; slaves being drowned in rivers by hanging stones around their necks as the wife and children witness the murderous orgy in vain; slave men being forced to plough fields yoked to oxen; slaves and children being buried alive as ritual propitiation to evil spirits when flood barriers or embankments were destroyed during the monsoons; were all part of the collective memory of the subaltern people.<sup>68</sup> In addition, another severe punishment meted out to slaves for offences such as un-chastity, theft, killing of cows was that of impalement.<sup>69</sup> Probably, this Good Friday song by Rev. Paulose builds on this collective popular memory as Jesus is envisioned by the poet/believer as standing exhausted with a body that is shivering and sweating as the severity of sin takes its toll on the Savior in whose death the sinner finds life and salvation. However, unlike the case of the Travancore slave the crucified Savior returns as the resurrected victorious King

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<sup>67</sup> See, song 146, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>68</sup> Sanal Mohan, "Narrativizing Oppression and Suffering: Theorizing Slavery," in *South Asia Research* 26, no. 1 (February 2006): 20–24.

<sup>69</sup> An account of impalement in Travancore is cited by A. Selvaraj—"An iron spike was thrust through the criminal's skin, in the lower part of the back where a crosscut had been previously made for its insertion, then the point of the spike was guided by the executioner's finger, so as to bring it out at the neck or shoulder, carefully avoiding injuring any large arteries or vital organs since that would afford the poor victim speedy relief. The lowest extremity of the spike was then made fast to a wooden post which was raised perpendicularly, and fixed into the ground; and thus, the culprit was supported, partly by the iron spike under his skin and partly by a small bench placed underneath his feet, and raised about ten inches from the ground. Tortured by thirst, but denied water, scorched by the sun by denied shade, devoured by insects but refused any means of keeping them away, his miserable existence terminated in a lingering death which in some instances was prolonged for three days. A shower of rain was hailed as a great blessing as it caused the wound to mortify, and bring about the long awaited end." See Selvaraj, *Christianity and Social Transformation*, 48. Also see Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, 63–64.

that makes the believers forget their sadness and ushers in great happiness. This imagery of Jesus can be seen in Paulose's Easter song that envisions Jesus as Immanuel God whose resurrection proves that "He is able and good and True God."

Bliss extreme bliss, Jesus Christ the King is resurrected  
Today is great happiness to the church, Jesus Christ the King is resurrected.  
Forget sadness your beloved Lord is resurrected and appeared to many...  
The one who beautifully revealed prophecies, Immanuel came along with them...  
He broke the tomb and resurrected himself, and proved He is son of God  
Able and good He is leader for all, Lord Jesus is true God.  
As told earlier God resurrected, His word has no change  
Those who follow and believe in Jesus surely will never be ashamed...  
Like Christ resurrected, at the right time he will make us alive  
How lucky that Jesus resurrected for us, we will resurrect for eternity.  
Glory in the highest, let peace increase over the earth  
Let our enemy be destroyed! Victory! Immanuel has resurrected.<sup>70</sup>

Thus, the resurrection of Jesus Christ sees the subaltern identifying with the victorious presence of Jesus the King. Jesus' resurrection brings happiness to the believing community as the sadness of their beloved Jesus' suffering dissipates from the scene. Moreover, Jesus' breaking of the tomb and resurrecting Himself is taken as proof for Him being the son of God who is able and good leader for all. As the subaltern submits to the leadership of the victorious King, he/she is now assured of the power of the word of God and has no shame in following and believing Him. Thus the subaltern, who was frequently shamed in daily social living for his degraded existence and religio-cultural beliefs, finds new found confidence in the modernizing

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<sup>70</sup> See, song 159, translated from the original Malayalam.

message of Christ and the Lutheran Mission. Moreover, the believer cannot believe his luck in what Jesus has done, as now the future promise that just like Jesus he/she too would resurrect for eternity is made possible for him/her. Suddenly the subaltern who lived a life of distress and despair sees his world change as “luck” has entered his life discourse because of the resurrected Christ and His word. Consequently, the resurrected Jesus brings to the subaltern believer’s life the possibilities of two unimaginable and unlikely realities—namely, increase in peace and victory over enemies—making the subaltern indeed “lucky.” So here we see how the subaltern believer identifies with the resurrected Christ as the initiator of “luck” in his/her life, in contrast to the earlier pre-Christian belief and lived reality that promoted a fatalistic sense of resignation over his/her servile and degraded existence. So now the subaltern believer stands witness to the victorious King:

It is a wonder that God Jesus’ gospel fills the world every day...

Raised up Jesus’ gospel is ringing all over the world

Everyday this sun admits people into the church through the gospel.

With fear Satan trembles, changes his abode and goes halleluiah

The Holy church is raised up and growing, glory to Jesus halleluiah.<sup>71</sup>

Indeed, as the subaltern identifies with the victorious King, he/she amazes at the gospel of the risen Jesus ringing all over the world with people flocking into the Holy community—the church—every day, striking fear in the heart of Satan who now changes his dwelling place far away from the Christ believing subalterns.

### **Subaltern Yearning for the Work of Christ: Jesus as Relative, Sin Forgiver, Powerful Obstacle and Fate Remover, Protector from Sadness and Suffering, and Provider of Refuge**

Alongside identifying the person of Jesus, an important aspect of Christian theological

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<sup>71</sup> See, song 198, translated from the original Malayalam.

reflection has been related to understanding the work of Christ. This aspect comes across very strongly in the songs written and translated by the subaltern Lutheran poets in the Malayalam lands. Drawing from lived reality, the subaltern believer is placed within an imagined world of struggle and suffering that permeates every aspect of his/her life, with Jesus Christ seen as Redeemer and Protector. An important subaltern metaphor employed to project this need of protection and presence in the life of the subaltern is that of “bendhu,” meaning—relative. Within the subaltern socio-cultural living the “relative” kinsman was supposed to be a pillar of support, constantly present during personal and community needs and especially during times of “rites of passage.” Even the story of the beginnings of the independent Sambavar congregations that came over to the Lutheran Mission in 1911 was of the Christian message being propagated among kinsmen in the Sambavar villages of Kuttichel, Puliyoorkonam, Kurungalloor, Puthu-Kulangara; and immediately after Rev. Nau’s Lutheran outreach within a year, in the villages of Kanakodu, Aryanadu, Luthergiri (Kattaikal), Chalaikonam and Chullimanur. In a more significant note, the relative for the subaltern was a source of strength during times of struggle and conflict, and the deceased spirit of the relative was venerated and remembered through family observances such as “*Kuduthi*.” In such observances the understanding was that the spirit of the deceased relative would partake of the food that was first offered to him during important family and community celebrations, and that his spirit was the “protective spirit” that kept malevolent wicked spirits at bay from family members. It is in this sense that the perception of Jesus as relative in the subaltern songs makes for interesting analysis:

**Chorus:** O Lord Jesus, Father always shed grace to us slaves

You come as a relative, give victory always.

Dark evil spirit groups are pouring cunning actions

You stand nearby as relative and act mercifully...

Flesh (is) fighting with me and makes me a slave of sin

Instead of me falling down into the harsh fire of curse, give me decent victory continuously.

O Lord of life to continue to get appropriate victory in war by giving your word as light make me live always.<sup>72</sup>

Also in another song of Paulose:

My relative respectful Jesus it is night time, my Savior you come near and dwell with (me)

If you stand as my relative surely whatever may happen no calamity (will befall me).

O God end burdens of the day which passed and with joy give me timely sleep and comfort me.

O Savior cast away sufferings, illness, evil dreams, temptations and untimely death.

O Jesus in your name you (please) forgive all the harms of sin which happened because of me (and) bless me today.

O Lord Jesus send your angel as guard, O dear (Jesus) I will wake up in the morning and praise you.<sup>73</sup>

In both the songs of Paulose, the poet builds on the popular memory and reality of the slave past and suffering of his community. The poet prays for Lord Jesus to come and stand alongside the subaltern as a relative so that he can have comfort in sleep and praise Him again in the morning. However, there are forces that are troubling the subaltern believer from within and outside, who through their “cunning actions” were enslaving and pulling him/her down the “harsh fire of curse.” Here, we find the subaltern believer wrestling with his pre-Christian religious beliefs of fearing “evil spirits” and the imposed hegemonic perception of he/she being a cursed entity because of bad karma of his/her previous life and consequent unborn existence.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See, song 346, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

<sup>73</sup> See, song 426, translated from the original Malayalam.

<sup>74</sup> According to the dominant Hindu religious ideology that was maintained through its mythical creation

As the subaltern believer contests these life-denying notions, he/she now seeks the presence and participation of Jesus Christ in his/her quest for continuous victory over evil forces. In this war with these “dark evil spirits” who are ushering in sadness and temptations into the life of the subaltern believer, only Jesus the relative can deliver “decent victory” by acting mercifully through His presence and by giving the light instilling word.

Likewise, in the other evening song above, Jesus Christ is called upon as relative of the subaltern believer to come near and dwell with the believer through the night. Given the fact that the “jungles of Travancore” where the subalterns lived constantly instilled fear in the hearts of the people, the lighting of a lamp to dispel the darkness of the home and also overcome fear for a comfortable sleep into the night, were practices of everyday life. The song accordingly professes the faith that with the presence of respectful relative Jesus, the subaltern believer is immune to the calamities of life. Both songs clearly show that the subaltern Lutheran community believed the work of Christ to be vigorously thwarting the forces causing pain and fear in their life, and as the agency that could change their miserable existence. In this regard, the work of Christ is also envisaged as that of being the “forgiver of sin,” as the song calls upon Jesus to bless the subaltern after forgiving “all the evils of sin” that happened in him/her. Probably, here the poet is working on the perception of the subaltern body as the site of sin, and proposes that in Jesus not only can the sins happening in it be forgiven but the subaltern body can even turn into a site of blessing. For this, the believer yearns for the savior Christ to act on the normal occurrences of subaltern daily living in Travancore by ending the “burdens of the day,” and casting away

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story, the Brahmins (priestly class) were born out of the mouth of the primordial man; the Kshatriya (warrior class) was born out of the hands; the Vaishyas (traders and merchants) out of the thigh; and the Shudra (servile class) out of the feet. The Chandalas or Dalits (subaltern slave castes) were not even described as having any part in this creation story, thereby, assigning them an “outside” and “inferior” existence that corresponded to their social reality of living a degraded and de-humanized life. See, Kalpana Kannabiran, *Tools of Justice Non-Discrimination and The Indian Constitution* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012), 138.

“suffering, illness, evil dreams, temptations and untimely death.” To the subalterns of Travancore these realities of life and daily incidents that contributed to such problems, were “obstacles” that continuously impeded any possibility of them leading a normal life in society. Interestingly then, Jesus is envisaged as the “obstacle remover” and “fate remover” to whom the subaltern can turn to in prayer and hope. Rev. Paulose conveys these aspects of Christ’s work in his songs:

The magi are about to proceed in haste  
To worship and present gold and other things  
Before the Savior who is obstacle remover...<sup>75</sup>

In another song Paulose writes:

Jesus Son of God bears the burden of sins of the world  
He is remover of all fate of this judged world, the only Holy sacrifice Lamb of God...<sup>76</sup>

Also in Manasseh’s translated work:

King of Kings, to frighten and make enemies run away, support us  
Come Lord, to eliminate deceit and maliciousness from the whole nation.<sup>77</sup>

The stanza of Rev. Manasseh’s song which is an addition to translation of the Lutheran Hymnal song “God bless our native land,” has the poet asserting the urgency of the King Jesus to eliminate deceit and maliciousness from the land in which the subalterns live. Further, the prayer is that the King would also support the believers by frightening and making their enemies run away. These verses point to the subaltern yearning for God to intervene in their social living and

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<sup>75</sup> See, song 89, translated from the original Malayalam.

<sup>76</sup> See, song 198, translated from the original Malayalam.

<sup>77</sup> Song 427 of the IELC hymnal is a song translated by Rev. Manasseh from the original English “God bless our native land.” This song has two stanzas in the Lutheran Hymnal no. 577, but Manasseh’s translation has three. This particular stanza that is quoted is an addition. See, song 427, translated from the original Malayalam. Also see, song 577, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, (Concordia: 1941).



radically change their habitat. Furthermore, the verses of Paulose’s songs show how the subaltern obsession with fate and luck is significantly targeted by the subaltern poet. The internalization of the imposed hegemonic ideas of fate as the reason for subaltern suffering and degradation and the experienced reality of obstacles impeding subaltern emancipation and uplift; are contested by the poet here. The subaltern poet promotes the idea that Jesus Christ is remover of all fate of this judged world by His work of sacrificing Himself for the sins of this judged world. As a result, now the subaltern believer is encouraged to radically challenge and reject the perception of him/her being the bearer of bad fate. In Christ, he/she is blessed. Thus, the earlier fixed schema for subaltern life is radically subverted by the victorious Jesus, because instead of the subalterns being resigned to their fate they are now set free from their fate and can access blessings in Christ that had been denied until now.

**Chorus:** Lord, son of God, give us your blessing!

Ocean of blessing, give us your blessing

Answer the prayers of sinners and slaves who suffer in this world with burdens of sin.

“Vessels of anger”<sup>78</sup> come with longing to take baptism in the name of the Triune God

Please renew them for you, by laying your loving hands on their heads.

Lord through the way of eternal life watch over these new born babies

O Jesus let them with eagerness to Jesus drink the milk of the word every day.

Lord, help these to die and rise again through baptism and stand steadfast in your Holy church...

Come near us and give us victory when the sins that fells humankind—Ropes of Satan (worldly desires and enjoyment of the flesh), create struggles in our life.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> The term “vessels of anger,” translated from the Malayalam song, can be taken to mean vessels as kitchen utensils; or more likely in this case—as characters—caught in the drama of violence as “instruments and victims” of anger.

<sup>79</sup> See, song 204, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery:

The above baptism song of Rev. Paulose sees entry into the community of Christ as a huge blessing. This perception itself is a shift from the Lutheran missionary emphasis of baptism being a means of grace by which salvation is made available in Christ. More interestingly, the poet depicts subalterns as “vessels of anger” who yearns to enter the Body of Christ and prays for renewal through the son of God’s “loving hands.” Here, viewing the subalterns as “vessels of anger” from the perspective of an object probably points to their existential reality as objects of violent exploitation and de-humanization; while seen from the sense of subject, it probably refers to the unethical and destructive lifestyle that drove the subaltern to inflict pain on themselves and others. Importantly, the work of Christ is seen in terms of His renewing touch falling on the heads of such believers and watching over them daily through the “drinking” of the word of God. The linking of the word of God with the nurturing imagery of “drinking” milk probably is an attempt by the poet to target both the need for systematic catechetical instruction and also the importance of being filled everyday with the word of God.

Importantly, the song projects the subaltern aspiration that in the new community of Christ the subaltern not only retrieves his/her humanity as one “touched” by God, in contrast to the imposed hegemonic Travancore practice where the Sambavars cannot be touched by God or the high castes because of their ability to “pollute” them; but also, as receiving protection and victory from all eternal life denying Satanic forces that create struggles and failure in human life. Undoubtedly, the subaltern Lutheran believer is able to conceive and proclaim such a prayer because of their access to new socio-economic and religio-cultural resources that were made available due to the Lutheran mission in their midst. The fact that the presence of the Lutheran missionaries provided the subaltern Lutherans with a powerful agent of advocacy, who could

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2010).

protect them from the local hegemonic elites who troubled them, was also attributed and transferred to the religio-cultural experience where Lord Jesus was understood as working to redeem them from sinful and suffering existence, and providing them liberation and refuge. The King Jesus now becomes the source of all things in the life of the subaltern, thereby affirming His role as Provider Lord:

O King Jesus! The sinner is coming, end my sadness of sin O provider! ...

O King Jesus! Give liberation, hear my supplication O dear provider! ...

My King! In the shadow of death, you are my refuge dear provider!<sup>80</sup>

As we have seen in this section, the subaltern Lutheran perception of the work of Christ, fully engages the gospel with the fallen subaltern daily living condition. An important aspect that stands out in this reflection is the significance attached to Immanuel God's presence upon the subaltern condition of sadness and suffering.

### **Subaltern Believer's Hope in Christ: Redemption from the Web and Fear of Death, Death a Vehicle of Comfort to Leave Behind Worldly Suffering and Enter the Pure Abode Where Justice Abides**

Having understood Jesus as one who came into the world as one like them and having revealed His glory as the victorious King, Jesus is now seen as providing and calling the subaltern believer to a new life filled with hope in Christ. This is especially meaningful and important to the subaltern believer because his life is still lived in the midst of suffering and sadness. Nevertheless, the subaltern understands that God in His fullness of time was born for them, tolerated suffering to save them and brings them into heaven through His work of redemption and advocacy. This hope of entering a new place of promise captures the imagination

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<sup>80</sup> See, song 247, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

of the subaltern believer in yet another song from Rev. Paulose:

**Chorus:** O Ocean of compassion show mercy and protect me (a) slave,

O God who redeemed the people who were trapped in the web of death

In the fullness of time with mercy son of God born in a virgin

Elohim fulfilled excellently God's will.

You tolerated many sufferings to save sinners and admit (them) into great Canaan

O God Jesus Christ who is the Holy son of God the Father.

To destroy the head of the king of death Jesus died and rose again

O God who redeemed this slave from the fear of death.

Advocating for me by sitting at the right side of God the Father...

O Jesus strengthen (my) faith...

You will return immediately to give me the wonderful gift of luck

Reign over me (and) lead me (and) admit me into land of heaven.<sup>81</sup>

The above song captures the futuristic hope that the subaltern believer places in Christ Jesus, while also acknowledging the present redemption that he/she experiences in God. In a hint of their existential despair, and probably drawing inspiration from the Exodus Red sea story, the believer affirms that God who redeemed people "trapped in the web of death" had come to redeem the subaltern sinner. The subaltern now draws strength from knowing that the son of God has through His death and resurrection destroyed the head of the king of death and thereby redeemed him/her from the fear of death. The poet expresses this aspect by depicting the subaltern believer as a "slave," for whom the fear of death was not only a fearful memory of their past but also a prevalent concern in subaltern everyday living in twentieth century Travancore. Moreover this overcoming of the fear of death is built on the belief and hope that

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<sup>81</sup> See, song 332, translated from the original Malayalam.

Christ Jesus advocates for the sinner before the Father in heaven. This hope now expands into the future as the subaltern believer believes in Christ's immediate return, and His reign and leadership over the subaltern believer and his/her final admittance into heaven. Interestingly, this entry into heaven is also a "lucky" event for the subaltern believer, as this is the place of God's glory—a pure abode where justice abides.

Eternal bliss is my luck, it is a pure abode where justice abides

True faith is worthy of being welcomed, even when good works are unworthy.

The abode where God's glory shines, the abode where Holy angels sing

The abode where the Lamb of God and saints abide with happiness.

Here is no night, cold, heat, thirst and hunger, pain, sadness, death, there is also no sin

In that Satan (is) without happiness.

How lucky we see God and shine as children equal to the Sun,

(then) joining with our friends the host of angels we sing praise songs there.

Quickly handsome bridegroom of Zion will be revealed in the clouds and (will) admit us

Salvation of love is a gift for everybody, (and it is) Jesus' love earning.

We have to wait for the bridegroom's coming, quickly we have to pass through the path of suffering,

And within seconds the earth will perish and tears will vanish, (we will be) in the lap of merciful Jesus.<sup>82</sup>

Also in another Paulose song:

Surely this is age of Salvation, who can tell what will happen tomorrow...

Everyday suffering is increasing in the world, sadness is growing and not ending

Today or any day death will come to all, nobody gets exemption from that duty

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<sup>82</sup> See, song 467, translated from the original Malayalam, *IELC Malayalam Hymn Book* (Sulthan Bathery: 2010).

The True Veda reveals who will accept (you) in eternal bliss

(if we) believe in glorious Jesus then death is a vehicle of comfort to reach salvation

Jesus will come again immediately to take His believers with him there.<sup>83</sup>

In the first song above, some of the major concerns of subaltern living are projected as accessible to the subaltern convert in eternal life. Concerns of this world, such as lack of justice and happiness, thirst and hunger, pain, value and dignity, and love; are visualized as being available to the subaltern believer in heaven. Thus, heaven above is perceived as a land that exists in stark contrast to the problematic land of Travancore where the subalterns live at present. It is a place where justice abides, where there is happiness, where there is no night, cold, heat, thirst and hunger, pain, sadness, death and sin. In an additional interesting imagination, the subaltern poet points out that in this heavenly abode Satan is the one without happiness, thereby drawing a contrast with their present living conditions where Satan is happy to see his success in the pain and suffering of the people. The hope is that because of Jesus, salvation earned as a gift by Him for everybody is now made available to the believing individual/community such that they are admitted into this place of subaltern yearning. The subaltern in distress cannot believe his luck in being accepted into such an imagined reality, and he/she eagerly lives with the hope that with a quick passing through the path of death he/she would be in the lap of merciful Jesus, shining as children and celebrating their presence before God with songs of praise.

Additionally, in the second song, the poet captures a common subaltern theme—namely, the impermanence of life and increase of sadness and suffering—and dismisses “death” as a normal occurrence for all human kind. In a significant move, the poet assuages the believer and instills hope by furthering the idea that for those who believe in Jesus, death is not a final and painful event; rather, it “is a vehicle of comfort to reach salvation.” As we see, the native

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<sup>83</sup> See, song 445, verses 1, 3–7, translated from the original Malayalam.

Lutheran response to the gospel enables the Sambavars to resourcefully engage their subaltern condition and imaginatively construct a hopeful future on which they can ground themselves in the dismal present and move forward in life's journey by faith in Christ Jesus.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen how native theological reflection from the subaltern Sambavars was articulated from the vantage point of their own socio-economic and religio-cultural location. From this perspective the Sambavar Lutheran community appropriated the gospel message and contested their own past religio-cultural worldview and beliefs by creatively using Christian concepts introduced among them by the Lutheran missionary. In and through such songs the subaltern Lutherans expressed their faith in Jesus Christ, but also extended this faith to dialogue with aspects of their daily socio-cultural living in Travancore that hindered and weakened their troubled existence. This goes to show that even though the gospel message was introduced and controlled heavily by the Lutheran missionaries during the MELIM period, there was a healthy native theological reflection that remained latent underneath. The gospel-culture interaction during the MELIM phase in Trivandrum surely had engaged the missionaries, native agents and native converts in the active task of transforming their world.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **CONCLUSION**

This research has tried to bring to the fore the work of MELIM set within a context of colonial modernity and subaltern aspiration for transformation of their “lived” existence. Placing the MELIM outreach efforts to subaltern India within the context of village life in late nineteenth and early twentieth century South Travancore, what emerges is the realization that the subaltern converts actively sought ways to change their own existential “lived reality” by employing available resources to socially, economically, and religio-culturally emancipate themselves. In this attempt the gospel message brought through the agency of the American Lutheran missionaries turned out to be a significant “dialogue partner” with which the subaltern Lutheran convert re-imagined his/her life and envisioned a new being with implications for the present and the future.

#### **Significance of History**

This research has mapped out the history of the work done by MELIM in South Travancore among different castes, and has documented how the Lutheran mission started in the Malayalam areas as a result of concerted efforts and assiduous wooing of the American Lutheran missionaries by the subaltern Sambavar community. Furthermore, this story has made abundantly clear that the Lutheran missionary believed in catechizing his converts from a very doctrinally sound Lutheran position and articulated his disappointment and disillusionment to the Home Board in St. Louis, when the converts did not measure up to its standards. In addition, what emerges in this research is that the mission phase of the Lutheran Church in the Malayalam



lands was by no means a smooth transmission of the gospel to the native community. On the contrary, it was a dynamic gospel-culture encounter that led to the establishing of the Lutheran church in the midst of diverging goals, concerns, successes and disappointments. Importantly, this engagement on the field affected both the missionary and the natives. As theologian and missiologist Andrew Walls points out, the western missionary contributed immensely to the knowledge of “non-western” societies by working and living among the natives and engaging their culture. In this engagement however, they clearly exhibited their double identity. As representative Christians, with all their human fallen-ness and limitations of human vision and foresight, they tried to do characteristic Christian things; while as representative Westerners they displayed their cultural and intellectual superiority, shaped by western history and conditions and values, western social networks and intellectual discourse.<sup>1</sup> Keeping Walls insights in mind, this research project also finds that the American Lutheran missionaries in their interactions with the subalterns of South Travancore were representative Western Christians; who shaped by their history, culture and values, proclaimed and lived their faith in the native culture. As bearers of an enlightened worldview and Christianity, they believed that they had to “instruct” and align their native converts into their way of thinking about life and faith. This meant that what was important in the transmission of faith to the subaltern converts was adherence to “right belief” as displayed in the learning and confession of pure Lutheran doctrine and systematized propositional approaches to Biblical truth.<sup>2</sup> In short, just like any western missionary during that period the MELIM missionaries stood within the framework of Modernity, and worked their way through

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Walls points out that the missionary movement more than any other aspect of western society, contributed crucially to the knowledge about the non-western world as a result of their engagement with the cultures of the native people as they lived and worked amongst them. Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History. Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), xviii.

<sup>2</sup> Meinzen, *A Church in Mission*, 76–85.

the binary opposite perceptions of the “enlightened” West and the “lazy and superstitious” Orient.<sup>3</sup> For this reason, epistemological categories like “ignorance,” “superstition,” “truth,” and “knowledge,” were used to differentiate between the Western Lutheran missionary and the non-western oriental “other,” with the belief that with the dissemination of Christianity and its values the “other” would develop themselves to some level of “enlightenment.” However, even as the researcher passes this judgment on the missionary and his work based on the benefit of present day analytical tools; one has to concede that probably the missionaries living and working in those times would seldom have realized their own Christian faith being integrated with the ideas and values of Modernity.

The missionary perception of his role as the one who brings “light” to the darkness of native life and thereby “saving souls,” becomes sufficiently clear when we look at the mission history that has been written about MELIM up till now. Written mainly from the perspective of Missionary Historiography, the work and sacrifices of missionaries in MELIM have been highlighted and celebrated. Even though missionary efforts in MELIM have been rightfully documented in such writings; for without their crucial intervention subaltern life in Travancore would even to this day have been one of oppression and de-humanization; what has been sorely missed however, is the story of the converted populace. It is in the telling of their story that the significance of MELIM in enabling the subaltern Sambavars take advantage of opportunities made available by colonial modernity, namely—education, alternative structures of power for socio-political participation like church and its mission institutions, new religio-cultural vision,

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<sup>3</sup> This perception comes across in many of the missionary letters to the Home Board during this period. For example, the initial Director of the Trivandrum Lutheran mission Rev. F. R. Zucker in many of his letters portrays the MELIM missionaries as working hard and overtime to convert and help the “lazy” and “superstitious” subaltern convert in Trivandrum. Also, Rev. Kauffeld, another missionary during the 1940s, observes that the missionary no matter how much time he has spent in the oriental field will always never fully come to terms and know the ways of the Orient.

perception of the new Self, etc.; is revealed. Furthermore, at the larger level of academic and political dialogue, the silence of target converts in traditional missionary historiography has been used by vested interests in India to further interpretations of “passivity” among subaltern converts to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, we find that even during the mission period of MELIM such questions over the lack of adequate spiritual concerns among subaltern converts was a dominant perception even among the missionaries. Here, even though one cannot completely dismiss the role played by the native elite and powerful local agents within the Lutheran mission to lead the missionaries to such a perception of the subaltern convert; one also has to concede that the primary concern and enthusiasm of the subalterns to attain some level of socio-economic emancipation and access to resources as a result of their association with the Lutheran missionary, heavily contributed to such negative perceptions about their motivation to convert. It is in this regard that this historical research assumes significance; because as one wades through the different layers of transactions taking place within MELIM, what is revealed is subaltern initiative, agency, aspiration and hope for new life in the Body of Christ. Consequently, we are led to see how the subalterns not only were desirous of socio-economic benefits but were also ripe for religio-cultural transformation. Thus, by documenting subaltern Lutheran participation in the building of the church in South Travancore, we not only appreciate the Lutheran missionary’s contribution as immense and vital, especially in bringing the Lutheran message and also important resources to the local culture; but also celebrate the subaltern Lutheran agents and converts from within the culture who likewise suffered, contributed and participated in their own way, in establishing the community of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> A dominant argument found in right wing Hindu circles in India is the narrative that unsuspecting and ignorant Dalits and Adivasis of India were coaxed and coerced by Christianizing missions to convert to Christianity with false promises of “no caste,” “egalitarianism,” or “new life.” See, P. Kauffeld to Home Board, Letter, 18 March 1947, Kauffeld 1947 file, CHI Archives, St. Louis.

This leads us to another interesting aspect emerging from this historical search, namely, the emergence of the subaltern subject in the history of MELIM. Here Gayatri Spivak's problematizing of the voice of the subaltern with her question, "Can the Subaltern Speak," comes to mind. Surely, as Spivak points out, the subaltern subject does not speak outside of the dominant discourse that supplies the language and conceptual categories for the subaltern to speak.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, the subaltern subject in MELIM comes across as a representative of subaltern contradictory consciousness. At times the subject remains subservient and confined to the control of the mission and its agents, while at other times; he/she surfaces as one driven by "critical consciousness" to fight against injustice and assert his/her own rights. More importantly, the subaltern subject in MELIM history comes across as someone who is able to negotiate the maze of opportunities and pitfalls, and through "hits and misses" makes use of available resources and opportunities to engage and further the subaltern cause. This ability to critically engage the historical experience of their "lived reality," and seek transformation of their social being with the active involvement of Christ Jesus, as seen in their theological reflection; points to the subaltern subject's skill at constructing a new subjectivity by appropriating available resources within the boundaries and control of the new faith system and its proponents. Thus, the subaltern subject does speak in MELIM history and displays this ability by constructing an alternative mode of representation about themselves through the appropriation of Christian theological categories and conceptual frameworks such as "creation," "sin," "Christ,"

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<sup>5</sup> Spivak's conclusion that the "subaltern cannot speak" has been at times interpreted to mean that those living oppressed lives in the periphery of socio-cultural and political relations cannot voice their resistance, or that their subjective voices could only be heard within the dominant language; because there is no "pure" subaltern consciousness that is devoid of the imprints of the colonizer. However, in drawing such conclusion, her primary concern was related to the essentializing of a subaltern identity wherein the subaltern in an ideal sense was autonomous from the hegemonic elite. Spivak contends that the subaltern can speak in the deconstruction of the transaction between the subaltern and the colonizer. See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subalterns Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrifice," *Wedge*, 7/8, (Winter/Spring 1985): 120–30.

“redemption,” “blessing,” “salvation,” “faith,” “born again” etc.; to contest hegemonic portrayals of their “polluted and bad-karmic” subjecthood and thereby reconfigure their own subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, a significant aspect of documenting subaltern participation and theological reflection in the history of MELIM is its value in engaging the historical consciousness of the subalterns in South Travancore. Here, one has to admit that the consciousness of the subaltern Sambavars was not entrenched on the foundations of their history. As a slave caste, history was something that was alien to them as they were consigned to a peripheral existence where daily living itself was a pre-occupation and struggle for the “self.” Also, the reality of being a slave caste meant that for the Sambavars (and other slave castes) a significant part of their oppression included a rupturing of their ability to remember and construct a history of their own, such that their very voices could not be brought together for collective mobilization and emancipation. However, through their engagement with MELIM we see the subaltern Sambavars becoming historical subjects with an aspirational future. These aspirations were imagined by seeking an addressal of the dismal present in which they lived but with the hope of God’s active presence in “lived reality.” In a sense, the subaltern Lutheran community in MELIM comes across as what Emmanuel Katongole calls “tactical communities;” using tactics to sustain and further their existence.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the Sambavar Lutherans as a weak community lacking socio-economic and

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<sup>6</sup> Sathianathan Clarke in his explanation of subaltern religion explains it as a site of contestation in which subaltern communities reconfigure their own subjectivity, through: copious, though judicious borrowing from the dominant religious tradition; calculating, though provisional, piecing together of all available symbolic resources; and creative, though alternate-mode, imagining of their own collective religious experiences. See Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 4, 126.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Katongole writes about the methods that African Christian communities employ to critically engage and survive the twenty-first century post-modern context. Katongole builds upon Michel de Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics, where strategies are methods used by the “strong” from its own well-identified and delimited base of power to manage relations vis a vis an exterior “other” who could be a threat or a target; while tactics is the instrument of the “weak” who not having a clearly delineated locus for themselves, operate through isolated actions by taking advantage of the opportunities that arise from the cracks that open in particular conjunctions of the surveillance by strategic powers. See Emmanuel M. Katongole, “Twenty-First Century: On Surviving Postmodernism,” in *Interpreting the New Testament in Africa*, eds. Mary Getui, Tinyiko

political clout, play within the rules set by the village power-holders in Travancore and by the missionaries in their mission created avenues and spaces; and take advantage of opportunities that open up at given moments of time to further their own cause. Among the many instances, events such as the visit of the Home Board officials in 1944 where the Sambavars petition the Executive Secretary to relax education requirements for their students; petitioning in 1948 for better opportunities in the mission; petitioning for the establishing of the native church to be put off for another ten (10) years in 1954–1956 period; can be seen and understood as instances of such tactical moves being played by the Sambavars in conjunction with their subaltern allies to critically engage and win concessions from a position of weakness. A negative consequence of being a “tactical community” is that even today the subaltern Sambavars in the Malayalam lands do not exhibit a great urge to be conscientized about their history and learn from the mistakes of the past. Exhibiting elements of being an uncritical community they continue living in an oral tradition of ascribing blame to others for the ills and weaknesses of the community.

Consequently, still controlled by their subaltern contradictory consciousness and vulnerable to the manipulative designs of hegemonic socio-political forces; the Sambavar Lutherans exhibit a tendency to speak about the church as being “made” for them by American Lutheran missionaries. As a result, when disillusionment crept in and better opportunities came by, the subaltern Sambavars in the Lutheran community for personal benefit and well-being took the recourse of reversion back into Hinduism.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, the significance of MELIM history lies in reminding the subaltern community of their ancestor’s historical response to the gospel

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Malueleke, and Justin Ukpong (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2001), 266–68, 273.

<sup>8</sup> Many Sambavar Lutherans have re-converted over the years into Hinduism as a result of government benefits of “protective discrimination” for previously untouchable communities being denied to them. Thus, by use of Hindu names to identify themselves, buying of Hindu certificates through Aryasamaj and Gazette notifications etc., the Sambavars have sought to take the benefit of government reservation in jobs and education thereby gradually distancing themselves from the Lutheran Church. See, Christudas, *Tranquebar to Travancore*, 86–96.

message, of their participation along with the missionaries in establishing the Body of Christ in subaltern Travancore life, and also locating the gospel in their own life situation. In so doing, MELIM history can become a dynamic co-partner in activating and motivating the community to appreciate its own commitment, investment and aspiration; and also critically evaluate and respond to the needs of the Lutheran Church in Kerala today.

### **Christian Faith and Its Contextualization in the Native Culture**

As we have seen in this research project, the contextualization of the gospel in the local terrain of Sambavar “lived reality” shows that the conversion of the subalterns during the mission period was not driven only by a desire to gain social and economic emancipation.<sup>9</sup> What emerges from this research project is the fact that there was also a pressing desire among the subalterns, like the Sambavars in this case, to re-configure their religio-cultural worldview and beliefs and overcome their religiosity of suffering, fear and appeasement. Thus, this research makes the case that the desire of the Malayalee Sambavars in Travancore to enter the Lutheran mission was an effort by this oppressed community under the leadership of influential community leaders to reject and overcome a “non-egalitarian, exploitative and despair instilling” symbolic worldview that was manifested in the socio-economic and religio-cultural way of life in Travancore. For this, they sought an alliance with the Lutheran missionary and through the active involvement of their kinsmen, the subaltern Sambavars sought to enter into the Christian world vision of human living that proclaimed a counter-cultural “egalitarian, accepting and hope-instilling” worldview. In this new religious meaning system the Sambavar Lutheran converts made use of theological resources in the newly embraced religion to resourcefully construct an

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<sup>9</sup> Historians such as Dick Kooiman have suggested that Dalit conversions in South Travancore had socio-economic emancipation as its primary objective. Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India. The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989), 197–200.

alternate worldview that spoke directly to their concerns, aspirations and hopes.<sup>10</sup> The perception of a “loving, redeeming and blessing-providing” God manifested in the socio-economic and religio-cultural generosity displayed by the benevolent Lutheran missionary who was ready to engage, literally embrace the “polluting slave,” and even represent him/her before powerful administrative authorities; had a far reaching impact on the collective consciousness of Sambavar converts. Undoubtedly, the Christian faith and its perceived community stood in symbolic contrast to that of their previous religiosity of fear and a community impacted by socio-economic exploitation and degradation.

This research project has also demonstrated how the Christian message was contextualized in the native culture by the subaltern Sambavar Lutheran community. In the early twentieth century, Sambavars of MELIM lived as a community of subalterns surviving at the periphery of native village life in South Travancore. Caught in the midst of difficult life realities, we see the Sambavar Lutherans coming under the influence of new religious vocabulary, vision and values, and making use of these previously unavailable resources to construct their new belief system. This theological reflection was made possible in part because of the Lutheran missionaries attempt to translate the gospel into the local vernacular. As a result, songs, bible tracts in Malayalam, Christiani magazine, etc. were mediums used to contextualize the gospel message to life in Travancore. However, even though the primary concern of such efforts was to disseminate pure Lutheran doctrine and thoughts to the people in Travancore, over time one thing that becomes clear is that this missionary supervised gospel proclamation also had a responsive effect among native Lutheran converts. For instance, we have seen how the native Sambavar community heard the message and opened themselves for the gospel to address and

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson and Clarke, *Religious Conversion*, 346.



challenge their “lived reality.” Even as the missionaries stood within a western modern worldview and life practice, their theological “instructions” that probably remained in the world of abstractions were taken up by the native Lutheran agents and converts to creatively engage it with their life concerns and struggles. Thus, as Lamin Sanneh points out, the Western missionary takes an important piece of the credit for results achieved in Christianizing missions, because they provided the most important categories for faith in this intercultural encounter, even though such encounter might or might not have conformed to their motives and intentions.<sup>11</sup>

More importantly, what we see in this research project is the locating of faith in the socio-cultural reality and experience of the people which also provides meaning and hope. Drawing from Peter Berger’s observations on the “Sacred,” what we see in this historical reminiscence of Sambavar Lutheran religiosity is a faith articulation that resourcefully uses socio-cultural materials filtered through the symbolically constructed reality of personal experience. Thus, religion and its faith practice bestow upon the believer a valid ontological status by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference that becomes the symbol system which imposes order on the Sambavar life and their universe of living. This new religious affirmation, maintained through interactions within the community, now shelters the individual/community from chaos by providing explanations for suffering, injustice and tragedy.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, as we see in this research, the subaltern convert is provided with an ultimate purpose in life which enables him/her to organize, perform daily activities, and aspire for a better future; with purpose and meaning. Thus we see the Christian faith becoming plausible to the subaltern Sambavar converts through their contextualizing of new concepts such as “sin,” “faith,” “salvation,” “life in

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<sup>11</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process. The African Dimension* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 152.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 32–51.

Christ,” etc. to address their own struggle-filled everyday existential “lived reality.” An important part of this cross-cultural process of gospel dissemination involved the subaltern Sambavars resourcefully employing the gospel message to challenge the “plausibility structures”<sup>13</sup> of their pre-Christian religious and hegemonic socio-cultural transactions of twentieth century Travancore to construct and live in the new religious system.

As the Sambavar Lutherans imagine and align their lives to the new religious system, we see them being selective in prioritizing certain aspects of the gospel message to answer their life questions and make the gospel relevant and meaningful to their daily living. In fact, for the western missionary the motivation to engage the non-western world was because of the conviction that Christ belonged to all humanity and that the good news of Christ could be intelligibly received by all humanity.<sup>14</sup> However, in their attempt to transmit faith in Christ across linguistic and cultural frontiers it was revealed that Christ had meanings and significance never guessed before.<sup>15</sup> For instance, in this research project we have seen that when the gospel engaged with subaltern Sambavar culture,<sup>16</sup> the confessing of Jesus Christ as protector and redeemer Lord meaningful to the life context of the Sambavars, became a religio-cultural resource for the community to ground their life in this chaotic and troublesome world of daily living and aspire for a peaceful present and blessed eternity. Thus, what we see in the Sambavar

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Berger introduces the concept of “plausibility structures” into his discussion of religion as dialectic, where religion is maintained by “plausibility structures,” whose weakening can have a consequently weakening effect on the religious system. These “plausibility structures” are the conversations and interactions of people (socio-cultural context for a system of belief) that contribute to the religion’s body of knowledge and its institution. For instance, religious institutions like churches, synagogues, or friendship network, kinship relations in village communities, are “plausibility structures.” With regards to the context of Sambavars in South Travancore during the period of this research, the plausibility structures like “caste rules,” “belief in pervasive influence of evil spirits,” etc. contributed to the maintaining of Sambavar pre-Christian religiosity and its meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Walls, *The Missionary*, xviii.

<sup>15</sup> Walls, *The Missionary*, xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Culture here is not understood as a static reality, rather is a dynamic reality that is connected to the praxis of contextual theology. See Felix Wilfred, *Margins. Site of Asian Theologies* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008), 10.

theological reflection brought forth by the subaltern Lutheran pastor-poet is the weaving together of the cosmic and the anthropological into the theological, with contextual theological reflection starting from the socio-cultural and contextual experiences of the community.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, building upon Felix Wilfred's observation, we see that the theological reflection of the Sambavar Lutherans in Travancore is a contextual theology grounded in the "interpretation of life" in a concretely lived and realized context.<sup>18</sup> In this the context includes aspects of "time" (historicity) and also "space" (the matrix of culture and civilization, modes of thinking, and ways of acting).<sup>19</sup> Epistemologically speaking, the Sambavar response to the gospel concurs with the view that our "thoughts draw their origin from experience."<sup>20</sup>

Similar observations to the ones made above can also be seen in Jeremiah Anderson's study of the Paraiyars in Thulasigramam, Tamil Nadu. He concludes that the Paraiyars demonstrate malleability of religion where the sacred is part of the social, with religious beliefs and worldviews being grounded and embodied in the community experience.<sup>21</sup> He also notes that the Paraiyar worldview based on the epistemological ground of their social setting is locally conceptualized, with notions of the less visible world stemming from tangible, conflict ridden daily existence and vice-versa. Accordingly, since they do not have a dualistic understanding of the universe, the Paraiyar Christians hold the less visible world and the visible world together as a complete unit in which human beings and spirits interact daily.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, an important aspect that emerges from this research project, that belongs to a different historical time and space, is

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<sup>17</sup> Wilfred, *Margins. Site of Asian Theologies*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Wilfred, *Margins. Site of Asian Theologie*, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Wilfred, *Margins. Site of Asian Theologies*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Wilfred, *Margins. Site of Asian Theologies*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah Anderson, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 149–50.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars*, 152.

the ability of the Sambavar converts in the Malayalam part of the country to contextualize the gospel in their own life situation where the sacred and the social were held together as mutually dependent and infiltrating each other. However, under the influence of the Lutheran missionaries and their “instruction” we see the Sambavars begin to change their perception of the sacred and their lived reality.<sup>23</sup> As the subaltern converts delineate between the oppositional binary categories of “good” and “evil,” the Lord Jesus Christ is perceived and confessed as the “good” that brings blessings, comfort and protection through His presence among the subalterns; while “evil” is attributed to Satan and the previous religio-cultural categories such as “pey,” and “pishachu” etc. Thus, the Lord Jesus Christ and His word introduces and sustains the “good” in the new vision of life for the subaltern converts; meaning that when the Sambavar Lutheran converts fear harm or feel the urge to get back at possible opponents in real life, they quietly approach a native “pujari”<sup>24</sup> to carry out their plans.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, the work of Christ is not contextualized to include any negative functions that formed part of the previous Sambavar religiosity.<sup>26</sup> Rather, what is seen is that when the need is felt by the Sambavar Lutheran

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<sup>23</sup> In interviews done by the researcher, the Sambavar Lutheran converts mostly argue that any talk of “pey” and acts of “evil forces” in the life of people today is mostly “old people talk.” The new Sambavar convert who has grown in the Lutheran Church in Trivandrum see themselves as being “in Christ,” and having a new life in Him.

<sup>24</sup> A native temple priest.

<sup>25</sup> Even today Sambavars in the Lutheran villages display a sense of fear about people indulging in witchcraft (Shudram) to harm them or their families. Other forms of fear instilling practices are those of “Shabikyum” and “Praavum” (cursing) that are believed to have efficacious power. Some of the practices to get back at opponents include the practice of “Kutti Adi” where the person visits a Hindu temple or subaltern “Kavu” and pays the pujari to insert a sharp stick into a sacred “Aal” (Banyan) tree to harm an opponent.

<sup>26</sup> This aspect of Sambavar Lutheran religiosity is derived from the researchers own experience as a pastor among the subaltern Sambavar community. Also, from interviews with other pastors belonging to the India Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Trivandrum area who have traditionally worked with the subaltern communities, it has been revealed that the Sambavar converts live in a liminal world where they attribute all “good” to the influence and love of Christ Jesus, while ascribing “evil” to works of Satan (pishachu). There have been personal stories narrated by Lutheran pastors where Sambavar Lutheran believers in the villages of Trivandrum while confessing faith in Jesus Christ and being a faithful church-goer, would visit the pujari at the “Paraiyan Kavu” or “Mundani Madan Kovil” near Kottur Lutheran Church (both in the Luthergiri district) to solve issues plaguing him/her or the family, or to scheme to get back at opponents. Rev. Subin Raj, interview by author, Malayinkil, July 1, 2012. Also, Sundereshan pujari, interview by author, Nedumangadu, July 15, 2013. Rev. Manuel Mohanan,

Christian to employ the services of the “pujari,” it is done stealthily by going underground; thereby showing the liminality of the subaltern believer’s religious affiliation.

The aspects of “history” and “contextual theology” converge in the MELIM story of subaltern Malayalee Sambavars of South Travancore. In fact, this story upholds the observations of historians like Colin Firth who point out that in most cases it is not the missionaries who sought out their converts, rather it was the converts who sought out the missionary and initiated conversion movement among their people.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, this MELIM account also points to the contextualization of the gospel by native people in ways that are meaningful and speaking to their life realities. In part, this also explains the plurality of Christian communities in India and explains the reasons for attempts being made at self-theologizing by the Indian Church.

However, today as the Indian church attempts to make the church truly “Indian,” the criticism levelled by the subaltern groups are that it is equating “Indian” in terms of “Sanskritic” culture, where Indian Christian theology is articulated mostly along lines of high caste Indian religious categories.<sup>28</sup> It is in such a context that theologies like Dalit Theology, Tribal theology, Womanist theology etc. have risen in India. Even as the larger theological discussion in India has centered around concerns to document the gospel’s dynamic presence and activity in the lives of its people; in the case of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church<sup>29</sup> we see that native theological reflection has remained unacknowledged and submerged. Presently, even composition of songs

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interview by author, Chenkavilla, July 17, 2013. Rev. Sukumaran, interview by author, Malayinkil, July 20, 2013. Rev. Subin, Rev. Mohanan and Rev. Sukumaran are Sambavar pastors working in the Trivandrum Synod of IELC and have worked mostly in Sambavar Congregations.

<sup>27</sup> Cyril Bruce Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1976), 203.

<sup>28</sup> Jesudas M. Athyal, “Gospel and Cultures: A Subaltern reading of the history of Christian Mission in India,” *Jesudas M Athyal Blog*, accessed December 30, 2014, <http://jmathyal.tripod.com/id18.html>.

<sup>29</sup> The India Evangelical Lutheran Church is the indigenous Church formed through the coming together of the three MELIM Districts—Ambur, Nagercoil and Trivandrum—with all its mission sites.

and poetry (both original and translated) are no longer encouraged and published by the church.<sup>30</sup>

At the very least, this research project points to the importance of encouraging and acknowledging the work of such gifted believers who truly capture the experience of the believing community and bring it to the realm of collective consciousness for spiritual edification and further investigation.

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<sup>30</sup> Probably Rev. E. Manasseh was the last pastor-poet whose compositions (translated works) were published in the Malayalam Lutheran Hymnal. There have been other pastor-poets who have composed songs but they have mainly remained at the level of congregational or personal use. Many of these songs are either forgotten or are no longer in use.

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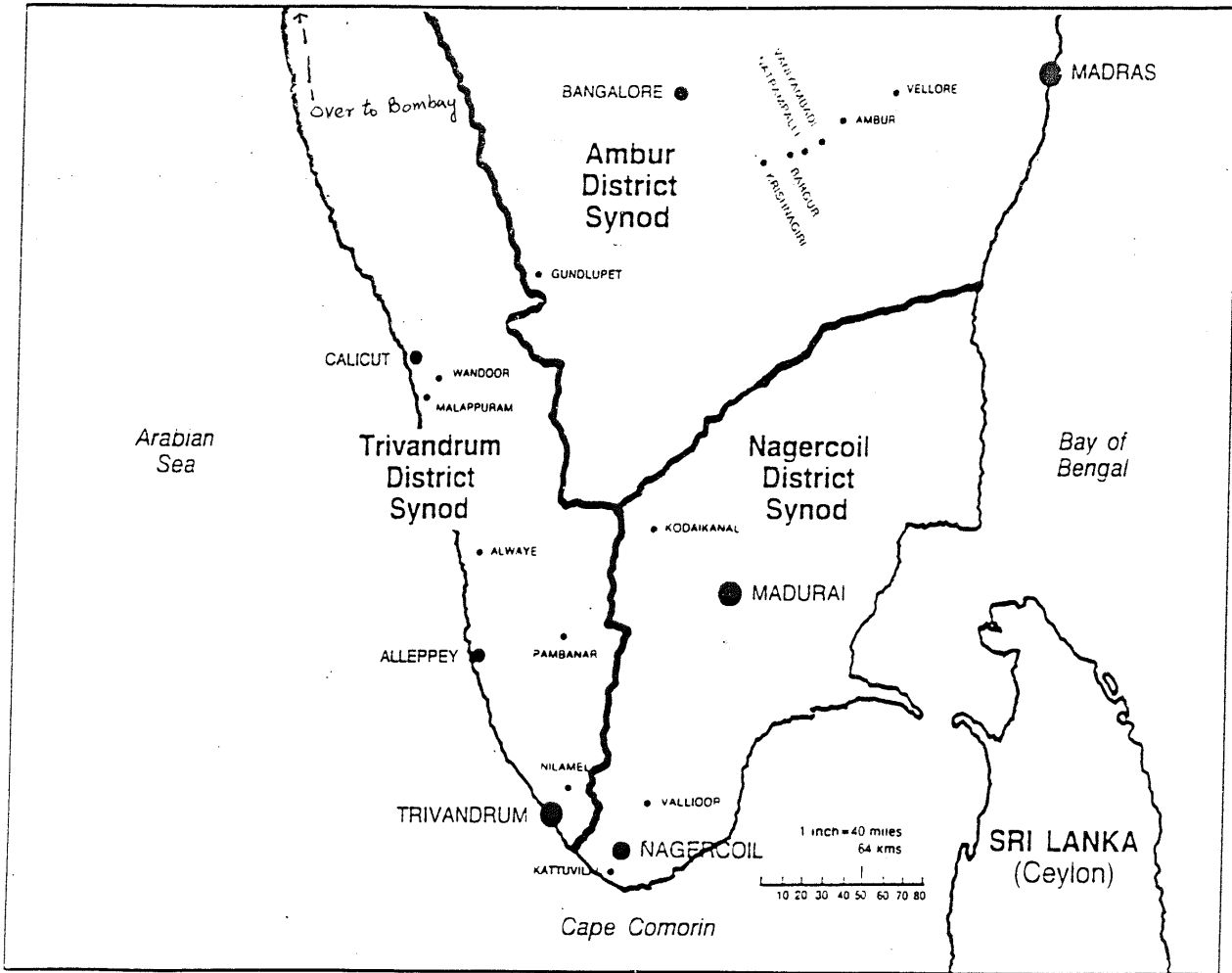


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Map showing the Three Synodical Regions of the India Evangelical Lutheran Church in South India

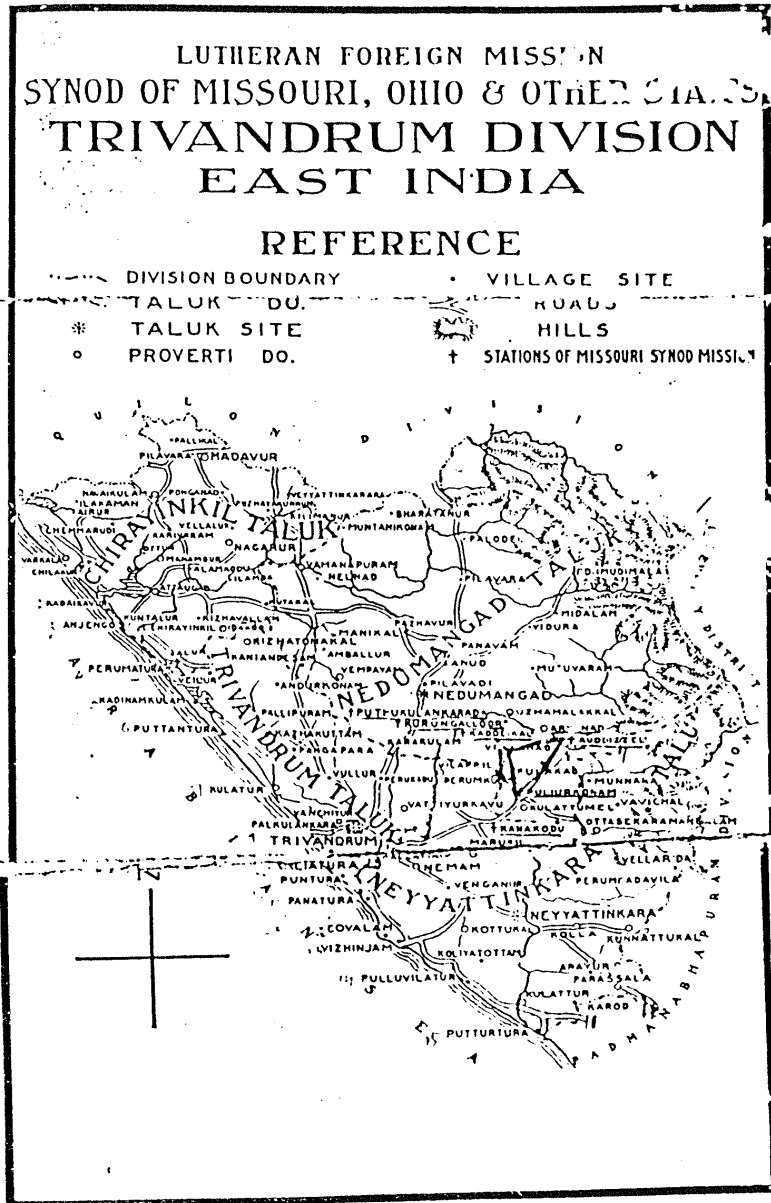
MAP SHOWING THE THREE SYNODICAL REGIONS OF THE INDIA EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTH INDIA



Mission Education Services  
 Department of Stewardship  
 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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 St. Louis, Missouri

Map showing the Mission work of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the Malayalam Speaking regions of Kerala (Trivandrum Division)



Map.2. Mission work in the Malayalam Speaking regions of Kerala

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### **Current Memberships in Academic Societies**

None