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Q1(c)

Syro-Malabar Christians

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Anthropology GS 2 · 10 marks · Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization

1.1 Evolution of the Indian Culture and Civilization-Prehistoric (Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic), Protohistoric (Indus Civilization). Pre-Harappan, Harappan and post-Harappan cultures. Contributions of the tribal cultures to Indian civilization.

Core demand of the question

- Identify the Syro-Malabar Christians as an Indian community
- State origin traditions, rite, language and social organisation
- Place them in Kerala's caste-like ranking and in Indian Christianity
- Avoid treating them as a foreign enclave only

Revision summary

Syro-Malabar Christians are Kerala's East Syriac Catholic community, in communion with Rome.

Origin memory is the Thomas tradition; the rite was Latinised after Diamper and later restored.

They are socially distinct from Malankara, Orthodox, Latin and Protestant Christians.

Endogamy, land and literacy produced a caste-like rank inside Kerala Christianity.

They are an Indian social system using a West-Asian liturgical language, not a foreign enclave.

Introduction

Syro-Malabar Christians are an Eastern Catholic community of Kerala whose liturgy follows the East Syriac tradition while they remain in communion with Rome. They are an Indian social group with a long local history, not a recent missionary colony.

Body

Origin and rite

Community memory traces the church to **Thomas the Apostle** on the Malabar coast in the first century. Historians treat that as a founding legend whose kernel is early West-Asian Christian contact with Tamil-Malayalam ports. The rite used East Syriac, linked to the Church of the East, until Portuguese Latinisation after the **Synod of Diamper (1599)** and later restoration of the Syro-Malabar hierarchy (modern eparchies from the late nineteenth century, a **major archiepiscopal church** in 1992).

They are distinct from **Syro-Malankara** (West Syriac, also Catholic), **Jacobite and Orthodox** Syrian Christians, **Latin Catholics**, and Protestant groups. Anthropology must keep these churches separate; "**Kerala Christian**" is not one caste.

Social structure

Syrian Christians (Nasrani) historically ranked near upper-caste Hindus in land, oil-pressing and trade. **Louis Dumont** and Kerala ethnography noted a **caste-like order inside Christianity: Syrian groups, Latin fisher Catholics, and Dalit converts did not intermarry freely**. **K. C. Alexander** and later sociologists described endogamy, tharavad-like property, and high literacy.

Language is Malayalam in daily life; Syriac remains liturgical. Migration to the Gulf and to Indian cities has produced a translocal parish without dissolving endogamy. Political influence in central Kerala is real, but it is the influence of a landed, educated minority, not of a ghetto.

Anthropological point

Indian Christianity is **indigenised**. Syro-Malabar practice sits inside Kerala kinship, church associations and party competition. **G. S. Ghurye's** civilisation frame and **M. N. Srinivas's** Sanskritisation are incomplete here: status was maintained through church, land and English education as much as through Hindu ritual copying.

Flow diagram

Thomas / East Syriac -> Syro-Malabar
Syro-Malabar -> Kerala kinship and land
Syro-Malabar -> Rome communion
Latin and Dalit Christians -separate ranks. -> Syro-Malabar

Conclusion

Syro-Malabar Christians are an East Syriac Catholic community of Kerala with an apostolic origin story, a restored indigenous rite, and a caste-like internal ranking. They illustrate how a world religion becomes an Indian jati-like group without ceasing to be a church.

Facts & figures

Synod of Diamper 1599

Portuguese-backed synod that imposed Latinising reforms on the St Thomas Christians of Malabar.

Nasrani / Syrian Christian

Local name-group for several Kerala churches of Syriac heritage; not identical with the Syro-Malabar Catholic church alone.

Major archiepiscopal church

The Syro-Malabar Church has sui iuris status with a major archbishop; liturgy is East Syriac in origin.