NATION AND THE STATE, THE NATION-STATE: LIBERATION FROM CONCEPTUAL EURO-CENTRISM[1]

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Abstract

This paper presents the complexity of the realities of the nation, state, and nation-state in the Indian context, which resulted from the application of the western conceptualisations of the nation and the nation-state. In doing so the paper examines in a historical context the western concept of the unitary nation-state. Under this form of conceptualisation, the nation is regarded as independent of and prior or subsequent to the state. It would mean that there can be one or more nations within a single state. In such a conceptualisation no clear distinction is made between ethnic group and nation, and India is not regarded as a nation-state. However, the Indian nation was born out of the Indian nationalism for a sovereign democratic India, which was pluri-ethnic, multi-class, and gender partnered. Hence, the indigenous atypical Indian nation is a creature of civic nationalism, not ethno-nationalism. The origin of the Indian nation-state is rooted in an ethnic plurality joining in a common political cause for national liberation and a national state, without the compulsions of ethnic homogenisation. The western concept of the mono-cultural nation does not fully explain this reality of the Indian nation-state. The Indian experiment gives social science the scope for liberating the concept of the nation from western parochialism and makes it universal.

The 'nation', 'state' and the 'nation-state' are among the politically most volatile concepts in the social sciences. How one views or defines these concepts, largely influences her/his attitude or

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interpretation of all major social and political processes taking place within a country and the world. More often than not, axiomatically, the ethnocentrically embedded ideal-typical western nation-state with its Westphalian and French Revolutionary ancestry becomes the conceptual-theoretical benchmark from which the analysis of the empirical variations in other country-situations takes off. The situation has become even more complex and complicated with the information technology revolution releasing forces of transformation that are beginning to give shape to transnational, global networks and institutions that have trans-sovereign domains. This has raised the spectre of the future of nation-states and continues to be the hot social science concern of western and non-western countries.

In this paper I shall revisit the nation and state and nation-state paradox and proceed to examine the prognosis of the future of the nation-state. This I shall do keeping our Indian experience as the empirical case.

SITUATING THE CONTEXT: NATION AND NATION-STATE

The postcolonial countries have been caught up in the stranglehold of the western conceptualisations of the nation and the nation state. The Indian sub-continent witnessed the clash of the Titans in the thirties and the forties on what constituted a nation, even as the sub-continent was engaged in the act of overthrowing the British imperial rule. The conflicting interpretations of nationality, not in a small measure, affected the course of our political history. My argument is that the South Asian sub-continent provides a complex theatre, within which the western and the indigenous concepts of the nation and nation state are playing out their roles, providing social science with a valuable laboratory for judging the relative efficacies of the two interpretations, contributing to the universalisation of the concept.

The ancestry of the nation-state is traced by some to the landmark Treaty of Westphalia signed in 1648, which called for the ending of the Eighty Years of war between Spain and the Dutch and the Thirty Years of war in the German phase. The principle of "exclusion of external authority over domestic issues" reflected the belief that "the autonomy of states was a precondition for the relative monopoly of power within."[2]

The first explicit conceptualisation of the nation, as we all know, took place with the French Revolution, when the French declared themselves a nation. State policies aggressively pursued the project of constructing a unitary nation state in which French citizens would have a *single* cultural and political identity. The French Revolution contributed to the *normative* definition of the modern, western, democratic nation-state (Linz *et al.* 2003: 1). This is a model that still obsesses the minds of many (but not all) social scientists.

Let us examine how the South Asian subcontinent situates us in a historical context in which the western concept of the unitary nation state is invoked as well as contested. Jinnah's argument of a *two-nation theory* conformed to the well-established *normative* concept of the western nation-state. He made it clear that "Muslim India cannot accept any constitution which must necessarily result in Hindu majority government…*Mussalmans are a nation according to any definition of nation and they must have their homelands, their territory and their states*…We wish our people to develop to the fullest our spiritual, cultural, economic, social and political life in a way that we think best and in consonance with our own ideals and according to the genius of our people" (italics added; cited in Desai 1976: 416).

Gandhi contested this version of the nation while sharing the Indian complexity with Louis Fischer. He argued: "We are not two nations…We in India have a common culture. In the North, Hindi and Urdu are understood by both Hindus and Moslems. In Madras, Hindus and Moslems speak Tamil, and in Bengal they speak Bengali and neither Hindi nor Urdu. When communal riots break out, they are always provoked by incidents over cows and by religious processions. That means that it is our superstitions that create the trouble and not our separate nationalities" (cited in Desai 1976: 419; Fischer 1944).

Tagore (2004: 453-465) harboured an abhorrence of the (western) concept of 'nation' that led to the mutilation of millions and mindless destruction during World War II. He was in close wavelength with Gandhi when he asserted that the real problem of India was not 'political' but 'social'. India had tolerated "difference of races from the first, and that spirit of toleration has acted throughout her history" constantly in search for finding out "something common to all races,

which will prove their real unity." It has all along been "experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, yet fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences."

Both Gandhi and Tagore claimed the salience and capacity of the civilisational heritage of India for accommodating and enriching cultural diversity within a shared national political community. While the Poet lost faith in the European nations' claim to civilisation, Gandhi chose to critique the western discourse on the nation itself, clearly and unambiguously. He observed: "The English have taught us that we were not one nation before and that it will require centuries before we become one nation. This is without foundation. We were one nation before they came to India. … It was because we were one nation that they were able to establish one kingdom. Subsequently they divided us"(Gandhi 1921: 31).

Gandhi contested the Euro-centric normative definition of the nation-state, by extrapolating 'civilisation' in place of the 'ethnic' in formulating the concept of the Indian nation. The civilisational base refers to *that enduring, variegated complex of thoughts, beliefs, ideas and idea systems, art and artefact, social, economic, political and cultural institutions, cumulating over a long period of time, to which an ever-growing number of distinctive cultures have been contributing and drawing with a sense of fulfilment.* The individual contributions enriched and sustained a civilisation greater than the sum of its contributions. In this sense, Gandhi is a precursor of the alternative theorising on the nation-state, which replaces ethno-nationalism with civic-secular nationalism (see Mukherji 1999: 56-57).

After Gandhi, Nehru reinforced this model of the nation. While Nehru "was attracted by the political and economic examples of the modern West…[I]t was fundamental to him that Indian nationalism could not fashion itself after European examples…Nehru self-consciously rejected the idea that Indian nationalism was compelled to make itself in one or other of these images" - i.e. the Gallic version of community of common citizenship or the *volkisch* idea of shared ethnic or cultural origin (Khilnani 1999: 167).

In our historical context, Jinnah and Gandhi provide the two

opposed models of the nation – one Euro-centric, and the other indigenous. It can be asserted that *the culturally homogenising Euro-centric model, which was indigenous to the west, was not universal enough to fit the civilisational ground realities of the South Asian subcontinent. At the same time the indigenous model of the nation-state developed and pursued by India consists of universal elements, which the rest of the world is beginning to appreciate and examine with profit.*

Pakistan by adopting the Euro-centric model of the nation-state, where the Muslim nation constituted for itself a state in the classic western mode, had to surrender a major segment of its territorial sovereignty to yet another Muslim nation-state - Bangladesh - in the same classic mode. The logic of such political vivisection is infectious. Both these states have declared themselves Islamic. In the Indian case, which adopted the indigenous *civic-secular culturally plural model* of the nation-state, the democratic framework has provided the scope for a variety of mechanisms by which the state is able to pursue its nation-building project, incorporating dissenting, even secessionist forces, by providing democratic space for them. This secular-civic model has enabled her to resist ethno-nationalistic designs for separate sovereignties out of Indian Territory.

The tradition of theorising of the nation and the nation state that is consistent with Jinnah's position of Mussalman's constituting a separate nation, which justified a sovereign state for them, follows the logic of ethnic nationalism as the basis of a nation-state. What Jinnah invoked was religious ethno-nationalism. The fundamental question is: what constitutes the 'ethnic'? What are the implications of an exclusively cultural determinant of the nation and the state?

ETHNO-NATIONALISM, NATION AND STATE-NATIONS

I have discussed in detail elsewhere the fallacies associated with the acceptance of ethno-nationalism as the only basis of the nation-state (Mukherji 1991, 1994, 1998, 1999). One variety of conceptualisations regards the *nation as independent of and prior or subsequent to the state*. That is, there can be one or more nations *within* a single state. When there is such an ethno-nation, it has the potential to claim some form of self-determination extending from autonomy to

sovereignty. The sovereign state-project then becomes the construction of a homogeneous ethno-nation consistent with the state. This is possible because of the manner in which 'nation' is defined. The definition of the 'nation' is fluid and varies from; (a) those who hold that 'any body of people who feel they are a nation' are a nation; (b) to those who consider that 'when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation or behave as if they formed one', is good enough to qualify as a nation; and (c) to those for whom the minimum requirement for a nation is 'any self-differentiating ethnic group' (Essien-Udon 1962: 104; Seton-Watson 1977: 5; Connor 1997: 40-43). I shall briefly discuss two authorities in some detail, one Indian and the other, western – T. K. Oommen and Anthony Giddens.

Oommen, whose contribution in this field is widely recognised, is more specific. Nation "is a territorial entity to which people have an emotional attachment and in which they have invested a *moral meaning*: It is a homeland - *ancestral or adopted*…It is the *fusion of territory and language* which makes a nation; a nation is a community in communication in its homeland" (1997: 33). Oommen concedes that "to become *nationals* in a territory into which a group immigrates is not simply a matter of that group's choice only, but also its acceptance by the earlier inhabitants" (italics added; Oommen 1997: 20).

More recently, he illustrates seven situations in which the nation and state could be related: (i) one-nation, one state (rare; e.g. Japan); (ii) *parts of different nations* coming together to constitute a state (e.g. Switzerland); (iii) one-nation, two states (e.g. North and South Koreas); (iv) one-nation – one part in one sovereign state and the other attached/affiliated to another sovereign state (e.g. Bangladesh and West Bengal; Irish Republic and Northern Ireland in U.K.); (v) one-nation, divided between two sovereign states, constituting parts of them along with other nations (e.g. Indian and Pakistani Punjab); (vi) several nations come together to constitute a state (e.g. India, Pakistan, erstwhile Soviet Union); and (vii) a set of migrants drawn from a multiplicity of nations constitutes a state (e.g. U.S.A., Australia) (Oommen 2004: 746). Latent in all these examples is the principle of fusion of language community with homeland-territory. Implicit in this formulation is the euro-centric assumption of the *ethnic* basis of nations, that seek some kind of self-determination or self-rule (some administrative structure) within the

overall sovereignty of the state, or in the extreme case, seek complete political sovereignty.[3]   Oommen's is a case made out for nations as linguistic ethnicities.

I have cited Oommen at length because he exposes the confusion with clarity. He contends that nation is a fusion of territory (homeland) and language. But the fusion of religion and territory, to which he is averse to give 'nation' status, with laudable intentions, has nonetheless resulted in separate sovereignties in several parts of the world (Palestine, Israel, the Gulf countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh, etc.). In Oommen's formulation, the nation appears to be a fluid structure from which segments can be subtracted from one territorial location to form a nation in another. If such logic is extended, every ethnic-nation will have their branches all over the world! Fijians, Mauritians, British and U. S. citizens of Indian origin, for instance, would constitute nations. Since the nation is a fusion of language and territory, one wonders what national identities these expatriates would form in these countries – Tamil, Bengali, Punjabi, Malayalam nations! Further, it is difficult to understand how migrants 'as parts of nations' electing to leave their homeland in search of adoption of an alien territory could become a nation, provided the 'earlier inhabitants' welcomed them, not otherwise! This means the earlier inhabitants can welcome immigrants as new nations. The matter becomes increasingly complicating.

Anthony Giddens, in one of his Director's Lectures at the London School of Economics underscored the crucial importance of making a conceptual distinction between the 'nation-state', the 'nation' and 'nationalism'. Because "they often have a different momentum, they do not necessarily relate directly to one another." The *nation-state* according to him, "is above all a political formation…is essentially a political system which rules over a given territory defined by its borders", having "control of an apparatus of law and over an apparatus of military power." The *nation*, following Benedict Anderson, is a symbolic, imagined community associated with the nation state, 'but not inevitably'. *Nationalism* is "an emotional fuel upon which the symbolic community of the nation runs." The reason for distinguishing the three concepts can be understood from the fact that you can "have a nation without a nation state" (e.g. Scots, Welsh, Kurds). He then proceeds to categorise "three different forms of nation–state-nationalism

combinations today." These are: (a) *classical nation state,* which was established in Europe and the U. S., and other areas colonised by Europeans. The idea of the nation, barring exceptions like Switzerland, "is the idea of a shared culture and commonly shared language." (b) The *state nations* are states which were established "before the symbolic community of the nation could actually be set up or which never managed to achieve a symbolic community of the nation." (c) The category of *nations without states,* "involves people who believe they belong to a given symbolic community…[with] a shared language, a shared cultural history and some kind of symbolic, partly invented history, but [who] do not have a nation state" (Kurds). That is why nations without states breed nationalism "filled with national identity" (Giddens 2001).

Giddens' conceptualisations contain certain anomalies. His nation-state is based on the premise of the ethno-nation as a historically evolved, stable political formation. In comparison, the state-nations are unstable having to cope with nations within, that aspire for their own sovereign states. That is, the nations without states form the parts of the state-nations. He betrays an inconsistency when he discusses the resilience of the nation states in the face of challenges posed by globalisation. He observes that they are "having to adapt to downward devolution, which includes local nationalism and the pressures of nations-without-a-state." How come that stable classical modern democratic western nation states have to contend with the nationalisms of the nations-without-states? And if classic nation states are faced with this problem, how then are they different in form from state-nations? He argues: "You can only have nationalist movements if you have a nation state as the outcome of those movements, so nationalist movements almost universally want to form nation states *even if nation states do not exist in relation to those symbolic communities*" (italics added; Giddens 2001).

Giddens implicitly acknowledges the existence of multi-ethnic nationalism leading to the formation of a multi-ethnic nation state, in the absence of such symbolic communities. If only, Giddens studied the South Asian sub-continent closely, he would grasp the complexity and reality of *multi-ethnic* (not multi-national) nation states.

The conceptual ambiguities in Giddens are better met by the

earlier conceptualisations of Hobsbawm. He draws attention to the fact that the 'nation' is the product of a particular and recent historical period. It "is a social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the 'nation-state.'" It is "pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as they relate to it". Analytically, nationalisms precede nations and the "real 'nation' can only be recognised aposteriori." He agrees with Gellner that nationalism is "primarily a principle which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." This means that the political duty of all those who constitute the polity which encompasses and represents the nation overrides all other obligations (Hobsbawm 1990: 9-10).[4]

The Indian state in these formulations becomes just a legal entity that embraces a multitude of nations (ethnicities), who ought to be given some administrative structure of self-rule within the overall structure of the sovereign state, and who have the potential for seeking sovereignty. In this burgeoning literature there is no clear distinction between the ethnic group, ethnicity, nation and so on. For example, what is 'ethnic' to Smith is nation for Oommen.[5] The 'nation' for Connors, Seton-Watson, Essien-Udon and the like are indistinguishable from the 'subjectively self-conscious ethnic community' of Brass, which for him is 'ethnicity'. According to these formulations *India is not a nation-state. India is among the state-nations of the world. India is a multi-national state.*

Not only Oommen, even some (not all) of our respected Marxist scholars and leaders, held captive under western ethno-centrism, did not consider India to be a nation. For example, Irfan Habib posed the question: 'Is India then a nation?' His emphatic answer was: "Marxists must without hesitation answer this question in the negative…India is not a nation because it meets the requirement of neither a common language nor a common culture" (Habib 1975: 16).

However, twenty two years later, he changed his position radically. Tracing the evolution of Indian nationhood from the Rig Vedic times, through Sanskrit, Greek and Persian sources; Alberuni, Amir Khusro, Akbar and Abul Fazl's *A'in-e-Akbari*; the political centre created by the Delhi Sultanate and The Moghuls; the Battle of Plassey; Ram Mohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshav Chandra Sen; the formation of the Indian National Congress and Gandhi's constructive

programme; the Kisan movement led by the Left; Habib observes: "The Indian nation has thus emerged after a long process of creation, in which consciousness or the mental orientation of its inhabitants has played a vital role. But a nation can, then, be also eroded or destroyed the same way it has evolved or been built. In modern times, just as national consciousness has grown, the same factors for its growth, such as the press and communications, have also intensified feelings of religious identities over ever larger spaces. Communism in India inevitably developed alongside nationalism. In Hind Swaraj (1909) Gandhi had warned that 'nation' could have no association with any religion, and people of different communities in India must live 'in unity.' It was for this that he struggled without any respite and finally laid down his life: Secularism has been at the heart of our nationhood" (Habib 1997: 9-10).

NATION-STATE AND STATE-NATION

Where then lies the scope for alternative theorising? It lies in the conceptualisation of the nation being congruent with the state as pointed out by Hobsbawm. As early as 1991 I had observed: "The nation can no longer be accepted as conceptualising an ethnic cultural identity with a common language or religion, as the stable basis for a state. The logical implication of such theorising is dissensus-generating rather than consensus-creating, nation-destroying rather than nation-building. The concept of nation must admit the construction of a *comprehensive secular culture*, which enables a plurality of cultures to co-exist and grow without infringing on each other, which enables the efflorescence of the values of freedom and equality to get institutionalised and embodied in the concept of a *citizen,* which transcends the primordialities of his language, religion, caste, race, and sex. The task of nation-building is the constant creation of democratic space through the establishment and institutionalisation of a set of formal structures for the construction of a comprehensive secular culture"(Mukherji 1991:21).

The nation-state in this formulation is not based on ethnic-nationality. The foundation of Indian nationhood was laid during the 'Indian national' movement for independence. The national mobilisation, whether under the leadership of Gandhi or Subhash Chandra Bose, crafted an identity transcending (not merging) the ethnic, class and

gender components that composed it. This is not to say that ethnic cleavages, class distinctions, gender and caste discriminations and their contradictions were resolved - they were *transcended* for an overarching common goal. There was some kind of a *process* of all ethnic and other identities participating in the national political mobilisation. Inherent in this process was embedded the Indian concept of secularism that promoted that partnership of plural identities in the task of political emancipation, and later, nation-building. The Indian nation was embedded in the womb of Indian nationalism for a sovereign democratic India, which was pluri-ethnic, multi-class, and gender partnered. Hence, the indigenous atypical Indian nation is a creature of *civic nationalism*, not ethno-nationalism.

The basic understanding behind the formulations that have come up as an alternative to the classic Gallic concept of the modern nation-state, which at any rate is becoming increasingly inapplicable even in the countries of their origin, is very well captured by Tilly who observes that "only a tiny portion of the world's distinctive religious, linguistic and cultural groupings have formed their own states, while precious few of the world's existing states have approximated the homogeneity and commitment conjured up by the label 'nation-state'" (1994: 137). Earlier, Gellner had pointed out the paradoxes of the Euro-centric concept of the nation. He observed, that the number of 'potential nations' was "much larger than that of possible viable states." It followed that "not all nationalists can be satisfied, at any rate, at the same time." Logically, "a territorial political unit can only become ethnically homogeneous in such cases, if it either kills, or expels, or assimilates all non-nationals" (Gellner 1983: 1-6). These observations clearly indicate the obsolescence of the so-called modern democratic western ethno-nation state.

I hold that the nation-state is a *dyadic* concept. The 'nation' and the 'state' are analytically separate and yet one does not exist without the other. They are congruent. The state, which is a political institution, is a *structural* concept. The 'nation', on the other hand, is a *cultural* construct. The state cannot exist in isolation as a legal entity and no more. There will be of necessity, some legitimacy, however strong or feeble, accorded to the state for it to exist. This comes in the form of loyalty to the state of its members as citizens. This is the 'nation'

component of the state. *There can be no state without it's being a nation, and no nation exists until it has carved out a state for itself.*

The historicities of nation-states vary. Nation-states have originated with states fulfilling the aspirations of ethno-nationalism based on some ethnicity (language, religion, etc., as for example, in the case of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Serbs, Croats). The classic Gallic version of the nation-state was the state declaring itself a nation, and then compelling the ethnic plurality to a pan-French nationality with a singular linguistic national identity to match. Today the situation in France is quite different, with its different linguistic and religious ethnicities asserting themselves within the nation-state. The Corsicans, the Maghrebs (Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian Arabs) and others are asserting their linguistic and/or religious ethnic-cultural identities (see Wikipedia 2007b, 2007c).

Situations in the U. K., Spain, Belgium and several other European countries are similar. In the U. K. there is a resurgence of Scottish, Welsh and Irish ethnicities mainly in opposition to the dominant English. In particular, Scottish ethnicity verges on ethno-nationalism threatening secession from the U. K. There is a steady decline in the composite identity of 'Britishness' (Wadia 2006). In Spain, Catalonia, the Basque country, Galicia and Andalusia manifest different levels of ethnicity and ethno-nationalism for greater autonomy or even sovereignty (Wikipedia 2007a). Belgium provides an interesting case of the Dutch speaking Flemish and French speaking Wallons maintaining precarious balance in the uneasy existence of the Beligian nation-state (Bousetta *et al.* 2005). In all these countries there has been a common history of steady immigration from European Union (EU) and non-EU countries, linked to the era of colonialism and chronic labour shortages in the post World War II reconstruction. Added to this has been the substantial migration on account of political asylum granted to victims who had suffered in the Middle East countries. In particular, the fundamentalist extremist postures of destructive elements within the Islamic groups, with the rise of Al Qaueda, have fuelled latent racist discrimination that threatens the Huntingtonian thesis of 'clash of civilisations' to assume the proportions of a self-fulfilling prophesy. These developments conclusively demonstrate the inadequacy and fragility of the western Euro-centric ethno-based conceptualisation of the nation and nation-state.

Many post-colonial nation-states have emerged through nationalist movements for independence. The origin of the Indian nation-state, in sharp contrast, is rooted in an ethnic plurality joining in a common political cause for national liberation and a national state, without the compulsions of ethnic homogenisation. The alternative, indigenous concept of the nation builds in the scope for a plurality of ethnic groups to engage in competition and conflict with each other within the larger framework of the nation-state. Take for example, the Indian Constitution declaring Hindi as the official national language, yet the state accommodates the multiplication of national languages. The Constitution, far from pursuing a homogenising project, celebrates cultural diversity. India has scripted a multi-ethnic nation-state, which is unique, and a model for classic nation-states that are now facing serious ethno-nationalist strifes.

A number of important theoretical formulations emerge from this discussion, which I have stated earlier, elsewhere (Mukherji 1998: 113-114): *First, state formation and nation-building are two different historical processes*. In the experience of most postcolonial countries the formation of sovereign states has preceded their crystallising into nations. That explains why, for instance, Pakistan faced further 'partition', even though it was founded on the assumption of religious ethno-nationalist solidarity. Pakistan has so far been failing in putting into place the process of its crystallisation into a nation-state. To this day, Pakistan is faced with rival ethno-nationalisms in its north western frontiers, within the Islamic fold. This equally makes it comprehensible why India has had to, and continues to, weather the many linguistic, religious, caste and tribal conflicts, stretching itself to create democratic space for the many issues that continue to surface. The process of nation-state building is open-ended.

Second, every nation-state has to have *nation-building project*. From the most mature to the most vulnerable nation-state, nation-building is a continuous process. No nation-state can afford to ignore this imperative. This project has to constantly negotiate the variety of contradictions, not merely ethnic – class, gender, environmental-ecological, etc. – through its institutional mechanisms. Failure to do so may cost the country dearly – even leading to its dismemberment. The dismembered territory, once again, will have to follow the imperative of nation-state building project.

Third, the process through which the nation crystallises, more likely than not, will be marked by *internal strifes and conflicts*, often violent and fierce, over clashing values and interests. The outcome of such conflicts need not necessarily lead to final breaches, but can result in accommodations, adjustments and new syntheses in societal relations.

Fourth, the process leading to the crystallisation of a pluri-ethnic nation-state is marked by an overall consensus of its people (representing different cultures with competing and conflicting interests and values) *internalising an evolved, shared set of values*. These values are expected to underlie the functioning of its major societal institutions (economic, political, socio-cultural and institutional), mechanisms and practices. The *people develop a common stake*: (a) in preserving, pursuing and enriching the plural cultural traditions and identities; (b) in their common economic well-being; (c) in the enjoyment of political and civil rights and performance of obligations as citizens. Above all, it means the capacity of the people to *transcend* – not necessarily subordinate or surrender or reject – cultural particularistic beliefs and practices in favour of universalistic values, norms and goals for overall common and individual welfare. Democracy and the scope for *constant creation of democratic space* make the political environment congenial for the maturation and sustenance of a nation-state. I have observed elsewhere: "*In the Indian context ethnic identity and Indian national identity are not necessarily mutually antagonistic or exclusive, and the former is often a necessary condition for the latter*" (Mukherji 1994: 48).

Fifth, the coming-into-being of a relatively crystallised nation-state *does not signal the end of contradictions and conflicts* in the society for all times, it only means that such a state is much less vulnerable to dismemberment, as the ultimate loyalty of its citizens to the nation-state, in an affective-emotional-cultural sense, is internalised. The nation-state provides a stable territorial space within which social changes and transformations can take place.

Sixth, a settled nation-state need not remain so for all times. Social changes from both endogenous and exogenous sources can generate new contradictions, unsettling the existing legitimacy of its institutions and mechanisms. This will naturally lead to the need for a new consensus different from the earlier. In this sense, *nation-building*

is not a one-time process but a continuous one. Neither developing nor developed nations enjoy any special immunity. In fact currently the serious problem of ethno-nationalisms that established nation-states are facing all over Europe, only provides strength to my theoretical argument.

Juan Linz, Alfred Stepan and Yogendra Yadav have presented a comprehensive researched paper on 'Nation State or State Nation?' which is an excellent attempt at a comparative study of Spain, Belgium, Canada and India. The paper distinguishes between 'nation-state', 'state-nation' and the 'multinational state' (Linz *et al.* 2003). The difficulty is that the authors conceptualise the nation-state in the normative vision of the modern western democratic state, in the mould of the majority mono-cultural unitary state. The ethnic-cultural variability and heterogeneity, therefore, has to be introduced in the new concept of the state-nation. The multinational state is the most problematic, in which the state is marginalised and the nations (ethno-nationalisms) within are engaged in contesting for their own sovereignty. The position I have taken on the reformulated nation-state, corresponds largely to *their* state nation. Secondly, their formulation does not make it very clear as to whether there is any difference between state-nation and state-nations (in the plural). A case is made wherein cultural diversity is accommodated in a model of asymmetric federalism in the state-nation. Others and I have made this case since a long time, not to argue for an alternative concept, but for an alternative definition of the western ethnocentric nation-state itself.

So long as one adheres to the western concept of the mono-cultural nation, how one associates the state with the nation will always remain problematic. The Indian experiment gives social science the scope for liberating the concept of the nation from western parochialism and makes it universal.

THE FUTURE OF THE NATION-STATE

I am in complete agreement with Giddens that globalisation will not witness a rapid withering away of the nation-state. What is happening and will continue to happen is the re-shaping of the nature of sovereignty. The nation-state is not only involved in 'downward devolution' of power,

it is also inevitably engaged with the upward integration with supra-national global and international structures of governance. The multiplicity of nationalisms – Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, Afghan, Kurdish, Palestinian, African – all go to indicate the resilience of the nation-state.

I will conclude with the findings of the *Conference on the Evolution of the Nation-State through 2015*, held in the summer of 1999, sponsored by the National Intelligence Council of the U. S. A. to deliberate upon the forces shaping the evolution of the nation-state contributing to the global trends until 2015. The purpose behind studying *Global Trends 2015* was to assess the "significant international characteristics and trends likely to affect the future security of the United States" till 2015. Some of the best minds in the U .S. deliberated on various aspects of the nation-state and their future. The study is of no less significance for us as it is to the rest of the world (Lehman 2000).

The Conference identified four basic sources of consequential changes among the diversity of influences at work that might take place in the evolution of the nation-states: (a) the process of globalisation, (b) the evolution of political attitudes, (c) the activities of non-state actors and (d) emerging standards of governmental performance. The Conference identified many circumstances that may affect the evolution of the nation-states between 'now and 2015', "but they did not anticipate its demise or even its radical transformation."

There were two perspectives on the processes of globalisation. One, which emphasised that the growing "interdependent world would create more and more trans-sovereign problems that are not responsible to unilateral state action" and "with the influential non-state actors and their networks" peoples' allegiance in certain issue areas will be competing with state. The other perspective argued "that states possessed the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances rather than be overcome by them."

It was recognised that given the differential capacity of states and "varying popular standards of expected state performance…[s]ome states are likely to use globalisation related developments and non-state actors as tools to improve their legitimacy and cohesion;" other states

will "merely cope; their governments will remain in power;" some will fail or collapse (Lehman 2000).

Three trends are likely to feature. One, "unilateral state action will become less effective as trans-sovereign problems become more prevalent." Second, increasing pressure and influence of non-state actors will progressively change the role of governments "from monopoly providers of services to managers of services that are provided both by the state and the variety of non-state actors." Third, the trans-sovereign problems "will tend to create increasingly uniform standards concerning what constitutes acceptable government performance" (Lehman 2000). India, like many other developing countries, is facing up to these and many other challenges through intense internal debates attempting to craft responses within the framework of a live democracy.

NOTES

1   This is a revised version of the P .N. Haksar Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh on 6th September 2004. A discussion on nation-state is a fitting tribute to the memory of P. N. Haksar. He fully understood the limitation of the concepts, developed in the western tradition and history, to explain the complex Indian reality. One such concept is the nation-state for which, according to him, there is no equivalent word in the Indian languages. Endorsing this position of Haksar, we may say that there is nothing so sacrosanct about the western concepts – they are not immutable. There is no reason why we cannot re-conceptualise concepts that do not fit realities larger than the western. Concepts may be considered in *motion* over time, rather than frozen for all times – a prisoner of *particular* historical ancestry. Only by such a process can concepts *universalise*. I take it as my privilege to have attempted an exercise of this sort in this paper in memory of P. N. Haksar.

2   France and Sweden brought with them the proposals for peace. For the first time the concept of territorial sovereignty was introduced. Territorial clauses defined territorial sovereignties of France, Sweden, Brandenburg, Bavaria, the Netherlands and so on. The central authority of the Holy Roman Empire was virtually replaced by the sovereignty granted to 300 odd princes before it was finally dissolved in 1806 (Treaty of Westphalia 2007; Lahneman 2000).

3   Oommen argues that the state is only a legal entity (community) and must admit the presence of a multiplicity of nations "which did not ever stake any claim to statehood, although they have opted for a separate administrative set-up within a federal set-up" (Oommen 1991: 13). Elsewhere, he states, "it is a combination of instrumental ethnicity emanating out of material deprivation and symbolic ethnicity based on anxiety to preserve one's cultural identity, which gives birth to the motive force for state formation." This is however "plausible only if the ethnic group can constitute itself into a nation, the pre-requisites of which are territory and language" (Oommen 1997: 21).

4   More recently, Snyder defines nationalism "as the doctrine that a people who see themselves as distinct in their culture, history, institutions, or principles should rule themselves in a political system that expresses and protects those distinctive characteristics." He points out that scholars generally distinguish between ethnic and civic nationalisms. Those subscribing or referring to the former (in the German and Serb tradition) "base their legitimacy on common culture, language, religion, shared historical experience, and/or the myth of shared kinship, and they use these criteria to include or exclude members from the national group." Those referring to the latter (like those of the British, the United States, and for the most part the French), "base their appeals on loyalty to a set of political ideas and institutions that are perceived as just and effective." Inclusion into this group is through birth or long residence in the nation's territory, and sufficient knowledge of the nation's language and institutions to participate in the nation's civic life (Snyder 2000: 23-24).

5   Ethnic is defined by Smith as having six characteristics: collective name, a common myth of descent, a shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity. Oommen regards the six characteristics as actually making the nation, and only when the attribute of "territory is removed from it does it become an *ethnie*. On this basis of the re-appropriation of the concept *ethnie*, he theorises that a person or a group oscillates between a nation and an *ethnie*, depending upon whether territorially the person/group is in or out of its ancestral or adopted homeland (Oommen 1997: 20).

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DALIT CHRISTIANS IN KERALAM

Johnson X. Palakkappillil

Abstract

According to a strong tradition St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus Christ arrived in Keralam in 52 A.D. and established the Church. The descendants of this early Church are called St. Thomas Christians. As this Church was guided in administration by the East Syrian Church of Persia, the St. Thomas Christians came to be known also as Syrian Christians. The first Christian community in Keralam seems to have assimilated the caste system of Keralam. They also claimed their descent from Namputiris, the Brahmin caste of Keralam, although this claim is refuted. It is also said that the caste feelings made the early Christians uninterested in proselytisation, and conversions from the lower castes began only in the 16th century. After conversion the dalit Christians continued to be subjected to caste discrimination by the other Christians. The traditional Christians and the Church in Keralam seem to have failed the dalit Christians. The traditional Christians should shed their claim of having descended from upper caste and the consequent caste values. The Church should accept the dalits in the development process as equals. Above all the dalit Christians of Keralam should organise themselves, assert their identity and try to seek their development by themselves.

The state of Keralam[1] lies on the southern end of the Indian sub-continent, with Arabian Sea as its western boundary. The tiny state with a teeming population of 335 million stands as a unique model of social development. It stands very high on the quality of life indices, with a high literacy rate of 90.9 per cent compared to the national literacy rate of 64.8 (Census of India 2001a), infant mortality rate (IMR) of 14.1 compared to 70.5 nationwide (Census of India 2001b), life

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expectancy at 70.7 and 86 for male and female populations respectively compared to 62.4 and 63.4 nationwide (Census of India 2001c) and a highly favourable sex-ratio of 1058 females for 1000 males (Census of India 2001c). The achievement of the state in the various development spheres is considered to be unique when it is matched with the per capita income of the state, which is lower than many states in India.

The achievement in the various aspects of social development has made Keralam a progressive state, and from the angle of social equality too, it is said to be ahead of most of the states in India. The factors that are thought to have contributed to its rare achievements are the spread of literacy and education, progressive land reform measures, organisation of the working classes, and the unique composition of the various religious groupings.

It might appear as a surprise to the students of development studies that Mc Kim Marriot (1965: 25), in studying the caste phenomenon of five different regions in the Indian subcontinent, viz., Keralam, Coromandel, upper Ganges, middle Indus and Bengal delta, found Keralam to have had the maximum rigidity, and that Sri Vivekananda is said to have commented on the observances of the complex dehumanising caste system of Keralam: "that I have walked into a lunatic asylum"(Wikipedia 2007; George 2007). But there has been various changes in the social fabric of Keralam as far as inequality and caste based observances are concerned. Starting with the revolutionary temple entry proclamation in 1935, through which the erstwhile princely ruler of Travancore (the major component of the present Keralam state) allowed entry in the temples to the lower castes, Keralam progressed to be one of the most egalitarian states of the Indian Union.

However, this progress does not mean that the state is totally free from social inequality based on caste system. In tune with the general trend in contemporary Indian society, caste based inequalities still exist in this progressive state as well, probably much more subtly than elsewhere. Advance in literacy and education and acceptance of the value of equality have not freed the secular institutions of democratic politics and bureaucratic administration from caste considerations. For instance, almost all political alliances and decisions, and appointments

to various posts of importance have caste consideration as an underlying factor. Both the major political formations in the state – leftist front led by the Communist Party Marxist and the united front of centrist groups led by the Congress Party – play along the caste lines in their decisions and have caste linked components within their fold as supporters. The third group, the Bharatiya Janata Party is not yet a political force of significance in the state and has a more explicit Hindu religious foundation, which implies caste influence as well. Thus in the present scenario of Keralam, caste functions as a basis for organised political strength and bargaining power. The vital issue in the present context is the fact that the marginalised sections under the caste system, or the dalits are the least politically organised on caste lines and continue to be the most backward sections of the society.

DALITS OF KERALAM

The term Keralam is said to be derived from *Ceralam* after the *Cera* kings who ruled Keralam in the first two centuries. According to Bernard, about the 4th century B.C. Aryan Brahmins were said to have come and settled in Keralam, followed gradually by other castes. They lived along with the native population consisting of *cerumar, vettuvar, katar, malayar, pulayar, kuravar* and *kuricciyar* (Thoma 1992). These original inhabitants were made to occupy the lowest position in the caste hierarchy.

However, according to Dalit Bandhu a well established Buddhist tradition of about 1200 years was wiped out from the region by Aryan power. Till 800 A.D. it is said to have been a homogeneous, casteless society, perhaps of a single race, under the sway of Buddhism. This was replaced with a caste Hindu society in the 8th century A.D.[2] With the onset of Hinduism, divisions on the basis of caste emerged. The much touted legend of Parasurama[3] is read today as a story of the conquest of a non-Hindu land, for or by Hindu Brahmins. This story is indicative of the caste foundation of the Keralam society (Bandhu 1992). This assumption, that caste system was an alien introduction in Keralam, is strengthened by the fact that the exact fourfold *varna* system was not found here. The castes that existed here were Brahmin, Namputhiri, Nair, Izhava, Paraya, Pulaya and Araya. Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were not recognisable here. The royal families were made *kshatriya* through

a ritual called '*hiranyagarbha*'. Another indicator in support of this position is that *namputiri* as a caste is not found elsewhere; '*namputiro'* meant Buddhist monk. When the Hindu revival happened, the priestly class equivalent of Buddhism is said to have been integrated into the caste fold as equivalent to the Brahmins.

The legends of Parasurama and Mahabali[4] are indicative of the Brahmanical domination and depiction of the lower status of the other castes. In fact, *pulaya* would mean the owner of *pulam,* that is, the earth. Perhaps, it was to destroy this claim that the earth was declared as *brahmaswam* and *devaswam* (property of the Brahmanas and the Gods) by the conquerors, while making the erstwhile owners their slaves. The occupations created in the new feudal system were those of *menon, pilla, varyar, pisarati, kaimal, kuruppu* and *nampiar.* However, according to the caste tradition their descendents began to be known in those names, thus forming an intermediate caste and class.

Kadankavil (1999) refers to the historical analysis of P. K. Balakrishnan's *Jativyavasthayum Keralamvum,* which says that inequality in Keralam was not a contribution of Aryans or *Namputiris*; rather it had been there even before them and that the fall of *cherans* was on account of the internecine rivalries among them. He lists the opinions of the authors who consider the origin of the various dalit communities from the original *cherans* who are said to have been the sovereigns of this land in the ancient times. He cites N. K. Jose's view that the dalits are those who were driven out from the Indus valley at the arrival of the Aryans and were subjected to oppression in the land. Those who fled the valley along the sea-coast established themselves as fisher-folk and were relatively free from caste oppression and slavery. Those who came to the South along the mainland were subjected to the oppression of the powerful invaders and in the course of time became the subjected castes.

Kadankavil (1999) agrees with the much discussed theory that the Chera rulers were the original inhabitants of this region, and the term *cheramar* (used for *pulaya* community) comes from that. He points out the presence of the members of this community all over the state, in every village as an indication of their being the original inhabitants of this land. It is said that the other depressed groups have emerged from them after their subjugation.

Though the castes at the lowest rung of social hierarchy, namely the *Pulayas* and *Parayas* were treated with very dehumanising practices of purity-pollution, it appears that there was also a sort of mutual dependence and care in the unequal and unjust relationships. While the *Pulayas* were considered to be highly knowledgeable in the matters of agriculture and dependable, the *Parayas* were recognised for their skill in the manufacture of household utensils, and in music and warfare. Terms like *Pulayanarkotta* (the *Pulaya* fortress) and *Parayappada* (the *Paraya* army), and the references to a *Cheramar* kingdom, which possibly was a *Pulaya* dynasty etc. point to a different functional role of these lowest castes in the society.

Slavery in Keralam

There are evidences which speak about slavery in Keralam. *Pulayar, parayar, kuravar, vettuvar* were the slave castes. The writing of the king of Kannur (in north Keralam) is a strong indicator of the existence of the exploitation of lower castes as slaves. King of Kannur had written to King Manuel of Portugal in 1507: "It is my desire that certain sections of the people in my kingdom whom I and my *nayars* hold as slaves…, *tines* (*tiyan*) and *mucuas*, may not be converted to Christianity… The conversion of the slaves will give rise to conflicts between them and my vassals. The *nayars* derive their income from them and they do not want to lose it" (Mundadan 1984: 379). This statement is a pointer towards the motif of the oppressors that perpetuated the caste system, and resisted conversion, namely, financial gain; and that of the oppressed, namely, liberation and emancipation from the oppressing systems.

It was with the arrival of the missionaries of the Church Mission Society/London Missionary Society (CMS/LMS) that efforts were made to ban slavery in the region. By 1819 slavery was abolished in those areas that were directly under the British (East India Company). In the Malabar region of Keralam slavery was abolished in 1843. In 1854 slave trade was banned in Kochi princely state (currently part of Keralam) and in 1855 slavery was abolished in Travancore part of Keralam (Gopalan 1999).

Identity and Assertion by Dalits in Keralam

The earliest of the attempts of the dalits to assert their identity

in history is seen in *Channar Lahala*, a revolt by the *Channar* community of the South, for the rights of their women to cover the upper part of their body. This was inspired by the missionary efforts at education of the *Channar* community. In the course of the LMS work among the backward castes, there was a conflict between two caste groups, viz., *Channars and Parayas*, which resulted in the *Parayas* losing their interest in the conversion process. The former group, however, became stronger in faith, and are today called as *Natars*. The conversion process led to conscientisation of these groups. One such result was the decision of *Channar* women to cover their breasts (to wear a top), which was denied till then. This led to a conflict which is known as *Channar Lahala*. It had two stages – first part was for the right to wear a close fitting apparel over the breasts called *rauka*, and the second was to cover the upper body part of the women by using *melmuntu* (a kind of shawl or blouse) over the *rauka*. This led to violence between the caste Hindu groups and the *Channars*. The former were supported by the police and the administration. The latter were supported by the missionaries, and under their influence the British government intervened to give liberty to wear dress that would protect their modesty (Jose 1991).

Kooiman (1989) gives a sketch of the efforts of the LMS in conversion such as education, employment and fight for civil liberties. He is of the view that the *Channar* struggle for the right to wear 'tops' must be seen as the product of both Christianisation and Sanskritisation. He concludes that the change of life and thoughts in the LMS Christians was not substantial.

Bandhu (1994c) presents a glorious picture of Ayyankali, as a proud fighter for *dalit* rights in a milieu marked by caste oppression during the first quarter of the 20th century. In the history of India and Keralam, he is seen as the lone representative of the *dalit* community to have asserted one's right to be a free individual and inspired others to do so. However, his efforts for a wider, non-sectarian oppressed caste front were foiled by the manipulative attempts of the dominant sections of those times, with the patronage of the Diwan of Travancore.

CHRISTIANITY IN KERALAM

It is widely accepted with the support of a living tradition in a faith community that one of the disciples of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas

the apostle arrived in India on the Keralam coast (in A.D. 52), preached the Christian faith, established churches and was killed in A.D. 72 at Mylapore in Tamil Nadu. The descendants of these early Christians have been known as St. Thomas Christians. Another traditional source that refers to the establishment of Christianity by St. Thomas is the oral tradition of songs which were popular among the St. Thomas Christians. This tradition speaks that the early conversion to Christianity was from among the Brahmins and the Christian community enjoyed the status of a higher caste, and retained it through practices of purity and pollution. The earliest historical document indicating the existence of a Christian community in Keralam is the Tarisappally Copper Plate which is dated to be of 8th century A.D. In addition to dealing with various commercial and revenue related matters, the document mentions the status of the Christian community as a caste community (Thoma 1992; Kunjanpillai 1955; Mundadan 1984). The members of the community came to be known as *Nazaranikal* (after the name of Jesus as the Nazarean) or St. Thomas Christians (after the name of the apostle St. Thomas). This Church of the early Christians in Keralam is said to have been guided and supported in administration by the East Syrian Church of Persia (Mundadan 1984). That is how the St. Thomas Christians came to be known also as Syrian Christians.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in Keralam, the western Christians took notice of the presence of a vibrant Christian community different from theirs. Their observations have been documented in many places. On the basis of these as well as other evidences, the following profile of the Syrian Christian community could be constructed.

- A forward community well established within the caste hierarchy
- Almost homogeneous in nature based on endogamy
- Indigenous and attuned to the local culture
- Actively involved and holding local leadership in trade and agriculture
- Fiercely proud of their local Christian identity and ready to resist domination

Interface with the Western Tradition of Christianity

With the arrival of the Portuguese in 1498 in the west coast of

India, there began an attempt, which can be described as aggressive, at conversion of the natives into Christianity. Conversion of the fisher (*mukkuva*) folks of Keralam coast to Christianity, as a by-product of the Portuguese colonisation efforts, did not affect the existing Syrian Christian community. The fresh converts were not included in the traditional community, for reasons such as difference in liturgical traditions and opposition to the Portuguese customs. Instead, a new caste like community of Christians was formed in Keralam, who became the Latin Christian community of Keralam. They were never welcomed to be part of the traditional Christian community. The traditional Syrian Christian community had been under the jurisdiction of the diocese of Angamaly with Bishops being sent from the Persian Church. The new converts belonged to the Latin diocese of Kochi, which was created on 4th February 1557 after the missionary activities of the western missionaries began to take shape (Jose 1991).

Together with proselytisation by the Portuguese there were also efforts to reform the St. Thomas Christians, in the sense of making them conform to the western traditions of Christianity. This gradually led to the development of a Latin Church distinct from the existing Syrian Church in Keralam. The basic distinguishing feature was the liturgical rites and languages, namely Latin and Syrian (Aramaic) respectively. In this process and because of various developments, some of the earlier Syrian Churches came under the Latin rite. The schism of 1653[5] was the result of one such development (Thoma 1992; Koilparampil 1982).

It was with the incident of *Koonankurisu*[6] in 1653, that there emerged a split in the Church in Keralam for the first time. A majority of them later returned to the Catholic fold. Those who opposed the western domination and sought for autonomy in administration or continued linkages with the East Syrian Churches formed denominations away from the communion with the Roman Catholic Church. This was mediated through the leaders of the protest group, the Arch Deacon Thomas, and Mar Gregorious, the bishop who arrived from the Middle East at his invitation. The latter introduced elements of faith different from the existing faith, which crystallised the split. They were initially called *puttenkuttukar* - people of new faith (Thoma 1992). There were further divisions in this splinter group, some of them retaining affiliation with the Churches of Middle East, some others becoming affiliated to

the Protestant Churches of the West, and still others getting absorbed into Evangelical and Pentecostal groups of the 20th century.[7]

CHRISTIANITY AND CASTE

The first Christian community in Keralam appears to have assimilated the caste values *mutatis mutandis*, without much ado. Though it was a thriving community of believers in Christ, it absorbed almost all the characteristics of a caste. Thus it was endogamous, and practised purity and pollution norms. A vast majority of the pre-Portuguese era Christians of Keralam were said to have had fair complexion, and this was considered to be a factor indicating high caste origins (Fuller, as cited by Koilparampil 1982). It had the standing of an intermediary caste, though its followers claimed their descent directly from the Brahmins of Keralam – i.e., *Namputiris*. This Christian community in Keralam does not seem to have shown the proselytising nature of the early Christianity. The caste values seem to have made the community survive and proliferate only through birth within the community rather than by conversion (Thenayan 1982). This is supported by the writings of Bernard Thoma (1992) wherein he refers to the decree of the well known Synod of Udayamperoor (Diamper) of 1599 on the caste based untouchability in the Christian community (see also Zacharia 1994).

Gouvea in 1606 also spoke about the practice of untouchability in the Christian community: "Like the other people of Malabar, they avoid touching low caste men, and if they happen to touch them, they wash themselves, not owing to the superstitions… but because they live among the Nairs, and, if they touch low castes, they themselves become untouchables and thereby lose ordinary intercourse and communication in buying and selling, and the honour from their kinds, because it is only with the Christians and Brahmins that the Nairs may have intercourses, both being high caste men. All other castes are considered low, and their number is large" (cited in Zachariah 1994: 49). Gouvea seems to justify the practice as a survival strategy, rather than caste discrimination. Decree II of session IX of the Synod of Diamper spoke of the rules of purity and pollution observed among the Syrian Christians and prohibited the practice on the ground that before

God all are equal.

Authors like Dalit Bandhu (1994a) refute the tradition about the conversion of early Christians of Keralam from the Brahmin caste and suggest that the initial converts should have been from some other castes, in all likelihood lower, as the caste system itself was non-existent in early Keralam. Bandhu asserts that the early Christians were converts from the fisher folk as evidenced by the edicts of Tarisappally (848 A.D.), Thazhackattuppally (mid 11th century) and *veeraraghava pattayam* (1225 A.D.). Pathirappally (1999), quoting various scholars, states that the original inhabitants of Keralam were *cheramar*, and so were the first Christians in this region. If that be the case, the community has undergone a *sanskritisation* process to stake the claim to *namputiri* origins (Koilparampil 1982; Srinivas 1977).

However, according to Bernard, the historian of St. Thomas Christians, to assume that it was the backward/lower castes of those times who accepted Christianity is also not correct. For, given the kind of caste system prevalent during those times, it was impossible for the dalits to have tried for conversion (Thoma 1992). That the early Christians of Keralam had a caste pattern of existence almost in lines with the upper castes of the Hindus is also enunciated by Kunjanpillai (1955).

According to Zacharia (1994) the caste feelings made the early Christians uninterested in proselytisation. Conversions from the lower castes began only after the synod of Diamper, when Fr. Francis Roz became the bishop of St. Thomas Christians in 1599. Special arrangements were made for the converts from lower castes in the churches, either by erecting separate buildings, or by allocating a particular part of the church to them.

Koilparampil (1982) in his study had found that the Christians of Keralam of the pre-Portuguese period, were not very much different from the Hindus with regard to caste observances. Even today the caste vestiges remain within the Christian fold with communities that are endogamous and observe caste practices in different degrees. Gough (1961) too pointed to the caste structuring of the Catholic community of Keralam similar to that of the Nair caste group.

Dalit Conversions to Christianity

It was only by the 18th century that serious efforts were made to bring Christianity to the lower castes of India. In 1706 Lutheran Missionaries of New Jerusalem Church, under the leadership of Zeegenbalg, preached among the lower castes of Tranquebar of Coromandel coast, not far from Kanyakumari. But before long, the pattern of discrimination was practised in the Church as well, as evidenced by the writings of Benjamin Schultz who opposed the practice of distributing communion[8] to the dalit converts in separate cups/plates/vessels. However, due to the fear that the Christian message would never have acceptance among the higher castes, further efforts were concentrated on attracting higher caste groups to the Christian fold. Thus establishment of Christian educational institutions in various urban centres became a trend, and many of them did influence the elite class of those times (Jose 1991).

It is assumed that Hinduism (the Aryan pattern of caste Hinduism) came to Keralam only much later than elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent, and when it arrived, Christianity was already there. Instead of opposing a movement (of Aryan Hinduism) towards oppressive division of society, Christianity seems to have co-opted the system and become a caste by itself, without letting the message of liberation to go out to other sections suffering oppression (Jose 1991). N. K. Jose (1991) criticises the Church in Keralam for this failure. He points out two historical documents – the first one around 800 A.D. which addresses the leader of the community as 'the head of the faithful', which later on in the 15th century finds an address as 'the head of the caste' (*jatikku kartavyan*). The early Christians in Keralam relished their *savarna* status and had slaves as per the customs of the society. Claudius Buchanan in 1800 mentions his conversations with a local *nasrani*[9] priest at Kannankulangara Angadi who said that the people of his community had not increased or decreased in number, implying that there was no addition to the community from new conversions.

Dalit Conversions to Syrian Catholic Church

Bandhu (1994c) says that the history of dalit conversions to the

Catholic Church began only in 1856 with the conversion at Nedumkunnam. However, even before that, flow from dalit communities to non-Catholic Christian denominations had begun. Serious efforts at the conversion to the Catholic Church in Keralam were prompted by the belated realisation of the archbishop of Kochi, Martini (1844-1853) that the Anglican (and Protestant) influence in the society was increasing on account of conversions. Seeing the need to have the upper hand and perhaps other material advantages as well, he persuaded Palakunnel Vellyachan to work among the dalits. However, it was in 1857, under the influence of the then Bishop Barnardine (1853-1868) that he agreed to it. His chronicles, *Palakkunnel Vellyachante Nalagamam* (Joseph 1971)[10] describes in details about the earlier efforts of conversion to the Syrian Catholic Church from among the dalits.

Though Palakunnel's evangelisation efforts among the dalits were more from a forward Christian vantage point, yet he was opposed, ostracised and even attacked on that account by the existing forward Christians. For instance, on the Sunday following the dalit conversion at Nedumkunnam in 1856, the forward group came for the mass, boycotted the service, and many of them felt that they should have a purification bath. At the conversion that took place at Edathua in 1864 the priests did not take the initiative and a layman did the initiation. And a *pulakappela* (*pulaya* chapel) was constructed for dalit converts so that they did not enter the church and pollute it (Jose 1991: 95).

The vows the neo-converts had to take included their willingness to be still *pulayas* and at the service of their respective *achans*, not to claim any privilege other than having the true faith, and to accept the dual punishments (from the Church and from the owners) if they ever tried for equality (Jose 1991: 88-89). This reveals the motive and attitude of the Catholic Church towards the dalits and their conversion. The dalit Christians continued to be subjected to caste discrimination by the other Christians despite their conversion to Christianity. In effect conversion did not change their caste status as untouchables before others including the Christians.

Authors like Kadankavil (1997a, 1997b) and Jose (1991) have given details of the various attempts of dalit conversion to the Syrain Catholic fold. Blessed Cyriac Elias Chavara, the founder of the first

indigenous religious order for men (the Carmelities of Mary Immaculate), who was also the Vicar General of the Syrian Catholic Church in the middle decades of the 19th century, was another pioneer in converting dalits. With the establishment of the first monastery of the order in 1831 at Mannanam (Kottayam district), he is also said to have taken care of the uplift of the *pulaya* Christians of the locality. His direct involvement in this matter was seen in 1864 as cited in the Mannanam Chronicle.[11]   It mentioned the establishment of a catechumenate around that time and reported that young boys from the vicinity used to come to the monastery and remained there till evening. In order to promote their study, provision for meals was also made through collection of *pitiyari* (a handful of rice kept apart by the families and pooled together for the poor). Though a Sanskrit school was established in 1846 which was said to be open to all, there is no concrete evidence as to whether the dalits were admitted there. The Chronicle also records the establishment of a structure with the provision of a chapel in the land donated by Thuruthimalil family. This is said to have been at Arpookkara near Mannanam. He was instrumental in establishing a catechumenate in Edathua as well. It is observed that between 1866 and 1931, the efforts by the Carmelites had led to the conversion of over 20000 dalits to the Syrian Catholic Church.

In the 20th century, Thevarparampil Kunjachan[12], having his base at Ramapuram near Pala (Kottayam district), worked for almost five decades for the conversion and pastoral care of the dalits belonging to *Pulayas*, *Parayas*, *Panars*, barbers, hunters and carpenters in and around Ramapuram. About 5000 people were said to have been baptised by him. His efforts included home visits, provision of relief and assistance to those in need of treatment and education, and training them in Christian faith life (Chacko 1987).

According to N. K. Jose conversion was a means adopted by the dalit castes to attain liberation from oppression (Kadankavil 1999). The end of the Muslim sovereignty in 1707 saw the reassertion of caste oppression in several part of India, which prompted the oppressed castes to seek conversion as a way out for their freedom. The Church had its agenda in its programme of dalit conversion.

The protestant (LMS/CMS) missionaries inspired the converts to assert their equal rights, what Chattambi Swamikal[13] visualised in his book '*Kristumatachedanam*' (the destruction of Christianity). In contrast the Catholics in converting the lower castes who were attached to their lands tried to make them all the more submissive. The dialogue between the catechumens and the missionary priest before the first conversion as cited by the pioneer Syrian Catholic missionary among the dalits itself is evidence for this.[14]

Jose (1991) sees the Protestant efforts of conversion in the south and central Travancore more as a movement to freedom for the dalits, whereas the Catholic conversion, towards north Travancore, seemed more a prerogative of the 'owner' to decide what religion his 'slave' should follow, and a way to check the threat of the slaves from going away. He sees three motives: (1) to create an alternative to the Protestant efforts and assert the Catholic supremacy of the Christian Church, (2) to make sure that the working class remained docile and available even after slavery had been abolished in 1855 and (3) to reap the benefits of the proportionate government privileges for the Christians on the basis of numerical strength. Conversion had a strong impact with reference to the third motive. Conversion improved the representation of the Christians in the legislative assembly of Travancore on the basis of population size. The census reports of Travancore showed that the Christians grew from 191009 in 1854 to 697387 in 1901. Jose (1991) attributes this increase to the inclusion of the neo-convert dalits in the Christian group, almost 430000 dalits joining the fold.

Resistance to Conversion

As there began an outflow from the depressed classes to Christianity, there were efforts to restrain this. One such effort was *brahmanishtha matham*.[15] Further to this, the temple entry gave to the depressed classes a right – access to the temples for worship with the upper class Hindus. The government under the diwanship of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyyer was restricting all the special privileges for the depressed classes only to those who had not got converted into Christianity (Bandhu 1994c). These were some steps to discourage the conversion of dalits.

Ayyankali, the only leader of reckoning in the modern history of dalits in Keralam, seems to have resisted and worked against Christian conversions, because he perceived that the goal of conversion was not the progress of the dalits, but strengthening of the Christian fold or of the spiritual well-being of the souls of the dalits. He opposed Charathan Solomon, the representative of dalits from Kuttanad in the assembly of the princely state of Travancore, when he argued for the converted dalits (Assembly Proceedings, February 12-24, 1913 as cited in Bandhu 1994c). This he did, because perhaps he thought that Solomon was not worthy of taking such a stance after his conversion to Christianity unless he reverted back to Hinduism, on the basis of which he was nominated to the assembly (Bandu 1994c).

However, Ayyankali was not against the support of Christians or working with them, as seen in accepting the support of missionary Edmund during the Parinad *Pulayar-Nair* conflict, also called the Kallumala agitation, somewhere around 1915. During that time the dalits were given shelter at the Christian missionary school without making conversion to Christianity a condition for this service. Bandhu (1994c) raises a pertinent question in this context. If Ayyankali had not opposed the outflow of dalits to Christianity, what possible difference would have been there other than the dalits being fewer and Christians (dalit Christians) more in number? Would it have made the situation of the dalits (dalit Christians) any better?

PROBLEMS FACED BY DALIT CHRISTIANS

While the analysis of the caste based inequality in the social organisation of India is applicable to the Indian Christian community as well, the plight of the majority of the Indian Christians, who happen to be dalits, is perhaps a little worse, on account of the added alienations they suffer. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India once said that he could not perceive a problem specific to the untouchables or dalits. To him the problem was that of economic deprivation, of which the untouchables were also a part (Jose 1999). Even now, 80 per cent of the dalits are landless and have less than 100 days of work in a year (CSI Youth Movement 2003). Koilparampil (1982) has pointed out that caste based discrimination in the Syrian Catholic Church is perpetrated

against the dalit converts by neglecting them and denying their due share in the resources and functioning of the Church.

The Social Status

The social status of the dalit Christians has remained the same as it was before their conversion. Till about fifty years ago, there used to be separate church or space within the church, allocated for dalit Christians. Gopalan (1999) cites the contradiction in dalit Christians tracing their Christian background to the 19th century. They are still treated as *puthu* (neo) Christians, while the converts (if there are) from other castes are never called as *puthu-christians*. He quotes the example of one Edamaram, a convert from a higher caste (Kadankavil 1999: 108). Whereas, if someone by name Choti became Christian and received the name Mathew in baptism, he would be called Mathaipulayan instead of Chotipulayan. There had been instances of discrimination regarding the burial place. Even in the recent past, in 1989, in the parish of Kuravilangadu (Kottayam district) there was an incident in which the body of a dalit who was buried near a traditional Christian was exhumed at night and buried elsewhere (Kadankavil 1999: 111). Gopalan quotes from a memorandum submitted by the converted Christians to Simon Commission in 1929: "We remain today what we were before we became Christians – untouchables – degraded by the laws of the social position obtaining in the land, rejected by caste Christians, and excluded by our own Hindu depressed class brethren" (Kadankavil 1999: 112).

Koilparampil (1982) refers to the concept of disharmonic social system to describe the situation arising out of the caste system of a community which by its principles cannot have caste. Professing highest forms of equality, the community fails in bringing the equality ideal to practice. The lack of visibility of the dalit section in the various fields of influence and leadership points to their backwardness. There are claims on the part of the Church of having spared no efforts for their uplift. There is much hue and cry made in various forums regarding re-conversion of dalit Christians to Hindu religion for better socio-economic benefits, and also about their drifting away from the Catholic Community to new Evangelical-Protestant communities, because of the equal treatment and/or economic benefits they receive in those communities.

Gopalan (1999) concludes with his assessment on the role of conversion to Christianity in the development of the dalits. He reads a *savarna* plot to weaken the dalits in general, in the struggle between the dalits of Hindu fold being supported by *savarna* Hindus and the Christian dalits being supported by traditional (*savarna*) Christians – the former against including Christian dalits in the reserved list, and the latter for that. He points out that the traditional Christian community, which now supports reservation for dalit Christians, has not made any effort in reserving job opportunities for the dalit Christians in the numerous educational institutions which they run. A much quoted couplet from the famous Malayalam poet, Vayalar Ramavarma, depicts the plight of the dalit converts to Christianity. "*Kristyaniyayi matam mariyenkilum, Ittappirikkoru teentalanippozhum* – despite having changed religion and become Christain, Ittappiri continues to be untouchable" (cited in Jose 1991: x). He says that the life of the dalit Christian still remains "like a dark shadow of the urban civilisation - *nagarika naralokattinte syamamaya nizhallenna pole*" (cited in Jose 1991: xii).

Oppressive Nomenclature and its Implications

The converts to Christianity from lower castes have been called by various nomenclatures over the past two centuries – *puthukristyanikal, avasakraistavar, parivarthanakraistavar, harijankraistavar, pulayakristyani, parayakristyani, marddita kraistava* and *atisthanavargakraistavar* (Gopalan 1999). When the Gandhian programme of *harijanodharanam* was in vogue, the term *harijan* began to be used for this section of Christians. After the political mobilisation on the basis of ethnic identities, this term was discarded by the dalit Christians as well.[16]

Koilparampil (1982) has quoted Imtiaz Ahmed, who has observed this fact with the new converts into Islam and Christianity. The prefix 'new' (*puthu*), according to the latter implied a slightly inferior status. K.C. Alexander's study pointed out the stigma attached to the term '*puthukristyanikal*', which literally means new Christians, but in practice it segregates. The term 'new Christian' was seen as used by Vischer, the Dutch Protestant chaplain of Kochi from1717 to 1723, which according to him consisted mostly of converts from the low castes (Mundadan 1984: 354). This term was in vogue till the 1950s. Thereafter the dalit Christians have come to be called as *avasakristyanikal* or depressed Christians (Varghese 1988: 5). The term which now they have chosen for themselves is *dalitkraistavar* or dalit Christians (Jose 1991: 2).

As already elaborated, dalit is a nomenclature which expresses the process of making a human being a dalit or oppressed. It expresses the emotions and thinking which the oppressed people possess (Bandhu 1994b). Literally dalit means broken, divided, separated or foot-trodden. The term was used as early as in 1922 to refer to those groups who were oppressed through caste system. Swami Sraddhananda was the President of *dalitoddharaka samiti* of Delhi. And hence the conference of the Indian National Congress in Bardola in 1922 appointed him as the convener of the committee for the uplift of the untouchables (Jose 1999).

Writer on dalit issues, N .K. Jose raises the issue of whether it is to be dalit Christians or Christian dalits. Can there be dalits among Christians when Christianity preaches the fatherhood of God and equality of all who believe in him as children of God, while there can be Christians from among the dalits? There can be no divisions among Christians. Whether the dalits should first assert and accept their dalit condition and then speak about their religious identity, which is a matter of choice rather than something they are born with (Augustine 1996; Jose 1991). This was adopted by Christian Dalit Liberation Movement in 1984 in its second formation meeting at Hyderabad (Paravila 2003).

Marginalisation of Dalit Christians

Mathew M. John (2003) speaks about the marginalisation of the dalits. He points to the threat of monoculturism which, in absorbing diverse dalit cultures, in effect wipes them out. The political efforts remain at the level of marches and rallies. In the visual media, especially cinema and theatre, the dalits are depicted as supportive or comical characters. Their rich tradition of their folk culture is being absorbed and commoditised. He cites as an example, the use of *vaittari* (a kind of refrain typical of such songs, which are expressions of the struggle and pathos of the dalit existence), in the modern cinematic and commercial music. "This bleeding dalit reality is transformed into entertaining stereotypical hollow stuff by the dominant culture" (CSI Youth Movement 2003: 20).

The main reason for the marginalisation of the dalit Christians was the practice of discrimination against them. Gough (1963) observes that conversion to Christianity was taken recourse to by the Hindus of the so-called low castes to improve their social status. However, their fond hope that those thus converted would get greater acceptance by the intermediary castes like the Nairs was not materialised. The dalits converted to Christianity continued to be discriminated by the forward sections of Christian community; and this led to their displacement, both among the dalits and among the Christians. Gopalan (1999) accuses the Church to have extended the evils of caste system to Christianity as well. In the words of Stanislaus the dalit Christians have been subjected to six fold discrimination – by the state, the non-dalit Hindus, non-dalit Christians, the hierarchical Church, fellow dalit Hindus, and the sub-groups of the dalit Christians (Paravila 2003).

Constitutional Provision

At the time of independence the Christian point of view was presented in the constituent assembly by the forward Christian representatives, H. C. Mukherjee, Jerome D'Souza and Rajkumari Amrita Kaur. Mukherjee said that Christians did not require a reserved constituency/representation on the basis of their religious minority status. Though this stand was much appreciated as noble on the part of the Christians (which meant withdrawal, in 1950, of the 1935 reservation on the basis of religious minority status), the brunt of this position was borne by the Christian dalits who form almost 75 per cent of the Indian Christians (Jose 1991).

On account of this position taken by the Christian representatives in the constituent assembly which appeared magnanimous and in the spirit of national integration at that time, the Christians were not included for any special provisions, other than the freedom to run educational institutions for the noble motive of moulding the character of the adherents of Christian faith. However, it was the Christian dalits who were deprived of what was due to them on account of their social backwardness.

Dalit Christians are not covered under the special provision of reservation for the depressed sections of the society. Dalit Christians

are denied the protection through reservation on the basis of their faith, while the fact remains that change in religion has not really made them free from the clutches of centuries-long backwardness. The confusion arises from equating socio-economic background as pertaining to religious faith. The crux of the issue lies in the definition of those deserving special treatment on the basis of their membership in Hindu community. The argument here is based on the premise that untouchability as a practice is of Hindu origin. Hence, those who belong to other faiths do not suffer from the evil of untouchability and hence need not be included in this category. Islam and Christianity being free from this evil, those getting converted to these religions are not included in the scheduled list. The fallacy of the argument lies in the conclusion that the practice of untouchability is restricted to the source of its origin, and that legal or moral principles (e.g., of equality) are always practised as preached. This social reality was observed by Gandhiji long back, that a *harijan* whether Christian or Muslim, would continue to suffer the bondage of untouchability all through one's life (Gandhi 1936).

The constitutional provision of reservation has also contradicted itself by ignoring the fact that untouchability is removed by law (article 17 of the Constitution) and hence legally, there would be no Hindu who is suffering from untouchability. The dalit Christians do not enjoy the right to seek civil protection and safeguards provided to all dalits under the Untouchability (Offences) Act 1955, the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1976, and the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 (Chinnappa and Raj 2006).

Since 1950s there have been struggles of dalits for equal rights and/or special protective measure. On account of the pressure they could exert, the Sikh dalits got it in 1950, and the Neo-Buddhists got the same in 1990. But the dalit Christians are still deprived of this protective measure (Augustine 1996). Here again, a further contradiction is revealed. The criterion for determining the inclusion of a caste group in the list of the Scheduled Castes is the social, economic and educational backwardness resulting from the traditional practice of untouchability. When it comes to converts to Christianity this backwardness is set aside, but the same is accepted in the case of converts to Sikhism or Buddhism both of which are egalitarian in principle as Christianity.

In 1965, the Kumarapilla Commission report which studied the reservation of seats in educational institutions observed: "The social backwardness of the Scheduled Castes is so great that the new convert is not easily assimilated with the congregation he has joined and others instinctively keep away from them until his standard rises. That will come only by gradual stages. The evidence is that the degree of segregation of the new convert from the Scheduled Castes is almost as high as before the conversion…we are convinced that in practice converts from the Scheduled Castes are treated as socially backward" (Augustine 1996: 41).

Some of the pronouncements by the court of law point to the justice issue involved in the case of dalit Christians. Justice J. Kanakaraj is quoted by Augustine: "There is a popular myth that when a person is converted into Christianity he is accepted and treated as equal to every other citizen. I am calling this attitude as a myth because in practice there is no such acceptation or treatment. May be within the Church the person may have some concession or a show of equal treatment. But in the competitive world of seeking admission to the educational institution or seeking appointment to posts, he suffers from the same difficulties as his Hindu brother or sister suffers" (cited in Augustine 1996: 45).

Those who look at the dalit issue as a justice issue in analysing the political decisions right from the constitutional assembly, suspect a right wing Hindutva agenda. It starts with the defining of those who were to be considered for reservation privileges. It was K. M. Munshi in the constituent assembly who suggested that the reservation should be on the basis of religion and that only Hindus be treated as Scheduled Castes. "Persons who belonged originally to Hindu Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and were subsequently converted to Christianity should on re-conversion to Hinduism be eligible to all educational concessions granted to Hindu Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. They will also be eligible for other concessions in respect of grant of land, establishment of colonies etc. for which Hindu Scheduled Castes and Hindu Scheduled Tribes are eligible" (Jose 1991: 49). There is a similar order regarding the grants for students who belong to these categories.

There has also been a rightwing campaign within the country to mislead 'Hindu' dalits that their rights will be eaten away if Christian

and Muslim dalits were to be given reservation rights. K. V. Kumaran, All Kerala Pattika Jati Varga Federation President says: "Hindu dalits should not oppose the inclusion of Christian dalits in the Scheduled Caste list. There should not be any loss for those who are already in the list. Instead of the existing one per cent reservation, they should be accorded reservation proportionate to their population" (Raj 2006: 35).

DALIT CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

With reference to the depressed sections of the society, Fannon says that "practice of violence binds them together as a whole" (see Pandey 2006). However, this does not seem to have taken place in the case of the dalit Christians of Keralam. They are a divided lot. It is in this context that writers like Massey and Bandhu call for 'dalit solidarity'.

Gopalan (1999) points out re-conversion as one of the ways in which some of the Christian dalits have tried to cope with the situation of deprivation. They converted back to Hinduism to receive the privileges due to the reserved castes. However, Kadankavil (1997b) observes that in spite of the strong attractions offered in the form of reservation benefits, very few of the dalit Christians have gone back from the faith. This probably shows how they value the spiritual tradition they have chosen.

Individual Dalit Leadership

Dalit Christian response to the socio-economic problems they face as a community does not show much to mention except the committed work done by a few individuals in facing the oppression and deprivation they have been subjected to. One of the few outstanding individuals from among the dalit Christians, who dedicated themselves to the cause of the community, is Pampadi John Joseph. He did the pioneering work among *cheramar* Christians. *Cheramar Sangham*, started by him, was a response to the *non-Christian* dalit mobilisation through Ayyankali's *sadhujana paripalana sangham*, to which the government allocated many privileges on condition that it remained exclusively Hindu. John Joseph insisted that all *cheramars* irrespective of their religion should join the *sangham*. Himself a convert to

Christianity, he popularised the term *cheramar* for the *pulayas*. The letter he wrote to the British Parliament highlighting the plight of the Christian dalits and the need for special privileges for them in the year 1935, was a realistic depiction of the dalit Christian situation then, and it is true to a great extent even today. He also highlighted how Christianity helped the converts and broadened their horizon. He published a periodical '*cheramardutan*' to bring the dalit issues to the public (Jose 1991: 78-84; Bandhu 1994c).

Poykayil Yohannan of *Pratyaksha Raksha Sabha* was another leader from among the dalit Christians who worked for the uplift of the community. He was threatened and persecuted at several places because he preached against the discrimination practised against the dalit Christians as injustice. There was no effort to counter his arguments, except the use of brutal force to suppress such responses.[17]

Political Organisation

From 1909 to 1950 the dalit Christians in India had reservation in accordance with the Government of India Act of 1909. In 1935 the British Government in India included Christians as a special constituency along with the Muslims. At that time, the forward Christian regions of Goa, Travancore and Kochi were not under the British rule (Jose 1991). However, when the issue of reservation of seats for the lower house came up for discussion, the Christian leadership (of predominantly forward or *savarna* Christians) argued for religious minority status, rather than Scheduled Caste status, presenting Christian community as one without the distinction of dalits and non-dalits. Accordingly they were given 8 seats in the lower house at the centre. In the lower houses of the presidencies the number of seats reserved for Christians was nine in Madras, three in Bombay, three in Bengal, two in Uttar Pradesh, two in Punjab, one in Bihar, one in Assam and one in Orissa, and three seats in the upper house of Madras. It was with this system that dalit Christians were removed from the list of social groups for special treatment. This was the national picture just before the independence.

Gopalan (1999) feels that the road to liberation lies in achieving power, political power, which needs united effort on the part of the various oppressed groups – the dalits, the backward castes, the minority

communities etc. Till 1964, dalit Christians in Keralam used to be at least nominally represented in the state assembly through two Congress MLAs (members of the legislative assembly), P. Chacko and P. M. Markose. Since 1964 there has not been any representative of the dalit Christians in the state assembly. In 1991, there were 34 Christian MLAs representing the 19.32 per cent of the Christian population in the state. However, not a single one among them was a dalit Christian. It is said that there are as many as 50 influential pockets where the dalit Christians can wield considerable influence on the election outcomes, if they are politically organised. In 13 assembly constituencies there are between 25000 and 45000 dalit Christian voters. There are 21 constituencies that have 10000-25000 dalit Christian voters. Other small pockets of possible dalit Christian influence in politics are eight constituencies with 5000-10000 voters and another 20 constituencies with 1000-5000 voters. They have not been able to make an impact of their numerical size in these areas, because there has not been any successful organisation of the dalit Christians politically.

Dispositions and Identity

As discussed earlier and elaborated by Ilaiah (1996), acceptance of identity and assertion of the same while adapting what is befitting for a human life of dignity is today widely discussed as the way to liberation. However, with regard to the dalit Christian community of Keralam, this needs to be explored. In an otherwise enlightened and progressive society, it is supposed that the dalits also would possess a higher level of self-esteem.

Jain (1991) in the review of the book, "Ethnicity: Identity, Conflict, Crisis" (eds. Kumar David and S. Kandirgamar) says that the solution may not lie in the regeneration of communities which may incite ethnicity, but rather in (a) a more just distribution of resources, (b) making development process more mass-oriented and (c) making the decision making process more participatory. Paravila (2003) has quoted the observation of Louis regarding the problem with asserting one's identity leading to denial of reservation privileges, and consequent concealment of the dalit identity. This does not in any way help organisation of the dalit Christians on their self identity.

There have been some attempts at dalit Christian movement. On 24 July 1955, a gathering of a few leaders, including Catholic priests, initiated a movement, called *Avasa Catholica Mahajana Sabha* (ACMS). They elected P. M. Markose as President, P. C. Paul as secretary and V.J. John as treasurer. The first meeting of the organisation was held at Chethipuzha (Kottayam district) and was attended by the Chief Minister of Travancore, T. K. Narayanappilla. In that meeting the declaration regarding free tuition to the children of dalit Christians was made. Campaign for welfare measure was pursued. In the face of the threat of resignation by Christian MLAs, Panampilly Govinda Menon, the then Chief Minister of Keralam sent an appeal to the central government to include the dalit Christians in the scheduled castes' list, although it did not have a positive result.

In 1965 the ACMS adopted the name *Harijan Catholica Mahajana Sabha* (HCMS) in tune with the prevalent Gandhian thinking and influence of those days. But in 1995, taking into account the new socio-political thinking and the identity-assertion paradigm, the organisation further changed its name to *Dalit Catholica Mahajana Sabha* (DCMS). DCMS also has feeder organisations like DCYL (*Dalit Catholic Youth League*) and DCVS (*Dalit Catholic Vanita Sangham*). They organise seminars, camps, cultural feasts, vocation promotion camps etc. The DCMS has given leadership to various campaigns for securing equal rights for the dalit Christians, on its own, and in collaboration with other dalit organisations.

FUTURE HOPE OF DALIT CHRISTIANS

The foregoing presentation on the development of the Syrian Catholic Church, and the conversion of the dalits into its fold since the middle of the 19th century shows an underlying contradiction in the community as to the values it preaches and the praxis of the same. This contradiction is most glaring with reference to the egalitarian ideal Christianity upholds.

Jose (1991) observes that the differentiation and consequent division in the Church based on rites apparently is a question of power relationships; but deeper still is the caste mindset of people of Keralam that could not tolerate the acceptance of a people, whom the existing

Christians thought to be of lower caste, as fellow members of their faith community.

The Synod of Diamper[18] is said to have abolished the evil tradition of *ayittam* (untouchability). As there was strong reaction against this egalitarian measure, an alteration seems to have been made, which said that *ayittam* would be when *savarna* Christians were present and not in their absence! A dalit perspective of the famous *koonankurisu* oath points to the caste significance of the synodal decisions that were in conflict with the commercial interests of the Syrian Christians. The predominantly trader community of the Syrian Christians felt threatened that, if the dalits were part of their community, their status as a non-polluting community would be lost. The new decisions banning caste differentiation would make them a polluting community, thus rendering trade with the upper castes impossible. This is said to have been the underlying reason for the revolt leading to the oath of *koonankurisu.* Hence it had more to do with caste related economics and social status than the apparent struggle against religious domination (Muthukattil 1999).

Bandhu (1994c) is unsparing in his criticism of the dalit conversions. It was not faith that made the converted or the missionaries/ converters to convert to Christianity, but a hope (false) that they would find greener pastures, equal opportunities as Christians in Christianity. He draws parallel between the discrimination in Hindu community and Christian community – as the dalits who had devotion to/faith in Vishnu or other Hindu deity along with *savarna* Hindus, the dalits who professed faith in Jesus Christ along with the traditional (*savarna*) Christians were never treated equal, but were discriminated against; discrimination cut across religions, because caste worked as the social fabric for all the communities.

The consciousness of the Syrian Christians seems to have been in tune with the existing social milieu where the caste system was the accepted form of social organisation. According to Dalit Bandhu and N. K. Jose, the very usage for the leader of the community as '*jatikku karthavian*' (found in the Angamaly *Padiyola*, a document written on palm leave in 16th century), where community is referred to by the term '*jati*' which means caste, is indicative of the acceptance of the

community as part of the existing caste system (see Mundadan 1984: 183). Being favourable to themselves as belonging to the privileged group, it appears that change in the system hardly ever appeared to them as warranted. The omission of the efforts for dalit conversion to Syrian Catholic Church, well documented by Bernard Thoma (1992) in his two volume work, '*Mar Thoma Kristyanikal*' (St. Thomas Christians), is also perhaps indicative of this disposition in the community. Similarly Syrian Catholics maintained caste like relationship with Latin Catholics. There are writings which show the caste mentality within the Syrian Catholic Church. For instance, the migrants from the Latin Catholic diocese of Verapoly (Kochi), who settled in the predominantly Syrian Catholic areas of Kottayam and other hill regions, were not given membership of the Syrian Catholic Church parishes. This in course of time led to the creation of a Latin diocese in those areas (Paravila 2003).

The efforts of Robert Dinobili (*tattvabodhakar*) and Beschi (*viramunivar*), who had assumed the high caste and brahmanical cultural elements to present Christianity as culturally suited to the dominant castes, might have unwittingly contributed to the caste inequality in the Church. In fact, in 1623 Pope Gregory XV permitted the high caste converts to maintain their caste based distinctions. The rationale was that caste was more of a matter of social relationships than of faith. In 1779, the concept of separate cemetery for the dalits was accepted by the Roman Catholic Church.

According Dalit Bandhu, Christianity is a religion of the dalits in India, where almost two thirds of the total Christian population is dalit. They became Christian, because of the hope it offered, of being Christians at par with other Christians. But it never happened so (Bandhu 1994a). In the 50 years after the independence the policies of protection and reservation have not changed the dalits much. Including the dalit Christians in the reservation list is not going to hurt the rest of the dalits, nor is it going to benefit the Christian dalits much. What is needed is a situation where dalits, whether listed or not listed in the schedule, are able to live as human beings with the rest of the humanity. For this all those who are dalits should unite in struggle. Bandhu points out the subtle ways in which the forward classes have always managed to defeat the unity of the backward classes of the society. If the same

should not happen, the dalits have to be united. The *pulayas* over the time have now been divided into eight groups, but the Nairs (now a forward group) in Keralam who were of 42 divisions have now become united as one group (Bandhu 1994a).

Dalit Bandhu calls for the unity of all Christians of Keralam for the cause of dalits, and asks the traditional Christians to shed their false claim of having descended from *namputiris*. The 'unity of the community' (*samudayika aykyam*) according to him is possible only among equals. He strongly points out that the Church has failed the dalits and dalit Christians by not siding with them, and not including them in the development process as equals, and being smug and satisfied with the doles they managed from the western nations. He makes a radical call to the Christians of India to declare themselves as dalits after the model of their leader Jesus, who lived and died the life of a dalit, or else honestly agree that they are not followers of Christ, but merely the members of the institutionalised religion of Christianity. Similarly he calls upon the dalit Christians to assert their dalit unity first, for that has been their identity, in spite of embracing Christianity, and fight for their progress together with the other dalit communities (Bandhu 1994a).

Thomas (1999) speaks about the ways in which the caste inequality is to be encountered by the discriminated sections. It is the way of assertion of one's caste identity (*jati tanima*). The need is to have *swatwabodham* (identity consciousness). He is critical of communist influence which suppressed the caste identity under the class identity (*vargabodham*) leading to a state of stupor *swatwasamudaya bodham* (community identity consciousness). In his view, strengthening the caste identity is not necessarily creating conflict. Assertion of one's identity does not imply contradicting other different identities.

NOTES

1   The author prefers to use Keralam (the term in Malayalam, the local language) to refer to Kerala.

2   Some of the terminologies in use in the region are indicative of this: e.g., *palli* (the term Christians and Muslims use for their centre of

worship). The term is from the ancient Buddhist language *pali* in which the term means a Buddha *vihara*. There are many places in Keralam which end in *palli,* which are thought to have been centres of Buddhism. When people adopted the newer religions of Christianity and Islam, they retained the term for their centre of worship, whereas the Hindu renewal resulted in the destruction of Buddhist culture in Keralam, that the resultant Hindu culture deliberately refrained from using this term for their centres of worship. There is also a tradition that hundreds of Buddhists were killed on spears *(sulam)* and hence the name of the town at the banks of Periyar called *Alavai*, which means spear.

3   Parasurama is venerated as the 6th incarnation (*avatara*) of Vishu according to Hindu mythology. He is considered a *ciranjivi* (immortal), and is known for his warrior skills, for his effacement of a royal *kshatriya* clan in war, and for his legendary role in the creation of the landscape of Keralam from the Arabian Sea, by virtue of throwing his axe from Gokarn redeeming the land up to Kanyakumari from the sea.

4   The legend of Mahabali (Bali) the *asura* king, whose growing power was checked by the *suras* (*devas*). He was sent down to the netherworlds by deceit through the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, who appeared as a Brahamana. Today this is seen as symbolic of the conquest of the Dravidas by the Brahmana dominated *Aryas* through unfair means.

5   The first recorded split in the Church of Keralam was in 1653. The Church was split into two, those who adhered to the Pope of Rome under the jurisdiction of the western Latin Bishops, and those who opposed this western authority and tried to continue the links with the Persian Church.

6   Literally, it means 'bent cross.' The tradition goes thus that the protesting native Christians hung to a huge rope (*vatam*) which was tied to the cross while taking the oath not to abide by the rule of the Portuguese missionaries. With the impact of pressure exerted by so many people the cross is said to have gone bent.

7   Koilparampil (1982: 48-67) presents briefly the various denominations of Christianity within the state of Keralam. Jacobite Church, Malankara Orthodox Church, Nestorian Church, Mar Thoma Sabha, Anglican Church, Church of South India, Church of Brethren, Pentecostal Church, Salvation Army, Seventh Day Adventists, Juyomayam (Ancara Vedam), St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India, Thozhiyoor Church, Church of God, Jehova's Witnesses, Pratyaksha Raksha Deiva Sabha, Lutheran Church, Church of Thrissur (Surayikal), Catholic Church (Latin, Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara).

8   Communion refers to the act of receiving the consecrated bread which according to the teaching of the Catholic Church is the body of Christ in the form of bread. It is only those practising Church members, or members of other Churches in communion with the Catholic Church, who have the right to have 'communion'.

9   *Nasrani* is the local term for Syrian Christians, after the name Nazarene, used to refer to Jesus Christ (of Nazareth).

10   Being one of the earliest documents and considered authentic due to the involvement and leadership of the author himself, this work is extensively cited in this paper. The translation from the original Malayalam is of a free nature.

11   The citing is from '*Positio 1977.*' *Positio* is the documentation issued by the Catholic Church on the process of beatification (honouring the members of the Church after their death, with the title 'Blessed', on the basis of outstanding practice of Christian virtues). In 1986 Fr. Cyriac Elias became the first Indian Christian to be beatified.

12   Officially, Kuzhumpil Augustine (1891-1973) was elevated to the status of 'Blessed' in the Catholic Church, in 2006, on the basis of his practice of Christian virtues, especially through his apostolate among the dalit Christians of Ramapuram (Kottayam district).

13   A 19th century Hindu reformer of Keralam, who tried to strengthen the Hindu religion by reforming it and preventing conversions to Christianity.

14   "*Ee kutuvan astamayirikkunna pulayar mammodisa mungiyal mappilamarayittu natannu chattamuntu kalayammennu vaccakunnu mammodisa mungunnatennu nerallatta abhiprayangale paranju aaddehavum pulayare mukkunnatinu maticcatallate dhyanattinu vannappol avare mutakkiyilla*"(Joseph 1971). The *pulayas* were eager to receive baptism because of their eagerness to sit at par with the traditional Christians during the social celebrations. This prevented the missionary apostolic, Marsellenious from conferring baptism on them. After clarifying the issues with the missionary he agreed to confer baptism and finally on *Dhanu* 24th 1858 a group of 18 *ezhavas* were baptised. Later on, the catechumens among the *pulayas* were brought to the missionary on his visit to Nedumkunnam, and he was made to understand the genuineness of their preparation. While the bishop was passing by Karukachal, he made the *pulayas* to kneel down and make the sign of the cross. After witnessing this and after getting clarification regarding this from the priests concerned he decided to confer baptism on them the very next day. However, Fr. Palakunnel sensed that his

elder brother was opposed to this, and hence he did not proceed with the process. At this the bishop took initiative and enquired why this was not happening. Knowing about the opposition of Fr. Palakunnel's brother the bishop decided to visit him and persuaded him to cooperate in this matter. At this juncture the Hindu community began to get restless about this (according Fr. Palakunnel, the Satan instigated the Hindus). The secretary to the bishop, Fr. Thomas and Fr. Palakunnel questioned them about their views. 'Do you intend to go away leaving your masters after receiving baptism?' They replied in negative and added that even after baptism they would live by working for them only.

Q: Will you become proud because of the baptism and stop giving way to the Hindus (*kavyan*)? Will you oppose this practice?

A: We will give way to them and move away farther from them than before. Even then we want to go about knowing the creator God.

Q: When you get baptised, if you think that you can leave your status and move around in the company of the *mapillas*, it will not happen. In any situation one can be a child of God, there is no need to change the (social) status to follow the gospel *(vedam)*.

A: We will continue to remain *pulayas*. We need only *vedam*.

Q: Promise in one voice three times, so that every one can hear that when you get baptised, you would not think of yourselves as *sudarma*, and would not leave your masters (*accanmar*).

A: After we get baptised we will not leave out masters (three times).

15   An initiative of *Sadananda Swami* towards the end of the 19th century or beginning of the 20th century to strengthen Hindu religion, and prevent conversions from the Hindu fold. It had the support of Ayyankali during its initial phase (Bandhu, 1994b).

16   On 24 November 1985 the Government of India prohibited the use of this terminology (*harijan*) to refer the scheduled castes.

17   In an earlier study, Palakkappillil (1997) has recorded the recollection of some of the Christian converts of Ezhupunna, who narrated how their efforts at self-assertion were met by physical violence.

18   Synod, held at Udayamperoor in 1599, is seen as a very controversial official Church assembly, as many of the traditional practices of the Church of Keralam were banned, and many traditions from the Western Church were forcibly introduced. A total lack of the local culture and

tradition, and mutual understanding between the two traditions, viz., the Latin and Syrian, are cited as the reasons (see Zacharia 1994).

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