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## UNIT 17 CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ORGANISATION

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### 17.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit describes the social organisation of Christians in India. A study of this unit will enable you to

- explain the origin of Christianity in India
- list and describe the common features of Christian faith
- describe the Christian social organisation in terms of family, the role of the priest, church and Christmas among Syrian Christians of Kerala
- identify and explain the areas of relationship between Christian and Hindu social life in Kerala.

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## 17.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the previous unit we have looked at Muslim social organisation. In this unit we are going to familiarise you with the social organisation of another community, namely, the Christian community. Since the community of Christians has different bases of social organisation depending upon the region of a particular group, we have chosen one specific community as an example. It is called the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. Its social organisation is discussed here with reference to family and church.

The spatial and demographic dimensions of the Christianity in India are examined in section 17.2. Then we have a brief discussion on the origin of Christianity in India, with special reference to Kerala and Goa, and the eastern and north eastern parts of the country. Next, we describe the basic tenets of the Christianity. Then we begin with our case study of the Syrian Christian community of Kerala also known as the Christians of St. Thomas. Here, we discuss the case of Syrian Christian family in India. Here, we examine the role and status of the husband's mother, husband's father, the grandparents and the mother's brother in the family. Besides these we also discuss the aspects of patrilocal residence, patrilineage and inheritance in the Christian family. Next, we describe the role of priest, church and Christmas in Syrian Christian social organisation. Lastly, we analyse how the Hindu rituals and the elements of castes are in practice among the Christians of Kerala.

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## 17.2 ORIGIN OF CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA

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In this section, we shall first discuss the spatial and demographic dimensions of the Christian community in India and then state briefly how Christianity first spread in Kerala and Goa and later in the eastern and north-eastern states.

### 17.2.1 Christian Community: The Spatial and Demographic Dimensions

In India there is no one homogeneous Christian community, but there are many different ones, organised around regional, language and sectarian bases. There are Kerala, Goan Tamil, Anglo-Indians in North India, Naga and North East Indian Christians, who are different in their language, socio-cultural practices and economic status. It is difficult to speak about a general Christian way of life in India for these very reasons. There are many churches, many denominations or groups, many sects or brotherhoods among them.

According to the 1981 Census there were 18 million Christians in India and the percentage of Christians in India's population accounted to 2.43 per cent. The total Christian population had almost kept up with the national increase of 24.69 per cent over 1971-81. In 1991 their population was 2.32 percent of the total population. However, the distribution of Christian population has been very uneven in India. There are dense settlements of Christians in some parts of the country while in other regions there are small and scattered Christian communities. In Andhra Pradesh, in the year 1981, the Christians represented 2.68 percent of the total population. In Kerala the percentage of Christians was 20.6. So also Manipur had a 29.7 per cent Christian population.

In fact, Meghalaya with 52.6 percent and Nagaland with 80.2 percent registered the highest concentration of Christian populations. Tamil Nadu had 5.78 percent Christian which was over twice the national average. Very low percentages of the Christian population had been recorded in some central and northern states of the community. For example, Jammu and Kashmir 0.14 percent, Madhya Pradesh 0.7 percent, Rajasthan 0.12 percent and Uttar Pradesh 0.15 percent. In 1991, the highest concentration of Christians was found in Nagaland (87.46 percent) and Meghalaya (85.73 percent). In some States such as Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana etc. the Christian population was very low.

### 17.2.2 Christianity in Kerala and Goa

Christianity came to Kerala through the work of St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus in the first century and in the fourth century through the influence of traders from Syria. Accounts show that St. Thomas, a follower of Jesus, converted several Nambuthiri Brahmans to Christianity. Thomas is said to have landed in the ancient port of Muziris in 52 A.D.

The Christians of St. Thomas were very prosperous, and historians write that the local kings were very pleased with them and gave them several privileges.

In 345 A.D. a Christian, Thomas of Cana set out with permission from the Bishop of his land, and came to Kerala with a number of Christians from Jerusalem, Baghdad and Nineveh.

The Indian Church of St. Thomas came into a close relationship with the Persian Church from the time of the arrival of this immigrant group. However, in the sixteenth century, Persia lost control over the Indian church for the St. Thomas Christians came under the ritual domination of the Portuguese who had arrived in India for purposes of trade. When the Portuguese arrived in India they found a well established Christian Church, where the believers spoke of themselves as being “the Christians of St. Thomas”. They are also called the Syrian Christians.

This period began with the ‘discovery’ of a sea route to India by Vasco de Gama in 1498. Trade was not their only concern. The priests who followed the first Portuguese travellers and discoverers began the establishment of Portuguese rituals in the Churches of Kerala. The Christians of St. Thomas loved their ancient ceremonies, and they did not want to transfer their loyalty from the Patriarch of the East (who was like their Pope) to the Pope of Rome.

It was only in 1653 that the St. Thomas Christians were able to free themselves from Portuguese domination. At this time a division was created in the community of St. Thomas Christians, between those who followed the Pope, and those who followed the Patriarch of the Eastern churches. Historical events, such as the coming of the English divided the community into several more groups. Some of these are called the Anglican (now a part of the church of South India) Mar Thoma, Evangelical and the **Yakoba**. The Yakoba are themselves divided into two parties because of a church quarrel. Yet, all these groups or denominations share a similar culture. The church practices of each of the group is somewhat different.

In 1509 Alfonso de Albuquerque saw that if the Portuguese were to consolidate their commercial interests they must have a permanent residential interest in India. Goa became central in this interest, and along with administrators the ships of the Portuguese also carried priests. Evangelical work among the native people of Goa began with the work of Franciscan friar Antony de Loueo in 1517. In 1542, Francis Xavier arrived in Goa, and soon after he began his work amongst the Paravas, the fisher-folk in the Coromandel Coast.

The Dutch followed the Portuguese in the colonisation of India and consequently, its commercial exploitation. However, they were not zealous in spreading the Christian faith, and they did not arouse the deep hostility that the Portuguese did. The English followed the Dutch, and they spread the Gospel through missionaries (Menachery 1973).

### **17.2.3 Christianity in the East and North East**

In 1793, Carey and Thomas of the Baptist Missionary society arrived in Kolkata, where they proceeded to translate and print the Bible in the vernacular. In 1806, Rev. Caludius Buchanan was already writing about the importance of the dissemination of the Bible in Malabar, and he was aided in his plans by the British Resident in Travancore. Benjamin Bailey spent decades in the translation of the Bible in Kottayam, Kerala.

In the North East hills of India the first attempt to preach Christianity was made by William Carey, the founder of Serampore College near Calcutta. He sent one of his early converts named Krishna Chandra Pal to the Khasi hills in 1813.

Christian Missions were from a very early period interested in education. Western ideas were introduced through the schools and colleges set up by Christian missionaries, and in turn had its impact in the growth of the National movement. We know how close Mahatma Gandhi was to C.F. Andrews and how the gentleness of Jesus' life made a profound impact on the ideas on non-violence that Gandhi evolved, for liberating the country from its colonial fetters (Neil 1984). Since it is not possible to present an account of the social organisation of all Christian communities in India, we are here selecting only one section of Indian Christians for this purpose. In the following sections you will learn about the Syrian Christian social organisation.

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## **17.3 TENETS OF CHRISTIAN FAITH**

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However, in spite of regional variations as described above there are certain tenets, which unite Christian life and experience all over the country. The first of these is that all Christians believe that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is their saviour. They believe that Jesus was born to Mary, a virgin, and that God, the Father, sent him to redeem people of their sins. The concept of virgin birth, is accepted alike by Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians in India. Christianity asserts that Jesus was the Son of God. However, Jesus' father on earth was Joseph. He was a carpenter who protected Mary and took her away to Bethlehem where the baby Jesus was born in a stable. The story of the poverty surrounding Jesus' birth is a very important one for Christians. It establishes the background of much of what Jesus taught, and the manner in which his teachings celebrated poverty, meekness and humility.

### 17.3.1 The Life of Jesus

The life of Jesus is the central principle around which Christians in India organise their ritual life. The two most important religious festivals of the Christians are Christmas and Easter. Christmas marks the anniversary of Jesus' birth, and is celebrated by attending the Church, eating festival food, wearing new clothes and greeting friends and neighbours. In India, there would be differences among Christians in the kind of festive food that is served, or the kind of clothes that are worn. These are, however, regional differences of custom. The belief that Jesus' birth must be celebrated and this celebration unites Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Goan, Malayali, Konkan or Naga Christians. Similarly, all Christians mourn the crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday, and celebrate his Resurrection, or victory over death on Easter Sunday. All Christians believe that Jesus was killed by his enemies who hated what he taught; but on the third day, he arose from the tomb and convinced his followers of his divinity, for soon after he ascended to heaven. The Christian church then came into existence with the belief in the Resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharist service, which is the central part of Christian rituals, enacts the life of Jesus. It is like a sacred drama, which is performed so that the Christians may continually remember the life of Jesus, hear again his teachings, and try to live their lives in the way that he taught his disciples. Let us now briefly discuss the various elements of Christian faith.

### 17.3.2 Various Elements of Christian Faith

Christianity is a historical religion, and all Indian Christians accept that their Master, born in the Middle East, was Jesus of Nazareth. The Bible is the sacred book of the Christians. It provides the basis for Christian beliefs and the norms for Christian behaviour. The Four Gospels (a part of the Bible) of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to be found in the Bible are often read by all Christians in the country. These are memories of Jesus' life; they affirm that Jesus is authentically human, as well as Lord, Messiah (Christos, the Son of God).

For all Christians in India as elsewhere, the reality of God is affirmed in Jesus' life on earth. All Christians accept the propriety of speaking of God in a three-fold manner, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is a problem of great theological complexity, and among Christians there can be differences in the interpretation of the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Let us, for our purposes merely say that all Christians believe in the Trinity. They believe also that the Universe has been divinely created, that people are sinful, and that Jesus was sent to earth so that people and God could become reconciled. The Christian Church was founded by Jesus and his spirit is constantly present and sustains all the Church and all believers. Finally, all Christians believe that all human life (human history) must one day close, and then will follow the day of judgement when people will either be rewarded or punished according to the kinds of life they have led.

#### Activity 1

Read the section on the Tenets of Christian Faith carefully. Now describe briefly the tenets of your own religion, or, any other religion. Compare, if possible, your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

**Check Your Progress 1**

i) How did Christianity come to Kerala? Use three lines for your answer.

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ii) Which colonial powers were interested in evangelisation (teaching and spreading the ideas of the Gospels)? Use three lines for your answer.

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iii) Briefly state the teachings of Christianity. Use eight lines for your answer.

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**17.4 THE CHRISTIANS OF ST. THOMAS: AN  
EXAMPLE OF CHRISTIAN SOCIAL  
ORGANISATION**

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Christianity, like any other religion, is a way of life. Differences in the social organisation of Christianity will arise from the historical, cultural, political and geographical environment in which the community is founded. Thus the social organisation of Christians in Goa, Delhi, Punjab, Nagaland or Tamil Nadu will differ from one another depending upon the region and its culture and/or sectarian differences. The social organisation of Christians of St. Thomas, called the Syrian Christians, has been described in order to show you the specific nature of organisation of a particular Christian community in India. It is only one example of Christian life in our country, but it may help you to understand what Christianity is about. The following sections describe Christian social organisation in terms of family, the role of Priest, Church and Christmas among Syrian Christians of Kerala. The interaction between and some common rituals of the Christians and Hindus have also been referred. In the earlier sections, the origins of Christians in India and some of their basic beliefs have been given. All this should give you some ideas regarding the social life and organisation of the Christians in India.

### 17.4.1 The Christian Family

The Syrian Christian family is a very close knit one. Let us look at Christian family relationships, and see what they say about this particular Indian Christian community.

#### The Husband's Mother

When a Christian bride enters her husband's home, her husband's mother would have a very important role to play in her new life. Close relations between a Syrian Christian husband and wife, specially in the early years, are thought to be unseemly. When they move into an independent household with the birth of children, that husband and wife complement each other, but a certain reserve always marks their relationship.

The closeness of family bonds, which characterises the Syrian Christian family, is a tribute in fact to the relationship between a woman and her son's wives. It is not merely cooking and the organisation of the household that a bride learns from her husband's mother. She learns the Christian virtues of charity and piety as well. However, there are often tensions between the two women, since the relationship is an unequal one.

#### The Husband's Father

The relation of a Syrian Christian woman to her husband's father is one of respect. He is the head of the household till the time of his death. However, by the time he is about sixty years of age, he may retire from active social life. While actual control of property may be in the hands of the sons, the father is treated with great respect, and his advice is always sought. It is he who leads the family at prayer when after dinner the family kneels together on the carefully laid out reed mats. Further, it is the father who gives formal permission, necessary economic assistance and the blessings when a couple want to set up house separately. The relationship between sons and fathers is one marked by devotion, affection, obedience and respect on the one side, and by patronage and authoritarianism on the other. This relation, full of tensions, is also reflected in the relation of the bride to her husband's father.

For many Christians, while they live in **nuclear households** (consisting of parents and their unmarried children) the ideal family that they generally desire are **three generations**, in which all the sons bring their brides into the paternal households, and live all together with their children. However, in practice, amongst the Syrian Christians, the sons set up separate households with the birth of children.

#### The Grandparents

For these Christians, grandparents play a very important role because they live close by. The paternal grandmother is an important person in the life of the child, particularly as the child grows up. A teasing relationship is often evident. Even before they go to formal school, they accompany their grandmother every day to the parish church. It is to her that they recount the events of the day. She teaches them stories from the bible and songs about Jesus.

On the other hand, with the grandfather the relationship is one of great formality. This is the consequence of authoritarianism and patrilineality. The grandfather in the Christian household is the *griha nayakan* (head of the house) and this idea of domestic authority is pervasive, he leads in family prayers, gets priority in being served the best at meal times, makes all important decisions regarding property, money and the arrangement of marriages.

### **The Mother's Brother**

The mother's brother is of great importance to the children. Gifts from the mother's brother are received on occasions of marriage and birth. The mother's brother always brings abundant quantities of fruit and sweet foods called *palaharam* when he comes to visit. Many Christmas vacations are spent at the mother's brother's house with the maternal grandparents. Here the children are honoured and beloved guests.

As they grow up, however, their father's house becomes more important. It now becomes the centre of their life, particularly when they are sons. It is to this house and property that they will be **heirs**. This is "their own house" as opposed to their "mother's brother's house".

### **17.4.2 The Patrilocal Residence**

Patrilocal residence (staying in the same locality as the father) is of great importance to these Christians. Brothers always live in neighbouring houses, food and garden products are often shared. They visit each other, celebrate rituals and ceremonies in each other's houses, share sorrows and difficulties. The link between them is that they are of the same blood and the same name.

### **17.4.3 The Patrilineage**

For the Syrian Christian, the patrilineage is important, and the significance of house names must be understood in this respect. A man is better known as Vazhapallil Paul or Pallivadikal Thomas, for the house name carries the ideas of property, privileges and lineage. It expresses the idea of patrilineal **descent** or of membership in a lineage organised around the male descendants of an ancestor.

In contrast to descent is filiation, which relates an individual to both parents, not merely to the father and his male relatives. The relation of children to their mother is in striking contrast to their relation with their father. It is to the mother that the young child turns to for every need, and she mediates between the child and the father, the latter being a distant figure. In fact, among these Christians all women should be like Mary, the mother of Jesus. They must be gentle, soft and humble like the *matav* (mother).

Women are never formally included in the affairs of the outside world, those relating to the domain of property and income for instance. Even in the question of marriage it is the fathers who meet, discuss financial and practical matters and fix the alliance. Women cook, clean, take care of children and are devoted to the religious life, spending much time in prayer and attending devotions at the Church.



### 17.4.4 Inheritance

Till 1986, women were given *stridhanam* by their fathers, which was seen to be their share in father's wealth. It was controlled not by women, but by the husband's father. After a Supreme Court ruling in 1986, a woman may inherit equally with her brothers should her father die without writing a will. Written wills, however, ensure even today that it is sons who inherit property, while daughters are given away in marriage with *stridhanam*, which is never really hers to use, since her husband's father or her husband will control it.

Inheritance customs express the dominant place of the father in the Syrian Christian household. Traditionally the concept of equal share was never of importance to the Syrians. Property was divided according to the whim of the father, or according to the need of his children. The question of manipulation and favouritism arose frequently. The writing of wills has always been very popular amongst these Christians, and the father has absolute control over his sons.

What does this brief discussion of the Christian family show? It describes patriarchal authority which is in fact the basis of Christian social organisation. The next section will discuss the church in the context of Christian social organisation.

#### Activity 2

Read Sub-section 17.4.1 once again. By now you would be aware of the role of the husband's father in a Syrian Christian family. Now, note down in about fifteen lines the role of husband's father in the family of your own community. Compare, if possible your note with those of other students at your Study Centre.

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## 17.5 THE CHURCH

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Here we will look at the priest, the church and the celebration of a Christian festival, i.e. Christians, in order to understand more aspects of Christian social organisation.

### 17.5.1 The Priest in Christianity

The Christian priest is greatly respected by his parishioners. When he conducts prayers and offers the sacrifice (as the central rite of Christianity is called) he stands in place of Jesus Christ. He has the power to reveal the sacred world to those who believe. The Christian priest is a man of God. Amongst the Yakobas, the priest is expected to grow a long beard, and wear a round black cap, loose trousers and a flowing black or white gown. These are the signs by which a priest is known. He must be always calm and disciplined. When he goes to the Church he must not talk to anyone, all of his being must be directed to God. When people are in trouble, ill, suffering or dying he must be with them. At times of joy, feasting, marriages, births, entering a new house, he must be present to bless the occasion. No one will start a celebratory meal without the priest. If the village is having an exhibition of fire-crackers on a feast day or a function, the priest must be present. He is given the best place to sit in, the best food, and the greatest respect.

The prelates or Bishops of the Church are treated with even greater respect. It is only on festivals and other important occasions that the people meet them. At other times they live in the monastery in meditation and prayer. The Bishops are the leaders of the community. Every Christian knows them by sight and by name. To be related to a Bishop in anyway is of great value. As soon as the Christians see a Bishop, all conversation stops, every one stands at attention. Even if the Bishop is younger than many of his parishioners, they express great respect, almost awe. Those who come to him must bow their heads and receive a blessing with his handcross. To have a Bishop officiate at a baptism or marriage or funeral is considered to be a very great honour.



Fig. 17.1: The Christian church

### 17.5.2 The Christian Church

In this section, we will describe the architecture and interior of the church. The construction of the traditional Syrian church in Kerala (see figure 17.1) follows the principles laid down by the Hindu *Shastras* on architecture. It is surrounded by a courtyard on all sides. The walls are similar to Hindu temple walls in height, width and design. Inside, the Church is whitewashed; sometimes there are religious paintings on the wall or ceilings. These pictures tell the story of Jesus, and often have pictures of St. Thomas, who is said to have brought Christianity to Kerala. The altar is placed on a higher platform, and no one may climb the steps upto this sanctuary. It's a holy place. Only the priests and his assistants are allowed access to the altar, the holy vessels, the cross and candles that are kept there. There are no chairs or pews in the traditional Syrian Church. The floor is covered with reed mats, and on these the people kneel and pray. The men stand on the left side facing the altar; the women stand on the right side. There is an aisle between them, down which

the priest's assistants will walk swinging the container of burning incense, which purifies the air. Many churches have silver or bronze oil lamps that have wicks burning in them. The devotees come and pour oil into these lamps and each will light a wick in honour of Jesus. In each of these churches there will usually be a large stone cross in the outer courtyard, which can be seen from very far away.

The church is the heart of Christian social life. People in the villages visit the church every evening for *Sandhya Namaskaram* and in the morning for *Vishudha Qurbana*, the Holy Sacrifice. The Holy Sacrifice is a symbol of the life of Jesus. The priest, through the rituals of the church, acts out of the great mystery of the life of Jesus. The mystery of religious belief lies in that moment and practical reality is kept away, while the sacred world is for that moment brought closer.

Everyday, the people participate in the great mystery of the Sacrifice, and specially on Sundays the churches are full. The two greatest festivals are Christmas and Easter, which are celebrated with great joy. In fact, for many traditional Christians, the perception of time is not according to the Western calendar year, but centres around the life of Jesus. It begins with the birth of Christ.

We will now discuss Christmas celebrations amongst these Christians as an example of their religious life.

### 17.5.3 Christmas

Twenty five days before Christmas are days of Lent or abstinence, to mark the coming of great Joy.

The days before Christmas are days of hectic activity. The house is cleaned and made ready for guests. On Christmas Eve all the churches are open, decorated with green leaves and plants. The houses on the roadside look bright with lights. The streets are full of children. Each Christian house is marked by a big star, because when Jesus was born, a bright star was seen in the sky. There is usually among these Christians of Kerala, no practice of decorating a tree, buying new clothes or sending greeting cards. What is given great importance is going to Church, eating an elaborately cooked meal and spending the day together with relations and friends. Those who are wealthy have their houses white-washed, while others clean, polish and wash their houses for a week.

The first part of the Christmas service begins on the twenty-four evening. The main service takes place in the early hours (3 a.m.) of the twenty-fifth of December. In the evening prayers, the priest tells the people about the birth of Christ to Virgin Mary. He tells them of the wise men who came from the East and gave Jesus gifts, and how shepherds came to see the child who was born in Bethlehem. The priest tells the people again how poor Jesus was born in a manger, wrapped in rags amongst animals. After these hymns and prayers of the evening, the people go home.

At 3 a.m. on Christmas morning all the Christians will be walking to their church. They bring with them oil, candles and incense as gifts for the church.

In the Church, the priest wears very beautiful golden and green robes, the candles are all lit, and the Church is filled with the fragrance of incense. In the Christmas songs and prayers that follow an important place is given to Mary. She is *deva mata* (mother of God) *rajmakal*, a princess and David *putri* (a daughter of King David).

After the celebration of Qurbana (Holy Sacrifice) the people kiss the Cross and leave their gifts of incense and oil. They are like the shepherds and the wise men who came to Jesus at his birth and left offerings for him.

Dawn breaks as people leave the Church. The narrow roads and bylanes are full of early morning worshippers each greeting the other. No one is dressed in his or her newest or best, all come to Church in simple ordinary clothes, usually white cotton. It is enough that they have woken up at 2.30 a.m. to express their devotion and belief in the birth of Jesus.

Having described one of their rituals, we shall now try to show in the next section, how Christianity in India is to be understood in relation to its regional cultural dimensions. Here we have described the relation of Christianity to Hinduism in Kerala.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- i) Describe the family organisation of the Christians in Kerala. Use about seven lines for your answer.

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- ii) Outline the importance of the priests in a Christian society. Give your answer in about three lines.

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- iii) How do the Syrian Christians celebrate Christmas? Give your answer in about three lines.

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## 17.6 THE RELATION OF CHRISTIANITY TO HINDUISM IN KERALA

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The Christians of Kerala are in a specific cultural relationship to their Hindu neighbours. We will take some examples here in order to understand how the Christian and the Hindu share many aspects of their social life together. Let us first look at calendar and time.

### 17.6.1 Calendar and Time

The Malayalam era follows the Christian era by 825 years. It is still used in everyday speech when referring to the past, for marking the dates of the establishment of churches, houses and gravestones. If you wish to know which year 2005 is in the Malayalam era, you only have to subtract 825 years.

The months have names different from the Western calendar months. Each month has a certain attribute or character. Thus *Karkadam* (July-August) is considered to be the worst, a time of rain and hunger. *Kanni* (September-October) is thought to be a bad and inauspicious month, and during this period house construction will not begin, nor will marriages take place. *Dhanu* is the best season, and it is the time of Christmas, which the Christians celebrate with great joy.

The calculation of time according to moments is still done by the *nazhika*. The day is divided into 60 *nazhikas*, and each *nazhika* is 60 *vinazhikas* (24 seconds). This precise way of calculating time is used by people in making traditional (Ayurvedic) medicines, which follow given rules, held by both Hindus and Christians to be life laws of nature.

Days have special significance in terms of auspicious and inauspicious. Wednesdays are considered so dangerous that there is a saying that even a leopard cub will not emerge from its mother's womb. Fridays and Tuesdays were considered auspicious by both Hindus and Christians for oil baths and washing the head in the most elaborate fashion. On these days men would avoid travel, as this would cause extra work on a day which belonged to the women. Let us look at another example, that of house building, now.

### 17.6.2 Building of Houses

The Hindu *asari* (craftsman) who builds for the Christian, follows the customs and rules that he would for a Hindu client. The Christian places wholehearted trust in the *thachan* or carpenter who follows the rules laid down by the *Thatchu Shastra*. These are rules of measurement, location and construction. The Christian house is in architectural style essentially like any Hindu house of similar status. A traditional house-builder said, "In this matter the Christians have full faith in the Hindu *Shastras*. They know that if we do not do as the books say then some misfortune will befall the house or the occupants."

### 17.6.3 Elements of Caste in Christianity

The Syrian Christians of Kerala believe that their ancestors were Brahmans who were converted to Christianity by St. Thomas, a follower and friend of Jesus who came to Kerala in 52 A. D.

The Christians believe that when they converted from Hinduism to Christianity, they were forced to break away from their original caste group. However, their caste status is maintained by them because they are careful to behave in certain ways, which are in keeping with caste defined behaviour. They maintain the traditional boundaries and distances between high and low castes, even though this is against the moral laws of Christian life. It was the only way in which they could survive, and survive they did for almost two thousand years. Adaptation and compromise were the two laws by which this Christian community lived for many centuries. Even today, in spite of the many changes brought about by modernisation, they sustain their daily life, many of the traditional customs of the past. Let us look at some of these.

Like the Hindus, they have faith in horoscopes; like their Hindu neighbours they too tie the *tali* or marriage locket; they observe death pollution often to fifteen days, and the rituals of bathing to remove death pollution called *pula kuli*. Like the Hindus, they celebrate *onam* and *vishu* (harvest and new year festivals). They also celebrate *annaprasanam* (first feeding of a child with rice).

### Check Your Progress 3

Select the correct answers of the following questions.

- i) How many years separate the Malayalam era from Christian era?
  - a) 825 years
  - b) 625 years
  - c) 925 years
  - d) 725 years
  
- ii) Whose rules and customs are followed by the craftsman while building the house for a Christian client in Kerala?
  - a) Hindu client strictly
  - b) Both Hindu and Muslim clients
  - c) Muslim client only
  - d) None of the above

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## 17.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have first given a general picture of Christian community in India and then described common features of Christian faith. For discussing Christian social organisation, we selected the example of Syrian Christian community and examined family, role of priest, church and Christmas among the Christians of St. Thomas. Thus, through a case study of Syrian Christians of Kerala, this unit has given you an understanding of Christian social organisation.

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## 17.8 KEYWORDS

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<b>Descent</b>	A principle, which symbolises the importance of birth in allocating group membership and individual identity.
<b>Heirs</b>	Descendants who will inherit a name, status and property.
<b>Nuclear household</b>	This would consist of father, mother and their unmarried sons and daughters.
<b>Stridhanam</b>	Women's wealth. A women's share in her father's property given to her at marriage.
<b>Three generations</b>	This would consist of a man, his son, and his son's son, along with their dependents, in a patrilineal society.
<b>Yakoba</b>	A term used to refer to a particular Christian sect amongst the Kerala Christians.

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## 17.9 FURTHER READING

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## 17.10 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- i) Christianity is believed to have come to Kerala in 52 A. D. through the teachings of St. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus.
- ii) The colonial powers interested in evangelising India were the Portuguese, to some extent the Dutch and the British.
- iii) Christianity teaches belief in the Trinity-the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost Spirit. Jesus came to earth to redeem men of their sins. All Christians believe that one day there will come the day of the Judgement, when good will be rewarded and evil punished. It teaches its people to abide by the moral code outlined by the Bible, their holy book.

### Check Your Progress 2

- i) The family organisation of the Christians in Kerala is patrilineal. The father is the head of the household. He wields immense power over the other members of the family. Sons have a relationship of filial devotion obedience and respect, towards their father. Daughters are sent away by marriage and are given *stridhanam*, but their bonds with the natal family remain strong.
- ii) The priests are the leaders of society. They are given much importance and respect.
- iii) The Syrian Christians celebrate Christmas by going to Church, by greeting each other and by eating festive food.

### Check Your Progress 3

- i) a
- ii) b