



**National
Council of
Churches'
Review**

NCC REVIEW

**Vol. CXLV
No. 2
March 2025**

UGC-CARE List ISSN 0975 - 1882

The National Council of Churches Review (NCC Review)

The Organ of the National Council of Churches in India

UGC approved Journal

Formerly published as "The Harvest Field" since 1862

Vol. CXLV

No. 2

March 2025

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Views expressed in the NCC Review do not necessarily
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Registration No. 33/2019

EDITORIAL

Not Just on March 8th...

Each year, International Women’s Day (IWD) serves not only as a celebration of women’s accomplishments across all spheres of life but also as a powerful reminder that gender inequality persists. Celebrated on the 8th of March every year, this day was earmarked by the labour movement in North America and Europe. Women were fighting for fair treatment at work, the right to vote, and equal rights. This year, as we observe this occasion, it is impossible to turn our eyes away from the ASHA Workers' strike going on in Kerala.

In India’s villages, Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) play a critical role in keeping communities healthy. Translating to ‘Hope’ in Hindi, ASHA, under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), are often the first point of contact for villagers for any health concern. Their work includes providing medication, giving first aid, raising awareness about hygiene, nutrition, sanitation, and vaccination, and helping women with pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare.

Despite very low pay and employment benefits. Many of them work 8 to 12 hours a day, walking from village to village in extreme heat or rain, often without protective gear. They get no health coverage when they fall ill, sometimes due to the very work they do. They are the backbone of India’s rural health system, but their work is completely invisibilised and constantly undervalued. ASHAs have resorted to collective action in demanding acknowledgement as workers and being compensated accordingly.

Around the globe, women continue to earn less than men for the same work. The gender pay gap persists across nearly every sector, reflecting not just differences in compensation but also systemic biases that undervalue the contributions of women. This is all the more true for

different types of care work, where women are considered naturally fit for the role and denied adequate resources and compensation for their labour. India's public health rests on the invisible work of countless women, and this strike is a powerful reminder that a just, inclusive healthcare system is impossible to achieve without securing their basic rights.

From wage gaps and under-representation in leadership roles to gender-based violence and unequal access to education or healthcare, the challenges women face have very real material consequences. IWD urges us to do more than just celebrate—it calls on everyone to act, to break barriers, and to rebuild systems for a world that is truly just and equal for all.

International Women's Day also forces us to consider intersectionality—the way gender intersects with caste, class, race, sexuality, and other identities. Women experience gender inequality differently based on their social position. Too often, mainstream gender equality movements have emphasised the voices of privileged women while marginalising others. It is important to amplify the voices of those who are most marginalised and ensure that policies work not just for some women but for all.

But it's not just about what governments and organisations can do. Each of us has a role in advancing gender equality. Whether it's challenging stereotypes at work, sharing caregiving responsibilities at home, advocating for inclusive policies, or simply listening more deeply to women's experiences, individual actions matter. Social change begins in everyday interactions and choices.

International Women's Day is a powerful reminder of what has been achieved and what remains to be done. It is a day to celebrate the courage of women who have fought and continue to fight for justice. But more importantly, it is a day to recommit to the work ahead. True

gender equality is not a distant dream—it is a possibility within our reach if we choose to make it a priority.

So let us not reduce this day to a ceremonial gesture. Let us use it as a catalyst for dialogue, reflection, and most importantly, action. Every woman deserves to live in a world where she is heard, her choices are respected, and her rights are upheld—not just on March 8th, but every day of the year.

Rev Dr Abraham Mathew
Managing Editor



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ON DESCENT AND IDENTITY OF SYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN KERALA: RE-READING THROUGH HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

-Bibin Paulose & Abhilash Babu***

Abstract

Syrian Christians are considered one of the oldest Christian communities in India, especially in Kerala. According to tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle is believed to have introduced Christianity to the region during his arrival on the Malabar Coast¹ in A.D. 52. Prevailing historical narratives (both oral and textual) concerning the community exhibit their considerable diversity. Despite certain ambiguities, these narratives play a pivotal role in shaping the community's identity, descent, and tradition. The Syrian Christians innovatively documented the history of their church through lengthy chronicles and presented them in various segments. This article does not intend to unearth the archetypal history of Syrian Christians in Kerala. However, utilizing the 1720 Malayalam manuscript titled 'Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal,' the article seeks to reevaluate the chronicles of Syrian Christians, often overlooked by popular historiography. The article adopts a qualitative approach while grappling with questions on constructing the identity and narrating the descent of Syrian Christians. Since the culture and tradition of Syrian Christians is entangled with legends, folklore, and myths, the article places itself within the framework of a historical research design. It seeks to collect and analyze past events and thereby attempts to offer a re-reading about their descent, tradition, history, way of life, and the processes of identity construction.

Keywords: Syrian Christians, Identity, Kerala, Culture

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¹ Malabar Coast is a region along the southwest coast of India, primarily in Kerala. It is bordered by the Arabian Sea to the west and the Western Ghats to the east. It was known for its role in the spice trade, especially in black pepper.

Introduction

The term ‘Syrian Christians’ does not have a commonly accepted definition. Nevertheless, some Syrian Christians maintain that the term should be used to represent only those people who had originally come from ‘Syria’ and their descendants.² Some Indian scholars of church history assert that the term ‘Syrian’ applied to the Syrian Christians in Kerala is due to their adherence to the ‘Syriac’ liturgy in their ecclesiastical tradition. Church historian Abraham J Puliurumpil states, “The term ‘Syrian’ denotes a group of people who follow the Syrian rite.”³ The stories and folklores significantly shape the narrative of how Christianity began in India, particularly in Kerala. The genesis of Christianity in Kerala is, therefore, wrapped up in legends, and it has a long history.

The legend of St. Thomas is quite popular among Christians in Kerala, and for the most part, they still believe in the tradition of St. Thomas. St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus Christ, is believed to have come to Kerala in AD.52. He is said to have converted some of the Nair⁴ and Namboothiri Brahmin⁵ families, along with Jews and other local communities in Kerala, to Christianity and to have built seven churches in different parts of the region. Hence, it is claimed by some present-day Christians that they might be descendants of Hindu upper-caste families and are known as ‘St. Thomas Christians,’ for following the teachings of St. Thomas. However, the arrival of Portuguese in India made significant cultural, historical, and identity shifts among these Christians, which also led them to be identified by others as ‘Syrian Christians.’ Over

² K.C Zachariah, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century* (Delhi: Oriental Longman Pvt Ltd, 2006), 9.

³ James Abraham Puliurumpil, *A Period of Jurisdictional Conflict in the Suriani Church of India, 1800-1838* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, India, 1994), 14.

⁴ Nair community of Kerala is traditionally known for its matrilineal social structure, where lineage and inheritance are passed through the mother's side, and for its historical role as a warrior and land-owning class.

⁵ Namboothiri Brahmins, a prominent community in Kerala, traditionally structured their society around joint families, emphasizing patrilineal descent and inheritance. They significantly influenced Kerala's socio-political structure, including the unique matrilineal sambandham system with the Nair community, which shaped regional kinship patterns.

time, internal schisms emerged within the Syrian Christian community, losing unity and dispersion under various church jurisdictions. Syrian Christians currently encompass distinct factions with unique traditions, identities, and cultural systems.

Traditions and Folklores

The prevailing and widely disseminated narratives are integral to the tradition of Syrian Christians in Kerala, closely associated with St. Thomas, a missionary from Syria. According to such narrations, St. Thomas is believed to have reached *Caranganore*⁶ in A.D-52, where he is credited with converting some Nair and Namboothiri Brahmin families to Christianity. Moreover, St. Thomas is also reputed to have been instrumental in founding several churches and chapels across Kerala. It is believed that following his work in Malabar, St. Thomas travelled to the Coromandel Coast,⁷ where he is said to have been martyred in A.D 68.⁸

Some Western and native historians show sympathy towards the claims of St. Thomas' traditions. For instance, S.H. Moffett emphasizes the oral and traditional origin of St. Thomas Christians, stating that these traditions, passed down through songs and folklore hold closer authenticity to the ethnic and religious roots than written manuscripts of damaged inscriptions.⁹ Many Christian folklores in Kerala, such as *Margam Kali*,¹⁰ for example, explicate the origin of Christianity in the

⁶ Caranganore, historically known as Kodungallore, is a significant town in Kerala's Thrissur district, once identified with the ancient port of Muziris. It was a vital hub for the spice trade, connecting India with the Roman Empire, Greeks, Arabs, and Chinese. The town is renowned for its religious landmarks, including the Mar Thoma Shrine, believed to have been established by Saint Thomas in 52 CE.

⁷ Coromandel Coast is the eastern coastline of India, stretching from the Godavari River to the Kaveri River. It has been an important area for trade, with ports like Chennai and Puducherry. It is also significant in Christian tradition, as it is believed to be the site of St. Thomas' martyrdom in Mylapore, now part of modern-day Chennai.

⁸ Zachariah, *The Syrian Christians of Kerala: Demographic and Socio-Economic Transition in the Twentieth Century*, 10.

⁹ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1 (New York, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 24-39.

¹⁰ Margam Kali is a folk dance performed by women among the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. The name 'Margam' means 'way' or 'path.' The dance revolves around the life and teachings of the apostle St. Thomas. During Margam Kali, a group of female dancers moves around a lit lamp. The lamp signifies Christ, and the dancers portray his disciples.

region and celebrate the arrival and activities of St. Thomas in Malabar in pure artistic mode. In his excerpt, John C. England, another Western historian, notes that the song accompanying a sacred dance recounts the introduction of the Christian way of worship and the path of Christian conversion to Kerala. Interestingly, resemblances can be observed between *Margam Kali* song and the *Yathrakali*,¹¹ the journey songs of the Namboothiries, from whom early conversions to Christianity are claimed to have originated. These traditions indicate the adaption of Chaldean/Syrian liturgies to local, with conversions often occurring in the context of upper-caste marriages, and the patterns of daily prayer and instructions were normal.¹² It is often claimed that what holds Syrian Christians in Kerala together is their shared belief in belonging to a church initially founded by St. Thomas, the Apostle.

Historical Trajectory of Facts

The nomenclature ‘St. Thomas Christians’ in Kerala initially derives from beliefs associated with the legend of St. Thomas. However, popular history states that the genesis of Christianity in the region is marked by two significant migrations from the Middle East. According to historical church records, In AD 345, a community of Christians from Edessa,¹³ arrived in Kerala under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, a Syrian merchant, accompanied by Bishop Joseph. They were granted certain privileges by King Cheraman Perumal, enabling them to practice their faith freely. The second significant migration occurred in 825 AD, when another group of Christians settled in Kollam, Kerala, further consolidating the presence of Syrian Christian traditions in the region. Following the said migrations, Syrian Christians came under the ecclesiastical administration of the Eastern Church, characterized by Syrian rites, located in the eastern regions— Edessa, Mesopotamia, and the Middle East. They embraced Syrian liturgy and theology in their

¹¹ Yathrakali, a traditional folk-dance hailing from Kerala, is also referred to as Samghakkali, Chattira Ankam, Sastrankam, Kshatrankam, or Panemkali. Mainly performed by the Namboothiri Brahmins, it blends socio-religious elements with martial movements inspired by Kalaripayattu.

¹² John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East Before 1500* (Delhi & Hongkong: ISPCK Delhi & CCA, 2002), 59-65.

¹³ Edessa was a city in ancient Mesopotamia, located in what is now modern-day Şanlıurfa, Turkey.

religious practices. From the very outset Syrian Christian community in Kerala, the Patriarch of Antioch, the principal bishop residing in Syria, entrusted to oversee the entire Syrian Christian community globally, is acknowledged as the supreme head of the Church.

The discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco da Gama in 1498 marks the beginning of the Portuguese period in Syrian Christian history, and this seafarer's arrival with his two ships at the port of Calicut signalled an end to India's political isolation from the West. Susan Visvanathan notes that, "from its inception, the Portuguese mission in India prioritized the conversion of Syrians to Roman allegiance."¹⁴ Portuguese missionaries aimed to convert Syrian Christians in Kerala to Roman Catholicism, clashing with the Syrians' commitment to their Eastern Church allegiance. In 1599, Alex de Menezes, a Portuguese missionary and the Archbishop of Goa, convened the historical synod called *Udayamperoor Synod*¹⁵ in Kerala.

The synod condemned Syrian Church doctrines, affirmed Roman beliefs, and established Roman sacraments, consolidating Roman Catholic influence in the region. After the synod, the Syrian Church fell under Roman patronage for over fifty years. In 1653, a significant moment unfolded for Syrian Christians in Kerala— the *Coonan Cross Oath*. Taking place in Mattancherry, a locality near Kochi in Kerala, a large group gathered to symbolically reject Portuguese ecclesiastical oppression by touching a rope tied to the cross during the Coonan Cross Oath. This collective act of defiance, known as the *Coonan Cross Oath*, marked a historic revolt against Portuguese dominance. Following this event, Syrian Christian community underwent a division. Those who maintained their allegiance to the Church of Rome were turned into Romo-Syrians (Roman Catholic), while those who chose to break away from Roman authority became Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite Syrians). Presently, Syrian Christians exist in various denominations: (1) Romo Syrians (Roman Catholic) - A.D 1653, (2) Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) - A.D 1653, (3) Syrian Reformed (Marthoma) - A.D 1889, (4) Anglican Syrian- A.D 1840. Again in 1912, the Syrian Orthodox split into

¹⁴ Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala; History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14-15.

¹⁵ Udayamperoor Synod, held in 1599 near Kochi. Its primary aim was to bring the Syrian Christian community in Kerala under Roman Catholic control by enforcing Latin liturgical practices and doctrines.

two: the Jacobite sect, following the Patriarch of Antioch,¹⁶ and the Orthodox sect, rejecting the Patriarch's administration and recognizing the metropolitan (Bishop from India) as their supreme head.¹⁷

The Manuscript '*Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal*'¹⁸

Since the article focuses on the construction of identity and traces the descent of Syrian Christians in Kerala, the re-reading manuscripts and historical narratives become instrumental. Therefore, the manuscript titled '*Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal*' written by Fr. Mathai Vettikkunnel, a Jacobite Syrian Orthodox priest from Manarcadu in Kerala in the 18th century has been used as the fundamental historical source to draw the voids in the popular church historiography. '*Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal*' has been discovered by historians and is kept in the Leiden University Library (Leiden MS Or.1214). Historians speculate that it could be written in 1720. The original document, written in Malayalam, the vernacular language of Kerala, has since been translated into various foreign languages. The manuscript was some collated letters to the Patriarch about the grievances were the community in Malabar faced during 18th century.

Methodology

This article takes recourse to the qualitative method to understand the identity construction and the descent of Syrian Christians in-depth. As the identity and descent of Syrian Christians are entangled with legends, folklore, and myths, the article sets itself into the framework

¹⁶ Patriarch of Antioch is the spiritual leader of the Syriac Orthodox Church and holds a significant role in Eastern Christianity.

¹⁷ Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala; History, Belief and Ritual Among the Yakoba*, 12-32.

¹⁸ The manuscript known as '*Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal*' is Originally contributed by Gabriel, the Metropolitan of the Syrian Christians on the Malabar Coast, it is currently safeguarded in the Leiden University Library, identified as Leiden MSOr.1214, https://catalogue.leidenuniv.nl/permalink/31UKB_LEU/h8k1rj/alma990021142580302711

This Manuscript has been translated into English under the title "The catastrophes that have befallen the Syrians of Malayala" by Sarah Knight, <https://malankaraofantioch.files.wordpress.com/2021/08/appendix-2a-sarah-knight-phd-mathai-vettikkunnel-ms.pdf>

of a historical research design, prompting the article to collect and analyse the past events encapsulated in both oral and textual accounts and thereby attempts to offer a re-reading about their descent, tradition, history, way of life, the processes of identity construction. Within the framework of this historical research design, the article demands a meticulous revisiting of the ontological position already being acknowledged as the fundamental part of the traditional way of articulating the descent and identity of Syrian Christians. The article, therefore, focuses primarily on re-reading primary data documented in oral and textual narratives, the backbone of which is the manuscript '*Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal*'. In addition to this, data from secondary sources like historical records and research-related documents have also been used. Hence, the adopted historical research design is clubbed with the amalgam of textual and contextual methods. The textual method has been described as insisting that given 'the autonomy of the text itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning...the text itself should form the self-sufficient object of inquiry and understanding'. Meanwhile, the contextual method holds that the context "of religious, political, and economic factors" determines the meaning of any given text and, therefore, must provide "the ultimate framework" for any attempt to understand it.¹⁹ The advantage of this kind of research method is that it facilitates the article to re-examine conventional historiography and the identity of Syrian Christians in Kerala in a manner that can provide ample space for the parallel form of historiography to be the fundamental a priori for unearthing the descent and identity of the community. Thus, the 18th-century manuscript '*Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal*', along with other popular church histories from the 20th century, have been pensively analysed and interpreted in this article within the context of probing the descent and identity of Syrian Christians in Kerala.

St. Thomas' Tradition in Kerala

Since there are disagreements between historians about the arrival of St. Thomas in Kerala, the article neither rejects nor supports the claim related to St. Thomas' story. Instead, it tries to delve into the possibility that St. Thomas could have arrived at the Malabar Coast. The Apocryphal 'Acts of Thomas' written in Syriac in the 3rd century A.D. is the earliest reference to trace the activities of St. Thomas in

¹⁹ Shefali Jha, *Western Political Thought: From the Ancient Greeks to Modern Times*, 2nd ed. (Noida: Pearson India Education Services Pvt. Ltd, 2018), 2-4.

India. This source states that St. Thomas came and preached gospels in different parts of India. He also reached the Kingdom of Gondophares, the founder of Indo-Parthian kingdom, who ruled between c.19 and A.D. 46 spanning parts of modern Afghanistan, Pakistan and north-west regions of India.²⁰

The manuscript *‘Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithanngal’* begins with the reference of the arrival of St. Thomas at the Malabar Coast. It also opens up the account of the arrival of St. Thomas in Mylapore²¹ where he said to have preached gospels and built church. The manuscript explains the establishment of only six churches in Malabar: Maliyamkara, Kottakkal, Idappally, Goakkamangalam, Niranam, and Thiruvamcode. But, in the oral traditions, the apostle is said to have built seven churches in Malabar: “Kodungallore, Quilon, Chayal, Niranam, Kokamanglam, Parur, and Palayu.”²² In contrast to the well-known church histories and legends, the manuscript indicates variations in the locations where the churches were believed to be established. Although many histories explain St. Thomas’ arrival at Malankara, this manuscript explains that St. Thomas first reached Mylapore and later left for Malankara, the land of the Chera King.²³ It also traces the origin of the Christian community in India at Mylapore instead of Malabar Coast. Based on the details given by Istvan Perzcel, it is to note that, “the tomb of St. Thomas was venerated in ‘Mylapore’ and which was observed by the traveller Marco Polo in AD 1293.”²⁴ Some of the early Portuguese records also mention the same tradition

²⁰ George Nedungattu, *Quest for the Historical Thomas Apostle of India: A Re-Reading of the Evidence* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India. 2008), 117-18.

²¹ Mylapore, located in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, is one of the oldest inhabited areas in South India, with historical references in Sangham literature. It is renowned for its historical significance as the location where St. Thomas the Apostle is believed to have preached and been buried.

²² Susan Visvanathan, “The Legends of St. Thomas in Kerala,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 22, 2/3 (1995):27–44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23003931.pdf?casa_token=5DLJ7oqkItEAAAAA:48Vw19aFBiEN4TZr9T1hAHLftqFrDnVPjBRhI206MeTnX7fPRH7Wo6wkt51m3auOjgilhZukSshKF5LWyu-a7LwB43QiDoo66iDOrozEJJSnqxJR9dY

²³ The Chera Kingdom was an ancient Indian kingdom that existed from around the 3rd century BCE to the 12th century CE, located in the southwestern part of India, primarily in present-day Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu.

²⁴ István Perzcel, “Syriac Christianity in India,” in *The Syriac World*, ed. Daniel King, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 657.

that the origin of the community was at the Coromandel Coast, which was later destroyed due to calamities and was not at the Malabar Coast.

The story about the construction of seven churches by St. Thomas in Malabar is still confusing. Though Syrian Christians often take recourse to oral tradition to transmit this story from one generation to another, no historical or geological proof is available concerning the time of building churches in places. Therefore, it is to be considered a story in which Syrian Christians can claim their tradition around these churches. Further, it can be assumed that these stories were part of establishing an identity in society. The physical presence of a church would reiterate the power of the Christian community in Malabar, and this could be the main reason for the making of such stories.

Syrian Christians and their Nair Descent

In E.M Philip's work, 'The Indian Church of St. Thomas,' St. Thomas is credited with establishing seven churches named "Maliyamkara, Palayur, Kottackal, Gokkamagalam, Niranam, Chayal, and Quilon."²⁵ Pius Malekandathil further acknowledges St. Thomas's conversion of some Nair families to Christianity. Notably, Malekandathil points out the reliance on oral tradition and local narratives for the history of these churches, as written sources only by the end of the 19th century²⁶. The narrative becomes more intricate due to variations in the number of churches and their associated names.

While the manuscript narrates St. Thomas appointing two priests after establishing Christian settlements in Malabar, it does not corroborate popular history regarding the conversion of either Nair or Namboothiri Brahmin families. Following St. Thomas's demise, a dispersion of early Christians occurred, marked by internal conflicts and the emergence of Manivakkachar, a sorcerer with disputed origins. Manivakkachar, post the priests' deaths, persecuted Christians and imposed a ban on baptism. Apart from these, the manuscript states that these people were intermarried with other local people according to the customs of the

²⁵ E.M Philip, *The Indian Church of St. Thomas*, ed. Kuriakose Corepiscopa Moolayil (Changanacherry: Mor Adai Study Centre, 2002) 29. <https://maypoleofwisdom.files.wordpress.com/2023/12/indianchurchofst0000emp.pdf>

²⁶ Pius Malekandathil, *Kothamangalam Rupathayude Charitrapaschathalavum Kristava Koottaymaude Verukalum* (Kothamangalam: Bishop's House, 2002), 70.

believers. Regarding this manuscript, the migration of Christians from Tamilnadu to Kerala may also be dated to the 9th century.

The manuscript provides insights into St. Thomas' arrival in Mylapore and his gospel preaching. Despite narrating St. Thomas' experiences in Mylapore, the manuscript does not elaborate on the construction of a church; instead, it emphasizes the formation of a community over the establishment of a formal church structure. In contrast to various historical accounts detailing St. Thomas' arrival in Malankara, the manuscript posits that St. Thomas initially reached Mylapore before journeying to Malankara. Furthermore, it uniquely traces the inception of the Christian community to Mylapore, deviating from the more commonly associated Malabar Coast narrative.

In popular Christian historiography, St. Thomas is believed to have baptized some Nair families, and the present Christians are the progenies of such lineage. However, they never explained what prompted those families to convert to Christianity, considering that the Nair community enjoyed a higher privilege in society. Based on these stories, it is claimed that Syrian Christians may have a legacy with the Nair community. However, there are still some ambiguities in statements like, as the story says, St. Thomas said to have baptized seven Nair families, but now, a group of Christian communities of Kerala claims the descent of that Nair community, which also possesses a hierarchical system caste within itself. Besides, how can that be possible since the Nair community follows endogamous relations following the matrilineal line? Considering all these statements, what may be the actual reason behind the claim of the Nair descent of Syrian Christians in Kerala? Whatever those reasons may be, the story of St. Thomas forms the backbone in relation to the origin of the Syrian Christians in Kerala.

The Northists (*Vadakkumbhagar*) and Southists (*Thekkumbhagar*)

Most of the popular histories give an account of the division between the Syrian Christians of Kerala. They were divided into— Northists (*Vadakkumbhagar*) and Southists (*Thekkumbhagar*). According to traditional history, Thomas of Cana, had two wives; the first received his northern estates, while the second received his southern estates. From these two wives, the Northists and the Southists have descended.

According to E.M Philip, “though both Christian sects followed the same religion, customs, rituals, and venerated the same bishop, they

were not ready to intermarry and always maintained distinction from others.” He explains that they “lived separately in the southern and northern parts of Mahadevar Pattanam,”²⁷ with Southists claiming descent of Thomas of Cana and asserting that they have “Semitic blood, for the wife of Thomas was a Syrian woman.” In contrast, the Southists viewed the Northists as descendants of Thomas who “had mingled with native Christians by intermarriage,” or from his second wife, “a local Nair woman.”²⁸

However, the Malayalam manuscript gives different and detailed information about this part of the history of Syrian Christians. According to the manuscript, “in the land designated in the country of Kodungallore, they built a church and, from east to west in South-North direction, four hundred and seventy two shops and houses behind the shops were built”.²⁹ By this description, it can be understood that, during that time, the houses and shops of Christians in Kerala were arranged as two lines facing each other in North and South directions. Nevertheless, popular history says, ‘to protect the lineage purity’, those who had come along with Thomas of Cana abstained from intermarriage with local people; this manuscript, on the contrary, gives a detailed explanation of intermarriage occurred among them.

The Christians who were originally in Kerala when Thomas of Cana arrived, participating with those who had come from outside, received some privileges from the king, and they lived together in the Pattanam (Market) built by Thomas of Cana. Even if we rely on E.M Philp’s argument, the Northists from the group agreed to intermarry with the natives, and Southists became the second group who stayed in their ‘racial purity’. In contrast, the Malayalam manuscript held the position that, most probably, all of them intermarried because the Christians were apprehensive of the depletion of those who followed true faith in society.

²⁷ Mahadevar Pattanam was an ancient settlement in Kerala. While its exact location is unclear, it is thought to be linked to places like Kodungallore, historically identified with the ancient port of Muziris, or other early coastal towns. The name ‘Pattanam’ suggests it was a town or port with significant cultural and commercial activity.

²⁸ Philip, *The Indian Church of St. Thomas*, 86.

²⁹ Mathai Vettikkunnel, *Malayalathilolla Suriyanikkarkk Bhavicca Bhavithangal*, trans. Sarah Knight (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2019), 5-6, https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/34855/2/Knight_2019_2.pdf

Incidents of First Schism

The attempts of the Portuguese to Latinize the Indian Syrian Christians led to the famous *Udayamperoor Sunnahadose* of 1599, which burnt all Syriac texts, allegedly Nestorian, and also tried to efface the links between Chaldean Patriarch of Babylon and Indian Syrian Christians by introducing the authority of Jesuit bishops and archbishops which lasted until the Dutch conquest.³⁰ The synod not only burned the manuscripts and historical data of Syrian Christians in Kerala, but it also tried to impose Roman culture and liturgy in worship as well as the daily life of Syrian Christians. According to the manuscript of Mathai, “during 1580’s, when the initial efforts to convert the Syrian Christians in Malabar went futile, the then Portuguese bishop bribed the Kingdom of Kochi,³¹ so that he ordered to torture the native Christians who refused to join the Portuguese for three years, but later they succeeded in making the Syrian Christians to join them.” The decrees taken in the Synod affected Syrian Christians’ narratives and disturbed many of their customs. The decrees taken in the Synod sabotaged the aristocratic leadership of priestly families in this community. R.E Frykenberg excerpts, “in most priestly families, the right to be a priest was hereditary. Lineage histories and historical legends show that some elite families follow the tradition which exercising hereditary authority of Priests or Bishops descended over generations, with the nephew succeeding uncle in unbroken lineages of inherited positions.”³²

According to popular church history, after the death of Mar Abraham, the last Chaldean Syrian Metropolitan in 1597 AD, the Syrian Christians did not have a Metropolitan leader until the arrival of Mar Gregorios Abdul-Jalil in 1665 AD. Thus, for about 68 years the Syrian Christians in Kerala were under the control of Portuguese tyranny. In 1652 AD, Mar Ahtalla, a bishop, was sent by the Syrian Catholica to Malabar to rule the Syrian Christians, but unfortunately, he was killed and thrown

³⁰ Radu Mustață, Sermon on Saint Thomas, the Beloved Apostle: A Syriac Catholic Panegyric From Seventeenth Century Malabar (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2019), 3.

³¹ Though the manuscript doesn’t provide information about the then ruler of the Kingdom of Kochi in 1580, the kingdom of Kochi, originally known as Perumpadappu Swaroopam, was ruled by Keshava Rama Varma. According to the manuscript, the king was given thirty thousand ‘figure bearing’ coins (coins bearing the images of figure or people) by the Portuguese bishop.

³² Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.

into the sea by the Portuguese. This event was the immediate cause of the famous *Coonan Cross Oath* of 1653 AD. As a revolt against the Portuguese, the Syrian Christians joined a meeting in Mattancherry, in Kochi, and made an oath by tying a rope around a cross that, from now onwards forever, for the times of the generations to come we would not join either in good or bad terms with injurious franks and they also signed an agreement on the same.³³

Contrary to popular history, the manuscript explains that, even though most of the Syrian Christians joined in the *Coonan Cross Oath* and expressed their anguish against the Portuguese, a Portuguese bishop, who residing in Kodungallore, secretly wrote letters to some of the Syrian priests along with expensive clothes and ornaments to bribe them. Most priests accepted the gifts, visited the bishop in secret, and received cash and other alms. By accepting these gifts, some Syrian Christians who took oath started obeying the Portuguese and adopted their liturgy. Contrary to popular history, this is how the schisms in the community formed, not as an immediate split after the oath. As a result of this incident, the Syrian Christians were divided into *Puthenkur*, who relinquished the Portuguese faith and started following the Eastern Church and later known as the Jacobite faction, and the Pazhayakur, who remained in the Portuguese tradition later came to be known as the modern Syro-Malabar Church. The manuscript presents a different picture, which is not mentioned in any other popular church histories.

Conclusion

Syrian Christians, an oldest Christian community in Kerala, trace their origins to Syria's cultural, ecclesiastical, liturgical, and historical roots. According to legend, St. Thomas, the apostle of Jesus Christ, is said to have converted some Nair, and Namboothiri Brahmin families along with Jews and other local communities of the region into Christianity. It is claimed by majority Syrian Christians that, they are descendants of those Nair/Namboothiri Brahmin families who adopted the teachings of St. Thomas. This genealogical origin is often believed to contribute to their distinct identity within Christianity. Syrian Christians have documented their history through lengthy church chronicles, legends, and folklore, which encapsulate centuries of emotions and thoughts of

³³ Emy Merin Joy, "Christian Manuscripts of Kerala (India): Revisiting Popular Histories of the Syrian Christians in the Early Modern Period" (MA Thesis, Central European University, 2019), 39-42.

Syrian Christians about themselves. The 18th-century manuscript by Fr. Mathai Vettikkunnel serves as a fundamental historical source that sheds light on the descent and identity of Syrian Christians in Kerala. However, it does not offer comprehensive details about the founding of the church by St. Thomas in Mylapore. Historical events like the Udayamperoor Synod and the Coonan Cross Oath also play a significant role in shaping and redefining the descent and identity of Syrian Christians in Kerala. The Udayamperoor Synod tried to impose Roman culture and liturgy in worship and daily life of Syrian Christians, while the Coonan Cross Oath marked a historic revolt against Portuguese dominance. Folklore and oral tradition further catalyze the identity construction and unearthing of the descent of Syrian Christians in Kerala. The living oral tradition functions as the repository of identity appropriation, carrying out the task of cultural mediation. Therefore, without any doubt, it can be argued that Syrian Christians' descent and identity in Kerala is the outcome of a synthesized process of historical events, church narratives, textual accounts, legends, and folklore. All these factors immensely contribute to constructing their identity and narrating their descent.

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INTERNET CONNECTION AND DISCONNECTED COUPLES: IMPACT OF CYBER ADDICTION ON MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Shaji N. P.*

Abstract

Addiction is a lifelong disease that involves compulsive seeking and taking of substances or performing an activity despite harmful consequences. Addiction due to substance is referred to as substance addiction, and addiction due to some behavioural pattern is known as behavioural addiction. Substance addiction includes alcoholism and drug addiction, and behavioural addictions include gambling, shopping addiction, work addiction, love addiction, cyber addiction, etc. Addicted people abuse addictive substances or follow a particular unwanted behaviour continually, though they know that it causes harm to them. It can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, background, or relationship status. The significant symptoms of addiction include loss of control over a particular substance or behaviour, tolerance, withdrawal and neglecting responsibilities, emotional disturbances, financial struggles, loss of trust, co-dependency, and chronic stress. Among married couples, addiction can have an extreme impact on their relationships because it decreases emotional stability among individuals and creates financial problems and many other issues that may lead to couple conflicts and divorce. This article attempts to analyse the impact of cyber addiction on marital relationships.

Cyber Addiction

The word ‘cyber’ comes from the ancient Greek ‘Kubernetes,’ which means to assist, steer, guide, control and govern.¹ Cyber addiction is often used as a synonym for internet addiction, which occurs when a person has a compulsive need to spend a great deal of time on the Internet, to the point where other areas of life, such as relationships, work, health, etc., are affected. The Internet is a globally connected network system that enables communication and data services through

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¹ M. Lehto, “The Cyber Space Threats and Cyber Security Objectives in the Cyber Security Strategies,” International Journal of Cyber Welfare and Terrorism 3/3 (2013): 1.

an enormous collection of private, public, business, academic and government networks. It is a virtual arrangement that links millions of computers and electronic devices worldwide, allowing users to communicate and exchange information seamlessly.

The Internet, despite its potential for addiction, offers numerous benefits. It facilitates information retrieval, online transactions, communication, entertainment, education, and social interaction. It has revolutionized communication, commerce, and education, making instant communication, economic and commercial activities, and reduction in transportation costs possible.² The Internet, through its various communication technologies, has the power to bridge geographical boundaries and foster interpersonal relationships at a low cost. It has made it possible for individuals to connect and exchange information seamlessly, regardless of their physical location.

Cyber addiction, a global issue, has numerous adverse effects on individuals' lives. Mental health professionals have found that it disrupts personal, family, and marital lives. It also impacts interpersonal relationships, quality of life, academic performance, lifestyle, social interaction, and occupational performance. Excessive use of the internet can lead to physical and psychological problems. The tendency of a family member to be addicted to the Internet often affects family functioning, roles, and relationships. Although not as visible as other addictions, most people engage in their online activities through internet-based media such as online games and social networking.³ When the time and effort people spend on the internet increases, it can lead to addictive behaviours. Many aspects can affect marital quality among the couples. Here are some elements that affect marital relationships due to the influence of cyber addiction.

Impact on Quality of Life

Cyber addiction can have a considerable impact on an individual's quality of life. Quality of life is a person's perception of their well-

² G. Arslan, "Psychological Maltreatment, Forgiveness, Mindfulness, and Internet Addiction among Young Adults: A Study of Mediation Effect," *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 72 (2017): 57.

³ Reyhaneh Bagheri, et al., "Server Connection Versus Marital Disconnection: An Investigation of the Effect of Internet Addiction on Couple Burnt out in Iran," *Technology IN Society* 72 (2023): 2.

being, considering their culture, values, goals, and expectations. The factors contributing to quality of life include physical, mental and spiritual health, relationships, education, work environment, social status, wealth, sense of security and safety, freedom, autonomy in decision-making, and social belonging. A low quality of life can lead a person to experience social seclusion and loneliness.⁴ Excessive internet use can disturb sleep patterns and lead to sleep disorders, a serious consequence of cyber addiction that significantly affects an individual's well-being and quality of life.⁵ Cyber addiction could also lead to physical health problems, such as musculoskeletal disorders from prolonged sitting and sedentary behaviour.⁶ It also can worsen mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD.⁷ Cyber addiction also leads to financial problems due to excessive spending on internet-related activities. It can also lead to relationship problems with family and friends due to neglect and abandonment of offline social relationships. Cyber addiction can negatively impact academic or work performance due to excessive time spent online. These financial and social consequences further exacerbate the negative impact of cyber addiction on individuals' lives.⁸ It indicates that cyber addiction hurts the lives of individuals. Low life quality of the couples can lead to marital dissatisfaction.

Low Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is a person's attitude towards their marriage or relationship with their spouse. It is a subjective concept that reflects how a person perceives the benefits and costs of marriage. Marital satisfaction is a vital aspect of couple relationships, influencing

⁴ D. J. Kuss, and M. D. Griffiths, , "Online Social Networking and Addictive Behaviours: A Review of the Psychological Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8/9 (2011): 3528.

⁵ O. Király et al., "Problematic Internet Use and its Relationship with Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in Young Adults," *Cyberpsychology, Behaviour, and Social Networking* 22/10 (2019): 690.

⁶ T. Hinkley and M. Taylor, "The Effects of Excessive Internet Use on Children's Physical Activity Levels," *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport* 15/3 (2012): 231.

⁷ D. J. Kuss, and M. D. Griffiths, , "Online Social Networking and Addictive Behaviours: A Review of the Psychological Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8/9 (2011): 3528.

⁸ D. J. Kuss, and M. D. Griffiths, , "Online Social Networking and Addictive Behaviours: A Review of the Psychological Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8/9 (2011): 3528.

individual and couple's well-being, better physical health, relationship stability, intimacy, better parenting skills and a stable environment for children. Research has shown that cyber addiction is negatively correlated with marital satisfaction. Studies indicate that husbands more addicted to the Internet were less satisfied with their marriages, and wives who were more addicted to social media were more likely to experience marital dissatisfaction.⁹ Schneider found that the negative impact of internet addiction is evident among couples with traditional monogamous marriages, and in such marriages, the female partners are found to experience marital dissatisfaction.¹⁰ Internet abuse can lead to couples conflict and adversely affect a couple's social life, work, and relationships.¹¹ People who spend more time on the Internet are reported to spend less time with their families.¹² The time spent on the internet, especially for social purposes, is negatively related to marital satisfaction among couples and can lead to family conflicts.¹³

Psychological Distress

Stress is an individual's physical, emotional, and mental response to any change or demand that may happen in their lives.¹⁴ Excessive internet use may create psychological arousal and lead to sleep problems, failure to eat for long periods, and inadequate physical activity, possibly leading to the user experiencing physical and psychological issues such as depression, OCD, low family relationships and anxiety. Internet addiction can cause conflict among couples, which can lead to

⁹ López-Fernández de Sevilla et al., "Materials for Education in the 21st Century: Cyber Addiction and Marital Satisfaction in Adolescent Couples and Adults," *Revista de Psicología Social Aplicada* 26/1 (2019): 53.

¹⁰ J. P. Schneider, "Effects of Cybersex Addiction on the Family: Results of a Survey," *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 7/1 (2000): 31.

¹¹ K. W. Beard, "Internet Addiction: A Review of Current Assessment Techniques and Potential Assessment Questions," *Cyber Psychology and Behaviour* 8 (2005): 7.

¹² P. Kerkhof, Finkenauer, C. and Musses L.D., "Relational consequences of Compulsive Internet Use: A Longitudinal Study of Newlyweds," *Human communication Research* 37 (2011): 153.

¹³ G. S. Mesch, "Family Relations and the Internet: Exploring a Family Boundaries approach," *Journal of Family Communication*, 6 (2006): 119.

¹⁴ Mohd Yusri Mustafa, Nurul Naimah Rose and Aida Shakila Ishak, "Internet Addiction and Family Stress: Symptoms, Causes and Effects," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1520 (November 2019): 25. <https://iopscience.iop.org>. Accessed January 8, 2024.

stress in the family.¹⁵ Stress also follows with characteristics such as loss of focus, irritability, insomnia, and loss of appetite. It reduces the time spent with the spouse and other family members. Couple stress can happen because of the imbalance between the demands of any of the partners and the other partner's ability to fulfil their needs. Stress negatively affects marital quality and relationships between husbands and wives.

Marital Conflicts

Conflicts are common in any marital relationship because minor conflicts help couples understand each other, realise the causes of the problems, and lead to solutions. Solving conflicts is an essential process in improving marital relationships. Excessive internet use can lead to marital conflicts in several ways. It can disrupt communication between partners. When one partner is absorbed in their online activities, they may neglect their partner's needs and feelings, leading to abandonment and resentment. Too much gaming and social media use can lead to reduced attention span and intimacy, making it challenging for couples to connect on a deeper level.¹⁶ Online infidelity, such as online affairs or cyberstalking, can be a significant source of conflict in marriages.¹⁷ Parental marital conflict is found to be one of the causes of severe internet addiction among children.

Social Anxiety

Social anxiety disorder is an anxiety disorder that causes people to feel extreme fear of anxiety in social circumstances. It is an intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. Individuals with internet addiction are more prone to develop social anxiety disorder.¹⁸ American Psychiatric Association described that social anxiety disorder is characterised by feelings of unnecessary fear or anxiety

¹⁵ Mohd Yusri Mustafa, Nurul Naimah Rose and Aida Shakila Ishak, "Internet Addiction and Family Stress: Symptoms, Causes and Effects," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 1520 (November 2019): 25 [https:// iopscience.iop.org](https://iopscience.iop.org). Accessed January 8, 2024.

¹⁶ O. Király et al., "Problematic Internet Use and its Relationship with Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in Young Adults," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 22/10 (2019): 690.

¹⁷ K. S. Young, and C. D. de Abreu, "Internet Addiction: A Critical Consideration for the Field of Addictions," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 1/2 (2011): 57.

¹⁸ O. Király et al., "Mental Health and Addictive Behaviors in Young Adults: A Systematic Review of Clinical Findings," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 8/2 (2019):

in social circumstances, which can lead to refraining from social communication.¹⁹ The Internet provides a sense of comfort and control for individuals with social anxiety, allowing them to connect with others online without the fear of face-to-face interactions.²⁰ Using the Internet as a means of social interaction arises from a negative evaluation of oneself against the anticipated expectations of society.²¹ Individuals with social anxiety prefer communication through the Internet than face to face communication.²² Social anxiety is expected to affect marital relationships because individuals with social anxiety may give importance to virtual communication rather than communicating with their spouse and family members.

Marital Infidelity

Marital infidelity is defined as the crossing of borderlines of a marital affiliation with the formation of a physical or emotional relationship with a person outside the marriage relationship.²³ Marital infidelity threatens the marriage bond and develops a loss of feelings of marital belonging among the couples. Several studies have investigated the link between internet addiction and marital infidelity. A study found that men who were addicted to the Internet were more likely to engage in extramarital affairs.²⁴ Another study reveals that couples who conveyed higher levels of internet use were more likely to experience marital

¹⁹ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.). (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), np.

²⁰ O. Király et al., "Mental Health and Addictive Behaviors in Young Adults: A Systematic Review of Clinical Findings," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 8/2 (2019): 249.

²¹ Mei S. et al., "Problematic Internet use, Well-being, Self-esteem, and Self-control: Data from a High-school Survey in China," *Addictive Behaviours* 61 (2016): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.addbeh.2016.05.009>. Accessed January 4, 2024.

²² J. Peter and P. M. Valkenburg, "Adolescent's Exposure to Sexually Explicit Materials on the Internet," *Journal of Communication* 56/4 (2006): 639. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.00313>, Accessed January 4, 2024.

²³ Nasrin Baboo and Nurallah Mohammadi, "Investigating the Effect of Internet Addiction on the Tendency to Marital Infidelity in Couples in Shiraz," *Propósitos y Representaciones* 9 (2011): 1087. <http://dx.doi.org/10.20511/pyr2021.v9nSPE2.1087>. Accessed January 4, 2024.

²⁴ O. Király et al., "Problematic Internet Use and Its Relationship with Symptoms of Anxiety and Depression in Young Adults: A Systematic Review," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 22/10 (2019): 690-701.

conflict and infidelity.²⁵ Cybersex is a term used by psychologists to describe all the activities done online for sexual fulfilment. It affects the marriage and family relationships.²⁶ Young K. S. found that online relationships have replaced relationships with individuals in the real world, a significant reason for increasing divorce cases.²⁷

Low Self Esteem

Self-esteem can be defined as the self-evaluation of people in all situations.²⁸ It is the overall feeling of one's worth or value and is focused more on being or self than doing. Excessive gaming, especially on online platforms, was found to be associated with decreased self-esteem among adolescents.²⁹ Frequent use of the internet can lead to lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression and anxiety.³⁰ Excessive internet use can also lead to social seclusion and reduced face-to-face communication abilities.³¹ Individuals with low confidence prefer online interaction because they think they can interact more confidently on the internet.³² Such individuals are liable to be addicted to the Internet.³³ Low self-confidence among married individuals can lead to communication problems and can end up in marital conflicts and divorce.

²⁵ C. H. Ko, et al., "The Association Between Internet Addiction Disorder and Marital Adjustment in Taiwanese Married Couples," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 42/2 (2016): 231-244.

²⁶ Greenfield D. N., *Virtual Addiction: Sometimes New Technology Can Create New Problems* (Academic Press 1999), np.

²⁷ K. S. Young, "Internet Addiction: Symptoms, Evaluation, and Treatment: Innovations in Clinical Practice: A Source Book," 17 (1999): 19.

²⁸ S. J. Inclair et al., "Psychometric Properties of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: Overall and Across Demographic Groups Living Within the United States," *Evaluation Heal. Prof* 33 (2010): 56, doi: 10.1177/0163278709356187. Accessed January 4, 2024.

²⁹ S. Jain, Kumar V. and A. Kumar, "Prevalence of Gaming Addiction among Adolescents in India," *Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research* 13/10 (2019): 1.

³⁰ S. Srivastava, P. Srivastava, and Mishra S. K., "Social Media Use among Indian Youth: An Empirical Study on Its Impact on Mental Health," *International Journal of Management Research & Review*, 8/11 (2018): 105.

³¹ J. Gackenbach, *Video games and addiction*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, (2008), 12.

³² L. Leung, et al., *Mediated Interpersonal Communication*, Volume 18, (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 359.

³³ K. Niemz, M. Griffiths and P. Banyard, "Prevalence of Pathological Internet Use among University Students and Correlations with Self-Esteem: The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), and Disinhibition," *Cyber Psychology Behaviour* 8 (2005): 562. doi: 10.1089/cpb.2005.8.562. Accessed January 4, 2024.

Poor Quality Time

The widespread use of the internet can negatively impact relationships, especially among married couples. Internet addiction can reduce the quality of time spent by couples together. Research suggests that internet addiction reduces quality time spent together and increases conflict between partners.³⁴ Partners who spent more time on the Internet reported lower levels of relationship quality.³⁵ The time spent in cyberspace is positively associated with family conflict, particularly when the internet is used for social purposes such as having a chat with friends and playing games using the internet. Problematic internet use was found to take away attention, time, and interest that the users would invest in their partner, decreasing not only the internet user's relationship quality but also the partner's quality of relationship.³⁶ The reduction in relationship quality among couples may happen because the partner feels ignored and abandoned when their partners spend time on the internet rather than with their spouse.³⁷

Co-dependency

Co-dependency is a condition characterised by an unnecessary emotional attachment to someone or something, leading a person to a loss of personal autonomy and identity. It is a phenomenon associated with addiction. Co-dependency is also an emotional and behavioural condition that prevents a person from developing healthy and mutually satisfying relationships. Individuals with codependent tendencies may struggle to control their behaviour around their addiction, just like those with internet addiction may find it difficult to limit their screen time.³⁸ Codependent relationships often harm personal relationships, and

³⁴ E. A. Kolek, and R. P. Saunders, "Shall We Facebook That? An Examination of the Influences on Users' Decisions to Engage with Friends or Strangers Online," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 29/5 (2008): 422.

³⁵ M. A. Whisman and L. A. Uebelacker, "Relationship Dissatisfaction and Excessive Internet Use: A Systematic Review," *Journal of Family Psychology* 28/2 (2014): 246.

³⁶ Kraut R. et al., "Internet Paradox. A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-being," *Am Psychol*, 53/9 (1998): 1017.

³⁷ R. Shamala and Kakshina U. Kanthy, "Internet Addiction and Marital Satisfaction among Urban Couples," *International Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 15/3 (2021): 150.

³⁸ D. J. Kuss and M. D. Griffiths, "Online Social Networking and Addiction: A Review of the Psychological Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8/9 (2011): 3528.

excessive internet use can lead to neglect of the physical and emotional needs of loved ones.³⁹ Codependents might use substances or behaviours to escape emotional pain or stress. Similarly, internet addicts may use the internet to cope with negative emotions.⁴⁰

Poor Mental Health

Mental health is a person's overall well-being regarding thinking, feeling, and behaving. Low mental health affects a person's ability to cope with stress, relate to others and make healthy choices. Marital dissolution is often associated with worsened psychological and physical health. Excessive internet use has been linked to adverse effects, including addiction, social loneliness, diminished attention span, and reduced mental health. Internet addictions are characterised by signs such as obsession with the internet, withdrawal symptoms when incapable of accessing the internet, lenience of pleasurable effects of internet use, loss of control over internet use, continued use despite adverse consequences, and neglect of other activities and responsibilities due to internet use. Internet addiction is linked to many mental health difficulties, such as depression, increased anxiety levels, other mood disorders, social loneliness and declined social skills, sleep troubles and insomnia, and attention and hyperactivity disorders.⁴¹ Persons with superior levels of depression are more prone to develop internet addiction. Some people experience relief from their depression when they are online. It also has been observed that extroverts communicate more in natural settings, and introverted people are more likely to use the internet.⁴² For many people, the internet helps them to hide their identity and trust on the internet to reduce their anxiety.

Impact on Marital Quality

Marital quality and cyber addiction are two complex and interconnected topics that have been gaining attention in recent years. Research has

³⁹ S. E. Caplan, Relations Between Problem Video Games and Aggression in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games," *Cyber Psychology & Behavior* 10/2 (2007): 174.

⁴⁰ J. Gackenbach, *Video Games and Addiction* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), np.

⁴¹ D. J. Kuss and M. D. Griffiths, Online Social Networking and Mental Health: A Review," *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* 2/4 (2011): 191.

⁴² Tanja Vujjovic, "Internet Addiction, Online Activities and Conflict with Parents among Young People," *ResearchGate* (January 2021): np. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/349039702>. Accessed January 5, 2024.

shown that cyber addiction can have a significant impact on marital quality. The term ‘Marital quality’ measures positive aspects of marriage and the quality of relationships among couples. Marital satisfaction is subjected to several essential factors, such as communication among the couples, openness, and the readiness to adjust to each other. Many young couples in modern society do not want to have highly negative situations, especially in marital relationships, and they may opt for divorce as the only and immediate solution to their problems. Marriage is a critical transition stage in life, and the status of individuals changes from being single to being married.⁴³ Unresolved issues will likely increase the chances of conflicts and dissolutions in marital relationships. Psychologists found that addiction can become a trigger for marital conflict dissolution. It also has been observed that most divorces happen in the early stages of marriage in the modern era.⁴⁴ It indicates that young couples are more prone to marital dissatisfaction than older ones.⁴⁵ Many other studies suggest that factors such as drug addiction and crime involvement have a significant role in marital separation and divorce. Every marriage and couple relationship has its roles, powers, structures, forms of communication, discussion, and problem-solving.⁴⁶

Impact on Divorce

The effect of internet addiction on marital relationships has been a topic of increasing concern, particularly in the context of divorce. Divorce or termination of marriage is the end, cancelling the legal duties and responsibilities entailed in the marriage contract and suspending the bonds of matrimony between married persons.⁴⁷ Internet addiction also affects communication between partners, leading to feelings of disconnection and isolation. Black et al. found that individuals with internet addiction were more likely to engage in addictive behaviours,

⁴³ Marziah S. Z., et al., “Perception of Marital Quality among Young Married Couples in Selangor,” *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation* 24/4 (2020): 4115.

⁴⁴ Velotti P. et al., “Emotional Suppression in Early Marriage: Actor, Partner, and Similarity Effects on Marital Quality,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 33/3 (2015): 277.

⁴⁵ Abd. Majid M. and Hudin S., “Trend dan Faktor Perceraian Rumah Tangga di Negeri Selangor Dari Tahun 2011 hingga 2015, AL-IRSYAD,” *Journal of Islamic and Contemporary Issues*,” 2, no. 2 (2017): 40.

⁴⁶ Goldenberg, H. and Goldenberg I., *Family Therapy: An Overview*, (8th ed), (Singapore: Cengage Learning, 2012), 23.

⁴⁷ N.A., “Divorce Rate in India,” <http://www.advocatekhoj.com/library/lawareas/divorceinindia/9.php?Title=Divorce%20rate%20in%20India>. Accessed June 24, 2024.

such as gaming or social media use, to cope with stress and emotions rather than communicate with their partners.⁴⁸ Excessive internet use was associated with decreased communication skills and increased relationship conflict. Individuals with internet addiction may avoid communication with their partners due to feelings of embarrassment or shame related to their online activities.⁴⁹ Excessive internet use was associated with decreased intimacy and sexual satisfaction in married couples.⁵⁰ Excessive internet use can also lead to feelings of insecurity and anxiety in relationships, and it can lead to divorce.⁵¹

Conclusion

Internet addiction can have a considerable effect on marital relationships, leading to conflicts and, in due course, divorce. Individuals with internet addiction were more likely to experience relationship problems, including decreased intimacy and communication with their partners.⁵² Excessive internet use correlated with poorer levels of relationship quality and excessive conflict in married couples. They also implied that extreme internet use can lead to feelings of negligence and rejection, causing spouses to feel insignificant or unloved.⁵³ Understanding the causes is important so that sufficient measures can be taken from the early stages to avoid instances and incidents of divorces in the future.

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⁴⁸ Black D. W., Balsam Katz K. and Schlosser S. P., "Clinical Features and Psychiatric Comorbidity of Internet Addiction in a Sample of Treatment-seeking Individuals," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 68, no. 2 (2012): 248.

⁴⁹ Caplan S. E., "Preference for Online Social Interaction: A Comparison Across Age Groups," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 6, no. 6 (2003): 597.

⁵⁰ Kim J., Lee Y. and Lee S., "The Impact of Excessive Internet Use on Married Couples' Relationships: A Systematic Review," *Computers in Human Behavior* 39 (2014): 222.

⁵¹ Campbell W. K., "Attachment Style and Online Social Networking: An Examination of the Relationship between Attachment Style and Online Social Networking Habits," *Computers in Human Behavior* 36 (2014): 1.

⁵² Kuss D. J. and Griffiths M. D., "Online Social Networking and Addiction: A Review of the Psychological Literature," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 8, no. 9 (2011): 35289

⁵³ Green L. and Bavelier D., "Learning, Attentional Control, and Action Video Games: A Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective into Flow Experiences," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 21, no. 1 (2012): 36.

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RITES AND RITUALS IN THE SOLEMNIZATION OF A KHASI MARRIAGE: INDIGENOUS, CHRISTIAN OR AN INTERFACE, AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

- Ruth Ibameri Kharbamon* & Pankaj Kumar Kalita**

Abstract

Rites of passage are closely connected to biological transitions in a person's life and mark important transitional periods in a person's life such as in birth, puberty, marriage and death and are reflections of one's identity or belonging to a community or faith. Earlier, the rituals and rites were unique and distinct confirming to the society's norms. However, with social mobility which encourages interfaith and intercommunity marriages, the rituals have been either modified or acculturated. The Khasis of Meghalaya had their own unique rites and rituals in relation to birth, marriage and death. However, social mobility factors and particularly the advent of Christianity impacted significantly on these practices among the converts, who have surreptitiously retained some of the indigenous practices into their Christian worship especially in relation to the solemnization of marriage. This article attempts to see if there is an interface between Christianity and the indigenous faith in relation to the marriage rituals among the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, a state in North East India.

Introduction

Rites of passage are closely connected to biological transitions in a person's life and mark important transitional periods in a person's life such as in birth, puberty, marriage and death and are reflections of one's identity or belonging to a community or faith. The ceremonies involve activities and exhortations that strip individuals of their present role and prepare them for new roles and the procedures, rites, and rituals acknowledge a person's entry into a different phase of his or her life.

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In his study, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915),¹ French sociologist Emile Durkheim explored the moral authority of rites of passage, emphasizing the social pressure exerted through the collective consciousness of society. These shared rituals compel individuals to conform to societal norms. Rites of passage, therefore, are special rituals marking life's transitions, guided by a society's beliefs and values—such as naming a baby, reaching adulthood or marriage, achieving qualifications, or passing from life to death.

The changes of status are related to changes in society because the term identity embraces social and psychological aspects of life. The anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in his *Rites of Passage* explains how cultures and communities ritualize and guide the transitions in life from infancy to old age. He says, “For every one of these events, there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another.” He developed a framework to describe dangerous life transitions, rooted in tribal superstition that viewed ‘life crises’ as moments of spiritual danger, where evil spirits or ancestors could harm the child or community. These perils, beyond human control, necessitate religious rites to pacify the forces and restore equilibrium. Rites of passage, therefore, are rituals that guide life's transitions, shaped by societal beliefs and values.²

Earlier, the rituals and rites were unique and distinct confirming to the society's norms. However, with social mobility which encourages interfaith and intercommunity marriages, the rituals have been either modified or acculturated. This paper attempts to look at the rituals involve in marriage among the Khasi community in present day Meghalaya, a tribal state in the North east of India and to understand the societal impact on the different practices.

Meghalaya

Meghalaya, located in Northeast India, was formed in January 1972. It borders Assam to the north, Bangladesh to the south, and the Jaintia and Garo Hills to the east. The state is made up of three hills—Khasi, Jaintia, and Garo—each with its own distinct culture, beliefs, and traditions, though they share a common matrilineal system. These hills are divided

¹ E. Norbeck, and Bobby C Alexander, “Rite of Passage,” *Encyclopedia of Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/topic/rite-of-passage>, 2018, 8.

² Victor W Turner, “Themes in the Symbolism of Ndemdu Hunting Ritual,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 35 (1962): 37.

into districts, with Shillong serving as both the district headquarters of East Khasi Hills and the state capital. The inhabitants of these hills are the Khasis. The Khasis settled at various places before they came to the present location and “one of the earliest groups of races migrating to North East India.”³

The Khasi Social Structure

Khasi society places a strong emphasis on the family, known as *Ka iing*, which forms part of a sub-clan called *Ka Kpoh* (siblings). Several sub-clans originating from a common ancestress are referred to as *Ka Kur Ka Jait*, while those with direct lineage from the father’s side are *Ki Kha Ki Man*. “The concept of the triad is central to the social consciousness of the Khasis.”⁴ For the Khasi, the family is centered around the distinct roles of *Ka Iawbei* (progenitress), *U Thawlang* (ancestral father), and *U Suidnia* (maternal uncle).

Ka Iawbei is “the ancestress of the clan, the sub clan and the family.”⁵ She is the custodian and has the responsibility of keeping the *tip kur tip kha* relationships, which means she has to be aware of the family ties between her own family and those of her husband’s family so as to ward off the sin of incest. *Ka Iawbei* observes Bareh “is the custodian of family ties and a family priestess. She makes ready all the accessories for the religious offerings.”⁶ *U Thawlang*, the ancestral grandfather, is highly revered by the entire family and is honoured through ceremonial acts of homage from his children. He, as Gurdon observes is “the executive head of the new home. He occupies a very high place and is second to none but u *kni* and he bears the heat and the burden of the day”.⁷ *U Thawlang* plays a key role in strengthening the *tip kur tip kha* solidarity, while *U Suidnia*, the de jure head of the family, holds significant responsibility for decision-making, particularly regarding deaths and marriages. He is the “protector,

³ Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* (Guwahati: Spectrum Publications, 1997), 11.

⁴ O.L Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India* (Calcutta: Firma Klm, 1993), 35.

⁵ O.L Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India*, 34.

⁶ Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 290.

⁷ P. R.T Gurdon, *The Khasis* (London: MacMillan and Co, 1914), 66.

the caretaker, defender, priest and the legal head of the family, the sub clan and the clan.”⁸

The Khasis had their own unique rites and rituals in relation to birth, marriage and death. However, social mobility factors and particularly the advent of Christianity impacted significantly on these practices among the converts, who have surreptitiously retained some of the indigenous practices into their Christian worship especially in relation to the solemnization of marriage.

Marriage Among the Khasi Society

Marriage to the Khasi is considered sacred, in fact, the most sacred of all institutions. It is deeply and inextricably connected to the Khasi tenet of *ka Khein Kur Khein Kha* (the knowledge and respect of one's kith and kin). The maternal relations are one's *kur* and the paternal relations are one's *kha*⁹ and the solemnization is closely linked to the *long kur long kha* or the clanship. Each complements the other and the two are considered to be the pillars or the props of the Khasi society and marriage solemnities are featured by addresses between the spokesmen (*ksiang*) of the bride and the groom before the *kur* and the *kha*.

A marriage can be solemnized once there is a mutual consent between the parents and families of both the man and woman. Certain rites and rituals and negotiations will have to be completed before the actual solemnization can happen. Male members from the clan (*kur rangbah*) of the groom are prohibited from marrying the female members of the bride's clan (*kur kynthei*) for three generations, since it is considered an exchange of rice (*ai khaw kylliang*). First cousins should not marry for three generations. These directives are adhered and acknowledged to, irrespective of whether one is following the indigenous faith or is a convert. A marriage negotiation is really a time of exhortation and advice handled meticulously by the spokespersons from both the families. To an indigenous believer witnesses will have to be called and the blessings of the ancestors will have to be invoked – *U Thawlang*, (the ancestral father), *Ka Iawbei* (the (ancestral mother), *U Suidnia* (the ancestral uncle).

⁸ O.L Snaitang, *Christianity and Social Change in Northeast India*, 35.

⁹ Sitimon Sawian, “The Marriage Ceremony (Ka Shongkha Shongman),” in Bijoya Sawian (translated) *The Main Ceremonies of The Khasi* (Guwahati: Vivekananda Kendra Institute of Culture, 2012), 8.

There are three stages in the marriage ceremony of the Khasis- the offer (*Ka Kai Iawbei*) the engagement (*Ka Kai u Suitnia*), the solemnization of the marriage (*Ka Kai U Thawlang*). To the Christian converts there is the engagement and the solemnization of the marriage. The celebrations that follow the solemnization will depend on the economic status of the families. Further, there are three kinds of ceremonies- *Ka Pynhiar synjat*, *Ka Lamja Lamdoh* and *Ka Khawai Madan* followed by the indigenous believers.

In the first practice, *Ka Pynhiar Synjat*- both the man and the woman prepare rings and *ka iarong kwai* a netted pouch nut for exchange of betel nuts between the family members of the bride and the groom. Depending on the economic status of the respective families, the rings can either be of gold or silver. Presently, especially among converts *kwai,u tympew* are exchanged from any pouches not necessary from netted ones. In the *Lamja Lamdoh* ceremony, the same practices are followed, *ka jingiapynebeit ktien*, the negotiation, *ka jingiabat ktien* the confirmation, the preparations, the handing over and the responsibility of the spokesperson is the same as the ceremony of the *pynhiar synjat*. The only difference here is that there is no exchange of rings and no hog is killed and sacrificed. The meat for the purpose is usually purchased from the market. If a hog is killed, parts of the animal should be sold off before it is cooked and consumed.¹⁰ In the ceremony of *ka Iadih kyiad* or consumption of wine, the practices followed are the same. The only difference is that in this ceremony they only celebrate with fish and rice beer. The kind of ceremony is very simple and solemnized when the bride is already pregnant and in also in the case of second marriages.¹¹

Rites And Rituals in the Solemnization of a Khasi Marriage

When a man is attracted to a woman and wants to marry her, he confides with his parents who in turn confides with the maternal uncle. The family considers the preliminaries through a thorough research and survey. Should there is no unwanted bindings, the family decides on a spokesperson either from the *kur* or the *kha*, but most preferably from the *kur*, the spokesperson accompanied by a few male members pays a courtesy visit to the family of the woman).The same procedure is followed in the house of the woman where a senior male member of the *kur*, most preferably, the maternal uncle is chosen to be the

¹⁰ H Lyngdoh, *Ka Kot Niam Khasi* (Shillong: Ri Khasi Book Agency, 1937), 118.

¹¹ Sitimon Sawian, "The Marriage Ceremony (Ka Shongkha Shongman)," 12.

spokesperson or go-between on behalf of the family. The first meeting then is a kind of exchange of understanding between the two families.¹²

Among the indigenous believers, it is at this time, that rituals *ki shait ki khein* are performed to examine the possible drawbacks or success of the ensuing marriage. In case the rites reveal some negativity in the relationship, *ka pynpra ktien*, a ceremony of dishonoring of the word is done, in which case, the couples will have to, discontinue their friendship. In a situation, where the rites and rituals show a positive interpretation, and once, an understanding is reached and the relationship is being condoned by both the families, the *kur kynthei* or the clan of the woman fixes the time for the *iabat ktien*, the honouring of the word, which is strengthened by *ka iateh ktien*, the engagement.¹³ The same is being done by the Christian converts except that verbal discourse, *ka ktien*, replaces the acts of performing the rituals. Once the negotiations have completed, the month and the date for the engagement is scheduled.

In an indigenous engagement ceremony, the groom and the best men are dressed in suits with a red or white silk turban on the head. The spokesperson wears the same and is gifted with a red silk or cotton turban by the groom. The woman and the bridesmaid- an unmarried woman (virgins) selected from among the members of the family are all dressed in their fine silks with the woman to be betrothed wears the *taphmoh khlieh* or the head cover. The spokesperson wears a turban of red/white silk or cotton given to him by the bride. The family besides prepares the *iad-hiar*, homemade liquor and a feast for friends and families. In a Christian engagement the man and his troupe are dressed well too, but the wearing of turbans is not mandatory. It is a matter of individual choice.

The man's kin delegates a few male members to accompany the groom to the woman's home. Among the delegates is the maternal uncle, who is the most revered member of the family, or a senior male member of the *kur* to function as the spokesperson at the engagement ceremony. Irrespective of one's faith, the maternal uncle has an important role to play as a spokesperson from the woman's family.

On the day of the solemnization of the marriage there is once again the interface perceived in the various practices and rituals followed. The morning of the wedding begins with a prayer at the bride's house in the

¹² H Lyngdoh, *Ka Kot Niam Khasi*, 111.

¹³ Homiwell Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi (Shillong: Ri Khasi Book Agency, 2013)*, 112.

room where the bride prepares for the ceremony. The eldest maternal uncle, *U kni rangbah* prays beseeching God Almighty, *U Blei*, the Ancestor, *U Thawlang*, the Ancestress, *Ka Iawbei* to bless the union, the entire family clan of the bride so that the ceremonies and the celebrations will go off smoothly. The uncle puts a little rice on a brass plate and some fresh water in a *luta*, a container, and prays after which he gives some grains of rice to the bride to eat.¹⁴ At the groom's house, the same practice is followed. The maternal uncle, an elder or a priest prays to God, and invokes the Ancestress to bless the relationship. Among Christians, a prayer fellowship of reading from the scripture and prayers is held led by the priest or the deacon before the groom and the bride leaves their home for the church.

A significant ritual on the morning of the wedding practiced by both the indigenous and Christian believers is the preparation of the unsavoured unsalted pork curry and *u phiang*, a pot of white steamed rice both of which are to be delivered from the home of the bride to the groom's by the maternal uncles and male members of the family. It is mandatory for the groom to be served the dish of steamed rice and unsavoured pork curry by his mother before he leaves his house for the solemnization of his marriage. The pork dish is substituted by either beef or chicken in Christian denominations where there is a restriction in the consumption of pork. The two dishes are received by the maternal uncle of the bride and the family members, both male and female at the threshold after which the troupe is treated to high tea before they leave.

After completion of the ceremony at home, the groom, along with his train of escorts leave for the bride's home but without the presence of the mother, the eldest aunt, the father, the uncle (the father's brother/s) who are not allowed to be part of the delegation. The same practice is followed by Christian converts, though with certain compromises. The groom's delegation to the church does allow the presence of the father and mother, though there are Christian families who strongly adhere to the belief that the mother of the groom should not be seen together with the bride on the wedding day. Presently, though, the concept of the joint reception encourages the meeting and interaction of both the families at the reception venue.

A brother or a male cousin carry the servings of *u kwai u tymphew* betel nut in *ka iarong*, a netted bag, which has a *salu saw* red, cotton strap slung on his shoulder.¹⁵ The delegation is met half way by the bride's

¹⁴ Sitimon Sawian, "The Marriage Ceremony (Ka Shongkha Shongman)," 12.

¹⁵ Sitimon Sawian, "The Marriage Ceremony (Ka Shongkha Shongman)," 14.

male family members at a place decided upon. On reaching the bride's home, the spokesperson first enters the house followed by the groom and the entire delegation. The same practice is followed by the Christian converts (except for those belonging to a certain denomination) where the delegation off the groom is met) by the bride's maternal uncle and the male family members at a place decided upon, to exchange *u kwai u tympew*.

The solemnization of the marriage takes place at the bride's home among the indigenous believers. Inside the house, the bride sits in the drawing room, *ka nongpei*, waiting for the groom to arrive. To her right, a chair is reserved for the groom, while the bridesmaids are seated to her left. The bride's parents sit in a row behind her, and the delegation from the groom sits facing the bride. Between the two groups is a low table, on which *ka iad um* (rice beer) is placed in *ka dong siej*, a bamboo pitcher. The rice beer will eventually be poured into *ka dong shimat*, another bamboo container.

On reaching the bride's house, the *ksiang*, the maternal uncle of the groom who is the spokesperson enters first, followed by the groom and the rest of the party according to seniority.¹⁶ At the bride's house, the parents, sisters, cousins and aunts welcome the groom in the traditional way by smearing a little mustard oil on the forehead of the groom. The spokesperson, the maternal uncle, then formally hands over the groom to the maternal uncle or the father of the bride who leads the groom to be seated next to the bride. This is followed by an exchange of *iarong kwai*, betel nut pouches.

In a Christian ceremony, the groom enters the church first, escorted by his family and friends. As he arrives, the church bell is rung to announce his presence. Inside the church, the groom sits waiting for the bride. When the bride reaches the church grounds, the bells are rung a second time to signify her arrival. She walks down the aisle, escorted by her maternal uncle, father, eldest brother, or another senior male family member, followed by the bridesmaids. The escort formally gives the bride away to the groom, marking the completion of his role in the solemnization of the marriage. From this point onward, the ceremony is handed over to the priest.

The marriage ceremony among the indigenous believers begins with exhortations from the spokespersons of the two families. They

¹⁶ Sitimon Sawian, "The Marriage Ceremony (Ka Shongkha Shongman)," 14.

formally complete the wedding ties and dedicate the union to God, the Creator. The spokesperson of the bride offers a testimony and affirms that, in the event of any unfortunate circumstances, he assumes full responsibility and accountability. Once the exhortations are concluded, the bride's *ksiang* (spokesperson) announces that the formal addresses are complete, and the priest will now proceed with the rites and rituals, prayers and libations, blessings, and benedictions.

Sawian (2012) records the ceremony as follows:

“The bride's *ksiang* (spokesperson) takes the water or *iad hiar*, (rice beer) brought by both the families and the rice from the *shangrit*, the cane basket, and mixes them in *ka dong siej*, the long bamboo container and then pray. After this, the *ksiang* (spokesperson) pours some of the mixture thrice on the rice, as a libation, *suit ka shor* and then continues to pray. After which he pours the remaining contents in the *dong siej* on the rice thus ending the *suit kashor*.”¹⁷

Following this, there is an exchange of rings which is really part of the *pynhiar synjat* ceremony. The rings can either be of gold or silver depending on the status of the families. In this part of the ceremony, the maternal uncle of the groom hands over the ring to the bride and the maternal uncle of the bride gives away the ring to the groom. The rings are then slipped on to the fingers by the groom and the bride on their own. On the completion of the ceremony, the relatives of the bride take some share of the food that has been prepared as part of the wedding feast to the house of the groom, before the feast at the bride's begin. This is symbolical of the successful and final completion of the marriage ceremony. Food is then served at the bride's home to the groom's escorts, with the bride and groom joining them for the feast. It is mandatory for the couple to consume all the rice used in the *suit ka shor* rites and libations, which has been specially cooked for them. After the couple and the groom's escorts have eaten, the feast is opened to all relatives, friends, and well-wishers who have witnessed the marriage. The solemnization of the marriage in the church is the sole responsibility of the priest. Similar to the practice of indigenous priests, the priest makes an announcement inviting anyone who objects to the union of the groom and bride to speak. The ceremony begins with the reading of scripture, prayers, and the singing of hymns. This is followed by the exchange of vows and rings between the couple, after they have been

¹⁷ Sitimon Sawian, “The Marriage Ceremony (Ka Shongkha Shongman),” 19.

dedicated in prayer to God. The priest then formally announces their union as one in matrimony. The ceremony continues with an exhortation and blessings for the couple by the priest, after which they sign the marriage certificate. In most instances, the priest presents the couple with a Holy Book as a gift. This is followed by blessings from church elders and a member of both families. The reception, which may be held jointly or individually, typically follows the church ceremony. In the evening, after the reception, the groom is welcomed into the bride's home by her mother and female members of the family. As part of this tradition, oil is ceremonially smeared on his forehead, accompanied by advice and words of exhortation.

Presently, certain Christian families, on the same day of the wedding pay a visit to the groom's family and the reception venues if the wedding celebrations are done separately. However, this practice is not condoned among the majority of Christian converts, for they still abide to the practice of visiting the bride's home only three days after the wedding.

On the third day after the solemnization of the marriage, irrespective of whether one belongs to the indigenous or the Christian faith, the *kur* of the bride escorts the couples to the house of the groom carrying fruits and gifts for the close relatives. At the in-law's house, the bride and groom are given the traditional welcome—a smearing on their forehead of both the bride and the groom, blessings and gifts followed by an elaborate feast.

These are the rituals observed in a marriage ceremony of the Khasi. As can be perceived, many of the rituals practiced by the indigenous believers have been incorporated even among the Christian converts. The different practices ensure the sanctity and the permanence of the marriage. There are many instances of intermarriage between Christian converts and indigenous believers. In such situations there is a mutual understanding between the families.

In all situations though, the maternal uncle occupies a significant role from the very beginning of the relationship as well as the other male members of both the families. The serving and exchange of *u kwai u tympew* is very significant. The pot of steam rice and the dish of unsavoured meat taken from the bride's home to the groom's on the morning of the wedding day and his eating of the same before he leaves the house is mandatory. The traditional welcome by both families by the smearing of the oil by the respective in laws. These are practices which have smoothly integrated into the solemnization of a Christian

marriage. Similarly, in the present-day context, traditions such as joint receptions, the practice of the mother-in-law not seeing the bride on the wedding day, and other customary restrictions have been largely compromised, even among indigenous believers. As a result, there is a noticeable blending of practices between the two faiths, with the primary emphasis remaining on upholding the strength and value of marriage.

Conclusion

To conclude it is important to emphasize the profound significance of rites and rituals in delineating transitions of status within individuals. These ceremonial practices serve as effective reflections of a society's deeply ingrained belief systems, encapsulating the essence of communal identity irrespective of an individual's specific faith. Furthermore, they not only signify personal milestones but also bind individuals to their respective communities, fostering a sense of belonging and shared cultural heritage. Beyond mere observance, the role of rites and rituals, thus, contribute to shaping the intricate fabric of societal cohesion and individual identity.

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NCCI NEWS

HONOURING THE BIBHAS LEGACY – RECOGNISING BRAVE YOUTH COMBATING GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

Reports confirm that Bibhas Nayak, a young member of the Church of North India and son of the Most Rev. B. K. Nayak (Moderator, CNI), tragically lost his life after bravely intervening to stop an assault on two young women by three men in the dark. His courageous action saved the lives of two male companions and shielded others from further harm.

Known for his adventurous spirit and compassion, Bibhas actively supported the education of underprivileged girls, embodying a deep commitment to justice and dignity.

In recognition of his heroism, the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) has proposed the creation of an annual national award in Bibhas's name, honouring young individuals who stand against Gender-Based Violence with courage and integrity.

This tribute not only commemorates Bibhas's selfless act but also amplifies the message that the bravery of our youth must be celebrated and emulated. NCCI expresses deepest condolences are with Bibhas's family. We also express solidarity with the women affected and urge authorities to ensure swift justice and stronger measures to protect women from violence.

CCA NEWS

INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION EXPLORES EMERGING GEOPOLITICAL RECONFIGURATIONS AND CHALLENGES TO PEOPLE'S SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), in collaboration with the World Council of Churches (WCC), hosted an international consultation on "Emerging Geopolitical Reconfiguration in South Asia: Challenges

to People’s Security and Peace with Justice” from 13–14 March 2025 in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Held alongside the WCC Pilgrimage of Justice, Reconciliation, and Unity (PJRU) Reference Group Meeting, the consultation gathered 40 global participants—including scholars, church leaders, and civil society voices—to assess shifting power dynamics, regional security threats, and the role of faith in advocating peace and justice.

Key sessions explored strategic rivalries, religious extremism, shrinking civic spaces, and external interventions from major powers like the USA, China, and India. Experts from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka shared country-specific insights, while panellists called for interfaith solidarity and ecumenical responses to conflict and violence.

“South Asia’s evolving realities demand that the global ecumenical community engage with urgency, wisdom, and deep commitment to peace,” said Dr Mathews George Chunakara, CCA General Secretary.

The event reaffirmed the vital role of churches and faith communities in shaping a just and sustainable future for South Asia

WCC NEWS

WCC LIFTS VOICES IN SOLIDARITY WITH WOMEN AND GIRLS ACROSS THE WORLD

The World Council of Churches Gender Justice Reference Group, in a statement for International Women’s Day on 8 March, expressed solidarity with women and girls across the world. A powerful statement affirms that gender equality is not only a human right but a moral and spiritual duty, essential to human dignity and justice.

The statement calls for urgent action to uphold women’s dignity, rights, and safety—every day and everywhere. It urges stronger laws and policies to prevent violence and discrimination, ensure equal access to education, healthcare, and employment, and promote fair wages and

representation in leadership. “True progress means not just survival but the freedom to thrive,” the statement affirms.

Highlighting the ongoing global impact of gender-based violence, wage gaps, and systemic inequality, the statement calls on churches, governments, and communities to act decisively. “Education is a powerful tool for transformation,” it reads. “Empowering women empowers society.”

The message emphasises the role of faith communities in challenging harmful theologies, training leaders to address domestic violence, and promoting a just Christian worldview.

It concludes with a strong commitment: “Today, we do not simply commemorate but commit—to building a world where women and girls can lead, flourish, and live free from harm.” global ecumenical diaconal discourse and practice. “I am acutely aware that my understanding of diakonia remains influenced by Eurocentric logics—from which I can free myself, only with concerted effort,” he acknowledged.



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BIBLE STUDY

“DEFIANCE OF LENT TOWARDS INJUSTICE: A THEOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER AS A PARADIGM OF RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSION”

*- Don Paul **

Tradition has traditionally understood Lent as a period of self-denial and preparation for Easter, a season of repentance, fasting, and spiritual discipline. However, a deeper theological reading reveals that Lent also serves as a model for resisting injustice and confronting oppression. This article offers a theological reinterpretation of the Book of Esther as a paradigm of defiant faith, aligning it with Lenten themes of fasting, prayer, and moral courage. Drawing upon biblical exegesis and theological reflections, this study highlights how the narrative of Esther exemplifies the transformative power of divine providence, communal fasting, and courageous action against systemic evil.

Introduction

Lent is a season of repentance and renewal of spiritual life through fervent prayer, scripture meditation, and fasting. Lent is not merely a religious act of abstaining from food but a battle between a person and his/her inner self. In other words, it is a battle between one’s weaknesses, unjust practices, and motive to oppress others. True fasting nourishes one’s soul by sidelining the passions of body and brain. Therefore, merely observing the fast by refraining from food without also abstaining from evil thoughts and actions is futile. The Book of Esther, a beautiful tale in the Bible, tells the story of a young, charismatic woman named Esther who bravely faced an unjust massacre through fasting. This article aims to explore how Esther’s call for fasting defied systemic injustice. Thus,

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Esther's call for fasting accelerates to raise her voice against all sorts of injustices in society by embracing the righteousness of God.

Lent/Fast: Biblical and Theological Understanding

The Bible speaks extensively about fasting, with numerous passages on the subject in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. From the very beginning, God has emphasized the importance of fasting.¹ Throughout history, God's people have fasted to seek God's grace.² In the New Testament, Jesus Himself observed forty days of fasting in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-2), setting an example for spiritual discipline and devotion. Lent, therefore, carries deep biblical significance, representing a time of repentance, purification, and preparation to grow closer to God. The Hebrew Bible uses the word '*tsom*' to refer to fasting, which is an act of complete or partial abstinence from food and drink.³ The Hebrew Scriptures primarily understand the theology of fasting as a sign of repentance. It serves as a means to seek God's mercy, especially during times of divine wrath, as seen in the Book of Jonah when the people of Nineveh repented through fasting (Jonah 3:5-10). Secondly, fasting is a response to grief.

In the Old Testament, people often mourned by observing fasts on various occasions. It also functions as a preparation for significant events or rituals, as seen in the fasting of Moses, Elijah, and Daniel. Fasting, typically a personal act of devotion, can also serve as a communal practice, often accompanied by lamentation and repentance.⁴ Interestingly, the prophet Isaiah strongly criticises empty, ritualistic fasts that lack genuine action. He emphasized that true fasting must be accompanied by acts of justice, mercy, and righteousness (Isaiah 58:6-

¹ In Genesis 2:16-17, God commanded the first humans not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, they failed to uphold His command and were expelled from the Garden of Eden.

² Moses fasted and received the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28), Elijah fasted and attained a prophetic vision (1 Kings 19:8-9), and Daniel fasted for wisdom and divine revelation (Daniel 9:3).

³ Som, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament Vol XII*. Edited by G Johannes Botterwick and Helmer Ringgren (Cambridge: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 297-298.

⁴ J D Douglas and Merrill C Tenney, "Fast," *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, edited by Moises Silva (Zondervan: Zondervan Publications, 2005), 995.

7). This biblical and theological foundation provides the framework for reinterpreting Esther's story within the Lenten context.

Historical Setting of the Book of Esther

The Book of Esther is set during the reign of King Ahasuerus who is better known by his Greek name Xerxes I, (486-465 BCE) of the Persian Empire, a vast kingdom stretching from India to Ethiopia (Esther 1:1). This period falls between the Babylonian Exile (586 BCE) and the return of the Jews to Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah.⁵ After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, many Jews were exiled to Babylon. In 539 BCE, the Persians, under King Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon and allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:1-4), but many remained in Persia. The Book of Esther takes place around 480 BCE, during the reign of Xerxes I, when many Jews still lived throughout the Persian provinces. Xerxes I (486-465 BC) was a powerful but impulsive Persian king, known for his lavish lifestyle, military campaigns against Greece, and his centralized rule. His rule included extravagant feasts, political intrigue, and strong bureaucracy, all reflected in the opulence of the Persian court in Esther chapter 1. The Jews were a minority group in Persia, living under foreign rule, and often subject to the whims of Persian officials. The threat of Haman's decree (Esther 3:8-9) to annihilate the Jews reflects the precarious position of Jewish communities in exile.⁶ Keeping all these historical facts will be helpful to grasp the theological connotations of Esther's call for fasting.

Defiance of Esther's Call for Lent: A Paradigm of Resistance to Oppression

The Book of Esther narrates the struggle of the Jewish people against Haman's genocidal decree in the Persian Empire. While it lacks explicit mentions of God, it subtly reveals divine providence through human agency. Esther, an orphan-turned-queen, emerges as a key figure in resisting systemic oppression. Reading Esther through a Lenten lens calls believers to action. In a world plagued by systemic oppression,

⁵ A F Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Esther* (Cambridge: University Press, 1907), 18.

⁶ Joyce G Baldwin, *Esther* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 17-18.

inequality, and persecution, the story of Esther serves as an exhortation to engage in justice-oriented faith. Three key elements of her story align with the themes of Lent:

a) Fasting as Spiritual and Political Resistance

Esther 4:16⁷ records her call for a three-day communal fast before she approaches the king. This communal fast precedes Esther's bold intervention before the king, underscoring fasting as an instrument of empowerment rather than passive submission. In Jewish tradition, fasting is both a spiritual discipline and an act of protest. Esther's fast mirrors the Lenten call to fasting, which serves as both an act of repentance and a means of sharpening one's resolve against injustice. Just as Christ's fasting in the wilderness prepared Him for His ministry against the forces of evil, Esther's fast strengthens her resolve to confront the oppressive decree. In this sense, Esther's fast aligns with the Lenten call to challenge societal injustices through prayerful defiance. Therefore, fasting is not merely a process of self-denial but a communal resistance against all kinds of social evils.

b) Courageous Advocacy and the Necessity of Speaking Truth in the Face of Power

Bishop Desmond Tutu, the well-known South African theologian and human rights activist, once said, *"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."* Neutrality is a kind of mere silence. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'silence' as *"a lack of sound or a situation in which someone does not talk about or answer questions about something."* One can also interpret it as an obscure sound. Therefore, the absence of an appropriate response or reaction results in absolute silence. Today's society lacks prompt responses to injustice; in other words, voices are insufficient to combat social evils because they are afraid to speak truth to power. Here comes the importance of Esther's approach to King Ahasuerus (Esther 5:1-8), as it is an act of immense courage. She finds refuge in Lent and gains

⁷ "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."

the courage to advocate for the people despite the threat of a massive massacre, just as Jesus Christ prepared Himself in His forty days of wilderness life before the public ministry. She risks her life by breaking royal protocol, embodying the Lenten theme of sacrificial love and prophetic witness. Her willingness to speak the truth on behalf of her people reflects the calling of the faithful during Lent—to speak against injustice even when it is costly. Albert Einstein’s famous quote holds significant relevance in this context. He says, *“The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil but by those who watch them without doing anything.”* Thus, the Lenten season should enable us to challenge unjust systems by speaking the truth with might. Also, Lent reminds believers that faith is not passive but demands courageous action against structures that perpetuate suffering.

c) The Power of Collective Spiritual Action and the Reversal of Injustice

Esther’s call for communal fasting highlights the importance of collective spiritual disciplines in confronting injustice. Similarly, Lent invites believers not only to personal repentance but also to corporate acts of justice, such as advocacy for marginalized people and fasting in solidarity with the oppressed. One of the Lenten prayers of the Syriac Orthodox Church calls the entire faithful to feed the hungry, emphasizing that observing Lent without action is meaningless.⁸ Hunger is an outcome of an unjust and failed political-bureaucratic system. Likewise, Lent should be a preparatory time for the faithful, during which their collective efforts can have a significant impact on society. Collective spiritual action has the power to break unjust systems.

The climax of the Book of Esther showcases a dramatic reversal: Esther 7:10 sees the execution of Haman, the architect of oppression, on the very gallows he built for Mordecai. The Jewish people then celebrated the festival of Purim,⁹ marking their triumph over systemic oppression. This narrative reflects a biblical pattern of divine justice, reminiscent of

⁸ Valiya Nombile Namaskaram (Udayagiri: Seminary Publications, 2024), 179-181.

⁹ Purim is a joyous Jewish festival commemorating the deliverance of the Jewish people from a plot to exterminate them, as recounted in the Book of Esther, celebrated on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Adar.

how Christ’s crucifixion subverted the powers of evil. Lent ultimately prepares believers for Easter, when the faithful celebrate Christ’s victory over sin. Thus, we can understand the Purim festival in relation to Easter. Therefore, the meaningful completion of Lent is possible only through victory over injustice.

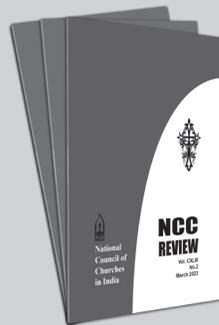
Conclusion

The Book of Esther, when viewed through a Lenten lens, offers a profound theological paradigm for resistance against oppression. Lent is not merely a season of individual reflection but a call to moral action and communal solidarity. Esther’s story, with its themes of fasting and courageous defiance, serves as a model for believers seeking to embody Christ’s justice in a world marred by systemic sin. As Gustavo Gutierrez opines, *“True spirituality is not withdrawal from the world but a radical commitment to its transformation.”* Esther’s narrative invites the faithful to embody this transformative spirituality by standing against injustice with faith, the ability to speak truth, and courage. In doing so, the church fulfils the Lenten call to “loose the chains of injustice” and proclaim the hope of God’s reign amidst the brokenness of the world.



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