Do Historical Narratives Create Social Norms? The Case of Syrian Christians and Malabari Jews in Kerala

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This article uses case studies of the Syrian Christian and Malabari Jew communities to show that a historical narrative may be viewed as the fundamental premise for the existence of endogamous practices within a religious community. Essentially, the narrative itself has come to be presented as proof that certain practices are justified.

Endogamy is simply the practice of marrying within one’s social group usually for maintaining purity within the family (Koenig and Thornhill 1994). The strictness of the endogamous norms of the Syrian Christians and Malabari Jews can be viewed through the following examples even though the outcomes of the cases are different. The first example deals with the marriage of Leelamma and Dilip Kumar. Leelamma belonged to the Syrian Christian community and married Dilip Kumar with the belief that he too was a Syrian Christian. However, it was later found that he belonged to the Hindu Ezhava community and had simply converted to Christianity for the purpose of marrying her. The wife then filed for nullifying the marriage on the grounds that “converts are considered socially inferior in status, and members of ancient families do not marry converts” (Leelamma v Dilip Kumar 1993). She also contended that one who is not born a Christian, cannot be considered a true Christian. The possible reason for the wife's contention could be the severe punishments given by her community in case of disobeying the endogamy rule. Another example from the
Syrian Christian community is that of Mary John, a Syrian Christian who had been baptised at the St John’s Church at Attamangalam near Kumarakom. At the age of 94, she expressed her last wish to be buried at the church where she was baptised (Kumar 2016). However, since she had married a Hindu, she was denied this final wish. Such orders by the church are not uncommon. A spokesperson for the St John’s Church said,

“She had broken ties with the church post her marriage to a Hindu, and she lived as a Hindu. One is automatically disowned by the church under such circumstances.” (Prakash 2017)

The third example is that of the marriage of Balfour Salem and Seema Koder in 1950. Salem belonged to the Malabari Jewish community while Koder belonged to the Paradesi Jewish community (Katz and Goldberg 1993). In this case, both parties were aware of each other’s religion and status, but faced persecution from the rest of the Jewish communities in Kerala. The couple was forced to hold their marriage in Mumbai as they were forbidden to do so in a synagogue in Kerala. In the eyes of the Paradesi “white” Jews, Koder had forfeited her status as a “white” Jew and her son would not be allowed to be circumcised in a synagogue (Fernandes 2008).

**Historical Narrative**

Narratives have been recurring elements in history, they are sometimes even seen as a necessity.

“It has been held that narratives can themselves be explanatory in a special way; or that narratives are per se a form of explanation, if not indeed self-explanatory”. (Dray 1971)

A historical narrative can, however, distort certain events and facts to fit a desirable story. Every religion has fabricated some sort of narrative to give it a soul and to have legitimacy among its followers. This is completely understandable if it wishes to survive the age of skepticism and modernity. However, some have created a historical narrative for the sole purpose of becoming “heraldic manifestos that declare the putative superiority of the family as per a set of imaginary and construed norms” (Varghese 2004). When a narrative is conceived in such a way, then it begs us to question if the narrative itself has led to the creation of a social hierarchy within a religion and if it is the primary reason for endogamous practices.

**Syrian Christians**

There are many stories as to how the Syrian Christian community came into existence. The
The most popular claim is that their story begins around 52 AD when Saint Thomas, the disciple of Jesus Christ landed at Maliankara near Cranganore and spread Christianity. It is believed that he converted a good number of the local inhabitants in present-day Kerala, mostly the upper caste Nambudiri Brahmins and also established seven churches in Kerala (Brown 1956). The tag “Syrian” has nothing to do with Syria, the country. It is actually a reference to the “Syriac” language that the group was fluent in, but when this language was incorporated as the liturgical language by the Kerala Christians in the 17th century it was mistakenly pronounced as “Syrian” (Varghese 2004). The Syrian Christian community thrived economically and politically due to the benevolence and tolerance of the rulers in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar who donated land and financed the building of their churches (Encyclopedia.com 1996).

When the lower caste Hindus were converted to Catholicism by the Portuguese in the 17th century and to Protestantism by the British, the so-called “upper caste” Syrian Christians never saw them as equals. The Christians who joined the Catholic fold came to be known as Latin Christians and those who joined the Protestant fold became the New Christians. The Latin Christians and the New Christians were considered to be inferior to the Syrian Christians. What the Syrian Christian community rarely mentions is that there is an internal division within the community itself into the Northists and the Southists (Varghese 2004). Within the Syrian Christian community, there are several accounts that are used to explain their origin. These other accounts are as creative as the one used to trace the origin of the Syrian Christians from the arrival of Saint Thomas (he was one of the 12 apostles of Christ) to present-day Kerala. These other accounts still stay true to the objective of the Saint Thomas story, which is to portray the Syrian Christians as the “first Christians” in India. The second legend is that the Syrians are descendants from families brought to Kerala by a merchant of Syria, Thomas of Cana (no relation to Saint Thomas), in the fourth century (Brown 1956). It is believed that Cheraman Perumal, the ruler of Cranganore, received them and conferred privileges on Thomas of Cana and the Syrians he came with. Beyond this, the second legend has several versions as to why there is a Southist and Northist divide (Pothen 1963). One version simply claims that the native Christians in the region lived on the north side of the city while the Christians who came with Thomas of Cana resided in the south side of the city. The other chronicle says that the Southist side descend from Thomas of Cana’s union with a West Asian wife from Syria and the Northist side are the descendants of his union with a Nair woman (Swiderski 1988). The second narrative of the Thomas of Cana story gives the Southist side more legitimacy due to their “pure blood,” while the Northist side is viewed as being the descendants of a concubine.

**Malabari Jews**

Like the Syrian Christians, the Malabari Jews or the Cochin Jews have lived in Kerala for a very long time; in fact, the Malabari Jews can be traced back to nearly two millennia in the Malabar region (Katz 2000). There are various origin stories of the Cochin Jews in both Hebrew accounts in Malabar and those by foreign travelers. While some say that the first
Jews sailed to South India on the ships of King Solomon in 931 BC, others say that they fled to Malabar after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD (Slapak 1995). Like the Syrian Christians, the Cochin Jews enjoyed many privileges from the rulers of Malabar who allowed them to occupy the higher economic strata of society. Sometime between 379 and 1000 CE (date contested), the Chera king, Bhaskara Ravi Varma, bestowed a gift of copper plates to the community, giving them 72 privileges, including the freedom to practise their religion and tax exemption “as long as the world and the moon exist” (Pinsker 2015; Katz 2000; Beth-Hillel 1973; Ayyar 1926).

The Malabari Jews enjoyed their privileges for a very long till the coming of the Paradesi Jews or the “White Jews” from Europe in the 15th and 16th century. These so-called foreign Jews came to Kerala as they were fleeing the religious persecution of the Alhambra Decree in Spain and Portugal (Slapak 1995). Upon reaching the coast of Kerala, they too were bestowed with privileges by the ruler of Cochin but to a lesser degree as compared to the Malabari Jews. These Paradesi Jews did not embrace their Indian counterparts in Cochin. Instead, they transformed the egalitarian customs of traditional Judaism to conform to the prevalent caste hierarchy of Hinduism (Katz and Goldberg 1993). An intricate system of castes and sub-castes were created within the Jewish community where the sub-castes strictly followed endogamous marriage and the “superior” group denied the “inferior” group a role in Synagogue life. This internal division was based on one’s descent from Israel and on one’s skin tone (Katz 2000). Of the 900 Jewish families, only a hundred belonged to the Paradesi Jews. Although these hundred families considered themselves to be of a higher sub-caste, they were apparently lower on the scale of wealth and influence. So why did the Cochin Jews (non-Meyuchasim) care if the descendants from ancient Israel (Meyuchasim) accepted them? They were, after all, the majority and possessed greater wealth and influence. The simple answer is that the smaller group possessed something that the larger group did not have and always wanted—“Yichus”, or an unquestionable Jewish status which came from their origins from the Jewish homeland of Israel (Katz 2000). The reason for this need to prove their Jewish status arose when travelers from Europe came in contact with the Paradesi Jews. These Jews had more in common with the European travelers as they had lived in Europe themselves. Travelers would believe the stories told to them by the Paradesi and favoured them more because of their white skin. The mindset of these European travelers was shared by the colonial powers as well. The Paradesi Jews claimed that the local Cochin Jews with darker complexion were nothing more than the descendants of Indian slaves who had converted to Judaism (Beth-Hillel 1973). This story, of course, has been contested by the Malabari Jews who claim to be direct descendants of Jews who came from Israel over two thousand years ago.

Conclusions

Looking at the historical narratives that these two communities hold so dear, we see a pattern in the practices of both communities. Both communities wish to be part of the narrative that has a more ancient origin story and this seems to give them greater
legitimacy in their minds. They also seem to support the historical narratives without scrutiny.

It is by no means impossible for Saint Thomas to come to Kerala as many sources show that there was trade with the Malabar coast and the Araba region. At the same time, there is no conclusive proof that Saint Thomas did come to Kerala because most of the sources that cite this visit are by members of the Syrian Christian community who have a vested interest in this narrative (Ayyar 1926).

The stories in this article have one common feature: they all speak of an origin that dates back thousands of years ago. The emphasis on such ancient stories is to create the perception that the members of these communities are “purer” than their counterparts who were converted by missionaries. These stories invite critical readings not only because they lack historical record, but also because several alternative theories exist simultaneously within and outside the community.

End Notes:

[1] Marriage outside the Syrian Christian community can lead to excommunication. The person can no longer be buried at the family church and cannot go to a church of other denominations as the baptism that occurred in the Syrian Christian church will no longer apply (Kumar 2016).

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