



The Contribution of CSI Christians to the Development of Culture in Kerala

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How to Cite: Tanya Filbert. The Contribution of CSI Christians to the Development of Culture in Kerala. International Journal of South Asian and Global South Studies, 01(01), 01

Received Date: 08/07/2026 | Revised Date: 17/08/2026 | Accepted Date: 07/09/2026 | Published Date: 30/09/2026

ABSTRACT

The Church of South India, constituted in 1947 through the union of Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist denominations, represents one of the twentieth century's most significant ecumenical achievements. In Kerala, the church inherited the institutional legacy of two centuries of Protestant missionary work, chiefly from the Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society, together with elements of the older St. Thomas Christian community. This paper argues that CSI Christians have been principal architects of Kerala's modern cultural personality in five domains: education, the press and literature, music and worship, social reform, and healthcare. Across these domains, the community has mediated between indigenous religious traditions and modern institutional forms, producing a hybrid Christian culture that has shaped the state's literary, social and artistic life.

Keywords: Church of South India, Kerala's modern cultural personality, indigenous religious traditions, hybrid Christian culture

1. Introduction

Kerala occupies a singular place in global Christian history. Christians comprise nearly 19 percent of the state's population, against the national average of 2.5 percent, and Kerala is home to the oldest community of Indian Christians, with liturgical evidence supporting migration from Syria by the fourth century CE and folk tradition locating the community's foundation in the apostolic activity attributed to St. Thomas the Apostle in 52 CE. Six major Christian sects coexist in the state today, but the community that identifies with the Church of South India has produced cultural contributions whose scale is difficult to overstate.

Formed in 1947 after a long consultative process, the CSI was, in the words of its analysts, "the pioneer of a united and uniting church," bringing together Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists under a single episcopal structure. With over 4 million members, fifteen thousand congregations and twenty-four dioceses, it remains the largest Protestant body in India. Within its ecumenical movement, "space was created for congregations to preserve their own distinct denominational identities and local traditions". Daugherty has described the 1947 union as "one of [the ecumenical movement's] greatest institutional successes".



2. Historical Background

2.1 The Syrian Christian Inheritance

The St. Thomas Christians form the demographic and cultural matrix from which the broader Kerala Christian community, including the CSI, emerged. The community has been described as tracing "its origins to the legendary Brahminical conversions made by St. Thomas the Apostle in 52 CE". Until the Portuguese encounter in the sixteenth century, the Hindus of Malabar and the St. Thomas Christians "shared a world in common," with the community adopting and assimilating practices from upper-caste Hindu neighbours over a period of fifteen centuries. The Syriac (East Syriac/Aramaic) language and music played a formative role in Christian religious experience in India from the earliest period, becoming part of Kerala's wider cultural heritage.

The Portuguese intervention, consolidated at the Synod of Diamper, sought to Latinize the Malabar Church and triggered massive Thomas Christian resistance over the status of the Syriac language. As Jaisy A. Joseph has shown, in the context of the Inquisition, "the crime of the Thomas Christians was stepped up from error to heresy," and any purification effort by the Portuguese "inevitably targeted the Syriac language, triggering massive resistance". Despite these pressures, the Syriac literary tradition continued to flourish in the community's manuscript archives: István Perczel's research on the Syriac manuscripts has shown that during Mar Abraham's time, the learned elite was reading and copying high-level East Syriac literature, including the *Paradise of Eden* by Abdisho of Nisibis and the Gospel commentaries of Ish'oyahb of Merv.

2.2 The CMS "Mission of Help" and the Anglican Presence

The CMS "Mission of Help," sent to Kerala in 1816, was intended to assist the reformation and revival of

the ancient Syrian Christian Church rather than to found a new church, although its long-term effects reshaped the church "into something more consistent with British Christianity and more subject to British rule". Benjamin Bailey, the foundational CMS missionary in Kerala, was also the agent of a typographic revolution: in 1829 he cast the first native types for Malayalam, fixing the curvy script that became standard. This typographic work enabled the printing of the New Testament in Malayalam in 1829 and the complete Bible in 1841, and made possible the first native Christian Malayalam journal, *Gnan Nikshepam*, in 1848.

The CMS concentrated its work in central and northern Kerala. The missionary Joseph Peet built churches and schools in Mavelikkara, Poovathur, Kodukulanji, Krishnapuram and Kattanam, and Mavelikkara subsequently became an important centre of Christianity and English education. Under Hawksworth, a separate CMS mission was established at Tiruvalla in the Pathanamthitta district with significant educational work among oppressed castes.

3. Education and the Shaping of Modern Kerala

3.1 A School System

Christian missionaries, including the CMS and LMS, brought the modern education system to Kerala and, alongside the Travancore Royal Family, the Nair Service Society, the SNDP Yogam and the Muslim Educational Society, made significant contributions to educational progress. By 1920, the CMS and LMS alone were running approximately 700 schools roughly 27 percent of Kerala's 2,581 schools with this network extending from village primary schools to seminaries, colleges and teacher-training institutions. Out of this inherited missionary school network, the modern CSI educational system would emerge.



3.2 Women's Education

The CMS and LMS were the pioneers of mass female education in Kerala. The wife of the CMS Reverend Thomas Norton set up the first girls' school in Alleppey in 1820, while the LMS established a girls' boarding school in 1819 under the patronage of the wife of the Reverend Charles Mead. Other early foundations included a Mrs. Joseph Peet's school in Mavelikkara in 1838, a Mrs. John Chapman school in Kottayam around 1847, and a Mrs. Henry Baker school at Pallom in 1871. In Cochin, the wife of Samuel Ridsdale opened the first girls' school in 1826, followed by four further girls' day and boarding schools. In 1848 Protestant missionaries established Kerala's first female teacher training school, institutionalising women's pedagogical preparation. LMS missionaries introduced vocational courses for girl students, including lace-making, embroidery, crochet and spinning, creating early forms of women's economic self-sufficiency.

3.3 Colleges and Higher Education

The CMS College at Kottayam was established in the 1810s to educate boys intended for the priesthood in the local indigenous church and became a centre of higher learning with lasting consequences. The Methodist/LMS contribution included what would later be known as Scott Christian College in Nagercoil, founded through the LMS mission field of South Travancore and affiliated to Madras University, which produced generations of Christian professionals. As Burton Cleetus has shown, missionary intervention extended beyond the realm of religion and "shaped an important bearing on education, including women's education in shaping individual perceptions of sanity, morality, and hygiene, leading to the reconfiguration of social and community relationships". This broader educational enterprise constitutes one of the institutional

foundations of Kerala's contemporary status as India's most literate state.

4. Literature, Language, and the Press

4.1 The Malayalam Press

The introduction of the modern printing press to Kerala in 1821 by an English missionary, followed by Benjamin Bailey's typographic innovation of 1829, gave the Christian community a near-monopoly on the early Malayalam print infrastructure. Christian mission presses, with their output of magazines, booklets and short treatises on religion and science, "set the stage for the development of Malayalam prose". As K. N. Panikkar wrote, "by facilitating access to literary products, print contributed to the making of a new cultural taste and sensibility and thus of a new cultural personality".

4.2 The Emergence of the Malayalam Novel

The Malayalam novel emerged in the crucible of colonial modernity, and as Sruthi Vinayan and Merin Simi Raj have argued, the new genre is a "parergon" of the cultural possibilities opened up by an emergent print culture. Christian mission presses produced much of the early prose available to Malayalam readers, and Christian households became both consumers and producers of the novel form. The *Puthen Pana* tradition, exemplified by the earlier Jesuit Arnos Pathiri (John Ernest Hanxleden, 1681–1732), had already demonstrated that regional literature could serve as a medium of cultural renaissance, indigenising Christianity by emphasising "themes of devotion, equity, and harmony, consciously embedded to contest caste and religious biases". CSI Christians inherited this literary imagination and extended it through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

5. Music, Worship, and Architecture



5.1 The Syriac Choral Heritage

The Syriac chant tradition of the St. Thomas Christians, including those who later joined or worked alongside the CSI, has been recognised as integral to Kerala's wider cultural heritage, with the Syro Malabar tradition possessing "about 4 million members" representing the largest of the eight churches of the Thomas Christians. Despite Portuguese challenges, the community "zealously cherished and preserved the Syriac tradition" and "adapted many liturgical practices from the Roman rite by translating the respective Latin texts into Syriac, and composing them anew in Kerala, thereby adding another layer to the already vast Syriac chant repertory". The St. Thomas Christians "defended their linkages with the Syriac liturgical and musical traditions against the incursions of foreign Catholic and Anglican missionaries," and accomplished this in part by retaining Syriac chant melodies "even as churches began to sing in vernacular languages such as Malayalam".

5.2 Instrumental Practice and Liturgical Architecture

Instrumental accompaniment in Kerala Christian worship has long included the tambor, the tiriyankol (a Malayalam adoption of the Portuguese trianguolo), and the violin (sometimes called the rebec), with the use of the organ documented as early as 1505. The twentieth century "saw a remarkable flourishing of 'Christian art,'" and Anglicans in mission contexts worldwide erected Gothic revival cathedrals "as a sign of their apostolicity [and] their legitimacy as the true church". In Kerala, the architectural inheritance from the CMS and LMS Anglican-Methodist missions was adapted in CSI churches after 1947, while the union itself created space "for congregations to preserve their own distinct denominational identities and local traditions".

6. Social Reform and the Kerala Renaissance

6.1 The Caste Question and Dalit Christianity

The cultural contribution of CSI Christians cannot be detached from their engagement with social reform, which was foundational to the Kerala Renaissance. The introduction of the LMS and CMS into Kerala is widely described as a "great landmark in the history of the social renaissance of Kerala". The CMS, in particular, "brought a radical change in the social structure of Kerala" because it "shook the traditional static society of Kerala and converted it into a progressive one".

For the slave castes of Kerala, Pulayas and Parayas, Christianity offered a way out of the circle of pollution; "Scriptures provided the slave castes new vistas of knowledge which they encultured to form a counter discourse against the public sphere set up by the dominant castes". Dalit Christian literature became "the primary source where Christianity metamorphosed into an oppositional force in resisting oppression as well as in creating a social space with agency". Missionaries concentrated on slave-caste communities by means of slave schools and chapels, where "slave-caste men, women, and children were taught the word of the Lord" and "basic literacy was imparted to them". Following the Comaroffs, this constituted what scholars have called "a revolution in habits".

6.2 The Abolition of Oozhiyam

The activities of the LMS and CMS missionaries changed the socio-economic conditions of the lowest sections of society, and the missionaries were "the real agents for spreading a Western education of the state". CMS missionaries in Mallappally "preached the gospel of Christ in such a way that it shook the foundation of the pernicious caste system" and "raised their voices against the social inequalities such as slavery, untouchability, pollution, and the forced



labor system". Together with their educational and conversionist work, these efforts made the abolition of *Oozhiyam* (bonded labour service) possible.

6.3 The Dalit Liberation Movement and the Separate Administration Movement

The cultural transformation initiated by the missions found expression in locally-led movements such as those of the foremost Dalit leader of Kerala, Ayyankali, and the Pratyaksha Raksha Dharma of Poykayil Yohannan (Poykayil Appachan, 1879–1939), whose "intellectual contributions for the liberation of the Dalit people of Kerala through songs, Bible commentaries and social activities" made him "one of the unparalleled renaissance heroes in the history of Kerala". Dalit groups moved a resolution in 1941 for separate churches, supported by English Bishop B. C. Corfield of the Anglican Church. After the formation of the Church of South India in 1947, the ongoing discontent of Dalit Christians with Syrian Christian domination reached a critical stage in the 1961–66 Separate Administration Movement. A group eventually broke away in 1966 to form the CMS Anglican Church under the leadership of the Dalit priest Stephan Vattappara, leaving today 160 small congregations under indigenous Dalit clergy.

6.4 Composite Culture

While North India erupted in rebellion in 1857, South India was experiencing a range of cross-cultural contests between missionary Christianity and local converts, who protested against Indian culture being dismissed as a work of the devil. Converts "made efforts to retain their indigenous cultural ethos as part of their lived experience," and these early attempts to balance Indian identity with Christian beliefs were later replicated in a second anti-hegemonic movement as Indian Christians claimed "respectful inclusion into the new composite nation of postcolonial India". As they became more culturally conscious, Indian

Christians "used educational strategies to strengthen the formation of India's composite culture, so that India's Christians could now (re)assert their rightful place within the postcolonial nationalist framework". CSI Christians, with their dual British-Protestant and Indian-Christian inheritance, were particularly well positioned to mediate this composite cultural formation.

7. Healthcare as Cultural Formation

Christian missionaries in Travancore used medical philanthropy to elevate the lower sections of society and viewed western medicine as a tool for evangelisation through charity. By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the medical mission enterprise had grown enormously: "the number of doctors and medical agents sent to India by the Protestant societies rose from 28 in 1870 to 335 in 1912". The CMS had sent medical supplies and experts to Travancore as early as 1816, and the LMS started a medical training school in 1864.

The institutional legacy of this mission medicine endured: "the extensive network of Christian mission hospitals in India faced an abrupt loss of financing and supply of medical missionaries during and after independence in 1947," and yet "many of the remaining went on to become indigenously owned Christian hospitals and prestigious medical colleges that maintained the heart for the poor and for spiritual care that was inspired by their founders". Factors contributing to their success included shared mission, early emphasis on medical education (especially for women), local champions, strong community linkages, and strategic collaborations. CSI Christians inherited and expanded this network of hospitals and medical training institutions, many of which remain significant healthcare providers in Kerala.

8. The Mission of the CSI as Continued Cultural Engagement



The Constitution of the CSI gives prime importance to evangelization, but the church has also developed "a broader understanding of mission with a stronger social commitment, the establishment of love, righteousness, justice and a participation in nation building, with witness in the sociopolitical arena". This dual commitment has positioned CSI Christians as cultural brokers between religious identity and civic engagement.

At the local level, the Anna-daan initiative was begun in 2001 by the women's fellowship team of CSI churches to fulfil the needs of the poor, with the church feeding between 15 and 25 elderly poor daily. The same congregation had earlier, in 1980, initiated a medical centre on the northern side of the church premises with the help of doctors. Such fellowship-driven cultural practices combining charitable giving, communal worship and social service represent the contemporary institutional expression of a tradition whose origins lie in the CMS "Mission of Help" sent to Kerala in 1816.

9. Conclusion

The contribution of CSI Christians to the cultural development of Kerala operates through several intersecting vectors. In education, the inherited CMS and LMS networks came to constitute roughly 27 percent of Kerala's schools by 1920, including the

first girls' schools, the first female teacher training college and the foundational CMS College at Kottayam. In print and literature, Benjamin Bailey's typographic innovation of 1829 enabled the Malayalam New Testament and Bible, and Christian presses laid the groundwork for modern Malayalam prose and the novel. In music and worship, CSI Christians inherited the Syriac chant tradition whose melodies survive alongside vernacular Malayalam hymns, and contributed to a hybrid liturgical culture that Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian congregations shared after 1947. In social reform, CMS and LMS missionaries confronted caste hierarchy, untouchability and bonded labour, providing the moral grammar of the Kerala Renaissance. In healthcare, mission philanthropy built institutions that endured through the indigenisation of post-1947 India.

Across these domains a common pattern emerges: CSI Christians occupied a position of cultural mediation, preserving indigenous Syriac and Malayalam traditions while introducing Western institutional and intellectual forms. The 1947 union of the Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregationalist denominations under the CSI gave institutional permanence to a hybrid Christian culture whose contribution to Kerala continues to shape the state's social, intellectual and artistic life.

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