

# NEW SOURCES AND NEW HISTORIES: UNRAVELLING THE HISTORIES OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS OF KERALA

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## ABSTRACT

*Women Religious congregations of Kerala, being taken as part of the Church history, has not so far been received much attention of the academic world. Women Religious congregations started at a particular social juncture were purposefully utilized by the ecclesiastical authorities to cope with the changes during the colonial period. The congregations became centers of spiritual and temporal moulding. The children were trained to become good Religious and good wives. With large quantity of convent records, hitherto unexplored histories of women Religious, unravels the Syrian Catholic efforts to meet the urgent need to educate and mould the Syrian –Catholic women in this phase. Here the attempt is to show, how the women who opted secluded life is made socially productive, through a European religious institution transplanted to Kerala in the wake of colonial modernity.*

**Keywords:** Women Religious Congregation, Nalagamam, Social Reproduction, Modernity.

## Introduction

New methodologies and new approaches to history and acceptance of multiple realities and multiple truths, has enlarged the horizon of historians. Search for new sources or untapped sources to unveil histories are getting much importance now a day. Writing histories of difference and shedding light to untold histories, hidden figures and veiled narratives, disrupts the status-quo and enables a diversity of voices to be heard. It is not only about new sources but also about silences in history and how these silences are spelled. When talking about new sources in unveiling histories, two problems confront us. One is how the old materials and old sources are put in new ways and two, unraveling the hither to unexplored areas. It is in this context study of religions or religious institutions are taken into consideration. Women religious congregations are generally treated as part of the church history but it needs much more explorations. No one has taken any serious interest in the study of religious congregations or Christian monastic orders of Kerala except few sisters or priests. This has to be changed and a more comprehensive approach is needed to study the emergence and working of the religious congregations in the wake of colonial modernity.

Study of women's history and of women Religious<sup>1</sup> had gone a long way in west. But women Religious who are central not only to Syrian-Catholic<sup>2</sup> history but also to religious history, institutional history, women's history and social history of Kerala has not acknowledged as an area of study even today. Here the purpose is to rebuild bridges, make connections and integrate the history of women religious into the larger context of women's history and social history of Kerala. The focus of the paper is the social manifestation of religious congregations and their place in the social history of Kerala rather than the ideational level or the philosophies which they may have generated.

## Review of literature

Previous studies pertaining to women religious in Kerala are few. Alex Paul Urumpackal's *Vocations in India, Vol.2: The Religious Women* (1986) , gives a detailed account of different religious vocations in Kerala as well as its statistical data. *Indian Women in Religious life: A Formative Approach* (2003), by Bhavya argues how Religious life makes true womanhood. Another work directly dealing with women religious of Kerala is *Gender and Spirituality: A Feminine Perspective* (2008), by Annie .P.V. The work is about the invisibility of women particularly women religious; though a minority who contributed much to the society. The invisibility was not due to her passiveness or inactivity but because of the strong traditional patriarchal domination and an authoritarian control over them. This work emphasized how women as object, has changed to a subject of study. Though a study on spirituality in general, the focus is on the Holy Family Congregation that had its origin in the Trichur diocese in 1914.

Two PhD thesis produced in this area are that of Fr. James Thallachellur's, *Formation of Religious Women in the Syro-Malabar Church with Special Reference to the Congregation of Mother of Carmel (A Historico-*

*Juridical Study*), thesis for the degree in Canon law, Pontificum Institution Oriental, Rome, 1990 and by Mary C. John, *The Evolution of the Congregation of the Mother of Carmel and its Impact on Society and Culture with Special Reference to Women* (1866-1991), Calicut University, 2002. The first study makes a comparison of formation given to women religious of Congregation of Mother of Carmel with that of other congregations having its origin in Syro-Malabar Church. The second thesis is about the contribution of Congregation of Mother of Carmel (CMC) in the field of social welfare and women's development especially educational, over a period of 125 years. As a matter of specific importance, the above two works have concentrated on the emergence of first congregation for women in Kerala as well as its activities. Since all the works have concentrated on the history and activities of a particular congregation, these works could not encompass the socio-economic factors behind the starting of new congregations in the wake of colonial modernity. The gradual spreads of convents to different parts of Kerala have not studied so far. More over sources pertaining to Women Religious congregations opens up new vistas of social life which is not so far unraveled and as such it is opening new areas of research.

### **Methodology**

The present work is interdisciplinary in approach and Sociological, Anthropological and Historical tools of analysis have been made use of. Collection of the data pertaining to the area of study unraveled a wide repository of sources so far unearthed. The new sources enlarged the horizon of historians by entering the religious space so far considered unapproachable by the lay people. The history of the origin and growth of convents which belongs to four different congregations, spread far and wide in Kerala, necessitated extensive field survey so as to collect various sources pertaining to each convent. Each convent had a history independent of another and all records are preserved in the respective convents. A random visit of these convents of three ancient dioceses of Kerala helps to study the conventual history, otherwise unraveled.

### **Contested notions, new sources and new histories.**

An understanding of the Religious life is essential for a better understanding of the women Religious. Nunnery<sup>3</sup>/ Women religious congregation is an integral part of the universal Catholic Church. It is a European institution and it came to Kerala through Catholic Missionaries.

Religious life is a form of life within the Roman Catholic Church characterized by the lifelong profession of the evangelical counsels (vows), of poverty, chastity, and obedience according to the approved constitution of a particular order or congregation<sup>4</sup>. The Religious live in their special domiciles (convents) and are recognized inside and outside their institution by their distinctive dress (religious habit). Their lifestyle itself effectively separates the Religious from the world outside the church and distinguishes the Religious from the laity in the church. The Catholic community has the notion that, this is a special vocation or call. Religious Life is considered as a "way of perfection", in "closer following of Jesus." Although lay life is, in theory, normative and a fully salvific form of Christian life, Religious life is actually regarded by many Catholics, including some religious themselves, as a superior way to serve God<sup>5</sup>.

Renunciation of the "world" or keeping aloof from the world is an important feature of the life. Whatever form Religious life takes - eremitical or cenobitic, contemplative or ministerial, stable or mobile is in fact, monastic, means "aleness", of the Religious.<sup>6</sup> The aleness or apartness of the Religious means that she or he, either singly or with others, creates an alternative life form. The objective is the quest for the fullest possible realization of the true self in relation to reality conceived as a whole or as transcendent.

The purpose of women's monastic life was union with God, but it offered another dimension too; for many, the convent provided an alternative to marriage. Over the time, the decision to start a celibate life as religious was for different purposes. It helped women to be independent of man. A woman, who sought an alternative life, was free from the burdens and responsibilities of family life. The risk of child bearing can also be avoided. This provided Christian women an opportunity to live together in an association that would be impossible in society because of the traditional dependence of women on man. Congregation gave them, support and creative energy to be independent and to develop a spirituality and ideology that was particularly female<sup>7</sup>. Celibate communities also provided support system for a uniquely feminine spirituality and ideology in the face of androcentricism. The decision to lead a chaste life was an autonomous one in a society that left little to the preference of women.

Complete negation of the world was impossible because there was always dialectic between monasticism and the world the monk had abandoned. The various dimensions of Religious life are a clear indication to show that different forms taken by religious congregations at different periods were conditioned by the demands and expectations of the society that supported them. Information about the

beginning of religious life, constraints in early years of community life, formation of the religious, rules and regulations, everyday life, their financial status and interaction with the renounced world can be drawn from the convent records, which are rich repositories of knowledge.

The data in the convent archives are official records maintained from the beginning of the institution. A tradition handed over by the Catholic missionaries, documentation and preservation of records are still meticulously done by religious institutions. Because of the secluded nature of congregational life, convent records are not easily accessible to the public. Sources of study for this virgin area of research include:

- a. *Nalagamam* or chronicle –most important unpublished primary source. The chronicle of an institution is an unassuming record of naked facts of its starting, growing, intervening events, its nature, configuration, pattern and progress. Each convent had a history independent of another and all records are preserved in the respective convents. In some of the provinces there are two types of *nalagamam*, general and confidential. Apart from *nalagamam*, constitutions and directives, book of accounts, book of tradition, reports, and proceedings of the general council, annual reports of the charitable institutions, the baptism records of the converts, all manuscript form the primary material for this study.
- b. The published materials like letters of both the religious and the priests, rules and regulations, code of conduct ,prayer books, hagiographies etc
- c. History of the congregations , history of the convents and biographies of the founders, diaries and letters of the religious and clergies published by the religious gives first hand information about the life and activities they pursue. These publications were at first meant for private circulation and to educate the beginners in the congregational history.
- d. Church related documents like diaries and letters, pastoral letters, *vaidikapanchangam* (almanac for priests) and *mangalapatram* (wishes on festive occasions).

Women religious congregations have been part of the Western Christian tradition since the early Christian centuries and had no precedent in the church history of Kerala. The people of Kerala had heard of men and women who practiced religious virtues, but they did not have any living examples of religious virginity, except that of men<sup>8</sup>. Women, who desired to live as a virgin, had no other choice but to marry.

In the wake of colonial modernity, the gendered self already existing within the community began to change, in order to cope with modern ideas and institutions. The evolving Syrian -Catholic Church, took efforts to educate, regulate, shape and produce women of values, morality and 'womanly' qualities. During this period some of the Syrian-Catholic women challenged the traditional role ascribed to them they began to enter the spiritual field from where they were alienated so far. The decision to opt for Religious life or their passive attitude towards marriage represents a slippage from the social reproduction - an alternative life outside the family system through religious system<sup>9</sup>.

The changing attitude towards women and their sphere of activity in the wake of colonial modernity and the women's earnest desire to cross the domestic space created an atmosphere congenial to take a deviation from the traditional course of womanhood. Traditional role ascribed to women were challenged by and they began to enter the spiritual field from where they were alienated so far.

Religious congregations started in Kerala were an indigenized form of Western religious orders. Influenced by the European ideals, and inspired by the indigenous spiritual tradition, women religious congregations soon became an integral part of the societal landscape of Kerala. The beginning of Religious life and the making of nun did not happen in a single day. It was not an easy process. It took years to make a nun and to give an institutional form. Koonammavu *nalagam* details the intricacies involved in the formation of nunneries and nun in Kerala. A European institution as such was introduced in Kerala.

The decision of the Christian women to deviate from the traditional roles got social acceptance when they joined the congregation. The canonical pattern of religious congregation was introduced in Kerala so as to accommodate those women who opted for Religious life. In fact the church authorities could identify those who opted for an alternative space and directed them to a more secure divine space where their chastity is protected and controlled. The process of surpassing the traditional roles and the acceptance of the community to lead such a life was accompanied by the institutional formation given to them.

The beginning of women religious life in Kerala can be traced back to 13<sup>th</sup> February, 1866, when the first indigenous congregation for women, Congregation of Mother Carmel was started at Koonammavu<sup>10</sup>. The women who desired to lead a virgin life were placed within the congregation of Mother of Carmel with twin objectives: 1. Self-sanctification through contemplation and mortification of

the senses. 2. Work for the salvation of the soul of others through prayer and education of young girls<sup>11</sup>. In other words charism of the congregation was both contemplative and apostolic. The initiative for the foundation of the congregation was taken by Rev. Fr. Chavara Kuriakose Elias, the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Verapoly and the then Prior General of the CMI monasteries and Fr. Leopold Beccaro OCD, the Carmelite delegate in Kerala at that time<sup>12</sup>. A widow named Eliswa and her 14 year old daughter Anna were the first members<sup>13</sup>. The convent was constructed in their property.

Twenty two years after the foundation of the first indigenous congregation in Kerala, Franciscan in spirit and mendicant in nature, the second congregation for women was established in Kerala. Franciscan Third Order for women, named and approved by the Vicar Apostolic of Kottayam, Rt. Rev. Dr. Charles Lavigne and popularly known as the Clarist Congregation, was founded on 14th December 1888<sup>14</sup>. Inspired by the Franciscan life of poverty and simplicity and influenced by Thommachan Puthenparambil, a lay man from Edathua, eight pious women from Pala and around, became the members of the Third Order of St. Francis and started a kind of community life in a small house, in the property of a leading parishioner, Itty Joseph Pazhayakottaram in 1875. It was a congregation for women with less patrimony. A deep and intense prayer life, integrated with hard manual labour, care for the aged and the orphans and service of the poor, marked their way of life<sup>15</sup>. Unlike the Carmelite sisters who followed a monastic type of life and contacted with the outside world through the apostolate of women education, Clarist sisters were out in the world, looking for the poor and the destitute.

The third indigenous women religious congregation of Syro-Malabar Church known as Sisters of the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament was founded on 8th December 1908 at Champakulam in the Vicariate of Changanacherry. The congregation was founded by Fr. Thomas Kurialacherry (1873-1925), and Vallayil Philomena (1880-1972), the co-foundress<sup>16</sup>. According to the constitution, this congregation is to be a harmonious blend of both prayer and action. For that they should do activities that would foster faith in others and liberate the people around. One of the purposes of the establishment of the congregation was to educate the illiterate girls around, which they considered as the outward expression of their love for the Eucharist.

The Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is the fourth indigenous congregation for women that took shape in the Syro-Malabar Church of Kerala. It was founded at Pala on January 1st 1911 at the initiative of Fr. Mathew Kadalikattil (1872-1935). Several devout women, both virgins and widows, in and around Pala, eager to lead a community life, who had neither the required education nor the financial means to enter the established religious congregations, joined this congregation<sup>17</sup>.

If the first two congregations took inspiration from the European congregations, the other two were purely indigenous in concept and all the four were formed necessarily according to the societal needs of the time. An overview of the beginning of congregations indicates that, different congregations emerged in different periods were to accommodate women from different strata of the society. Secondly it also shows that the women who were desirous of religious life had to fulfill the societal needs apart from self sanctification. This necessitates an understanding of the period in which these institutions began to emerge. Social reform movements, during colonial period, led by the intellectuals and upper middle class males together emphasized the restructuring of the traditional society, by improving the 'lot' of women. The changes were oriented towards the making of 'modern' women, having 'specific womanly' characteristics. In this process, the emergent community consciousness produced mechanisms of their own to mould women of their community, having common gender disparities that cut across various communities.

The efforts to reform women came from the male counter parts of each community. Within the Syrian-Catholic community ecclesiastical authorities took the lead. The influence of the new ideas and modern institutions on Syrian-Catholic community began to appear by the mid-nineteenth century. The efforts to educate women, itself were a modernising tool, and it started along with the establishment of first women religious congregation. These endeavours were to cater the spiritual and temporal needs of the community and this necessitated the moulding of Syrian-Catholic women in the phase of modernity.

With the emergence of women religious congregations, Nazrani women entered an alternative space other than familial. They crossed the domestic space to enter the spiritual life, surpassing the general notion that, 'wifhood and motherhood', is the embodiment of womanhood. The group of women who opted for celibate life made significant changes within the community and society. These women utilized the support of the clergy and the lay people to start convents and convent schools and it became the centers of learning and formation for Syrian-Catholic women. The types of activities carried out by the women religious were exceptional in Kerala. By running schools and boarding, orphanages, weaving and industrial schools they became visible in the social scenario of Kerala. So convents were not mere

religious institutions. It was more than that. The emergence of congregations and large number of convents in different parts of Kerala was the result of the collective efforts of the women religious.

Over a period of ninety years, altogether 149 convents were started by four congregations<sup>18</sup>. Except the first convent at Koonammavu, all other convents were started in the traditional Syrian Christian belt<sup>19</sup> and no two congregations have convents in same place. The first and third congregation, i.e., CMC and SABS from the beginning had education as its charism and other two mainly focused on poor and destitute. Even then in the later years they too switched over to education.

It is important to note that majority of the early convents had schools and boarding attached to it. In places where convents had no schools, they worked in parish schools. There were instances of building of schools in places where there is no schools by parishioners or well to do families and bringing sisters to that place either from neighboring convents or they helped them in constructing convents. Even three parishes shared a convent. This is one of the reasons for increasing the number of convents.

Construction of the convents was not an easy task. It took years to complete the construction as per the requirements of a religious house. For eg., Carmelite sisters started their life in a temporary house. Only after one year they could move to their permanent residence. Clarist sisters constructed their first convent with the donation of Pulickal Mariam and the money collected through their work and through begging<sup>20</sup>. Philomena or Sr. Shanthal, the foundress of the SABS congregation and the children under her care did not get any convenient place to reside at Edathua. In the end they got a manger and later on they got a boat house to reside. After two years, they settled permanently at Chamapakulam<sup>21</sup>. So the construction of each and every convent was a struggle for sisters.

More convents mean more vocation, which needs large resources to survive. It is true that over 90 years the four congregations had 149 branches within three vicariates, i.e., out of 413 parishes.<sup>22</sup>. But the question is how these congregations could manage with the establishment of its branches which hardly had any assets with them? The answer to the question lies in fact in the mechanisms through which the religious mobilised resources in order to meet their livelihood challenges. One cannot deny the reciprocity between the religious and society. Though the religious were shut behind the walls, cut off from the relatives and society, they thrived on the material support of the lay people. The sisters, who belonged to the noble families, got their patrimony in the form money or land. Salary from the schools, boarding fees, income from handicrafts and other small enterprises also added the income of the convents. The donation in the form of land and money even though rare and alms received at times of need; all became the base for many convents.

Regarding the spread of the congregation three trends can be noticed on the basis of the initiative taken to start the convent in other places. The initiative came from three groups mainly, the sisters, ecclesiastical authorities and the people. Analysis of the interest taken by the last two groups would reveal the actual cause and the reciprocity between the religious and the laity. The laity who wanted to educate their daughters helped the construction of schools and convents in the form of money, material, and the religious in turn gave secular and religious education to the girls. They were trained to be good religious or good wives. Thus the urgent need to educate the Syrian-Catholic women fell upon those women who opted out of the society to lead a secluded life.

## Conclusion

Women Religious Congregations, which are considered as part of the religious history of Kerala, clearly shows the social manifestations of the religious institutions. New Sources are used so as to understand the subject with a new perspective. New methodologies and new perspectives on the women Religious unraveled the reciprocity between the Religious and the society, they left behind. If the changing social scenario of Kerala in the wake of colonial modernity gave social sanction to the establishment of congregations, the changing material condition of the Syrian-Catholic gave economic sanction to the foundation of the convents and attached institutions. More over the emerging political economy as well as the social mobility of the classes in Travancore and Cochin had been influential in producing these changes among the Syrian-Catholics. Thus women religious congregations established in Kerala at a particular social juncture had been instrumental in bringing about social change in the community which had the socio- religious backing of the period.

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Religious are women and men, who seek to live their baptismal consecration more perfectly through the observance of the evangelical counsels (vows) of poverty, chastity and obedience. The women who wish to follow celibate life and to do apostolic work is women Religious. Throughout the text, word 'Religious' is capitalized when it refers to the specific state of Religious life, whereas, religious as an adjective referring to concern with the transcendent dimension of life or religious is not capitalized. Women Religious / Nun / Sister are used simultaneously in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Syrian Catholics are traditional Christians of Kerala who came under the Papal jurisdiction. They are also known as Romo-Syrians, *Pazhayakooru* or they themselves call Catholics.

<sup>3</sup> Nunnery is a medieval term to signify the place where the nun lived. In Catholic monastic hierarchy nun is one who chose cloistered life and belongs to Second Order in the church and the Religious to the third order.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra M. Schneiders, *Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context*, Vol.1, U.S.A, 2008, p. XXIII.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Serenity Young (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Women and World Religion*, Macmillan, New York, 1998, Vol.1, p.144.

<sup>8</sup> Koonmmavu Nalagamam, Vol.1, p.1, (This original Malayalam manuscript is kept in the Koonmmavu Convent Archives)

<sup>9</sup> Anru Lee, 'Women of the Sisters' Hall: Religion and Making of Women's Alternative Space in Taiwan's Economic Restructuring', in *Journal of Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol.15, No. 4, August 2008, p. 376.

<sup>10</sup> Koonmmavu is 16 kms away from Aluva, situated in between North Paravoor and Puthenpally and adjacent to Varappuzha.

<sup>11</sup> Munnamsabha Kanyastrikalude Nyayapramanam, 1875, p.1; (Constitution of the Sisters of Third Order; The term Constitution is used to denote the term Nyayapramanam, which means the rules and regulations of the congregation. The word constitution began to be used widely only after the II Vatican Council (1964) and the rules and regulations are not static but they are updated according to the needs of the time)

<sup>12</sup> Chavarayachente Sampoorana Kruthikal: Nalagamangal, Vol.I, CMI publishing Committee, Mannanam, pp.124-125; Koonmmavu Nalagamam Vol.1, pp. 3-5. Fr. Leopold Beccaro was a Discalced Carmelite Missionary (1837-1914) who came to Kerala in 1859. He received the deaconate and priestly ordination in Kerala. He learned Malayalam within four or five months after his coming to Kerala and looked after the spiritual needs of the parishioners of Koonmmavu. There are differences of opinion about the founder of the congregation. In the context of the death of Fr. Kuriakose in 1871, Fr. Leopold mentions Fr. Kuriakose as the founder of the congregation; Leopold Beccaro, *Life of the Servant of God*, trans. Postulator, St. Joseph's Monastery, Mannanam, 1970, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Koonmmavu Nalagamam, Vol.1, pp. 3-5.

<sup>14</sup> Changanacherry Franciscan Moonnam Sabhakaraya Kanayakalude Nalagamam, Vol.1, 1888-1914, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Directory: Franciscan Clarist Congregation, Portiuncula, Aluva, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Divyakarunya Aradhana Sabhayude Nalagamam, Vol.1, 1908-1925, kept in SABS Archives Rita Bhavan, Koothrapally, Changanacherry, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Thiruhridaya Sabhayude Nalagamam, Pala, p. 1-2

<sup>18</sup> Beena Paul, *Identity Formation of Catholic –Nazrani Women: A Study with reference to women Religious Congregations of Kerala, 1860-1950*, Unpublished Thesis, SSUS, Kalady, 2014, p.150

<sup>19</sup> Koonmmavu (1837), Mutholy (1856), Vaikom (1809), Changanacherry (1017), Arakuzha (999), Ambazhakad (300), Pulincunnu (1557), Karukutty (1829), Ollur (1718) and Kayalpuram (1878)

<sup>20</sup> Lalam Madam Nalagamam, Vol.1, p.17

<sup>21</sup> SABS Nalagamam, Vol.1, p. 13

<sup>22</sup> According to the data provided by the "Vaidikapanchankam of 1949", in 1948, Ernakulam, Trichur and Changanacherry had 127, 124 and 162 parishes respectively. Vaidikapanchankam: Calendar for 1949 of Archdiocese of Ernakulam, Ernakulam 1949, p. 41.