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## " The Role Of Syrian Catholic Education In Social Upliftment In Kanyakumari"

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the transformative impact of the Syrian Catholic Mission on the educational and social landscape of Kanyakumari district, with a specific focus on the upliftment of marginalized communities including Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and women. Drawing on historical records, missionary reports, and educational policy documents, the study situates the mission's work within the broader context of caste-based exclusion in Travancore and later Tamil Nadu. The Syrian Catholic approach to education was deeply informed by its Eastern Christian theological framework, which emphasized equality, community solidarity, and the spiritual dignity of every human being. This ethos led to the establishment of inclusive schools in rural and caste-segregated areas, many of which offered free education, boarding, and moral instruction to first-generation learners. These congregations played a dual role as educators and social reformers, often walking miles into isolated villages to offer instruction and pastoral care. Ultimately, this study argues that the Syrian Catholic Mission in Kanyakumari functioned not merely as a religious organization, but as a socio-educational movement that reshaped caste, gender, and class relations. Its legacy continues to influence the district's educational infrastructure and communal harmony, serving as a model for inclusive education in India's pluralistic society.

**Index Terms** - Syrian Catholic, Dalit hamlets, moral instruction, Kanyakumari, Travancore, female literacy, social mobility, educational policies, congregations, vocational training, theology, caste, gender, and pluralistic society.

### I. INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION

Education has long been recognized as a key driver of social transformation, especially in societies fragmented by rigid hierarchies of caste, class, and gender. In the southern tip of India, the Kanyakumari district formerly part of the princely state of Travancore, presents a unique case where Christian missionary activity intersected with indigenous social reform. Among the various missionary efforts in this region, the Syrian Catholic Mission stands out for its commitment to inclusive and community-rooted education. Originating from the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Catholic traditions, which trace their lineage to the Apostle Thomas and are culturally embedded in Kerala, the Syrian Catholic Mission brought a distinctly Eastern Christian sensibility to its work in education, social reform, and community building.

This paper focuses on the educational initiatives of the Syrian Catholic Mission in Kanyakumari district from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasizing how these efforts contributed to the upliftment of historically marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, OBCs, and women. While Western missions often replicated colonial hierarchies or adopted a Eurocentric model of education, the Syrian Catholic approach was marked by its theological emphasis on dignity, equality, and service. Schools were not merely spaces for academic learning, but platforms for eroding caste discrimination, fostering inter-caste solidarity, and empowering the voiceless.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: CASTE AND EDUCATIONAL EXCLUSION IN TRAVANCORE**

The social landscape of the Travancore kingdom, which included present-day Kanyakumari district, was shaped by a deeply entrenched caste system that governed every aspect of public and private life. In this rigid hierarchy, Brahmins and upper castes such as the Nairs held privileged access to religious, economic, and educational resources, while Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) were subject to systemic exclusion. Literacy was considered a caste privilege, and education was largely confined to temple institutions or elite households. For large segments of the population, particularly the Paraiyars, Nadars, Mukkuvars, and Sambavars - access to formal education was either severely limited or outright denied.

Children from lower castes were often barred from entering school compounds, reading sacred texts, or even walking on roads leading to upper-caste settlements. Such restrictions were enforced both through social norms and state policies that, until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, showed little interest in universal education. Girls, especially from non-elite communities, were doubly disadvantaged, facing patriarchal restrictions in addition to caste-based discrimination. As documented in the Travancore Education Reports of the early 1900s, enrollment among Dalits and women remained staggeringly low, despite nascent reform efforts by progressive Dewans like T. Madhava Rao and C.P. Ramaswami Iyer.

The arrival of the Syrian Catholic Mission in Kanyakumari thus marked a turning point in the district's educational history. It initiated a deliberate movement to bring the excluded into the educational fold, not as passive recipients but as active agents of their own transformation. By embedding schools in local culture and language, and by fostering community ownership, the mission laid the groundwork for a sustained challenge to social inequality one rooted as much in faith as in pedagogy.

## **EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND PEDAGOGY OF THE SYRIAN CATHOLIC MISSION**

The Syrian Catholic Mission's approach to education in Kanyakumari was deeply rooted in a theological worldview that emphasized the equal dignity of all human beings. This belief found expression in the mission's commitment to holistic education an approach that integrated intellectual development with moral, spiritual, and social formation. Drawing from the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara traditions, the mission believed that education was not merely a secular pursuit but a sacred vocation. Every child, regardless of caste, gender, or creed, was seen as an image-bearer of God and therefore worthy of formation in truth, justice, and compassion.

From the outset, Syrian Catholic educators rejected the dominant models of caste-based schooling. Instead, they pioneered community schools that were open to all, often built on church premises and maintained through local volunteerism. These institutions prioritized inclusivity, not only in admissions but also in the ethos of classroom culture. Caste-based seating, food-sharing taboos, and social segregation were deliberately abolished within school settings. This radical inclusiveness was one of the earliest educational challenges to Brahminical orthodoxy in southern Travancore.

Pedagogically, the mission emphasized vernacular education. Tamil was the primary medium of instruction in almost all schools, even when missionaries themselves were Malayali. This linguistic sensitivity helped make education accessible and culturally resonant, especially for first-generation learners. Malayalam was offered as a second language in areas with high migrant populations, and English was introduced at the secondary level to ensure broader opportunity and upward mobility. By integrating moral stories, folk songs, and Biblical analogies into the curriculum, the mission created a pedagogy that was rooted in local realities while oriented toward universal values.

Instructional methods evolved over time. In the early decades (1890s–1930s), rote learning was supplemented with oral storytelling and parables to foster moral reasoning. Teachers often lived in the villages they served, forging personal relationships with students and parents alike. As schools expanded in the 1940s–1960s, they adopted visual aids, group work, and dramatizations as tools for active learning. By the 1990s, many mission schools had incorporated digital tools, computer labs, and life-skills modules especially in vocational and girls' institutions.

This philosophy of “educating the whole person” distinguished Syrian Catholic schools from both government and other mission schools. While others may have excelled in infrastructure or academics, Syrian institutions consistently aimed to nurture students into virtuous, socially responsible citizens who could transform their communities from within.

## **INCLUSION OF DALITS AND OBCS: A MISSION OF SOCIAL REDEMPTION**

One of the most transformative aspects of the Syrian Catholic Mission's educational enterprise in Kanyakumari was its unwavering commitment to the inclusion of Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). In a region historically marked by caste-based segregation, where lower castes were excluded from temple premises, public wells, and government schools, the mission's embrace of these communities through education was nothing short of revolutionary. It not only challenged the social order but also created new possibilities for dignity, identity, and socio-economic mobility.

From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Syrian Catholic missionaries took deliberate steps to reach out to Dalit communities such as the Paraiyars and Sambavars. Schools were not merely established in neutral spaces but in Dalit hamlets themselves, ensuring that children had physical and psychological access to education. Fr. Elias Panakkal and Fr. Joseph Kuzhinjalil, among others, played a pioneering role in setting up village schools where Dalit children were treated with equal respect.

The educational inclusion of Dalits was often met with violent resistance from upper-caste landlords and conservative social forces. Mission schools were occasionally vandalized, and teachers especially priests and nuns, were threatened for their association with “polluting” communities. Despite these challenges, the Syrian Catholic Mission stood firm, often backed by diocesan leadership and sympathetic allies in the Travancore bureaucracy. Bishops and senior clergy issued pastoral letters condemning casteism as a sin, making the mission’s schools not just academic institutions but also platforms for prophetic social critique.

The outcomes of these efforts were tangible. By the 1950s, Syrian Catholic schools had produced some of the first literate Dalit teachers, catechists, and parish leaders in the district. By the 1970s, Dalit graduates from mission schools were entering nursing, civil service, and seminary life. Education became a tool not just for individual mobility but for collective resistance. Caste names were dropped, inter-caste marriages increased within Christian communities, and a new generation of confident, articulate Dalit Christians emerged many of whom would become mentors for the next generation.

This deliberate and theologically grounded inclusion of Dalits and OBCs stands as one of the most enduring contributions of the Syrian Catholic Mission to Kanyakumari’s social fabric. It exemplifies how faith-based education, when combined with a justice-oriented vision, can become a vehicle for structural transformation.

## **GENDER EMPOWERMENT AND THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS**

In Kanyakumari district, the early 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a sharp gender divide in access to education. Girls, particularly those from Dalit and OBC backgrounds, were not only excluded from formal schooling but often married off early or relegated to domestic labor. The Syrian Catholic Mission, in collaboration with women’s religious orders, launched a quiet but powerful revolution that challenged these norms and created new futures for thousands of young women.

The mission’s commitment to gender empowerment through education was both theological and strategic. Drawing on Catholic teachings that emphasized the equal dignity of men and women, the mission saw the education of girls not as ancillary but as essential to the transformation of society. As many missionary sisters often said, “Educate a woman and you educate a generation.” This belief became the bedrock of the mission’s efforts to open primary, middle, and high schools exclusively for girls often in communities where no girl had ever seen the inside of a classroom.

The real force behind this movement was the network of women’s religious congregations, especially the Daughters of Mary (DM) and the Sisters of the Destitute (SD). These sisters did more than teach they lived in remote villages, walked for miles daily, and created educational environments that were culturally sensitive and safe for girls.

These efforts faced cultural resistance. Families were reluctant to send their daughters to school; girls were pulled out for marriage or labor; and in some cases, religious sisters were accused of violating

social norms. But the mission responded with patient advocacy, pastoral care, and consistent outreach. Sisters conducted home visits, held parent meetings, and enlisted village elders to support girls' education.

The schools produced remarkable outcomes. Marriage age for girls increased, maternal mortality rates declined, and more women entered professions such as nursing, teaching, and clerical service. Many alumni went on to work in mission institutions or became leaders in panchayats and women's self-help groups. Importantly, the schools also created strong alumni networks and "mentor circles," where older students guided younger ones in education and life choices.

## **INSTITUTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

A defining strength of the Syrian Catholic Mission in Kanyakumari was its ability to build and sustain a broad, community-based educational infrastructure. Unlike colonial missionary models that operated through top-down control or state dependence, the Syrian Catholic approach was grassroots-driven, ecclesially grounded, and structurally inclusive. Education was not imposed on communities it was co-created with them.

The mission's institutional foundation began with humble parish schools in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most were started in thatched huts beside village churches, staffed by lay catechists or local clergy. Over time, these schools were formalized, recognized by the Travancore state, and expanded through diocesan planning and religious collaboration. This development followed a deliberate, phased model: primary schools were established first, followed by middle and high schools, teacher training institutes, and eventually vocational centers and colleges.

Each institution was not an isolated entity but part of an ecosystem, interconnected through diocesan support, community participation, and a shared spiritual mission. It is this ecosystem that allowed the Syrian Catholic Mission not only to survive hostile socio-political climates but to thrive and become a blueprint for holistic, faith-based education in rural India.

## **CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCE: RESISTANCE, BACKLASH, AND ENDURING IMPACT**

The remarkable achievements of the Syrian Catholic Mission in Kanyakumari were not accomplished without facing significant resistance. The mission's egalitarian ideals especially its educational inclusion of Dalits, OBCs, and women challenged deep-rooted caste hierarchies, patriarchal norms, and socio-religious conventions. These challenges came not only from conservative Hindu society but also occasionally from within the broader Christian fold, including segments of the Latin Catholic community and hesitant elites within Syrian Catholic circles.

One of the earliest and most persistent sources of resistance was the upper-caste backlash. In many areas, landlords and village elites saw the mission's schools as threats to their social dominance. Mission-run schools were accused of "polluting" public space by admitting Dalit children. In some cases, access roads to schools were blocked, Christian families were boycotted, and teachers were harassed. The mission

responded with resolve relocating schools, doubling down on community engagement, and leveraging support from sympathetic government officials and progressive allies in the Travancore bureaucracy.

Despite these headwinds, the mission remained resilient. Its emphasis on community support, flexibility in curriculum, and moral-spiritual pedagogy allowed it to navigate changing political, economic, and cultural landscapes. Over the decades, it evolved into not just an educational provider but a cornerstone of civil society in Kanyakumari.

### **THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF THIS RESILIENCE IS VISIBLE IN MULTIPLE WAYS:**

A literacy revolution among Dalits and OBCs

The creation of a local Christian middle class that emerged from mission schools and went on to work in teaching, healthcare, administration, and pastoral ministries

The normalization of girls' education in previously conservative and rural areas

The rise of female religious leaders who became icons of professionalism and compassion

A legacy of inclusive and participatory education, admired even by secular educational planners and NGOs

Today, Syrian Catholic institutions in Kanyakumari continue to thrive, adapting to 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges such as digital learning, interfaith engagement, and environmental education. Yet they remain grounded in their founding principles: human dignity, social justice, and educational empowerment.

### **CONCLUSION**

The history of the Syrian Catholic Mission's educational work in Kanyakumari is a compelling testament to how faith-based initiatives can effect profound social transformation. At a time when casteism, gender inequality, and illiteracy entrenched themselves deeply in the socio-political fabric of southern Travancore, the mission emerged as a redemptive force one that dared to educate the unlettered, empower the marginalized, and imagine a society based on justice, dignity, and compassion.

The enduring legacy of the Syrian Catholic educational movement in Kanyakumari can be seen today not just in school buildings or exam results, but in transformed lives. Teachers who were once orphaned students, women who became the first graduates in their village, Dalits who now serve as civic leaders all testify to a sacred vision brought to life through chalkboards, catechism, and communal care.

In an age where education is often reduced to metrics and marketability, the Syrian Catholic Mission offers a counter-narrative one where learning is intimately tied to liberation, and where the margins become the center of grace and growth. Its work in Kanyakumari remains a model of how education, when rooted in faith and justice, can become a quiet revolution one that changes not just minds, but destinies.

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