‘Onesimus to Philemon’: Runaway Slaves and Religious Conversion in Colonial ‘Kerala’, India, 1816–1855

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Abstract

Several theories emerged, based on the Christian conversion of lower caste communities in colonial India. The social and economic aspects predominate the study of religious conversion among the lower castes in Kerala. Most of these studies only explored the lower caste conversion after the legal abolition of slavery in Kerala (1855). The existing literature followed the mass movement phenomena. These studies ignore the slave lifeworld and conversion history before the abolition period, and they argued, through religious conversion, the former slave castes began breaking social and caste hierarchy with the help of Protestant Christianity. The dominant Dalit Christian historiography does not open the complexity of slave Christian past. Against this background, this paper explores the history of slave caste conversion before the abolition period. From the colonial period, the missionary writings bear out that the slaves were hostile to and suspicious of new religions. They accepted Christianity only cautiously. It was a conscious choice, even as many Dalits refused Christian teachings.

Keywords


Numerous studies deal with Protestant missionaries’ ‘contributions’ and their interventions in the social, economic, and religious lives of lower castes...
in nineteenth-century Kerala, India.\(^1\) Many of the early investigations and some recent ones argue that passion for material benefits and the acquisition of new traditions drew lower castes towards Christianity.\(^2\) In other words, through conversion, lower castes began breaking social hierarchy, aided by European evangelical movements. Another group of scholars was more interested in religious belief’s experiential realm that brought lower castes closer to Christianity.\(^3\) Sanal Mohan analyses the experiential aspects of Dalit conversion, lower caste religious aspirations, and the emergence of Christian notions by critically engaging with missionary writings. However, most of these studies have used British Anglican protestant missionary sources. Consequently, these approaches have severe constraints since they often follow the extolling narratives of protestant missionaries uncritically. The existing studies developed and discussed the Dalit Christian life only when conversion became a mass movement after the legal abolition of slavery in Kerala (1855). This article intends to explore the history of protestant Christian work among the runaway Pulaya slaves before the legal abolition of ‘slavery’ in Kerala. The history of slave conversion raises some fundamental questions regarding the material benefit or rice Christian theory of South Asian historiography.

**Christianity and Slavery**

Pre-colonial Kerala society was organized based on caste in a hierarchical order ranging from the sacred to the Untouchable, from the Brahmin to the Pulaya. Sociologists already noted that Kerala’s caste hierarchy and practices were entirely different from other parts of India. Syrian Christians and Muslims hold comparatively a high position in the Kerala society. Though mainly traders and small-scale farmers, these two caste groups follow polluting occupation like

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dealing in fish, toddy, leather meat, etc. They also eat beef, considered highly polluting. As far as the ritual is concerned, they should be ranked along with the Pulayas and Parayas, as they eat meat and follow several untouchable occupations.\textsuperscript{4} However, these two groups were not considered polluting castes. Christians were traditionally identified as a caste among several other castes in Kerala and recognized within the caste hierarchy.\textsuperscript{5} Syrian Christians claimed to be Brahmin converts from the time of St Thomas, an apostle of Jesus Christ. He is believed to have visited Kerala in the first century C.E. At the same time, many scholars challenged these beliefs and claims based on archival records, which put the history of early Christian settlements in Kerala only in the ninth century C.E.\textsuperscript{6}

Slave trade was an essential feature of Kerala society. Many documents throw light on the transactions of slaves as commodities.\textsuperscript{7} These slaves belonged to the agrestic slave castes of Kerala such as Pulaya and Paraya. These castes are referred to as Dalits in contemporary political parlance. The transaction of a Pulaya was a legally established relationship involving several mechanisms and institutions. With the arrival of the Portuguese (1498) and the Dutch (1603), slave trading networks got strengthened in Kerala, as they also exported and imported slaves. Although caste slavery existed before these colonial powers, they transformed and reshaped its existing forms through the slave trade. The upliftment of the untouchable lower caste persons to the status of domestic slaves and linking caste slavery/ Kerala slavery to Indian Ocean slave networks are the critical structural shifts during this early modern period. Conversion of slave castes was an important consequence of the Portuguese era when many domestic slaves were baptized with Portuguese names.\textsuperscript{8} The church historian Joseph Thekkedath observes that many Pulayas were baptized in the Latin Church of Pallurthy in 1571 (present-day Ernakulam district in Central Kerala) by the Portuguese. When these ‘converts’ entered the church, they were

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provided separate Holy mass on Saturdays, since Syrian Christians objected to celebrating Holy mass with them on Sundays. Pulaya Christian children went separately for evening catechisms, while Syrian Christian children went in the morning. Even feasts were celebrated on different days as slave converts celebrated Christmas on 26 December.9

Syrian Christians were major slaveholders and agents of the Portuguese and Dutch in Kerala, and recent studies show how slaves in Cochin were mostly sold by Syrian Christians, as part of their alignment with Dutch East India Company officers.10 Francis Day noted that Cochin Christian church buildings often acted as slave godowns or warehouses in the Dutch period and on extraordinary emergencies. When not required for religious purposes, these buildings were used in the weekdays to keep lower caste slaves.11 According to Kerala sources, church buildings played an essential role in the sale of slaves as the public auction of slaves was also often conducted in churches.12 Sources claim that Syrian Christians had a minimal role in spreading the gospel among the lower-castes as they maintained a strict caste hierarchy, exploited, and oppressed lower castes. In fact, only by the nineteenth century, British Protestant missionaries, who were pioneers of the lower-caste conversion movement in Kerala began to consider the slave castes as human beings endowed with dignity. With the arrival of nineteenth-century Protestant missions, the slave castes in Kerala began embracing Christianity and are called Dalit Christians today.

Missionary Movements Among Slaves

After India's independence, the three administrative units of Malabar district of Madras Presidency in the north, the princely states of Cochin in the south, and Travancore in the south of Cochin were joined together to form the State of Kerala. Travancore was the first among the princely states in British India

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to receive Protestant missionaries. The London Missionary Society (LMS) was the first Protestant mission in Kerala. William Tobias Ringeltaube was its founder, and he started his work in 1806. The Church Mission Society (CMS) was the other prominent mission in colonial Kerala. This article mainly focuses on the CMS missionaries who worked in Travancore. CMS mission was established with a specific aim to spread Protestant Christianity among the Syrian Christian community in Travancore and Cochin. Their objective was to start a pure ‘English’ mission among Syrian Christians. The process of sending Protestant Mission to Kerala began when in 1806 Claudius Buchanan (1776–1815), a Chaplin of the East India Company who knew the Syrians’ religious practices in Kerala pleaded before the CMS to send a ‘Mission of Help’ to the Syrian church. In his book *Christian Researches* (1812), Buchanan gives a vivid account of his visit to native state Travancore in 1806 and writes enthusiastically of the Syrian Christians and their comparative freedom from error. He narrates a visit he paid to Travancore to inquire into the condition of the ancient Syrian Church there. John Munro (1778–1858), the British Resident in Travancore from 1810, was mainly responsible for the commencement of the Church Missionary Society’s Travancore work. This Evangelical Resident believed that there had to be a revival of the Jacobite Syrian Christians in Travancore. He wanted to help the Syrian Christians in various ways. He tried to establish a Syrian college in Kottayam for which he sent a request to Travancore Queen. Following Resident’s recommendations, Queen Parvathi Bhai of Travancore gave orders to the Tahsildar to donate a land of six *dandu* (about 15 acres) in Kottayam, in a venue chosen by the Syrian leader (Ramban). The land-donation of the Queen was received in 1815. One hundred Pulaya slaves were also given to do manual labour. In response to John Munro’s request, the Madras Corresponding Committee decided to send missionaries to Travancore. The Resident believed that the Syrian Christians in native states needed reform, and he requested Thomas Norton, the first Englishman who was trained as a Church missionary, to join him. Norton accepted Munro’s offer in 1816 and commenced missionary

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work in Travancore and Cochin, exclusively for Syrian Christians. In its early decades, CMS missionaries worked among Jacobite Syrian Christians and tried to convert them to Protestantism. In the same year 1816, Travancore Rani sanctioned the erection of a CMS church at Alappuzha, and she donated, free of all charges. Gradually, few other missionaries arrived in Travancore, and all of them actively worked among the Syrians, and they built churches and schools for this community. But these initial cordial relationships between the Syrian Christians and the missionaries eventually became strained and by 1836 conflicts between them reached an impasse, where no reform was possible. This led to their separation. Anglican missionaries broke ties with Syrian Christians in 1836. In the same year, CMS missionaries called a synod for solving this issue. After the meeting, the Jacobite Christians passed a resolution, “we, being the Jacobite Syrians, subject to the Patriarch of Antioch, and observing the church rites and rules established by the prelates sent by his command, cannot, therefore, deviate from them, and as no one possesses the authority to preach and teach the doctrine of our religion in the church of another without the sanction of their respective patriarchs, we cannot permit the same.” No reform having been possible, a separation became a reality. From that time onwards, the Church Missionary Society began to make converts from the lower caste people. This decision changed the entire Christian history of Travancore.

Early Slave Conversions in Kerala

Church Mission Historian W. S. Hunt noted that a joint letter from Benjamin Baily, H Baker senior and Joseph Fenn was sent to London in 1818. This is the first reference to slaves in Travancore CMS documents. The letter said: “[T]hey (slaves) are now in a forlorn condition, regarded rather as brute beasts than as human beings. When they grow old, their masters discard them, and they subsist by begging and pilfering. Should any plans for their melioration be adopted and we can be of any assistance it will afford us great pleasure.” The first batch of CMS missionaries (1816–1825) already started some work among

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the slave caste people in Travancore and Cochin. They started village schools in different parts of Kottayam, even though only very few slave caste children joined them. This social change led to conflict with slave owners and government officials. The upper castes opposed the entry of slave caste children into schools. For instance, the report of Henry Baker Sr., on 14 July 1845 read: “The schools are going on well. The school for slave children is an exception. The owners of the slaves are much opposed to having them taught and are constantly calling them away to their work and sometimes beating them.”

In the meantime, a few slave castes eagerly turned to the Christian missionaries for help and wanted to receive Christian faith and education. This was least surprising in the context of slave conversion history wherein their thirst for new faith is evident.

CMS missionary Sarah Tucker provides a piece of interesting information on a Pulaya woman and her enthusiasm for the new faith. In 1827, the first slave caste woman was baptized at Cochin. Her name was Kalee and was christened as Lucy. Sarah Tucker writes:

Kalee, a slave of the lowest caste, whose freedom had been purchased by a European gentleman, who was about to proceed with his family to Java, whither Kalee was to accompany them. To fit her for service she was instructed in needle-work and household duties, but just before the family left Cochin she ran away, and nothing was heard of her for many months. One Sunday, as Mr. and Mrs. Ridsdale [CMS Missionaries in Cochin] were returning from Church, they saw a large black ill-looking figure, with only a few rags for covering, sitting on the steps of the verandah, and recognized the lost Kalee. She earnestly begged to be taken into the compound, but there was something so forbidding in her whole appearance, that for a moment they paused, till other thoughts prevailed, and they admitted her. Ridsdale began his usual course of instruction with her, but it was long before any signs of improvement appeared; at last, the light dawned upon her soul, her heart was subdued to God, and it would have been difficult to trace the miserable, sullen, scarcely clothed Kalee in the humble, patient Lucy, as in her clean white dress she would sit on the floor listening with fixed attention to every word that fell from the lips of her much-loved pastor. She became a regular communicant, and for several years continued to grow in grace, but her health declined, and

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22 Hunt, The Anglican Church, p.57.
after a lingering illness, she fell asleep in that Savior who had become so precious to her soul.\(^{23}\)

Kalee’s baptism was the beginning. Mission reports give other instances of slave caste women’s conversion in the Cochin area. In 1850, CMS missionary Henry Harley reported that certain families of Pulaya slaves were under instruction at Moolicherry, near Chavakkad in Thrissur. H. Harley says, “in 1850, 14 March-I [Harley] have intimated that we have been endeavouring to get the slaves under Christian instruction at Moolicherry. The greater portion of the slaves belonging to Brahmans and Nairs, from whom a member of our congregation, named Devasy, has hired several for work. Konan, the man who is employed in instructing them has had some difficulty, as they are daily employed in work, and even the children go out with their parents. He, however, collects as many as he is able daily, and instructs them.”\(^{24}\)

Missionaries faced several difficulties in bringing the slaves under instruction as the owners were opposed to it.\(^{25}\) In 1850 in Thrissur, twenty-four Ezhavas and one slave woman named Kurumba were baptized, and Kurumba adopted the name, Ruth. Her baptism excited a good deal of interest, as she was the first slave baptized in Thrissur. Her husband died of smallpox before he was baptized.\(^{26}\) Available evidence suggests that these two Dalit Christian women Lucy and Ruth were the pioneers of the Dalit conversion to Christianity in Kerala. The early slave converts faced many problems from their landlords. From the missionary reports, we understand that slave masters did not welcome slave caste conversion, and the landlords cruelly treated the converted slaves.

Gospel-communication among slaves introduced the new hope for the future and promised them a Christian life. Preaching among them awakened their spirit, and they shifted their thoughts away from the muddy paddy fields to the sacred churches. The male-dominated narratives of faith is something very striking. Although women played a crucial role in the slave congregations, unfortunately, not much has been written about them. This situation forces us to examine the way slave women were excluded from the archives. The accounts in missionary journals provide us a somewhat filtered view of the Dalit women’s lives and histories. Most missionary reports give a narrow view


of Dalit Christian women’s life. Historians have not yet explored the proselytization among the runaway slaves.

**Christianity Among the Runaway slaves**

The high castes’ opposition and cruelties towards the slave castes and low castes were ruthless and brutal. The slave caste people faced all kinds of physical and mental torture, forcing them to run away from oppressive landlords to save their lives. Running away from cruel landlords has been noted in other historical contexts as a mode of resistance. Social scientists have noted that running away was an activity of liberation by the slave, enabling them to imagine a new social world and life in freedom. It was also a form of protest against slavery. It was a weapon of a weaker section.\(^{27}\) In the ethnographic writings of British administrative officers and protestant missionaries in colonial Kerala, it was noted that most of the runaway slaves were either unwilling or unable to tolerate the excessive cruelties which landlords inflicted on them. Many found refuge in faraway places where they could labour in relative independence. The agrestic slaves tried to run away from cruel landlords and rigid caste structures. Many found refuge in the eastern hilly areas of Travancore such as Mundakayam (Now Kottayam District).\(^{28}\) The CMS Missionary Henry Baker Junior (1819–1878) was the founder of the runaway Pulaya slave mission in Travancore. Baker was an active missionary in Travancore (1843–78), and was popularly known as the Apostle of Hill tribes.

In 1848, during one of his missionary tours, Henry Baker Junior met a few Hill Arrians [tribes] in Travancore. After a few weeks, five hill Arrians visited his Bungalow in Pallam, near Kottayam.

> There were five men, from as many different hills, begging me to go and open schools among them. Again and again did they come on this errand, but I hesitated to go so far, as I had several new but increasing congregations. There was no road through 45 miles of jungle. “Five times,” said they, “have we been to call you. You must know we know nothing right; will you teach us or not? We die like beasts, and are buried like dogs; ought you to neglect us?” “Cholera and fever,” said another, “carried off


such and such members of my family; where are they now?” They stated that they “wanted no pecuniary help, as they had plenty of rice.” They offered to make over their lands as a proof of sincerity, and waited about, determined to have me in their hills; so I promised to meet them the next week, on the banks of a river...²⁹

Finally, in 1849, Baker promised to meet them in the following week on the banks of a river about thirty miles away. Baker Jr and his younger brother Alfred George Baker decided to make their first rendezvous with the Arians, and they started their journey to the forest.³⁰ They waited on the banks of the river for Arrians. That was a wonderful place, which Baker named ‘Mundakayam’ meaning ‘Heron’s pool’. The name is derived from a pool in the beautiful river which flowed close by.³¹ After they visited the hill tribe settlements, they started their mission work. In 1849 Baker Jr spent two weeks of every alternate month among the hill tribes. On his journeys to the hills, Baker understood that several runaway Pulaya slaves were living in this forest.

One day, while passing along an elephant track on the side of a mountain, Baker observed a thin column of smoke rising among the rocks. Baker and his group silently approached, not quite knowing what they might find, rather expecting to come upon smugglers. They were surprised to see a tiny hut hidden in a cleft of a granite rock with four emaciated beings beside it, two men clad in pieces of bark beaten into a matted substance and two women with no covering except a fringe of green twigs around their waists. They had been there for months, living on honey, roots, and wild fruits.³² Baker also wrote about other runaway groups, (Monday, 14 October 1850) – ‘Had a visit from some runaway slaves with offerings of jungle beans and new baskets. The men wear their hair long, but the women have no clothing when in the jungles, excepting leafy twigs, though now they had scant clothes on. There are several parties of such poor escaped slaves in the jungles; they live in huts in little cultivations of paddy collecting honey and other forest produce.’³³ These narratives show that, slave caste runaway was one of the modes of resistance, and it was a common practice among the slaves in Kerala.

³⁰ Hunt, The Anglican Church, p.188.
³¹ Collins, Missionary Enterprise, p.247.
³² Hunt, The Anglican Church, p.203.
In 1850 H. Baker Jr opened a new mission station in Mundakayam. “A first-rate colonizer” was how he was referred to by Thomas G. Ragland, one of the CMS Madras corresponding secretary. At Mundakayam, he secured a large compound for the Brahmin landlord’s mission and settled many families and especially runaway slaves. Very soon there was a large congregation of hill tribes and runaway Pulaya slaves. For them, in due course, a beautiful church, 50ft by 25, was built by captain Babington of the Madras Army, a connection of the Macaulays, and one who had several links with Clapham sect. He had come up to the hills for shikar and had the missionary to accompany him on a tour through the district, the expenses for which he met. He was impressed by its missionary prospects. Many Pulaya slaves lived in high ranges of Mundakayam. Baker persuaded these families to settle at Mundakayam, where they could have the protection of the missionary. Baker wrote, in 1851 February, 

There are four slave families who have lived here three years; one of the men had been hung up over a smoky fire by a chain fastened round the ankles, the other extremity being fastened round another man’s wrists. A woman had had nettles tied over her face and bosom, while her brother was beaten till he died under the blows. Hundreds of such as these are hiding from their masters in the jungles. I once found four in a hut far up a mountain side, miles away from other habitations. They lived on wild yams, of which there are plenty to be dug out.

He found more slaves in that area. After months, the Mundakayam mission became very popular in Travancore and other regions. Mundakayam received global attention, thanks to the writings of Henry Baker. Also, the international missionary journals published the Mundakayam mission story’s and sketches. The CMS historian Eugene Stock noted, “Baker’s picture was more familiar in old CMS publications that of the hut built in a great tree, twenty-five feet from the ground, out of the reach of tigers and elephants, in which Baker lodged from time to time.”

35 Gladstone, Protestant Christianity, p.103.
36 Hunt, The Anglican Church, p.188.
37 Baker, The Hill Arrians of, p.35.
For instance, a Cover page of ‘The Church Missionary Gleaner, August 1850-
The Mission Hut in The Tree.

Baker Jr consulted his co-workers in Kottayam to get someone to work among the runaway slaves. But the native missionaries were not interested in working there and they opposed Baker’s idea. Reverend George Matthan, first CMS native missionary wrote: “Baker received special funds from his friends in England to appoint a person to go to the mountains and jungles in search of such people. He got a volunteer to do that job on a small allowance just for his food and clothing”39. Finally, the elder native mission worker Varkey [Varghese] agreed to work among the runaway slaves. Varkey Moopen [Teacher] knew the whereabouts of these fugitive slaves and he offered help to the Missionary. Varkey’s work was to hunt the slaves, talk to them, and invite them to a Bible school at Mundakayam.40 Varkey Moopen began the school with four people, and gradually the numbers increased to twenty, then to thirty. A shed of bamboo, thatched with elephant-grass, was put up. This was the ‘slave school’ for the fugitive Pulayas and they settled in Mission land.41 About eight in the morning each brought some roasted roots, jack fruit, or rice boiled and tied up in leaves for the midday meal. At the same time, some fugitive groups were not interested in joining the Christian mission. Baker himself used to take special sessions for runaway slaves after the Sunday worship service. They learned, but in three years none had come for baptism. Baker never forced slaves to baptism.42 The first little schoolroom was built with 150 rupees sent all the way from Punjab by Henry Lawrence. The first baptisms were in January 1852, when Baker had the joy of admitting seventeen whole families into the visible church of Christ. After Baker sent a letter to some friends at Stamford (England), they offered to pay a native Christian’s expenses who should go into the jungles and seek out the lost sheep.43 Within three or four years, five hundred persons were baptized from all parts of the mountain district.44 Vernacular Malayalam sources say, Mundakayam, the runaway settlement, was very popular in other parts of Travancore.

Baker Jr regularly visited Mundakayam slave settlements: “One day, one Pulaya man, who was caught by his master and carried off about three weeks

41 Hunt, The Anglican Church, p.203.
ago, under a promise of good treatment, had been most unmercifully beaten, and chained by the leg to a tree for several days and nights. Someone released him, on which he again escaped to the jungles all covered with sores. Baker notes further, “The slave-school continues; many come from distances of eight or ten miles bringing their food with them and remain all the Sunday in the school-shed. A persecution had arisen against those slaves at Mallapalli [central Travancore] who were learning in the schools. Twenty of them fled to us, and resided in jungle cultivation, about a mile and a half from Mundakayam.” During that time Baker and other European missionaries became icons among the slave caste people. Missionary movement gradually spread further among the lower caste people.

During that period, missionaries and slave Christians also faced a lot of problems. Many people were troubled, especially the upper caste and former landlords. Some were beaten and cruelly punished. Christian instruction had an impact on them. Several had their eyes opened to see the value of Jesus as a saviour and a friend. They wished to be baptized and were admitted into the Christian church. However, “Many of them became troubled in their conscience, thinking that they were bound to return to the masters from whom they had run away, for they remembered how Paul sent back Onesimus to Philemon.” Some of them soon returned having been severely beaten by their masters; but others remained and helped to lead their fellow slaves in the lowlands.

In contemporary anthropology, the disciplinary power of the notion of sin has received scholarly attention. Sanal Mohan argued in the context of slave caste conversion in Travancore, “the notions of sin and repentance were instrumental in changing the social conduct of slave castes. These notions required transformation of the self.” The extant literature does not seriously explore the inner transformation. Also, this history is just the opposite of material benefit theory of Dalit conversion. The new social conduct emerging from these transformations made the slave castes who experienced them actively engage with the new public sphere where contests over social equality took place. Simultaneously, CMS missionaries started systematic evangelization

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47 Onesimus appears in two New Testament epistles (Philemon and Colossians 4:9). Onesimus was a runaway slave, and he converted to Christianity by the teachings of Paul.
among the slave caste people. Gradually slave caste conversions became a mass movement.

A Mass Movement

The history of slave conversion in central Kerala is closely linked to T. G. Ragland’s visit, the Madras corresponding secretary. In 1850, at Mallapally, he saw the hardships of agrestic Pulayas in the paddy fields. He even witnessed a Pulaya slave unequally yoked with an ox pulling a plough.51 It was a common punishment practice among the Travancore landlords. Missionary ethnographic data give more details about this kind of practices. Even women slaves were yoked with ox or buffalo.52 Ragland urged the native clergyman, George Matthan to teach the Pulaya slaves and left a sum of money for such a purpose. With this, G. Matthan began the work and was supported in this mission by the CMS missionary John Hawksworth. Systematic work among the Pulayas in Central Travancore (the Church Missionary Society’s region) began under Ragland’s inspiration.53 As a first step, G. Matthan and John Hawksworth wrote a few articles in missionary journals. They wrote about the horrors and the sufferings of Kerala slavery. Other missionaries were joined the writing circle. As a result, gradually, the system of Kerala slavery came to be known globally. For instance, in 1852, George Matthan’s one of his articles says,

5 December 1850- In the course of my visits to the people I met with some slaves. The condition of these unhappy beings is, I think, without a parallel in the whole range of history. They are regarded as so unclean, that they are thought to convey pollution to their fellow-creatures, not only by contact, but even by approach. They are so wretchedly provided with the necessaries of life that the most loathsome things are a treat to them. Their persons are entirely at the disposal of their masters, by whom they are bought and sold like cattle, and are often worse treated. The owners had formerly power to flog and enchain them, and in some case to maim

52 For instance, Lady missionary Maria Mitchell’s ethnographic work says one of the London Mission Native workers told her he had seen a woman and a buffalo yoked together in a plough with his own eyes. He also saw two women tied together by their hair and then thrashed with thorns. Maria Hay Flyter Mitchell, *In Southern India. A Visit to Some of the Chief Mission Stations in the Madras Presidency* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1885), p. 218.
them, or even to deprive them of their lives. The slaves form a great proportion of the population of this country, being probably one-sixth of the whole.54

Missionary ethnographic notes of central Travancore says that the slaves faced many problems. Horrid instances of cruelty have occurred, the oppressed slaves had their arms and legs broken, and have been left to die; others have had their eyes put out, and have been left to wander in darkness all their days.55 Their situation was similar to that of the lepers mentioned in the Scripture. They were not allowed the use of public roads. If they bumped into a road, they were to cry out “jow” “jow”. Everyone would know that it was the cry of a slave or polluted being and the response would be “go” “go”. The poor creatures were obliged to run abandoning their journey and go back and find an exit from the road speedily. Generally, they got into a filed, ditch, or jungle, so that they were far enough and would be able to hide themselves.56 Such being the situation, the missionaries turned their attention to slave caste people.

G Matthan opened a school for slaves in Kaipatta, near Mallappally. John Hawksworth was the Missionary in charge, and nobly seconded him. Some Syrian Christian landlords allowed their slaves to attend the mission school.57 School rooms were simply made of mud walls, bamboo poles and cocoanut leaves for roof.58 The advantage of these mud and thatched schools is that they were cheap and the school could be easily shifted and reconstructed, depending on the movement of the people. Besides, these schools were cool and clean.59 (See figure 1 and 2). The first baptisms took place in September 1854, under torrential rains. On 8 September 1854, Habel, a slave originally bearing the name Thaivathan embraced Christianity under the Church Missionary Society’s tutelage. Two families, consisting of eight persons were baptized—after four years of instruction. Others desired baptism, but caution was necessary. Missionary journals glorify this incident. Very soon, baptism of Habel grew into a ‘mass movement’.

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55 H, A, *Day dawn in Travancore; a brief account of the manners and customs of the people and the efforts that are being made for their improvement* (Kottayam: CM Press, 1860), p.71.
59 Miss Baker, Pulayars of Travancore South India, *CMS Awake!*, July (1898), 81–82 at 81.
figure 1 A slave church

figure 2 A slave Church
This was the typical model of slave churches. The Figure 1, *A Slave Church in the Rice Fields, Travancore*. It was based on the model of Velloor Dalit Congregation, near Kottayam.60 Figure 2 shows a Dalit church in Thamaral near Thiruwalla.61

In 1854, two other slave schools were also opened for Mallapally slaves. The Pulaya slaves who learned in these schools began to teach their own people about Christianity. At the same time, there was bitter opposition to the conversion of the Pulaya slaves by the upper caste Hindus and the upper caste Syrian Christians. Ridicule, persecution and contempt were, tried, to stop the progress of the mission work. The slave schools were burnt down, and those who attended were beaten up repeatedly. In Mallapally, one Pulaya woman was beaten up for allowing her son to attend school, and when that had no effect, the boy was taken away forcibly, by his Syrian Christian master. The slave mother went to enquire after him and was beaten again. Her husband hearing her cries, went to see what was happening when the cruel master attacked him so unmercifully that he could not rise up.62

Missionaries reported several such cruel treatments the slave caste people suffered. In Mallapally, the first slave school in which some were baptized was set fire to and burnt down twice within a day or two. The second time when the slaves assembled for their regular Christian worship, they stood amidst ashes. They said that it was there that they found Jesus and hence would continue to worship him in the very same place.63 Mallapally conversion movement was an important page in the history of Travancore CMS mission because the Systematic work among the Pulayas began from there. Gradually, the baptism of Mallapally slaves grew into a ‘mass movement.’ The Church Missionary Society in central Travancore, by the turn of the twentieth century, had more than 39,000 Dalit Christians, more than half of the total membership of the Church Missionary Society.

Conclusion

This study covered the period from the early decades of the nineteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, until the abolition of caste slavery in what

is now referred to as the state of Kerala. More precisely, this paper reaches up to the time when the celebrated convert to Christianity, Kaippatta Habel, embraced Christianity in 1854, which also marked the beginning of slave caste conversion in Travancore. The religious conversion of slave caste was a systematic movement. The day-to-day experience of the Dalits in Kerala who began to embrace Christianity from the middle of the nineteenth century was one of dehumanization, despite their intense desire for liberation from the shackles of caste and oppressive hierarchies. The fact that the Dalits were carrying the burden of a slave past made them vulnerable to domination in their social and religious lives. Missionary historical records show how in spite of undergoing persecutions and suffering in their life, the Dalits who joined the missions and embraced Christianity absorbed the notions of equality, self-esteem, and self-confidence. On the other hand, local vernacular writings from the colonial period demonstrate that slaves were often hostile to and suspicious of the new religion preached to them. They did attend Bible classes and studied the gospels. However, they accepted Christianity only cautiously, and even so, many of the Dalit converts did not accept Christian teachings. Missionaries on their part did not administer baptism indiscriminately, but only for those who were well-prepared for it. In general, the existing literature does not address the history of the Dalits who refused Christianity even after the missionary teachings.

Slave conversion was a complex phenomenon. Striking is the freedom the slaves exercised either to join or not to join the missionary movement. The history of slave conversion played a crucial role in the legal abolition of slavery and its debates. The slavery in Travancore and Cochin was brought to the world's attention by the nineteenth-century Protestant Christian missionaries. The LMS and CMS missionary workers are the only group reporting from Travancore and Cochin region, and they were very instrumental in globalizing the knowledge about the condition of local slavery and slave trade. They published some articles in English newspapers and evangelical journals. The mission workers opposition eventually led to the slavery abolition law in Travancore and Cochin. A certain amount of paternalism is apparently at work

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64 Mohan, Modernity of Slavery.
when we analyze the protestant missionary interaction with the slave caste, which contrasts with the oppression, humiliation and violence they suffered under their Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords. It is striking that even under such hugely oppressive conditions of caste slavery, we do not assist at any slave rebellion. Available historical sources do not report any such rebellion to have taken place. Further researches could throw more light on the conversion of slave caste. They may help us eventually understand certain interstitial spaces and ambivalences between the missionaries and slaves of that period. Finally, the early converts’ new lifestyle of faith was one reason for the mass conversion movement in Kerala.

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