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**ICM**  
INDIA CENTRE  
FOR MIGRATION

# **Gulf Migration, Social Remittances and Religion**

## **The Changing dynamics of Kerala Christians**

**Ginu Zacharia Oommen**

**Report**  
**Senior Fellowship Programme**  
**2015**

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**India Centre for Migration**

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The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) set up the India Centre for Migration in 2008 with Cabinet approval as a 'not for profit' society, which serves as a research think-tank to the Ministry of External Affairs, Govt. of India, on all matters relating to 'International Migration'. The Centre is currently located in Akbar Bhavan, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi. The Centre undertakes empirical, analytical and policy related research, and projects to document good practices, to support informed policy making and enable strategic interventions for a coherent and harmonised response to the transnational movement of people from India.

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## Executive Summary

The article has discussed the changing dynamics of Christianity in Kerala while discussing the case of return Syrian Christian community from Gulf countries. The article has discussed the changing religious practices, doctrines and rituals of return migrants of Syrian Christians from GCC countries to Kerala. It is an empirical research based on field work conducted both in Kuwait and Kerala.

The Syrian Christian community constituted 18.6 % of the population of total population of Kerala. It comprises of different denominations like Syro-Malabar, Malankara Catholics, Jacobites, Orthodox Syrian Church, Marthomites, Caldhaites, Cannanites and Protestant Syrians. Earlier, the community was concentrated in and around 5 or 6 districts of Kerala. However, due to the high rate of education, occupational diversification, few local job opportunities in the community, the Syrian Christians have migrated to other states in India and also abroad.

The circular migration to the Gulf countries has strengthened the connectivity of the migrants with the home society and thus resulted tremendous changes in the practices and nature of the home society as well as religious institutions. The researcher found that the migration and remittance does have a significant impact on the religious practices of the Syrian Christians in Kerala.

### Observations:

- The article has analyzed the migration-centered religious reorientation of Kerala Syrian Christians which has inducing commodification of religion, assertion of communal identity, proliferation of radical religious groups, rise of 'Prosperity Gospel' and the emergence of new forms of worship in the Syrian Christian community.
- At present, the Syrian Christians have been using religion as a strategic platform to transform the economic capital earned from migration to achieve social prestige, status and legitimacy in the home society. They are also trying to maintain links with Kerala as well as an easier-entry to the Syria.
- In general, a vast majority of migrants to the Gulf were mostly middle-class or poor. A significant proportion of remittances from Kerala have been invested in cultural aspects namely, marriages, education, churches etc.
- Mainly, the rituals and death ceremonies are commoditized and objectified with the increasing family earning and wealth. A large share of money has been spent on religious ceremonies, marriages, death anniversaries, marriage among the Christian immigrants. It brings social prestige and admiration of the family in the local social setting.
- The religious practices are becoming liberal from the influence of the American Evangelical ideas. The traditional, oriental and hierarchical nature of the Syrian churches has been replaced with loosely knitted 'neo-Pentecostalism' and 'commercial Christianity'.
- Some of the religious concepts such as Tithe, Tele Evangelists, Gospel Channels, Prayer and Worship, Holy land (Israel) pilgrimage, notion of 'Biblical Israel' which were originated in American evangelical theology. These are very popular among Syrian Christians in Kerala. Interestingly, the American Evangelical ideas have been popularized in Kerala by the influence of Gulf migrants.
- The pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine is another significant aspect which is widely prevalent among Syrian Christian immigrants. Currently, pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine (holy land) is extremely popular and thousands of believers from Kerala are undertaking a pilgrimage to Israel every year to visit holy sites. Every year almost all the churches in GCC states organize a Pilgrimage via Jordan to the Holy Land especially during the summer vacations.
- Tithe is an Old Testament conception of contributing one tenth of one's income to poor and needy. It was not popularized earlier but recently it popularized among the Syrian Christians migrants as a mark of thanks giving for economic success. It enhanced the annual income of the Church had increased 300 times in the last three decades.
- The Syrian Christians have been firmly following rules and practices of Christianity in Kerala. However, the socialist-communist legacy of Kerala has a significant impact on the Christian community. Additionally, the Church hierarchy particularly Catholics were at loggerheads with the Communist parties. Many Bishops and clergies openly supported the Marxian ideas and the Liberation theology had immense influence among the Church leadership.

# Gulf Migration, Social Remittances and Religion

## The Changing Dynamics of Kerala Christians

**Ginu Zacharia Oommen**

### Introduction

The religious topography of Kerala, southern state of India, is quite unique. Muslims and Christians together constitute nearly 40 percent of the total population, which is a rather different demographic pattern from the rest of India. Along with the social changes, by the beginning of 20th century, the newly introduced colonial economy prompted Keralites to migrate to plantations in Sri Lanka, Singapore, and Malaysia (Malaya) as clerks and coolies.

The discovery of oil in Gulf countries and the subsequent oil boom in 1970s generated a huge wave of migration from Kerala. Currently the state of Kerala sends the largest volume of immigrants to the Gulf countries. The 'Gulf migration' provided a new lease of life for the otherwise poor employment situation in the state, and at present nearly 2.28 million Keralites are working in different Gulf countries. As a result of migration, Kerala has witnessed a series of diverse economic and social changes including among others, a money order depended economy.

The circular nature of the Gulf migrants has significantly influenced the class structure, social hierarchy, worship patterns, family structure and above all religion and religiosity in Kerala. Though several previous studies have examined the economic consequences of migration and remittances in Kerala, no attempt has been made so far to explore how migratory movements and remittances affected religion and religious practices in Kerala thus leading to a subsequent social transformation. Consistent with many post-colonial trans-feudal societies religion in Kerala provided a clear avenue for the newly rich migrants from Gulf to establish their legitimacy and position in the social order as well as a medium of re-entry for the erstwhile upper classes. This on the one hand, contributed to larger investments in churches/mosques/temples and religious establishments across Kerala, largely funded by migrants and Gulf based associations; and on the other, to the prevalence of new and ostentatious religious practices, doctrines and rituals.<sup>1</sup>

The broad question that this study attempts to investigate is: whether the reorientation of Syrian Christian immigrants lives in the host country (Gulf countries) and the newly created wealth there has brought about any major change in the lives and practices of Christians back home (in Kerala). The broad question that this study investigates is whether migration –centered religious reorientation of Kerala Christians is abetting commodification of religion, assertion of communal identity, proliferation of radical religious groups, rise of 'Prosperity Gospel' /Tele Evangelists and the emergence of new forms of worship in the Christian commu-

nity.

This is an empirical study based on the field research in Kuwait and Kerala. The field research was conducted at Abassiya, the Indian settlement in Kuwait from December, 2009 through January, 2010 and at the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala during June 2015. Pathanamthitta district is one of the prosperous 'Gulf pockets' in Kerala with sizeable Syrian Christian population and the first wave of migration to Malaya and Singapore in 1900 was from the outskirts of Pathanamthitta. The main methods of documentation were through detailed interviews of immigrants and observances at various cultural performances and festivities.

During the field work, in-depth interviews nearly 70 immigrants in Kuwait, along with professionals, Indian journalists, community leaders, priests and academicians of the Kuwait University, were conducted with help of a detailed interview schedule. Moreover nearly 60 respondents were interviewed at Pathanamthitta alongside academicians, theologians, Bishops, clergies, journalists, local politicians, community leaders and so on. A convenient sampling was followed in the study whereby the informants were selected through the links established within the community. The key persons of each parish helped to identify the possible respondents.

In Pathanamthitta I had interviewed nearly 70 people, particularly the return migrants who are very active in the Parish affairs. I had in-depth discussions with Bishops, clergies, theologians, and pastors of the charismatic/new generation Churches. My participation in the services of different parishes especially the newly build churches helps me to understand the internal intricacies. The author's close association with the vicars of various Christian denominations, Kerala Associations and Clubs further helped in conducting the research more thoroughly. Moreover, the author had the opportunity to attend various social gatherings like marriages, baptism, Christmas carols, feasts, processions, funerals and other church celebrations, that provided an opportunity to interact and get responses from people outside of the subject list. This undoubtedly helped to understand the internal dynamics of the community.

This study deals with the Syrian Christian denominations- Siro-Malabar, Syrian Orthodox, Malankara Catholic, Syrian Marthomite and Syrian Jacobite as these denominations were the pioneers of migration. Though the Latin Catholics could be included in this study but their social and historical formation is quite different from the rest of the non-Catholic Syrian denominations. In brief, this study is mainly focuses on the Eastern Syrian non-Catholic denominations in Kerala.

For the purposes of this paper, the names of the respondents have been changed to hide the real identity.

## Migration and Changing Dynamics of Kerala Society

Subsequent to the oil-price boom in the Gulf countries in 1973-74 the large-scale infrastructural and economic development projects were planned and initiated which included creation of amenities like schools, hospitals, houses, improvement of transport and communication etc. These programmes created a spurt in demand for not only highly skilled technical experts but also for semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Therefore, the major outflow of Indian migrant workers and other personnel during the past four decades or so has been to the Gulf countries where about 5.5 million.<sup>ii</sup> The maximum number of Indian workers is in Saudi Arabia. Other major employers of Indian workers are the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. The Gulf migrants are the transitory migrants as stringent residency and citizenship laws as well as the contractual nature of their work forbid them from settling permanently in the GCC countries.

The state of Kerala sends the largest number of migrant workers to the GCC countries -nearly 2.28 million. In addition Gulf remittances also constitute a major share of the annual GDP of Kerala and in 2013 Kerala received nearly INR 60,000 crores in the form of remittances.<sup>iii</sup> Due to the large scale migration and remittances flow, a commoditized economy and conspicuous consumption practices have developed as integral features of Kerala's society. Remittances are spent on daily household consumption, consumer durables, construction, repair of building, acquisition of lands, education and religious ceremonies.<sup>iv</sup>

Year	Remittances (Rs in Crores)
1991	3025
1992	3882
1993	6084
1994	7069
1995	9521
1996	10,761
1997	10,817
1998	13,692
1999	14,438
2000	15,732
2001	17,362
2002	18,465
2003	19,797
2004	21,251
2005	22,828
2006	24,526
2007	30,122
2008	43,288
2011	49,950
2012	60,000
2013(January-August)	75,000

### Estimated Remittances flow to Kerala, 1991-2013

**K C Zacharia and IrudayaRajan, Migration Monitoring Study, 2012**

Migration and remittances are twin pillars which supported the sustenance of much acclaimed 'Kerala Model'. The CDS survey shows that out of the total emi-

grants, in 2007 nearly 89 percent emigrated to GCC countries and around 5.7 percent moved to USA and Europe.<sup>v</sup> The CDS survey further explores that around 18 percent of Kerala households send minimum one emigrant abroad and 26.5 percent had either an emigrant or return emigrant. In 2008 INR 16,493 crores was received by Hindu households, Rs. 7,800 crores was received by Christian households and Rs. 19,000 crores was received by Muslim households.<sup>vi</sup> The district wise data suggests that the Muslim dominated Malappuram district sends largest contingent of migrants, particularly to GCC region and also receives highest amount of remittances.

K C Zacharia writes that Kerala's household characterised by a wide range of consumer goods and high consumption levels. Foreign goods have become wide spread and are deemed as a necessity to maintain basic status in the society<sup>vii</sup>. There is a general argument that Kerala society has shifted its orientation to consumerism as a result of Gulf migration. Importantly Kerala's social and cultural landscape is highly influenced by migratory process and remittances.

CDS data narrates that a substantial amount of remittances have been channelized by the families of emigrants to buy lands and also to build luxury/dream houses in Kerala. Since 1980s the remittances and migration have had a huge influence in the socio-cultural and political dynamics of Kerala. A consumerist culture with different shades of 'new richness' has a profound influence in the Kerala society particularly in the gulf migrant dominated areas or 'Gulf pockets'.

Since Gulf migration is both transitory and circulatory in nature its impact is strongly reflected in all spheres of the society including the religious space. The most transparent impact of migration is in the realm of religion and a new religious market is emerging in Kerala through social remittances. Though a large amount of research had been conducted on the economic consequences on Kerala's society, the socio-cultural changes associated with migration process, particularly its impact on the religious spaces has been largely untouched.

### Conceptual Framework

Contemporary migration is marked by an acceleration of the pace of interaction between the host and home setting through multiple networks. Margolis argues that "immigrants establish and maintain familial, economic, political and cultural ties across international borders, in effect making the home and host society a single arena of social action<sup>viii</sup>". The current phase of international migration has set in motion a plethora of such transnational movements. They are transnational in the sense that they refer to movements which come into being within the social intricacies and specificities of certain communities, yet are increasingly identified and appropriated outside<sup>ix</sup>. Technological advancements have further strengthened the migrants' links with the home countries on a day-to-day basis. The migrants make efforts to sustain their relations with the sending country through transnational religious practices as well<sup>x</sup>.

Religious communities simulate transnational movements which challenge the way in which we imagine religion and politics traditionally. The migrants often retain their religious beliefs and traditions through various

kinds of social and economic links with the home country<sup>xi</sup>. Although social scientists have written extensively on the role of religion in the diaspora, very little research has been done on the impact of transnational religious groups in the sending countries. *Transnational Migration and Fading States* (1997) by Rudolph and Piscatori concludes that in today's postmodern age religious communities have become vital agents in the creation of a transnational civil society<sup>xii</sup>. Immigrants lean towards religious institutions to escape the hostility and discrimination of their settings and also to achieve social recognition. Hirschman argues that for immigrants who are separated from their homeland and from many relatives, religious membership offers a refuge in the sense that it creates a sense of belonging and participation in the face of loss and the strains of adjustment<sup>xiii</sup>. Ebaugh noted that religious mobilisation also help immigrants cope with marginalization by providing fellowships, social services and leadership positions to compensate for the downward mobility many of them experience<sup>xiv</sup>.

Vertovec argues that the new rituals and religious practices reinforce the homeland ties of the immigrants<sup>xv</sup>. At the same time, newly moneyed migrants rely heavily on the religious trajectory for the strategic conversion of their economic capital into prestige and status<sup>xvi</sup>. In the case of Syrian Christian immigrants the transnational religious institutions are operating as one of the viable networks connecting sending and receiving countries. Moreover, the unique social situation in the GCC region has reshaped their religious and ritual practices and reinvigorated community/denominational centred identity.

In the host setting the transnational religious practices enhance the transformation and reshaping of identity, perception and ritual practices of immigrants. Non-acceptance and alienation of the immigrants have strengthened their quest for spiritual and religious identity. New places of worship have emerged as "community centres" to fulfil the identity-vacuum the alienated immigrants experience in these societies.

The reorientation of immigrants' lives in the host setting has a direct impact in the sending society as well. The Indian migration to Gulf countries is both transitory and circulatory in nature, which heightens the transnational activities of the immigrants and their links with the sending country. The religious restructuring and the ghettoisation of immigrants have inadvertently affected the socio-cultural realm of sending society (Kerala). The change in religiosity and religious practices were in turn influenced by the migrant experiences based on their religious beliefs in their host countries. These differential experiences made them reinvent their own religions in a transnational environment but exclusivist in spirit, in the home state of Kerala. Katy Gardner (1995) in her research highlights that the Muslim return migrants in Bangladesh engage into more orthodox, dogmatic forms of Islam which challenges saints and shrines of old order<sup>xvii</sup>. In Kerala the Gulf returnee frequently spends substantial amount of money in becoming patrons of religious activities— a culturally approved way of transforming wealth into political power and social status (Oscella, 2003)<sup>xviii</sup>. Ebaugh and Yang (2001) identified a number of immigrant congregations that kept in daily contact with their sending country through internet<sup>xix</sup>. Levit argues that the religious institutions like,

protestant groups reinforce localized transnational attachments and also encourages civic and political engagement based on religious beliefs in the home country. The migrants often retain their religious beliefs and traditions through various kinds of social and economic links with the home country<sup>xx</sup>.

Contemporary studies have mainly examined the economic consequences and impact of remittances in the sending countries, but left unnoticed the deep influence of 'Social Remittances'. Social Remittances are ideas, practices, identities and social capital that flow from host country to receiving country<sup>xxi</sup>. The socio-cultural-ideological reorientation in the lives of migrant's in the host society is directly transmitted through identifiable pathways and their source and destination are very clear. Interestingly, one of the crucial variables which stimulates the 'social remittances' is the transnational religious networks.

Hence this study argues that the socio-cultural influences from host settings would be transmitted directly to the sending society through multifarious transnational networks including the religion. The transnational religious networks play a significant role in the reorientation of the societal space in the sending society. The change in immigrants' lives and the restructuring of their beliefs has a direct impact on the religious realm in the home society as well.

### **Syrian Christians of Kerala and Migration**

The Christians, including the Syrian Christians of Kerala, constitute 18.6 per cent of the population of Kerala accounting for 6 million people<sup>xxii</sup>. Of them the Syrian Christians - one of the oldest Christian sects in the world - comprise nearly 3 million<sup>xxiii</sup>. Syrian Christians of Kerala are defined as persons born to Syrian Christian parents and who follow the "Syrian rite"<sup>xxiv</sup>. The Syrian Christians comprise different denominations like: Syro-Malabar, Malankara Catholics, Jacobites, Orthodox Syrian Church, Marthomites, Caldhaites, Cannanites and Protestant Syrians. Earlier, the community was concentrated in and around 5 or 6 districts of Kerala. But, with the high rate of education, occupational diversification, few local job opportunities in the community, Syrian Christians have migrated to other states in India and abroad.

The history of Syrian Christian migration dates back to early twentieth century when there was a massive flow of them to Southeast Asia - mainly to Singapore and Malaysia. In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century the educated and able among the Syrian Christian and Ezhava community from Central Travancore migrated to Sri Lanka, Burma and Southeast Asia as teachers and skilled labours in British owned plantations.

The migration to Southeast Asia was always unstable due to the hostile situation in East Asia region, a traditional area of emigration since colonial times. Later, in 1960s the proximity of Syrian Churches in Kerala with Ethiopian Orthodox Church has opened new avenues of migration to Ethiopia and African countries mostly as teachers, paramedics and skilled labours for Syrian Christians. Subsequently with relaxation of immigration laws in United States of America, paramedics and professionals from the Syrian denominations also emigrated to North America and Canada.

Finally, with the consolidation of oil in the Persian Gulf in 1970s Syrian Christian also joined the fellow Keralites to explore the new fortunes in West Asia. Kuwait was the first Arab Gulf country that had opened doors to the indigenous Christian community of Kerala.

In the late 1940s, a small group of members of the Marthoma Syrian Church was the first to set up worship services in the region. The Oil boom of the 1970s has accelerated further the immigration of Syrian Christians to GCC countries, which simultaneously led to the establishment of Syrian churches across the Gulf countries except Saudi Arabia.

The migration has unequivocally altered the socio-economic landscape of the Syrian Christian community and in 2003 the non-Catholic Syrians received nearly INR 3000 crores as remittances from abroad<sup>xxv</sup>. In Kerala the Christians rank second in the proportion of population that emigrated abroad and the Marthoma Syrian community has the distinction of sending the highest number of international emigrants<sup>xxvi</sup>. In 2003 of the total remittances sent to Kerala, Roman Catholic households received 9.4 %, Marthoma Syrians, 5.6%, Orthodox/Jacobite Syrians 7.0% and Church of South India and Protestants received 2.0%. Interestingly nearly 31 percentage of the Syrian Marthoma households received minimum INR 22,000 as remittances in 2004<sup>xxvii</sup>. Moreover Christians' share in the migration to United States is much higher than the other communities. In 2008 Christian households received nearly INR 7800 crores as remittances<sup>xxviii</sup>.

Interestingly maximum remittances have been received from the GCC countries. Since the late 1960s remittances from the Gulf States have been a major source of income for Syrian Churches in Kerala. It is to be noted that all the Syrian Churches have separate Gulf Diocese /Diocesan Bishops and serving in a Diaspora diocese is considered a very prestigious assignment among the clergy. The Marthoma Syrian community rank high when compared to all other communities in terms of literacy, education, migration rate, expenditure in health, ownership of land and house, remittances and so on. The path breaking prosperity and socio-economic development of the Syrian Christians is highly attributed to the unprecedented flow of remittances from the international Diaspora particularly from Gulf region.

### **The Assertion of Religion among Kerala Immigrants in the Host Setting**

Currently there are nearly 60 Malayalam Churches in the GCC countries that include both Syrian Christian and Catholic denominations, besides various neo-Pentecostal and Charismatic groups. Until the 1990s, the Church trying to woo immigrants was nothing more than a routine and low key affair. However, in the last one decade or so the role of religion has dramatically increased among Indian immigrants, especially within the Syrian Christian community.

The history of Christians in Kuwait began in the early 1900's when Reverend Dr Samuel Zwemer and Reverend Fred Barney, missionaries from the American Reformed Church of America, arrived in Kuwait in 1900. Subsequently in 1911 Kuwaiti Amir Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah granted permission to the American Reformed Church under the leadership of Dr Scudder to build a

hospital, which was finally established in 1913<sup>xxix</sup>. The Kuwait Oil Company (KOC) was established in 1934 as a partnership between Gulf oil and British Petroleum. Since the majority of staff members were Christians, the KOC built two Churches in Ahmadi in the late 1940s and up until now, the two Churches are maintained by the Kuwait Oil Company. The American hospital Chapel was later converted into a Church in the mid-1960s. Currently the NECK is located on the premises of American Medical Mission premises.

The small Arab congregation of Kuwait consists largely of Kuwaiti Christians and there are approximately 150-200 families of local Kuwaiti Christians. The first Christian family came from southeast Turkey and Iraq in the beginning of 1920s and they have been in Kuwait for over 90 years. These Kuwaiti Christians belong to the Presbyterian congregation and Rev Immanuel Gharib is the lone native pastor of Kuwait<sup>xxx</sup>.

Kuwait gained independence from Britain in 1961 and the ruling Al Sabah family has been in power since then. In the 1970s and 80s, the Kuwaiti ruling elite tried to maintain a degree of neutrality between the USSR and the USA. However, towards the end of the 1980s, Kuwait switched over completely to the United States in terms of its geo-political strategy. The Iran-Iraq War was the decisive factor in consolidating closer ties with the United States. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent intervention of the US consolidated the Kuwait- US relations to a great extent.

In the post 1990s, after the liberation of Kuwait church activities have picked up, most probably because of the discernible presence of Americans in the country. For instance, the United States Department of State's report on the religious freedom (2010) says that "the U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. Intensive monitoring of religious freedom matters remained an embassy priority. During the reporting period, embassy officials met with senior representatives from the major recognized Christian denominations, encouraged them to present their concerns in a unified manner to the Government, and advocated on their behalf in high-level meetings with government officials"<sup>xxxi</sup>.

The American intervention in Kuwait altered the social dynamics of the Arab Christian minority and also expanded the non-Islamic space in Kuwait. For instance in January 1999 the Arab Congregation in Kuwait ordained Reverend Immanuel Benjamin Ghareeb as the clergy of NECK. Though he graduated from the Presbyterian Theological seminary in 1989, he was ordained as a priest in 1999 and he was the first Kuwaiti Christian to be ordained with the support of American Episcopal Church<sup>xxxii</sup>. Secondly, in December 1999, the Bible Society established its distribution office - The Book House Company Ltd. Interestingly Kuwait was the first country to allow the Bible society to set up the office in GCC states. Currently NECK has an agreement with the Kuwaiti government to import books and gifts that relate to the Christian faith through the Book House Company Ltd. Finally, Kuwait was notably the first member of the Gulf Cooperation Council to maintain diplomatic ties with the Vatican State. But in 2001 Apostolic Nunciature was upgraded from charge d'affaires to full ambassadorial status to represent Vatican's interest in the region.



Currently, the American Revival Church or the Light House Church is a well-established congregation with more than five American pastors. The website of the Light House Church shows the multiple spiritual activities of the American missionaries for expatriates. It is interesting to note that the senior priest of Light House Church has resided in Kuwait since 1985 and now the church has an official Bible college and an American school.

During the Christmas season in 2009, I witnessed the display of religious symbols like stars, the bursting of crackers and loud carol singing in the streets by the immigrants. Some of the old respondents informed me that explicit and public display of Christian symbols is a more recent phenomenon - after the liberation of Kuwait. The non-intervention of the government regarding the public celebration of the Christian faith could be due to the strategic dependence of the Kuwaiti regime on the Americans.

However the excessive expansion of Christianity has been sharply criticized by Islamists. For example, in February, 2012 few Kuwaiti Members of Parliament openly called for a halt to the construction of new churches in Kuwait. Kuwaiti MP Osama Al-Munawer announced on Twitter that he was planning to submit a draft law calling for the removal of all churches in the country<sup>xxxiii</sup>. This was followed by the call of the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia for the demolition of all Churches in the GCC states including Kuwait. The displeasure among some sections of the Kuwaiti population at the assertion of Churches and also the intrusion of Christians in the country is increasing<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

During my field research among the Kerala migrants to the Gulf, I observed that religion is salient factor in a migrant's day-to-day life, as it fills the emotional hole created in the context of extreme social isolation that migrants experience in foreign countries. The Christian immigrants of Kerala in Kuwait have noted that in the last one decade or so the spirituality and the role of religion have increased exorbitantly among Kerala migrants.

Till the 1990s in Kuwait religious activities in Kerala and among the migrants in the GCC, was nothing more than a routine and low key affair. Radical religious groups such as the neo-Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian denominations, Muslim groups with strong Wahabi traditions such as the Jamaat e Islami, and Hindu fundamentalist groups like the RSS and various cults like Matha Amrathandamayee have made deep inroads in the lives of Kerala immigrants in the GCC states particularly Kuwait. These religious groups are transnational in nature and they are actively linked to both home and destination countries. Moreover the lack of social interaction with the local people and social alienation felt by the immigrants in GCC countries has only strengthened their quest for spiritual and religious identity.

The major development among migrants particularly Christians in the beginning of 1990s was the rise of neo-Pentecostal and new religious groups. Digging deeper,

one can see that there is a gamut of issues that led to the assertion of the religious organizations in the life of expatriate workers. Two major Gulf Wars and the subsequent War on Terror contributed to the emergence of a new politico-religious context that aggravated the situation further. The region's political instability and economic slump, the hostile social environment and the community's continued social alienation from the host society has invigorated the phenomenon. For instance in Kuwait, Iraq's invasion of the country in 1990 and the subsequent expulsion of immigrants from Kuwait inflicted a sense of insecurity and deep-seated fear in the minds of the migrants. The proliferation of prayer groups with charismatic priests, huge donations to missionary activities, popularisation of donation to religious activities, increasing dependence on godman/sadhus/pastors/clergy, and emerging trends for pilgrimage to the holy shrines in India and abroad reflects the exuberant presence of religion in immigrant's life

The re-assertion of belief among the immigrants has some personal reasons also. The stress in the life of a construction worker to earn the requisite money in the limited contract period or the anxiety over the extension of the period of stay deepens this assertion. Interestingly the major activities of the transnational religious groups are mainly in labor camps which were neglected by the mainstream host society for many years thereby garnering a vast majority of discipleship from the working class section. Geo-political churning, socio-political isolation and the exclusion of immigrants from the social structure of the host society has further consolidated the religious space

The accumulation of wealth remains another major concern for immigrants and struggle towards this process is met with anxiety, stress, competition and insecurity. Consequently in Kuwait, 'popular religion' like neo-Pentecostals have attained an upper hand over the 'official religion' since the popular religion emphatically stresses on the prosperity gospel. The volatile situation is being exploited successfully by the former with a large number of immigrants especially the youth moving towards the new religious movements.

In Kuwait, presently religion is salient factor in a migrant's day-to-day life, as it fills the emotional hole created in the contexts of extreme social isolation that migrants experience in foreign countries. Diaspora religious practices play a major role in sustaining the transnational links between home and host settings and also it creates an alternative sense of belonging to the sending country. In the contemporary context religion provides the opportunity for immigrants for community formation and produce intense conflict between the 'mainstream' and 'popular/conservative' religious groups and also helps to carve a unique "denominational/Born Again identity". Moreover the host settings have paved the way for the emergence of 'popular religion' and it creates unique 'global identity' which transcends the national boundaries.

### **Gulf Migratory Networks and the Upsurge of 'Prosperity Gospel' in Kerala**

The Indian migration to Gulf countries is both transitory and circulatory in nature, which heightens the transnational activities of the immigrants and also their links with the sending country. Over the time lives of migrants and non-migrants become trans-nationalised incorporating ideas, practices, beliefs and traditions from both societies. Religious beliefs and practices could also act as key components of social remittances. The broad question that needs to be addressed here is whether the re-orientation of immigrant's lives in the host country (Gulf countries) and the newly created wealth brings dramatic change in the religious sphere of Kerala.

The dynamics in the host setting has a direct bearing on the life style, consumer patterns, spiritual and worship modes, architecture and the outlook of the Kerala society. The transitory and circulatory nature of the Gulf migration has strengthened the migrants' connectivity with the home society and thereby made tremendous changes in the practices and nature of the home society as well as the religious institutions. One of the arenas which had a profound impact through migratory process was undoubtedly the religious space of the Syrian Christians. The change in religiosity and religious practices were in turn influenced by the migrant experiences based on their religious beliefs in their host countries. These differential experiences made them reinvent their own religions in a transnational environment but exclusivist in spirit, in the home state of Kerala. The transitional migration has highly altered the socio-cultural and the spiritual landscape of the Syrian Christians. As indicated above the spiritual reorientation in the lives of Syrian Christian immigrants and the change in religiosity echoed in the home society, which has a direct impact on the traditional nature of the Church.

Presently, 'Popular Religions' like neo-Pentecostal churches made deep unprecedented inroads among the Syrian Christians. These evangelic groups have well knitted networks in Kerala with large congregations to cater to the need of returning migrants. Proliferation of Evangelical prayer groups with charismatic pastors, huge donations to missionary activities, popularisation of 'tithe,' proliferation of diocese in both India and abroad, increase of Seminaries and Bible colleges, reflects the brazen and lively presence of religion on communal life. In this context, traditional churches such as Syrian Christians find it difficult to compete with the charisma of these 'new' religious variants and thus they struggle fervently to stop the exodus of its members to the Neo-Pentecostal churches.

The Syrian denominations in Kerala have been following Orthodox traditions and Eastern Syriac liturgy due to their long standing communion with the Middle Eastern Patriarchates. Most of the Syrian Churches are highly organized, with a muscular hierarchy, ritualistic in nature and has oriental-ecclesiastical traditions. Even interventions of European missionaries during the colonial period haven't changed the oriental eastern traditions and other ritualistic behaviors. But the neo-Pentecostal-new generation churches were quite successful in creating a dent into the Syrian community through the active support of the migrants. The Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal churches are very popular in the Diaspora setting with large followers from the Syrian denominations. Moreover there are numerous transnational-Charismatic churches operating in GCC countries with loosely knitted hierarchy.

Pentecostalism was originated in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century in Los Angeles in USA and it is initially known as 'Azusa Street' movement. The battle between God and devil lies at the centre of their theology and the Pentecostal movement reached the shores of Kerala in the beginning of 1940s. They couldn't penetrate within the Syrian denominations and have made some inroads among the downtrodden and lower-caste sections in the Southern India. On the other hand though neo-Pentecostal Church is originated within the Pentecostal denomination its theology and practices are quite different than the parent Church. The neo-Pentecostal church is largely an American Church and the Indian congregations have close contacts with the American Pentecostal movement.

The neo-Pentecostal is also predominantly an American based movement and its theology is centered on the 'Prosperity Gospel'. The neo-Pentecostal Churches are predominantly a Global Religion and emphasize the prosperity gospel. It is a unique theology connecting both faith and wealth within the frame work of the Bible and the globalized market. The "prosperity gospel," is a consumerist theology, whose popularity among American Christians has boomed in recent years and it teaches 'God blessing is the material wealth'. The aim of prosperity gospel is to achieve material prosperity, which is seen as evidence of the love of God. Neo-Pentecostalism is in a way a neo-liberal commercial theology which provides new kind of religious space, a blend of neo-liberal materialistic values and spirituality and promotes accumulation of wealth and material consumption. In other words it upholds a new version of 'commercial Christianity and sanctifies the 'material prosperity'.

The spiritual reorientation of emigrants in Gulf and their quest for new spirituality makes significant impact among the Syrian Christians in sending society as well. During my field research in Kerala I had visited the 'Heavenly Feast' a popular neo-Pentecostal Church in the Pathanamthitta town on a Sunday morning. The large congregation is comprised largely of middle class and most of the participants belong to the various Syrian denominations. During my interaction I had understood that most members of the congregation are either migrant families or return migrants. The Pastors' sermon was quite interesting and he said "*Why drive a Maruti when a Mercedes waits? Why live in a four-bedroom house when a mansion is in God's plan for your life? God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us,*".

Currently, the neo-Pentecostal groups are very popular among the Syrian Christian community in Kerala. The codified liturgy, colourful sacraments, altar, cassocks and candles of Syrian Churches are replaced with Electric organs, theatrical prayer sessions, thundering orations, amplified guitar, trumpet, thrashing drums, loud music. Presently, Sundays are filled with drama and pageantry. Spirited prayers, miracles, speaking in tongues, thundering oratory and devil beating preachers have become the order of worship.

Looking closer varied issues have been responsible for the sudden popularity of these Charismatic groups. The cradle of the neo-Pentecostalism is among the migrant workers in Gulf region as most of these Churches are

transnational in nature. For example the major activities of 'Heavenly Feast Church' are in the GCC countries and they have more than 25 congregations in the West Asian region.

The Diaspora connections, uninterrupted financial flow and the deep influence of social remittances have significantly reoriented the outlook and functioning of the religious institutions in Kerala. Katy Gardner's work on the migrant communities in Bangladesh indicates that return migrants engage with the purist and orthodox version of Islam and rejects local practices particularly Sufi worship modes. Similarly Levitt also explores the spiritual influence of Dominican Diaspora from USA in local Dominican churches and argues that migrants makes tremendous changes in the homeland religious setting through 'social remittances'<sup>xxxv</sup>.

Interestingly, Kurien(2014) writes that 'religious institutions undergo tremendous transformations not merely as a result of remittances but also as a consequence of the very process of developing overseas branches of their diasporas'<sup>xxxvi</sup>. The ideas and practices that had been generated through the reorientation of migrants lives in the host setting has been transmitted via social remittances, which inadvertently reshaped the traditional structure of the Kerala's Syrian Christian denominations. One of the respondents pointed that 'I was a staunch Jacobite before migrating to Sharjah. But the hardships in the alien desert have moved closer to God. The Grace Fellowship pastors visited me regularly when I was in need and I got baptised in UAE. After returning to Kerala, I have planted the 'Grace Fellowship Church' (transnational neo-Pentecostal Church) along with my friends from UAE. For the last 7 years I regularly organise a two day spiritual convention in the local community'. In Pathanamthitta I have encountered return migrants with same stories and they have been the torch bearers of the neo-Pentecostal Churches in Kerala. I have personally observed that Church has become the "epicenter" for many respondents and the frequency of their participation in religious activities have increased very high.

One of the pastors said 'Heavenly Feast is a well established church now with strong parishes amongst the diaspora community. The ardent followers of our church are in GCC countries and nearly 25 Pastors are working fulltime in the Gulf region'. The 'Tent Worship' (worship in make shift Tents) an Old Testament concept has been popularised in Kerala by the neo-Pentecostals and the Church claims that they have nearly 5000 tents across Kerala. On a regular Sunday worship at one of the Tents in Pathanamthitta it was quite apparent that most of the people were either gulf returnees or the relatives of the migrants. One of the respondents commented that 'Heavenly was introduced to our family by my sister who is a nurse in Qatar. We witnessed many miracles after joining the Tent worship'.

In Kuwait, Pastor Josey Joseph, the pastor of Heavenly Feast parish said 'in the beginning we had many challenges and the response in India was very cold. But we got an unexpected response from the Gulf migrants particularly in Kuwait. At present we have nearly 60 parishes across GCC region and the TV channel has been operational at the initiative of Gulf migrants. Now we got strengthened in Kerala with the help of migrants and their relatives'.

There numerous neo-Pentecostal churches in the Gulf pockets in Kerala and most of them have been flourishing with the support of remittances. For instance, the Bishop Barnabas of Syrian Marthoma Church commented that 'neo-Pentecostals are a by-product of migration and conspicuous consumerism in Kerala. Neo-Pentecostal churches have been a new phenomenon and it has been flourishing at the cost of the uncertain lives of Gulf migrants'. He further noted that many members of the neo-Pentecostal groups do not sever ties with the traditional Syrian church. Interestingly many members of the radical groups keeps dual membership in both Syrian as well as neo-Pentecostal Church and would prefer all the sacraments(marriage, baptism, funeral) to be conducted at traditional church. The vast flow of remittances, modernity and consumerism had also brought immense uncertainties and instability in the lives of the families and the new generation Churches have been using the this volatile context. Miracles, financial prosperity and individual economic growth are some of the core teachings that have been suited well to for anxious and uncertain public.

Significantly most of the new churches are quite transnational in nature with deep roots amongst the younger generation. The neo-Pentecostal-new generation churches are quite dogmatic and maintain high rigidity in their teaching. For instance they explicitly forbid participation in the festivals and ceremonies of other religions including other Christian denominations. These churches never support ecumenism and maintain a purist rules for the believers. Most of these churches are quite exclusivist and promotes a unique 'born again transnational identity'.

Though the neo-Pentecostal hierarchy is quite loosely knitted, the Gulf migrant associations are the strongest pillar of the Heavenly Feast. The migrants who returned to Kerala are retained in the fold through the activities of the Gulf associations. Interestingly almost all the Churches have well organised Gulf associations in Kerala and they have emerged as a powerful lobby in the decision making. As a result a new generation, Charismatic, neo-Pentecostal churches have been burgeoning in Kerala with the active support of Gulf based networks and in some of the towns in Central Kerala there have been housing projects exclusively for the 'born again Christians'. For example the upcoming 'Zion Housing Society' in the outskirts of Tiruvalla, (one of the prosperous Gulf pockets) has been planned for the Gulf returnees particularly for the members of 'Grace Fellowship'. A member of 'Zion Society' pointed out that 'this housing project has been planned for the 'born again' to stay together when we returns back from Gulf. It has a big prayer hall and there are similar projects in other towns too'.

In the mid-1980s some of the neo-Pentecostal Pastors along with American preachers have made some efforts to penetrate into the Syrian Church, but they couldn't succeed due to the stiff resistance from the traditional Church. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent uncertainties in GCC had been a turning point in the unprecedented growth of the neo-Pentecostal Churches amongst the Syrian Christian denominations. The ghettoised, hostile environment and spiritual reorientation of the Syrian Christians in Gulf has a direct impact in Kerala and it has been responsible for the formation of a dogmatic identity and space in the sending

society. The neo-Pentecostals groups separate themselves from the rest of the world and project an "exclusive" spiritual identity from the rest of the denominations

### **'Holy Land' Pilgrimage and the assertion of 'Biblical Israel'**

The neo-Pentecostals have brought varying 'American Evangelical' theological concepts and traditions to Kerala via GCC region. Tithe, Tele Evangelists, Gospel Channels, Prayer and Worship, Holy land (Israel) pilgrimage, notion of 'Biblical Israel' are some of the concepts that had origins in American evangelical theology which are very popular in Kerala. Interestingly the American Evangelical ideas have been popularised in Kerala by the influence of Gulf migrants.

Currently, pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine (holy land) is extremely popular and thousands of believers from Kerala are undertaking a pilgrimage to Israel every year to visit holy sites. Though pilgrimage to Holy Land never existed in Kerala due to the costs, the practice is now quite popular among the Gulf migrants. The pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine is another significant aspect which is widely prevalent among Syrian Christian immigrants. Each year almost all the churches in GCC states organize a Pilgrimage via Jordan to the Holy Land especially during the summer vacations.

Perhaps due to the influence of Gulf immigrants the pilgrimage to Israel/Palestine has become very popular in Kerala too. The travel stories of Gulf migrants to Israel and Palestine have had a tremendous impact amongst the people in Kerala and at present numerous travel and tour agencies have been facilitating the visits to Israel very frequently. In addition some of the Malayalam dailies also had taken initiative for these visits.

Interestingly, alongside the 'Holy land' tours the theory of 'Biblical Israel' is also penetrating into the society. The notion of Biblical Israel is coined by American Episcopal Church in the 1970s and it also had indirect support of US Administration to justify enormous financial support to Israel. The conservative Christians in USA particularly the Republican supporters believes that the unequivocal support for Israel fulfills a Biblical injunction to protect the Jewish State<sup>xxvii</sup>. It is an insular and strategic philosophy to justify the occupation of Israel through the lens of Bible and the American Tele-Evangelists often stress on this aspect<sup>xxviii</sup>. Kerala with strong roots in eastern Orthodox history have been historically closer to the Arab/Chaldea/Syriac traditions than the notion of 'Israel'. At present the theological understanding of Biblical Israel and tremendous support for Israel is growing among the Christians in Kerala.

In addition the long duration of stay and poorer working conditions in the Islam-dominated GCC countries inadvertently creates a sense of alienation from the host country and this diabolic situation being used by the new generation churches to invigorate the idea of 'Biblical Israel'. The support for Israel has largely entered into the Kerala coast through the active intervention of Gulf migrants and the neo-Pentecostal Church. Furthermore the 'Apostolic Zion Church' in Kottayam conducts regular prayers for the wellbeing of Jewish nation and also promotes 'Holy Land' pilgrimage. Hence we could witness the visible influence of American theo-

logical concepts being widespread in Kerala through the preaching and activities of neo-Pentecostal groups.

Saji Thomas, an active member of 'Grace Fellowship' pointed out that, "Our church is quite active in teaching about the Israel, as the knowledge of Israel quite important to understand the second coming of Israel. We have special prayers for Jewish land and the Church regularly organizes 'Holy Land' visits' to Israel. I had visited Israel along with family when I was working in UAE and I am planning to take my mother next year'. Fr K M George, noted theologian and the former Principal of Syrian Orthodox Seminary observed that 'interest for 'Holy Land trips' is very high among the Kerala Christians and this is indeed a new phenomenon. These trips had initially started among the migrant community in GCC countries in the late 1990s and finally Gulf migrants had introduced this to Kerala. Now the parishes across the denominations are competing each other to visit Israel. Some of the clergies are also running tour agencies to facilitate these visits'.

### **Salvation through Tithe**

Another theological conception which has been popularized through Gulf migration is 'tithe'. Tithe is an Old Testament conception of contributing one tenth of one's income to poor and needy. This was not widely prevalent among the Syrian Church in Kerala. *Tithe* had been popularized by the neo-Pentecostals particularly among the migrants as a mark of thanks giving for economic success. Earlier the annual subscriptions and ceremonial/festival contributions were the main income of the Church. However, the 'Tithe' became a practice widely among the Gulf migrants in response to the unprecedented fortunes and capital they had received in the host setting. The trustee of a local Syrian Church mentioned that the annual income of the Church had increased 300 times in the last three decades. One of the Gulf migrants pointed that 'regular contribution of 'Tithe' would multiply the income and blessings'. Another respondent commented that 'I went to Gulf from an economically weaker family. At present I am blessed with immense wealth and thus I have decided to give one tenth of my income to 'missionary activities' in India'. Through Tithe the people are expecting both salvation as well as the protection of their unexpected wealth. Eminent theologian Fr K M George said 'Tithe was never popular among the Syrian Christians. The Gulf migrants have popularized this concept in Kerala. Tithe is the back bone of the neo-Pentecostal Churches as they propagates that both salvation and prosperity could be achieved through the enormous contribution of Tithe'.

The Pentecostals, along with Tele-evangelists, have reshaped and popularized the concept of religious contributions as an avenue for more richness and material prosperity. Neo-Pentecostals have made 'Tithe' to be the compulsory duty of a believer and this turned to be the major revenue for the preachers and Tele-evangelists. The critics have alleged that the split of neo-Pentecostals into numerous splinter groups is largely centered on the financial disputes, emanates due to the unaccounted flow of 'Tithe'. Like the American Gospel TV channels the idea of "tithe" is being highlighted by the Malayalam Tele-evangelists as the main path for material blessings.

### **Liberation Theology and Commercial Christianity**

The socialist-communist legacy of Kerala had a significant impact in the Christian community. Though the Church hierarchy particularly Catholics were at loggerheads with the Communist parties many Bishops and clergies openly supported the Marxian ideas and the Liberation theology had immense influence among the Church leadership. Liberation Theology is an attempt to interpret scripture through the plight of the poor.

This Christian school of theology was developed in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s and it focuses on the liberation of the oppressed and poor<sup>xxxix</sup>. The main emphasis was on the redistribution of wealth, allowing poor peasants to share in the wealth fight for social. The youth and student movements of the Syrian denominations embraced the revolutionary theology and this was quite popular in the parishes in 1970s and 80s. The decline of left and progressive forces in the socio-cultural realms of Kerala by the late 1990s and diversion of left parties towards the power politics had affected the progressive movement in the Church as well. The collapse of the left discourse along with the influence of large scale migration has severely hampered the prospects of progressive theological moorings and gave rise to the tide of 'commercial Christianity' in Kerala. The rise of aspirant rich migrants coupled with an ambitious and uncertain social situation has further weakened the liberal ethos and have fortified the 'commercial Christianity' in Kerala. The large scale migration to Gulf have jeopardised the prospects of 'liberal' ideas and this vacuum have been filled by the radical religious groups. The eminent Liberation theologian Fr Sam Koshy commented that 'earlier the humane and social action of the Church was quite popular among the younger generation. But with the large flow of remittances, consumerist and careerist thinking gained more momentum, which invariably strengthened the prospects of 'commercial Christianity' and 'Prosperity Gospel'.

### **Remittances, Renovations and Religious Investments**

At present the Syrian Christians have been using religion as a strategic platform to transform the economic capital earned from migration to achieve social prestige, status and legitimacy in the home society and to maintain links with Kerala and also as an easier-entry to the home community. The migration and remittances have made significant changes in the Syrian Christian churches. A vast majority of migrants to the Gulf were mostly middle-class or poor. The flow of remittances from abroad has transformed the class structure of the Kerala society by promoting upward mobility for families that have sent migrants to the Gulf. Migrant sending families have increasingly used income earned in the Gulf to promote religion in the public sphere in Kerala, in the process, enhancing their visibility and power in social hierarchy. This on the one hand, contributed to larger investment in churches/mosques/temples and religious establishments across Kerala. Since the beginning of 1990s, there has been a proliferation of temples, churches, mosques and other religious institutions particularly in Gulf pockets.

Successful migrants have invested remittances and savings in culturally significant arenas –marriages, education, temples, churches etc. The absence of migrant in the home society is filled through his spending patterns contributions in religious institutions and charity.

Migrants' contribution to the religious institutions is manifested as his presence even if he/she residing in the Gulf. The Syrian Christians tried to display his social mobility through the renovation or construction of churches, parish halls, parsonages, cars for Vicars, arch gates, flag staffs, and memorial halls.

The local Bishops pointed that nearly ninety percent of all the old churches have been either renovated, reconstructed or new churches have been built by demolishing the old ones. The Vicar General of Syrian Orthodox church highlighted that the uninterrupted flow of contributions have prompted the Church towards the mega construction spree. Bishop Mar Barnabas of Syrian Marthoma Church pointed that 'migrants contribute voluminous amount of money for the construction projects and local vicars now spend more time at construction sites rather than pastoral care'. During the church visits announcement made by the secretary of a parish was quite amusing, as he said 'Saturday is the deadline for the installation of 'family plaque' at the Parish Hall. Those who are interested to erect the family plaque should kindly pay INR 3 lakhs to the trustee'. On inquiry I found that nearly 70 parish members had already paid the required amount and all of them were either migrants or return migrants.

On vacations when migrants visits Kerala it is common practise to donate the cushions, candle stands, pulpit covers, altar candles, carpets, altar curtains. The absence of migrant from the society is filled through these monumental donations. The local religious institutions also play a central role in providing systematic support for the reintegration of emigrants into the community when they return home on vacation or permanently after completing the contracts. In Kerala the construction extravaganza is responsible for the growth of local 'parish complexes'. The Church complex comprised of church, flag staff, arch gates, marble lambs, parish hall, parsonage and sometimes buildings for rentals. The church documents reveal that the entire complex has been sponsored by the migrants' families to take over the patronage of the Church.

This process of obtaining social mobility by acquiring religious capital often disrupts the existing power structure within the community. The society witnessed the emergence of new class generally known as "New Rich". It is noted that significant growth of new rich had upset the rural power structure. The position and status enjoyed traditionally by a few landed and aristocratic families are now challenged.

The demolition of the old churches often creates conflicts and legal disputes in the Community, which is often termed as the conflict between the old landed families and the New Rich. The emerging rich class consider the Church as the symbol of the feudatory structure and reconstruction and demolition the old ones is often termed as the attack on the old class structure of the community. Migration has nevertheless allowed families to use capital to invest in status and class enchanting activities, engendering changes in local power structure. For instance in one of the parishes the construction of a new church had been stalled for nearly 5 years due to a prolonged legal battle two groups of , certainly between old traditionally rich and the 'new rich' migrant families. An elderly member of the traditional faction commented sarcastically that 'the old church was built

by our forefathers and only few families had the resources to regulate the affairs of the church. Now most of the parishioners have money due to migration and these 'new rich' wants to demolish the old edifice and to build a new one. The old Church is quite strong and there is no need for a new Church, but this is an indirect attempt to grab the patronage of the Church and also to be elevated into the hierarchy'.

The enormous contributions to Church and the erection of concrete religious building by newly rich migrants is a covert attempt to capture the hierarchy of Church which had been denied to them due to the feudal structure of the community. Hence the new construction boom in the Christian community could be termed as the demolition of the past class hierarchy and the formation of a new social configuration. Generally the new rich migrant families receive the support of local Diocesan Bishops since the Church hierarchy is highly dependent on remittances from Diaspora.

In Pathanamthitta the clergies highlighted fierce conflicts in the Church with the entry of new rich migrant families into the system. Bishop Mar Kurilos commented that, 'migrants are not interested to support the activities of education or health care, because the construction of schools and hospitals will not help to attain fame and also it doesn't enable him to enter into the social hierarchy. Thus most of them would like to invest or contribute in local parish to enhance their social status'.

In fact, in Kerala since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century the Syrian denominations were in the forefront to establish schools, colleges and hospitals and Church played a crucial role in the field of education and health. However at present the resources of the Church are diverted more towards the construction boom than the other social deeds. Hence the current trends of the Syrian church indicate that the space of religion/local parish is used by the migrants to attain the social legitimacy and to bounce back to the community. The active involvement and participation in the Church is to disseminate ones' newly attained economic mobility.

The worship centers are also places for recognition and the display of individual success. The patronages of church or parish designations like secretary or trustee are seen as symbols of social mobility and recognition. The annual elections for Church office bearers have turned to be the spaces of stiff competition to display individual success and socio-economic mobility. One of the vicars pointed that competition for leadership in Church often ends up in conflicts and personal rivalries. Elections for the Church hierarchy are a month long affair with house to house campaigns by the candidates which was not a very common practice in Kerala.

The migrants also fiercely negotiate with the hierarchy to enhance their role in the affairs of the Church. For instance, presently with the influx of surplus money there is greater demand for the elevation of parishes' to be equivalent to Cathedral. Earlier the Cathedral title was given to parish with more members/income and also it could be attached to the Bishop house. The reason behind new demand is that the Cathedral can send more lay representatives in the Church Council and also laity could play crucial role in the election of Bishops. In the Syrian Orthodox denominations certain newly built parishes have been given special status and more lay

representatives in the Church councils since the parishes agreed to make significant increase in the annual subscription to diocese. Thus the parish committees and councils have thus been seen as social mobility and turned to be the spaces to exhibit individual prosperity.

### **Commoditisation and Revitalisation of Rituals and Ceremonies**

Religious ritual is another significant area to a migrant's strategic conversion of economic capital into prestige and status. Migration in particular to the Gulf has accelerated the ongoing process of commoditisation of ritual practices. The elaborate revitalisation of local festivals and feasts should be understood within the context of emigration. The sustained interest of the emigrant on local festival is related to the display component of religious rituals. Pastors, Astrologers, Tantris, Godmen, and ritual specialists in general have all been able to exploit this growing religious market. Therefore the new upsurge in religious activity has inadvertently commoditised the rituals and ceremonies. The migration related wealth has led to an ever increasing commoditisation of ritual practices allowing for new performers and sponsors of local church procession or feast. The high spending of money on religious ceremonies and social occasions like Baptism and marriage are increasing among the Christian immigrants. Large parts of remittances are used to organise performances of ritual activities which work towards maintenance and augmentation of migrant households honour.

Pilgrimages to various religious places in Kerala are increasingly popular among immigrants in the GCC countries. These pilgrimages and participation of immigrants at the feast in native churches could be termed as expressing their attachment to the home society. The participation in the local church Perunal or feast shrines reinforces their roots, an opportunity to express their attachment to the sending society and also to create an alternative category of belonging by the immigrant community<sup>xi</sup>.

Local Festival is important factor in migrant's life, it is an announcement of his arrival for vacations. The focal point of Perunal (local Church feast) is Rasa or procession. During the feast a new practise which is widely prevalent is to donate silver or gold plated cross to church and also carry it proudly during the procession. Carrying the Silver Cross in Rasa becomes a perfect vehicle for return migrants to showcase and project to the community his transformed status and mobility. Caroline Brettel argues that, "the catholic church and its various activities provide a context where Portuguese emigrants can convert economic success abroad into social prestige when they return to their native village"<sup>xii</sup>.

The processions are also arenas for competitive and conspicuous consumption and also provide opportunities for the display of hierarchy<sup>xiii</sup>. In Kerala the church procession provides fewer opportunities to display some of the material possessions of the migrant families. Social prestige cannot be achieved in host environment and it is only in his home village that degree of social mobility is valued and social prestige is accorded. In this context villagers are the jury that measures the success of the emigrants. Thus carrying the silver cross provides for the affluent migrants a public space to demonstrate

the newly acquired social status and economic prosperity. Through these displays the individual status has been transcended as well as reinforced.

Interestingly one of the ceremonies which has been highly commoditized and turned to be the space of display is the funeral. In the Syrian Christian community the simple, sober and most painful religious affairs are being made occasions to flaunt wealth and social status. The funeral processions are taken out with pomp and show with expensive and decorative coffins, hiring of choirs to sing the devotional songs and which move along with the procession with a large convoy of cars, and distribution of 'heavy' food packets after the ritual. The tradition of serving just black coffee is also giving way and is being replaced with gala lunch.

According to the Bishops the average Christian spend enormous money on funeral as a result of which a new funeral industry has emerged which is positioned around flower merchants, coffin sellers, caterers, news papers and videographers., There is a rush for front-page obituary space in leading local newspapers. Such an announcement with a photograph costs 150,000 rupees in "Malayala Manorama"(local daily). Even poor and non-migrant have begun to imitate the rich in buying costly coffins popularly known as 'Swarga Petti'( Heavenly Coffins). The *Swarga Petti* is fancy expensive coffins imported from China and this has turned to be the marker of prestige and status. Rev George Tharakan a local priest explained that 'in the past a large number of friends and relatives would gather to sing hymns, read the Bible at a bereaved house , now that being replaced with professional and expensive Choirs and singing groups.

Moreover practise of funeral service being videotaped is another unique feature of the Kerala Christian Community. This practise started in connection with migration. Earlier the ceremony was photographed for the children staying abroad who missed to attend the funeral. However over the period of time it has become an avenue to publicize the honour and prestige of the family. With the advent of social media within hours after funeral this is uploaded on the web for the public. Dr Mohan Varghese, who teaches in a local college comments that 'now days in the funeral the participants have to perform and participation of local MLA, Municipal Chairperson, politicians and Bishops are considered to be the symbol of status and prestige. Now the funeral became more elaborate to add colour to the video graphing'.

## Conclusion

The arrival of new religious practises and remittances from the GCC countries are changing the Syrian Christian landscape in Kerala with long-history of Christian presence. Religious and spiritual reorientation among Syrian Christian communities in the host countries is abetting the assertion of communal identity, proliferation of radical religious groups, rise of godmen and cults, and the emergence of new forms of worship in the Kerala society. The Gulf migrants and their families are invariably using the trajectory of religion to achieve social mobility and prestige in the sending society. The spiritual restructuring in the lives of migrants in the host setting has strengthened the quest for spirituality and thus the doctrine of 'prosperity gospel' is making deep inroads in the Syrian Christian community. The traditional,

oriental and hierarchical nature of the Syrian Churches has been replaced with loosely knitted 'neo-Pentecostalism' and 'commercial Christianity'. The transnational nature of neo-Pentecostal churches has a direct impact on the religious space of Kerala society and the Diaspora networks are playing a crucial role in restructuring the home land churches. The impact of social remittances is quite visible in the religious spheres and the Gulf connections are directly responsible for an 'Americanised' version of Christianity in Kerala.

Gulf migration perhaps has eroded the traditional nature of Syrian Christians, giving rise to a more exclusionary, dogmatic and a consumerist version of spirituality. Rituals and ceremonies have become the avenue to display the mobility and also to strengthen the honour of the family. In Kerala religion is being used as a strategic platform to transform the economic capital earned from migration to achieve social prestige, status and legitimacy in the home society, and to maintain links with Kerala and facilitate easier-entry of the migrants to the home community. In other words, the religious spaces are being utilized by the migrants to display the newly acquired socio-economic mobility and also to demolish the feudatory class structure. The large flow of remittances and the urge to display the newly acquired socio-economic mobility could be termed as the reasons for the commoditization of rituals and ceremonies in Kerala. The local religious spaces have turned to be the jury to evaluate the economic mobility of Gulf migrants and this often disrupts the existing class hierarchies. The aspirant 'new rich' migrants is inadvertently relying on 'spirituality' and 'religion' to erase the 'past' and to elevate into the status of erstwhile upper classes.

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1.	Labour Market Assessment in 6 EU Countries	ICM in collaboration with International Organization for Migration (IOM) - 2011
2.	India EU Engagement and International Migration: Implications for Policy and Way Forward	Basant Potnuru and Vishishta Sam, India Centre for Migration (ICM) - 2012
3.	India- EU Mobility: Building Bonds through Remittances and Philanthropy	Puja Guha, Indian Statistical Institute, Bangalore - 2013
4.	Awareness and Information Dissemination: Lessons from a Field Publicity Campaign in the Punjab project	Paramjit Sahai, CRRID, Chandigarh - 2013
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