

**EXPLORING THE MARIAN CULT AND SYNCRETIC
PRACTICES IN THE SELECT CHURCHES OF KERALA AND
TAMIL NADU**

*Thesis submitted to the University of Calicut
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature*

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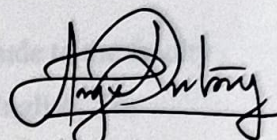
This is to certify that the thesis entitled **“Exploring the Marian Cult and Syncretic Practices in the Select Churches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu”** submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Language & Literature is a bona fide record of the studies and research carried out by **Ms. Anju Antony** under my supervision and this research work has not previously formed the basis of award for any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar titles or recognition.



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DECLARATION

I, **Anju Antony**, hereby declare that this thesis titled, “**Exploring the Marian Cult and Syncretic Practices in the Select Churches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu**” is an authentic record of the research work carried out by me under the supervision of Dr Rajani B., Associate Professor and Principal, The Zamorin’s Guruvayurappan College, Kozhikode, and it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.



Anju Antony

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CONTENTS

Chapter I	Introduction	1-50
Chapter II	The Many Faces of Mother Mary: A Socio-Cultural and Theological Perspectives on Marian Cult Through History, Scriptures, and Literature	51-95
Chapter III	Sacred Stories and Sacred Spaces: The Role of Apparitions in Shaping Marian Cult Across Different Cultural Contexts	96-139
Chapter IV	From Apparitions to Devotion: The Role of Cultural Syncretism in the Evolution of Marian Cult and Its Practices in the select Churches	140-207
Chapter V	Conclusion	208-229
Chapter VI	Recommendations	230-232
	Work Cited	233-248

Abstract

This study, titled *Exploring the Marian Cult and Syncretic Practices in Select Churches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu*, investigates the Marian cult within these specific churches, focusing on how Marian devotion has been shaped by cultural syncretism, oral narratives, and local religious traditions. Renowned for their association with apparition stories and miracle tales of Mary, these churches offer a unique lens through which to explore how such narratives have reshaped the belief systems of local communities and facilitated the integration of Mother Mary into the religious, caste- oriented, and cultural landscapes of the region.

Drawing from cultural studies and religious syncretism theories, this thesis explores how Mother Mary has been indigenized within the socio-cultural and religious frameworks of Tamil and Malayalam-speaking communities. It also interrogates the intersections of power, culture, and religious authority, analysing how Marian devotion has adapted to local contexts while retaining theological significance. By framing Marian piety as a vehicle for the propagation of Christianity, the study explores whether Mother Mary functions as an ‘invisible goddess’ within the local religious consciousness, where the worship of mother goddesses is part of the region's cultural legacy.

Furthermore, the study distinguishes the Marian cult from general devotion and contextualizes its role within the Syrian Christian tradition. It highlights the significance of Marian apparitions in religious syncretism, demonstrating how Marian devotion transcends religious boundaries. The research also examines the role of missionaries in propagating Marian piety by blending local traditions within caste-based hierarchies in Malayalam- and Tamil-speaking regions of that time. In

an era of contested religious identities, this thesis critically examines the Marian cult as both a theological and cultural phenomenon, underscoring its enduring relevance in the religious landscape of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Marian cult, Syncretic practices, Marian apparitions, oral narratives, cultural syncretism, caste, religious identities, intersections of power, religious landscape, Marian devotion.

സംഗ്രഹം

"മാതാവ് ആരാധനയിലെ മതാനുഷ്ഠാനസമന്വയം കേരളത്തിലെയും തമിഴ്നാട്ടിലെയും തെരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത പള്ളികളിൽ" എന്ന ഗവേഷണപ്രബന്ധം പ്രാദേശിക മതചാരങ്ങളുടെയും വാമൊഴിവഴക്കങ്ങളുടെയും പാരമ്പര്യബന്ധങ്ങളിലൂന്നി നിന്നുകൊണ്ട് കേരളത്തിലെയും തമിഴ്നാട്ടിലെയും പള്ളികളിൽ മരിയാഭക്തി എങ്ങനെ വികസിച്ചുവന്നു എന്നന്വേഷിക്കാനുള്ള ശ്രമമാണ് നടത്തുന്നത്. തെരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത പള്ളികളിൽ നടന്നു എന്ന് വിശ്വസിക്കപ്പെടുന്ന മാതാവിന്റെ പ്രത്യക്ഷപ്പെടലും അനുബന്ധ അത്ഭുതങ്ങളും അപഗ്രഥിച്ചുകൊണ്ട് മാതാവ് എങ്ങനെയാണ് ഒരു പ്രാദേശികതയിലേക്ക് സമരസപ്പെട്ടതെന്ന് പ്രബന്ധം ചർച്ചചെയ്യുന്നു. മാത്രമല്ല ജാതിമതസാംസ്കാരികപാരമ്പര്യങ്ങൾ അതിനെങ്ങനെ നിദാനമായി വർത്തിച്ചുവെന്നും പ്രബന്ധം അന്വേഷണവിധേയമാക്കുന്നു. സാംസ്കാരിക പഠനത്തിനുള്ളിലെ മതസമന്വയസിദ്ധാന്തം (Syncretic theory) മുൻനിർത്തിയാണ് പ്രബന്ധരചന നിർവ്വഹിച്ചിരിക്കുന്നത്. കേരളത്തിലെയും തമിഴ്നാട്ടിലെയും സാമൂഹ്യ സാംസ്കാരിക നിർമ്മിതികളുടെ ചട്ടക്കൂടിലൊതുങ്ങിനിന്നുകൊണ്ട് മാതാവ് ആരാധനക്ക് സംഭവിച്ച പരിണാമം പ്രബന്ധം സവിശേഷമായി വിശകലനം ചെയ്യുന്നുണ്ട്. മതമേധാവിത്വവും ഭിന്നരൂപത്തിലുള്ള അധികാരസ്ഥാപനങ്ങളും മാതാവ് ആരാധനയിലുണ്ടാക്കിയ സ്വാധീനം വിശകലനം ചെയ്യാനും പ്രബന്ധം ഉദ്യമിക്കുന്നുണ്ട്. വാമൊഴിയായി പ്രചരിക്കുന്ന മാതാവ് പ്രത്യക്ഷീകരണത്തിന്റെ കഥകളും ഇതര പള്ളികളിൽ നിന്നും വ്യത്യസ്തമായി നടത്തുന്ന ആചാരാനുഷ്ഠാനങ്ങളും ഭക്തരെ എങ്ങനെയാണ് സ്വാധീനിക്കുന്നതെന്ന് സമകാലരാഷ്ട്രീയസാഹചര്യത്തിൽ നിന്നുകൊണ്ട് അപഗ്രഥിക്കാനും പ്രബന്ധം ശ്രമിക്കുന്നുണ്ട്.

താക്കോൽവാക്കുകൾ: മാതാവ്, ആരാധന, മതസമന്വയം, ജാതി, അധികാരം, ഭക്തി

Chapter I

Introduction

Narratives, whether fables, fantasies, or travel accounts, were instrumental in producing the cultural imaginary (a set of images, discourses, and narratives that enable a community to share a fantasy, an anxiety, or a collective desire, and influence the ways in which the community would acquire knowledge or interpret the world—it is a social condition that influences the unconscious of an entire community.) (Nayar 14).

Mother Mary plays a pivotal role in Christianity, not only as the divine mother of Jesus but also as a powerful mediator. Her journey as an ordinary Jewish woman in Palestine, chosen to be the mother of God according to the Bible, has fascinated people for centuries. A theological branch called Mariology has emerged to study Mother Mary by analysing Biblical references and the devotional practices, sacramentals, and liturgy associated with her. Over time, iconography, images, literature, and paintings have honoured her in countless ways, emphasizing her role across various cultures. Her apparitions have significantly transformed nations, peoples, and cultural practices worldwide. Far from being someone who died and was forgotten, Mother Mary's constant presence and involvement in human affairs make her unique in the Church. She deserves high veneration from the faithful according to the Church.

Devotion to Mother Mary has been expressed for centuries through prayers, pilgrimages, Holy Mass, rosaries, and feast day celebrations. Art and iconography are developed to show her significance as the *Theotokos* (Mother of God) and the most venerated human being. *Pieta*, the evergreen art piece by Michelangelo is an example

of how she influenced and inspired the world of art. This idealization of the Perpetual Virgin has also invited discussions and debates in the religious and academic contexts. Her unique, but submissive position in the redemption of humanity along with Christ makes her *Co-Redemptrix*, and *Co-Mediatrix* as she stands as a mediator between humanity and God according to the Church. All these attributes of Mother Mary have paved the way for increased Marian devotion which can be considered as Marian Cult. The Marian cult has been practiced for centuries, evolving and adapting over time. But, in the current scenario there is a resurgence of Marian piety especially after the apparitions occurred in the 19th and 20th century (Fernandes 30).

Marian piety has notably increased in Catholicism during the latter half of the twentieth century. Although the Church advises caution in approaching apparitions, their frequency has grown, and they are no longer rare occurrences. During the pandemic, when physical access to these apparition sites was restricted, detailed descriptions of Marian apparitions became widely available on YouTube and other internet platforms. Those confined to their homes gained extensive access to social media, where apparition stories and related miracles were abundant. This virtual connection to spiritual centres and miracle stories probably provided comfort in a time of crisis. Online prayer services and retreats also gained momentum, with middle-aged individuals increasingly engaging in these activities. The spiritual and religious support helped alleviate the fear and anxiety of that period, with Marian devotion and prayers becoming particularly prominent.

Pope Francis encouraged the faithful to rely on Marian prayers, especially “amid the looming threats to the world such as [the] pandemic” (Gomes). He highlighted the Rosary as a “spiritual weapon” during challenging times, bringing

peace and focus to believers. This emphasis, in all likelihood, contributed to the increased popularity of Marian shrines and the surge in pilgrimages to these sites following the pandemic (Gomes). Even in Kerala, Marian Apparitions are not rare phenomena. The number of retreat centres in the name of Mother Mary has increased among which Kreupsanam, a Marian Shrine in Alappuzha has become immensely popular. The widespread miracle stories from Kreupasanam and other Marian retreat centres spark curiosity, prompting a deeper exploration of Marian apparitions and the devotional practices surrounding them.

E. Ann Matter, a renowned Marian theologian, asserts that the twentieth century has been, more than any other period in Christian history, “the age of the cult of the Virgin Mary” (125), supported by extensive evidence from the Marian apparition database. This veneration of Mary extends beyond theological implications, intertwining with the socio-political and cultural landscapes of the time. Apparitions of Mary, often occurring during times of adversity, carry messages of hope or consolation, which in turn inspire new forms of cult practices, such as the creation of new prayers, rituals, and pilgrimage centres, all accompanied by miraculous stories. These narratives hold significant cultural value and invite a thorough examination within the cultural context of the twenty-first century.

When a Marian apparition takes place in a specific region, the site often becomes a destination for pilgrims, attracting visitors who bring with them personal stories of miracles and divine experiences. Many historic and well-known churches in India are deeply connected with such miraculous accounts, preserved through oral traditions long before the rise of social media platforms. These narratives, deeply embedded in local customs and influenced by regional beliefs, have contributed to the

growth of Marian devotion over the years. In South India, this devotion often blends with goddess worship traditions and indigenous rituals. Several ancient churches in the area are particularly famous for Marian apparitions and the devotional practices surrounding them. Due to the breadth of this topic, the study is narrowed to explore the Marian cult and related practices in the select churches across Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Accordingly, this thesis titled, *Exploring the Marian Cult and Syncretic Practices in the Select Churches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu* delineates the Marian devotional practices and their intricate, dynamic interactions with other cultures in these specific regions.

This study examines several key questions to understand the relationship between Marian devotion and the cultural practices of South India, especially Kerala and Tamil Nadu. The Marian cult in select churches of those regions, shaped by stories of Marian apparitions and miracles, has led to the development of unique festivals, rituals, and practices. For instance, in Velankanni, a church renowned for Marian apparitions, several rituals have resemblance to those in Hinduism. Vasudha Narayanan aptly describes this phenomenon as “Christian apparition, Hindu forms of piety; Christian vision, Hindu frames; Christian ground, Hindu rituals” (25).

These practices are deeply intertwined with the region’s diverse goddess traditions including mother goddess worship, illustrating a complex form of religious syncretism. Additionally, the research investigates the role of missionaries in introducing and promoting Marian cult practices, emphasizing their impact on local religious expressions. The syncretic practices observed can be seen as a natural blending of religious beliefs with cultural customs, or as intentional efforts to adapt Christianity to the local context. By exploring these elements, the study aims to

highlight how Marian cult is embedded in the cultural identity of the Christian communities in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

In the present scenario, both Marian devotion and the Marian cult are often used interchangeably, though the latter once denoted a negative connotation. Both terms denote the high veneration given to Mother Mary; however, while devotion refers to the broader practices and prayers dedicated to Mary, cult distinctively indicates the structured prayers, rituals, and practices that express reverence to her. The continued practice of this reverence over centuries is deeply rooted in the social, religious, historical, and cultural significance of Mary. It makes her a subject worthy of academic inquiry to understand her devotion's enduring importance.

The term "cult" has different meanings in different contexts. According to *Merriam-Webster*, a cult is "a religious group, often living together, whose beliefs are considered extreme or strange by many people" (*Merriam-Webster*). This group may deviate from the main groups having a different system and practices. According to William H. Swatos, the cult is "collectively centring around a real or imaginary figure whose followers believe that their lives are made better through activities which honour or are proscribed by the leader" (20) in sociological terms. However, in the theological contexts, cult attains the meaning of a system of religious worship and practices. The cult indicates "obsessive devotion to or veneration for a person, principle, or ideal" (13) in the Christian context according to Elliot Miller and Kenneth R. Samples. The Marian cult emphasizes the prominence of Mary through dedicated prayers, the recitation of the rosary, and other specific devotional practices. Chris Maunder, the English Theologian says that "the word 'cult', when applied to Marian apparitions, has the sense of the Latin *cultus*, i.e. all those activities

surrounding a focus of faith, and should not be read as having any pejorative meaning implying deviance, as used in the media and some sections of academia” (Mauder, *Our Lady* ix). In the Catholic tradition, honouring the saints and Mother Mary is a well-established practice. The Latin term “cultus duliae” refers to devotion to the saints, while devotion to Mary, due to its unique and elevated nature, is designated as cultus “hyper duliae” (Kappiliparambil 233–34). In this thesis, the term “Marian Cult” is used with this context in mind, free of any pejorative connotations. However, the Marian cult is seemingly a less-explored area in Christianity, as “historians of Christianity have tended to misunderstand the cult of the Virgin as a basically medieval phenomenon, a relic of a former age, and, in any case, an idea at odds with the rational and egalitarian religiosity of modernity” (Matter 126).

The Catholic Church's special emphasis on Mary has drawn substantial criticism from other Christian denominations. As Michael P. Carroll notes, “The Mary cult is probably the single greatest obstacle to the eventual reunification of the Christian churches” (xii). It shows how Marian devotion has divided Christian Churches. Many churches do not accept the central role of Mary as Catholics do. While the ecumenical initiatives by the Second Vatican Council aimed to lessen Marian emphasis in modern times, the continued apparitions of Mary worldwide have renewed interest in Marian devotion. Apart from that, Pope John Paul II, an ardent devotee of Mary, dedicated himself to revitalizing Marian piety within the Church. His efforts, coupled with the well-known apparitions at Fátima and Lourdes, have played a significant role in reigniting Marian devotion in the present Catholic Church.

According to Theology, Mother Mary cannot be worshipped or adored (Dillon). Only the creator, the God the divine, deserves all worship and adulation.

Mother Mary was the ordinary woman from Nazareth who showed her willingness to become the mother of God, though it could evoke a sense of shame and degradation in society. Her readiness to accept the will of God makes her unique in human history and thus she has to be venerated as mother of God. She is the only human being that deserves high veneration or reverence as the norm in the Church. Keeping this theological background of Mary, the thesis attempts to focus on the influence and impact of the Marian Cult in the cultural contexts of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

The Marian Cult has evolved throughout history alongside the spread of the message of Christ as the Good News. The narratives surrounding the incarnation of Christ have drawn attention to the unique qualities of his mother, leading to discussions of her distinctive role. In cultures where pagan goddesses were once worshipped, a maternal figure embodying virtues and powers similar to and sometimes surpassing those of these deities gradually emerged over the centuries. Devotees found it easier to relate to a human figure who sympathized with and understood their struggles, serving as an advocate on their behalf. Thus, more than Christ who is both divine and human, Mother Mary became closely associated with humanity, functioning as an intermediary between heaven and earth.

From the second century onwards, Marian devotion gained momentum. Her descriptions in the Bible, Apocrypha, and the works of the church fathers were discussed and the Churches in the name of Mary were constructed. The devotion changed into a cult from the fifth century onwards, after the Council of Ephesus declared her mother of God.

Despite her increasingly important role in doctrinal debates, the personal veneration of the Virgin known to later generations was not yet the norm, even in the fourth century. It is in practice only after the Council of Ephesus and the recognition of her title as *Theotokos* in AD 431 that we find the real development of the cult of the Virgin which was to find expression in the sixth century in particular in the establishment of Marian feasts and stories of her appearances and of miracles performed by her (Cameron 6).

By the fifth century, the celebrations of the feast days of Mother Mary were celebrated in an elaborate manner in Jerusalem, which claimed to have observed them since second century, and in Constantinople (Rubin 55). The cult of worshipping Mother Mary and sharing bread in her name was observed by a group of people known as the Collorydians by the fourth century and it was rejected by the church finding it as idolatrous. However, “the actions ascribed to the Collorydians are in many ways strongly reminiscent of Graeco-Roman goddess worship” (Shoemaker 78). This cult practice was condemned by the Church due to its worshipping nature.

Throughout these centuries, narratives and stories of Mary spread across the world through icons, images, and paintings. These art forms help reaffirm her invaluable position in Christianity, replacing the visible power symbols of other religions and their goddesses. In this way, Mother Mary attains the status of an unrecognized goddess within certain religious spheres. This near-deification of Mary and the mode of worship that emerged from excessive veneration has been criticized over the centuries by various Church Fathers and theologians. Her images and statues were carried onto battlefields, and it was believed that she interceded for and protected the soldiers. Mary is considered as the guiding star for the navigators in the

sea who are curious to see and conquer unexplored lands (Thoppil 84). Marian cult is thus intricately linked with the notion of power and aristocracy of that period and the dominance of the religion.

The period between the proclamation of the Marian dogmas of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 and the Assumption into Heaven in 1950 is referred to as the “Marian age,” during which Marian devotion significantly intensified (Van Osselaer 580). This era transformed the perception of Mother Mary from being seen solely as the Queen of Heaven to embodying the ideal mother of humanity. As Christianity evolved into a religion centred on love, Mary emerged as a central figure, inspiring practices like the celebration of May as “the month of Mary” (Van Osselaer 580). Her universal appeal as a loving mother has intensified observing different practices in Marian Cult.

Marian cult is no different from its intricate association with the socio-political, cultural, and religious circumstances. The increased Marian piety kept by the Monarch symbolically represented their pure reign with the intercession of Mary and evoked the notion that it was free from sins (Rubin 47). Mother Mary was the political as well as cultural symbol at the time of Reconquista as her image was in the mast as well as in the flag to get protection from the Muslim Moors. It was believed that the apparitions of Mary occurred on the battlefields to direct and strengthen them. The people from Spain and Portugal always remained the staunch devotees of Mother Mary and wherever they went to conquer the land, they took Mother Mary along with them. When European missionaries encountered native cultures, they found that Mother Mary served as a powerful bridge of connection.

The universal appeal of the mother figure, present in nearly all cultures, made it easier for missionaries to use her image as a vehicle to spread the gospel. By assimilating the characteristics of local goddesses, Mary emerged as a distinctive figure in both religious and cultural contexts, dispelling the ancient, unnamed fears many natives held toward their deities. Unlike the often wrathful and punishing gods who afflicted their devotees with disease, drought, or barrenness, Mary's image evoked love and compassion and ensured their protection and intercession. This contrast made her especially appealing. Introducing Mother Mary into foreign landscapes became a strategic tool for capturing and colonizing the minds of the missionaries, yet her high veneration endured and flourished across diverse regions, including Latin America, Africa, Mexico, and India. As Miri Rubin notes, "Religion, with Mary's consoling figure at its heart, was used in the efforts to control and pacify the oppressed. It also marked the beginning of the association of Mary with the oppressed people – prisoners, the poor" (395).

As monarchs expanded their empires, religion played a crucial role in shaping native populations to align with their culture and traditions. Imposing Christianity on indigenous peoples was a key component of the colonizers' agenda, often involving the destruction and devaluation of native religious practices. Colonialism extended beyond the invasion of lands as it sought to erase cultural and traditional heritages. Missionaries, in their efforts to spread Christianity, employed various strategies beyond forced conversion, offering positions and privileges to entice native populations. In many cases, they paved the way for colonial rule. Mother Mary, with her unique ability to assimilate and adapt to diverse indigenous and foreign cultures, became one of the most effective colonial tools in this process.

Christianity in Kerala is non-Western in its origin according to the traditions. Most of the time, Christianity in India is comprehended as “Western and colonial” (Joseph 1) in the present scenario, as the efforts of the missionaries are given more priority. The numerous narratives on missionaries and their encounters with different cultures that need to be improved and civilized in their perspectives also invoke the feeling that Christianity is the product of the West though it emerged from Jerusalem and spread by Apostles and disciples of Jesus. However, Christianity in India is not the product of European missionaries; it has an apostolic tradition according to their socially and culturally enrooted belief. Christianity in India was not introduced by missionaries but by St. Thomas, one of Jesus’ apostles according to the tradition. It is believed that St. Thomas came to South India in the first century and converted people to Christianity. As Mathias A. Mundadan, the Christian historian observes,

According to the Indian tradition, St Thomas came by sea, and first landed at Cranganore about the year A.D. 52; converted high caste Hindu families in Cranganore, Palayur, Quilon and some other places; visited the Coromandel coast, making conversions; crossed over to China and preached the Gospel; returned to India and organized the Christians of Malabar under some guides (priests) from among the leading families he had converted, and erected a few public places of worship. Then he moved to the Coromandel and suffered martyrdom on or near the Little Mount. His body was brought to the town of Mylapore and was buried in a holy shrine he had built. As the tradition goes, Christians from Malabar, West Asia and even from China used to go on pilgrimage to Mylapore and venerate the tomb (29).

This tradition necessitates the understanding of the features of the early Christians and how the Christians who lived here resisted and fought against colonialism how they received Marian piety before the arrival of missionaries, its nature, and how they survived in this land. Marian Cult in the cultural contexts of South India is thus intrinsically connected to the history of Christianity in India. When the missionaries arrived, as Miri Rubin observes, they were shocked to see the Christians completely different from them:

In southern India, European traders met the communities of Christians who held St Thomas as their apostle, and whose sacred language was Syriac, the language of some of the earliest Mary-poetry. Along the coasts of Africa and Asia contacts between Christians and non-Christians were centuries old and Mary fitted into fragile patterns of coexistence (357).

The Syrian Catholics in Kerala, who claimed to have received the faith from the disciple of Jesus, St. Thomas were considered as the first Christian Community in India. They were popularly known as St. Thomas Christians or Nasranis. Their history was also linked with the intricate caste system that existed at that time. It is believed that St. Thomas came to the coastal part of Kerala in AD 52 and converted Brahmins to the Christian faith (Thomas 22). The historical accuracy of this information is still disputable. They were traders and warriors owning land and were supported by the rulers of that time. They remained a privileged group with the right to land and trade and were exempted from taxes. It is said that they stood between the upper-caste Brahmins and the lower-caste people in the social strata of that period. Nasranis were allowed to have slaves at home and to have private armies like Hindu upper-caste

people. They supported the caste system and slavery even at the beginning of the twentieth century (Thomas 23).

Apart from the Syrian Catholics, a group of Christians with their leader Thomas of Kana was believed to have come to the coastal area of Kerala known as Knanaya Christians in AD 345. They came from the Middle East, reportedly fleeing persecution in their homeland. The seventy families associated with the Syrian Catholics maintained relationships with the Chaldean church and the Syrian Church of the East (Thomas 24). They kept their groups “pure”, avoiding marriages outside their community. But these people are also considered as part of the Syrian Christians as Thomas of Kana was a great trader and had ties with the rulers of the regions in present Kerala.

After Vasco de Gama paved the way for Missionaries to arrive in India, Portuguese missionaries started converting people to Christianity. St. Francis Xavier converted “Mukkuvar”, the fishermen caste of the coastal area up to the area of Goa as the Portugues agreed with the King of Venad to get these people under the church patronage. Those Converted Christians were known as Latin Catholics. They were not considered Syrian Catholics because of the differences in caste and rite. The attempts to convert the Syrian Catholics to the rite of Portuguese Christians, i.e., Latin Catholicism, ended up in rifts. Portuguese missionaries demeaned the Syrian Catholics as Nestorians who followed Nestorian heresy (Joseph 99). It was a heresy in the Church based on the theological understanding of Christ. A group of people led by Nestorius, the archbishop of Constantinople who belonged to the Armenian Church believed that Jesus Christ has two separate personalities, God and human. He suggested that since Mother Mary is the mother of the human Jesus, she cannot be

addressed as *Theotokos*, the mother of God. In the council of Ephesus in AD 451, Nestorianism was condemned as heresy by the majority under the leadership of archbishop mar Cyril. However, the Christians of the East who respected Nestorius as the great theologian accepted his perspectives. Since the Syrian Catholics in Kerala had strong connections with the Eastern Church, they came under the influence of Nestorianism. At present, the Catholic Church accepted that there was a mistake in interpreting the meaning of the word *Theotokos*, and thus it cannot be considered as heresy.

Mother Mary veneration and its mode during this period was not documented. Since the Nasranis were under the influence of the Eastern Church, some historians argue that they may not have used any icons or images in their churches. However, it is said that the Udayamperur Synad tried to erase the traditional practices of Nasranis, in which the eight-day lent taken on behalf of Mother Mary included. The Portuguese missionaries considered this kind of Mother Mary cult idolatrous. This *Ettu noyambu* (eight- days lent) is not canonical for the church, but it is celebrated in India and some Arabian Countries. It is believed that this lent is celebrated to protect the chastity and dignity of women. Women gathered together in the churches and stayed in temporary shelters constructed near the church premises, cooked meals together, and spent time in prayers attending holy mass, and reciting the rosary. This Marian cult was practiced before the arrival of missionaries.

In 1599, there was a dictatorial attempt to make the Syrian Catholics latinised in the historical Udayamperur Synad. However, most Syrian Catholics who came as a group rejected the attempts by taking the *Koonen Kurishu* Oath on 3rd January 1653 by holding onto the rope tied around the cross at Mattancherry. Around twenty

thousand men publicly declared that they never accepted the Portuguese hierarchy and their special rights known as *Padroado*. As a result, St Thomas Christians were divided into two groups as new Christians and old Christians (*Puthen Kootukar* and *Pazhaya kootukar*). The new Christians who participated in the *Koonen Kurishu Oath* are now known as Syrian Orthodox Christians or Jacobites (Thomas 27-29).

In 1889, there was another split in the Jacobite group due to the Anglican church's influence, and a small group was formed known as Marthoma. In the early period of the twentieth Century, the Jacobites were divided into two factions known as the Malankara Orthodox Christians (the Methran faction) and the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Christians (the Bava faction). They are similar in liturgy but divided due to certain rifts. But in 1930, under the leadership of Archbishop Mar Geevarghese Ivanios, a minority of Malankara Orthodox Christians united with Rome, and they were known as Syro-Malankara rite. This group is Roman Catholic in doctrine and jurisdiction but Jacobite in their liturgy. The old Christians who did not participate in the *Koonen Kurishu* oath are known as Syro-Malabar Christians at present and they form the majority of the Christian population in Kerala. “The Syro-Malabar Catholics were under the authority of foreign Carmelite bishops for centuries and were granted indigenous bishops only in 1896. In 1992, the Syro-Malabar Church became a major archiepiscopal sui juris church and is recognized by the Vatican as an Eastern rite of Catholicism” (Thomas 27). All these groups, Syro Malabar, Syro Malankara, Marthoma, Knanaya Christians, the Malankara Orthodox Christians (the Methran faction), and the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Christians (the Bava faction) are together known as Syrian Christians. But Syro Malabar Rite, Syro Malankara Rite, and Latin rite come together to form Roman Catholicism in Kerala. The Roman Catholic

Church is centralized under the Pope, while the Jacobite Syrian Christian Church (Malankara Syrian Orthodox Church) accepts the spiritual leadership of the Patriarch of Antioch (Thomas 28-30).

The cultural and social life of Nasranis in the early periods was interlinked with the Nayar community. Along with them, the Nasranis were considered warriors and protectors of the Local Kings. They learned Kalarippayattu and martial arts, and upon completing their training, they were granted the right to carry swords (Menon 342-352). This position was highly respected in society, and they were treated as land-owning upper-caste individuals. Intermarriages between the Nayar community and the Nasranis were common, and the rituals and practices of both groups had striking similarities. The ritual known as *Chatham*, performed after the death of a family member, was observed by both religious groups as Bayly observes; “Many of their birth, puberty, and marriage rites were almost indistinguishable from domestic rituals enacted by high-ranking Hindu Malayalees, and they shared the same terminology for many of these rites with the region's caste Hindus” (Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings*, 252). Nasranis were also granted privileges, such as owning slaves or domestic help. Caste discrimination practices of that time were prevalent among Nasranis as well. Missionaries often described the Syrian Christians or Nasranis as “Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Oriental in worship” (Thomas 23). Nasranis were vegetarians; rice, vegetables, and milk formed the typical diet, and they refrained from consuming meat and liquor (Payyappilly 28). Their expertise in trade, especially with foreign merchants, earned the Nasranis a prominent position in society. Historians like Dalit Bandhu N. K. Jose suggest that these privileges were

granted to Nasranis by local kings to impress foreign traders, who were an important source of income for the kingdom (Payyappilly 30).

The similarities in rituals and rites elevated the Nasranis to a Savarna status in the social hierarchy, granting them privileges such as access to temples and sacred spaces. There was a belief that a Christian male could remove a Brahmin's ritual impurity through touch, thus freeing the Brahmin from the need to undergo purification rituals (Thomas 22). Additionally, it is said that the Brahmin community often preferred Christian families as neighbours, as their touch was considered capable of purifying oil pressed by lower-caste individuals from coconuts.

This acceptance of Syrian Catholics by the local Kings enabled them to construct churches for their religious needs. Most of the churches they built were under the patronage of Hindu rulers. It is said that the funds and timber to construct certain churches were granted by the Kings. "Hindu rulers endowed and protected Syrian churches in the same way as they patronized Hindu temples. These acts of benefaction served to incorporate the Syrians' holy places into the networks of shrines and temples which comprised the Hindu king's domain" (Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings*, 251). The Savarna Nasranis were allowed to enter into the temples and allowed to attend the festivals. The elephants were sent to the Churches from the temples for the church festivals. Special lights and decorated umbrellas were sent from churches as well as temples during festival seasons. Most of the ancient churches and temples were adjacent to each other.

The cultural encounter between Christians in Kerala and European rulers, along with differences in rituals, prayer services, and culture, created significant

trouble. The Kattanars of Nasranis were dressing up in the same way as the other believers. They used oil and water for baptism as Hindus did for their rituals. Moreover, their prayers were in Syriac, not in their mother tongue Malayalam. When the beef-eating and hard-drinking style of the Portuguese missionaries gave the Nasranis a cultural shock, the Indianized, syncretic lifestyle of the Nasranis enraged the missionaries. Nasranis were forced to follow the Latin Catholic rite by the missionaries, abandoning their Syrian prayers. The missionaries made strenuous efforts to change their liturgy by correcting their prayer books. Thomas Christians, who saw their whole way of life threatened, seeing what their ancestors had nurtured and preserved for untold generations endangered, resisted as best they could. The missionaries said that their faith and forms of worship were flawed by idolatrous communities surrounding them and could be treated as heresy. Everything handed down to them from their traditions was unacceptable; and that their family ceremonies, customs, and traditions were an abomination, St. Thomas Christians sought to defend themselves (Frykenberg 134-35). At the same time, the St Thomas Christians were experiencing the othering from the missionaries; they were already Christians, but they were treated as the other Christians (Joseph 101).

Meanwhile, the Portuguese Missionaries entered the regions of Tamil Nadu and converted Paravars, the pearl trading community in the sixteenth century. Their conversion changed the hitherto lower caste status of that community. During this time, shrines dedicated to saints and Mother Mary began to appear along the coastal trade routes (Bayly 324). Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary was there to preach the gospels to the people in the coastal area with a small group of interpreters and he did massive conversions in the history of India. Through his aura and spiritual power, he

attracted many people and after his departure, the missionaries completed the task of conversion and gave the Paravars privileges in the churches. “This mass conversion was based in part on a military agreement between the King of Venad and the Portuguese, which shifted the Mukkuvar community from royalty-based patronage to a church-based one” (Thomas 26). These Christians from the fisher- caste are known as Latin Christians and their caste and rite make them different from the Syrian Catholics.

Robert Nobili, a Roman Jesuit missionary who came to Tamil Nadu, immersed himself deeply in the local culture by adopting the lifestyle and customs of a Brahmin, as part of the Madurai mission. He began one of the earliest Christian missionary projects of “cultural accommodation” (Pickering 104) in Madurai. He became well-versed in the Vedas and Puranas, engaging in theological discourses about God with Brahmin priests. Through these discussions, he attempted to convince them of the teachings of Christ and converted some to Christianity. Nobili refused to identify with the name “Phurangi” by which the Christians were addressed, he appointed Brahmin cooks and became a vegetarian (Zupanov 5). However, Nobili initially misunderstood the Sanskrit texts as the core of the Indian belief system, focusing exclusively on the upper-caste Brahmins. “In de Nobili’s view, religion was ultimately a matter of spiritual realities, belief and liturgy, and the mission’s task was to present the distinctive soteriological message of the Gospel in Indian social and cultural form” (Mosse 81). Converts were not required to adopt new cultural identities or to abandon caste customs according to him. After twenty years of attempting to proselytize the upper caste, he realized his methods were insufficient to reach every caste in India. Additionally, the Paravars or Mukkuvars, influenced by

Portuguese authority, were suspicious of Nobili, while the Portuguese authorities themselves disapproved of his adoption of what they considered a pagan lifestyle and practices. This further complicated his mission, limiting his success and acceptance among the local populations and the Portuguese Church.

By the nineteenth century, Syrian Christians in Malabar began to lose their once-privileged positions, including their roles as key office-bearers in royal courts. At the same time, internal religious disputes within the community reached a peak by straining their harmonious relationships with other religious groups and weakening their military connections. The collapse of the traditional military system in Malabar, driven by the region's shifting political issues, had a particularly negative impact on the Christian soldiers who had long served the local kings. Additionally, the transition of local rulers toward modern weaponry, introduced by foreign powers, diminished the significance of martial arts. It also reduced the stature of the Syrian Christian warriors.

The decline in the export of goods and commodities, which had once flourished in the Malabar region, also contributed to the community's diminishing influence. Disruptions to vital overland trade routes compounded these economic difficulties and reduced Malabar's importance as a trading hub. These socio-cultural and economic shifts brought about a significant and unprecedented decline in the status of Syrian Catholics in the region. At the same time, the Syrian Catholics in Cochin adopted the lifestyle of the Brahmanical upper caste and they said that their ancestors were converted Brahmans by St. Thomas. Bayly observes:

A further sign of this change was a significant alteration in the group's caste lifestyle, that is in the set of customs and observances which defined them in relation to other communities and caste groups. This was apparently what James Forbes was describing in his *Oriental Memoirs*, published in 1813, when he declared, 'Many of the St Thome Christians now preserve the manners and mode of life of the brahmins as to cleanliness, and abstaining from animal food. Francis Buchanan also found signs of a shift to vegetarianism and a 'clean' Brahmanical lifestyle among the Syrians of Cochin, particularly among the Katanars, who appeared to be leading this move to 'Brahmanise' the group's customs. (*Caste, Society and Politics in India*, 284)

According to Bayly, the remarkable loss in social status and incentives might have led the Syrian Catholics to use this high-status theory of inception. However, it is undeniable that they were enjoying the privileges of Savarna up to the eighteenth century. She further added that there was a trend in many parts of India to get Brahmanised as part of the new state-building policy. Bayly connects it with Marthandavarma's attempts to introduce new festivals and temple construction projects. In Tamil Nadu, the Paravar community changed their rites and practices to gain social status and respect during this time (Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, 284-285).

The religious separation between Hindus and Christians widened due to local disputes that allegedly occurred in the Cenannur district, where Christians were forbidden from entering temple proximities. They were deemed polluted and no different from lower caste converts according to Savarna Hindus. Consequently, the

rituals performed together in religious harmony were suspended. In 1841, several outbreaks aimed to exclude Syrian Catholics from temple premises. This resulted in changes to longstanding rituals, such as carrying the statue of St. Thomas during the Ambalapuzha temple festival processions. (Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, 286). By the mid-1880s, the disputes with Hindu and Syrian Catholics reached their zenith, and their entry to the temples was completely banned. The riots and inter-communal battles especially at the time of festivals worsened their harmony. Beyond the divisions between Hinduism and Christianity, internal conflicts among Christians also contributed to their decline. But it is impossible to erase the cultural memory of generations where people share common religious and cultural practices.

Christianity was not alienated and a stand-alone religion in India when it integrated with its soil. This integration and appropriation led to Christianity having its cultural roots, and people who embraced the faith were not considered foreign in this land. The cultural and religious amalgamation resulted in the coexistence of different religions within the cultural frames of Kerala. The history of Christianity in Kerala is thus intertwined with the complex caste system and social structures that have developed over the centuries. After the arrival of foreign missionaries, the cultural interchanges were reshaped and reappropriated. The cross-examination of the rituals and practices indicates the layers of historical and cultural interchange with foreign and local elements. The caste system, the impact of colonialism, and its aftermath will shed light on the formation of the present Christian identity. Thus, it highlights the importance of analysing history to comprehend the trails through which Christian identity has been shaped over the centuries. Since the social and cultural life

of Christians is closely linked to the Churches, it is essential to examine the syncretic practices in the churches associated with Mary cult.

In addition to the socio-cultural changes of the nineteenth century, the religious landscape of Kerala experienced significant transformations. Jesuit missionaries aimed to revive ancient religious practices, such as processional rites and the veneration of Mary and other saints. This revival served as a reminder of the harmonious ties that once existed between different religious groups. While these localized practices gradually flourished in various regions, the nature of that harmony could never be fully restored by reflecting the complexities of the changing religious dynamics in Kerala. Surprisingly, some parts of Kerala have preserved their traditions and maintained religious harmony by continuing to practice intermingled rituals associated with their churches.

Churches play important roles in defining Christianity. They not only ensure the spiritual development and growth of individuals but also their well-being in social, cultural, and political realms. The emergence of churches in Kerala is linked to the arrival of St. Thomas and the belief that he established seven and a half churches in South India. The initial style of service in these churches involved gathering to pray to God and sharing bread in His name. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that St. Thomas established these communities as spiritual gatherings rather than physical church buildings. Almost all the historians agree with the fact that there were Christian communities from the early period onwards though the exact whereabouts are disputable. However, these churches have played profound roles in changing the cultural, social, and political map of India, especially Kerala. To understand the history of Christianity, it is vital to know how churches evolved as a space for

religious, spiritual, and cultural gatherings. This institutionalized structure in Christianity has become one of the important factors that work with specific activities for the spiritual growth of individuals. At present, “The Christian churches in India are often seen as an important site of cultural interaction” (Kennedy 155).

As “India was precolonially Christian” (Joseph 29), there were gatherings and prayers in the churches. The churches in South India were said to be modeled after the style and structure of Indian temples. The similarity was so noticeable that Vasco da Gama once mistook a temple for a Christian church and honoured the goddess Kali, thinking she was a localized version of Mary (Joseph 71). Since churches had to accommodate a larger number of believers compared to temples, they were often reconstructed to fit the growing Christian population in a particular area. None of the churches in India today are as old as the temples in terms of construction. Moreover, the resemblance of the churches to temples enraged Portuguese missionaries, who destroyed many of the older churches and rebuilt them in a Gothic style. This led to the loss of the indigenous appearance of South Indian churches, which gradually evolved to adopt a more Westernized aesthetic over time. It is a common misconception that “Symbolized by its European churches, Western clerical dress and liturgy, Christianity in India has also been judged as a legacy of the colonial past” (Mosse 79). However, the antiquity and heritage of Christian churches in South India trace back to the very beginnings of Christianity itself.

Most churches in South India, dating back to the arrival of St. Thomas, were dedicated to Mother Mary. The practice of naming churches likely emerged later as more churches were established. Some were renamed after Mary following the arrival of missionaries. Several of these Marian churches are closely associated with

apparitions of Mary, where she is believed to have requested church in her name, often followed by miraculous events. Globally, many Marian apparition narratives share a similar structure, with Mary making specific requests and performing miracles. The churches which are popular with Marian apparitions and pilgrim centres are across South India and the practices are deeply enrooted in the cultural specificities and nuances of each locality.

Marian shrines and churches, often constructed following suggestions made by Mary in apparitions and eventually validated by miracles, maintain their sacred status through numerous oral narratives of healing and divine intervention. These oral traditions generate a sense of hope and awe, deeply tied to the specific locality. Thus, Mother Mary becomes an integral part of both the church and the surrounding community, connecting the apparition to a particular place. Though the themes of oral narratives about Mother Mary may have universal resonance, the distinct local flavour gives each apparition a unique identity. As a result, Mother Mary is often associated with the specific name of the locality, such as “Velankanni Mata,” “Kuravilangadu Muthi,” “Koratty Muthi,” or “Manarkad Amma.” In these cases, the place name and the Marian shrine become synonymous, making the apparition and the church an inseparable part of the region's cultural and religious identity.

These oral narratives not only elevate the status of individual churches but also transform them into prominent pilgrimage centres, attracting devotees and enhancing their reputations. Apart from that, these churches bring significant economic benefits to the surrounding communities, as pilgrimage sites create opportunities for local businesses. People in these regions can engage in various businesses, such as selling images, miniature statues, and other essential devotional items. Temporary homestays

and hotels also thrive near pilgrimage centres. Along with the church associated with the apparition, the entire region experiences drastic transformation, opening up numerous opportunities for development and growth irrespective of the religion. Beyond their religious significance, these churches contribute to the social, cultural, and economic prosperity of the regions in which they are located.

Distinct cult practices, such as adorning Mother Mary statues with sarees, organizing rosary processions, offering special prayers, and holding candlelight vigils make these church sites unique. The appropriation of Mary within diverse cultural contexts, as reflected in these practices evokes curiosity, which ultimately forms the basis of this thesis. The flourishing of Marian cult practices, through syncretic elements, requires deeper exploration to understand how the stories are integrated with the cultural nuances of the region. It is equally important to examine how these narratives resonate within the local cultural psyche, often infused with myths and folklore. However, the major focus of this thesis is the religious syncretic practices associated with the localization of Mother Mary, and how she is appropriated and indigenized into the cultural landscapes of South India. It also explains how theological doctrines are understood and interpreted in the multi-religious contexts of South India.

The objective of the study focuses on the methods and practices followed by select churches in Kerala and Tamil Nadu to demonstrate how Mother Mary cult has been localized through rituals and practices adopted from Indian culture. The syncretic or inculturation practices promoted by the Second Vatican Council serve as foundational examples, showing how Christians in these regions have developed their own Indianized customs that are interwoven with the local socio-cultural fabric. Here

in the select regions of South India, power relations will always be reflected in the religious spaces as the interconnections between culture, religion, and history are inseparable. “In the Tamil countryside, religious institutions and their festivals have long been central to the exercise of dominance and control in local and regional political systems” (Mosse 80). Understanding the syncretic practices necessitates discussing the interrelationship of power with culture and religion. Apart from that, though the influence of colonization and appropriation has changed the lives of both Tamil and Kerala Christians, they have “fashioned for themselves not only a certain distance from colonial and postcolonial powers but also some leverage in mitigating the foreigners' effect upon domestic cultures.” (Dempsey 15). It necessitates understanding the syncretic practices and rituals envisaged and promoted by local cultures in the Marian Cult.

Moreover, the thesis explores the centrality of Mother Mary in Christianity, examining whether her apparition narratives accelerate the religion's growth and adaptation in South India. This analysis offers a different kaleidoscopic view of Christianity which relies on a female figure for its propagation in these contexts despite its patriarchal origin. Christianity was reached here by the Apostle of Christ, and his gospel was Christ himself. But the scrutinized exploration of the spread of Christianity explains how Mother Mary is integrated into the cultural landscape of South India, where multiple Mother Goddess traditions prevail. The study seeks to examine how Mother Mary's piety is reflected in the spread of Christianity in South India. The role of apparitions and the accompanying miracle stories is analysed in this thesis to understand Marian cult practices.

The narratives of Marian apparitions play a crucial role in the establishment of new churches dedicated to Mother Mary, transforming them into popular pilgrimage centres in India, particularly in South India. These stories are instrumental in spreading Christianity, exhibiting structural similarities with apparition accounts from various global contexts. However, each apparition typically gives rise to a new church that embodies localized cultural practices, often mirroring the rituals associated with the region's local deities. The syncretic practices stemming from these apparitions are deeply intertwined with the accompanying narratives. This thesis engages with the localization of apparition stories and examines their significant role in promoting the cult of Mother Mary in South India.

By investigating whether Mother Mary piety is used as a medium for propagating Christianity in South India through syncretic religious elements, this thesis not only highlights her profound significance within the Church but also examines whether she is being perceived and revered as an “invisible goddess” within the local cultural framework. The role and impact of apparition stories in introducing and integrating Mother Mary into a foreign cultural landscape is another unexplored area that this thesis addresses. It also examines the means through which Mother Mary is made familiar to local people. While this thesis explores the phenomenon of apparitions, it does not focus on their authenticity, originality, or the debates surrounding their acceptance or denial. Instead, it treats apparitions as widely discussed events within the context of cultural reception and syncretism.

Another objective of the study focuses on the syncretic elements in Marian Cult within the broader theoretical framework of Cultural Studies, rather than delving deeply into folklore or mythical narratives. However, since cultural syncretism

inherently involves aspects of power, resistance, myths, and folklore, the thesis incorporates discussions of these themes. It also explores the psychoanalytic dimension of apparitions to explain their impact on the religious and cultural psyche of the people. While cultural syncretism serves as the central theoretical focus, the thesis expands its scope to engage with cultural theory but does not limit itself solely to this framework.

The concept of syncretism falls under the broad umbrella of Cultural Studies that is synonymous with the term inculturation according to Mortillaro, “the meaning of that process of adaptation, interpenetration and mixing of different elements that characterizes the encounter of Christianity with local cultures” (124). The term has been widely used in religious contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to describe the blending of two distinct cultures, defined as “a situation where there is a mixture of heterogeneous elements” (Boyer 268). Over time, especially after the rise of postcolonialism, its meaning has evolved to reflect the interactions between different cultures as Charles Stewart notices, “syncretism describes the process by which cultures constitute themselves” (124). In syncretism, it preserves the nuances of cultures when different cultures blend together.

Psychological, social, and historical mechanisms, which are vital factors in the evolution of religion, play significant roles in shaping and defining the idea of syncretism. Thus, syncretism contributes to different fields of Anthropology, Theology, religious studies, and Cultural studies referring to the “borrowing, affirmation, or integration of concepts, symbols, or practices of one religious tradition into another by a process of selection and reconciliation” (Berlin 9). It can be studied

in sociological, anthropological and historical contexts. However, this thesis limits its scope to religion.

Syncretism had a pejorative connotation as it declared the supremacy of one religious power over the other. The word syncretism was “used in a negative way, implying that syncretism was related to a form of dangerous hybridization, whereas inculturation was associated with a serious effort of adaptation conducted by theologians” (Mortilaro 124). According to Mortilaro, the negative connotation was attributed to this term by the seventeenth century after Lutheran reformation. When this term was used in the context of theology during the seventeenth century, it had a pejorative meaning as it was associated with destroying the identity of the religion by spoiling its pure nature. Though in the present century, this word attained a positive strategy in the multicultural parlance to stop conflicts, it had been perceived as “the corruption of truth” (Van der Veer 186). Catholic Church prefers to use the term inculturation instead of the word syncretism as it indicates the hegemonical power structures associated with it. Many consider syncretism as a “term of abuse often applied to castigate colonial local churches which had burst out from the sphere of mission control and begun to “illegitimately” indigenize Christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of Christianity which had originally been offered” (Stewart 265). Instead of this term church depended on the term “inculturation” coined by the theologian Masson in 1962 (Mortilaro 125) and it was used in the Vatican Council II. However, in the present context, syncretism is synonymously used with this term.

Syncretism inherently involves the acknowledgment of differences, particularly within the Indian context. It reflects “a politics of difference and identity,”

where the concept of power is essential to its understanding (Van der Veer 185). Given its connection to power dynamics, syncretism in India is perceived with both positive and negative connotations. On one hand, it signifies tolerance and cultural interconnectedness through the acceptance of foreign religions. On the other hand, it can also suggest the dominance of one religion, which may be viewed as the authentic and pure form, thereby marginalizing others. Within India's multicultural landscape, syncretism carries deeper and more complex meanings.

In his essay “Syncretism, Power, and Play”, Andre Droogers argues that syncretism encompasses more than simply the merging of two cultures or religions. If the focus is on the process of religious blending, the term syncretization is more appropriate. However, when analysing the final result, it may manifest in various forms of syncretism, including symbiosis, amalgamation, acculturation, metamorphosis, identification, and dissolution, depending on how the intertwining of cultures occurs (Droogers 224). According to Droogers, syncretism inherently involves power dynamics, particularly when a new religion “adopts elements from the popular religion” (226).

In India, where religious harmony and secularism are foundational principles in a democratic society, syncretism can be seen across various religious landscapes. India's pluralistic outlook has long attracted global attention for its tolerance of diverse faiths. However, this religious tolerance is increasingly under threat, deliberately undermined by recent political agendas. The wounds created by religious intolerance are difficult to heal, as they deeply affect the delicate core of a nation's identity. Therefore, it is crucial to revisit India's once-celebrated pluralism, where

different religions were welcomed, and distinct spaces of worship and protective laws were provided.

In this socio-cultural context, studying the syncretic elements that once shaped religious encounters is essential. The “Indianization” of foreign religions, evident throughout history, speaks to a legacy of cultural integration. As meta-narratives are constructed and histories rewritten with the intent to spread division and hatred, it is crucial to be reminded of the syncretic practices that shaped and enriched cultures, fostering unity rather than division. The syncretic practices shed light on how tolerance, resistance, and adaptation of Syrian Catholics make them unique. They are not isolated or separated communities nor merely products of Western colonization; they are Indians with rich cultural and religious practices that are deeply rooted in Indian culture.

The remnants of the syncretic past, embedded in contemporary religious practices, are analysed through the rituals observed in the selected churches of this study. Churches dedicated to Mother Mary have been chosen specifically because it is largely through her that the Church facilitated localization and syncretic practices. The understanding of syncretic elements in Christianity based on the Mother Mary cult and apparition narratives in Kerala and Tamil Nadu contexts seems to be an unexplored area where the study was limited to the cultural contexts of Tamil Nadu. Since the oral narratives on the establishment of the select churches are the major concerns of the study, the focus was on collecting the materials from the church archives. The booklets and pamphlets collected from the select churches are used as primary materials to describe the oral tales along with certain non-fictional and critical works on Mother Mary. The booklets, *Velankanni Shrine History* (2005) by

Shrine Publications, *Vallarpadathamma (The Mother of Vallarpadam- 2017)* by Fr. Shaiju Thoppil, *Kuravilangadum MariyaDarshanavum (Kuravilangand and Marian Apparition 2020)*, the edited work by Dr. Joseph Thadathil, *Marth Mariam Church, Kuravilangadu Guide to the Pilgrims (2016)* published by the Promotion Council of Marth Mariam Church, Kuravilangadu, *Emme Dalaha Parish Bulletin (April 2024)*, *Kuravilngadu Font and Foundation (2019)* published by Pigrim Promotion Council, and edited by Rev. Dr. Joseph Thadathil, Marth Maiam Archdeacon Pigrim Church, *Kurayathe Kakkunnaval Kuravilangad Muthiyamma (2019)* by Benny Kochery, *The Cultural Heritage of Kuravilangadu (2019)* the edited work by Mathew Alappatumedayil and Kuriakose Kappiliparambil published by the Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, India Publications, and *Sanghasmrithi Vol.I Korattippallyum Puthrimarum Oru Charithrackyanam (2017)* by Dr Ignatious Payyappilly have been used as the primary materials for collecting the oral narratives, apparition stories and the history of the select churches for the study.

The work, first published by Oxford University Press in 1976 and the edition in 2013 with a new preface, *Alone of Her All Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* written by Maria Warner is one of the primary texts chosen for the study which speaks about how the Marian cult is shaped and reshaped through different centuries along with the social, historical and cultural changes. More focusing on the mythological and feminist approach, the work details on the symbolic representation of Mary through the Western lens. By addressing Mary through an interdisciplinary approach Warner points out the major concerns of motherhood and the virginity of Mary and how they become the focal point in Marian devotion. From the ordinary woman of Nazareth, how Mary is adorned as the “queen of heaven” over time is

another major concern of the text. By dividing into five chapters as Virgin, Queen, Mother, Bride, and Intercessor, the book addresses the multiple roles given to Mother Mary and how her images have evolved over time. Mother Mary embodies both archetypal and mythical elements according to Warner,

By emptying history from the figure of Mary, all the various silks interwoven for centuries on the sensitive loom of the mind are deprived of context, of motive, of circumstance, and therefore seem to be the spontaneous expression of enduring archetypal ideas. Once the combination of historical and social circumstances is ignored, the reasons for such a symbol are also obscured, and the distortions and assumptions the symbol perpetuates in our lives become invisible (341-42).

The attributes of Mother Mary, developed over centuries in response to historical needs, have become “invisible” (Warner 342), accepted as natural within Christianity. As Roland Barthes observes, this is precisely the function of myth: “it transforms history into nature” (129). In this sense, the image of Mother Mary acquires seemingly universal, archetypal qualities associated with motherhood and divinity, even though, as Warner argues, “she is not the innate archetype of female nature, the dream incarnate; she is the instrument of a dynamic argument from the Catholic Church about the structure of society, presented as a God-given code” (344).

Miri Rubin’s *Mother of God A History of the Virgin Mary* (2009) is another primary text that focuses on the image of Mother Mary over centuries. It is a historical and cultural explanation of the understanding of Mary. According to her, it “is a history of the ideas, practices, and images that developed around the figure of the

Virgin Mary from the earliest times until around the year 1600. It is based on a wide range of source materials – music, poetry, theology, art, scripture, miracle tales” (Rubin xxi). Though Mary is less described in the Bible, she becomes a vital figure in Christianity and is revered as the mother of God. It is rich in profound detailing of cultural artifacts along with theological descriptions. It focuses on the documentary style of narration rather than providing a theoretical approach.

Māriyamman-Mariyamman: Catholic Practices and the Image of the Virgin in Velankanni (Tamil Nadu) is another key text by Brigette Sebastia, published by the French Institute of Pondicherry in 2002. This work focuses on the Velankanni apparitions and the establishment of the church, highlighting the paradigm shift in the region’s sociological, cultural, and social development. It explores how Mother Mary becomes indigenized alongside the Tamil deity Mariyamman, as devotees refer to her as 'Mary Amman.' Both Mariyamman and Mary Amman coexist in Tamil Nadu’s cultural context. The text examines how Mother Mary, by adopting certain attributes of Mariyamman and evolving into a perceived 'better version' of the deity, is integrated into Tamil Nadu's religious and cultural framework.

To explore the nature of the Marian cult in the West, several secondary sources are referenced, including *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (1992) by renowned sociologist and psychologist Michael P. Carroll. Carroll examines the cult of Mary through the lens of psychology, arguing that Marian devotion is rooted in unconscious human needs, as interpreted through Freudian theory. He discusses the influence of pagan goddesses on Mariology, particularly focusing on how the concepts of virginity and motherhood reflect societal tensions regarding women's roles and fertility. While Carroll provides valuable insights into

the psychological and theological foundations of Marian devotion, his analysis seems to be limited in scope, as he does not fully expand these ideas into broader cultural or historical contexts. More than that, he does not elaborate on the idea of cult through the text.

To dive into the history of Syrian Catholics in India, three major works have been analysed and used in the thesis as the secondary materials: *Saints, Goddesses, and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900* (2003) by Susan Bayly, *Privileged Minorities: Syrian Christianity, Gender, and Minority Rights in Postcolonial India* (2018) by Sonja Thomas, and *Christianity in India: The Anti-Colonial Turn* (2019) by Clara A. B. Joseph. Susan Bayly's work provides a comprehensive cultural history of Christians in South India, focusing on how their presence expanded and was integrated into the cultural contexts of South India between 1700 and 1900. Bayly explores how Christianity and Islam have been accepted in South India, and analyses how these faiths have adapted to local customs and beliefs. Her work offers a historical backdrop that shows how Syrian Christianity evolved within a complex cultural and religious setting, drawing attention to the syncretic practices that shaped their identity.

Sonja Thomas's *Privileged Minorities* focuses on the postcolonial period, by focusing nuanced examination of Syrian Christians' socio-cultural evolution in Kerala, especially regarding gender and minority rights. A major part of her study looks at the development of distinct dress codes for Christians in Kerala and how these codes symbolized identity, status, and religious differences. While her first chapter provides a historical overview of Syrian Catholics, the emphasis is on how these historical identities were reshaped in the modern era through practices like dress

and behaviour, which became markers of privilege and social status. The detailed historical and cultural analysis of St Thomas Christians intricately linked to the caste system is analysed in the text. She also examines the identity of women in the postcolonial society where “a normative “dominant woman” paradigm has emerged that privileges upper-caste and middle-class experiences over and against other expressions of womanhood mediated by caste, class, race, and religion” (Thomas 6). It also explores the role of religion in shaping the identities of women and examines how clothing “concretely marks the limits of intersectional group inclusion and exclusion” (Thomas 16).

In *Christianity in India: The Anti-Colonial Turn*, Clara A. B. Joseph analyses how the St Thomas Christians reacted to colonisations and how the syncretic practices and assimilated cultures changed over time. By presenting the brief history of St. Thomas Christians, she explores the medieval texts and “discusses the medieval perception of India as the native land of a community of Christians, the promise of hope and encouragement this view offered the West in its fight against Islamic communities, and the importance of remembering this in the context of the Thomas Christians of India” (Joseph 15). The work also details how Syrian Christians attempted to resist the dominance of Portugal by analysing the texts, *Three Voyages of Vasco Da Gama and His Viceroyalty*, and “The Narratives of Joseph the Indian,” which concerns a Thomas Christian priest who is believed to have travelled to Lisbon with the famous explorer Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1501. This book also details how St. Thomas Christians were treated by the Portuguese by labelling the St. Thomas Christians as heretics with their political and religious superiority.

Kerala Christian Sainthood: Collisions of Culture and Worldview in South India (2001) is Corrine D Dempsey's work on the saint cult in Kerala. It elaborates on the role of sainthood in shaping Kerala Christian identity creating a complex cultural hybridity by mixing up local and Western elements. The author explores how Keralite Christians reinterpret the colonial religious systems by analysing St. Alphonsa and St George and how these cults become unique in their own way, delineating the local style of venerating the saints. This cult includes the process of reappropriation that cannot be completely deviated from Western ideologies, but the religious practices balance both the flavours of local and foreign and reshape themselves to fit into the local cultural contexts according to Dempsey.

Through the chapters, the book scrutinizes the ways saint traditions in Kerala foster communal relationships and reflect broader socio-cultural dynamics. It explains how local stories and festivals portray Christian saints and Hindu deities as familial figures, symbolizing Hindu-Christian interdependence within village communities. In contrast to official narratives, these local traditions highlight an ambivalence in sacred power, where devotees encounter both blessings and punishments. Dempsey analyses the interconnections between Christianity and Hinduism in rituals and practices, offering insights into cult practices and rituals that incorporate syncretic elements.

In *Historiography of Christianity in India* (2012), John C. B. Webster explores the development of Christianity in India, critiquing how early narratives often emphasized European missionary viewpoints. He points out that these accounts frequently overlooked the roles Indian Christians played in shaping their own religious identity, instead casting them as passive recipients of Western influence. Webster calls for a more balanced perspective that recognizes the significant

contributions of Indian Christians, especially in navigating complex issues like the caste system and adapting Christianity within the Indian cultural landscape.

Webster also delves into the social and political aspects of Indian Christianity, examining how Indian Christians have engaged with both their faith and their cultural context in a predominantly Hindu society. By emphasizing the agency of Indian Christians in these processes, he presents a version of Indian Christianity that is deeply integrated into Indian society and distinct from Western Christianity. His work advocates for a nuanced historiographical approach, one that appreciates the diverse experiences of Indian Christians and acknowledges their active role in the broader narrative of Indian religious history.

The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image (1993) by Anne Baring and Jules Cashford delves into the goddess symbolism in prehistorical societies and examines how the goddess archetypes influenced cultural and spiritual life. They analyse various goddess figures associated with nature, fertility, and cosmic order to understand the nuances of goddess worship that reflected humanity's reverence for life's interconnectedness. This spiritual perspective formed the basis of collective rituals and social bonds according to them (Baring and Cashford 112).

The book also discusses the impact of patriarchal structures, which led to a gradual suppression of the goddess's role and a shift towards male-centred religious systems. Goddess attributes were reduced or integrated into male deities, and they were detached from the natural world. In Christianity, The Virgin Mary, while revered as the "Queen of Heaven," is not seen as the "Queen of Earth," leaving her with attributes of a goddess yet not fully recognized as one (Baring and Cashford

ch.14). This shift, they suggest, has contributed to modern society's need for a balanced spirituality that could reconnect with goddess archetypes, promoting inclusiveness and spiritual fulfilment (Baring and Cashford ch.14).

Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary (2005)

by Francis Clooney analyses the themes of gender and the divine in theological contexts in detail. He translates three classical Hindu hymns in Sanskrit and one in Tamil to comprehend the descriptions and attributes of Sri, Devi, and Apirami and how Mother Mary can be placed along with them in the theological and cultural realms of Goddesses. Aware that Mother Mary's position in Christianity prevents her from being regarded as a goddess, Clooney explains three hymns dedicated to Mary alongside hymns to these goddesses to endorse an understanding of "the other" and provide theological perspectives on venerating Mary from within the framework of Hindu goddess worship.

God-Sent! The History of Accredited Apparitions of Mary (2018) by Roy

Abraham Varghese offers a theological analysis of Marian apparitions that have been recognized across various regions worldwide. Varghese contextualizes these apparitions historically and spiritually, exploring their profound impact on the faithful. Drawing on Biblical texts and Church studies, he interprets these appearances as divine messages meant to comfort and guide believers, especially in times of crisis. Emphasizing Mary's essential role in humanity's salvation, Varghese portrays her as an intervening figure who offers solace and guidance during moments of sorrow, asserting the authenticity of these events as channels for divine communication. Through numerous examples, he illustrates how these apparitions bridge the divine and human realms. The Church's recognition of these events reinforces their

theological significance, enhancing their spiritual authority. While Varghese acknowledges the cultural influence of these apparitions on regional religious practices, his work primarily centres on a theological understanding, which somewhat narrows its scope by limiting an in-depth cultural analysis.

In *Our Lady of the Nations: Apparitions of Mary in Twentieth-Century Catholic Europe* (2016), Chris Maunder presents a thorough historical, cultural, and political analysis of European Marian apparitions. Through both prominent and lesser-known cases, Maunder illustrates how these apparitions have intersected with socio-political issues, such as wartime fears and anti-communist sentiments. He explores the transformation of sites associated with Marian apparitions, as well as the Vatican's cautious stance towards emerging visions, creating a landscape of tension and reverence. Furthermore, Maunder reveals how evolving narratives of Mary through apparitions shape national and political identities, positioning Mary as a potent symbol of both spiritual and political expression. He also analyses the cults and shrines developed around the apparitions and how apparitions create “an international community of belief” (Maunder 1).

Moved by Mary: The Power of Pilgrimages in the Modern World (2009), edited by Anna-Karina Hermkens, Willy Jansen, and Catrien Notermans, is a collection of essays examining the importance of Christian pilgrimages, particularly those to Marian shrines. This anthology explores how pilgrimage experiences deeply influence individual identities, highlighting the strong emotional bonds pilgrims form with sacred sites, especially those associated with Mary. Divided into four sections, the essays illuminate the links between religious devotion and national identity, emphasizing the role of Marian devotion in fostering unity and collective spirit.

Combining insights from anthropology, sociology, and religious studies, the collection shows how pilgrimage practices evolve and remain meaningful across diverse cultural landscapes.

Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines (2002), edited by Selva J. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey, is a seminal work examining how Indian rituals and cultural practices intersect with an Indianized form of Christianity, illustrating the workings of syncretism through these interactions. By engaging with local cultural specificities, Christianity in India manifests a unique blend, distinct from Western ritual practices. The work explores how Christianity engages with other religions, maintaining its essential nature while adopting Indian cultural expressions. Worship and practices across different regions of India are closely intertwined with indigenous customs and rituals, challenging colonial binaries and embracing a syncretic religious identity. This adaptive and dynamic form of Christianity resists traditional exclusivist attitudes, highlighting its openness to cultural integration. Although the book does not specifically address Kerala's festivals and cultural practices, it offers a foundation for connecting Marian festivals to locally influenced customs.

The work, *Marian Apparitions in Cultural Contexts: Applying Jungian Concepts to Mass Visions of the Virgin Mary* (2019) by Valeria Céspedes Musso is a study that employs Jungian psychological theory to explore the phenomenon of Marian apparitions. It emphasizes Mary's roles as a maternal figure and a protector, underscoring her symbolic connection to the feminine dimensions of the human psyche. The analysis demonstrates how apparitions of Mary are deeply intertwined with cultural, social, and spiritual realities. By examining specific case studies of

apparitions, the work investigates themes such as collective yearning, cultural identity, and archetypal representations, offering an in-depth perspective on the enduring relevance of Marian visions in forming personal and group experiences.

American Patroness: Marian Shrines and the Making of US Catholicism (2024), edited by Katherine Dugan and Karen E. Park, is a recent anthology examining the enduring significance of Marian shrines in the United States. This collection addresses the central question, “Why and how do Marian shrines persist in the twenty-first century?” (Dugan and Park 2). Through a fresh perspective on American Catholicism, the essays analyse the dynamic role of Marian shrines, which continue to draw pilgrims from around the world. Additionally, the increase in virtual visits and online prayer services, especially post-pandemic, is shown to have transformed Marian devotion in American Catholicism, illustrating how digital engagement reshapes religious practice.

Chris Maunder's *Mary, Founder of Christianity* (2022) examines the theological understanding of Mary, focusing on her role in the New Testament and addressing modern trends in biblical studies. This work analyses how Mary has been assigned a subordinate role in the Jewish tradition and introduces a new perspective that challenges traditional understandings of her. It emphasizes Mary's active involvement throughout all stages of Jesus' life and asserts that she played a foundational role in the emergence of Christianity. The author urges readers to reconsider and recognize her significant contributions to the Christian faith by addressing her foundational role in Christianity and challenges the traditional role attributed to Mary.

Most scholarly works on Mary have originated in the Western world, often analysed through various theoretical frameworks. However, her role in India, particularly in the spread of Christianity, has not been thoroughly examined within its cultural context. Many churches in Kerala and Tamil Nadu are renowned Marian shrines and sites of apparitions, yet there is a noticeable lack of comprehensive studies on Marian cult practices in these regions. This gap presents an unexplored area that offers a valuable opportunity for research.

Flynn M. Fernandes' Ph.D thesis, *The Cosmic Mystery of Mary and the Action of the Holy Spirit: A Study of Marian Apparitions and Manifestations and Their Significance for the Pilgrim People of God* (2019), addresses Marian apparitions in Velankanni and other sites worldwide, exploring them in biblical and theological terms. However, it lacks a cultural analysis of these apparitions and the associated cult practices. This gap is precisely what the current research seeks to address.

Understanding the historical development of Christianity in India is crucial, as it reveals how the religion and local culture have blended over time. A cultural analysis of Marian cult practices is especially relevant in countering the rise of Hindutva ideologies, which often present Christianity as a foreign religion. By examining how the Mary cult intertwines with local goddess traditions, this research helps illuminate the syncretic nature of Christianity's evolution in India and offers a more nuanced understanding of the region's religious history.

The significance of this study lies in its examination of the methods and practices that have fostered the Marian cult in Kerala and Tami Nadu. In today's context, Marian apparitions and devotion need to be understood not only in terms of

their religious aspects but also for their cultural, social, and political importance. In its December 2015 issue, *National Geographic* highlighted Mary as “The Most Powerful Woman in the World,” (39) sparking discussions around her influence beyond Christianity. This portrayal underscores Mary’s universal appeal, whether as a symbol of hope or as a point of controversy, and emphasizes the need to study her role academically, particularly how she is contextualized through syncretic practices that blend local traditions with her global image.

The Marian cult in South India, especially Kerala and Tamil Nadu, forms a distinct type of devotion that is deeply embedded in the cultural framework of the regions. Mary, whose image transcends Christianity, is uniquely localized and intertwined with regional traditions, highlighting the importance of inculturation practices. Through these syncretic practices, Marian devotion adapts to the cultural context, transcending traditional religious boundaries and creating a distinctive form of worship. This dynamic adaptation of Marian devotion, enriched by oral traditions and folklore surrounding miracles and apparitions. It presents a valuable area for academic exploration, shedding light on how religions intersect and interact in complex cultural contexts.

This study is highly relevant within the current cultural and social landscape of India, where religious ideologies sometimes influence minority identities, often framing them as foreign or postcolonial and attempting to suppress their deep cultural heritage as part of India’s history. The Marian cult in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, particularly as associated with ancient Syrian Catholic churches and traditions, sheds light on the distinct identity of Syrian Catholics and their rootedness in the local culture. Although colonial policies, such as the British strategy of “divide and rule,”

created divisions among religious communities, these groups retain a rich cultural memory that reflects their legacy and heritage within the Indian context. Mother Mary's integration with South India's multi-goddess traditions makes her presence familiar and accessible, fostering a sense of "Indianness" that is enhanced, not disrupted, by syncretic practices.

In an era when debates on religious purity sometimes challenge India's secular ethos, the Marian cult provides an example of how cultural diversity has historically enhanced religious devotion and coexistence. Marian piety serves as a bridge between religions, facilitating interfaith dynamics and embodying a peaceful synthesis of traditions. Furthermore, in the wake of the pandemic, the resurgence of pilgrimages to Marian shrines and the comfort offered by devotional practices highlights the psychological and emotional support these traditions provide. This study thus opens avenues for exploring Marian piety's impact on individual lives and community resilience, offering a rich perspective for cultural and psychoanalytic scholarship.

The thesis consists of six chapters, including the introduction, conclusion, and an outline of the study's scope. The introductory chapter establishes a foundation by exploring the origins and historical development of Marian devotion, highlighting its cultural significance across centuries. This chapter also delves into the history of Christianity in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, illustrating the influence of regional customs and interactions on Marian worship in this area. The theoretical framework of syncretism from cultural studies is central to the analysis, allowing an examination of the fusion between religious and cultural elements within Marian devotion. Given the focus on the missionary era, the framework also incorporates considerations of power dynamics and inculturation, examining how Christian practices have intertwined with

local traditions to form unique expressions of faith. Additionally, the introduction outlines the research questions and objectives, emphasizing the study's importance and relevance to contemporary discussions. It provides a breakdown of each chapter's focus, clarifying how each section builds toward the study's aims. This chapter also includes a literature review, summarizing key research on religious syncretism, the history of South Indian Christianity, and Marian devotion, thereby setting the stage for the thesis and identifying research gaps that this work intends to fill.

The second chapter, titled "The Many Faces of Mother Mary: Socio-Cultural and Theological Perspectives on the Marian Cult Through History, Scriptures, and Literature," provides an in-depth analysis of devotion to Mother Mary. This chapter introduces Mary as depicted in the scriptures and examines her historical and cultural significance, tracing how her role within the Church has evolved over centuries. It discusses the various dogmas the Church has proclaimed regarding Mary and how these declarations have contributed to the development of Marian devotion. The chapter also covers Marian prayers and practices, illustrating how these devotions sustain the cult of Mary. Furthermore, it explores Mary's theological titles, such as *Theotokos* (God-bearer), perpetual virgin, queen, mediatrix, and co-redemptrix, and considers how these roles influence both nations and the faithful. This chapter concludes by reflecting on how Mary's enduring presence continues to shape religious practices and inspire devotion among believers.

The third chapter, titled "Sacred Stories and Sacred Spaces: The Role of Apparitions in Shaping the Marian Cult Across Different Cultural Contexts," examines the profound impact of Marian apparitions throughout history. It begins with a brief overview of significant apparitions, focusing on those at Fatima, Lourdes,

Medjugorje, Guadalupe, and La Vang. The chapter explores how these apparitions have transformed the socio-political and cultural landscapes of their respective nations and how they have led to the formation of new cult practices. It also analyses how Mother Mary is localized in places like Guadalupe and La Vang, integrating images and attributes of local goddesses into her representation. The discussion includes the influence of apparitions on the development of new religious practices and the factors that contribute to the occurrence of apparitions in specific cultural contexts. Furthermore, the chapter addresses how these apparitions foster a sense of community among believers, encouraging them to journey together in faith alongside Mary.

The fourth chapter, titled “From Apparitions to Devotion: The Role of Cultural Syncretism in the Evolution of the Marian Cult and Its Practices in South Indian Churches,” explores the various practices associated with the Marian cult in South Indian churches. It focuses on the select ancient churches renowned for their connections to Marian apparitions or Mary-related miracles, examining how these narratives and miracle stories have transformed the cultural landscape of South India, highlighting its distinctiveness compared to other regions. The chapter discusses the unique blending of Christianity with the intricate caste system in South India and its interconnections with the local multi-goddess tradition. It also addresses the pivotal role of Mother Mary in the spread of Christianity and the establishment of churches in the region. Through this analysis, the chapter illustrates how cultural syncretism has shaped Marian devotion and influenced the religious practices within South Indian communities.

The concluding chapter summarizes the findings of the study and reflects on the impact of the Marian cult in the South Indian context. It analyses the significance

of investigating syncretic practices within the churches and explores the reasons these practices continue to thrive in the contemporary era.

The sixth chapter elaborates on the scope of the study within various theoretical frameworks, highlighting how the figure of Mother Mary continues to influence socio-cultural, political, and historical landscapes worldwide. Through this exploration, the chapter emphasizes the enduring relevance of Marian devotion and its capacity to adapt to changing contexts. All the recommendations are presented in this chapter.

The methodology of this study adopts a multidisciplinary approach to explore the cult of Mary and its connection to ritualistic practices in select churches in South India. To assess the impact of miracle stories and apparition narratives, field visits to these churches have been conducted. The methodology also includes a qualitative analysis of the materials collected from the churches to gain a detailed understanding of the practices and festivals. Scholarly articles related to these festivals and practices are also examined, along with an analysis of oral histories and narrative. The study is situated within the broader framework of cultural studies, particularly emphasizing the concept of syncretism. Additionally, it incorporates psychoanalytical perspectives to analyse the nature of miracles and apparitions.

The research also delves into the complexities of the caste system and its relationship with power dynamics. Furthermore, it offers a comparative analysis of how devotion to Mother Mary transforms across different nations and cultures. Participatory observation of various church practices has been undertaken as an integral part of the study.

This thesis, titled *Exploring the Marian Cult and Syncretic Practices in the Select Churches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu*, aims to critically examine Marian

devotional elements through the perspective of cultural studies. By focusing on its practices, the study emphasizes the need to interpret religions within their cultural contexts, recognizing their strong ties to the socio-cultural nuances of specific regions. A comprehensive understanding of the Marian cult requires examining the social, cultural, theological, and historical dimensions of Mother Mary and tracing how these devotional practices have been transmitted and transformed across generations. The next chapter gives a detailed exploration of these themes, shedding light on the reciprocal influence between cultural and religious traditions.

Chapter II

The Many Faces of Mother Mary: A Socio-Cultural and Theological Perspectives on Marian Cult Through History, Scriptures, and Literature

Mother Mary occupies the paramount position in the Roman Catholic Church as the “mother of God”. She has the dignified singular identity above all saints. According to the Church, she is a virgin woman, conceived without sin, and assumed into heaven. These are the four dogmas that the Catholic Church highlights about Mary - her perpetual virginity, her immaculate conception, her assumption, and her position as the mother of God. Catholic Church believes that Mother Mary was born without sin of origin, she is conceived by the Holy Spirit so that her virginity is protected. The eternal God has no mother, yet Mary is uniquely privileged to be the mother of Jesus, who is both fully human and fully divine, thus earning the title of “Mother of God”. Since these dogmas are truths divinely revealed according to the Catholic Church, their denial or negligence is considered as heresy. The relentless post-Biblical growth of the narratives of Mary necessitates an analysis of her role in the Catholic Church which requires delving into historical and cultural contexts beyond the biblical accounts. Though the Bible provides limited narrations on Mary, primarily in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, it paves the way for the theological understanding of her role. Those rare appearances of Mary in the Biblical narratives are the milestones in the formation of Marian dogmas. Therefore, a careful analysis of what the Bible communicates about Mary is essential for a deeper understanding of her role.

In the Bible, the scant descriptions of Mary do not elaborate on her early life and growth. The gospels, written after the death of Christ around 30 A.D, aim to present him as the Son of God and the Savior of the world. In the Gospel of Matthew, the narration of Mary is included before describing the birth of Jesus. Matthew emphasizes that she is a virgin and recounts how the angel informed Joseph about Mary's pregnancy through the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25).

In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel directly approaches Mary and informs her of her conception by the Holy Spirit: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28). Although she is initially dubious about the news and states the famous words indicating her innocence and virginity, "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?" (Luke 1:34), the angel Gabriel continues, "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (Luke 1:35). Mary then accepts it as God's will and declares her consent, "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:26-38). She visits her relative Elizabeth, when she was informed that Elizabeth is pregnant for six months by the angel. Seeing Mary, the unborn child in her womb moves and Elizabeth praises Mary:

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. How have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord? (Luke 1:42-43)

These two evangelists state that Mary is a virgin mother chosen by God, highlighting the divinity and purity of her conception as to fulfil the prophecies in the

Old Testament about Messiah, “behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son” (Isaiah 7:14). These narratives are meant to highlight the lineage of Christ from the house of David. After her meeting with Elizabeth, Mary glorifies the Lord for blessing her with Messiah and for keeping His promise to the Israel by sending his son, which is popularly known as the Magnificat of Mary. “ Mary’s words of praise, so reminiscent of the sound of the psalms, may have seemed familiar and attractive to Jews who pondered the claims of Jesus’ followers” (Rubin 6). Mary is there in the Bible during the presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple, when the prophet Simeon warns her that “a sword will pierce her heart” (Luke 2:35), and the episode of seeking the missing Jesus’s in the Temple when he was twelve (Luke 2:39–52).

The inaugural public miracle of Jesus is tied to the intercession of Mary. This is one of the occasions which is marked as Mary directly talks to her son. At a wedding feast in Cana, Mary comes to know about the shortage of wine and brings the matter to Jesus' attention. Jesus replies, “Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servers, “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2: 4-5). Though Jesus’ reply has been interpreted in different ways, his timely response, turning water into wine, is considered as an example of Mary's intercession. This significant event serves as an illustration of Mary's influential role as an advocate and mediator, emphasizing her ability to bring about transformative solutions to human needs through her intercessory role.

When Jesus was in his last moments on the cross, he entrusted Mary to his disciple John. “He said to her, ‘Woman, here is your son’; and to the disciple, ‘here is your mother’. From that time on, the disciple took her into his home.” (John: 26-27). In Catholic teaching, early church leaders highlighted the above passage as proof of

recognizing Mary as the mother of all believers, even if the Bible does not explicitly mention it. Theologians call her “co-redemptrix,” suggesting she has a role in humanity's redemption by quoting this part from the Bible.

Mother Mary is present along with the disciples at the time of Pentecost. “All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and mother of Jesus, with his brethren” (Act 1:14). The titles of Mary “bride of the holy spirit”, and “seat of Wisdom” resonate with her reception of holy spirit at the time of annunciation and her presence in Sehion hall to provide holy spirit to the world. She is described by St. John as he sees in the vision; “a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” (Revelation 12:1). Mother Mary who assumed into heaven actively takes a decisive role in the redemption and salvation of humanity and she is honoured as the queen of heaven.

Based on these biblical references, numerous interpretations have been made to describe Mary and her nature. The core doctrines on Mary, called “Marian dogmas,” have been developed by the Church to denote how her piety has been shaped and reshaped through various socio-cultural and historical contexts. Mariology, the study of Mary, has evolved over centuries. The Marian cult fulfils the gaps of a missing goddess in Christianity, and her apparitions have remarkably changed the political and religious milieu of many nations. Therefore, it is important to analyse Mary as a mother, virgin, queen, and goddess from the perspectives of the Church.

In Catholic theology, there are three degrees of devotion to be practiced by Christians. The first is latria, or worship which is reserved exclusively for God. The second is dulia, or veneration, which is directed towards the saints acknowledging their virtuous life. The third is hyperdulia, or hyper veneration which is a special veneration uniquely attributed to Mother Mary considering her singular role in the history of salvation and as the mother of God (Esparza). These categorizations are for preventing idolatrous practices among the believers. However, a close reading of the nuances of merging the margins of hyper-reverence and worship opens up discussions in the Mary cult evolved through centuries.

In the early Christian era, emphasis primarily centred on Jesus Christ's divinity and teachings. However, Mary gradually ascended to prominence through theological discussions and the devotion of early believers. As the Church expanded, theological debates surrounding Mary's nature, including her perpetual virginity and her title as the mother of God, *Theotokos* emerged in the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D, contributing to the formulation of Marian doctrines (Rubin 40). This was the result of huge, heated debates and discussions on whether Mary gave birth to a human (anthropotokos), to Messiah or Christ (Christotokos), or to God himself (*Theotokos*) (Rubin 44). The untiring efforts of the patriarch Cyril of Alexandria in the Ephesus Council made Mary officially declared as the mother of God who actively participates in the redemption and salvation of humanity. The title *Theotokos* paved the way for the emergence of the Marian Cult in the early centuries.

From the fifth century onwards, after the declaration of the title *Theotokos*, Mary's status changed significantly over the centuries. The artistic representations of Mary also underwent drastic changes in appearance. As Christianity spread across

Europe, new discussions on God, order, law, customs, and practices led to remarkable changes in people's lifestyles. The emergence of monasteries, parishes, priests, and nuns, along with their emulative nature, increased the acceptance of Christianity, where Mother Mary gained more prominence as the mother of God, advisor, and bride of God. The efforts of Franciscan priests and missionaries during this period, who were dedicated to speaking about Mary and her son, also contributed in popularizing Mary and enhancing her veneration.

On the other hand, Mary's position as mother of God has initiated intensive debates on whether she can be considered a goddess. Since Christianity staunchly believes in monotheism, there cannot be a goddess. The church asserts that Mary can only be venerated as the mother of Jesus as adoration is meant only for one God. According to the Church, "God is owed latria (adoration) and the saints dulia (veneration), but Mary occupies the principal mediating position, as a creature belonging both to earth and heaven" (Warner xxxiv) because the church says that she deserves hyperdulia (special veneration). She serves humanity as the intercessor of her son. She does not give any boon or curse as a goddess does. But whatever she asks as a mediator, cannot be denied by her son. The church firmly denies the worship of Mary, known as Mariolatry, which comes under idolatry. Despite the Church's clear stance, the veneration of Mother Mary extends into nuanced territories, where some people elevate her status to that of a goddess. Although these discussions are not officially endorsed by the Church, the controversial positioning of Mary as *Theotokos* carries profound theological implications from the fifth century onwards.

As Jesus is proclaimed as the Messiah to different races, it becomes necessary to present his special birth and lineage as a descendant of King David. Additionally,

the concept of a virgin birth is emphasized to align with various cultural contexts. Since the Gospels provide scant descriptions of Mother Mary, the Church relies on other writings from different periods to provide these details. Those hidden writings are known as apocrypha, and they are not canonical texts. *Gospel According to the Pseudo-Matthew* and *The Book of James (Protoevangelium of James)* are famous works in the Apocrypha that deeply influenced the West. Later, these works are combined to form other apocryphal books, *The Gospel According to the Pseudo-Matthew* and *The Story of the Birth of Mary*. *The Book of James* is an Eastern tale that deals with the birth and life of Mary. It narrates the life of Mary as a Jewish daughter of Joachim and Anne. It is a detailed narration enrooted in Jewish tradition to prove the extraordinary and precocious account of Mary. However, Miri Rubin, the historian observes that the life of Mary was told in *The Proto gospel of James* as a narrative of Jewish cultic excellence refracted through the prism of ascetic values, for there was no institution of celibacy and virginity in the Jewish mainstream. Yet the author of Mary's life chose to endow her with a unique order of physical purity (Rubin 11).

The *Protoevangelium of James* describes Joseph as a widower with several sons (9:2). Following God's guidance, Zacharias, the high priest, instructs all the widowers of Israel to gather at the temple, each carrying a rod. When a dove emerges from Joseph's rod, he initially hesitates to accept Mary due to her youth. However, at the high priest's urging, he agrees and brings her into his household. Leaving soon afterward to complete some carpentry work, Joseph returns only when a census requires them to register. Taking Mary with him, he is uncertain whether to list her as his wife or daughter. Along the way, when Mary's time to give birth arrives, Joseph

leads her to a cave and leaving her with his sons, goes in search of a midwife. He encounters a woman on the road who tells him that Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Taking this as a sign, Joseph brings her back to assist Mary, and the woman is astonished by the miraculous birth of Christ. In another version of the story, the cave setting is replaced with a manger, where an ox and ass are said to worship the newborn Jesus (Rubin 20–25).

By carefully spinning the nuances of two important things- declaring Jesus as the descendent of David as the fulfilment of the Old Testament by connecting him to his non-biological father Joseph and the special virgin birth of Christ are the main intentions of these early texts. Later, a problem arose in making Christ the descendant of David as he was not biologically connected to Joseph; to avoid this contradiction, the fathers of the Church said that Mary was a relative of Joseph. Ephrem of Syria (A.D 373) in the fourth century, a powerful poet and one of Mary's most eloquent worshippers, explained: "The series of kings is written according to the names of men, instead of women, Joseph, the son of David, betroths the daughter of David because the child cannot be enrolled in the name of its mother." In other words, in a patriarchal society, even the Messiah can only be legitimate if his mother is properly married (Warner 25). Her motherhood is legitimized and honoured as *Theotokos*, which ultimately led to dramatic developments in Mariology (Maunder, *The Oxford Handbook of Mary* 63). However, these two apocryphal works have paved the way for formulating the major two dogmas of Mary- the perpetual virginity and immaculate conception (Garcia 4).

The spiritual motherhood of Mary is another accepted belief in Roman Catholicism, rooted in the concept of *Theotokos*. In the eighth century, the

Benedictine monk Ambrose Autpert referred to Mary as the “mother of believers and the mother of the nations” (Miller and Samples 42). By the thirteenth century, Christians began to address her as a heavenly mother. The Church engaged in extensive deliberations regarding Mary’s spiritual motherhood. However, Protestants typically reject the idea that entrusting Mary to John at the cross implies entrusting her to all believers. They view the birth of Jesus *through* Mary as a physical event that symbolizes a deeper spiritual truth. While Jesus receives his physical life from Mary, his spiritual essence is derived from the Father. In this view, believers’ spiritual lives come from their connection to Jesus, rather than through a physical lineage to Mary. Protestants often cite Scripture to emphasize this spiritual dimension: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63). Thus, the relationship between believers and Christ transcends physical lineage, as their spiritual life flows from him, ultimately connecting them back to the Father. While Protestants venerate Mary as the mother of Jesus, they do not regard her as their spiritual mother and do not accept her role as a mediator.

While the narratives affirming Mary as *Theotokos* are significant, it is the emphasis on her perpetual virginity that predominates in much of the Apocrypha. Although the concept of virgin birth was not part of Jewish traditions, early texts highlighting Mary's purity and virginity suggest the existence of traditions that celebrate the superiority of virgin birth. Rubin notes that “there was a tradition of stoic thought and practice, which elevated the virtues of control of the body and sexual abstinence, creating a comfortable environment for the reception of Christian virginity” (23). In the *Gospel of James*, Mary is depicted weaving a veil of purple and

scarlet for the tabernacle, mirroring Moses' actions: "with cherubims woven into it by a skilled worker" (Exodus 36:35). This act signifies the sanctification of her virginity in theological perspective. Consequently, the proliferation of these apocryphal accounts spurred discussions on the virgin birth and Mary's purity, which ultimately became dogma within the Church.

The Second Council of Constantinople (A. D .553) used the phrase "ever virgin" in relation to Mary. This concept of ever virgin in the Catholic Church says that Mary is conceived by the divine intervention. It also emphasises in "Mary's 'in partu' virginity, which is the belief that Mary's maidenhead was never ruptured even though she gave birth" (Caroll 6). Moreover, she has abstained from sexual intercourse throughout her life. This miraculous "in partu" virginity is the central element in Mary's cult. Nonetheless, possessing an intact maidenhead is not a new concept as the goddesses also possess the same. But their licentiousness makes them different from Mary, according to Raphael Patai as he states in his book, *The Hebrew Goddess* (28). The understanding of Mary as a perpetual virgin, an inseparable aspect of her identity, contributed to the emergence of monks, priests, and nuns who chose to imitate her life of celibacy. This development played a significant role in the rise of the Marian cult in the West. In his gospel, Matthew strongly asserted that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit before Mary and Joseph came together (Warner 19). This emphasis on virginity is considered the "necessary precondition of the divine birth of Jesus, which may have stemmed from a mythological tradition that pre-dated the Gospels" (Warner 24).

The concept of a miraculous or virgin birth is often linked to the origins of great heroes. Warner draws attention to parallels between the birth stories of

renowned figures and that of Christ, noting, “The historical fact remains that the virgin birth of heroes and sages was a widespread formula in the Hellenistic world: Pythagoras, Plato, and Alexander were all believed to be born of a woman by the power of a holy spirit” (Warner 35). Warner suggests that the notion of virginity may have been adopted from pagan traditions, reflecting how elements of ancient myth and pagan beliefs were woven into early Christian narratives. Expanding on this theme, Céspedes Musso connects the Virgin Mary to an enduring archetype of virginity that predates the Gospels, arguing that the concept of virginity has taken on varied meanings across cultural contexts (90). Many historians, including Roman Catholics, acknowledge that the belief in Mary's perpetual virginity influenced the rise of asceticism and monasticism. These religious traditions, significant in medieval times, viewed celibacy as a spiritually superior state to marriage. This perspective shaped how people perceived Mary and her supposed lifelong virginity.

After Mary was declared the mother of God in the Council of Ephesus, Marian devotion surged with her values like simplicity, humility, and complete submission to God's will, becoming subjects of widespread veneration. The Church Fathers honoured Mary with numerous titles and hymns, highlighting her role as the mother of God. In Syriac Christianity, situated between the Roman and Persian Empires, Mary was revered as the ideal embodiment of virtue, with virginity regarded as the highest attainable virtue. During this period, narratives focusing on her childhood and early upbringing gained prominence. The apocryphal *Gospel of James* notably recounts Mary's birth and formative years, painting a vivid picture of her life from infancy:

When Mary was one year old, Joachim made a great feast and invited the priest and scribes, and the whole people of Israel assembled. And Joachim brought the child to the priests, and they blessed her saying: “O, God of our fathers, bless this child and give her a name renowned forever among all generations. And all the people said: “So be it, so be it. Amen ...” And the child became three years old, and Joachim said: "Call the virgin daughters of the Hebrews and let them accompany the child to the Temple of the Lord with lamps burning in their hands. And they went up to the temple of the Lord. And the priests received her and kissed her and blessed her, saying: “The Lord has magnified your name among all generations; in you, the Lord will show redemption to the children of Israel”. And he sat her on the third step of the altar. And the Lord gave her grace, and she danced with her feet all the house of the Lord loved her. And her parents returned home marvelling and praising the Lord because their child did not turn back. Mary was in the temple of the Lord to be nurtured like a dove, and she received food from the hand of an angel. (Hoagland 40)

This story differs slightly from the versions in the scriptures that present Mary as an ordinary Jewish woman, familiar with household chores. Instead, this version suggests that she led a protected life in the temple before marrying Joseph. Prompted by this story, a church was built at Mary's birthplace in the fifth century. Discussions and heated debates arose about her birth being without sin. For the Messiah to be born, it was believed that the womb should also be pure and perfect. Therefore, the mother of the Messiah should be free from all sins, including original sin. Thus, the

concept of the Immaculate Conception of Mary entered the realm of Christian theology.

After centuries of heated discussions over centuries, Pope Pius IX officially declared the immaculate conception of Mother Mary as a dogma on December 8, 1854, settling the long-standing debate about her pure and virgin birth. It means that from the moment of conception in her mother's womb, she is freed from the stain of original sin. The Immaculate Conception, though as dogma would not take place until 1854, was a doctrine supported by many people, especially by the Spanish theologians.

However, some Greek church fathers like Origen, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and Basil thought that Mary still made mistakes like doubting, being vain, and having ambition while being very holy. But another Church father Ephraim stated that both Eve and Mary created without guilt. Eve caused death while Mary offered life. Ambrose of Milan praised Mary as the ideal virgin. St Augustine, though who was greatly influenced by Ambrose, believes that Mary, like all people, was born with original sin and she received a unique grace that helped her overcome it. Those incongruous opinions among the church fathers and theologians delayed the decision to declare Mary's immaculate conception as doctrine.

Once the divine Maternity and the perpetual virginity of Mary had been proposed by the church's teaching authority as true Catholic doctrine, the way was open for further development... Belief in Mary's virginity led to an emphasis on her holiness. The experience of the ascetics first showed the connection between a life of perpetual virginity and holiness. But still deeper reflection was needed to appreciate

the full treasure of Mary's sanctity, and this came through reflection on the divine Maternity. From the divine motherhood had come the awareness of perfect virginity; now Christian thought saw that God would make his mother all-perfect, by gifts of grace beyond compare (Miller and Samples 30).

In the early 12th century, a British monk named Eadmer spoke about the idea that Mary was born without original sin, known as the "immaculate conception". However, famous theologians like Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Peter Lombard, and Alexander of Hales disagreed with this concept. They rejected this concept, arguing that it contradicted widely accepted biblical teachings, which assert that all humans are born with sin and in need of salvation. John Duns Scotus (1264–1308) is credited with establishing the idea of the immaculate conception as Catholic dogma. He argues that believing Mary was born without original sin doesn't lessen the importance of atonement but enhances it. According to Scotus, Mary being sinless is a greater display of redemptive grace. He believes that sanctifying grace, based on Christ's anticipated merits, allowed Mary to avoid the original sin inherited by others in Adam's race. According to Christian theology, the decisive role of Mary in redemption and salvation makes her second Eve, as Jesus is the second Adam according to the church fathers. She is not only the mother of Christ, but she is also the mother of all, and she stands beside Christ as his mother, and the bride of God, "as the first Eve stood beside the first founder of the human race" (Rahner 34). She mediates, safeguards, and protects the people by easing their pains with heavenly medicines according to the Church.

This immaculate conception is rejected by Protestants saying that it uprightly denies the Bible which states that except Jesus, all humans are sinners. They consider

this dogma as an attempt to deify Mary. These controversial viewpoints continued up to 1854 until Pope Pius IX declared it an unquestionable dogma by stating:

We pronounce, declare and define . . . that the doctrine which holds the Blessed Virgin Mary to have been, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of Almighty God, given the merits of Christ Jesus the Saviour of mankind, preserved free from all stain of original sin, was revealed by God, and is, therefore, to be firmly and constantly believed by all the faithful. (*Council of Trent* 183-84)

If Mary is conceived without sin, death cannot hold any right upon her. Her death and assumption into heaven come under extensive deliberations based on the steadfast belief in the immaculate conception of Mary. The Assumption commemorates the belief that Mary was taken up, body and soul, into heaven at the end of her earthly life, without decaying her body. But the gospels, scriptures, and the early apocryphal writings do not say anything about her death and assumption. Rather, the Apocrypha from the fourth century describes it as full of myths and miracles.

By that time, Mary's death and assumption into heaven were also included in written narratives with mythical elements. One such text, *The Dormition of Mary*, published in the fourth century, describes how, upon her death, the room is filled with a sweet fragrance and a bright light. It states that Jesus appears to Mary in her house on Mount Sion, where she had lived after the death of her son, and reveals to her that her end is near. Upon hearing this, all the apostles gather to bid her farewell:

Stretching out his hands the Lord received her holy soul. And when her soul departed, the place was filled with a sweet smell and bright light. And a voice from heaven proclaimed: "Blessed are you among women." Peter and John, Paul and Thomas, ran to embrace her feet and receive her holiness; and the twelve apostles took her body on a bier and bore it forth. Instructed by Jesus, Peter, and the other apostles took her body to be buried in a new tomb near Gethsemane in the Kidron Valley, where miracles of healing accompanied her burial. Three days later, angels took her body to heaven (Hoagland 42).

This is one of the stories that is widely accepted among Christians. Since people continue to believe through centuries that Mary must have been taken into heaven the authorities of the church have declared this belief as dogma. In the first dogmatic pronouncement made by a pope since the First Vatican Council determined in 1870 that the pope is infallible in matters of faith and morals when he speaks *ex-cathedra* (matter of authority), Pius XII said: "We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever-Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory." (Miller et al. 38)

The Feast of the Assumption, deputed by Pope Gregory I (540-604), is set to be observed on August 15. This feast replaces the earlier celebration of Mary's dormition, or falling asleep, which had traditionally been honoured on January 18 in the Western Christian calendar. Pope Gregory I's decision to move the feast to August 15 has since become a widely recognized and celebrated event in the Christian Church.

The spread of the Empire and the powerful preaches of the priests and missionaries are the impetus to spread Marian piety across the world. The group named Syriac Christians (most of them are converted Jews) who highlight the divinity of the holy spirit with the idea of 'Shekhinah' have played an important role in addressing Mary. For them, Shekhinah represents the feminine aspect of God's presence, yet it does not specifically embody a mother figure. Nonetheless, Mary is always understood as par with Shekhinah, the holy spirit in the trinity in the Syriac belief system. So, she is addressed as a holy virgin bride. They never explore the personal and domestic life of Mary and Joseph; rather, they focus only on the purity and Virginity of Mother Mary who was conceived by the holy spirit. Their views on Mary are more based on Jewish traditions.

The glimpse of elevating Mary to the status of a goddess can be seen in Egypt where Goddess Isis is worshipped. Isis has Greco-Roman similarities in narration, but she is not so strong and playful. She is associated with her nurturing qualities, healing of mankind, protection, and fecundity. When Isis is at the peak of popularity, Christianity starts spreading in Egypt, which helps Mary to get almost the same attributes and acceptance among the new converts. Mother Mary gets accepted as the dear face of the domestic sphere as a saviour and protector as Isis was received once and her artistic representations of that period also show shocking similarity with that of Isis. But Isis is not a virgin mother as Mary is; The spread of Christianity in Egypt apace with this resemblance of Mary with their goddess. Egyptian churches imagine her as a breastfeeding mother. The popular image of Isis feeding Horus has been attributed to Mother Mary to substantiate the majestic quality of the mother whose baby is both human and God at the same time. Such "syncretic blurring of

boundaries” (Rancour-Laferriere 9) is not typical of Christians. Since Mary’s presence as a human with flesh and blood is accepted as the historical truth by the theologians, they deny her status as a goddess.

The miraculous stories spread across the places around Constantinople have spurred momentum among her pilgrims, drawing them to her shrines. One miracle goes like this: When a Jewish boy accidentally had communion bread with Christians, his father furiously threw him to the furnace. But a woman dressed in purple came and kept him unharmed, and later his mother found him in the furnace alive. The story reached the emperor and holy men; the father of a Jewish boy who refused to get converted was burnt alive. The boy and his mother got converted to Christianity (Rubin 74-75). According to Rubin,

The Miracle of the Jewish Boy registers several points of tension that could arise between Jews and Christians: it asserts Mary’s power against Jewish violence, contrasts her mercy against the Jew’s cruelty, and offers the prospect of Jewish recognition in the boy’s acknowledgment of Christian truth. It took polemic into the Jewish home, a sphere of paternal tyranny, and offered instead maternal nurture. This story became one of the most popular Mary miracles in future centuries. (75)

The miracle narratives surrounding Mother Mary have significantly contributed to the conversion of many individuals to Christianity, particularly in European countries. Her influence has been pivotal in the gradual and sustained growth of the faith across these regions. The political climate of these countries often supported this trend, as Christianity became the official religion. By the fifth century, the significance of Mother Mary was firmly established in Constantinople, where the

eastern Greek-speaking populations were predominantly Christian under the reign of the emperor. Meanwhile, the western territories, led by barbarian rulers who had also embraced Christianity, began to adopt this new religious framework. In this context, Christianity emerged as the religion of the powerful, further influencing conversions. Throughout this process, Mother Mary continued to play an essential role, serving as a symbol of faith and devotion that resonated deeply with both rulers and their subjects.

Mary has been known by various names across different cultures, each highlighting specific qualities that reflect her character and significance. This diversity of names underscores the universality of Mother Mary and her widespread acceptance around the world. In Orthodox Russia, her maternal aspect is emphasized, while Roman Catholic Poland also focuses on her role as a mother. Conversely, in Orthodox Greece, titles tend to idealize her holiness. In the West, various forms of “virgin” are commonly used, such as the English “Blessed Virgin Mary,” Mexican Spanish “a Virgen de Guadalupe,” German “die Jungfrau Maria,” and French “la Sainte Vierge.” Interestingly, some designations, like the French “Notre Dame” and the Italian “Madonna,” do not explicitly mention either motherhood or virginity (Rancour-Laferriere 20).

As these new names emerged, they inspired the creation of distinct images and icons of Mary, which were revered almost as if they embodied her presence. These representations contributed to her status as a polyvalent figure within Christianity, allowing for a rich variety of interpretations and expressions of devotion. Additionally, these icons were often used in military contexts, serving as symbols of

protection against threats and dangers. Soldiers would venerate Mary as a protector and saviour, further enhancing her political significance during the medieval period.

When Islam attacked and captured the major lands, the Byzantine leaders found problems with representations of icons on the battlefield. Instead of the God Jesus, the images of saints and Mother Mary were used rapidly in the field of operations. The religious practices of Islam which reject images and idol worship made the leaders think that their idolatry caused devastating failure in wars, especially in crusades. The Church council in Trullo in A.D 692 made decisions to prohibit making images that are sexually alluring and preventing rituals that were intrinsically linked to pagan origins and Jewish cultures. Emperor Constantine sought advice from the Council in A.D 754 regarding the veneration of the images and icons. The council, however, rejected the idea that images could accurately represent divinity, arguing that such representations were misleading. They believed that pagan arts could not embody the grace and elegance of divine figures. This stance ultimately led to the destruction or concealment of icons throughout Asia Minor until Empress Irene reversed the iconoclast policies by leveraging her political influence during the Second Council of Nicaea in A.D. 787. Her deeply rooted belief in Mother Mary played a crucial role in the re-establishment of icons and images. The restoration of these sacred visuals was supported by theologians like John of Damascus, who asserted that icons served merely as reminders of divine power; they represented the Word, and the events or figures depicted in the Gospels. According to him, the use of icons did not constitute idolatry.

By the mid-ninth century, the icons restored in the Churches brought forth a new impetus to the artistic arena of that period. Religious poetry, visual art, and

architecture dramatically changed during that time. New churches were constructed in honouring Mother Mary with a variety of architectural structures. She was reinstated in the coins by Michael III. She had been everywhere as icons, images, and domestic interiors. Images of Mary connected to fulfilling prophecies of the Old Testament were drastically drawn. Some artists had taken artistic freedom to interpret gospels to portray Mary as the vehicle of incarnation. The popularity of ivory art created Mary with her celestial majesty, as the guide and protector of humanity. Literature and philosophy developed based on the virtues and qualities of Mother Mary that reiterated her unwavering position in Christianity.

The Muslim conquest of the holy land during the seventh century that curtailed the pilgrimage to the shrines was the significant political event that led to the Crusades in the eleventh century. The blood-shed attempts of Christian nations of Europe to recapture the holy land to save them from the non-Christian authority and the threat of destruction were known as the Crusades. The relics from Palestine shrines were transferred to European countries; the shrines were duplicated. The multiple shrines and temples that created a European holy land set for the early medieval devotion to Mother Mary.

She remained in the learned upper class as their Virgin queen, mediator, and protector. The preachers and saints declared her as their haven and guide. Through different art forms like images, icons, miracle stories, and preachings Mother Mary reached the lower-class people. The paintings and images from that period gained popularity among the people and were treated with great respect. The songs and prayers used in the Churches also were embedded with the praise of Mother Mary. The veneration of Mother Mary which was intrinsically linked to adoration as

Goddess reached the ordinary people with various forms of art and Literature of that time (Warner 36).

Apart from these theological and historical narratives, people tended to focus on the realistic aspects of the dogmas and titles of Mother Mary. Though people were conditioned to the thought of virgin birth and the divine paternity of Jesus, there had been questions about how Mary received the child in her womb. Origen of Alexandria, an early Christian scholar and theologian stated that Mary received her child through logos- the multi-layered meaning of logos here indicated the word uttered by an angel during annunciation (Warner 38). It came under the mystical philosophy of how word got transformed as a human child. Moreover, the belief that anything was possible for God lay at the heart of Jewish tradition and was passed down through generations. A hymn written in the sixth century stated: “The centuries marvel therefore that the angel bore the seed, the virgin conceived through her ear, and, believing in her heart, became fruitful” (Warner 38). But St. Ambrose said that the mystical breath of the holy spirit was the Word of God made flesh, and the fruit of the womb brought to maturity. The science of that time influenced this belief (Warner 39).

Another title in the Catholic church attributed to Mother Mary was the “Queen of Heaven” (Rubin 76). It was bestowed upon Mary by Pope Martin in the seventh century. Popes such as Boniface IX and Sixtus IV have further elevated her status by referring to her as the “Perfect Queen,” “Royal Virgin,” and “Queen of Heaven.” Pope Pius XII, points out that the son of God reflects on his Mother Mary all the glory, majesty and dominion of his kingship “for having been associated to the King of Martyrs in the ineffable work of human Redemption as Mother and co-operatrix,

she remains forever associated to Him, with an almost unlimited power, in the distribution of the graces which flow from the Redemption” (Miller et al. 64). Over time, within the Catholic tradition, Mary comes to be revered under various titles, including Queen of Angels, Queen of Demons, Queen of Patriarchs, Queen of Prophets, Queen of Apostles, Queen of Martyrs, Queen of Virgins, Queen of Confessors, and Queen of Saints. This widespread veneration of Mary reflects her esteemed position within the Catholic faith.

William H Swatos defines the term “cult” in his famous sociological essay, "Church-sect and Cult: Bringing Mysticism Back in" as "collectively centring around a real or imaginary figure whose followers believe that their lives are made better through activities which honour or are proscribed by the leader” (20). The cult of Mary has been infiltrated into Christianity even before she was declared as *Theotokos* officially in 451 AD. Since the Greco-Roman empire has the practice of worshipping deities and goddesses, the arrival of *Theotokos* does not change their attitude towards a divine woman. For them, the great virgin mother goddesses of the ancient Near East, such as the Canaanite goddesses Astarte and Asheroth, the Akkadian goddess Ishtar, and the Sumerian goddess Inanna were there to worship. Since the idea of the Virgin Mother has been familiar to them, the Virgin Mary is also well accepted and adored. This concept of perpetual virginity makes Mother Mary different from other goddesses, though they show similarities in virgin births. There are other goddesses regaining virginity after the giving birth to their children, but the complete abstinence from sex makes Mary different from all of them. The virgin mothers who ensure the divine paternity of their blessed and divine children described in the mythologies are different from the Christian belief as it denies Mary having any physical contact with

the man or any Divine figure. She is virgin and mother at the same time, but “she is completely disassociated from sexuality” (Caroll 5).

The Marian cult began to take shape even before the formal declaration of Mary as *Theotokos*, with early practices highlighting her significance. In *Alone Her Sex*, Warner notes that early Christian cult practices primarily relied on relics and sites associated with martyrs’ suffering (296). However, in the initial period of the Marian cult, there were no tangible relics to support this devotion. It was not until Empress Eudocia discovered early representations of Mother Mary that this began to change. In AD 438, she sent a special portrait, believed to have been painted by St. Luke, to her sister-in-law, Empress Pulcheria. According to legend, Pulcheria later collected the grave clothes of Mary, as her body was thought to be missing from the tomb. Another account suggests that Greek soldiers discovered these grave clothes after a battle against the Mongols in 619 (Warner 297).

By the sixth century, the veil of Mary was already being venerated in one of the early churches in Constantinople, further solidifying her cultic presence (Graef 138). Even before the discovery of these relics, Mary had dedicated shrines and chapels. A basilica honouring the *Theotokos* was constructed in the 440s near Gethsemane, with support from Bishop Juvenal and Princess Eudokia, who was in exile at the time. Additionally, Empress Pulcheria funded the building of three major churches dedicated to the Virgin around 475. Among these, the chapel at Blachernae gained prominence due to its association with Mary’s grave clothes and St. Luke’s portrait (Warner 298). It is believed that this portrait drawn by St. Luke was brought to India by St. Thomas.

The gospels portray a distinct image of Mary, emphasizing her role as a mediator between heaven and earth while distinguishing her from pagan goddesses who embody a mystical power of self-reproductive life. Unlike those deities, Mary's uniqueness lies in her virginity before and after giving birth, which prominently features in discussions surrounding femininity. Elina Vuola offers a post-modern perspective on virginity, suggesting that it can represent a woman's "own" autonomy—a form of utopian sexual self-sufficiency. She asserts that by being a "virgin," a woman can reject oppressive sexual relations and live independently, remaining "untouched" (Vuola 60). In contrast, R.S. Sugirtharajah, in *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, highlights the shared experiences of the mothers of Jesus and Buddha, noting that their bodies are often seen as belonging to a higher purpose. He argues that "these women's bodies are not their own. Their bodies are there to perform a higher, noble, and useful role on behalf of humankind. The bodies belong to all except to the women themselves," (Sugirtharajah 152) suggesting that such notions reinforce the stereotype of women as ideal mothers, whose primary function is to fulfil valuable duties for humanity.

Mary Daly, a feminist Catholic theologian, presents an alternative perspective on the concept of Mary's virginity in her work *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. She suggests that virginity should be viewed as "independence and autonomy, rather than as sexual purity" (Vuola 59). In pre-Christian cultures, virgin goddesses were revered not solely for their physical purity but for their independent existence. This context invites us to reevaluate Mary's virginity through the lens of her autonomous power. Vuola notes, "Virgin motherhood was about a woman's mystical ability to produce life from herself. Mary stands on

this continuum: she is not the first virgin-mother in human history” (58). While this perspective enriches our understanding of Mary’s role, it also raises important questions regarding the implications of idealizing her virginity as a symbol of autonomy and independence.

Moreover, this interpretation must be balanced with the biblical narrative, which attributes the birth of Christ to the action of the Holy Spirit. This divine involvement complicates the notion of virginity as mere autonomy, prompting a deeper exploration of how Mary’s independence interacts with her unique role as the mother of Christ. The interplay between her autonomy and the miraculous nature of her motherhood calls for a nuanced understanding of her identity within both theological and cultural frameworks, challenging traditional views while affirming her significance in the Christian faith.

Mary's submissive nature to God's will allows her body to serve as the vessel for the Holy Spirit, thereby designating her as the Holy Mother. However, many Marian theologians argue that her consent to this role is not an act of passive subjugation. Vuola challenges the idea of passivity by asserting that Mary's willingness to embrace the unknown, as she gives her consent, stems from a profound faith and courage (Vuola 60). Her exceptional selection as the Holy Mother through miraculous pregnancy renders her not only unique but also powerful, embodying a blend of humility and strength that enriches her identity within the Christian tradition. This duality allows Mary to serve as a model for women, illustrating that the path of submission to divine will can also be an expression of agency and empowerment.

Though Marian piety and veneration have emerged and nurtured in specific cultural and historical contexts, some anthropologists argue that the Mary cult is the natural evolution of ancient adoration towards the primordial mother goddess. The mother archetype fulfils the desire for a heavenly mother in Christianity. The need seems to be more psychological, as it gives a feminine god who is affectionate and lovable rather than a male God who is an enforcer and disciplinarian. However, some anthropologists consider this Mary worship as the continuation of the great goddesses of old Europe. “Great Goddess existed for at least five thousand years before the appearance of Classical Greek civilization. Village communities worship her to this day in the guise of the Virgin Mary. The concept of the goddess in bear shape was deeply ingrained in mythical thought through the millennia and survives in contemporary Crete as ‘Virgin Mary of the Bear’” (Gimbutas 200). Gimbutas seems to explain how the rituals of the early period survived in the present scenario through different forms by establishing the connection with archetypes.

Carl J Jung’s mother archetype (132-148) has both positive and negative qualities. The positive attributes include all the nurturing qualities of a mother, magical power, helpfulness, empathy, love, and concern while the negative qualities enclose seductiveness, secretiveness, anger, and darkness (Erich 37). Mother Mary, according to Jung, like other goddesses, is derived from the archetypal figure deeply enrooted in the unconscious of human beings. According to him, the fourfold symbolism that emerged in the human psyche known as quaternity shapes the conscious mind to balance these contrasting aspects (Carrol 34). It creates harmony in integrating the opposite ideas or the complementary aspects of the psyche by leading to a sense of completeness. Thus, this quaternity produces images of a good man, a

bad man, a good woman, and a bad woman; but all religions may not have all these images, in Roman Catholicism, God, Satan, and Mary represent the first three images while the protestant group does not have the good female in their religious structure. However, this archetypal explanation by C J Jung is not fully accepted by Michael P Carrol, Professor in Sociology. He raises a few questions in his book, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary*:

The real problem with Jung's theory is that neither he nor his students have been much concerned with explaining such variation in any systematic way. Thus, Jung tells us that the “good female” aspect of the quaternity is not present in Protestant thought, but fails to tell us why this should be so. Why, in other words, should the “good female” be less evident in the Protestant societies of northern Europe than in the Catholic societies of southern Europe? Similarly, why should the “good female” have been submerged during the first four centuries of the Christian era, only to emerge in the fifth? (35)

According to Carrol, this theory does not completely explain Mary cult and its variations over centuries. Marian cult was intense only in eastern Italy and Spain in the beginning as Christianity coexisted with pagan gods at that time. Emperor Constantine did not impose any restrictions upon the pagan religions though he was converted to Christianity. After his death, his successors gave legal supremacy to the Christian church, and the rituals and practices of pagan religions were prohibited in the country. Pagan priests no longer get monetary benefits or support from the state. “All pagans were barred from holding office in either the state administration or the army. Army officers who themselves professed Christianity to retain their rank but who made no attempt to dissuade their families from paganism were to have their

property confiscated” (Carroll 77). Those who received baptism were not allowed to go back to pagan religions and the death penalty was the punishment awaited to such people. The authority might have thought that these deliberate and atrocious acts of imposing Christianity and monopolizing it by the state gradually sweep away all the pagan cultural nuances; in turn, they percolate through Christian practices.

Though there were attempts to relax anti-pagan laws at specific intervals, they could have been more successful as the majority had been converted to Christianity to get positions in the administration and to hold their properties. Pagan practices must have been continued secretly when Christianity has become the official religion that could be practiced at any time openly. This paradigm shift is one of the reasons for to spread Mary Cult in the fourth and fifth centuries which was closely linked with pagan rituals and practices.

The first church of Mary is built near Constantinople, immediately after the council of Ephesus. It is said that in this shrine, the “veil of the virgin” was venerated from the middle of the sixth century. After that the feast of purification of Mother Mary is celebrated in the seventh century onwards, followed by other feasts like the Assumption, the Annunciation, and the Nativity of Mary. The political climate that allowed Constantine to designate Palestine as a holy land also facilitated the veneration of Mother Mary. While some groups were reluctant to accept her as the “Mother of God,” others, such as the Collorydians, a women’s sect in the fifth century, actively practiced a cult centred around Mary. This group shared bread and cakes during their gatherings in her name (Rubin 56). However, it is important to note that the Collorydians were marginalized and never accepted by the mainstream Church.

Unlike many other sects, the Collorydians not only revered Mary but also permitted women to serve as priests. Epiphanius of Salamis, a church father in the fourth century, documented that the Collorydians shared similarities with heretical groups like the Montanists and Pepuzians from the second and third centuries, both of which supported female priesthood and venerated a Virgin figure that was not exclusively identified as Mother Mary. The sect leader, Priscilla, reported a vision in which Christ appeared to her as a woman, and during their prayer ceremonies, they invoked Eve, who is recognized by the Eastern Church as a precursor to Mother Mary. The widespread dedication of churches to honour Mother Mary during the fifth century has stimulated a flourishing in iconography wherein the depictions of Mary share a striking similarity with the popular goddesses of that period. "Mary's cult reached its height in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, from the eleventh to the fifteenth century. Between 1170 and 1270, for instance, in France alone over 100 churches and 80 cathedrals were built in her honour." (Baring and Cashford *Kindle Locations* 11580-11582).

Several churches dedicated to Mary were constructed on the ruins of temples that once honoured Cybele, the classical mother goddess in the Roman pantheon. Cybele was revered under various titles, such as "Magna Mater" (Great Mother), "Mater Deum" (Mother of the Gods), and "Mater Deum Magna Idaea" (Great Mother of the Gods of Mt. Ida). Following the ban on pagan worship in Rome, Mother Mary emerged to assume similar titles, replacing Cybele (Rubin 40-42). After the fall of the Roman Empire, the priests and teachers of these ancient practices were exiled, and their temples were closed. In this void, Mother Mary rose as the "Mother of God," taking the place of earlier deities like Isis and Cybele, both of whom were regarded as

the “Mothers of Gods” (Baring and Cashford, Kindle Location 11559). In many countries, Mary is venerated as a goddess, albeit within the framework of hyperdulia, a form of respect distinct from that given to God alone. The attributes of Mary that resonate with those of pagan goddesses lead Anne Baring and Jules Cashford to assert that “Mary is the unrecognized Mother Goddess of the Christian tradition” (Kindle Edition, 11497).

Apart from all the attempts to downplay the Mary cult by the Protestant group during the Middle Ages, a new theological stream has emerged as a counter-discourse called “Mariology”. The focus of the study is on Mary and her special role in the church. Even though this branch of studies is on the verge of decline, a new revival of Marian piety has emerged from the nineteenth century onwards, referring to this century as the “Marian age” by the theologians. The increase in the number of Marian apparitions is one of the reasons for this drastic change in the history of Marian belief. Marian cults in the modern centuries mainly depend on these apparitions.

The four dogmas are celebrated as the major Marian Feasts in the global Catholic Church. Even before that Marian feasts were celebrated in the church, from the fourth century. The Nativity of Mother Mary is celebrated on 8th September followed by the Lent of eight days. Her immaculate conception (December 8), Mary Mother of God (second Friday after nativity) Her assumption into heaven (August 15), the feast of Annunciation (March 25), Mary Protector of Crops (May 15), Mary of Mount Carmel (July 16) are the common feasts of Mother Mary in Syro - Malabar Church traditions. All the Wednesdays are meant to show piety towards Mary. Apart from all these feasts, the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God (January 1), Feast of Our Lady of Rosary (October 7), Presentation of Mary (November 21), and Queenship of

Mary (August 21) are celebrated in the Christian faith. All the feasts of Mary in different names are considered examples of Marian Piety in Catholicism.

The practices of venerating Mother Mary are innumerable in the church other than giving veneration through Liturgy. Reciting the rosary, Litany, and novena, and wearing scapulars and miraculous medals are part of Marian cult. Seeking the intercession of the mother of Perpetual Help through Novena had a history dating back to the 1860s. Taking eight days of Lent before the Nativity of Mother Mary, and fifteen days of Lent followed by the Assumption of Mother Mary are the other practices in the church to show the hyperdulia. The consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary is another act of Roman Catholic devotion to Mary to imbibe all her qualities as described in the Catholic News Agency, “The aim of the devotion is to unite mankind to God through Mary's heart, and this process involves the ideas of consecration and reparation. A person is consecrated to Mary's Immaculate Heart as a way of being completely devoted to God.” (“The Immaculate Heart of Mary”). The prayer has different versions:

O Immaculate Heart of Mary, Heavenly beauty and splendour of the Father, you are the most valued Heavenly treasure. New Eve, immaculate in soul, spirit and body, created of the godly seed by the Spirit of God, you are the spiritual Mother of mankind. Pure Virgin, full of grace then and now, your whole being was raised Heavenly in full glory, to be elevated above all the hosts within the Kingdom of God. O Heavenly Mother, Queen of Heaven and Earth, I recognize the glory of your highest title, The Immaculate Heart of Mary! Loving Mother, dispenser of endless blessings, you who continuously

intercedes on our behalf, please present my need before your loving Son Jesus (“The Immaculate Heart of Mary”).

The tradition of devotion to the heart of Mary dates back to the twelfth century. The heart, which keeps all things secret according to Luke 2:35, and the heart which is wounded by her son's most humiliating and atrocious death, is a symbol of the depth of the human soul and unconditional love. In the Fatima apparition on July 13, she told the three children, "To save poor sinners, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart" (“Devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary”). Along with the consecration of the heart of Jesus, the prayer to the Immaculate Heart of Mother Mary is a prayer used by Christians across the world.

The rosary is a chain or cord of specific knots or beads used for Marian devotional prayer. It is believed to have originated in the monastery and was designed around 1214 by a Carthusian monk, Dominic of Prussia. According to tradition, Mother Mary herself offered it to Dominic to aid in saving people from Albigensian heresy through prayer. This Marian devotional practice quickly spread worldwide. “The rosary resulted from a harmonious blend of the simplest Marian prayer with mental images of Christ’s life, particularly the Crucifixion. For those concerned about the 'marinization' of devotional life, the rosary provided balance” (Rubin 334). The Roman Catholic Church regards the rosary as a significant prayer for seeking Mary’s intercession against Satanic deeds. Mass recitations of the rosary in Marian shrines and churches during May and October are common practices among Christians. According to Warner,

Around 1470, the Dominican priest Alanus de Rupe (d. 1475) published the *De Utilitate Psalterii Mariae*, which instantly awakened fervent belief in the powers of the rosary to obtain the Virgin's mercy and protection, particularly in Cologne and Augsburg. His book was followed, before the end of the century, by others no less zealous, and the example of his ardour inspired preachers, particularly Dominicans of his order, to encourage the devotion. In 1495, Pope Alexander VI—the first pope to mention the rosary—gave the Holy See's approval (313).

The prayer in the Rosary is arranged in such a way that one “our Father in Heaven”, ten “hail Mary and one “glory be” constitute one “decade”. There will be five decades in each rosary cord which represents one session. The small rosary beads for “hail Mary” while the big one is meant to recite “Our Father in Heaven”. The Fatima apparition prayer, “O my Jesus, forgive us, save us from the fire of hell. Lead all souls to Heaven, especially those who are most in need” was later added to the end of each decade. Each decade begins with the meditating then mysteries of Jesus and Mary's different situations in life based on the Bible.

In Catholic homes, the divine mysteries—joyful, sorrowful, glorious, and luminous—are recited as part of rosary devotion. It was Pope Pius V regularised the Rosary with three sessions of 15 decades in the 16th century. Later in 2002, Pope John Paul II added the luminous mysteries to it. The mysteries are arranged specifically for the days of the week- glorious mysteries on Sunday and Wednesday, the joyful on Monday and Saturday, the sorrowful on Tuesday and Friday, and the luminous is on Thursday. When the religious conflicts in Ireland during the 16th and 17th centuries were at their peak, people used a single-decade rosary that could be

hidden easily later it came to be known as the 'Irish Penal Rosary'. The Rosary is the most celebrated traditional Marian devotional prayer that is used as the strongest spiritual weapon against evil spirits. "Devotion to the rosary rises when the Church feels weak and insecure; the prayer, therefore, often indicates an embattled mood among Catholics" (Warner 314). The rosary was recited to win wars and bring peace in the church. It is believed that the rosary is the most powerful weapon to destroy the devil after the Holy Mass.

Wearing the brown scapular is another devotional practice among Catholics, often associated with the Rosary. Promoted by Carmelite friars, the brown scapular is believed to offer protection from eternal damnation and reduce the period in purgatory, as promised by the Virgin Mary in her apparition to St. Simon Stock in 1251. This practice greatly increased devotion to Mary. While various scapulars exist worldwide, the Carmelite brown scapular is considered the oldest. During the Middle Ages, the scapular's fame was endorsed by numerous miracle stories. However, it gained renewed momentum in the late 19th century following the Marian apparition to the three children at Fatima, where they saw the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Mount Carmel, holding the brown scapular. It consists of two rectangular pieces of cloth of any fabric attached to a cord with the emblems of Carmelite Virgin Mary and cross. In different scapulars, the emblems may vary. Blue scapular of Immaculate conception, Scapular of our Lady of Good Counsel, Scapular of Sacred hearts, Scapular of St Josephs, and many more are approved by the later centuries by the church. Some protestant groups and the Anglican Churches also follow this practice of wearing the scapulars.

Hail, Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy,

our life, our sweetness and our hope.

To you do we cry,

poor banished children of Eve.

To you do we send up our sighs,

mourning and weeping in this valley of tears

Turn then, most gracious advocate,

your eyes of mercy toward us,

and after this exile

show unto us the blessed fruit of thy womb,

Jesus.

O clement, O loving,

O sweet Virgin Mary (“Marian Prayers”)

This prayer is the final prayer in the rosary known as “Salve Regina” in Latin. It is believed that this prayer comes from a Marian hymn from the 12th-century Abbey of Cluny. Since Mother Mary is described as queen of heaven in the Revelations, this prayer honours her as the queen of heaven and mother of mercy. This prayer has been popular since the thirteenth century as the belief in the heavenly Queen increased. This prayer is a reminder of the Marian cult that existed from the early period of Christianity.

The memorare of St Bernard is another prayer to Mother Mary used in their Catholic prayer. This was supposed to be part of the prayer *Ad sanctitatis tuae pedes, dulcissima Virgo Maria* in the fifteenth century to seek the intercession of Mary. It

was spread by St. Bernard in the seventeenth century, as a miraculous prayer for healing from diseases, mental torments, and heresies. The popularity of this prayer, along with the miraculous medals of Mary reached different worlds through the missionaries and this prayer is included in the daily prayers of Roman Catholics.

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary

that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection,

implored your help, or sought your intercession,

was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence,

I fly unto you, O Virgin of virgins, my mother.

To you do I come, before you I stand, sinful and sorrowful.

O Mother of the Word Incarnate,

despise not my petitions,

but in your mercy, hear and answer me.

Amen. (“Marian Prayers”)

Another prayer to “Mary, the untier of Knots” got momentum in the church after the election of Pope Francis in 2013. He is a staunch devotee of Mother Mary especially “Mary the untier of Knots”. and he specifically sought her help during the spread of the virus in 2021(Catholic News Agency). The feast of Mary the untier of knots is celebrated on September 28th. The painting named the same was installed in the Catholic pilgrim church in Germany from where the devotion originated.

Virgin Mary, Mother of fair love, Mother who never refuses to come to the aid of a child in need, Mother whose hands never cease to serve your beloved children because they are moved by the divine love and immense mercy that exist in your heart, cast your compassionate eyes upon me and see the snarl of knots that exists in my life. You know very well how desperate I am, my pain, and how I am bound by these knots. Mary, Mother to whom God entrusted the undoing of the knots in the lives of his children, I entrust into your hands the ribbon of my life. No one, not even the evil one himself, can take it away from your precious care. In your hands, there is no knot that cannot be undone. Powerful Mother, by your grace and intercessory power with Your Son and My Liberator, Jesus, take into your hands today this knot.[Mention your request here]

I beg you to undo it for the glory of God, once and for all. You are my hope. O my Lady, you are the only consolation God gives me, the fortification of my feeble strength, the enrichment of my destitution, and, with Christ, the freedom from my chains. Hear my plea. (“Marian Prayers”)

This prayer is a recent addition to the prayers. The cult of Mary is established through the specific and repeated prayers raised to her. These prayers exemplify the innate trust, hope, and expectation placed on Mary as a dependable figure, a consoling mother, and a powerful woman who alleviates all fears of her devotees. They serve as strong proclamations of complete devotion to her. Addressed to the mother of God who never abandons her children, these prayers reflect a deep “engagement with the promises of Mary's power” (Rubin 406). They are directed to the divine Mother who is both alive and approachable for mortals. Apart from the traditional history of

prayers evolved through centuries, Marian piety is evolving in the present day with the emergence of new issues. The prayer to Mary, the Untier of Knots, addresses the challenges of divorce, which has become a significant social issue. It is also highlighted to resolve the epidemics of the present age. All the Marian prayers of different centuries indicate that the intercession of Mary is sought by the Church whenever it encounters various problems. These prayers carry cultural memories that is transferred to subsequent generations. Marian prayers can be seen as responses to the tensions and challenges faced in various social, political, and cultural contexts. These prayers are passed down not merely as remnants of past issues but as expressions of gratitude for survival and divine intervention. Thus, they play a significant role in promoting Mary cult.

Mother Mary, portrayed as the epitome of all virtues, has paved the way for understanding femininity solely through the patriarchal viewpoint of the church. The idea of an obedient, silent, chaste, and virtuous woman is modeled on her, making it difficult for ordinary women to meet such an ideal. Mother Mary is depicted as a perfect woman who silently obeys God's decisions, endures all agony alone, and bears and mothers the best child. These glorified attributes have become the touchstone for determining the quality of women. Patriarchy has successfully promoted its ideal woman through this portrayal, creating an image of a submissive, ascetic, humble, and ever-virgin figure. Her idealization leads to the unrealistic and oppressive standards of motherhood as Adrain Rich rightly points out in her work, *Of All Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (27). The Church highlights the limited notion of sexuality as "... sexuality's purpose as principally procreative and has glorified the vocation of woman as that of motherhood in both biological and spiritual

senses” (Gray 336). The overemphasis of her virginity is one way to limit women’s sexuality and reinforces the notion that the ideal motherhood should be devoid of sexual agency according to Rich.

The concept of perpetual virginity of Mother Mary invites criticism from other feminist thinkers of the modern period as she is considered the symbol of oppression. According to the French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, this cult of virgin Mary, represented the supreme victory of masculinity as it diminishes women’s sexuality and makes the female body and female sexuality seem unwholesome and impure (Lee 24). As she observes in *The Second Sex*,

And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called ‘the sex,’ meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him, she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other. (Beauvoir 26)

Men consider women as other, creating an asymmetrical category. According to her, idealization creates an unattainable standard for real women by praising the virtues suitable for men’s interests. Julia Kristeva, another French Critic, and Philosopher criticizes the idealization of Mother Mary in her essay “Stabat Mater”. She is a woman impossible to imitate and is submissive to God. At the same time, Mother Mary is portrayed as the giver of life and the source of love in the hymn “Stabat Mater” (Kristeva and Goldhammer 141) . When Mother Mary sits and laments at the cross on the loss of her son, she is not victimized by the agony. Still, she is treated as the life-giver. Kristeva says that the depiction of Mother Mary as a

vital powerful woman indicates the elements of empowering women. “Mary can thus be taken as a fascinating and powerful symbolization of the best and worst in the Western and Christian discourses on woman”, according to her (Clooney 19). She emphasizes the need to understand gender more inclusively.

The feminist theologian like Mary C. Gray has pointed out the need for defining the language to “discover who is Mary to herself” (336) abandoning all the glorified attributes given by the patriarchal church and resist “the temptation of fantasising women with androcentric texts” (337) to present Mary as the divine other. She says that by rediscovering the language of God through the feminine angle feminist theology can liberate Mary from her delimiting space. She hopes that “it removes the whole burden of history from her if she does not have to be the symbol of female divinity excluded by the characterization of God as male” (Gray 337). The feminine spirituality has to be understood with its all wisdom; it should not depersonalise the womanhood as observed by her. The anxieties that “all women should be mothers, that femaleness is defined by motherhood, that women have been degraded as breeding machines, that female sexuality is similarly defined as geared solely to child-bearing, or ordered for women to be the play object for men” (Gray 338) can be eliminated if the motherhood of Mary can be reclaimed from “unworthy patriarchal connotations” (Gray 338) according to her.

In the Marian cult, the significance of icons, images, and paintings cannot be underestimated. As previously mentioned, the use of icons in the church has always been a contentious issue. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 endorsed the use of icons, only for them to be banned in 815, as they were deemed pagan practices. However, in 843, after the Synod of Constantinople, the use of icons was reinstated

(Boss 154). During this early period, her queenship and motherhood were celebrated through these icons. The belief that she was assumed into heaven and crowned as the Queen of Heaven further strengthened the iconography and paintings of that time. She becomes the seat of wisdom and virgin in majesty, along with these thematic representations:

One of the most ancient images in Christian art is that of the Adoration of the Magi. It appears in the catacombs in Rome, probably painted in the third century, being an image that is taken in the first instance from the Gospels. The visitation of the Magi to the infant Jesus is recorded in Matthew 2.11: “and going into the house [where the child was], the magi saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him” (Boss 161).

The Magi are the wise men who visit the infant Christ to worship Him, and they are traditionally considered kings from the East. The icon typically depicts the Christ child seated on the lap of Mary, with the wise men bowing down to worship Him. This symbolic representation portrays Mother Mary as the Seat of Wisdom, emphasizing her role in raising Christ in wisdom and reverence for God. In this way, iconography conveys a deeper meaning beyond what is explicitly stated.

From the beginning of the medieval period, miracle stories about paintings and icons of Mother Mary began to spread. Tales of bleeding images, weeping Madonna, oil-oozing pictures, and similar phenomena were reported from early on. These stories were circulated by bishops, priests, and devotees. The sacred images became linked to these stories, and churches were built based on them, with the consecration of these sacred images in those churches. These typical Catholic stories were not regarded as

myths; instead, the oral narratives of these miracle stories were passed down through generations. The sacred images enshrined in the churches gained popularity, often accompanied by numerous reported miracles. One such stories is described by Marina Warner,

A Jew orders some Christian workmen to destroy the picture. They refuse, so he smashes it himself and tells the workmen to throw it in the river. But the image is bleeding, and when the workmen put it in a basket, the blood seeps through and soaks the carriers. The Jew, horrified at the sight of this, is converted and builds a church to house the icon, where countless miracles of healing and exorcism take place (298-299).

These types of miraculous incidents have been reported till date. The sacred objects carry the miraculous powers according to the devotees. The miraculous appearance of Mary on the flames of the sacred candles, the fragrance of jasmine flowers from the sacred objects, the oil-oozing sacred objects are still there in the present century. People believe that “the dynamic holiness of icons and relics did not just stir the soul to the contemplation of higher things, they also physically communicated the properties of their subject or owner” (Warner 299). The reverence towards the images of different apparitions, miniature sculptures and paintings are kept in the houses as a common practice now.

However, in the present scenario, the veneration of Mother Mary has evolved significantly, and the church takes it with serious concern. She is not considered as a submissive, impassive, or idle figure but a powerful symbol and the strong advocate who takes action at the time of injustice. Mariology studies have drastically changed the perspectives of Church presenting Mother Mary as “the woman of strength,

independence, of integrity, of autonomous action” (Gray 338). Her image provides confidence and solace to women who suffer, portraying her as a strong, maternal figure whose intercession cannot be refused by her son, Jesus. Mother Mary is actively engaged with her devotees through her apparitions, believed to change destinies and participate in the Church's redemptive processes. This dynamic role has led to a remarkable increase in shrines, pilgrimage centres, and churches dedicated to her. These sites attract numerous pilgrims, drawn by miracle stories and testimonies that proclaim her powerful presence, especially in challenging times when faith is tested. The retreat centers associated with Mother Mary have become hubs of community strength and spiritual renewal, reinforcing the sense of community and faith. This widespread devotion underlines her importance as a symbol of hope, resilience, and intercessory power in contemporary religious practice.

This chapter analyses what the Bible says about Mother Mary in its early accounts and how her cult practices have historically evolved. To delve into the theological understanding of Mary, the chapter discusses the various dogmas associated with her and how different eras have bestowed her with diverse titles. The socio-cultural ambiance of each nation has further deepened the connection with Mother Mary. The spread of Christianity, along with the influence of colonial countries, has also contributed to making Mary familiar and popular. Her image as a mother resonates across cultural differences, while her ever-virgin image elevates her to a divine status in various regions.

These new titles have paved the way for prayers dedicated to Mary, leading to the establishment of new churches. Artistic expressions, images, and icons have also proliferated, inspired by Mary's titles. The cult practices associated with these

churches and pilgrimage centres have developed alongside these prayers. This chapter also examines the role of Mary within patriarchal cultural contexts and explains how Mary is perceived in the Church and Western countries. Her elevated position in the Church and her popularity among the faithful have been further intensified by Marian apparitions in different parts of the world. The next chapter discusses apparition narratives and their impact on the emergence of new cult practices.

Chapter III

Sacred Stories and Sacred Spaces: The Role of Apparitions in Shaping Marian Cult Across Different Cultural Contexts

Marian apparitions serve as a significant catalyst for deepening devotion to Mother Mary and establish a profound connection between believers and the divine. These miraculous encounters, where Mother Mary is said to appear to visionaries, convey messages from heaven and often result in the formation of new shrines and pilgrimage sites. Historical records and oral traditions surrounding these apparitions, which have persisted through generations, give rise to distinctive practices rooted in Marian piety. Even prior to the widespread veneration of Mary, such phenomena were reported globally, with the twentieth century witnessing a surge in these apparition events, described as the “fascinating dilemma of modern Christianity” (Matter 125). In today's Christian context, Marian apparitions play an essential role in enriching the spiritual landscape of faith by ensuring that devotion remains vibrant and dynamic, as Pelikan asserts: “for many millions of people no form of Marian devotion or doctrine has carried more momentous significance than her miraculous apparitions” (187). The intertwining of mythical narratives and ritualistic practices surrounding these apparitions fosters an enduring pilgrimage tradition which attracts countless believers to sacred sites and reinforcing the living heritage of Marian devotion.

The term “apparition” comes from the Latin *apparito*, meaning “appearance” or “presence.” An apparition is typically understood as the sudden, direct manifestation of a supernatural being to an individual or a group (Miller and Samples 80). Although often used interchangeably with “vision,” an apparition has a distinct

meaning. Unlike visions, which are internal experiences, an apparition is an external event in which “a three-dimensional person with a glorified, resurrected body” appears in physical space and is often witnessed by multiple people (Varghese 56). While visions can be either imaginative or spiritual, apparitions are not associated with creativity in this sense.

Freudian critics often interpret visions as hallucinations driven by unconscious childhood desires (Carroll 62). However, this view is largely dismissed by Mariologists, who argue that such an explanation fails to account for apparitions experienced by children with no predisposition for intense prayerful devotion. For instance, the 10-year-olds involved in the apparitions at Medjugorje and Fátima, who would typically prefer play over prolonged hours of prayer, challenge this interpretation (Horsfall 378). While some psychoanalysts suggest that visions may be the result of hallucinations produced by the seers’ minds, Horsfall contends that hallucinations lack an objective reality. In contrast, apparitions are understood to possess an external reality that exists independently of the visionary (Horsfall 380).

An apparition is understood as an encounter with an external, transcendent power, described as “objective interventions of a higher power” (Miller et al. 80). The Church holds a similar view on the authenticity of such events, asserting that “if the seer has experienced a real objective presence that is not of this world, then an authentic apparition has occurred” (81). The earliest recorded Marian apparition dates back to A.D. 40, when, according to tradition, the Virgin Mary appeared to St. James to instruct him to build a shrine in her name and under her patronage in Spain (Varghese 34). It is believed that she was alive at the time of this apparition, which is

regarded as a gift of bilocation. The message of constructing Marian shrines appears frequently in the early history of apparitions (37).

In the wake of numerous Marian apparitions during the nineteenth century, the Church became increasingly vigilant in announcing their authenticity and the messages they conveyed. Unlike earlier apparitions, which gained popularity through mass miracles, widespread devotion, and large pilgrimages, contemporary apparitions are scrutinized more closely. This is partly because most recent apparitions occur in public settings. The crucial feature of Marian apparitions in the present century is that many people, in addition to the visionaries, are able to see the apparition. Given the Church's conservative stance, only a limited number of apparitions have received ecclesiastical approval, despite there being over a thousand reported cases. The Church remains cautious in recognizing the supernatural nature of these events, prioritizing a careful process before granting legitimacy.

To gain approval for an apparition, the Church follows a systematic process that may take years to verify its authenticity. The primary concern is whether the nature of the apparition is supernatural. In addition to assessing the veracity of the apparition, the Church analyses the behaviour of both the visionaries and the faithful in receiving the apparition. The local bishop or a special commission appointed by the bishop investigates the case to determine whether it is authentic or demonic, and whether it is eligible to be declared authentic (Maunder "Apparitions of Mary," 431). Some investigations may even evoke mental trauma and tension in the visionaries. When an apparition meets the criteria for authenticity based on its basic characteristics, the bishop and the appointed committee can decide whether it is indeed authentic. There should be no political or personal agendas or commercial gain

involved; the seers should not be treated as celebrities, and the messages of the apparition must not contradict the fundamental beliefs of the Church (Horsfall 377). Furthermore, “it must not cause division within the Church, should renew community life, lead to the conversion of hearts, and promote the reawakening and stimulation of faith” (Miller et al. 85). Currently, the Church neither encourages nor discourages apparitions but takes time to observe and evaluate their consequences.

Places where Marian apparitions have occurred have grown remarkably popular over time. Key sites like Lourdes (1858) in France, Knock (1879) in Ireland, Fátima (1917) in Portugal, as well as traditional Marian shrines such as Guadalupe in Mexico and Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland, draw countless visitors each year. In times of social and political upheaval, economic hardship, and widespread suffering, these apparitions mark a transformative presence. As Hoagland observes, “Many ordinary people suffering from poverty created by the Industrial Revolution and the destructiveness of modern warfare saw these apparitions of Mary as a sign from heaven that God still cared for his people” (64). Marian apparitions thus serve as catalysts for change, urging people to confront their miseries and seek new purpose. Moreover, these sites become centres of healing and miracles, where divine intervention offers comfort and hope, filling the emotional and spiritual void in the lives of the faithful, commonly known as Marian Shrines.

Miracles of healing have been reported from these shrines, naturally fostering Marian devotion and associated cult practices. As a result, specific objects have become integral to these practices. Among these are the rosary, the Brown Scapular of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, and the Miraculous Medal, which are believed to have been bestowed by Mother Mary during her various apparitions. These objects are widely

used by Marian devotees around the globe. In the apparition at Lourdes, Mary revealed her Immaculate Conception and emphasized the importance of reciting the rosary. While some apparitions have promised Marian protection during times of warfare, others have urged a prayerful meditation on Mary's sorrows during Christ's crucifixion. The connection between the cult of Mary and her apparitions with socio-political and cultural contexts is undeniable. In the contemporary landscape, the Marian cult gains popularity through the narratives surrounding these apparitions. A scholar of Marian apparitions, Jaroslav Pelikan states that "it does seem safe to say that for millions of people no form of Marian devotion or doctrine has carried more momentous significance than her miraculous apparitions" (Pelikan 187).

Most seers who see Mary are women of no exceptional quality or high education qualifications. Most of them are children or housewives from the conventional lifestyle. They are described as "naive, pious, simple and sincere" (Musso 13) and most of them are from poor and modest backgrounds. At the time of apparitions, most of the seers are having personal issues or poor health conditions. Suffering is the recurrent motif in almost all Marian apparitions. The personal sufferings of the seers are perceived as suffering for humanity after these apparitions. This transition from meaningless personal suffering to meaningful suffering for the entire world is always significant. Even then, the apparitions have given women a privilege and status in the Church. The voice of the women is carefully heard and interpreted in the patriarchal-dominated Catholic church as a result of these apparitions.

The Marian apparition addresses the lack of feminine presence in the patriarchal religious landscape of Christianity. The church cannot deny that the

increase in the number of Marian apparitions, including those in the present century, indicates the active participation of Mother Mary in worldly issues. The feminine figure in Christianity emerges to speak for nations, offer solutions to problems, predict future apocalyptic events, and emphasize the need for stronger prayers. In doing so, Mother Mary breaks the silence imposed by patriarchy, asserting an active presence within the church. Marian apparitions not only create space for women but also establish Mary as an undeniable presence discussed beyond the confines of the church.

The apparition that occurred in Guadalupe in 1531 transformed the history of Mexico and Latin America. Juan Diego, a native Indian peasant who had converted to Christianity, received visions of Mary on four separate occasions. On December 9th, 1531, while on his way to church, he heard a voice calling from Tepeyac Hill. The Virgin Mary asked him to have a church built in her honour at that location. However, when Juan Diego conveyed this message to Archbishop Juan de Zumárraga of Mexico City, the bishop did not believe him and sent him away. Marian Apparitions are always democratic as observed by Pelikan. As he suggests “belief in Marian apparitions has, as often as not, been imposed from below on the ecclesiastical authorities by what is in some sense a democratic process” (186).

After the Virgin appeared to Juan Diego again and insisted on telling the bishop again, he returned to the bishop and repeated the message. The bishop was sceptical and asked for a sign to prove the authenticity of the apparition. The Virgin Mary instructed Juan Diego to climb to the top of the hill, where he miraculously found rare roses in full bloom, despite it being the wrong season. Juan Diego gathered the flowers and wrapped them in his cloak or tilma. Then he brought them to the

bishop. When he unfurled the cloak before the bishop, the roses fell to the floor, revealing a miraculous image of the Virgin imprinted on his tilma. Moved by this divine sign, the bishop repented of his scepticism and ordered the construction of a chapel at Tepeyac (Laso de la Vega 4). Even today, Diego's tilma is exhibited in the Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe without diminishing the image or disintegrating tilma over time. A part of the message from the Virgin Mary is written on the walls:

No estoy yo aquí que soy tu Madre? No estás bajo mi sombra y resguardo? No soy la fuente de tu alegría? No estás en el hueco de mi manto, en el cruce de mis brazos? (“Am I, your mother, not here? Are you not under my shadow and shelter? Am I not the source of your happiness? Are you not inside my cloak, in my embrace?”) (Pena 7)

The face of Mary, as seen in the cloak of Diago, exhibited both European and indigenous features. This mestizo features of Mary made people believe that she is the mother of everyone irrespective of their creed and colour. Unlike the blue-eyed white woman who had been represented through the iconography of Europe, the Guadalupe virgin was a brown-skinned youthful woman who did not carry her child along with her. It was a politically and culturally powerful symbol at the time of colonialization as Mother Mary became a mother to both colonized and colonizers. The apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe historically, religiously, and culturally transformed Mexico City, and she was declared the patroness of all of Latin America by Pope Pius X in 1945. The native Aztec people, whom missionaries had thought would be difficult to convert, were massively attracted to Christianity after this apparition. Our Lady of Guadalupe, who was said to resemble a native Indian in appearance and speech, communicated with Juan Diego in his mother tongue in the apparitions which led to

the widespread conversion of the indigenous population. “This Guadalupe has become the spiritual core of México. In the twenty-first century, her Basilica in México City is known as the most important Catholic shrine in the Americas” (Hernandez 22).

Before their conversion to Christianity by the Spanish Conquistadors, the Aztecs followed their own rituals and cultural practices, which included human sacrifices. In this land of multiple gods and goddesses, Christianity arrived with Spanish colonialism. The Spanish aimed to replace what they understood as the uncivilized practices of pagan beliefs and idolatry, emphasizing their religious superiority and power gained through multiple atrocities against the Aztecs. After the brutal attacks on the indigenous people and massive massacres in the early period, the Spanish conquistadors destroyed their temples and their symbols. The Aztecs were forced to be their slaves. The hostility, ill-treatment, and imposed conversion made most Aztecs resilient and rebellious. After the conquest, the missionaries came to the land with a comparatively softer attitude towards the indigenous people. Since the Indigenous people were familiar with the custom of accepting the new gods of their conquerors, introducing a new god was not a difficult task for them. Thus, Mother Mary as a black Madonna was introduced to them in the thirteenth century itself.

Guadalupe of México’s predecessor, the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, Spain, is no young virgin. She is in full adulthood, with the serious demeanour of a woman with the responsibility of the small child sitting on her lap. The baroque form of her dress, placed on her by the friars, covers her original bright polychrome. Known as a Majestic Virgin or enthroned Madonna, she,

in actuality, is a sitting woman holding a child, both formed in cedar in the style of the medieval period (22).

The mother figure was a contribution of European iconography and their attempt to represent the cultural assimilation they sought in their colonies. The Black Virgin represents the fertile goddess Isis in iconography. Black Virgins were associated with fertility in European art forms. Pagan elements were incorporated to include Mary in the goddess's cultural milieu, and thus the Black Virgin veneration closely resembled the goddess cult that existed in Mexico even before the Guadalupe apparition, though it was not popular among indigenous people.

The Virgin of Guadalupe, originally venerated in Spain, was a focal point for pilgrims long before the apparition at Tepeyac. However, when Juan Diego reported that the Virgin who appeared to him introduced herself as the Virgin of Guadalupe, it sparked a significant conflict. Diego said that she spoke to him in the Nahuatl language and the bishop who wrote the message from him used the help of the translator to understand Diego's language. Thus, the name, Virgin of Guadalupe, claimed to have been said by the Virgin Mary was attributed to the new church also. Thus, both churches in Spain and Mexico claimed the name, but the Tepeyac apparition gained widespread popularity, and devotees started focusing on the new apparition. This tension over the shared name led to a crisis in the Mexican devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe resulting in Mother Mary having greater socio-cultural significance than religious relevance. The critics of new Guadalupe said that the apparition itself was a fabricated story, while the miracles were reported day by day from the place of the apparition.

Later in 1895, Professor D. Mariano Jacobo Rojas, head of the Department of Nahuatl in the National Museum of Archaeology, History, and Ethnography conducted a scientific study of the word Guadalupe, believed to be pronounced by Mary. According to them, the Arabic word “Guadalupe” cannot be pronounced in the Nahuatl language. He concluded that the Virgin used the word Coatlxopeuh, which means “she who breaks, stamps or crushes the serpent,” and it was the equivalent of the Immaculate Conception in that language (Johnston 23). The immaculate conception of Mary was not officially announced as dogma during that time. Helen Behrens, who studies sacred images authentically, also claimed in her work in 1950 that Mother Mary never pronounced the word Guadalupe in her apparition as she spoke in her native language according to Johnston.

She spoke in the native language, and the combination of words which she used must have sounded like de Guadalupe to the Spaniards. The Aztec “te coatlxopeuh” has a similar sound: “te” means “stone”; “coa” means “serpent”; “tla” is the noun ending which can be interpreted as “the”; while “xopeuh” means “crush” or “stamp out.” Her precious image will thus be known (by the name of) the Entirely Perfect Virgin, Holy Mary, and it will crush, stamp out, abolish or eradicate the stone serpent.” (24)

The image of the woman crushing the serpent's head, drawn from the Book of Revelation in the Bible, symbolizes the defeat of the devil and his works. Mother Mary is often identified as the woman who will crush the devil's head. At the time, idolatrous practices in the Aztec community were at their peak. The deity worshipped at Tepeyac Hill was Tonantzin, revered as a great mother goddess. Her temple once stood at the summit of the hill, and she was depicted with a fearsome appearance:

“Her head is a combination of loathsome snakes’ heads and her garment a mass of writhing serpents” (3). Her temple was destroyed by the Spaniards during their colonization. However, with the apparition of Mother Mary at Tepeyac, she was placed in the position of the great mother figure for the Aztec people, symbolically replacing Tonantzin and leading to the eradication of idolatry. This shift contributed to the widespread conversion of the people to Christianity as an aftermath of the apparition.

The apparition stories, along with copies of the miraculous image from Diego's cloak, spread throughout Mexico and parts of Spain. Diego was placed in charge of the chapel erected at Tepeyac, where thousands visited. He recounted the stories in indigenous languages, sharing how Mother Mary addressed him. This event gave the indigenous people a renewed sense of vigour, instilling the realization that Mother Mary was not just a white man's goddess, but theirs as well. Before this, the missionaries were pressuring the Aztec people to abandon practices like polygamy and human sacrifices, which were central to their rituals to appease their gods. The Aztec people resisted conversion and Baptism. However, the apparition of Mother Mary transformed the situation. When they realized they had a mother who understood their flaws and strengths, a massive wave of conversions occurred without the need for force. It is said that around ninety lakhs of Aztec people got converted to Christianity with the effect of Apparition.

It was a profound experience for the indigenous people to encounter a different kind of mother—one who spoke to them and offered protection. This mother accepted them as they were and, without punishment, gently called them back to the true God, her son. The dignity and assurance in her words, delivered through one of

their own, had deep and far-reaching psychological implications in the lives of the Aztec people. It paved the way for a transformation of their society on social and political levels. Her benevolence and mercy attracted multitudes of Aztecs, leading to a paradigm shift as they abandoned long-held cultural practices that were integral to their identity.

Their newfound love and reverence for Mother Mary was expressed in the way they naturally honoured goddesses in their culture. This created tensions with the missionaries, who saw the Aztecs' adoration of Mary as bordering on idolatry, a grave sin in their eyes. The missionaries struggled to understand how Mary's direct intervention in the lives of the colonized could lead to such an intimate bond. They now witnessed the indigenous people localizing and embracing Mary as their most important goddess, a development beyond the missionaries' comprehension in the beginning periods of the Christian religious contexts.

The missionaries led the mass conversion of the Aztecs across the country. New churches, monasteries, schools, hospitals, and workshops emerged widely during that period as the phenomenal effect of this apparition. In 1552, the University of Mexico was established. As a religion, Christianity flourished, and social and cultural developments occurred through the involvement of missionaries. In the socio-cultural contexts of Mexico, the rapid growth and changes could be attributed to the Guadalupe apparition. Pilgrims from different parts of the world started visiting the church. The native people were selected as missionaries to preach and sent to different parts of the world.

The apparition of Guadalupe expressed cultural hybridity by presenting herself with a mixed identity of native as well as Spanish. The symbolic resistance of colonial arrogance which tried to remove the pagan rituals and practices naturally led to the syncretic amalgamation of these cultures. The imposed superiority of the West was challenged by her miraculous appearance on the cloak (tilma) that became sacred. The object of indigenous people was converted into a sacred object that marked a counter resistance of the native people. As Bhabha rightly pointed out, “Hybridity is the reevaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal” (162). By integrating the indigenous symbols with catholic piety, Mother Mary apparition helped the native people to regain their own identity by reversing the dominance of the Colonizers.

“Syncretism is a form of cultural adaptation in which elements from different traditions are brought together to form a new, cohesive system that serves the needs of the community while preserving the essence of the original beliefs” (Turner and Turner 78). The apparition of Mother Mary in Guadalupe allowed the native people to continue their traditional worship of goddesses in a different form, which also led to confusion among European missionaries about whether they were practicing Marian worship or simply showing respect towards her. However, cultural syncretism created a shared religious and cultural identity that fostered a sense of togetherness and diminished the hierarchy in the belief system. The apparition of Mary provided momentum for this cultural coherence.

By incorporating syncretic elements into the religious practices of native Indians, the conquistadors tried to spread Christianity in that period. Along with their

gods and goddesses, Mother Mary and Jesus were also placed into their religious and cultural landscapes. Still, the religious syncretic elements can be found in Mexico as Christianity cannot move away from the idolatry practiced by the Aztecs. But this apparition became the focal point of converting masses to Christianity in Mexico and Pope John XXIII proclaimed a Marian Year of Our Lady of Guadalupe from December 12, 1960, to December 12, 1961, and extolled her as “the mother of the Americas” (Johnston 118).

The exact moment when the miraculous spring appeared at the site of the fourth Marian apparition to Juan Diego remains unknown. However, the water from this spring is believed to possess healing powers, and devotees from around the world continue to collect it to this day. Many Marian apparitions are associated with a nearby miraculous spring, symbolizing the gift of new life, comfort, and spiritual purification. In Guadalupe, the Virgin Mary is particularly revered for her healing powers, and the nearby spring is seen as a source of healing from illness.

Mother Mary as the protector of Navigators is a common belief that exists in different cultural contexts. This faith will be rooted in the cultural sense by authenticating the story in a historical context. The story is the same in every culture with different people, but it emphasizes the miraculous power of Mother Mary over water. In Guadalupe, this story is also connected with the beginning of colonialism. The black Madonna in Guadalupe was once visited by Columbus himself to express his gratitude for saving him in the sea.

Historians within the order report that Columbus signed the contract with the Spanish monarchs while at Guadalupe. They state that the Virgin saved Columbus as

he was returning from one of his voyages to the Americas; the ship encountered a storm off the coast of Portugal and was saved when the sailors prayed to Guadalupe. Afterward, Columbus came to the monastery to give thanks (Hernandez 50).

This black Madonna was presented among the presence of multiple goddesses in Mexico where she was presented as one of the goddesses who exhibited the miraculous powers of multiple divine figures. She was the Goddess of fertility and prosperity. She showed resemblances with the deities of the pre-Christian era, especially Greco-Roman and Egyptian Goddesses of fertility and power. The local populace of Guadalupe considered Mother Mary as someone who could not be limited in the Christian realm. The Black Madonna herself was different from the Mother Mary the Europeans venerated. By embedding a distinct image of Mary within the cultural context and psyche of the people, Christianity was able to evoke a sense of *déjà vu* in the national consciousness, ultimately giving rise to the Black Madonna in Mexico. But “She herself is Other, allowing non-Christians to venerate her powers” (Hernandez 30). By creating images and icons that resonated with the native people, the missionaries and authorities sought to convince them that Mary belonged to their culture.

The apparitions of Mary in different parts of the world have given rise to distinct Marian devotions, each shaped by unique iconographies that incorporate specific symbols, styles, and messages conveyed during the apparitions. When the apparition took place in Guadalupe, the resulting images and paintings of Mary predominantly featured her as the one who crushed the serpent, symbolizing her triumph over evil. Her Immaculate Conception was another central theme, widely communicated through these depictions. During the colonial period, the artistic

representations of Mary were intentionally crafted to present her as superior to the pagan goddesses venerated by the native peoples.

Images of the Immaculate Conception show Mary standing on the moon. The moon played an important role in the pre-Hispanic worldview. Moon symbolism was related to the feminine principle, associated with water and the cycle of agriculture (sowing and harvest) and life (giving birth, menstruation). Together with lunar deities like the Aztec goddess Coyolxahuqui and Mayan goddess Ixchel, other goddesses personified fecundity and fertility and were associated with the moon such as Mayahuel, Tlazolteotl, and Xochiquetzal. Some of them, like Tlazolteotl, Mayahuel, and Ixchel, were usually represented with lunar symbols both in sculpture and in pre-Hispanic codices. Thus, it must have been quite easy for the native people to deduce that the Madonna was just another lunar goddess (Granziera 475).

Legends and myths from indigenous traditions were woven into literature and iconography, aligning native beliefs with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. This deliberate fusion of the local and the sacred helped to establish a Christianized vision of a New Mexico, where the Virgin Mary became a unifying symbol for both faith and culture. Their national consciousness is also connected to the Lady of Guadalupe.

The Aztecs greatly revered the sun god, and glowing rays added behind Mary signify that she comes from heaven and that her god has divine power. One theory holds that in Nahuatl, the word “Mexico” comes from three words that mean “in the centre of the moon”—and Mary is standing in the centre of a

black crescent moon. Borne on the shoulders of an angel who, some say, has native features, she dominates both light and darkness (Brading 54)

Her paintings are sold in millions apart from the prayers, novenas, and holy mass conducted in Guadalupe as a popular pilgrim centre. Vendors are selling numerous miniature figurines and images of her. The Virtual pilgrimage is also possible through the Internet. Guadalupe contains “history of the Religious-Cultural Fusion of our nation” (Harris). The powerful religious and cultural fusion has occurred through the deliberate attempt of the missionaries and this powerplay of iconography, literature, and oral traditions passed down through generations has played a pivotal role in shaping the religious and cultural identity of post-aparition Mexico.

Almost all Christian nations have utilized the image of Mother Mary for political and social purposes. The Immaculate Conception of Mary has been a central concern for many nations, as it symbolizes the “purity” of their political intentions and interventions. This concept becomes particularly significant when the Church and monarchy are closely aligned, as purity is often seen as a reflection of righteous rule. Spain, a nation deeply preoccupied with the idea of purity, has fully embraced and promoted the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The purity of the country's patron saint, the Virgin Mary, has been a model for its rulers to follow. In Mexico, too, the features of Mother Mary, especially the idea of purity carry lasting cultural and political significance. This idea of purity was spread through symbols and images, especially through the iconography related to water. “Mary is the ‘fountain in the garden’ and a ‘well of living water’”. These images, repeatedly presented to the

Indians, allowed them to make this connection between water and the Virgin Mary” (Granziera 475).

Most of the Marian apparitions occur in different countries at times of stress and political upheavals. When the country goes beyond the control of religion, Mother Mary appears to the seers to get back to the way of her son. The messages given to the seers show her direct involvement in the distressed and confused political scenario of church-state conflicts, forming new states and redrawing the map of Europe. The Guadalupe apparition is intrinsically connected to its revolutions for the independence of their country. As Marina Warner observes,

During the Mexican revolution, the Royalists fought under the standard of La Virgen de los Remedios, the ancient palladium of Cortes’ conquering army, which he had brought with him from Alcantara. The independents marched under the banner of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The progression from vision to sacred object (Juan Diego’s cloak) to cult site (the shrine church, now in a suburb of Mexico City), to palladium of a people and a nation and a cause—a progression that occurs in many stories of Catholic attempts to contact the eternal—is crystal clear from the tale of Guadalupe (310)

Historians like Blackbourn and Christian Shafe have the viewpoint that these apparitions are the “consequences of social, political, and especially religious tensions in the country where they took place” (Musso 17). For example, before the Fatima apparitions, the revolutionary Republic established in Portugal in 1910 drastically changed the policies of the country. “Many Catholic clergy were killed, property of religious orders was confiscated, and churches and seminaries were closed or

destroyed, Church property was nationalized, seminaries were removed from Church control, and holy days were no longer observed officially” (Bromley and Bobbit 9). Not only Portugal but France before the apparition was also going through its internal turmoil, famine, and epidemic.

The apparitions help the church authorities to have a naturally organized group of believers that seem to be a political danger to the civil authorities. As noted by the famous historian, “In a 19th-century world defined by secularization and the emergence of modern states, the Virgin Mary proved a potent weapon for Catholics in their struggle against both secularization and the hostility of the nascent nation-states of Europe to Church temporal power and influence” (Ventresca 443). The emerging modernity that shares the chaos and tension of the new world and morality codes has confused the clergy. The Republican countries that challenge the conventional norms of religion make threats to the hegemonic nature of the church. The apparitions during that period helped the authority of the church to get back their hold. In the work, *Marian Apparitions in Cultural Contexts*, Valeria Céspedes Musso shares the same view:

For Catholics, including priests and bishops, to counteract the wave of modernity, the apparitions were used as a tool to galvanize the laity and drive a strong oppositional movement. As seen in the Marpingen and Ezquioga cases, the imminent threats against the local Catholic churches forced the religious institution to co-opt the apparitional movement, a phenomenon that seemed to emerge, especially in 19th-century Marian apparitions, when the Roman Catholic Church was under threat by the inevitability of the modern secular state. (17)

The apparition of Mother Mary in Fatima has far-fetched consequences that illustrate how religion can influence the political structure of a country. In this incident, three children from Portugal have Marian apparitions over six months starting on 13 May 1917. They are asked to pray specifically for the souls of the sinners, for the soldiers involved in World War I, and for the country, Russia. Most of the people of France are Christians who have accepted and believed in the apparitions that influenced the political climate of the period. The entire Europe has been facing problems like material distress, unemployment, anticlericalism, and conflicts during the time of apparitions. The involvement of Portugal in WW I has evoked fear in the minds of the people and there have been bread riots in Portugal against the war. (Manuel 4). At the zenith of this anxiety, the divine intervention must have given them a release from the fear and chaos and hope for the future. Fatima thus becomes a potent haven for the laity and a powerful weapon for the church for the power play.

As observed by Paul Christopher Manuel, the hegemony of the clergy and their dictatorial power relationship made the people move away from the church during that period. Universities also initiated anticlerical movements to challenge the church's monopolistic control and entrenched policies. It paved the way for accepting the secular policies of the First Republic by the people. However, the unparalleled reception that the common folk gave to the apparitions changed the political dynamics of Portugal by reinstating the power of the church (5-6).

When the three children, Lucia, Francisco Marto, and Jacinta Marto, were grazing their sheep, they saw a light from the sky that approached them swiftly. The children were not afraid because they had already encountered angel apparitions

before Mary appeared to them. The angel, according to them, had taught them a prayer and had told them that the hearts of Mary and Jesus were attentive to their prayers. The children later understood that the angel had been preparing them for the Marian visits. As the strange light came closer, a beautiful lady appeared “above the holm oak tree, wearing a pure white mantle, which was edged with gold, which went to her feet. In her hands, the beads of a rosary shone like stars, with its crucifix the most radiant gem of all” (Delaney 153). She told them not to be afraid and said that she had come from heaven. She asked them to pray the rosary and to return to that place on the thirteenth of every month. The subsequent apparitions followed the same pattern, delivering messages to pray for the entire world and to seek repentance.

The final apparition, known as the “Miracle of the Sun,” took place on 13 October 1917 in the presence of more than seventy thousand people. During this event, the crowd witnessed only a cloud above the children and heard a sound resembling buzzing. Mary instructed the children to observe the day as Rosary Day and urged them to continue reciting the rosary daily. The miracle, described by *O Século*, a pro-government, anticlerical Lisbon paper, was recorded as an eyewitness testimonial. The incident is narrated as follows:

From the road, where the vehicles were parked and hundreds of people who had not dared to brave the mud were congregated, one could see the immense multitude turn toward the sun, which appeared free from clouds and in its zenith. It looked like a plaque of dull silver, and it was possible to look at it without the least discomfort. It might have been an eclipse that was taking place. But at that moment a great shout went up, and one could hear the spectators nearest at hand shouting: “A miracle! A miracle!” Before the

astonished eyes of the crowd, whose aspect was biblical as they stood bareheaded, eagerly searching the sky, the sun trembled and made sudden incredible movements outside all cosmic laws—the sun “danced” according to the typical expression of the people. Standing at the step of an omnibus was an old man. With his face turned to the sun, he recited the Credo in a loud voice. I asked who he was and was told Senhor Joao da Cunha Vasconcelos. I saw him afterward going up to those around him who still had their hats on, vehemently imploring them to uncover before such an extraordinary demonstration of the existence of God. (“Our Lady of Fatima”)

After this incident, people started talking about various experiences that they were having on that day and about what they had seen. Some are mere exaggerations out of excessive piety, but it must be noted that no newspaper claims that it is a conspiracy made by the church. When the majority stands for the apparitions with religious zeal, the liberal media hesitates to address it differently. Moreover, the following political events in Russia, when Lenin came into power by demolishing the Kerensky government, have made people believe that message said to be given by Mother Mary. The seers have written the said message as “Russia would soon reject God and spread war throughout the world; pray for Russia” (Manuel 10). When the new communist Government seized power, the moment of prophecy coming true caused many to believe in apparitions.

However, the political aftermath of those apparitions is intricate and completely transformed the liberal and modern nature of Portugal by re-establishing the rule of the dictator Salazar after the military overthrew the First Republic in 1926. The government reinstates the values and traditions of conservative conception and

makes Christianity the official religion. Marriage gets civil status and the government forbids divorces. New Catholic University is established while prohibiting the protestant religion by passing statues against it. He never allows church supremacy in his country though it has some privileges as it is the centre of the dictator's religion, but he is never hesitant to punish the clergy who go against his law. The growth of Salazar as a dictator is closely linked with his shrewdness in connecting politics and religion, especially using Fatima as a political tool.

Later, the Pope and Vatican Council criticized Salazar for his autocratic deeds in his country as well as in the African colonies of Portugal. When Pope Paul VI visited Fatima, he avoided visiting him which gives the idea that the Church does not support the inhumane and atrocious activities of any country. Later, the military movement called MFA overthrew the Estado Novo Government through the carnation revolution in 1974 which resulted in the shift to the democratically elected government. When the leaders of MFA try to bring social changes with their communist policies and to downplay the importance of Fatima, people resist it going back to Fatima and their religious values. After the democratic constitution was established in 1976, the church supported it, but church and state got distinct roles; religious freedom was also established (12).

More than that, the zealous devotees of Fatima formed the Blue Army that promotes the devotional cults of Mary during the time of the Cold War. The group was formed to pray for the entire humanity and especially for Russia. "The cult of Fátima was intensified with the emergence of the Cold War after 1947. As Stalinist Russia spread its ideology around the world, Catholic faithful hearkened Fátima's messages and prayed in the 1950s" (Manuel 14). The messages from Fatima reach

across the world reciting the rosary became a regular practice in Catholic families. When Pope John Paul II survived the assassination attempt on the same date that marked the 64th anniversary of Mary's apparition, he visited Fatima to express gratitude to Mother Mary, crediting her with saving his life. Pope's visits also have increased the significance of Fatima as one of the most popular pilgrim shrines and as Manuel points out, "Fátima is a Marian apparition with a political character— indeed, perhaps, the archetype of a political apparition" (16). The Fatima statue was taken around the world as the fear of people about the spread of communism and the beginning of nuclear war conquered their minds. Fatima is the first remarkable visionary event that was held in Europe and its impacts still resonate in the twenty-first century.

Before the Apparition in Fatima, a small town called Lourdes had attained much acclaim for the eighteen apparitions of Mary given to a child. In 1858, the humble fourteen-year-old Bernadette Soubirous, a shepherdess hailing from the impoverished town of Lourdes, goes through a profound encounter that forever alters the course of her life. Despite her meagre upbringing and lack of formal education, Bernadette possessed a gentle spirit, though physically frail due to asthma. When she goes to collect firewood from the nearby forest with her elder sister and friends, she sits near the river alone, at that time, she hears the sound of a wind, but nothing moves around her. When she finds the light emanating from the grotto near the river, she astonishingly investigates it from where a beautiful woman appears before her. She does not understand it is Mother Mary, but she wears a white veil and blue girdle with a pearl rosary in her hand. Initially silent, the apparition gradually reveals herself to

Bernadette as “I am the Immaculate Conception” (Harris 80) over subsequent encounters spanning fifteen miraculous days.

In these divine encounters, Bernadette receives messages urging prayer, penitence, and the construction of a chapel on the sacred site. Guided by the apparition, she uncovers the fountain near the grotto which is considered to have healing properties. Initially, the Church and clergy are sceptical about the apparition; after the canonical investigation, the authenticity is confirmed by the church which eventually leads to the widespread recognition of the event as genuine and the entity as “Our Lady of Lourdes” (Hoagland 71). Lourdes was eventually proclaimed as an international pilgrim centre. It stands as a bulwark that resists the anticlerical and anti-religious deeds of the country. Since France is the cradle for revolutionary ideals and antireligious ideology, the apparitions play a pivotal role in deciding the role of the Church in the country.

The people who believe strongly in Mother Mary's appearances have moved away from positivism and republican visions. They think that faith is more powerful than science. Miracles at the fountain of Lourdes, quick recoveries during eucharistic processions, and the popularity of medals with Mary's image have made the people dubious about the effectiveness of science and reasoning. The fervent belief womenfolk showed towards Mary is doubtful for the anti-clergy; some are hysterical at shouting their sudden cure; some show passionate displays of gestures that appear illogical.

The extravagant gestures and rituals during pilgrimage typified a Church increasingly reliant on women and fuelled anti-clerical claims that the ‘backward’ sex took refuge in obscurantism when faced with secular

awakening. At the same time, the Church was accused of deliberately catering to the 'sentimental' and 'meretricious' tastes of female worshippers, women consumed with a passion for Mary, the Sacred Heart, the infant Jesus, and any other kind of 'mawkish' devotion. Such characterizations had political implications because the case for denying women the vote in France rested largely on a conviction that they would bring about clerical domination (Harris 18).

Beyond its political implications, the medical community also investigates the phenomena of healing that purportedly occur in that location. By the century's end, non-Catholic medical practitioners bear witness to instances of miraculous healing, despite their disbelief in apparitions. Yet, they acknowledge the undeniable therapeutic effects the place exerts on individuals, effects that defy conventional scientific explanations.

Surprisingly, the grotto where the Mother Mary apparitions occurred was considered a "haunted" place by the local people. According to some villagers, the grotto was under a devilish spell due to its unkempt and wild appearance. Local stories suggest priests had predicted the apparitions from their deathbeds' wood, and some say their ancestors had made similar predictions. These narratives indicate that the community was prepared to accept the appearance of Mother Mary, authenticating the oral traditions. Now, the Marian apparition has transformed myths of fear into narratives of miracle and awe.

The apparitions in Lourdes have changed its socio-political history and their perceptions about modernity. The pilgrimage to that country irrespective of gender, caste, and colour differences indicates that many Christians find Mary as a solution to

her problems in modernity. Ruth Harris says, “the shrine’s massive appeal alone indicates how much religion remained a crucial part of “modernity”, itself a notion that requires reconsideration” (12). However, The Church's acceptance of the authenticity of the Lourdes Apparitions brought to the forefront a discussion on the complex interplay between religion and politics in the modern world that amplifies the power dynamics between them.

The cult of Mary, along with the worship of the sacred heart and infant Jesus has reached its zenith after these apparitions, especially among womenfolk. The Medal of Mary has been sold in magnitude that followed miraculous stories of instant healing and curing of diseases. These incidents have led to an inclination towards religion rather than the socio-political ideologies of that period. That is why some historians address these incidents as attempts to femininize religion. The more people receded away from the political revolutions, the more they clung to the religious revolution that occurred during that period which included the enthusiasm for pilgrimages, Marian Cults, and religious practices. Thus, the emergence of women upholding the activities of religion with unprecedented practices of the Marian cult along with a myriad of Mary apparitions not only femininize religion but also heralded the new socio-religious and political contexts which get influenced by them.

Many countries underwent a significant transformation after the Marian apparitions, with their political landscapes shifting. Secular parties were pushed to the fringes, as the messages of these apparitions were often interpreted in support of monarchy. Communism and secularism were seen as major threats to Christianized nations. As Engelhardt-Herringer observes, “Invocation of Mary was also useful in countries where Roman Catholics faced political opposition from secular parties, including in France, Italy, and Mexico” (512). In France, all major Marian apparition

sites held political significance. Graef notes, “In France, where the French Revolution and Napoleon ushered in an age of anticlericalism, Marian devotion may have been part of the Romantic response to the French Revolution” (340). More than that, “Our Lady of Guadalupe was a rallying symbol for the cause of Mexican independence, which was won in 1821, and La Virgen de Los Treinta y Tres was named after the thirty-three men who dedicated the cause of Uruguayan independence to the Virgin in 1825” (Engelhardt-Herringer 513). Marian apparitions have brought a paradigm shift in the destiny of many nations.

The frequent apparitions and the close connection with Mother Mary are often framed within the discussion of the feminine ideal, where Mary is positioned as the embodiment of this ideal. Her image as “morally superior, naturally maternal, and nonsexual” (504) was deeply embedded in popular culture across European countries. Mary embodies qualities of compassion, purity, and maternal love, resonating with individuals across diverse cultures and epochs. Though feminism questioned this unattainable feminine aura of Mother Mary, the catholic church always portrays her as an ideal version of a woman.

Through her apparitions, intercessions, and the enduring devotion of countless believers, Mary continues to transcend doctrinal boundaries, embodying a universal symbol of faith, hope, and maternal care. She remains an ever-present figure, offering solace and inspiration to those who seek her intercession, enriching the spiritual lives of countless faithful throughout history and into the present day. Mary became the cornerstone in shaping the character of women, serving as an exemplary model for generations through speeches, sermons, and retreats. As Jaroslav Pelikan observes, “historically the Virgin Mary has provided the content of the definition of the

feminine in a way that he [Jesus] has not done for the masculine” (1). It also paved the way for the increasing renewal of Marian devotion and Mary cult across the world.

However, this feminization does not offer any privileges to women other than becoming more active in the church. The patriarchal church norms always keep women on the fringes with their defined responsibilities and duties. In the patriarchal catholic imagination, women are supposed to undergo suffering and tears so that they can participate in the redemptive plan of God. The abundance of female seers involved in the apparitions could be attributed to this patriarchal notion. However, the number of apparitions has been increasing; most of the visionaries are women and children.

The apparitions in Belgium and Germany soon after Fatima apparitions also have their socio-historical significance, but they address the necessity of converting sinners and unbelievers into faith. Throughout history, various countries in Europe have reported Marian apparitions during times of societal upheaval and uncertainty. These special occurrences often coincide with critical periods marked by political, social, or economic turmoil as mentioned earlier. The appearance of the Virgin Mary during such times is often interpreted as a source of solace and guidance for believers amidst the challenges facing their respective nations.

The apparitions in Medjugorje in the Herzegovina region of Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1980s have attracted the attention of people across the world. The seers include six women and two men. When they go for a walk, they see Madonna as they claimed, and the apparition asks for a return to the religious practices of confession, holy mass, and prayer. She insisted on praying for peace in the world, so she later came to be known as the “Queen of Peace” (Maunder, *Our Lady of Nations*, 157) She appears as a beautiful young woman in a long grey

garment, and white veil with a crown of stars, hovering on a cloud, sometimes alone, sometimes with infant Jesus and/or angels. According to the seers, she looks and speaks like a Croatian, but she has something in her hand that the Virgin covers and uncovers; some of them say that it is her baby. The teenagers receive the messages from 1983-1987 as weekly in the beginning, later as monthly where the importance of all the religious practices gets reemphasized. More than that, fasting on Wednesday and Friday for the sinners is the new suggestion from her. This place is also acclaimed in popularity and millions of pilgrims go there every year, accompanied by the miracle stories of healing, converting to Catholicism, and returning to the sacraments. “The Queen of Peace called for inter-faith tolerance and reconciliation amongst the different ethnic and religious groups of Bosnia-Herzegovina, thus drawing from Catholic opponents the charge of Pluralism” (Maunder, *Our Lady of Nations*, 158-159).

But unlike other apparitions that occurred in different places, this one seems to be different. The seers have conducted several meetings about the apparitions. Some have got married whereas the seers of the past lived a secluded life without focusing on fame and refrained from marriage. But these seers travel across the world and attract devotees to their land. Anyway, some people in the catholic church are sceptical about these apparitions, they say that the apparitions are the hallucinations of the seers. Due to the conflict between the Franciscan clergy and the bishop of that time, the one group who opposed the bishop supported these apparitions and spread their popularity while the bishop wanted to suppress them. By that time Medjugorje had gained global attention and Pope John Paul II stood favourably for them. The church has neither approved nor condemned the apparitions and further study is

needed to proclaim its authenticity. However, the pilgrimage to this place was officially authorized; but the recognition of the apparition is yet to be given.

But the village has drastically changed with the apparitions. Many chapels have been constructed. People who migrated for jobs have come back as the industry flourished and offered job opportunities here. Hotels and other pilgrim facilities have increased. Medjugorje shrine in the rural area has become one of the most popular pilgrim centres in the present world attracting millions of pilgrims. People across the world especially from America have shown keen interest in these apparitions and the belief in divine miracles has increased. As these apparitions occur in the modern era alongside advancements in technology and communication, they wield significant influence in shaping the belief systems of people. Interestingly, Mother Mary instructs the seers to turn off their TV sets and return to prayer, yet paradoxically, television becomes a powerful medium for rapid communication and spreading the news of her apparitions.

Many places in Europe also have shared the stories of apparitions after the Medjugorje incident. The seers can get the apparitions wherever they go. The trend of apparitions occurring in various locations of the seers signifies a new pattern that serves as a model for numerous other apparition stories in different parts of Europe following a similar template. The proliferation of apparitions in European countries, termed the “epidemic of apparitions” by Chris Maunder (*Our Lady of Nations*, 84), emerges as a consequence of political and cultural turmoil. This phenomenon warrants deeper investigation as it highlights the unfaltering relevance of Mother Mary in contemporary times. It suggests that she continues to hold a pivotal role in shaping the modern belief system within Catholicism.

The apparitions address the struggling times of Catholicism by preventing the growth of Communism in European countries, consoling nations from the traumatized effects of war, and alerting people against social and moral degeneration. The rift between nations, the chaos of modernity, and disturbances in socio-political and cultural spaces often lead people to seek solace in their religious faith. Consequently, religious cults flourish in shrines especially in the twentieth century, offering a sense of stability and spiritual guidance amidst societal upheaval. The Medjugorje apparitions in the modern century pave the new way for spreading the religion with the help of the media. The new web community decides the future of the pilgrim centres by producing excessive news of miracles that in a way subvert hierarchies and canonical ways of determining the authenticity of apparitions (Maunder, *Our Lady of Nations*, 196). However, the apparitions along with Marian devotion decide the power dynamics and identity formation in religious practices.

Apparitions in the modern era prompt the church to reconsider Mary's significance as she is perceived to intervene in critical moments, even saving nations on the brink of ruin. Her continued presence serves as a driving force for the church, keeping it dynamic and relevant. Regardless of debates surrounding their authenticity, these apparitions have a deeper impact on believers, rekindling their faith and devotion. This is why certain countries embrace her as their national patron, recognizing her ability to inspire and protect their people. "Marian apparitions appear to be the Catholic equivalent of New Age spirituality" (Horsfall 384). This new-age spirituality evokes a sense of togetherness beyond the borders of nations and religions. As the devotees of Mary, they share a common brotherhood and a sense of belonging.

Mary's apparitions in the twentieth century provoke discussions that extend far beyond religious contexts. As Maunder notes, “regional histories, devotions, hopes, fears, expectations, mythologies, and points of tension all play their part in the story of an apparition” (*Our Lady of Nations*, 2). The significant political and social changes of the time often intertwine with Marian apparitions. When people drift away from traditional belief systems, these apparitions tend to occur. Maunder further observes that “Marian apparitions have been vital supports in the Catholic Church’s response to its perceived enemies over the past two centuries: republicanism, communism, moral liberalism, and religious indifference” (3). This perspective suggests that most apparitions are inherently anti-modern according to Engelhardt- Herringer, with Mary offering traditional remedies for the world’s troubles—encouraging prayer, attending Mass, and reconciling with God (510).

From the earliest days of Christianity to the modern era, Mother Mary’s significance has transcended conventional boundaries. She has been evolving into a timeless and deeply cherished presence for believers. She is not merely relegated to the historical narrative but is perceived as a living and accessible figure, offering comfort, guidance, and spiritual nourishment to those who believe in her. While traditionally venerated as the mother of Jesus Christ and the epitome of divine motherhood, Mary’s cult has evolved beyond the conventional understanding of Christian theology. Scholars, including Anne Baring, have underscored her role as an “unrecognized goddess in Christianity” (Baring, ch.3, Kindle ed.) emphasizing her profound impact beyond traditional religious limits.

In the work, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins*, Michael Carrol has attempted to connect the Marian Cult with Freudian psychology of the “Father- ineffective family” theory (Musso 22). It says that the father-ineffective

family produced “in sons a strong but strongly repressed desire for the mother (Carroll 112) and that devotion to the mother was originally expressed in the Cybele cult, according to him. “This devotion was later redirected to a new goddess, the Virgin Mary, as more people belonging to this group began joining the Catholic Church in large numbers” (Carroll 112). This Marian cult has been modelled on the goddess -worship in the past and it got reshaped in the present Christian Context.

Carroll also examines the nature of Marian apparitions, questioning whether they should be classified as hallucinations or illusions. Using Freudian theory, he explores the possibility of hallucinations. According to Carroll, two conditions must be met to identify a hallucination: 1) “the subject must perceive a stimulus and believe that it truly exists (i.e., is not imaginary),” and 2) “independent observers must be unable to detect any stimulus that corresponds, however loosely, to what the subject perceives” (Carroll 117). If an individual experiences something that others around them cannot perceive or recognize, it falls under the category of hallucination. This hallucination may result from the pursuit of gratification for unconscious wishes or the release of excessive sexual energy (Carroll 140-141).

He says that Marian apparitions can be considered illusions. Illusion is defined as “the misperception of a physical stimulus whose existence can be verified by independent observers” (Carroll 117). Even though the others cannot see the apparition, the others can feel that something happening around them and they can experience the difference, maybe as a light surrounding the vision. It can be identified as an illusion if the apparition fulfils the criteria:

First, they confront an unusual stimulus of some sort; second, they are experiencing great anxiety over the future; third, someone makes the explicit suggestion that an apparition of the Virgin Mary is in progress; and fourth,

their religious worldview legitimates the belief that an apparition of the Virgin Mary might be a sign from God and He is on their side (Carroll 217).

He discusses the intricate relationship between the Marian cult and apparitions. Deep-rooted religious beliefs validate these apparitions as real and meaningful, rather than dismissing them as illusions. Marian piety, combined with oral narratives of miracles and healings, spreads among the people, who collectively connect themselves with the apparition sites. These oral traditions then become part of the history of these sites. The cultural and historical contexts that fuel Marian piety also contribute to the frequency of apparitions, which often occur through imitation. He says there is no point in believing “that apparitions of the Virgin Mary, at least in predominantly Catholic areas, will cease, since the processes producing these apparitions are as likely to operate in the future as in the past” (Carroll 224). He concludes by saying that “so long as there is a Marian cult, there will be people who speak to the Goddess face to face” (Carroll 224).

But whatever psychology says, Marian apparitions in the various part of the world try to connect with the local people with different symbols and images. Similar to the Guadalupe apparitions, many other apparitions show the cultural syncretic elements through their involvement in different cultural contexts. Our Lady of La Vang is another Virgin Mary apparition in Vietnam's Quảng Trị Province in 1798. The apparition occurred during the late 18th century when Catholics faced atrocious persecution under the Nguyen Dynasty. The dynasty, viewing Catholicism as a threat to Vietnam's traditional values, initiated a widespread campaign to suppress the religion. As a result, many Catholics were tortured, imprisoned, or killed, and their churches were destroyed. some went into the forests of La Vang to escape from

persecution. They recited the rosary every night and Mother Mary appeared for them for couple of times to console and strengthen them. She appeared before them with her child and two angels by her side. She dressed like Vietnamese, and she was compassionate and affectionate to understand their plight. She taught them how to use herbs as medicine and promised her prayers.

People from neighbouring places were heard of the incidents and they were coming to visit the church. The devotees, with increased faith and hope for the future, constructed a decent and modest chapel to venerate her. Since the persecution subsided, the Church of La Vang stood high as a symbol of the resilience of the Vietnam Catholics. They honoured Mother Mary as their mother. The small shrine built in 1820 was consecrated in 1901. In 1961, Pope John XXIII granted a canonical coronation to the statue of Our Lady of La Vang, and declared the shrine a Minor Basilica highlighting her importance. Later, in 1988, Pope John Paul II canonized 117 Vietnamese martyrs who had died during the 18th-century persecutions. Today, the Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang holds a special place at Christ Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, serving as a beacon of their devotion, faith, and resilience. (“Our Lady of Vang”)

It is said that Vietnamese had the practice of worshipping mother goddess, and this practice was inculcated into venerating Mother Mary according to Nguyễn Hồng Dương, the critic from Vietnam. He says, “The Vietnamization of Catholicism (Việt hóa đạo), including the Vietnamization of Marian devotion, was a significant outcome of Catholic inculturation in Vietnam” (Duong 102). After converting to the Catholic faith, Vietnamese Catholics were not allowed to possess their pagan beliefs by the missionaries, their rituals and cultural rites were forgotten for centuries. However, by Vietnamizing Mother Mary through the image of the Lady of La Vang,

they are going back to their age-old traditions of worshipping their goddess. (Duong 102). Peter C Phan, another theologian in Vietnam, argues that “Marian devotion in Vietnam developed in both Vietnamese cultural and religious contexts. In terms of culture, he contended that Vietnamese women were historically very powerful in politics and family life and that this facilitated the spread of Marian piety among Vietnamese people” (106).

She is not the Christian mother there in Vietnam. People irrespective of religion approach her. Buddhist Monks, American Vietnamese, and pilgrims from various parts of the world visit her. Even in California, the image of the lady of La Vang is constituted for the American Vietnamese. Mother Mary “stands under three large banyan trees, adjacent to an old church building, wearing traditional Vietnamese attire composed of an áo dài and a crescent-shaped headpiece. With her black hair, dark eyes, and porcelain skin, she reflects an ideal image of beauty in Vietnamese society” (Ninh 91). This was to give solace to the people who migrated to America during the Vietnam War. “The Vietnamese Catholic Centre explains that this representation of the Virgin Mary “guides the spirit of Vietnamese people to return to their homeland roots” and to pray for their coreligionists who are suffering under communism. This is another reason she is referred to as Our Lady of Peace” (Ninh 92). In the sculpture they made was having the face of Vietnamese woman, that was a deliberate attempt to create the belongingness for a localised image of Mother Mary.

The cultural memory of Mother Goddess worship in Vietnam likely facilitated the appropriation of Mother Mary into Vietnamese culture, transforming her into the mother of Vietnam. As Jan Assmann states, “Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (110). The persistent efforts of Vietnamese Catholics to elevate Mother Mary as the

mother of Vietnam, invoking a sense of national consciousness, were likely strengthened by this deeply embedded cultural memory of the people.

Peter C Phan says that “Vietnamese Catholic devotees to Our Lady of La Vang had a close relationship with Buddhists since early times, in part because Buddhists reportedly once offered their pagoda to Catholics to transform it into a Marian shrine in La Vang” (107). The nature of Mary’s benevolence and care goes with Budha's doctrines as well. He seems to assume it based on the oral traditions of the country as there is no historical proof for it. The cultural amalgamation of Vietnam with the coexistence of different religions paves the way for Marian devotion. The worship of the Mother Goddess was part of their cultural psyche so that they could easily connect with Mother Mary.

The appearance of Mary in the attire of Vietnamese evoked a sense of belonging that was always necessary to create a sense of identity. That familiarity helps them overcome that transitional zone and disorientation created by embarking on a new religion. In the present scenario, the Lady of La Vang looked like a Vietnam woman. Through oral traditions and narratives, the process of indigenizing Mother Mary has been done through the constant efforts of the missionaries and Catholics of Vietnam. An Indigenous imagination around Mary has thus been created so that the Vietnamese outlook of the Virgin is naturally accepted and interlinked with their identity. “The transformation of her visual presentation into the appearance of a Vietnamese woman was like a climax of multiple localizing processes: the creation of local perceptions developed from local stories, processes of inculturation, and the development of national sentiments” (Duong 105).

As Homi Bhabha suggests in *The Location of Culture*, “The ‘third space’ displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new

political initiatives... It is that third space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity” (37). In the case of Our Lady of La Vang, the oral traditions and folklore of the Vietnamese people create this “third space,” allowing the Virgin Mary to have the face and characteristics of a Vietnamese woman, thus altering the established historical narrative.

It was in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council that inculturation practices were accepted in various cultures. The decision to include different styles of worship without labelling them as paganism, simply because they differed from Western practices, was a revolutionary step taken by the council. This encouraged Catholics to give Our Lady of La Vang a distinctly Vietnamese representation. It was also a systematic approach to integrate the localized image of Mother Mary with Vietnamese culture. The complaint that Catholicism in Vietnam had not yet been fully Vietnamized was addressed by this small but powerful action of localizing the image of Mother Mary. The elite culture and differences kept by the Catholic hierarchy was ready to give away their Western spirits. “Syncretic practices often lead to the formation of new religious traditions that reflect the complex interplay between colonizers and the colonized, resulting in unique and dynamic forms of worship and belief” (Patterson 221).

The oral narratives on the miracles and apparitions include the blessings of fertility and how Mother Mary blesses people to have children. She is the protector from the wild beasts and if we pray to the Lady of La Vang, she keeps us safe from the attack of tigers. All these beliefs are part of the folklore of Vietnam that makes Mother Mary immensely popular among them. She is the protector from all the epidemics including plagues. People also believe that Mother Mary grants them

prosperity and blesses them with a lot of buffaloes. They have the practice of keeping the leaves of the banyan tree and the grass from the garden before the church believing that they have medicinal powers and heal their illnesses (Duong 108). The people's traditional beliefs and practices are connected to their most trustworthy haven, Mother Mary and thus they are made as the customs over there. As Mary Douglas notices, "Religious syncretism allows for the transformation of cultural symbols, creating new meanings and practices that reflect the interaction between different cultural and religious systems" (165).

In the context of religious syncretism, this "third space" facilitates the reshaping and transformation of religious and cultural identities into something entirely new. It operates invisibly, yet powerfully, normalizing the newly formed history and enabling the community to accept this hybrid identity without questioning its origins. This process not only blends religion with culture but also enforces the legitimacy of this syncretic change within the collective memory of the people. Integrating Folklore of Vietnam with Catholicism gives the idea that the protection of the ancient mother goddess is equivalent to that of Mother Mary. This hybridity strengthens the bond of national consciousness by infusing the local traditions with foreign religion. Thus, syncretism creates a feeling of co-existence that neutralizes conflicts. This is how the Lady of La Vang becomes "our Lady" as she can be connected to everyone.

These Apparitions, though seemingly happening at the grassroot levels, have changed the traditional beliefs and systems of the Church itself. Mother Mary in the present scenario has been accepted as Mediatrix and Co-Redemptrix only after she reveals it herself in her apparitions that occurred in Amsterdam in the 1940s and 1950s, known as "The Lady of All Nations" (Maunder 1). The studies of the Church

have given more focus on these aspects changing the concept of Mother Mary who does not own power to herself but gets all blessings through her son. Apparitions have both internally and externally made an impact that surpasses religious boundaries.

Marian cult is thus intricately linked to Marian apparitions where “Devotional cults surrounding apparitions and pilgrimage sites often reinforce Catholic identity by encouraging confession, Mass attendance, and popular practices like Eucharistic Adoration and rosary prayers” (Krebs and Laycock 6). All the devotional practices with religiously relevant symbols evolved through the Apparition narratives of all localities have been significantly influencing the nature of Marian piety. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz asserts that “religious symbols provide a cosmic guarantee, not only for their ability to comprehend the world but also, comprehending it, to give a precision to their feeling, a definition to their emotions which enables them, morosely or joyfully, grimly or cavalierly, to endure it” (104). The emergence of new meditational prayers, scapulars, and medals with each apparition sets forth the revitalized and renewed Marian piety which seems to break the religious boundaries as well.

The close relationship with the pagan beliefs in the iconography of Mother Mary after the emergence of apparitions is evident from the Guadalupe apparitions. Mary, in the icons and pictures, shows striking resemblances to the goddesses of indigenous people. As observed by Marie Theresa Hernandez, “Kristeva explains in her essay “Stabat Mater,” “The history of the Christian cult of the Virgin is actually the history of the imposition of beliefs with pagan roots upon, and sometimes in opposition to, the official dogma of the Church” (28). The fertility goddess Isis was replaced but retained through the statue of the Black Virgin Madonna. Devotees worldwide visit the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is considered the mother of fertility.

Moreover, it is said that Tepeyac was the centre for the Indigenous goddess where Mother Mary appeared and replaced her significance. Mother Mary in different names with different purposes remains the absent goddess in Christianity by replacing multiple goddesses in different cultures. Marian Apparitions are drastically changing its nature by breaking its religious boundaries. Now Apparitions are not limited to Catholic Christianity. Muslims, Protestant Groups, and Orthodox communities receive Marian Apparitions in the present scenario. More than a religious strategy, Marian Apparitions have gained political and polemical implications at the global level. The international acceptance of Mary by different cultures elucidates that Mother Mary is not limited to the religion of Christianity.

According to Clifford Geertz, “Religious systems, especially in the colonial and post-colonial contexts, often integrate and incorporate elements from various traditions, creating a hybrid system that both respects and transforms the constituent beliefs” (112). Marian apparitions in different countries lead to the synthesis of religion, history, and cultures. Guadalupe and La Vang depict how local traditions and practices are intermingled reflecting the blending of Indigenous beliefs and Catholicism. The iconography of both the apparition images shows the effective melding of localization and cultural syncretism.

Mother Mary apparitions serve as a cultural bridge, continuously connecting native traditions with Western religious practices, and fostering a blend of global and local religious elements. These apparitions not only merge indigenous customs with Catholic devotion but also create a hybrid spiritual space where cultural and religious boundaries are blurred. The syncretic form of worship that emerges from these encounters renews and revitalizes Marian veneration, blending traditional prayers, rituals, and pilgrimage practices with modern expressions of faith. This dynamic

process promotes a new sense of spirituality that resonates with people across the world. It helps to integrate diverse cultural identities into a unified devotion to Mother Mary by connecting global to local.

The language through which an apparition communicates also challenges the traditional notion of the supremacy of Western languages. Mother Mary used the language of the native people in both apparitions. Oral traditions and folklore helped the apparition remain alive through generations. When a community is treated with integrity, its rituals and religions are preserved within its rich folklore. The apparitions of Mother Mary regain and reshape their dignity and identity in the public sphere. As Bhabha indicated through the concept of the “third space,” many cultures interact to form a new identity. Traditional boundaries become blurred to create a hybrid space for a new belief.

In both Fátima and Lourdes, the Marian apparitions deeply intertwine with local beliefs, fears, and cultural expectations. The miracle stories and apocalyptic messages from these globally renowned apparition sites have shaped not only the religious landscape but also the historical and political contexts of their respective nations. The transformation of these locations into major centres of Marian devotion, characterized by new practices such as pilgrimages, novenas, and rosary procession, reflects the process of syncretism in the modern era. This syncretic dynamic now extends to encompass New Age spirituality, integrating diverse global devotees and transcending national boundaries, thereby creating a universal spiritual movement centred on Mary.

Oral narratives of apparitions play a profound role in preserving and transmitting both religious and cultural knowledge. These miracle stories, intricately woven into local folklore and traditions, carry forward the community’s values, fears,

and rituals to future generations. In this transmission, the stories are amplified, intertwining with historical and supernatural elements that lead to their greater acceptance, localization, and adaptation within the region's cultural fabric. This dynamic process not only strengthens the spiritual relevance of the apparitions but also allows them to evolve and align with the community's unique spiritual and religious needs. Through this blending of oral tradition and folklore, apparition narratives develop a localized identity, creating a sense of harmony and hybridization deeply rooted in the community's spirit.

Understanding of Mother Mary, along with the select apparition stories and their relevance underscores her unique role in Christianity, where a mother god is absent. Her widespread devotion through Marian cults, apparitions, and pilgrimages transcends church boundaries, illustrating her universal appeal. Marian apparition narratives, both oral and written, have played a focal role in spreading the Marian cult with a renewed spirit of Marian devotion. Beyond being a figure of devotion, Mary embodies archetypes and mythical goddesses from ancient traditions, embodying nurturing love, and divine grace. These narratives have cemented her matchless position across social, cultural, historical, and religious contexts, making her a powerful and everlasting symbol that touches the hearts of believers worldwide.

Chapter IV

From Apparitions to Devotion: The Role of Cultural Syncretism in the Evolution of Marian Cult and Its Practices in the select Churches

Mother Mary is believed to have come to India during the early period of Christianity with the arrival of St. Thomas in AD 52, who reached the prominent seaport of Crangannur (Kodungallur) and converted many people (Payyappilly 34). This rich Christian heritage in Kerala dates back to early times, with churches dedicated to Mother Mary established even before the arrival of missionaries in South India (Pallath 31). The remarkable devotion to Mary has been passed down through generations of St. Thomas Christians. D. Ferroli, S.J., in his comprehensive two-volume study on Jesuit activities in Malabar, underscores the deep reverence these Christians held for Our Lady. In his assessment of “The Religious Conditions of the St. Thomas Christians in the Sixteenth Century” (31), he notes their significant devotion to her, as evidenced by their celebrations of her Nativity, Purification, and Assumption.

Traditionally, it is believed that St. Thomas established seven and a half churches in various parts of Malankara (Kerala), including the Marthoma Pontifical Shrine in Kodungallur (Muziris), the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Church in Palayoor, St. Mary’s Orthodox Syrian Church in Niranam (Niranam Valiyapally), the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Church in Kokkamangalam, the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Church in Kottakkavu (North Paravur), St. Mary’s Orthodox Church in Chayal (Nilackal), the St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Church in Kollam (Quilon), and the Thiruvithamcode Arappally (Half-Church) (Frykenberg 99). Among these, Niranam

Valiyapally stands out as one of the oldest Christian churches in India and holds a significant place within the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. This church serves as a living testament to the ancient Christian presence and heritage in Kerala, embodying a strong tradition of Marian devotion. Moreover, several other churches in Kerala claim origins tracing back to the early centuries of Christianity. Notably, Kuravilangad Marth Mariyam Church asserts that it is the site of the first apparition of Mother Mary. The intricate and non-linear history of Mother Mary's veneration in Kerala not only reflects the deep-rooted traditions of the Syrian Catholics but also highlights its ancientness and rich heritage.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala, regarded as the first Christian community in India, trace their faith's origins to St. Thomas and are commonly known as St. Thomas Christians or Nasranis. According to Pallath, "Pantaenus, a distinguished scholar of Alexandria who visited India in 189-190, attested to the presence of Christians in India already in the second century" (*The Catholic Church in India* 28). These Nasranis practiced distinct rites and celebrated Marian feasts and traditions that differed significantly from Western Christianity.

When Portuguese missionaries arrived in the fifteenth century, they disparaged the Nasranis by labelling them as Nestorians. Nestorianism was deemed a heresy within the Church due to its theological stance on Christ's nature (Frykenberg 105). This doctrine, led by Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, argued that Jesus Christ had two distinct persons—divine and human. Nestorius held that Mary was the mother of only the human aspect of Christ and therefore should not be called *Theotokos*, or "Mother of God". At the Council of Ephesus in AD 451, this doctrine was condemned as heretical, led by Archbishop Cyril; however, some Eastern

Christians who admired Nestorius continued to respect his teachings. Due to their strong historical ties with the Eastern Church, the Syrian Catholics in Kerala were unfairly branded as Nestorians by Portuguese missionaries, who sought to undermine the apostolic claims of the Nasranis (Joseph 36).

From the fifteenth century onward, missionaries regarded the Nasranis as pagans due to their distinct rituals, practices, and prayers. The scarcity of recorded history on Syrian Catholics before this missionary presence left much of their cultural, social, and historical legacy obscured. The arrival of the missionaries marked a paradigm shift and reshaped the lives of Syrian Catholics entirely. Troubled by the Nasranis' indigenous customs, some missionaries went so far as to destroy manuscripts and documents they deemed erroneous, erasing these Christians' heritage. By removing critical historical records and enforcing their own norms, missionaries initiated an era of religious imperialism, promoting narratives that aligned with their beliefs. As Edward Said remarks in *Culture and Imperialism*, “the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them” (23).

The Portuguese missionaries, in particular, were devoted believers in Mother Mary. When Vasco da Gama arrived in India, his ship carried a flag adorned with an image of Mother Mary, and he was guided by a ship named St. Gabriel (Thoppil 30). He brought priests along with his crew to attend to their spiritual needs. It is said that each of his voyages commenced with a Holy Mass and participation in a Marian procession from his church. Miri Rubin, in her work, *Mother of God A History of the Virgin Mary*, depicts the story like this:

Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut on the coast of northern Kerala, after he sailed around the southern tip of Africa, the Cape of Good Hope, he entered a temple and offered his thanks in front of a carved figure of an imposing woman. This was the Hindu goddess, Kali. Since the Temple did not resemble a mosque, he must have assumed it was a church. In another temple, he may have encountered an even more familiar figure, that of the God Krishna at the breast of his foster mother, Yashoda. The Kali figure must have had many arms, but then Mary was represented in so many different ways by her European adherents, perhaps da Gama, keen to offer his thanks, assumed this was an Asian version of Mary Mother of God. (356)

The seafaring Portuguese erected stone crosses along the shores wherever they landed, marking the beginning of their religious influence. When missionaries from Portugal arrived, they exhibited great zeal in spreading both the gospel and Marian devotion. Although they viewed the beliefs of the Nasranis as pagan, the missionaries leveraged the region's deep-rooted goddess traditions by promoting the veneration of Mother Mary. By establishing churches dedicated to her along the coasts and converting local populations, they initiated a profound transformation in the socio-cultural landscape of South India. Their political influence enabled the spread of Marian devotion, integrating it with existing goddess traditions. As Rubin observes, "Mary soon became the experience – new and startling, attractive as well as puzzling – of people whose lives were affected by Europeans in many ways" (357).

In the early sixteenth century, shrines dedicated to saints and Mother Mary began appearing in Western style along the coastal trade routes under the influence of missionaries. The cult practices of venerating saints and Mother Mary that emerged

during this period blended with local festivities, such as those honouring Amman and other Hindu gods and goddesses. These religious practices differed from European traditions, yet they did not significantly alter the deeply rooted cultural practices of the Syrian Christians. However, due to their special rights, known as *Padroado*, missionaries were able to introduce elaborate processional rites, the veneration of the Virgin, and the use of cult images of saints, which reinforced practices that Syrian Christians shared with Malayali Hindus. By the 1880s, CMS Christians strongly opposed the traditional rituals and festivals of the Syrian Christians. These celebrations included music, bawdy songs, Hindu-style drumming, and parading images of the Virgin Mary (Bayly 298). In their efforts to cleanse the church of what they perceived as idolatry, the CMS Christians failed to recognize that they were attempting to eradicate cultural practices that had been deeply ingrained for centuries, dismissing them as mere paganism. Even then, churches with their ancient heritage existed in the name of Mother Mary. From the early days of Christianity, churches were dedicated to Mother Mary as she became an integral part of the faith. Tradition holds that St. Thomas brought with him a picture of Mother Mary, believed to have been painted by St. Luke, another disciple of Jesus (Payyappilly 34).

This chapter analyses the history and oral narratives of selected ancient churches dedicated to Mother Mary in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, particularly those renowned for Marian apparitions or miracles. This study aims to understand how the people receive Mother Mary through these Christian churches and her significant role in cultural amalgamation. The focus is on Mother Mary churches that are recognized as pilgrimage centres, specifically associated with Marian apparitions, miracles, or visions. These ancient churches are notable for their deep-rooted Marian piety, and

each church possesses unique rituals and practices intricately linked to the socio-cultural landscape of South India. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to explore how Mother Mary contributes to making Christianity and its beliefs more embedded in local culture. By analysing the Marian festivals and practices associated with these churches, this chapter highlights the distinct inculturation practices that characterize Marian devotion in South India. In response to the unfounded accusations of being Nestorians, the Syrian Catholics in Kerala demonstrate a profound adherence to Marian piety and practices. Understanding the significance of churches named after Mother Mary and their associated practices illuminates their importance in the contemporary context.

The Kuravilangad Marth Mariam Church, also known as St. Mary's Forane Church, holds a significant place in the history of Christianity in Kerala. It is believed to be one of the ancient churches established after the seven and a half churches founded by St. Thomas. Francis Rose, S.J., the first Latin Archbishop of the St. Thomas Christians, noted in 1604 that “the church of Corelmgate was built long before the Portuguese arrived in India. It is named in honour of the mother of God” (Pallath, “The Mariological Faith”, 32). In 2018, Kuravilangad Church was honoured with the highest position that can be given to a Syro-Malabar church: Major Archiepiscopal status by considering the factors of its rich ancestry, tradition, and history, and above all, its incessant flow of pilgrims from various parts. The vicar was given the title of archpriest, the position immediately after the Vicar General.

Kuravilangadu is believed to have been a significant centre for spice trading with Jewish merchants (Kochery 52). According to one tradition, these Jewish traders, while traveling around the world, encountered the teachings of St. Peter after

Pentecost and converted to Christianity. Upon returning to Kuravilangadu, they likely shared their newfound faith with the local people in Malankara, which led to the formation of a group of Christians influenced by this Jewish community (53-59). Another tradition holds that Mother Mary appeared to this group of Christians in Kuravilangadu, and news of this apparition spread rapidly throughout the region. As a result, Brahmin families from Palayoor, who had received their faith from St. Thomas in AD 52, sought refuge in Kuravilangadu to escape religious persecution. “The migration to Kuravilangadu during the late first century and early second century was solely due to the apparition” (Thadathil 7-8). Among those families were the *Kally*, *Kallikavu*, *Sankarapuri*, and *Pakalomattam* families, with the Pakalomattam family emerging as a central figure for Christian spirituality in Kuravilangad. Additionally, five other families—*Valiya Veedu*, *Kathedathu*, *Puthussery*, *Chempankulam*, and *Manchery*—migrated from Myalapore to settle in Kadappoor, further enriching the Christian community in the area. Although the descendants of these high-caste families were prevalent in the area during the early periods, aside from the Pakalomattam family who are prominent as archdeacons’ family in Kuravilangad, are believed to have diminished in number, scattered, or become insignificant (Malekandathil 37).

To prove the antiquity and heritage of their church, the writers of Kuravilangadu depend on “Rampan Pattu”, the traditional Nasrani folk song which is believed to be composed by the first disciple of St. Thomas in Kerala, says that Kadappur Rampan, one of the heroic warriors of Kuravilangadu went to Mylapore in AD 72, hearing the funeral of St. Thomas (Kochery 60-63). The folklore details that the bishop of Kodungallur came to know about the death of St. Thomas after ten days

of his demise. He, along with Niranam Maliyekkal Thoma Rampan I, and Kadappur Rampan I reached Mylappur after ten days of journey. After their prayers in Mylapore for ten days, they got a vision of Thomas and returned to their places according to this folklore (Kochery 63).

Bishop Mar Joseph Kallarangattu of Pala remarks that “Kuravilangad is recognized throughout the Church as the womb of Syro-Malabar traditions, the root-house of Nasrani traditions, and a place sanctified by the first apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary” (Thadathil 5). Among the oldest Christian churches in Kerala and India, the exact year of its founding remains uncertain. Kuravilangad Church held a unique status as the home and administrative centre for Archdeacons who guided the Church for fourteen centuries. This church was also the parish of Mar Emmanuel Nidhiri, widely known as Nidhrickal Mani Kathanar, the second Vicar General of the Syro-Malabar Church and founder of “Nasrani Deepika”, the precursor to the *Deepika* newspaper. Kuravilangad Church is celebrated as the site of the first Marian apparition, a tradition deeply embedded in its heritage. The information provided here is compiled from various sources, including church booklets and official websites.

In the Syriac language, *Marth Mariyam* means “Blessed Virgin Mary,” with *Marth* being a respectful title used before female names. According to local tradition, the Kuravilangad Martha Mariam Church was founded after a miraculous apparition of the Virgin Mary to a group of children. Legend has it that Mother Mary appeared to the children as an elderly woman, known as *Muthiyamma* in Malayalam, while they were herding sheep on the hills of Kuravilangad. Disguised in this way, she gave them bread and directed them to a spring for water—one that had not existed before and was believed to have been miraculously created by her.

In some oral traditions, this elderly woman is said to have miraculously made bread from stones to feed the hungry children. When they asked for water, *Muthiyamma* used her fingers to dig into the soil, and a spring gushed forth. After drinking, the children searched for her, but she had vanished. Excitedly, they shared their experience with their parents, who, along with other villagers, went to see the spring. They were astonished to find fresh, clear water flowing abundantly in an area otherwise stricken by drought. The story goes that Mother Mary appeared once more, holding the infant Jesus, and instructed them to build a church in her honour at the location she had shown them. This apparition is believed by the faithful to have occurred as early as the first century, and it is considered to be the first Marian apparition in history (*Guide to the Pilgrims 2*). The current sanctuary in the southern part of the church, where *Muthiyamma* is enshrined, marks the location of the original church.

The second apparition associated with the Kuravilangad Marth Mariam Church involves a granite cross that was erected at the church's entrance in the 16th century. The cross features intricate engravings of a crucifix, a pelican, and a cluster of graves, and it rests upon stones shaped like lotus petals. This design reflects a harmonious blend of European and Hindu-Buddhist artistic influences. According to the legend, the cross was so heavy that attempts to lift and position it failed repeatedly. In response, the Namboothiri family from Kanjirakkad sent their elephants to assist in this endeavour, but even this effort proved unsuccessful. Just then, a dignified woman carrying a child and a cross appeared and offered her help. When she touched the cross with her right hand, it was miraculously lifted with ease. This event is regarded as the second apparition of Mother Mary in disguise at

Kuravilangad, leading many to gather at the foot of the cross on the first Friday of each month, lighting lamps as a form of *nercha* (offering) in the church. It is also said that the Kanjirakkad Namboothiri families, who provided elephants to help with the cross, were rewarded with a 'share' (*avakasham nalkal*) from the church as a gesture of gratitude.

The faithful constructed an early bamboo church modeled after the Hindu temples of that time. The exact period of its construction is debated, with some suggesting it was built in AD 105, while others propose AD 335. According to Prof. Pius Malekandathil, Professor of History at JNU, the *Vaidika Panchangam* published in 1890 from Kottayam dates the beginning of the Christian community to AD 427, whereas all *panchangams* published after 1911 place this date at AD 335 (Malekandathil 36). During the Synod of Udayamperoor, Bishop Menezes laid the foundation for a new church made of stone. Renovations occurred over various periods, and between 1954 and 1960, a new church was constructed, preserving parts of the old church as the sanctuary.

The church houses a monolithic statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose origin and construction remain shrouded in mystery. This statue holds special significance for the Kuravilangadu community, as it is tied to a legendary tale. During the sixteenth century, Maharashtrians were destroying churches in North India, discarding statues into the sea to be washed away. An abandoned statue of Mother Mary was found on the shores of Kaduthuruthy, where locals gathered to retrieve it. People from various parishes attempted to lift the statue, but they were unable to do so. However, when the residents of Kuravilangadu tried, they were able to lift it with ease, and it was subsequently placed in the church (Nidhiri 176-177).

In 1938, Diwan Ramaswami Ayyer remarked upon seeing the statue, “This is exactly like the Karthyani of Kumaranallur” (177). The resemblance between the Hindu goddess and Mother Mary is not merely a statement; it highlights the similarities in Hindu and Christian sculpture-making. The monolithic statue, akin to the idols found in Hindu temples, is a rarity that cannot be seen in any other part of the world. This unique statue serves as a powerful testament to cultural syncretism, reflecting the blending of traditions and beliefs.

Also inside the church is a portrait of Mother Mary, believed to be a replica of the one drawn by St. Luke the Apostle and kept at the Santa Maria Maggiore church in Rome. Some believe this portrait was given by Portuguese missionaries who brought seven Marian portraits to India. Others claim that this portrait was brought from Persia even before the arrival of these missionaries. Despite being centuries old, the portrait remains undiminished in the church. The statue of *Muthiyamma* within the church, depicting her with the baby Jesus holding a cross, made matching to the second apparition narrative. While the exact date of its construction remains uncertain, it is not as old as the church's founding.

This popular and ancient pilgrimage centre celebrates Marian Feasts in a grand manner. One unique celebration is the ancient practice of *Kappalottam* (procession with a miniature ship) as part of *Moonnu Noyambu* (three-day Abstinence/fast). The three-day fast is the most renowned feast celebrated in the church, reminiscent of the prophet Jonah's conversion. On the second day of the fest, the unique celebration of *Kappalottam* takes place exhibiting the memories of Jona's journey from Nineveh to Tharsisis. Seeking blessings from the Mother Mary inside the church by taking the miniature ship thrice before the door of the church, the people from Kadappur

province take the miniature ship to the ritual called *Kappalottam*. The way the ship rocks side to side due to large waves and swells will be imitated by the people running forward and backward. This ritual is repeated and announces the throwing of Jona from the ship; the calmness they experience will be presented. The legend says that when the people from Kadappur had to face a tempest in the sea and they prayed to *Kuravilangattu Muthiyamma* to save them and promised to present a replica of their ship to the church if they could escape from the imminent danger. When they could land safely on the shore they kept their promise. This ritual is continued as the grateful remembrance of the past. This effective amalgamation of the biblical story with the local oral history is another unique feature of the church.

Mother Mary's purification, which is celebrated on February 2nd, is also part of this event. As noted in the *Guide to the Pilgrims*, it is described as "the synthesis of fasting and feasting" (27). The *Moonnu Noyambu* is celebrated eighteen days before Lent, typically on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday preceding Lent. This is celebrated in a grand manner. Thousands of people join the procession from neighbouring churches and abroad. The procession, with brightly coloured umbrellas called "muthukuda," *chendamelam*, and band, makes the festival a feast for the eyes. The processional statues of saints like Alphonsamma and St. George are carried along with Muthiyamma. The main attraction of the procession is the elephant carrying the "thidambu", an arch-shaped piece of wood or metal painted gold, on which the image of the deity is inscribed. This elephant, adorned with a caparison, approaches the main door of the church, bows before the altar, and shows respect by raising its trunk. Participants holding "Muthukuda" (the decorated umbrella), "alavattam", and "Venchamaram", dressed in special attire, form a line for the procession,

accompanied by priests holding the Holy Eucharist and the cross. The people of Kalikkavu carry the holy statues, while the *Kanivelil* family from Muttuchira has the honour of holding the embroidered ceremonial umbrellas during the procession. The procession is described as follows in the book, *Kuravilangad Font and Foundation*:

On the first day of “Moonu nombu” (three- day lent) ie, on Monday, processions from five regions- Pakalomattam, Thootuva, Kozha, Kurianad, and Kuravilangad parish meet together at the Jubilee Chapel and proceed to the parish together. The procession begins from St. Sebastian’s Church with fireballs held aloft at the front. Of the holy statues in Cheriyapally, St. Sebastian is taken for the procession with the escort of drums, flags, *alavattam*, *Churutty*, *Thazha*, and ceremonial umbrellas enter the major church. After placing the relic at the altar, prayers with the thuribles are conducted. Then standing face to face, St. Sebastian invites the Blessed Virgin Mary, installed at the Narthex, to the procession (Thadathil 58).

Along with the statues of St. Joseph and St. Ougen, a procession takes place. This procession follows a well-established tradition to enter the Jubilee Chapel. The Pakalomattam family leads the way with the statue of St. Thomas, entering the chapel first. They circle the chapel and then proceed out to the church road. Then, the procession from the church moves into the chapel, encircling it, and places the statues of Mother Mary and St. Sebastian inside. The other statues exit the chapel and proceed to the church road. The procession from Thottuva, carrying the image of St. Alphonsa, and the procession from Kurianad, carrying the image of St. Theresa of Lisieux, enter the church in the third and fourth positions, respectively. They encircle the church and join the other groups on the church road. The procession from Kozha,

carrying the statue of Infant Jesus, enters the chapel last and positions the statue between Virgin Mary and St. Sebastian. After the *Ladeenj* in the chapel, the procession continues to the Major Church with St. Joseph at the forefront, followed by Virgin Mary and the other saints. After paying respect at the Cross, the procession proceeds to the Major Church and halts at the *fascia*, where St. Sebastian bids farewell to Mary face-to-face. St. Sebastian then goes alone to the Minor Church, accompanied by the *muthukuda* and a musical band. The other statues are placed in the facade of the Major Church.

On the second day, the famous “Kappalottam” and “Anavayil Chakkara” *Nercha* are conducted. The procession starts from the Major Church after a prayer to Mother Mary. The eight holy statues are taken to the Minor Church, where Blessed Mary goes inside to invite St. Sebastian for the procession. From the Minor Church, the statues of St. George, St. Michael, and St. Augustine are also taken out, positioned just before Infant Jesus. All the statues stand facing the Minor Church, with a bronze lamp held aloft on the fourth step in front of the rally.

During this time, caparisoned elephants carrying holy images of saints arrive at the grotto of the Holy Family, after having the offering of jaggery at the elephant's mouth. The main tusker carries the image of Blessed Virgin Mary. When there are multiple tuskers, they carry the holy images of St. Sebastian and St. Alphonsa. While these arrangements are made at the Minor Church, the Archpriest, after prayers and blessings at the Major Church, grants permission to the people of Kadapoor to carry the ship. The procession begins when the ship is taken out into the church yard and runs up the steps of the church three times with hoisted flags. The ship is then taken to the front and right side of the church before running up the steps of the Minor Church

to kiss the cross. It only successfully kisses the bronze cross held aloft on the third attempt. Meanwhile, the caparisoned elephants reach the Elephant Portal of the Major Church, offer their obeisance to the Blessed Virgin Mary by raising their trunks, and then approach the cross to pay homage.

The faithful participate in the “Kazhunnu nercha,” an offering where they take a miniature of the golden crown used on the Mother Mary statue on a plate. They go in a procession with a prayer and return to offer an amount of money fixed by the church. This offering indicates the subjugation of the faithful to the Virgin Mary and the saints. The fireworks known as “Vedikketu” has been stopped several years ago.

The story associated with the unique offering called "jaggery in the mouth of an elephant" or "anavayil chakkara," conducted as part of the three-day fest, is said to be linked to the Ettumanur Shiva Temple. According to the tale, a pilgrim from South Kuravilangad accidentally entered the Ettumanur Temple and was caught by the temple authorities. Since the presence of a non-Hindu was believed to have polluted the temple precincts, they decided to punish him by throwing him into a cage of tigers. Upon hearing this news, the parishioners of Kuravilangad marched to the temple, broke open the cage, and saved the pilgrim. In retaliation for this defiant act by the Christians, the temple authorities, along with an elephant from the *Devaswom* Board, marched to the Kuravilangad Church. When the elephant tried to break through the main entrance, its tusks became trapped in the wooden planks, causing it great pain. The people tried to save the elephant and saw the priest praying inside the church in front of Mother Mary on his knees. They pleaded with him to save the elephant. Through his prayers, the elephant was freed. From that day onwards, during the three-day feast, elephants from the Ettumanur Temple were deputed to accompany

the procession. In return, the church handed over the decorated “Muthukuda” or embroidered umbrellas to the Ettumanoor Temple Festival. The practice of honouring each other with maintaining the traditional legacy of Hindu- Christian cultural unity has been continued till recently. Caparisoned tuskers carry the “Thidambu” of Mother Mary as a tradition unique to that church (*Guide to the Pilgrims 27*).

An offering of Jaggery to the mouth of elephants is another uniqueness of the church. At the second day of three-day abstinence fest, the elephants were given jaggery and the piece from the given jaggery would be taken back as offering. As the excessive jaggery causes indigestion to elephant That piece of jaggery, licked by the elephant is believed to possess curative powers to heal all the abdominal diseases. This piece will be eaten by the devotees.

There is another version of the story based on the same offering, perhaps crafted to avoid the hostile tone of the aforementioned tale. According to this version, when the Kuravilangad Church planned to use teak wood for reconstruction, they cut the teak and kept it safe. However, this teak was meant to be used by the kings, and the local king did not approve of the church's actions. Believing the teak wood was kept inside the church, his men came with an elephant to retrieve it. Since the main entrance was closed, they decided to break the door open with the elephant. But the elephant's tusks got trapped in the wooden door. When they looked inside the church, they saw the priest praying inside. In some versions, it is said that they saw the priest talking to a queen with a boy child. (Documentary Shalom) They requested the priest to save the elephant and granted permission to use the teak. Learning of this incident from his men, the king sent he temple elephant to be sent to the three-day feast.

(“Kuravilangadu Church”). This story appears more ancient and less hostile than the previous one.

However, the parish is focusing on more spiritual oriented activities than showing its pomp at present. The ritual of every Saturday is special with the holy mass at 5pm, followed by the novena of Mary and the candle lit rosary procession around the church. This rosary procession is the miniature of the procession conducted in famous Apparition centres like Fathima and Lourdes. Many seek blessings from Mother Mary by attending the procession. The first Friday is also well observed in the church with numerous holy masses, confession and offering oil at the cross. *Chuttuvilakku nercha* or lighting the lamp on the ground of the cross is an ancient Christian practice that goes along with the *chuttuvilakku* in the temples. The rosary procession with lighted lamps is extended to First Fridays at 6.30 pm. Usually the faithful take fasting on that day and seek blessings from the God almighty through the intercession of Mother Mary.

The rituals of “Ettu Noyambu” are also a solemn devotional function with holy masses, rosary processions and prayers. It is observed as part of Mother Mary’s birthday on 8th September. The flower bouquets will be offered to Mother Mary during that time. The bishops from various dioceses inside and outside Kerala lead the holy mass and each day’s ceremony is closed with the “Pachor nercha” or *payasam*. Various programmes are arranged on that occasion. Days are arranged in such a way that the elders’ day, blessings of the vehicles, Day of the Ultimate offering, Day of Gratitude, Farmers’ Day, Day of Confession etc to be observed by the parishioners. The breaking of the fast by having a feast called Agape is also celebrated in the church. The legend says that *ettu-noyambu* was started by the Christian families to

escape from “Muslim incursion of the city of Kodungallur who may molest their girls” (Thadathil 61). The Christian families flocked inside the church and took fasting and recited rosaries for eight days to escape from them. Later, it became a practice in the church and the oral traditions say that women would come as a group and stay in the premises of the church for those eight days. This traditional practice of Catholics continues till date. Assumption of Mother Mary and the festival of the laying of the foundation stone for the new church replacing the bamboo church will be celebrated together on 15th August.

Traditionally, the “Thamuk Nercha” was conducted in the Syrian Christians who struggled against the wild animals for their livelihood. The belief was embedded in the early Travancore Christians (this practice is not seen in the Malabar Christians) to offer this special preparation of food to the Church in order to escape from the troubles of the wild animals. *Thamuk* is the mixture of fried rice, coconut, plantain and jaggery. But Kuravilangad Church has another oral tradition to observe it. As per *The Guide to the Pilgrims* says, during the reign of Ayilyam Thirunal Maharaja, a police constable named Mansingh raided the village of Kalathoor near Kuravilangad under the assumption of cracking down on unauthorized tobacco sales (33). However, under the label of this raid, the constable persecuted the Christians and molested the women of the area. In a state of panic, the people of Kalathoor decided to conduct the *Thamuk Nercha* at Kuravilangad Church on Palm Sunday to escape the constable's cruelties. Each married person from Kalathoor province will provide $\frac{3}{4}$ kg rice, 100 plantains, 5 coconuts and the price of jaggery to the church. These items are mixed in a yacht made in a single log of wood and the priests bless the food. Devotees,

irrespective of caste and creed, come to Kuravilangad to partake in the *Nercha* and seek protection and blessings *The (Guide to the Pilgrims 34)*.

The Marian apparition at the Kuravilangad Church is not officially approved by the Vatican. However, the oral traditions passed down through generations, alongside ancient cultural practices, maintain the richness and integrity cherished by the community. Since Kuravilangad was the only church for the Christians of that time, the need for churches in their own locality got increased as the number of people got increased by migration. Other churches in central Kerala, such as Ramapuram, Athirampuzha, Kothanalloor, Muttuchira, and Manarcad, upholding the Marian piety inherited from their mother church, Kuravilangad, were believed to have formed accordingly. Athirampuzha St. Mary's Church was established in AD 835, according to the Catholic Directory of Malabar published in 1934. There was a legend related to the inception of the Church. The Namboothiri in Ettonnuseri Illam did not have children for long years after his marriage. The dependent of the Illam, Peroorthaze Mappila told him to pray for Kuravilangad *Muthiamma* to grant him a child. When he was blessed with a boy child, as a token of gratitude, he gave the Christians land to construct the church. (*Parish Directory 22*).

When the rituals and practices of the Kuravilangadu church are analysed, it becomes clear how systematically they incorporate cultural nuances into the religious landscape. Maintaining the legacy of the ancient Christian community in a land where a plurality of religions has coexisted and integrated, they share assimilated practices borrowed and incorporated from other religious traditions. Upholding the belief that Syrian Christians are native converts from the Apostle, the uniqueness and antiquity of these rituals are well exhibited through their festivities.

The first apparition of Mary in Kuravilangad is traditionally said to have been witnessed by a group of children grazing sheep near the molehills. While this account hints that the children may have been part of a community influenced by Jewish converts, no further details about this community were provided. It is noteworthy that these children were not from the prominent families like Kalli, Kalaikavu, Pakalomattom, and Sankarapuri who were said to have fled from Palayoor to escape religious persecution. Prof. Malekandathil supports historian V.V.K. Valath's view that Kuravilangad may derive its name from the "Kuravar" people, as referenced in Sangam literature, which associates "Kurinji" landscapes with this region (Malekandathil 35-36). However, historians from Kuravilangad generally reject the notion of a lower-caste status for the original community, citing a lack of conclusive historical evidence. Thus, the exact origins and social status of the first Christian community in Kuravilangad remain a mystery.

It is important to recognize that the Christian community of Kuravilangad does not claim a direct conversion lineage from St. Thomas himself. Rather, their legacy rests on the possibility of an ancient heritage shaped by early influences. While converted Jewish traders who arrived for spice trade may have introduced elements of the Christian faith, it is the Marian apparition that stands as the transformative event in Kuravilangad's history, drawing high-caste families to settle there. The absence of details regarding the origins and caste of the first Christian community in Kuravilangad implies an underlying caste hierarchy embedded within the Christian historical narrative. This apparition, rather than any assertion of caste superiority, is viewed as having elevated the community's status and spiritual identity. While the Pakalomattam family's arrival is acknowledged and respected, it is the Marian

apparition that Kuravilangad emphasizes, placing the apparition above lineage claims and establishing itself as the site of the first Marian apparition in the world. In doing so, Kuravilangad both connects with the venerable past of the St. Thomas Christians and underscores the distinctive character of Marian devotion in Kerala.

The apparition of Mary significantly changed the social status of the local Christian community. Today, they claim to be “the chosen people of God,” a status that might be linked to the Marian apparition story. The integration of the four families from Palayoor with the native Christians, driven by the fervour of Christianity, is justified by the privileged status of the local community selected for the Marian apparition. This oral tradition is likely a deliberate creation to emphasize the unity and togetherness of the early Christians, showing that caste and creed did not affect them during the beginning centuries.

The processional practices at Kuravilangad Church maintain the legacy of the Mar Thoma Christians, who were granted seventy-two rights by the ruler of Venad in the Ninth Century. These rights included the use of musical instruments and elephants during their festivals. Among these traditions, the bronze lamp carried during the “Moonu Noyambu” (Three-Day Fast) procession is also part of these historical privileges. (*Parish Directory* 42)

The processional practices, such as the use of the “Thidambu” (the sacred image of the deity) on caparisoned elephants and the act of circumambulating sacred places, show striking similarities with Hindu festivals. This cultural syncretism is evident in the way the elephants (tuskers) pay homage to the cross and *Muthiyamma*, mirroring practices seen in Hindu temples. Apart from that, the rituals of inviting

Mother Mary to the procession and bidding her farewell by St. Sebastian facing each other resemble the Hindu ritual known as “acharam chollipiriyal,” which involves formally inviting and then respectfully bidding farewell to the deity during temple festivals. These elements highlight the cultural and religious exchange that characterizes the Kuravilangad Church festivals, assimilating cultural elements that lead to syncretism.

“Thamuk Nercha” is an ancient practice seen in most of the Marian Churches. But this practice is related to the temples that worship Bhagavathi or Devi. According to the historian V.V.K Valath, this ritual is transitioned from Hindu rituals to Christian Churches. He says,

There was a tradition in certain Bhagavathi temples where food items were brought, cooked on the temple grounds, and offered. This practice continues in temples like Attukal Temple in Trivandrum, Kalikulangara Temple in North Paravur, and Malappathi near Alathur in Palakkad. This offering called Thamuk is prepared by roasted rice flour and bananas among other ingredients. (91).

As historian N.K. Jose observes, the festival practices and processions in the region reflect remnants of Buddhist and Jain traditions. Even after these religions faded from the cultural landscape, both Christians and Hindus have continued to incorporate these practices into their own rituals (105-106). The emergence of cult practices in Kerala is closely linked to this cultural amalgamation. Fr. Ignatius Payyappilly, in his work *Sanghasmrithi Volume I*, notes that Christians replaced the Hindu worship of Bhagavathi with that of Mother Mary, while keeping the nature of

the offerings unchanged (34). Given that Kerala has a matriarchal tradition rooted in the worship of mother goddesses, these female deities are particularly prominent in the region. According to historian K. Damodaran, women were respected as protectors of agriculture and central figures in the community when mother goddess worship emerged (241). These cultural specificities likely contribute to the elevated veneration of Mother Mary in Kerala.

The Manarcad Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church of Saint Mary, an ancient church located in the district of Kottayam in which “Ettu -Noyambu” observed on September 1-8, while the exact year of the church's inception is uncertain, it claims to be around 1,000 years old. The church's antiquity is supported by “Vattezhuthu” inscriptions found on memorial stones established in graves dating back to AD 910 and 920. (*St. Mary's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church Booklet 2023*, 3). It is believed that the “Ettu -Noyambu,” or the Eight-Day Abstinence for venerating Mother Mary, originated at this church. The unique style of celebrating this Marian fest, which blends Hindu and Christian practices, gives the church a distinctive place in the history of Mother Mary veneration. It also highlights the early Marian piety among the Nazranis. The unusual practices associated with offerings and processions at the church are so popular that people, irrespective of their religion, come to seek the blessings of Mother Mary. Moreover, the relic of Mother Mary's belt, which she is said to have dropped to St. Thomas when she was taken into heaven, was brought to the church in 1982 and venerated. The relic is displayed for the faithful and many people come and are said to receive miracles by touching it with faith.

In the booklet offered by the church office, the tradition regarding the origin of the church states that due to trade rivalries, the once-famous trade city of Kodungallur

was engulfed in flames (*St. Mary's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church Booklet 2023*, 12). Several Christian families were forced to flee and settled in Manarcad and nearby areas. These families gathered and prayed for eight days to fulfil their spiritual needs and seek divine guidance while observing a fast. On the eighth day, they all had the same vision of a white cow and calf lying in a forested area where fish and deer could be caught, and Acacia Instia trees and canes were scattered around. Interpreting the vision, they constructed a church dedicated to Mother Mary and Baby Jesus. Thus, they celebrate "Ettu Noyambu" to honour Mary. The period of the migration of the families is unclear. However, it is believed to have happened before the arrival of the Portuguese missionaries (*St. Mary's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church Booklet 2023*, 11-14).

The grand procession named Raza, conducted on the sixth day of "Ettu Noyambu," is considered one of the longest processions in Asia. Thousands of decorated umbrellas with silk parasols and crosses and golden and silver crosses are used for the procession, which lasts 12 km. People who participate in this spiritual journey prayerfully sing Marian songs. It is believed that those who carry the decorated umbrellas receive the results of the prayers they hope for. As observed by Paul Younger, "The umbrella of sovereignty is important in the ceremony of all the royal houses of South India and Sri Lanka, but in the eighth century, the king listed it as the most prominent of the 72 privileges he was granting exclusively to the Christians and Jews" ("The Window Opens in Mannarkat", 122). Every church and some temples have this practice of using decorated umbrellas for the procession. This *Raza* is accompanied by the traditional *chendamelam* and caparisoned elephants. On the eighth day, there will be the grand display of fireworks.

The historically popular ritual known as “nada thurakal” (opening of the sanctum sanctorum) will be conducted on September 7th, after the prayer service at noon. The picture of Mother Mary kept in the Altar will be unveiled for the next seven days for “Darshan” or holy viewing. the Mother Mary image is open for public viewing only once in a year. The photo of the image was not allowed to be taken until a few years back so that the very sight of her puts people in spiritual ecstasy. There are many religious offerings, or “Vazhipadu” in which “Urulu Nercha”, or (a kind of circumambulation done by lying on the floor and rolling) “Sayana Pradakshinam”, “Pachor Nercha” “Aal roopam Nercha” are popular ones. Aal roopam Nercha is seen some of the Churches and this practice involves a silver or gold figurine or the replica of the human body parts to the church, usually in connection with prayers for healing from illness or diseases affecting specific body parts. This church also gives “Nercha Kanji” for all the people who come for “Ettu Noyambu”.

It is a traditional ritual to bathe in the “Manarcad Palli Kulam” or “Manarcad Church Tank”. Devotees take a bath in the tank as an act of purification and devotion, seeking both spiritual and physical healing. There are separate sections for men and women for taking baths. It is said that before bathing, the devotees fast and pray in the church. After the bath, they seek the intercession of Mary, believing that their diseases will be healed.

There was an oral tradition that exists in the area that Bhagavati is the twin sister of Mother Mary. The Hindu devotees who visit Bhagavati will come to see Mother Mary also. It is said that there were practices of visiting these two places by the devotees, irrespective of religion (Younger, “The Window Opens in Mannarkat” 119). At the temple annual festival, when the Deity goes around the village on the top

of the elephant and stops at the church to meet her sister Mother Mary. Then the congregation of the church receives the goddess and gives money and a tin of oil for the temple lamps. But in the current socio- political scenario, this oral tradition seems to diminish due to the social and cultural divide of the religions are guided and directed by different ideologies and practices.

The eight-day lent was not originally a mandatory observance in Catholicism. However, by the end of the ninth century, Syrian Catholics had embraced this practice with great enthusiasm. Though its significance diminished in the later centuries, Marian apparitions around the world in the twentieth century reignited devotion to Mary, leading people to revive this lent. Today, it is regarded as an ancient and unique tradition among Syrian Catholics, observed to seek the intercession of Mother Mary for a life of holiness (Kappiliparambil 223).

The National Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Ransom, Vallarpadam, also known as the Vallarpadam Basilica, is a prominent Marian pilgrimage center in Kerala, often referred to as “the Lourdes of Kerala” (Thoppil 15). Situated in the Kochi backwaters, north of Kochi port, it lies between Mulavukad Island and Vypin Island. The Goshree bridges, officially opened in 2004, now connect Vallarpadam with Ernakulam Town. Before the bridges were constructed, devotees depended on boat services to reach Vallarpadam. In 1954, the Central Government of India declared this church a “Major Pilgrim Centre.” Later, in 2004, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) raised its status to “National Shrine” (Thoppil 23). Pope John Paul II elevated the church to the status of Minor Basilica on December 1, 2004. The official announcement was made at the shrine on February 12, 2005. Since the construction of the bridges, which made the journey to the shrine more accessible,

people from across the country have been visiting the Vallarpadam Basilica seeking the blessings of “Vallarpadathamma” or the mother of Vallarpadam.

Since the official documents of the church were lost in the floods of 1341 and 1676, the exact year of the establishment of the first church is not clear. It was established in the name of the Holy Spirit, considered the first church in Asia dedicated to the Holy Spirit. According to a booklet published by the church, there is a legend explaining why it was named after the Holy Spirit.

In the early centuries, priests from Persia came to India to fulfil the spiritual needs of Christians. Due to the scarcity of priests, select individuals were appointed as catechists to organize and manage church-related activities. These catechists, known as “Asan,” were respected for their wisdom and loyalty to the church. The catechist of Vallarpadam, Pallikavettil Thommy Pethiru Asan, wrote a poem and presented it at a “Palliyogam” (church assembly) suggesting that the church be named after the Holy Spirit. The assembly unanimously agreed, and thus the first church in Vallarpadam was named the Holy Spirit Church (Thoppil 25-26).

With the arrival of Portuguese missionaries at the end of the 15th century, a period of mass conversions and Latinization commenced in India. The Portuguese were known for their deep-rooted Christian faith and Marian Piety. Their unique style of Church architecture was also popular. They not only established colonies in Christian-dominated areas of Kerala but also constructed churches, one of which was at Vallarpadam. It is considered that Portuguese reconstructed the previously damaged church at Vallarpadam named after the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost Day in 1524, the Christian community of Vallarpadam was collectively integrated into the

Latin rite. To commemorate this significant event, the Portuguese missionaries dedicated an altar to Our Lady of Ransom, adorning it with a portrait of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mercy, which they had brought from Portugal. From that day onwards, they celebrate the feast of St. Mary and the Holy spirit in the Church.

When a heavy flood destroyed the area of Kochi in 1676, the Vallarpadam Church was also swept away. Important documents of the church and the portrait of Mary went missing. Paliyath Raman Valiyachan, the Diwan of Kochi at that time, was sailing from Kochi to Chendamangalam when he saw the portrait floating in the river. Surprised by this discovery, he retrieved the portrait from the water. According to legend, the portrait was unlike any other he had seen, which astonished him. He personally brought the portrait to Vallarpadam, where the people received him with great joy. The community then constructed a temporary church using bamboo (*panambu*) and established the portrait with reverence. Later the church was known as “Panambu Pally”. To commemorate this event, they erected a flagpole at the spot where Paliyathachan handed over the portrait (41-46).

Realizing the need for a church for the faithful, Paliyath Raman Valiyachan donated a sizable area for its construction. The new church was built in the Portuguese architectural style. When the church was completed and blessed, he offered a sanctuary lamp that has remained lit continuously since 1676, with oil provided from his palace. After India's independence, when the Diwan rule ended, this tradition was discontinued. However, in 1994, the descendants of Paliyathachan came to Vallarpadam and reignited the lamp, celebrating its secular tradition.

As described by Fr. Shaiju Thoppil in his work, *Vallarpadathamma*, he miraculous rescue of Meenakshi Amma and her son from the deep waters through the intercession of Mother Mary is a remarkable incident in the history of Vallarpadam Church. On 23rd May 1752, Meenakshi Amma of Palliyil House, a Nair woman, along with her child, was traveling by boat to her family temple in Mattancherry. She was going to conduct the “Chorunu” ceremony, giving solid food to her son from the temple. A heavy storm capsized the boat, and it began to sink. Before going under, she cried out, “Vallarpadathamme rakshikkane” (Please save us, Mother of Vallarpadam). Others on the boat managed to save themselves, either by swimming or being rescued. Due to the heavy rain and storm, they people stopped the search for Meenakshi Amma and her child. That night, the Vicar, Rev. Fr. Miguel Correa, had a dream in which Mother Mary asked him to save the mother and child from the deep waters. Initially, he dismissed it as just a dream.

The next day, the family members attempted to retrieve their bodies using nets, but they could not find any trace due to the adverse weather conditions. That night, the Vicar had the same dream again, this time with Mother Mary appearing sad because he had not heeded her instruction. The following day, he shared his dream with the people during Holy Mass and asked them to join him with nets and boats to search for Meenakshi Amma and her child once more. They could only find fish for hours; they made one final attempt and discovered the mother and child entrapped in the net. This miraculous event spread quickly and people came from far and wide to witness the miracle and give thanks to Mother Mary.

The miraculous account narrated by Meenakshi Amma deepened the people's faith in Vallarpadathamma. She recounted that before she and her son sank into the

lake, she prayed to Vallarpadathamma, promising that if they were saved, they would remain her servants. As she sank deeper, she saw Mother Mary and her son, who looked at them before dozing off. When she was finally saved, she found herself before Vallarpadathamma.

To keep her vow, Meenakshi Amma built a small hut on the premises of the church and lived as a servant, or 'Adima,' of Mother Mary. She and her son would sweep the premises every day and clean the church. They were later converted to Christianity, taking the names "Mariyam" and "Yesudasan." After a few years, her son passed away, but Meenakshi Amma continued to live there until she was 72 years old. She was then buried in the cemetery near the church. But the present generation of her family connects to the Church of Vallarpadm. The family comes and distributes "sambharam" or butter milk to the devotees on the Annual day fest of Vallarpadathamma (57-61)

From that incident, the tradition of "Adima Samarpanam" or offering oneself as a servant of Mary began at the church. The practice of sweeping the premises with a broom, known as "Chool Nercha," also started. These acts of devotion have major roles in the church's tradition, honouring the miracle and the deep faith of Meenakshi Amma, and many people continue these practices. At present, people are offering sarees to Mother Mary though it is not an official offering in the church.

Vallarpadathamma thus famous for her protective power, especially for the childless women and pregnant women. The unmarried people will come and intercede before Mother Mary to get married. The fishermen seek her blessings when they sail in the sea, and they believe that she protects them and their boats. Many babies are brought to church for the "Choroonu ceremony", giving solid food for the first time.

Vidhyarambham of the children, the beginning of academics by writing letters also conducts in the church.

In 1887, a new portrait of Vallarpadathamma was drawn by the artist Michael Pillai from Tamil Nadu, incorporating the images of Meenakshi Amma and her son. Since everyone liked the portrait, it was decided to replace the old picture with the new one. The blessing ceremony was properly conducted, and the new portrait was installed on the altar. However, it is said that people could not see the image of Mary in the new portrait. As a result, the old portrait was reinstated on the altar, and people began to believe that it was a miraculous portrait.

These oral traditions of the church seem to shape the community's identity by effectively interweaving syncretic elements with local culture. The cultural memory passed down through generations fosters togetherness and harmony within the community. These stories remain alive through the practices followed in the church, allowing members to revisit the past with gratitude. The past is authenticated by these practices, intricately connecting it with history. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault states that “history is not a continuity, but a series of discontinuities, and it is these discontinuities that shape our identities” (12). The renaming of the church and the decision to change the rite to Latin by the influence of the Portuguese missionaries, reshaped the church's history and altered its identity.

The renaming of the reconstructed church after Mother Mary at Vallarpadam by the Portuguese missionaries not only reflects their Marian piety but also highlights the strategic role of Mother Mary in spreading Christianity. Renaming the church

after Mother Mary was not merely an act of devotion; it served as a well-structured ideological tool in a region where Hindu rituals and practices were common.

The image of the mother was effectively integrated into the local cultural context, where mother goddesses were familiar figures. While this renaming appeared organic within the religious framework, it was not innocent in its socio-cultural implications. Michel Foucault's observation in his book *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, that "Power is not held by individuals but is exercised through networks of relationships and institutions... The ideological state apparatus is the key site for the exercise of power" (91), is highly relevant here. The international mother figure of the Christian religion was localized and imbibed in the cultural psyche as Vallarpadathamma, making her relatable to people of various castes and religions nearby. This appropriation of Mother Mary in the church was firmly rooted in miraculous stories, transforming her into a mother figure for everyone, irrespective of caste or creed. Thus, the glocalization of the image of Mother Mary became an effective tool for spreading Christianity. The veneration of Mother Mary in the South Indian milieu is not only a spiritual activity but also carries significant political and polemical implications.

The ritual known as "Adima Vekkal" (becoming a servant of Mother Mary) is a part of Marian consecration in early Christianity in the West. Although the word "adima" literally means "slave," this ritual signifies imitating Mary by declaring one's total surrender to her. This practice can be seen in many ancient churches. In Vallarpadam, the ritual has been localized through the dedicated piety of Meenakshi Amma. In his work *Ritual Process*, Victor Turner notes that "rituals are transformative; they change the participants, the social structure, and the cultural

context” (128). It has become a traditional practice of the churches in South India. “Traditions are not just inherited but also invented and reconstructed to serve the purpose of the present” (1) as rightly observed by Eric Hobsbawm in the introduction of the work *The Invention of Tradition*.

In the early centuries, emperors performed this ritual to protect their countries from danger. Msgr. Arthur B. Calkins observed in his essay, “Marian Slavery in the Early Centuries,” “According to a tenth-century manuscript, when Constantinople, the city on the Bosphorus, was in imminent danger, the emperor confided it to God and the Virgin Mother, and it was spared” (Calkins, *missionmagazine*). Later, saints and Popes continued this practice. This ritual might have been introduced to Kerala by missionaries who were staunch Marian devotees. In the Kerala context, the ritual involves the prayer of priest and the faithful kneeling, declaring their willingness to be servants of Mary. It is believed that Mother Mary will be the mistress and protector of her servants by this act. The miraculous escape of a Nair woman, Meenakshi Amma, and her son was honoured by their complete dedication to Mary's service. This ritual, by evoking the memory of that incident, breaks the barriers of religion and caste, unites people as a community under the sovereignty of Mother Mary.

The Second Vatican Council revolutionized and rejuvenated the Church and its liturgy. It helped the Church to liberate itself from inhumane laws and practices. The Council discussed the idea of inculturation to assimilate the diverse practices of different churches. Moreover, by emphasizing the decisive role of Mother Mary in revitalizing the faith in the Church, it declared in the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, entitled “The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the Church,” that the Council sought to address whether she could be referred to

as “Mother of the Churches” (*Lumen Gentium*, ch.8) However, this title was not formally pronounced until the closing of the Council by Pope John Paul VI. The Council also analysed the cult practices regarding Mother Mary and her role in salvation, where it diverged from the traditional viewpoints of missionaries and Church fathers.

The cult, especially the liturgical cult, of the Blessed Virgin, should be generously fostered. The practices and exercises of piety recommended by the magisterium of the Church toward her over the centuries should be given great importance. Additionally, the decrees established in the early days regarding the cult of images of Christ, the Blessed Virgin, and the saints should be religiously observed (Council Document 67)

The remarkable decision to assimilate other cultures while preserving the essence of Christ was a turning point for the Church. This approach allowed people from diverse cultural backgrounds to connect with Christ using their own indigenous methods and forms of worship. By valuing the diverse perspectives inherent in a plurality of cultures, Christianity is no longer perceived as a foreign religion. This has helped to bridge cultural gaps between Christianity and other cultures, fostering a more inclusive and harmonious spiritual community. This cultural turn has changed the orthodox perspectives on the Marian cult. The frequent Marian apparitions and their wider consequences explain how the cult practices “satisfy deep human instincts that were also tapped in goddess traditions” (Clooney 18).

The comparison of Mother Mary with various Indian goddesses represents an effort to localize her image, moving away from traditional European depictions. The

Marian cult in India is deeply enriched with indigenous elements that vary across different regions. By intertwining the concept of Mary with local goddess traditions, her veneration is more deeply rooted in India's diverse cultural heritage. This localization makes her figure more relatable and accessible to Indian communities, fostering a unique blend of devotion that reflects the cultural and spiritual landscape of India where Goddess tradition is still relevant.

In the Goddess tradition of the West, great mothers are born from the sea (Baring and Cashford ch.14). Etymologically, the word Mary comes from the Latin word 'Mare' means the sea. Mary is considered a net and his son a fisherman. She is the patron of ships and sailors. She protects them from the heavy storms and turbulence of the sea. She is also compared to the guiding star for those who sail. Even in India, many boats carry her picture and name on it. She carries her child in the womb, gives birth, and protects and nourishes him as a mother. Like many goddesses of the West who were spinners of their own destiny, Mother Mary spins a web of life (Baring and Cashford ch.14). She is an exemplary mother who fulfils the criteria of a good woman.

Mother Mary is often understood within the binary of good/bad woman. As a paradigmatic opposite of Eve, Mary is always considered a lovable mother, dutiful and benign. She never yields to the temptation of Satan as Eve did. Eve symbolizes death, while Mary symbolizes faith. When Eve represents "bad femaleness," that is, activity, independence, and sexuality (Vuola 62), Mary represents the opposite—chastity, passivity, and surrender. These theological interpretations lead feminist theologians to argue that Eve is the only feasible model for women to imitate (Daly 132), as she represents the normal woman in the present context. "Both Eve and Mary

are necessary to reveal the full significance of the Christian story for women. Eve must be refigured so that she no longer bears the burden of men's ideas of women's sins" (Beattie 172–173). Both women have their own choices to make, and selecting one choice does not make anyone inferior to the other. However, these binary oppositions have defined the roles and responsibilities of women in society for centuries. The traditional theology on Mary has become the reasons for "women's low self-esteem, Christianity's negative attitude to the body and fear of sexuality, and on the development of sexual ethics distanced from real life" (Vuola 64).

This binary opposition is also there in Hinduism. The one who is submissive to the patriarchy with the feminine qualities of love, care, and tenderness qualifies the tests for a good woman. The goddesses are also inferior to the status of their male partners. The Catholic Church also asserts that Mother Mary does not have any absolute power, all her power comes from her son, Jesus. The medieval Virgin Cult practices, as pointed out by Warner in *Alone of Her All Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, had a practice of considering her the goddess of fertility and she can enkindle life. "The theological resolve to these contradictions was the suppression of the motif of sexuality and the concomitant stress on motherhood, through the dogma immaculate conception" (Robinson 95). The good mother is submissive to her son, and according to Catholic norms, her intercession will not be rejected by him. This idea aligns with pre-Christian notions of goddesses as both life-givers and life-takers. The dual nature of the goddess is intrinsically linked to Mother Mary, who is depicted as both the nurturing mother of God and the receiver of her son's dead body. These images of Mary are closely associated with the Western goddesses who possess the powers of giving life and taking life.

In Francis X. Clooney's *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*, he conducts a detailed analysis of hymns dedicated to the Hindu goddesses Sri, Devi, and Apirami, as well as the Virgin Mary. Clooney highlights the shared attributes of these revered figures, particularly their maternal qualities, caring nature, and protective powers. Both the goddesses and Mother Mary offer solace to those who seek refuge in them and are celebrated for their nurturing qualities and intercessory powers. Additionally, Clooney notes the similarities in their purity and moral virtues: Mother Mary is venerated for her perpetual virginity and immaculate conception, while the goddesses embody purity and virtue within their traditions. This comparative study reveals that, despite theological and cultural differences, these figures are revered in similar ways for their maternal care, purity, and intercessory capabilities. Clooney also underscores their theological differences: while Mother Mary is not considered divine and is honoured with hyperdulia, the highest form of veneration given to saints, Hindu goddesses are independent divine figures with absolute powers. The narratives of the goddesses are deeply rooted in specific cultural milieus, whereas Mother Mary is understood within the broader theological context of Christ's life. Moreover, his work addresses Mother Mary within the cultural context of India, syncretizing diverse religious practices in Catholicism without demeaning them as paganism.

The revival of going back to the goddess tradition is considered a tendency in the early 1970s as the feminist thinkers started “to reclaim the ideas of original matriarchy and the primacy of a female deity” (Ruether 274). Elizabeth Gould Davis’s *The First Sex* and Merlin Stone’s *When God Was a Woman* are considered as the pioneer works of the movement. The first one is controversial in narration with its

influential arguments like women were once the dominant gender with power and authority and matriarchal societies existed even before the patriarchy. When men were relegated to the secondary position, they led a rebellion against female dominance and suppressed female power, creativity and sexuality. Using mythology, Anthropology and history, she claims that the goddess tradition was destroyed and replaced with the dominance of a male deity. She severely criticizes Christianity for degrading her position and annihilating her soul. Stone, on the other hand, speculates that with the rise of patriarchy, the goddess worship was suppressed. Her book examines ancient Hebrew religion and the Old Testament to prove her point of marginalizing the goddesses. She connects the ancient goddess worship to contemporary spirituality. She also criticizes Christianity and Islam for being the patriarchal religions that “finish the job of killing the Goddess” (Stone 191). While Christianity focused on destroying the elements of paganism and goddess worship in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it maintained some similarities with that culture in its presentation of Mary.

Christianity, although patriarchal, preserved covertly many elements of earlier goddess-worshipping cultures and continued to see the divine as an immanent organic power of life in all things. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw not only the culmination of attempts to destroy the last remnants of European shamanism, by labelling witchcraft as “devil worship,” but also a series of other economic and cultural shifts that made the patterns of domination and estrangement much more rigid. (Reuther 285)

The mother goddess cult is observed in different parts of the world, characterized by nurturing abilities, selfless motherhood, and virginity. These

goddesses are capable of blessing and destroying simultaneously and possess the miraculous power of healing. They can cast away illness and catastrophe, protect their devotees, and in some traditions, they can mediate between humanity and divinity. A goddess can be a human transformed into a divine being either through a violent and untimely death or by marrying a divine figure and becoming divine. In Mother Mary, most of the characteristics of the goddesses is visibly seen. Since Mary's veneration often overlaps with local goddess traits, such as compassion, fertility, and protection, this syncretism allows Mary to fulfil roles similar to those of goddesses, reflecting cultural qualities that transcend the Church's traditional representations.

Self-reflexivity is the process through which goddesses reveal themselves to the people, often through various manifestations or symbols. They communicate their desires, frequently requesting the construction of temples or shrines in their honour. These powerful deities, capable of both blessing and destruction, use these sacred spaces as mediums to convey their will and bestow blessings. They are the great protectors from the evil and warriors of a particular locality. In the work, *Feminine Multiplicity: A Study of Groups of Multiple Goddesses in India*, Yoshinori Onishi says that in South India, "Village Goddesses are normally understood as protecting against threats to the village, typically, epidemic disease, and, when the disease demons do penetrate, the goddesses' power is said to ensure their eventual expulsion." (138) The relations between Mari Amman and Mother Mary in Velankanni exemplify this perception.

Velankanni, located in Tamil Nadu, India, is one of the most revered Marian shrines in the country. Referred to as "Eastern Lourdes," this shrine is believed to be the site of several Marian apparitions, where the Virgin Mary is said to have revealed

herself and requested to construct a shrine in her honour. Similar to the atmosphere and rituals of Hindu pilgrimage centres, Velankanni stands out for its unique blend of Indian cultural elements within the practice of Christianity. This process of inculturation is evident in various aspects of the shrine and its rituals. Known as “Arogya Mata” or the “Mother of Health,” the Virgin Mary is venerated by devotees as a healer of diseases and a protector of families. This title and her perceived role highlight the deep connection between the shrine and the personal faith and health of the pilgrims who visit. Margaret Meibohm observes that “The festival at Velankanni, through enabling the blending of past and present along several dimensions, provides a means of constructing and expressing a multifaceted sense of Indian Catholic identity for those who participate.” (61-62). The exact time of the establishment of the church is vague. But the miracle stories associated with Velankanni get spread all over and those stories help to create a theological framework for the Christian authorities. “The ideological side of the festival is also different because the flow of miracle stories, especially the production of written accounts of those stories, directs the festival away from the traditional multivocal celebration.” (Younger, *The Miracle of Velankanni*, 117)

The miracle stories of Marian apparitions are believed to spread during the sixteenth century. There is no historical proof for the apparitions, but these stories are orally transmitted through generations. In the shrine’s publication *The History of the Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health Vailankanni “The Lourdes of the East”* the miracle stories are given in detail. The first story related to Velankanni is about a humble shepherd boy on an errand for his master. Tasked with delivering a pot of milk, the boy made his way through the village. Feeling thirsty, he stopped to drink

from a tank where the villagers collected their water. Nearby, under the shade of a banyan tree, he rested for a while. Then he saw a vision of beautiful woman holding a child in her arms standing before him. “She wore modest but spotless garments. Her face was serene and majestic while the child’s face was radiant and glorious. Both the Lady and the child had celestial halos round their heads. Filled with a sense of awe and reverent fear, the shepherd boy was deeply moved but remained silent”

(Fernandes 108). The woman asked him for some milk for her child. Initially hesitant, fearing the wrath of his landlord, the boy relented when she asked again and gave them some milk. Upon arriving at the landlord's house, the boy nervously recounted the encounter. When they opened the pot, they got astonished by seeing it was brimming with milk. The landlord, and the boy hurried back eagerly to see the lady who stood under the banyan tree but found no trace of her. Realising the divine nature of the encounter, they knelt and worshiped at the spot where she had appeared. In reverence to the event, a shrine was later constructed there, and the tank was known as Amba Kulam, a place of their devotion. Younger considers this story resembling with the universal stories associated with Marian Apparitions which does not have an Indian flavour (“Healing Mother Velankanni”, 112). But in the narratives offered by the shrine, they are well described with the “Indianness” that Younger may not find out. The background of the oral narrative and the cultural contexts are suited for Indianizing the story. This story spread to the adjacent villages and the Christians in the neighbouring area understood this is Mother Mary with Baby Christ according to the church narratives.

In the cultural contexts of South India, where Mother goddesses are worshipped, the story easily fits into religious discourses. Unlike other Mary

apparitions that happened lately, where Mother Mary appears alone, this story is portrayed in the realistic realm of socio-cultural contexts, depicting a mother with a child. As a good mother, she understands the needs of the child and nourishes him with the help of a shepherd boy. She spoke the language of ordinary people and dressed in a manner familiar to that boy. In a country where stories of gods and goddesses appearing before devotees in disguise are popular, this apparition story does not stand culturally alienated. The land Lord running towards the place where the boy met the mother and child indicates a strong conviction of him in the miracle. He did not perceive the story as unfamiliar. This narrative fits well within the tradition of divine mothers in South India and this story appears much before the arrival of Christian Missionaries. Rila Mukherjee observes that “it is by this clever chronological stratagem that the cult and shrine are inserted into the Hindu sacred landscape” (161).

The next story of the miracle spread after the arrival of European missionaries who constructed churches in Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. Near the water tank, there lived a lame boy and his mother. To earn a living, the boy sold buttermilk under the thatched roof of the banyan tree. One day, a beautiful lady with a child approached him and asked for some buttermilk. He gave it to them. Then, the lady asked him to go to the churchman of Nagapattinam and tell him to construct a shrine on her behalf. The boy expressed his inability to walk, but she ordered him again. Astonishingly, he found that he was healed and ran to the city to pass the message. The shrine was constructed according to the lady's instructions, and now it is known as the Arogya Mata Shrine of Velankanni, according to this version of the story.

This story, focusing on the miraculous power of the Divine Lady, influences the cultural psyche of generations, demonstrating that those who obey her orders can experience miracles. The problems or ill health in their lives are no longer seen as unresolved curses or possessions by evil spirits; instead, they become opportunities for divine blessings. Whoever is willing to obey her commands will be granted all boons. Furthermore, the divine figure desires to stay among the people and bless them through her presence in the shrine. The self-manifestations of divine figures, expressing their need for a reigning area, are part of Hindu traditions and thus merge seamlessly with the cultural space of South India. The use of milk and buttermilk as culturally specific mediums to indicate the divine further helps the story assimilate easily into the cultural and religious fabric of South India.

The last mythical narrative effectively ensured the ancientness of the Church as well as the historicity of the Portuguese missionaries. Since all the missionaries were staunch believers of Mother Mary, they spread Marian piety wherever they landed. Their deep-rooted faith in Mary had started even before Portugal accepted Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception as “Queen of Portugal” in 1646. Wherever they went with the mission of spreading the gospel, they took Mother Mary with them. The last story is about Portuguese missionaries who travelled from China to Sri Lanka. During their journey, they encountered a violent storm, resulting in a shipwreck. Miraculously, they landed on the shore near the small shrine constructed by the local people. It indicates that before the arrival of missionaries, there was a shrine for Mother Mary. In gratitude for their survival, they promised to rebuild the shrine. On their next arrival, they offered Chinese porcelain plates to show their gratitude, which can still be seen today in the backdrop of the Marian image in

Velankanni. Since the miraculous day of escaping the Shipwreck was on the 9th of September, the festival of Velankanni is celebrated on that day. These three stories are considered as the oral histories of Marian apparitions that happened in Velankanni. These myths serve as tools for bridging the gap between the local people with a foreign Mother by making her familiar with their local cultural contexts.

The last miracle story must have profoundly impacted the fishermen of the local community. Velankanni, an area predominantly inhabited by fishermen, had its own deities to protect them from the wrath of the sea. Their ancient fears of the sea and their traditional beliefs about the unknown mysteries of the deepest ocean might have been alleviated by discovering a powerful lady who could offer protection from the wildest storms and perils. The unbounded power of this Divine figure not only provided them with a sense of safety but also surpassed the capabilities of the superior white people who were experienced, navigators and conquerors. This unparalleled power of divinity must have left an indelible mark on the cultural memory of the community, reinforcing their faith and providing them with a divine protector who could safeguard them against the unpredictable forces of nature. Mukherjee observes that this story gives an international dimension to Mother Mary Shrine.

The Hindu, Syrian, and Catholic dimensions were thus inserted into a larger story of commercial and imperial expansion. Velankanni is thus legitimized over a wide geographical area stretching from east to west, an area far larger than either Hinduism or Syrian Christianity could imagine (Mukherjee 163).

But this sharp observation by Mukherjee seems to lose its rational grounds when the Portugues lost their reign to the Dutch by the middle of the seventeenth

century. The hitherto famous trade centre of Portugal came under Dutch control. Since they are protestants, they did not promote the cult practices of Velankanni. Still, the cult practice in Velankanni did not diminish.

Processions are an integral part of the Roman Catholic faith and their festivities. These events involve taking venerated statues or images of saints or Mary, accompanied by prayers, music bands, fireworks, and illumination lights. The parade emphasizes the effigy with which the church is associated. The statue will be decorated with colourful and precious dresses and flowers, carried in a chariot or palanquin. Eucharistic processions, Marian processions, and processions of other saints are common in the Western Church as well. Moreover, most of the Marian Churches in India have modeled on the Western Marian Shrines, and as Frenz observes, “For a religious site processions are a powerful means to establish and maintain links within the sacred landscape and to define the status of the site in relation to other sites” (95). The processions are an integral part of the rituals to make the shrines and churches more visible. The Hindu and Christian processions have close resemblances, tracing back to the practices of Syrian Christians. However, after the Second Vatican Council, the Church has sought to incorporate theological aspects into the processions. A close analysis of the practices at the Velankanni shrine helps to explain these nuanced differences.

“The festival draws a crowd of both Hindus and Catholics estimated at one million from throughout Tamil Nadu, making it one of the largest religious celebrations in the state” (Meibohm 62). The devotees of Velankanni attend the eleven-day festival with personal preparations and sacrifices before they arrive at the shrine. Pilgrims walk kilometres on foot as an offering to Mata, reciting the rosary and Marian devotional

songs. In the past, there was a practice of walking for days to reach Velankanni as a proper pilgrimage, reciting rosaries. They may abstain from having certain food items, from sex, and wear special clothing. Men usually wear a white shirt and a saffron-coloured dhoti, while women wear a saree of the same colour with a white blouse, to be recognized among other devotees. Most people take lent for forty days before coming to Velankanni, similar to the pilgrims in Hinduism. After the journey, they need to purify themselves before meeting the mother. Purifying oneself before entering the shrines is also the practice of Hindu Culture. After taking a bath in the sea, they visit the Virgin Mary in the basilica and circumambulate the shrine in the way Hindu does in temples, then go to the chapel of Apparition popularly known as Chinna Velankanni. After paying the visit there, they change the dress code of the pilgrims and wear normal clothes. Visiting the chapel of Our Lady of Dolours, or Vyakula Mata, they offer sprouted coconuts, bunches of candles, and broken coconuts with wicks to light as lamps. Then they attend the holy mass in the church. There is also a practice of offering hair to Mata and shaving their heads as an offering as seen in some of the Hindu temples. People from different castes and religions have their methods of offering sacrifices. Some Hindu devotees break coconuts by flinging them to the ground. The pilgrims recite "Ave Maria", as sung in Lourdes, and line up with lighted candles. The Catholic Church perceives it as the in-cultural practices of the devotees to seek the intervention of Mother Mary in their various needs. But it is undeniable that most devotees seek blessings from Mother Mary, not asking her to mediate before her son for the blessing. For them, Arogya Mata is not the intercessor, but the powerful goddess who can help them from all their troubles.

Portuguese missionaries modeled the Velankanni Mata on a form of the Virgin Mary that was originally venerated in Lisbon, constructing the church in the same architectural style as Lourdes (Frenz 97) which led to it being known as the “Eastern Lourdes”. By introducing a culturally significant figure of Mary through mythological narratives and popular architecture, the missionaries integrated themselves into the power-knowledge discourses of religion. In the broader context of religious discourse, they strategically placed Mother Mary to influence and regulate power through epistemological discussions, as Foucault describes. This positioning allowed the missionaries to shape religious knowledge and beliefs within the local population, demonstrating the complex interplay between power and knowledge in the intricate caste system of South India.

The understanding of Mother Mary within the tradition of goddesses is an attempt to place her within the cultural milieu of India. This approach does not aim to demean or diminish anyone's importance; rather, it highlights the striking similarities and potential for mutual coexistence between Mary and Hindu goddesses. Whether or not Mary is called a goddess, she is not treated as merely human by her worshippers. The Marian cult recognizes her as a trustworthy refuge and solution for all troubles believer's encounter. She fulfils the innate need for a mother figure in Christianity, regardless of what Christian doctrine states officially. “Mata has an entirely benevolent power, strongly associated with healing, health, and childbirth, and marked by the absence of punishment or demonic exorcism. No villager would turn to Mata to request the punishment of those who had done him or her wrong” (Mosse 311). The legacy of our culture lies in this mutual enrichment and understanding of religions.

This shrine was rebuilt by Portuguese missionaries in 1920, as they were severely affected by epidemics. Considering this a sign from God, they began reconstructing the shrine according to tradition. Most converted Christians are from the fishermen's community known as Pattanavar, who are said to consider Mother Mary as their caste deity now. After converting to Christianity, they stopped worshiping their caste deity, Kuttiaanddavar, and he was replaced with Mother Mary (Sebastia 26). Their caste deity offered protection when they went to sea, and they would offer him a fish before their departure. However, the Christian Pattanavars now seek protection from Mother Mary, who, in turn, protects them from problems. The Christian Pattanavar community is privileged to take care of the activities of the shrine and the dressing of the Mother Mary statue.

The statue is prominently placed and decorated in the most significant location within the shrine. Devotees or pilgrims who visit offer their *Kanikka* (monetary donations) before the statue. After lighting candles and placing them nearby, they present trays containing offerings such as sarees, lentils, and vermilion powder. A catechist from the Pattanavar community collects these trays, returns them with half of a coconut, and accepts their offerings. The devotees then offer garlands of flowers, which the catechist places on the Marian statue or in a niche. He returns a piece of the garland, having touched the statue with it, along with half-burnt candles. (Younger, "Healing Mother Velankanni", 119) On their way back, the devotees can take rice, pepper, and salt placed before the statue as "Prasadam" from the shrine. Devotees typically partake of these offerings, and they take additional portions home as "prasadam", a sacred gift from the deity provided by the temples or the shrines.

In the Hindu tradition, a female who dies before reaching sexual maturity or puberty is considered a divine figure symbolizing sexual purity. Referred to as “Kanni,” she is worshipped for her divine power. “A female death before puberty is a form of renunciation. Arguably, it represents the ideal form of female renunciation, which is not the active ascetic control of sexuality (which itself is involvement or attachment to the world par excellence), but rather a passive condition of bodily purity, the absence of sexuality and sin” (Mosse 310).

Similarly, the Virgin Mary, by defeating death and maintaining her sexual purity, attains the status of Kanni and the highly venerated status of Mata in local traditions. In Hinduism, deities are believed to be alive, and offerings are given to them as acts of devotion. Devotees consume the leftovers of these offerings to demonstrate their submission and reverence as C J Fuller says: “*Prasada* is the material symbol of the deities' power and grace. During puja, different substances—ash, water, flowers, food, or other items— have been transferred to the deity, so that they have been in contact with the images or, as with food, have been symbolically consumed by the deity in its image form” (75). In the same way, Mother Mary is venerated here. The custom of using pepper and salt to ward off the evil eye, prevalent in Hindu culture, is also practiced here. This blend of traditions underscores the deep cultural reverence and the syncretic nature of worship within this community.

Devotees of temples often fear the wrath of deities if they do not maintain the ritualistic purity required by the caste system. When a woman is considered physically impure, she may be attacked by demons and certain deities. Menstruation is seen as making women impure, and during this time, they are prohibited from

entering temples. In contrast, Christianity does not associate the concept of purity with physical conditions. A menstruating woman can enter a church and receive the Eucharist. Ablutions are not mandatory before entering churches. The concept of impurity in Christianity is more spiritual than physical. Rowena Robinson observes that “Christian sacredness is offended by sin and sexuality, rather than impurity” (Robinson 89). Mosse also argues that saintly power is not based on ritual purity (475). Mother Mary derives power from her sexual purity, while saints derive power from their “triumph over suffering and death” (89). But in Velankanni, the rituals maintain the aspects of purity closely linked with Hinduism.

Taking the Mother Mary statue from its niche is also a big, revered task done in the presence of the priest, catechist, and selected nuns. But before taking the statue for “Darshan”, the face of Mary is wiped with wine used for the Holy mass. This act of polishing her face with wine also resembles the awakening of a deity in the Hindu religion with “Abhishekam”. The elderly woman, who is “pure” to conduct the ritual, dresses the statue of Mother Mary. After removing the crowns and ornaments from the statue by the priest with the assistance of the catechist, the elderly woman drapes a new saree on her. Though the Western procession tradition has this practice of honouring the effigies with special clothes, draping the silk saree is a visible sign of Indianizing that practice with local flavour. This silk saree will be cut into pieces and given to the pilgrims. In the Western Churches, there is a practice of keeping the relics of the saints attributing a divine power of healing to it. Nowadays, the relics of the saints will be used widely as something to be respected. But the pieces of silk saree offered to the pilgrims in Velankanni to keep them to eliminate the evil eye, they seem not to believe in its miraculous power (Sebastia 30). When the Statue was

installed in Velankanni, it had a blue dress on it. However, later Fr. Rodriguez changed the colour of the attire as saffron resembling the Hindu pilgrims visiting there.

The different Marian festivals in Velankanni will be celebrated with grandeur. Pilgrims from across the world come to participate in the festivals of Mata. The patronal festival is celebrated for ten days and ends on September 8th. The other festivals in May take place at the Chapel of Apparitions. The ten-day fest is like a village festival that ensures the participation of many people from different castes, with a special focus on the Pattanavars. The responsibility of conducting the feast for each day is assigned to separate castes of the locality, groups of nearby villages, families, and the parish as observed by Brigette Sebastia in her work, *Mariamman-Mariyamman: Catholic Practices and Image of Virgin in Velankanni (Tamil Nadu)*. Each group takes on the expense of the day assigned to them, and they compete to make their day beautiful with fireworks and illumination lights, offering sarees to Mata, etc. This division of days and assigned duties to particular groups is a customary practice in Church festivals in South India, similar to how Hindu festivals are conducted. In Velankanni, certain other Hindu castes also join the fest. The inclusion of communal and interfaith cooperation is another special feature of Velankanni. More than a religious festival, it is conducted in a secular way that involves celebrations from every stratum of society. However, it is particularly special to the Pattanavar community as they hold privileges as the major caste there.

The festival, like any other in South India, begins with “Kodiyettam,” a flag-raising ceremony. Before the ceremony officially begins, the processional statue of Mary is arranged in a movable cart used to carry idols, and the flag of Mary is placed

in another cart accompanied by the leader of the Pattanavar community and others from the same group. As a procession, they move to the Pattanavar Community Christian area and then return to the church. The flag is officially raised there in the church in the presence of high officials. That is the moment the devotees seek blessings from Mary, as the Priests say to pray for their needs. The flag, as the symbol of Mother Mary's power and victory over the evils, travels to the different parts of the locality at the time of procession and offers protection to them. As Bayly states, "Our Lady of Health is a warrior and conqueror. Her devotees identify her quite specifically with the fierce Amman goddesses of Tamil Nadu, and her cult legends use the term *sakti* to describe her endowment of supernatural power" (Bayly 368).

Raising Mother Mary's flag signifies the complete surrender of the devotees to her. Apart from the major flag raising, there is a ceremony that is repeated every day. However, unlike in other temples, this flag raising ceremony has a deeper significance. The ritual is associated with the symbolic representation of raising their prayers to God, and when it is lowered, God receives their prayers and grants them. Thus, the flag raising ceremony is considered a sacred event accompanied by prayers. The flag raising and lowering is repeated every day giving chances to the devotees to raise their prayers to the Lord. As Meibohm observes, this ceremony is done with the intense emotions. She adds that "the flag itself seems to confer great benefits when touched, judging by the attempts of pilgrims to grasp it and to obtain the coins and flower petals with which it has been in contact" (68). The devotees experience the presence of Mother Mary in that ceremony and many show devotional frenzy as observed by Meibohm. She also shares a significant observation shared at

Velankanni. This unprecedented importance to the flag hoisting starts from the Portuguese navigators who were saved by Mother Mary. They had a practice of keeping a flag on the ship mast before they started any voyage. The flagpole represents the memory of the Portuguese ship mast and the ceremony is more Christianised rather than its Hindu association. Thus, she adds that “the flag hoisting is a reminder of Our Lady’s appearance in India, and of the conversion to the present religious faith, especially perhaps to the East Indian, Goan, and Vasai Catholics, who carry the evidence of Portuguese influence in their surnames” (69).

The festival starts on August 29th every year. From August 30th to September 7th, the procession of Mother Mary is conducted along the streets, featuring a unique style of presentation. On a particular day, women carry the guardian statues of St. Michael and Archangel, followed by men carrying the elaborately decorated statue of Mother Mary in a large palanquin. The statues of other saints are also part of the procession. Bands and music accompany the event, culminating in a grand fireworks display at the beach. Every evening, the procession is repeated, with the final day celebrated in a grand manner. The statue as well as the palanquin are decorated with flower garlands and after the procession, people take the pieces of garlands to home. There will be people from across the world to attend the most celebrated festival of Mother Mary in India. People from Mumbai, Goa, Sri Lanka and Singapore join the practices of carrying the statue of Mary and other saints. The people in different religions accumulate there to seek blessings from her. “Along the religious dimension, the Velankanni festival provides a hybridity of Hindu and Catholic that appeals to a wide range of people and helps to foster a sense of Indian Catholicism” (67).

The Velankanni procession closely resembles the festival processions in Hindu temples. Attending the procession itself is considered a blessing at Velankanni. Many devotees wait eagerly to glimpse the deity in full glory, carried on the palanquin, to receive blessings. Those who may not go to the church can still attend this grand procession and seek blessings. As Meibohm notes, “The Velankanni processions highlight not only the Hindu but also the Christian aspects of identity. They are overlaid with Christian elements: priests, crucifer and candles, crosses on the palanquins, the prayers at the start, and the prayers and songs throughout” (68). More than a luxurious celebration, the devotees maintain a prayerful ambiance while attending the procession, declaring their deep faith in Mary.

The Shrine of Velankanni has significantly transformed the socio-cultural and economic landscape of the locality, particularly impacting the lives of the local fishermen community. Their lifestyle and business practices have evolved in harmony with the divine premises and its surroundings. The fishermen's community is responsible for various shrine-related tasks. A museum of offerings, consisting of votive gifts to Mother Mary, is situated near the shrine. Devotees can purchase provisions there to dedicate to the Virgin Mary as an act of thanksgiving. Shops selling medals, small cradles, candles, flowers, garlands, and food are also run by this community. Their piety towards Mother Mary has been a source of prosperity for them, enabling their flourishing through shrine-related activities. Being the third largest Marian pilgrim centre in the world other than Fatima and Lourdes, Velankanni attracts people from all religions and cultures.

The story of Mari Amman has various versions. She is a powerful deity associated with power and fertility. Some consider her a short-tempered goddess who

causes smallpox in the village if her wrath is provoked. However, she is also believed to heal the village from diseases. One version of her origin is linked to the myth of Parasurama. According to this tale, Parasurama's mother, Renuka, once glanced at a Gandharva while fetching water from the river. Since she is so chaste in her body and mind, she could carry water at home without pots and getting wet. But when she looked at Gandharva for a moment with desire, her chastity diminished, and she got wet by the water that remained as a mass on her head. When she returned home, her husband, Rishi Jamadagni discovered her momentary lapse and ordered their sons to kill her. When Parasurama was about to carry out this command, a lower-caste servant intervened to protect her. In his fury, Parasurama beheaded both his mother and the servant. Satisfied with Parasurama's act of obedience, his father offered him a boon. Parasurama requested his mother's return. Granted this wish, he hastily switched their heads, resulting in his mother having the body of the lower-caste woman while the servant received Renuka's body. This head-switching endowed her with both virtuous qualities and a short temper. This also enabled the untouchables to approach her. Another story suggests that her name comes with the "rain" as the word Mari suggests. It is believed that she protects her village fertile through the rain. Her ambivalence in nature indicates her power and it evokes fear in the devotees. When missionaries came to South India, their encounter with Mari Amman might not have been interesting. They described her as a "bloodthirsty" goddess who evokes "fear" in the "darkened mind" (Younger, *The Miracle of Velankanni* ,103).

In her studies, Brigitte Sebastia observes that Velankanni Mata is treated with remarkable similarities to Mari Amman. A village goddess like Mari Amman has her own territory and protects the villages; similarly, Mata marks her territory during her

procession and blesses the village. Before entering her “kovil”(temple), there is usually a “kulam” (pond associated with the temple for ablution), and devotees receive “theertham” (holy water) in the temples. The purification act of bathing is also observed at Velankanni, and the water from the Mata Kulam is considered to have healing powers. When Mari Amman wants a shrine, she appears in “swarupa,” meaning in her own image, which is evident through a stone or another sign. In Velankanni, the Virgin Mary appeared and asked for a shrine to be constructed for her. However, unlike the goddess, Mother Mary is always perceived as benign and benevolent and does not show her wrath on the devotees. Her ascetic nature and position as a mother in Christianity transcend her realm from the village, giving her an international charisma, while the goddess remains part of locally rooted beliefs. Younger, in his essay, “Velankanni Calling” states that “the underlying pattern of worship in the Velankanni pilgrimage festival is that found in the worship of the goddess Mariyamman” (93). Rila Mukherjee adds:

The preparatory vows, the shaving of the hair, the presentation of offerings, the frenetic worship, the sharing in the worship of others, and the ecstatic moments around the central shrine make up a pattern these villagers would have known from childhood in connection with the shrines of Mariyamman (170).

Placing Mother Mary to the most familiar cultural contexts of the local people, the international identity of Mother Mary is localized as a better mother goddess. Moreover, Mother-Child image of Velankanni “gives the basic Tamil polarity a sufficiently new form so that it provides hope and confidence to those who feel distraught and oppressed” (Younger, “Velankanni Calling”, 94).

Mari Amman is not replaced with Mary Mata in Velankanni, instead, a better mother, who does not limit her power to her reigning village, is being presented through the image of Mary. She, as the divine mother who protects the son-God, protects the families from evil. The theological explanation of Mother Mary veneration, hyperdulia may not be properly fit into this popular piety which is obviously alien to the people who are familiar with the worship of Mother goddesses in their cultural memory. Critics like Mukherjee compares this cult practice traces back to the St. Thomas Christians who shared syncretic practices of both Hinduism and Christianity.

The practices of Velankanni, while rooted in the dogmas and theological viewpoints of the Catholic Church, diverges from conventional Marian veneration. Here, Mary is celebrated more like a caste deity or village goddess, deeply embedded in the cultural psyche of the people. The practices and rituals followed in Velankanni are examples of popular piety in Indianized Christianity, reflecting a significant cultural syncretism. Though it is difficult to define the limits of hyperdulia (the veneration of Mary), it often borders on being perceived as Mariolatry, particularly by Protestant Christians who criticize the cult of Mother Mary. Despite this, the devotion to Mary in Velankanni harmonizes well with local cultural practices, showcasing a unique blend of religious and cultural syncretism.

Another Shrine of Mary, known as *Panimaya Matha* Church, or the Church of “Our Lady of Snow”, built by Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, has become an integral part of the Marian cult in Thoothukodi, Tamil Nadu. It is said that they brought the statue in 1555 from Manila and installed it in the chapel meant for the Paravar community at Punnayakayal. When the headquarters of Portuguese

missionaries were changed to Thoothukodi, they brought the Marian statue with them. They installed it there in the church that came to be known as Mata Church or *Periyakovil*. She is the protector of the community and the most revered figure among Paravars. By the end of the seventeenth century, periodic processions were arranged by the Paravar community to revere their Patron, Mother Mary, and they decorated the shrines with immense gold and treasures. “As the *Jati Talaivan* and the other great trading lineages began to pour their wealth into these ceremonial events, the festivals of Our Lady of Snows took on new importance for the group and soon came to function as a great corporate celebration of power and kingship” (Bayly 343). Considering their prosperity and progress are the boons from Mary, the Community constructed a golden car or “Pon Ter” for the Virgin Mary and celebrated the ten-day luxurious festival on behalf of Mother Mary from 1720 onwards.

In 1806, the Paravar community offered a gold car that was used for processions. Taking the statue of Our Lady of the Snow enthroned in a golden car, devotees pull the car through the surrounding areas to give everyone a “darshan” of the statue. The golden car, standing 53 feet tall to represent the 53 beads of the holy rosary, signifies their deep devotion to Mary. A morning star is placed at the top of the car, symbolizing Mother Mary as the hope of mariners. “The virgin is considered to be a goddess and the ruler of the domains she surveys. Her accoutrements and apparel signify her royal status” (Bayly 344). Since the car fest is a rare festival celebrated only on some special occasions, people are coming from Sri Lanka and Singapore to attend the gold car festival. This church was later raised as the Minor Basilica by Pope John Paul II in 1982 and now it is one of the popular pilgrim sites in India.

The Paravar community has a rich history of association with the Pandya kings through their pearl trading. The major income of the Pandya kingdom came from this pearl trade, which was owned and controlled by the Paravar community. When this trade was threatened by the Arabs, the Paravars sought help from the Portuguese missionaries. The Portuguese agreed to assist on the condition that the Paravars convert to Christianity. The leader of the community, Vikramaditya Pandya, was the first to convert, followed by a massive conversion of the community. However, those people continued to be Hindu in their culture as they did not get properly guided by the evangelists. Later in 1542, Francis Xavier arrived on the land, and he deeply influenced the community. When the missionaries constructed the church, the Paravar community accepted Panimaya Mata as their protector and caste deity. The book titled, *Christianity in India: From Beginning to the Present*, detailed their celebration of the Marian Feast in their native style as follows:

Their community leader, known as 'Jati Talavan' led processions to the Great Church or Mother Church (Periya-Koyil or Ma[̄]da-Koyil), where the Virgin or Our Lady of Snows was enshrined as a cultic patroness comparable to any tutelary avatar of the Mahadevi (lit: 'Great Goddess'—Minakshi, Kali, etc.). From his throne, situated just below her image, he would rise to unveil it, adorn it with garlands and jewels, and celebrate family ceremonies and marriages. At the annual festival of the Golden Car, an event lasting ten days, thousands of people would drag the huge-wheeled vehicle bearing the Virgin ('Mother of God') on its annual Rath Yatra through the streets of Tuticorin, doing so to the beating of drums, chanting of hymns and prayers, and festooning of garlands (Frykenberg 138).

Although Mary in Catholicism is not worshipped as a goddess, the replacement of other goddesses in the cultural memory with Mother Mary allowed the Paravar community to make her their central figure of devotion. By abandoning their pre-conversion family names and accepting Christian names and patronymics associated with Portuguese nobility, they ensured their upward mobility. “The Paravars wanted to be recognized and move up as an elite group in the caste hierarchy. Their economic success and movement into new trades and occupations were enormously enabling factors” (Robinson 112).

The caste privileges and honours given in the temples to a particular community determine the dominance and status of that community. Similarly, missionaries maintained the privileges of the caste system when they established churches. As Robinson states, “Rights to church honours as well as the command over the services of the subordinate castes were central to the cultural construction of caste position” (87). The egalitarian perspectives of Christianity promoted by the missionaries have not integrated with the intricacies of the caste system. The missionaries understood the caste system as a social phenomenon, distinct from religion. However, David Mosse observes:

There is in fact a double and contradictory burden on the local Catholic ritual system—firstly to express Christian religion and secondly to legitimize (or challenge) caste relations. This has involved missionaries and villagers in conflicts over an endlessly disputed and shifting boundary between ‘Christian religion’ and ‘local culture’ (80).

The Gold Car Fest of *Panimaya Mata* rather exhibits the rank and hierarchy of the Paravar community in their locality than the spiritual journey of the devotees. “In 1720, independent of the Church, the community constructed the Golden Car for their patron form of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Snows. In 1806 they built a grander chariot that still runs today” (Robinson 110). They rather considered themselves as the descendants of Kshatriya. The Christian identity helped them to highlight their royal origin. “Their [Paravar’s] appropriation of Christian Customs and practices served to render their caste identity much more cohesive and to lend legitimacy to their claims as Kshatriya status” (Robinson 111). In Tamil Nadu, it is evident that the religious festivals are the expressions of caste dominance and political power.

The divine feminine in Christianity has centred around the notion of the virginity of Mary. Her ascetic nature and sexual purity are important aspects of the Marian cult. Her perpetual virginity makes her unique. However, when placed in the socio-cultural context of South India, the emphasis shifts from the major idea of virginity propagated by Roman Catholicism to motherhood. The missionaries attempted to present a divine figure that resonated with the lower caste's identification with their goddess, embodying the binaries of good and evil. Thus, suppressing the motif of virginity central to Roman Catholicism, Mary is “revered simply and unequivocally in her maternal aspects as Mata. No longer fettered to her role as mediatrix between those who implore her and her divine son, she is worshipped as a divine being in her own right” (108). Since, Mother Mary represents “Sakti”, possessing healing powers, she is worshipped as the divine Mother figure with “her own right.” As observed about the goddesses by Spina R. Ninette, “From one perspective, the Goddess is the divine Sakti, the dynamic energy permeating the

universe, inherent in every form. From another perspective, she is the Mother Goddess whose sovereignty permits her to intervene in the lives of her devotees” (224). For Mother Mary, both definitions aptly fit her interpretation of the divine feminine.

Her sovereign nature in the present world gets visibility through her apparitions, shrines, and the pilgrim centres. The Marian pilgrimages, along with Marian piety, mark a “moving experience” (Hermkens, Jansen, and Notermans 5) in the modern world on different levels. The physical movements of the devotees and pilgrims to the site with lighted candles, rosaries, embroidered umbrellas, and prayers attain a ritualistic structure. "These repetitive, collective, multisensory physical movements provide cogency to the relations pilgrims want to establish with the divine, with their fellow travellers, or with their inner self" (Hermkens et al. 7). Their physical movement in the pilgrimage centres is intended for mental and emotional healing or as an act of thanksgiving for any incident that occurred in their lives. This emotional movement occurs within the pilgrims, fostering a connectedness with Mother Mary. Their problems and sufferings are transferred to Mary, providing them with emotional relief and strength. This emotional bonding makes them feel that they are always under her gaze, and she offers them protection as a benign mother.

Not only that, Mary reaches out to people from the shrines. Her grandeur is portrayed differently in various cultural contexts. In Tamil Nadu, she is treated as a goddess who comes out in a golden chariot. In Kerala, she comes out either on caparisoned tuskers or in a palanquin in a grand manner. Famous pilgrimage centres like Lourdes, Fatima, and Medjugorje witness grand processions of Mary marked by miracles and healings. Moreover, in the present scenario, statues of Mary from Fatima

and Lourdes travel across the world and reach various shrines for veneration. While the processions from local churches are limited to their own terrains, Mother Mary from major apparition pilgrimage centres moves across the world. Her mobility gives her a transnational character (7), connecting people across the globe irrespective of differences in rituals and cultures.

The cultural fluidity and influence of other religious discourses can alter festivities and styles. Celebrations and rituals are not static in any religion. Marian festivals, inherently evolving in nature, can be understood within the cultural milieu of religious syncretism. At the same time, they challenge the submissive yet benign nature of Mother Mary in Roman Catholicism by portraying her as a sovereign goddess who controls and protects her people. This difference in popular piety enriches the culture with diverse images for worship.

In the churches in Tamil Nadu, caste plays a pivotal role in deciding ritualistic practices. The intricacies of the caste system and their positions in the social strata have significantly influenced conversions. As Rowena Robinson observed, “The experience of Indian Christians is deeply marked by the caste system, and Christianity has often been adapted to accommodate caste identities and practices” (145). When Mother Mary is placed within the hierarchical caste system through images, portrayals, and miraculous stories, Marian piety spreads.

Though Christianity does not traditionally include Marian worship, the numerous ‘Mata Kovil’ in Tamil Nadu clearly indicate a strong Marian piety that has been adapted to include Mother Mary. Their acceptance of Mary as their caste deity or goddess has already been labelled as inculturation practices in theological terms in

Christianity. Attributing the qualities of their goddesses and caste deities to Mother Mary has used effectively to localize the religion. Mother Mary is a key figure that roots Christianity in the local cultural sphere of South India, bridging the gaps between Eastern and Western perceptions of God. She fills the void within the Mother Goddess tradition of South India and indirectly raises questions about the Patriarchal supremacy of the religion.

Marian churches maintain their status as pilgrimage centres by creating accessible boundaries enriched with unique material structures. These include images, pictures, grottos, and souvenirs, which evoke piety within the church premises, other than the rituals and practices. These items serve as vessels for cultural memory, authenticating oral traditions and folklore as imprinted memories for the devotees. In Kuravilangad Church, modern monuments such as the Palayoor Spring, which depicts the baptism of the first Christians by St. Thomas at Palayoor, enhance its spiritual ambiance. This spring is situated north of the Garden of the Cross, where the conversion of Brahmins by St. Thomas is illustrated. Opposite this grotto, on the slanting side of the college ground, the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary is depicted.

The church compound includes the Millennium Jubilee Grotto, Marthoma Nazrani Bhavan, Amma Veedu (a boarding house for pilgrims at a nominal rate, known as Mother's House), and the Maria Maggiore Art Gallery. Similarly, the Rosary Garden in Vallarpadam, the stone-engraved cross and other churches in the Manarcad Church premises, and the minor churches within the compounds of Thoothukudy *Panimaya Mata* Church and Velankanni, exemplify how these sites are restructured and reshaped as pilgrimage shrines. Thus, the physical appearances of the

Marian shrines, “Shrinescapes” play decisive role in Marian Devotion (Dugan et al. 14).

When the shrinescapes are closely examined “Mary is rarely alone in these shrines”. (14). The presence of other saints or different churches in the name of other saints can be commonly seen in these pilgrim sites. In Kuravilangad Church St Sebastian’s church is in the same compound. In Manarcad Church a small church St. George is also venerated. In St. Mary’s Forona Church Athirambuzha, the major festival itself is St. Sebastian’s feast. Vallarpadam church celebrates the feast of the Holy spirit other than the Marian festivals. This togetherness with the communion of saints and holy spirit is specifically to denote the high veneration to Mother Mary. Shrinescapes include the physical and sensory nature of the pilgrim centres. The practicing of rituals, along with its serene nature evoking piety and calmness influence the devotees. The impact of the pilgrimage is intensified when it is retold. The Marian shrines are sustained by the repetitions of this orally transmitted miracles or experiences associated with each shrine. The retelling of the experience makes each pilgrim centre unique and different as observed by Dugan and Karen E Park, “the experience of visiting a shrine is both an embodied experience of pilgrimage and a temporary experience whose power is in the retelling” (15). The pilgrim centres’ visits, which are integral to Catholicism, convince the devotees that “these places exist because Mary exists” (15).

More than mere existence, Mary makes her presence felt in these shrinescapes. The recurring activities, such as processions with lighted candles, and reciting rosaries, prayers, and songs make her a powerful symbol that transcends the constraints of terrain and time. “By repetitive performative acts, by selecting or

duplicating her image, carrying it around, gazing at it, or narrating about it, presence is communicated and invested in Mary, enabling her to operate, to move and mobilize people” (Hermkens et al. 8). Mary creates social movements by gathering people against abortions and social evils through her spiritual armies. For example, the Blue Army of Fatima stands for proclaiming the value of virginity. Reciting rosaries and attending holy masses, while practicing repentance, connects people through Marian piety, making the local rituals and practices associated with Mother Mary globally interrelated. The Marian Churches, shrines, and pilgrim centres “can thus be perceived as polysemic practices in which pilgrims invest power in Mary in order to obtain Mary’s power” (9). This pilgrimage also is part of deep Marian piety to show the reverence as well to seek penance for the sins.

Pilgrimages, novenas, honouring people with special positions are both European and Indian in traditions. These practices are embedded in South Indian religious contexts though the hostile attempts of missionaries to remove from the cultural memory. However, the tolerance they have shown to the practices was one of the reasons for its survivals. But these practices and rituals were not completely perceived as the cultural absorption of Indianism by Christianity. It is a misunderstanding that all the Christian rituals are the reshaped Hindu customs. On the other hand, “missionaries created ritual contexts and communicated values which were clearly seen as overriding the demands of caste and opposing Hinduism” (Mosse 85). In rituals, they opposed some of the Hindu practices too. But the religious and cultural blend of most of the rituals were perceived as the accommodating tolerance of the missionaries. As Mosse indicates, Christianity accommodates the system of

caste in religious terms, but in social reality, caste accommodates Christianity into it (84).

The Marian cults at Kuravilangad, Vallarpadam, and Manarkat signify more than a continuation of devotional practices; they serve as dynamic sites of cultural and social negotiation involving caste and identity. Within these sacred spaces, rituals and narratives surrounding Mother Mary function as instruments for elevating community status. Practices such as processions with caparisoned elephants, the offering of oil lamps, and rituals resembling *abhishekam* echo ancient Hindu temple traditions, reflecting a deliberate act of cultural adaptation. As Jan Assmann observes, cultural memory enables communities to preserve and reinterpret the past to strengthen social belonging and legitimacy (110). Through this lens, the Indianized representation of Mary, adorned in silk sarees, addressed as *Amma*, and placed within familiar ritual aesthetics, becomes both a symbol of national identity and a subtle assertion of caste-based prestige. Following Charles Stewart's view that "syncretism describes the process by which cultures constitute themselves" (124), these Marian devotions can be understood as active sites of identity formation, where religious blending serves to reinforce social hierarchy and collective memory rather than dilute it.

Similarly, the oral miracle narratives surrounding the Marian cult at Velankanni operate as reservoirs of cultural memory, sustaining a shared sense of divine experience and communal identity. In line with Assmann's concept of communicative memory (110), these stories are perpetually renewed through oral transmission, ritual performance, and devotional practice. Within the syncretic religious milieu of Tamil Nadu, such narratives bridge the worship of indigenous goddesses and Christian veneration, often reimagining local deities through the figure

of Mother Mary. The transformation of Mariyamman into Mary thus signifies not merely a theological adaptation but also a social and political rearticulation of identity within a Christian frame. As André Droogers conceptualizes syncretism as a form of “play” (219) involving negotiation, adaptation, and power, these devotional transformations reveal how Marian practices serve as subtle instruments of hierarchy and belonging. Consequently, the Marian apparition traditions of Velankanni do more than sustain religious faith; they constitute a culturally embedded process of reconfiguring identity and power within the collective imagination of Kerala and Tamil Nadu Christianity.

However, it was obvious that the merging Christian belief into the Hindu Cultural contexts where caste system prevailed, has led to the cultural synthesis that reflected in the religious practices. Marian cult varies across the cultural contexts, and it addresses the psychological and emotional needs of the faithful, relating to their cultural and spiritual realms.

Chapter V

Conclusion

The Marian cult that thrives in South India today is believed to be rooted in the traditions of the early St. Thomas Christian communities. This devotion has evolved by integrating local cultural nuances, resulting in a distinctive form of Marian veneration. While syncretic elements can be found in Marian practices worldwide, those in South India are notable for their unique style and specific practices. Marian devotion was not introduced by the missionaries who arrived in Tamil Nadu and Kerala; rather, these missionaries rekindled an already profound reverence for Mother Mary within these communities. In the contemporary context, the Marian cult in both Tamil Nadu and Kerala has experienced renewed vigour, fuelled by the influence of Marian apparitions reported worldwide, providing new impetus for the Church.

Throughout the centuries, the church in India has undergone numerous transformations, yet Marian piety continues to thrive with its distinctive practices, frequent apparitions, and gripping narratives of Marian miracles. When Mary is introduced into a culture, she not only absorbs its customs and symbols but also transcends them, achieving a universality that both surpasses and fits seamlessly within various cultural contexts. Known by a myriad of names, she embodies a wealth of identities that reflect the diverse cultures surrounding her while maintaining her unique essence. This remarkable adaptability allows Marian devotion to flourish across a range of communities, without conforming to a single, monolithic expression. The striking similarities she shares with different goddesses across various traditions, coupled with the multitude of ways she is venerated, highlight her ability to embody a core identity that aligns harmoniously with Christian doctrines. In this way, Marian

devotion retains its vivid and dynamic character, allowing it to resonate deeply within diverse cultural landscapes.

This rise in Marian devotion brought about practices such as Rosary processions, October as the Month of the Rosary, and prayers to Mary's Immaculate Heart. In South India, many of these devotional practices were adopted. Yet, South Indian Marian veneration includes region-specific practices that reflect the local culture. Exploring how Mary is understood as both the mother of Christ and, at times, a local mother goddess raises questions about the role of matriarchal traditions, especially in Malayalam-speaking areas, in accepting Mary as a mother figure deeply rooted in the community. These insights emphasize the distinctiveness of South Indian Marian devotion within a global context and reinforce the syncretic nature of her veneration in this region. The impact of popular apparitions at sites like Fatima and Lourdes further fuelled the renewal of Marian piety. In this context, Mary served as a mediator between humanity and God or Jesus, emphasizing her role in the spiritual lives of believers.

Mary Cult has evolved over the ages due to the associations and attributes she has received through various cultures since her declaration as Theotokos in the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. As the divine mother, Mary possesses certain qualities that make her distinct, defining her attributes. Marian piety spread with the recognition of these attributes of Mary throughout these centuries. Although her biblical references are few, theologians have made substantial efforts to integrate Mary within the Biblical frameworks. The second chapter has discussed how biblical references construct Mary's image and how her dogmas have developed over centuries. Each time she is introduced theologically and religiously, Mary interacts

with diverse cultures, acquiring qualities that resemble those of pagan goddesses. Many of her attributes are drawn from these goddesses, yet her perpetual virginity remains a unique feature that sets her apart as an idealized figure within the bounds of Christianity.

Since the Bible does not provide many personal details about Mary, the Church also relies on the Apocrypha for additional insights. The *Protevangelium of James* (or *Proto-Gospel of James*) and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* are two key texts that give further details about Mary and are discussed in the second chapter. These apocryphal texts have significantly influenced two major Marian dogmas: her Immaculate Conception and perpetual virginity. They were meticulously crafted to shape Mary's character, portraying her as a fitting mother for Christ. Her virginity and role as the mother of God became foundational for the development of Mariology, a specialized branch of theological study devoted to Mary.

Mariology is the branch of theology that encompasses the major dogmas surrounding Mary, including her perpetual virginity, the Immaculate Conception, the Assumption, and her title as Theotokos, as well as concepts like hyper-veneration, Co-Redemptrix, and Mediatrix. These theological developments have strong historical and cultural roots, as discussed in the second chapter, where their significance is explored in detail. The evolution of Mariology has not only moulded the understanding of Mary's role within salvation history but has also catalysed the growth of the Marian cult. Each dogma has contributed to a deeper reverence for Mary among the faithful, presenting her as a vital intercessor and maternal figure.

The cultural contexts in which these doctrines emerged often highlighted the importance of motherhood and female intercession, fostering a natural inclination for

devotion. Councils, such as Ephesus, and influential theologians, including Cyril of Alexandria, played pivotal roles in articulating Mary's nature and significance, solidifying her position within Christian doctrine. This theological foundation was further reflected in artistic expressions and popular piety, where representations of Mary in art and liturgy reinforced her elevated status. The phenomenon of hyper-veneration illustrates how Mary became more than a saint; she emerged as a central figure in the spiritual lives of Christians. With the introduction of concepts like Co-Redemptrix and Mediatrix, her role in the redemptive process was amplified, intertwining her devotion with broader theological beliefs. Moreover, modern Marian apparitions and movements advocating for her recognition continue to keep her significance alive, demonstrating her relevance in the lives of contemporary believers that led to Mary cult.

The cult of Mary emerged in Christianity even before her formal designation as Theotokos in 451 A.D, drawing on preexisting Greco-Roman traditions of worshiping divine women, such as the virgin mother goddesses Astarte, Ishtar, and Inanna. While these figures share similarities in virgin births, Mary's unique status stems from her complete abstinence from sexuality, which sets her apart from other goddesses. The Marian cult began to develop prior to her official recognition, with early Christian practices focusing on relics and martyr sites. The second chapter has detailed the role of relics in intensifying the Marian cult, examining their psychological, cultural, and social significance, as well as the emergence of new prayers, practices, churches, and pilgrimage sites. This chapter also has explored how Mary's role transcended and transformed women's positions in society while addressing the criticisms she faced for her decisive influence, which some argue has led to women's subjugation by presenting her as an impossible model of womanhood.

The third chapter has analysed the role of apparition narratives in the beginning and intensifying the Mary cult. Marian apparitions are vital in enhancing devotion to Mother Mary, establishing a strong bond between believers and the divine. These extraordinary events, where Mother Mary is said to reveal herself to visionaries, communicate heavenly messages, and often lead to the creation of new shrines and pilgrimage sites, have been documented through historical accounts and oral traditions. Over time, these apparitions have contributed to unique practices within Marian piety. Particularly during the twentieth century, there was a marked increase in reported apparitions, often seen as a complex phenomenon within modern Christianity. For many believers, these miraculous encounters hold significant importance, enriching their spiritual lives and preserving the tradition of Marian devotion. Critics who suggest that visions stem from psychological factors, such as repressed desires, do not account for the experiences of children who typically engage less in prayerful devotion. Consequently, apparitions are regarded as authentic encounters with a transcendent presence, with the Church affirming their legitimacy based on the genuine experience of an objective reality that surpasses this world.

Marian apparitions play a crucial role in the development of devotion to Mother Mary, serving as significant catalysts for change during times of social and political turmoil. Key sites such as Lourdes, Knock, Fátima, and traditional shrines like Guadalupe and Our Lady of Czestochowa attract millions of visitors each year, providing hope and healing amidst suffering. These apparitions not only foster Marian devotion through reported miracles and associated practices but also emphasize the importance of prayer and the use of devotional objects such as the rosary and the Brown Scapular.

The nature of seers who experience these apparitions is often ordinary, as many are women, children, or housewives from modest backgrounds facing personal hardships. Their suffering is perceived as meaningful, transforming into a collective suffering for humanity, thereby granting them a voice within the patriarchal structure of the Church. The case of the apparition at Guadalupe illustrates this transformative power, as it led to significant historical change in Mexico, demonstrating how these experiences can empower women and reinforce Mary's active role in contemporary issues. The piety spread from the grassroots level that sometimes surpasses the restrictions and cautions given by the church.

The third chapter on popular Marian apparitions such as Guadalupe, Fátima, Medjugorje and Lourdes has detailed the significant socio-political repercussions brought about by the influence of Mary. For instance, Mary's impact has reshaped the political landscape in Portugal, transformed the historical narrative of Guadalupe, and introduced various syncretic practices across different countries. This phenomenon of the Marian cult is universal, reflecting its broad relevance in contemporary society.

Since the Medjugorje incident, there has been a notable increase in reported Marian sightings throughout Europe, a trend that Chris Maunder describes as an “epidemic of apparitions” (*Our Lady of Nations* 84). These events often emerge in times of political and cultural turmoil, highlighting Mary’s continued importance in Catholic belief. These apparitions offer comfort during challenging periods, countering the rise of Communism, healing nations affected by war, and addressing social and moral decline. They have also contributed to the establishment of religious cults and shrines that provide stability and spiritual guidance in times of upheaval. The Medjugorje apparitions, in particular, have effectively utilized media to spread

stories of miracles, challenging traditional methods of validating these events and emphasizing the enduring power of Mary in the lives of believers.

In the context of the twentieth century, Marian apparitions have sparked discussions beyond strictly religious realms, intertwining with significant social and political changes. As traditional beliefs wane, these apparitions have become symbols of resistance against perceived enemies of the Catholic Church, such as republicanism and moral liberalism. Scholars like Maunder and Herringer suggest that these apparitions often serve as anti-modern responses, encouraging prayer and reconnection with God.

Apparitions highlight a notable shift among believers who have moved away from positivist and republican ideologies, favouring faith over scientific reasoning. This shift is especially pronounced among women, who express fervent devotion towards miraculous events associated with Mary, often leading to scepticism regarding the efficacy of science. The increasing reliance of the Church on female participation in rituals and pilgrimages also illustrates this trend, provoking anti-clerical sentiments that portray women's devotion as irrational.

Mary's evolving role transcends conventional boundaries, as she is perceived not only as the mother of Jesus but also as a living figure of comfort and guidance. Michael Carroll connects the Marian cult with Freudian psychology, exploring the nature of apparitions as potential hallucinations or illusions. He argues that while individual experiences may not be perceptible to others, they can still be felt, raising questions about the psychological origins of these phenomena. Ultimately, the Marian

cult reflects a historical trajectory of goddess worship, reshaped within the framework of Christianity, emphasizing Mary's ongoing significance in the lives of believers.

The third chapter also attempts to analyse how the language used by Mother Mary during her apparitions challenges the traditional supremacy of Western languages by embracing the vernacular of the native people. This approach, combined with the preservation of oral traditions and folklore, enables the apparitions to maintain their relevance and dignity across generations. Bhabha's concept of the "third space" illustrates how various cultures interact to forge new identities, blurring traditional boundaries and creating hybrid beliefs. The Marian apparitions at Fátima and Lourdes are deeply embedded in local beliefs, fears, and cultural expectations, shaping the religious, historical, and political contexts of their nations. The new spiritual movement is formed in the name of Mother Mary in the present scenario based on the Mary Cult.

The incorporation of Mother Mary into various cultural contexts, while respecting each culture's specific nuances, reflects the unique syncretic practices of each society. For instance, the image of the Mother Goddess in Guadalupe is deeply intertwined with the figure of Mother Mary, embodying a sense of national identity and consciousness. Local myths and folklore in that country have merged with Marian imagery, while local beliefs in supernatural elements have also influenced Marian devotion. Common features across different apparitions are miraculous healings, flowing water or sacred fountains, and heightened Marian piety during national hardships. However, the syncretic practices vary, as each belief system adapts the Marian cult to fit its cultural context which results in unique expressions of devotion to Mother Mary in each society.

In the fourth chapter, a detailed analysis of the history and folklore of Marian churches in Kerala and Tamil Nadu has been done based on those renowned for Marian apparitions and miracles. It has compared how the local Christian communities perceive Mother Mary through these ancient pilgrimage centres and examines her role in cultural synthesis. Each church studied is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural landscape of South India, distinguished by unique rituals and practices that blend Christian devotion with local traditions. It has depicted how Marian piety not only strengthens faith within the Christian community but also makes Christian beliefs more accessible to local culture, particularly through festivals and inculturation practices centred on Mother Mary.

The Kuravilangad Marth Mariam Church, one of India's oldest Marian churches selected for the study, is a remarkable site of syncretic devotion, merging Christian and local cultural traditions in South India. Believed to be established after an apparition of Mother Mary to local children, who received miraculous bread and water, the church's legacy is steeped in both faith and folklore, with the revered granite cross reportedly raised with the help of a woman thought to be Mary in disguise. For centuries, this church has drawn Syrian Catholic pilgrims who regard it as a sacred space that embodies their spiritual and cultural identity. Its festivals, such as the "Moonnu Noyambu" (three-day fast) and the *Kappalottam* (miniature ship procession), blend biblical narratives with local legends, incorporating elements like decorated umbrellas, *chendamelam* (drumming), elephants bearing "thidambu," and a monolithic statue of Mary that visually aligns with local deity images, echoing Hindu customs. Rituals such as the *Kappalottam* (miniature ship procession) and offerings like the "*anavayil chakkara*" (jaggery fed to elephants) echo temple practices,

incorporating elephants from the nearby Ettumanur Temple, symbolizing historical Hindu-Christian cooperation. The lighting of ground lamps (*chuttuvilakku*), reminiscent of temple rituals, is also performed, and the Saturday rosary procession with lighted lamps mirrors practices at Marian apparition sites, enhancing its syncretic character. *Ettu Noyambu*, an eight-day fast in honour of Mary's nativity, also incorporates community-specific prayers, rosaries, and cultural practices, a tradition rooted in historical legends. The "Thamuk Nercha," originally observed by Syrian Christians to seek protection from wild animals, illustrates one such practice with dual interpretations: it is both a thanksgiving offering and, as one tradition suggests, a ritual observed by the villagers to escape persecution from a police constable. The offering, a mixture of rice, coconut, plantain, and jaggery, is blessed in a communal celebration that brings people of all faiths to the church. This practice shares roots with similar offerings made to Bhagavathi in Hindu temples, demonstrating how ritualistic practices have been adapted from Hindu customs to Christian settings.

Kuravilangad Church holds the status of a mother church, from which many other churches originated as the Christian population grew in the area. These newer churches, while sometimes bearing different names, continue the legacy of Kuravilangad, with Marian devotion deeply woven into their practices. A significant legend recounts how the blessing of Kuravilangad's *Muthiyamma* (Mother Mary) enabled a Hindu family to have a child. In gratitude, this family donated land for the construction of St. Mary's Church in Athirampuzha, creating a space for Marian veneration in that community. The early spread of Christianity in this region focused heavily on the figure of Mary, whose compassion and miraculous intercessions were a

central message, helping to foster devotion and attract believers across cultural boundaries.

This syncretic blending underscores the unique religious and cultural landscape of Kerala, where Marian veneration has absorbed aspects of regional goddess worship and matriarchal traditions. Scholars like V.V.K. Valath and Fr. Ignatius Payyappilly note that offerings to Mother Mary often parallel those to Bhagavathi, the Hindu mother goddess, underscoring the importance of maternal figures in Kerala's spiritual life. Historian K. Damodaran also points to the historical reverence for female deities in the region, rooted in agricultural society, where women were central figures. The veneration of Mother Mary has likely drawn from these cultural norms, allowing her to assume a similarly protective and maternal role within the Christian community.

The Second Vatican Council marked a significant shift in the Church, revitalizing its approach to liturgy and relaxing restrictive practices. By endorsing inculturation, the Council encouraged churches to integrate cultural elements in ways that would connect indigenous communities to Christianity. This transformation also redefined the Marian cult, particularly in India, where Marian devotion took on local characteristics, often merging Mother Mary's image with that of regional goddesses. As the Marian cult grew, Mary was depicted with qualities relatable to Indian goddess traditions, enriching her veneration with Indigenous elements that fostered a deeper cultural connection.

The Manarcad Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church of Saint Mary, another ancient church in Kottayam, is renowned for its unique syncretic practices. The

celebration of Eight-Day Abstinence in honour of Mary blends Hindu and Christian elements, making it distinct in the history of Marian veneration among the Nazrani Christians. The origin legend of the church recounts how early Christian refugees from Kodungallur settled in Manarcad, prompted by a vision of a white cow and calf lying in a forest, which they interpreted as a divine sign to build a church dedicated to Mary and Baby Jesus. The “Ettu Noyambu” festival commemorates this vision with a week-long fast, special prayers, and cultural rituals such as the Raza procession, in which decorated umbrellas, *chendamelam*, drumming, and caparisoned elephants draw thousands of faithful in a grand display. This iconic procession reflects traditional South Indian symbols of sovereignty, similar to Hindu temple celebrations.

Another distinctive ritual, “nada thurakal,” or the opening of the sanctum, reveals a revered image of Mother Mary, open for public viewing only once a year on September 7th. Various offerings, or “Vazhipadu,” are popular among devotees, including “Urulu Nercha” (circumambulation by rolling on the ground), “Aal roopam” (donating a figurine for healing), and “Nercha Kanji” (a blessed porridge). Devotees also partake in ritualistic bathing in the church’s tank, believed to cleanse both spiritually and physically.

An ancient local tradition depicts Bhagavati, a Hindu goddess, as the twin sister of Mother Mary. Historically, devotees from both faiths visited each other's shrines, symbolizing communal harmony. During the annual temple festival, the goddess would ceremonially stop at the church to “meet” Mary. This syncretic practice, however, has declined in modern times due to sociopolitical and ideological shifts. However, Manarcad's practices emphasize a deep-rooted cultural fusion and annual rituals that resonate across religious boundaries. The Syrian Catholics of this

church maintain “Ettu Noyambu” as an ancient tradition, inspired by Marian apparitions in the 20th century, re-establishing devotion and connecting past practices with modern spiritual aspirations.

The National Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Ransom in Vallarpadam, known as the Vallarpadam Basilica, is another ancient Marian pilgrimage site chosen for the study. The history of the church has changed with the Portuguese arrival and it was reconstructed and renamed after Mother Mary, marking a shift in its identity toward Latin Christian traditions. This renaming symbolized the strategic integration of Marian piety into the local faith, making Mother Mary more relatable to the community as “Vallarpadathamma” (Mother of Vallarpadam). Her local persona mirrored familiar mother-goddess figures, allowing her to resonate with people of various faiths, especially Hindus.

One of the most defining syncretic rituals associated with Vallarpadathamma is the *Adima Samarpanam*, or the act of offering oneself as a servant to Mother Mary, inspired by Marian consecration in Western Christianity but transformed by the experiences of Meenakshi Amma, a Nair woman who survived a near-drowning with her child through Mary’s intercession. Fulfilling her vow to serve Mary, Meenakshi Amma and her son embraced Christianity, becoming “Mariyam” and “Yesudasan,” and lived on the church grounds as dedicated servants. This act of devotion started the *Chool Nercha* (broom-offering), wherein devotees sweep the church premises, embodying an intimate expression of Marian veneration with local practices. Meenakshi Amma’s lineage continues this practice by distributing *sambharam* (buttermilk) to devotees, keeping her legacy alive, and it showcases how individual

faith stories become integrated into collective traditions, fostering unity and a shared history.

The church also serves as a space for culturally syncretic rituals like the *Choroonu* (first feeding) and *Vidhyarambham* (initiation into academics), traditionally Hindu ceremonies now offered in Mary's presence at the shrine. These practices underline the deep cultural assimilation of Mother Mary within local customs, portraying her as a universal mother figure capable of offering protection and blessings across religious boundaries.

The shrine of Velankanni is another selected church that showcases a unique syncretism within South Indian Christianity. This fusion is evident in the rituals and miracles associated with the shrine, with Mary portrayed as a nurturing figure deeply attuned to local culture. Mary's depictions here align with South Indian village goddesses, known for offering protection from diseases and other threats. Much like the powerful local deity Mariyamman, Mary at Velankanni is venerated as a healer and protector, attracting pilgrims from various religious backgrounds, and reinforcing the universal, maternal nature of her role. The legendary narratives described in the fourth chapter have showcased Mary as a compassionate, protective figure who resonates with Indian cultural elements and extends her blessing and protection, especially to the local fishing communities. The detailed description of the syncretic practices of Velankanni clearly shows how caste plays a significant role in Marian cult in Tamil Nadu, especially in conducting festivals. Mother Mary is treated as one of the deities in that region and the features of the festivals are not different from that of the temples.

The *Panimaya Matha* Church, or Church of Our Lady of Snows, in Thoothukodi, Tamil Nadu, exemplifies a strong syncretic blend between Catholic and Tamil Hindu practices, rooted in the Portuguese missionaries' arrival in the sixteenth century. When the Paravar community converted to Christianity under the Portuguese in exchange for protection in their pearl trade, they embraced Mother Mary as their caste deity and protector, mirroring her as a tutelary goddess akin to figures like Kali and Meenakshi. The annual ten-day festival honouring Mary involves a grand procession in a gold car, or "Pon Ter," reminiscent of traditional Rath Yatra celebrations, with the 53-foot car symbolizing the rosary and topped with a morning star as a nod to Mary's connection with maritime communities. The Paravars continued many caste-related cultural elements, viewing Mary as a goddess figure and holding processions led by their caste leader, the *Jati Talaivan*, who would unveil and adorn her image, similar to rituals for Hindu deities. The church's caste-based honours preserved the community's socio-economic status, with missionaries supporting caste privileges and traditions, showcasing a complex, hybrid religious identity that both upholds Christian and Hindu cultural values.

The divine feminine concept in Christianity finds unique expression in South Indian Marian veneration, which adapts the Western ideal of Mary as a symbol of virginity into a maternal figure, resonating with local cultural and religious sensibilities. While Roman Catholicism emphasizes Mary's virginity and role as a mediator, South Indian contexts emphasize her motherly qualities and divine sovereignty, positioning her as a maternal deity who aligns closely with the concept of *Sakti*, the feminine power and energy revered in Hinduism. Mary is perceived as a compassionate protector, a healer, and a figure who embodies the spiritual and

physical support traditionally offered by local goddesses. Pilgrimage practices reflect this, as devotees embark on ritualistic journeys to Marian shrines, bringing offerings and performing sensory acts like candle-lit processions and prayers. These actions foster a profound emotional connection with Mary, symbolizing both healing and gratitude for her guidance and perceived presence in their lives.

Marian shrines themselves are physical embodiments of this devotion, blending sensory elements like grottoes, images, and monuments that preserve cultural memory and folklore. Unique local practices, such as carrying statues in processions and celebrating festivals, show how Marian veneration is integrated into broader religious frameworks, sometimes including non-Marian saints like St. Sebastian and St. George, thereby reinforcing Mary's association with the "communion of saints." This interconnectedness not only adapts Christianity to the cultural landscapes of South India but also creates a transnational Marian presence as shrines attract pilgrims from around the world. Through Marian pilgrimages, devotees express deep reverence, seek spiritual transformation, and participate in movements like the Blue Army of Fatima, which promote values such as purity and repentance. These practices signify how local Marian devotion is deeply interwoven with global Catholicism, establishing Mary as a powerful and mobilizing figure across varied cultures and beliefs.

The Marian cult in South India remains very vibrant even today, with apparitions and miracle stories involving Mother Mary becoming increasingly prominent. Contemporary Marian practices in South Indian churches are rooted in the heritage of St. Thomas Christians and are deeply interwoven with local cultural and social traditions. Marian devotion here is not merely a missionary legacy; rather, as

seen in the renaming of Vallarpadam to Mother Mary Church, Mary has served as a powerful cultural and religious symbol. In places like Velankanni, the Portuguese missionaries played a significant role in fostering Marian devotion, which remains strong to this day. Interestingly, many ancient churches in South India carry the name of Mother Mary rather than titles related to the Trinity, angels, or disciples, though the formal naming traditions may have evolved later.

The syncretic practices observed in Kerala's Marian churches often carry the cultural memory of historical social hierarchies, subtly reinforcing the elevated caste status of St. Thomas Christians. In churches like Kuravilangad and Manarcad, these practices underscore the privileged standing of this community, serving as a quiet yet powerful reflection of their lineage as a high-caste Christian group. Marian devotion becomes a central means for this community to affirm its esteemed status, highlighting their unique religious and social identity within the broader Christian landscape. At Vallarpadam, distinct Marian practices emphasize humility and devotion through acts such as ritual sweeping and symbolic servitude to Mary. These rituals signify not only physical and spiritual purity but also a profound dedication to emulating the virtues of Mary. Here, Marian devotion serves as a spiritual exercise in which followers symbolically relinquish pride and seek complete alignment with Mary's perceived virtues of humility, purity, and selflessness. Central to these rituals is the legendary story of Meenakshi Amma, a Nair woman who, after a miraculous escape with her son, abandoned her well-established life to honour Mother Mary. In an extraordinary act of devotion, she chose to become Mary's "slave," a gesture symbolizing complete submission and spiritual transformation. This ritual practice also reflects the underlying caste dynamics of the region. For the Latin Catholic

community, often marginalized as a "fisherman caste," these acts of servitude hold additional meaning. They serve as a claim to spiritual prominence within the Marian tradition, subtly engaging with caste hierarchies through a lens of divine piety. By adopting rituals that emphasize servitude to Mary, the community reinterprets their societal identity within a sacred framework. In this way, the ritual at Vallarpadam becomes a space where devotion intersects with cultural narratives, simultaneously embodying Marian virtues and challenging hierarchical norms in a uniquely spiritual context.

In Velankanni and *Panimayamata* Church, the intense efforts of missionaries to promote Marian devotion have elevated the community's status within the church, illustrating how religious affiliation can transform social standing. Conversion to Christianity shifted the social identity of these communities, yet their celebrations of Marian feasts retain elements that mirror the festivities traditionally associated with their caste deities. While these festivals may resemble those honouring a caste deity, the focus remains distinctly on Mother Mary. In this way, Mary has been skilfully adapted to serve as a central figure, embodying familiar qualities of traditional female divinities while maintaining her unique and prominent role within the Christian faith. This appropriation preserves the revered position of Mary as Christianity's central female figure; at the same time, her veneration shows deep connections to the local cultural roots of their belief system.

The thesis concludes with the findings that the Mother Mary cult is deeply embedded in the traditional belief systems and practices of South India, especially Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Not only are the practices, but also the festivals, iconography, and rituals, infused with syncretic elements that are profoundly rooted in

a harmonious past. Moreover, the Mary cult grants her a dynamic position within the cultural contexts of South India, where she is depicted wearing a saree and participating in festivals on caparisoned elephants and decorated chariots. Her image has become so appropriated—whether consciously or unconsciously—that she is closely linked to the goddess figures prevalent in the cultural memory of the faithful. Her miracles and apparition stories continue to thrive in the present day, with retreat centres like Kruepasanam, renowned for its Marian apparitions and numerous miracles, offering a deeper understanding of Mary.

This study also highlights how the image of a woman, particularly a mother, helped people connect with a religion that initially appeared foreign, as her miracle stories and apparitions invoked awe and reverence, signalling the power of the newly introduced god or goddess. The spread of these stories and oral narratives further fuelled this connection. Additionally, the psychological impact of Mary must be understood within this context, as her maternal image provides protection and comfort, becoming a sanctuary for the faithful during times of turmoil. She offers a sense of identity and belonging to the people.

The thesis also reveals the diverse nature of Marian piety within the St. Thomas Christian community, illustrating how different denominations (e.g., Latin Churches, Roman Catholic Churches, Jacobite Churches) possess distinct yet overlapping practices. These practices reflect the invisible caste politics and socio-cultural divisions that persist within the Christian community, despite its shared religious beliefs. Furthermore, the study argues that Marian piety has the potential to bridge gaps between different faiths and communities, as she is accessible to people regardless of their religion or social status.

The significance of this thesis lies in its kaleidoscopic exploration of the syncretic practices associated with the Marian cult in South India, revealing their intricate connections to the region's complex caste and power structures. Although devotion to Mother Mary has been present since the time of the St. Thomas Christians, the global phenomenon of Marian apparitions has continuously influenced Marian piety over the centuries, sometimes intensifying and other times diminishing it. The laity relies deeply on the apparition narratives and miracles attributed to Mary, which have shaped Marian devotion profoundly. This influence is so widespread that a secular magazine like *National Geographic* featured Mary as "The Most Powerful Woman in the World" in its December 2015 issue. This thesis underscores the importance of understanding Mary and the Marian cult within a broader socio-cultural context, rather than confining her significance to religious boundaries. By situating Mary within cultural and social frameworks, this study offers a more holistic perspective on her role and influence by illustrating how Marian piety transcends religious devotion to engage with local traditions, societal hierarchies, and evolving community beliefs.

The relevance of this study reinforces that religions are often the products of cultural synthesis. The practices of the Marian cult confirm that religion is a mixture of social, cultural, and historical influences and cannot be separated from culture. Since Christianity has existed in India from an early period, it should not be viewed merely as a foreign religion or a product of colonialism. Marian piety suggests that early Christians in India engaged in practices that afforded them a sense of social and cultural equality within the Indian context. The arrival of missionaries, however, led to attempts to separate Christians from Hindu religious influences and restricted their

access to temples. While these efforts reflected the limitations of that era, they also highlight the need for religious harmony and unity today. As religious tensions and intolerance continue to rise, this study offers hope by showing that Indian Christians practice a form of faith deeply rooted in the country's cultural heritage. For many, Mother Mary serves as a goddess or caste deity within their religious framework, and Christianity has embraced this cultural adaptation with tolerance. The future, however, is changing rapidly, and such changes may deepen divisions based on religious differences. This thesis stands as a call for humility towards history and culture, which provide essential sustenance for all religions. Marian piety demonstrates the potential for religious syncretism, serving as a reminder of the shared cultural memory of the past and the possibility of unity in diversity.

The scope of this study can be expanded beyond focusing on select ancient churches in Kerala to include a broader cultural and historical understanding of Marian piety within the Kerala context. The syncretic practices associated with the Marian cult are intricately linked to caste and social hierarchies, and the study can delve deeper into how these syncretic practices, alongside religious conversion, have played a significant role in elevating the social status of individuals and communities.

Additionally, this thesis provides a vast scope for examining Marian miracles and narratives, particularly through the lens of folklore and oral traditions. By doing so, it offers new insights into how religion, as a whole, is shaped by local myths and practices, evolving through traditions over time. Another area that could extend the discussion is the role of Marian piety in fostering interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue. The influence of new retreat centres, charismatic movements, and prayer groups can be explored, examining how these movements consciously or

unconsciously contribute to changing religious dynamics and promoting religious harmony from their fundamental perspectives.

Moreover, the study could also explore how Marian devotion addresses the challenges and tensions faced by individuals, contributing to the coexistence of religious and social harmony in a rapidly changing world. By expanding the scope to include these areas, the study will not only enhance the understanding of Marian piety but also its role in shaping religious and cultural identity, while promoting unity and peace in diverse societies.

Chapter VI

Recommendations

This area of study explores the syncretic practices within the Marian cult in select churches in South India, examining how Marian apparition stories and oral narratives have contributed to the enhancement of Marian piety in the region. The study focuses on whether the Mary cult, within the context of the multi-goddess traditions of South India, has been appropriately integrated into the cultural and historical frameworks of the region. The image of Mother Mary, depicted wearing a saree and appearing on caparisoned elephants during festivals in Kerala, or on decorated chariots in Tamil Nadu, highlights the deeper socio-cultural dynamics and power relationships, particularly with caste. This offers a rich scope for further research into the social and cultural transformations shaping Marian piety.

The relevance of this study can be extended to other regions, allowing for the analysis of how Marian piety has evolved through various local customs and traditions. The findings suggest several areas for future exploration, including a deeper examination of the role of caste dynamics in shaping Marian devotion, the impact of local religious festivals on the expression of Marian piety, and the integration of Mary within the broader multi-goddess religious context of South India. These areas provide valuable directions for future research that could further illuminate the complex intersections of religion, culture, and social structures in the region. The following are the other few recommendations added based on the findings of the present study:

1. The Mary cult can be explored based on the apparitions in the Kerala context alone to understand how it has reshaped the intense Marian devotion seen in the present century. Apparition-based retreat centres like Kripasanam and the numerous miracles attributed to the intercession of Mother Mary offer an opportunity to study this phenomenon in both theological and cultural contexts.

2. Mother Mary's piety is deeply interconnected with social turmoil, as well as religious and political tensions. The relevance of Marian apparitions during periods of social and political upheaval presents another area for further study.

3. The social conditions and cultural appropriation of the Mary cult in Tamil Nadu differ from those in Kerala. A separate study could explore the significance of caste and social hierarchy in greater detail within the Tamil Nadu context.

4. The role of missionaries in utilizing Marian piety to convert individuals to Christianity and attract followers to the new religion is a potential area of study. This could examine whether syncretic practices were deliberate attempts by missionaries or organically incorporated into local traditions.

5. Mary cult has evolved based on local stories intrinsically connected with folklore, myths, and oral traditions. This offers a rich area for further exploration to understand whether Mother Mary fits into the broader folklore traditions of the region.

6. A comparison of Mary with other goddesses in India is another creative area for study, as Mother Mary encompasses many qualities attributed to pagan goddesses. Exploring the archetypes of mother goddesses can offer further insights into the revival of goddess traditions in the context of the Mother Mary cult.

7. The syncretic practices in the present scenario are often limited and hidden due to the influence of charismatic movements and other retreat centres that

emphasize separating from other religions. A further study on the influence of the Mother Mary cult in attracting multitudes, irrespective of religious affiliation, in the current social and cultural context would provide valuable insights.

8. Advanced research can be conducted on Marian cult practices observed globally to understand the emergence of a new Marian movement that remains resilient even under adverse conditions. The psychological impacts of Marian piety on these faithful groups could also be further explored.

9. Another area for advanced research is the postcolonial understanding of Mother Mary cult practices and how they resist the notion that the faith of St. Thomas Christians is merely a residue of colonial identity.

10. The invisible caste politics within St. Thomas Christians, despite their belonging to different denominations, can also be examined. The inclusivity and variations in Marian piety across different divisions, such as Latin Churches, Roman Catholic Churches, Jacobite Churches, etc., could provide valuable insights into these dynamics.

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