



# Hindus, Christians, Muslims and Jews in Kerala, India

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*“The essence of all religions is one. Only their approaches are different”*  
— Mahatma Gandhi

Kerala is home to people of various religions. The caste system became prevalent in Kerala later than any other parts of India after fourth and fifth century AD. This diversity has led to a rich tapestry of religious practices and traditions. According to 2011 census of India figures, 54.73% of Kerala’s population are Hindus, 26.56% are Muslims, 18.38% are Christians, and the remaining 0.33% follow other religions or have no religion [1].

The mythological legends regarding the origin of Kerala are Hindu in nature. Kerala produced several saints and movements. Hindus represent the biggest religious group in all districts except Malappuram, where they are outnumbered by Muslims [2]. Various tribal people in Kerala have retained the religious beliefs of their ancestors. In

comparison with the rest of India, Kerala experiences relatively little sectarianism [3].

## Hinduism

Several saints and movements existed. Adi Shankara was a Hindu philosopher who contributed to Hinduism and propagated philosophy of Advaita. He was instrumental in establishing four mathas at Sringeri, Dwarka, Puri, and Jyotirmath.

Melpathur Narayana Bhattathiri was another religious figure who composed Narayaniyam, a collection of verses in praise of Lord Krishna. Temples in Kerala follow elaborate rituals and traditionally only priests from the Nambudiri caste could be appointed as priests in major temples. But in 2017 as per the state government’s decision, the priests from the historically backward caste communities are now being appointed as priests. Malayali Hindus practice ceremonies such as “Chorunu” (first feeding of rice to a child) and “Vidyārambham” (beginning of education, writing the first letter) [4]. Interesting the Hindu tradition of “Vidyaramabam” is observed by many other religions of Kerala as well, under-

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scoring the secular fabric of the State. Sri Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Ayyankali and Mannathu Padmanabhan are considered the most prominent modern day reformers who have contributed greatly to the social advancement of modern Kerala.

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## Islam

Islam is the second-largest practiced religion in Kerala (26.56%), only surpassed by Hinduism. The Muslim population in Kerala state is 8,873,472 [5]. Most of the Muslims in Kerala follow the Shāfiī School (Sunni Islam), followed by Salafi movement. Muslims in Kerala share a common language (Malayalam) with the rest of the non-Muslim population and have a culture commonly regarded as the Malayali culture. A number of different communities, some of them having distant ethnic roots, exist as status groups in Kerala [6].

Kerala has been a major spice exporter since 3000 BCE and it is still referred to as the “Garden of Spices” or as the “Spice Garden of India.” [7] Kerala’s spices attracted ancient Arabs, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians to the Malabar Coast in the third and second millennia BCE.

Islam arrived in Kerala, a part of the spice and silk traders from the Middle East. Kerala Muslims are generally referred to as the Mappilas. The Muslims were a major financial power to be reckoned with in the old kingdoms of Kerala and had great political influence in the Hindu royal courts [8].

The arrival of the Portuguese traders in Malabar Coast in the late fifteenth century checked the then well-established and wealthy Muslim community’s progress [9]. Portuguese began to expand their territories and ruled the seas between Ormus and the Malabar Coast and south to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). By the mid-eighteenth century, the majority of the Muslims of Kerala became landless laborers, poor fishermen, and petty traders, and the community was in “a psychological retreat.” [9] The subsequent rule of English East India Company allegedly brought the land-less Muslim peasants of Malabar District into a condition of destitution, and this led to a series of uprisings (against the Hindu landlords

and British administration). The series of violence eventually exploded as the infamous Mappila Uprising (1921–22).

A large number of Muslims of Kerala found extensive employment in the Persian Gulf Countries in the following years [10]. This widespread participation in the “Gulf Rush” produced huge economic and social benefits for the community. Great influx of funds from the earnings of the employed followed. Issues such as widespread poverty, unemployment, and educational backwardness began to change [11].

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## Christianity

Christianity is followed by 18.38% of the population of Kerala [12]. The Christianity in Kerala has long traditions from first century AD many of which is similar to the Malabari Jews, the latter has settled in Kerala since the King Solomon. According to traditional accounts, [13] Saint Thomas, the Apostle of Christ visited Muziris in Kerala in the first century around 52 AD and proselytized some of the then settled Cochin Jewish families and some Upper castes, they became the present “Mar Thoma Suriyani Nasrani” or Saint Thomas Syrian Christians. The first Roman Catholic Diocese in India was founded at Quilon in the year 1329 with the Catalan Dominican friar Jordanus Catalani as first Bishop (“Index – Quilon Diocese”) ([www.quilondiocese.com](http://www.quilondiocese.com)).

The 2011 Indian census found a total of 6,411,269 Christians in Kerala, with their various denominations as stated: Saint Thomas Christians (Syrian Christians) constituted 70.73% of the Christians of Kerala, followed by Latin Catholics at 13.3%, Pentecostals at 4.3%, CSI at 4.5%, Dalit Christians at 2.6%, and other Protestant groups at 5.9% [12]. The Syrian Christians fostered education gratefully in Kerala. Pioneers like Kuriakose Elias Chavara, who was one of the most prominent reformers in Kerala, insisted on a having a school along with the Syrian Catholic Churches in Kerala. These schools were open to students from all castes, creeds, and religions—a revolutionary idea at that time. Chavara also started one of the earliest Sanskrit schools at

Mannanam, near Kottayam. Syrian Christians found education as imperative for social advancement. Consequently, highly educated Syrian Christians reached high positions in administration under the Central and State governments. They were also pioneers in agriculture especially rubber in Kerala. Around the time of Indian independence in 1947 large sections of the community migrated to the high ranges and also to Malabar in search of fertile lands for agriculture. Although they suffered many hardships, their efforts led to the economic advancement of the community, making Syrian Christians one of the most prosperous in Kerala.

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## Judaism

Judaism arrived in Kerala with spice traders, possibly as early as the seventh century BC [14]. The Portuguese did not look favorably on the Jews. They allegedly destroyed the Jewish settlement in Kodungallur and ransacked the Jewish town in Cochin and partially destroyed the famous Cochin Synagogue in 1661. However, the Dutch were more tolerant and allowed the Jews to pursue their normal life and trade in Cochin. Since the 1960s, only a few hundred Jews (mostly white Jews) remained in Kerala with only two synagogues open for service: the Pardesi Synagogue in Mattancherry built in 1567 and the synagogue in Parur [15].

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## Jainism

Jainism, one of the three most ancient Indian religious traditions still in existence, has very small presence (0.01%) in Kerala, in south India. According to the 2011 India Census, Kerala only has around 4500 Jains, most of them in the city of Cochin, Calicut and in the Wynad district. The so-called Rules of the Tirukkunavay Temple provided model and precedent for all other Jain temples of Kerala [16]. A number of images of Mahavira, Padmavati, and Parsvanatha have been recovered from Kerala. Some of the Jain temples in Kerala were taken over by the Hindus at a later stage.

## Buddhism

Buddhism probably flourished for 200 years (650–850) in Kerala. The Paliyam Copper Plate of the Ay King, Varaguna (885–925 AD) shows that the Buddhists benefited from royal patronage in the tenth century [17]. The religion's popularity declined following the onset of Advaita Vedanta propagated by sage Shankaracharya.

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## Parsi (Zoroastrianism)

There were a number of Parsi families settled in Kerala, particularly around Kozhikode and Thalassery area. They practiced Zoroastrianism and even built the 160-year-old dadgah (fire temple) at S. M. Street, Kozhikode which is still in existence. They were mostly wealthy families who immigrated during the eighteenth century from Gujarat and Bombay. The community included famous families such as the Hirjis or Marshalls [18].

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## Tribal and Other Religious Faiths

Various groups classified as tribes in Kerala still dominate various remote and hilly areas of Kerala (Idukki—People and culture—Tribes). They have retained various rituals and practices of their ancestors despite influences of mainstream religions.

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## Religious Diversity

Kerala has a long history of religious syncretism, where different religious practices often blend together. This is particularly evident in art, architecture, festivals, and rituals that may have elements from multiple faiths [19].

Religious festivals are a significant part of Kerala's culture. They bring people of all backgrounds together and include events like Onam (a Hindu harvest festival), Eid, Christmas, and other celebrations that are widely observed and enjoyed by people of various faiths. Kerala has a multitude

of temples, mosques, churches, and other places of worship, each with its own unique architecture and cultural significance. These places often serve as social centers and foster a sense of community. In Kerala, there is generally a history of peaceful coexistence and tolerance among different religious communities. Interfaith marriages and interactions are not uncommon, and people from various religions often participate in each other's family and cultural events. Religion can influence social and economic aspects, such as educational institutions run by religious communities and charitable work done by religious organizations.

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## Religious Harmony in Kerala.

Kerala is a secular state with a diverse population that has peacefully coexisted for centuries, influenced by trade and adopting different religions at different times. Kerala's history of religious tolerance and interdependence between Hindus, Muslims, and Christians was shaped by trade and the support of local rulers. The interdependence between Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities in trading and agriculture in Kerala has historically led to peaceful coexistence, cultural integration, and the adoption of local practices. Kerala's religious sites were once similar, but the arrival of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century led to their differentiation.

Despite minor communal incidents, Kerala is considered a truly secular state where Hindus, Muslims, and Christians have been living together peacefully for centuries. The interdependence between Hindus and Muslims in Kerala, where Hindu carpenters built ships for Muslim traders, exemplifies the religious tolerance and cooperation that existed in the region. Stanford professor Saumitra Jha's study reveals that trading hubs where Hindus and Muslims work together have a lower incidence of communal riots, highlighting the importance of economic collaboration in maintaining religious harmony (Rational Expressions, Inc. 2023). The religious harmony in Kerala was maintained during the 2002 riots because Hindus and Muslims showed solidarity by exchanging bangles and actively

rejecting violence. The belief that Lord Ayyappa had close friends from both the Muslim and Christian communities highlights the inclusive nature of religious practices in Kerala. Kerala's high Human Development Index indicates that social and political factors contribute to religious harmony in the region ((Rational Expressions, Inc. 2023).

Religious beliefs and practices serve as coping mechanisms during times of stress, grief, or illness. Rituals, prayers, and community support provide comfort and solace, helping individuals navigate difficult life situations. Religions in Kerala, like elsewhere, provide moral and ethical guidelines for individuals. These frameworks can influence decision-making, interpersonal relationships, and societal behavior, shaping the psychosocial fabric of the community.

Religious practices such as meditation, prayer, and mindfulness, which are often integral to religious traditions in Kerala, have positive impact psychological well-being. These practices are believed to reduce stress, enhance emotional resilience, and promote a sense of inner peace.

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## Political Influence

Religious communities often have a voice in the political landscape of Kerala. Different religious groups may have their political affiliations and play a role in shaping state policies. The remittances sent from the Gulf to Kerala played a significant role in the state's economy, with 10% of the population contributing Rs. 1 lakh crore. (\$10 billion)

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## Influence on Mental Health Services

Religious beliefs and practices in Kerala have influenced attitudes toward mental health and the utilization of mental health services. Some individuals seek religious or spiritual interventions alongside or instead of conventional mental health treatment.

## Education as a Vehicle for Advancement

The people of Kerala, irrespective of their religious affiliation, has realized the value education and found it the most important tool for social advancement. Today with a 95% literacy rate and 93% female literacy, the State is a model for India. Initially Christians were in the forefront for promoting education. Later Hindus and Muslims too came forward to promote education significantly. Besides religious establishments, all these communities run arts, science, engineering, medical, and other educational institutions. Many people believe, one of the secrets of Kerala's communal harmony is its high level of literacy.

## Conclusion

A study of the major religions of Kerala—Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity and the smaller Jewish, Jain, and other communities takes one to the conclusion, one of Kerala's main strengths has been its religious harmony. People of all faiths here live in peace and harmony practising their faiths but at the same time deeply respectful to the traditions and religious practices of others. It's rich heritage that should never be lost!

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