



# Religion in Kerala

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**Religions in Kerala** are a mixture of different faiths, most significantly Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Kerala has a reputation of being, communally, one of the most religiously diverse and cosmopolitan states in India. 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% follows other religion or no religion.<sup>[2]</sup> Various tribal people in Kerala have retained various religious beliefs of their ancestors. Hindus constitute the majority in all districts except Malappuram, where Muslims are a majority.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 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 Brahmin religious figure who composed Narayaniyam, a collection of verses in praise of Krishna.

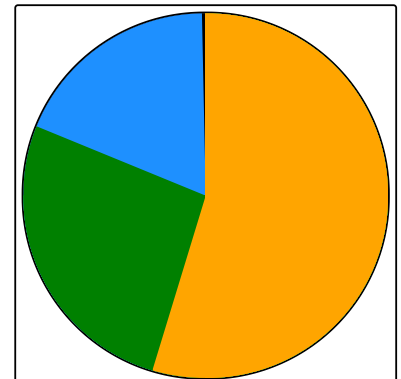
Various practises of Hinduism are unique to Kerala. Different cults of Shiva and Vishnu are popular in Kerala. Malayali Hindus also worship Bhagavathi as a form of Shakti. Almost every village in Kerala has its own local guardian deity, usually a goddess. Hindus in Kerala also strongly believe in power of snake gods and usually have sacred snake groves known as Sarpa Kavu near to their houses.<sup>[4]</sup>



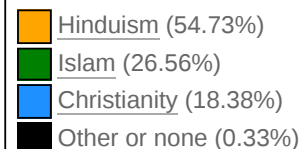
*Vavu Bali* ceremony honoring the deceased in the Malayalam month of Karkadakam

Ambalavasis.

Some of the most notable temples are: Guruvayur Temple, Thrissur Vadakkunnathan Temple, Sabarimala Ayyappa Temple, Thiruvananthapuram Padmanabhaswamy Temple, Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple, Chottanikkara Temple, Chengannur Mahadeva Temple, Parassinikadavu Muthappan Temple, Chettikulangara Devi Temple, Mannarasala Temple, Chakkulathukavu Temple, Thiruvalla Sreevallabha Temple, Kaviyoor Mahadevar Temple, Parumala Panayannarkavu Temple, Sree Poornathrayesa Temple, Kodungallur Bhagavathy Temple, and Rajarajeshwara Temple. Temples in Kerala follow elaborate rituals and only priests from the Nambudiri caste can be appointed as priests in major temples. But in 2017 as per the state government's decision, the priests from backward community was appointed. These priests are assisted by a caste known as



Religion in Kerala (2011)<sup>[1]</sup>



Vadakkunnathan Temple dedicated to Shiva at Thrissur

Malayali Hindus have unique ceremonies such as *Chorunu* (first feeding of rice to a child) and *Vidyārambham*.<sup>[5]</sup>

## Judaism

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Judaism arrived in Kerala with spice traders, possibly as early as the 7th century BC.<sup>[6]</sup> There is no consensus of opinion on the date of the arrival of the first Jews in India. The tradition of the Cochin Jews maintains that after 72 AD, after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem, 10,000 Jews migrated to Kerala.<sup>[6]</sup>

The only verifiable historical evidence about the Kerala Jews goes back only to the Jewish Copper Plate Grant of Bhaskara Ravi Varman in 1000 AD.<sup>[7]</sup> This document records the royal gift of rights and privileges to the Jewish Chief of Anjuvannam Joseph Rabban. According to some historians, St. Thomas found first converts in Kerala to his new religion amongst many of the Cochin Jews. However these Jews who accepted Christianity retained the Aramaic language once spoken by Jews in Middle East. Their descendants form the core of Syrian Christian community in Kerala. Later in the 16th century many Jews from Portugal and Spain settled in Cochin. These Jews were called *white Jews* as opposed to the native *black Jews*.



The Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi

The Portuguese did not look favorably on the Jews. They destroyed the Jewish settlement in Cranganore and sacked 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. According to the testimony of the Dutch Jew, Mosss Pereya De Paiva, in 1686 there were 10 synagogues and nearly 500 Jewish families in Cochin. Later Britishers too were tolerant. The Jews were protected. After the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, most Jews decided to emigrate to Israel. Most of the emigrants to Israel between 1948 and 1955 were from the community of *black Jews* and *brown Jews*; they are known as Cochini in Israel. 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 Matancherry built in 1567 and the synagogue in Parur.

## Jainism

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Jainism arrived in Kerala around the 3rd century BC. The Jain religion was brought to the South in the third century BC by Chandragupta Maurya (321-297 BC) and the Jain saint Bhadrabahu, according to Jain traditions. They came to Sravanabelgola in Mysore. The Jains came to Kerala with the rest of the Chera immigrants starting in the sixth century.

Among the existing original Jain temples in Kerala, the most prominent is called Jainmedu, Vadakkanthara village, about 3 km from Palakkad. This temple was reportedly built by Inchanna Satur. This indicates significant population of Jains lived in Palaghat during the 15th century. Later, various members of Marwari business community built the Jain temple in Kochi.



Marwari Jain Temple in Kochi

Some historians claim many Hindu temples might have been once Jain temples. Several places in Wyanad have Jain temples: an indication that North Malabar was once a flourishing center of Jainism. Historians believe that the decline of Jainism started about the eighth century. Jainism seems to have completely disappeared from Kerala by the sixteenth century; the foreign visitors from Europe do not mention the Jains at all.

## Present day

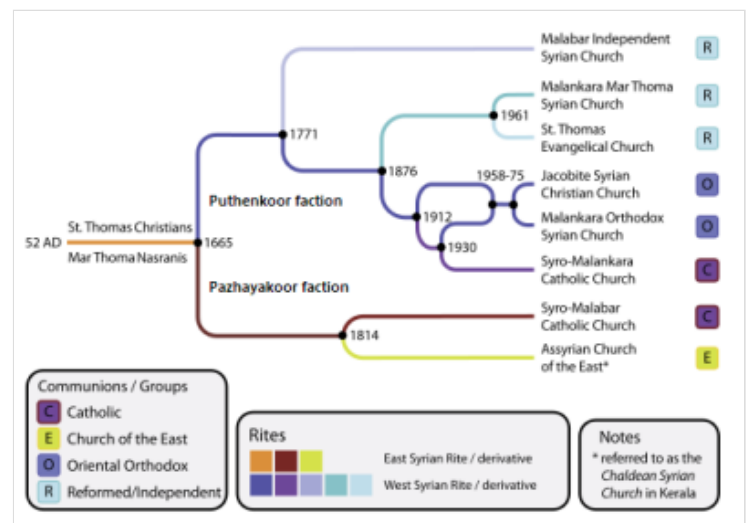
At present, Jainism in Kerala has a small following, mainly among descendants from the original immigrating Jains, and the North Indian business community, settled in and around Kochi and Calicut.

Jainism has a significant population in the Wayanad district bordering the Karnataka state. Amongst the existing original Jain temples in Kerala, the most prominent is called Jainmedu, Vadakkanthara village, about 3 km from Palakkad. The remnants of the Jain temple known as *Chathurmukha Basti* is a popular destination in Manjeshwaram, Kasaragod.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Christianity

Christianity is said to have arrived in Kerala in the first century CE in AD 52 with Thomas the Apostle and is followed by 18.38% of the population.<sup>[9]</sup> The works of scholars and Eastern Christian writings say that Thomas the Apostle visited Muziris in Kerala in the first century in 52 AD to share the gospel amongst Kerala's Jewish settlements and from this came Thomasine Christianity.<sup>[10][11]</sup> The 3rd and 4th centuries saw an influx of Jewish Christians from the Middle East.

Knanaya communities arrived during this time.<sup>[12]</sup> Syriac Christians remained as an independent group, and they got their bishops from Assyrian Church of the East until the advent of Portuguese and British colonialists.



Relationship of the Nasrani groups.

The arrival of Europeans in the 15th century and discontent with Portuguese interference in religious matters fomented schism into Catholic and Orthodox communities. Further schism and rearrangements led to the formation of the other Indian Churches. Latin Rite Christians were those baptised by the Portuguese in the 16th and 19th centuries mainly from the fisher folk. Anglo-Indian Christian communities formed around this time as Europeans and local Malayalis intermarried.

Protestantism arrived a few centuries later with missionary activity during British rule.

Various denominations/churches exist among Christians of Kerala. Around 10% of them are Catholics - Syro Malabar, Latin and Syro - Malankara

Syriac Christians in Kerala are also called Nasranis and they are Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Jacobite Syriac Orthodox Church, Syro-Malankara Catholic Church and Marthoma Syrian Church.

Other denominations are: Church of South India, Believers Church, Pentecostal Churches, etc.

Catholic communities are Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Syro-Malankara Catholic Church and Latin Catholic. Orthodox Communities are Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church and Jacobite Syriac Orthodox Church. All the other churches belongs to the Protestant community.



St. Mary's Syro Malabar Catholic Basilica - Ernakulam

Some of the prominent churches are: Manarcad Church, St. Mary's Church, Niranam, St. Peter and St. Paul's Church, Parumala, St. George Orthodox Church Puthuppally Pally, St. George's Church, Kadamattom, Marthoman Cathedral, Mulanthuruthy, Chengannur Pazhaya Suriyani Pally, Kozhencherry St. Thomas Marthoma Church, and Nilakkal St. Thomas Ecumenical Church

## Islam

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The general consensus among historians is that Islam arrived in Kerala through Arab traders either during the time of Muhammad himself (AD 609 - AD 632) or in the following few decades. Kerala has a very ancient relation with the Arabs even during the Pre-Islamic period. Muslim merchants (Malik, son of Dinar) settled in Kerala by the 8th century AD and introduced Islam.

Later the Zamorin of Kozhikode allowed the Arab Muslim traders to settle and form a major community in Kozhikode, from where the religion gradually spread in the following centuries. Significant populations of Muslims live in Malapuram district in the Malabar region. Noted historian A. Sreedhara Menon opines that the policy followed by the Zamorins of encouraging Muslim traders to settle down in his kingdom to flourish maritime trade perhaps accounts for the relatively high proportion of Muslims in Malabar. The Muslims also manned the Zamorin's navy and were so intensely pro-Zamorin that one of them issued an order to bring up one male member in every fishermen family in his kingdom as a Muslim so as to get sufficient numbers in his navy.<sup>[13]</sup> There is also a significant Muslim population living in the coastal regions of central and southern Kerala.

Since Islam reached Malabar as early as the 7th century it had almost mixed with the culture and traditions of the people of Kerala and Hinduism. So, the Islahi movements of Kerala (a part of the renaissance of the community) after the Malabar Rebellion of 1921, produced a Salafi sect known as Kerala Nadvathul Mujahideen from the Sunnis of Kerala. In later years, both these branches split multiple times to produce complicated branches and sects.

Muslims are generally referred to as Mappilas in Kerala. Islam is said to have arrived in the 7th century CE in Kerala. They form 26.6% of the population of Kerala.<sup>[14]</sup> They share a common language (Malayalam) with the rest of the population and have a culture commonly regarded as the Malayalam culture of Kerala with an Arabian blend.<sup>[15]</sup>



Cheraman Juma Masjid at Kodungallur

## Buddhism

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Buddhism probably flourished for 200 years (650-850) in Kerala. The Paliyam Copper Plate of the Ay King, Varaguna (885-925 AD)<sup>[16]</sup> shows that the Buddhists benefited from royal patronage in the 10th century.

## Parsi (Zoroastrianism)

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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 Kozhikode which is still in existence. They were mostly wealthy families who immigrated during the 18th century from Gujarat and Bombay. The community included famous families such as the Hirjis or Marshalls.<sup>[17]</sup> Some famous Malayali Parsis included the reputed Dr. Kobad Mogaseb, who was the first medical doctor from Kozhikode who graduated from London, as well as Kaikose Ruderasha who funded the Basel Evangelical Mission Parsi High School, Thalassery.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Tribal and other religious faiths

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Various groups classified as tribes in Kerala still dominate various remote and hilly areas of Kerala.<sup>[19]</sup> They have retained various rituals and practices of their ancestors despite influences of mainstream religions.

## Demographics

Kerala's Religious Population Source : Census India 2011

Religion	Population	%	Dist. with highest Population	Dist. with lowest Population
Hindus	18,282,492	<b>54.73</b>	<u>Thiruvananthapuram</u>	<u>Wayanad</u>
Muslims	8,873,472	26.56	<u>Malappuram</u>	<u>Pathanamthitta</u>
Christians	6,141,269	18.38	<u>Ernakulam</u>	<u>Malappuram</u>

Kerala's Religious Population Source : Census India 2001

Religion	Population	%	Population below 6 yrs of age <sup>[3]</sup>	%	Dist. with highest Population	Dist. with lowest Population	Population growth since 1991 <sup>[20]</sup>	Children born per women (TFR) <sup>[21]</sup>
Hindus	17,883,449	<b>56.2</b>	1,932,504	<b>50.78</b>	<u>Thiruvananthapuram</u>	<u>Waynad</u>	-1.55%	1.66
Muslims	7,863,342	24.3	1,178,880	30.99	<u>Malappuram</u>	<u>Pathanamthitta</u>	<b>+1.75%</b>	<b>2.97</b>
Christians	6,057,427	19	677,878	17.82	<u>Ernakulam</u>	<u>Malappuram</u>	-0.32%	1.78

2001 and 2011 census (Population)

Districts	Population(2001)	Population(2011)	Percent Hindus	Percent Muslims	Percent Christians
<u>Thiruvananthapuram</u>	3,307,284	3,301,427	66.94%	13.72%	19.10%
<u>Kollam</u>	2,629,703	2,635,375	64.42%	19.29%	15.99%
<u>Pathanamthitta</u>	1,195,537	1,197,412	56.93%	4.59%	38.12%
<u>Alappuzha</u>	2,121,943	2,127,789	68.64%	10.55%	20.45%
<u>Kottayam</u>	1,979,274	1,974,551	49.81%	6.41%	43.48%
<u>Idukki</u>	1,107,453	1,108,974	48.86%	7.41%	43.42%
<u>Ernakulam</u>	3,279,860	3,282,388	45.99%	15.67%	38.03%
<u>Thrissur</u>	3,110,327	3,121,200	58.42%	17.07%	24.27%
<u>Palakkad</u>	2,810,892	2,809,934	66.76%	28.93%	4.07%
<u>Malappuram</u>	4,110,956	4,112,920	27.60%	70.24%	1.98%
<u>Kozhikode</u>	3,089,543	3,086,293	56.21%	39.24%	4.26%
<u>Waynad</u>	816,558	817,420	49.48%	28.65%	21.34%
<u>Kannur</u>	2,525,637	2,523,003	59.83%	29.43%	10.41%
<u>Kasargod</u>	1,302,600	1,307,375	55.83%	37.24%	6.68%

## Tensions

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In the 21st century various extreme religious groups have become influential in Kerala.<sup>[23][24]</sup> In 2008 there was tension in streets of Kerala over introduction of a seventh standard textbook. The controversy was about a chapter in the book *Mathamillaatha Jeevan* (Jeevan, The Atheist). Jeevan refused to belong to any religion or caste.<sup>[25]</sup> Various groups alleged that this book was atheistic anti-religious propaganda by ruling Left Front government.<sup>[26][27]</sup>

## See also

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- Religion in India

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