

SOUTH ASIAN, MALAYALI



Location: An estimated 23,000 Malayali people live in Myanmar today, although little is known about their precise locations except that they are found in the nation's two largest cities, Yangon and Mandalay. The 1931 census of Burma returned just 3,205 "Malabar" people, or those from the Malabar Coast in south India. Their numbers increased to 5,000 by 1966.¹ Today 35 million Malayali live in India, with several million more scattered throughout the Middle East and in at least 20 other countries around the globe.²

Identity: The home of Malayali people is Kerala in the southern tip of India. Malayali is their ethnic name, but their language is called Malayalam, from the Dravidian words *mala* (mountain) and *alam* (land), signifying "the land of mountains." Despite their similar names, the Malayali are completely unrelated to the Malay people and language of Malaysia.

Language: Malayalam, which is part of the Dravidian language family, is distinct from Tamil. The two languages have different orthographies. Malayalam, which

has been officially designated one of the six "classical languages" of India, is not spoken by a single ethnic group but is a regional language spoken as a first language by over 100 different people groups, and as a second language by another 300 groups.³

History: Malayali history dates back thousands of years, with the Malabar Coast being a major center of the international spice trade since ancient times. The Roman scholar Claudius Ptolemy documented it in his book *Geographia* in AD 150. Having been brought to Myanmar to fill jobs for the British who wished to subdue and develop the land in the 19th century, many Malayali families found it tough, with one report noting: "Having left in search of greener pastures from their native villages...the working classes braved the seas, provided the much-needed labor to clear the swamps in Lower Burma and malaria-infested jungles, and in that process also became the most exploited and vulnerable section of the population."⁴ Anti-Indian sentiment rose up between the

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1930s and 1960s, causing thousands of families to return to India if they had the means to do so. For many, the dream of a better existence in Myanmar failed miserably, and they returned home destitute. Tragically, nearly half of them never reached their destination but died during the arduous journey.

Customs: In Myanmar, "the Burmese perception of Indians depended upon which strata of society various Indian groups occupied in the Burmese society. The Burmese had contempt for the poor Indians, who monopolized jobs such as scavenging, rickshaw pulling, and other menial jobs that the Burmans themselves were reluctant to do."⁵ After decades of hardship, "the biggest blow to the position of Indians in Myanmar came after the military takeover of the country by General Ne Win in 1962. From largely composing the upper middle class of Burmese society, the Indian community was reduced to becoming one of the most impoverished sections in the country."⁶

Religion: The majority of Malayali people in Myanmar are Hindus, with a small number of Muslims among them. Approximately one-third of Malayali are Christians, with many belonging to the Mar Thoma (Disciples of Thomas) movement, who are also known as Syrian Christians. Several major festivals are observed among the Malayali each year, including Christmas because of their ancient Christian heritage.

Christianity: The 1931 census returned 206 (6.4%) of Malayali people as Christians. The Mar Thoma denomination is indigenous to South India, where the Apostle Thomas is believed to have gone to preach the Gospel soon after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He reportedly performed miracles and led thousands of Hindus to faith in Christ before he was put to death by enraged religious leaders outside today's city of Chennai. Today, approximately one-third of Malayali people in Myanmar are professing Christians.



Population in Myanmar:
23,000 (2025)

Location:
Yangon Region,
Mandalay Region

Language Family:
Dravidian

Main Religion:
Hinduism (61.0%)

Christians:
7,820 (34.0%)

OVERVIEW

Population:
23,000 in Myanmar
(2025 Joshua Project)
3,205 (1931 census)

Other Countries:
35.5 million in India
773,000 in United Arab Emirates
709,000 in Sri Lanka
634,738 in Kuwait
595,000 in Saudi Arabia²

Other Names:
Alealumi, Keralite,
Malabar, Malayalam,
Malayalani, Malean, Maliyad,
Mallealle, Mopla

Location:
Yangon Region;
Mandalay Region

Language:
Malayalam [mal]

Dialects: 4

Scripture:
Bible 1841
New Testament 1829
Portions 1811

Jesus film: Malayalam

Global Recordings:
Malayalam #132

People ID: 17433

