



CHAPTER 3

CASTE SYSTEM IN KERALA

*“This sub-division of a society is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and have become self-enclosed units called castes. The question is: were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous, or did they close them of their own accord? I submit that there is a double line of answer: **Some closed the door: Others found it closed against them**”.*

BR Ambedkar

INTRODUCTION: *PARAYI PETTA PANTIRU KULAM*

To deliberate further into the central theme of the present thesis it is critical to understand the history and the persistence of caste system in Kerala. There is an interesting legend from Kerala called the *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam*¹⁰⁵ [in Malayalam] extensively dealing with the caste structure of Kerala. The literal translation of ‘*Parayi Petta Pantirukulam*’ will be ‘the twelve castes born of Parayi’. The *Paraya* [Male members Parayan and female members Parayi] community is the lowest in the hierarchy of caste in Kerala. The legend does not deal with establishment and institutionalization of the castes but on the existence of castes and the related hierarchy in Kerala.

The legend narrates the story of Vararuci, a Brahmin and a well reputed Sanskrit scholar in the court of Raja Bhoja¹⁰⁶, getting married to a *Paraya* because it was written in his fate. Vararuci was aware of his fate and tried to avoid as much as he can, but nothing can be done against what the fate has in store him. The story has an

¹⁰⁵ Kottarathil Sankunni, *EITHIHYAMAALA* [Malayalam], First Published (8 Volumes) in 1909-1934, 18th Special edition, November 2004, Current Books, Kottayam, Kerala

¹⁰⁶ The story does not delve into the details of Raja Bhoja or his domain.

explanation how Vararuci miserably loses in the game of fate and gets married to the lower caste girl. After their 'profane' marital relation the couple decides to go for the pilgrimage and they happened to travel through Kerala. Through this travel Vararuci's wife, the Parayi gave birth to twelve children. Vararuci, who is now an ardent follower of Fatalism instructs his wife to abandon the children stating that as the god has given them mouth their destiny would provide them food. These abandoned children were later picked up by various castes starting from Brahmin to Paraya.

The legend is all about their divine actions, many times challenging the caste system and brahmanical system of worship itself. The crucial point which comes through the legend is that caste is not determined by the birth but by upbringing. The mother born in the lower caste becomes a Brahmin through upbringing and her children born to a Brahmin and Parayi by birth get into different caste through the people who adopted them. Most of the castes in Kerala have been represented in the legend as,

	Name	Caste	
1	Melattur Agnihotri	Brahmin	Brahmin
2	Naranattu Bhrantan	Ilayatu	Ambalavasi/ Antarala Jati
3	Karakkyal Mata	Kshatriya	Kshatriya
4	Vatutala Nair	Nair	Kshatriya / Sudra [?]
5	Akavoor Chattan	Nair	Kshatriya / Sudra [?]
6	Uliyannur Perumtaccan	Taccan	Sudra / Craftsmen/ Christian?
7	Rajakan	Veluttedan	Sudra / Craftsmen
8	Vallon	Pulaya	Sudra/ Distressed Class
9	Pananar	Panan	Sudra/ Distressed Class
10	Pakkanar	Parayan	Sudra/ Distressed Class
11	Uppukootan	Muslim	
12	Vayilla Kunnilappan ¹⁰⁷		

¹⁰⁷ "Vayilla Kunnilappan is a deity himself" states the author Kottarathil Sankunni. Kottarathil Sankunni, *EITHIHYAMAALA* [Malayalam], First Published (8 Volumes) in 1909-1934, 18th Special edition, November 2004, Current Books, Kottayam, Kerala.

The legend cannot be considered completely propagating the hierarchy of the castes in Kerala. On the contrary the lower caste representations like Pakkanar [a *Paraya* by caste] and Perumtaccan [a carpenter] never miss an opportunity to give a dig at the Brahmins. The story of Pakkanar and Azhvancheri Tambrakkal is especially makes a comment on the *Vedic* practices of presenting a golden calf as *dakshina* [alms] to the Brahmin. In the legend, Pakkanar claims the stake on the golden calf because it is inanimate object and thus dead, thus belongs to the lower caste *Paraya* and not to Brahmins. Of course the story also gives the credit back to the Brahmins as Azhvancheri Tambrakkal, through his magical powers makes the golden calf walk behind him. The story of Akavoor Chattan expounds that even a lower caste person could get to see the '*parabrahma*', the eternal soul, through great devotion. Here too the legend prefer not hurt the sentiments of the upper castes and allows Akavoor Chattan to see the *parabrahma* manifestation only in the form of a Buffalo.

Nobody knows when these legends were created, but the compilation of the legends was done by Kottarattil Sankunni, published as articles in Malayala Manorama and Bhashaposhini in late 19th century to early 20th century. Later these articles were compiled into a book titled *EITHIHYAMAALA* [meaning the 'Garland of Legends'] in 1909. Thanks to the popularity the book, it had more than sixty editions. The characters of this legend are quite popular in Kerala and they seem to have lived in an area covering Malappuram District in north Kerala to Kollam District in south. Melattur Agnihotri, the eldest son of the Parayi was a Brahmin from Malappuram District and the legends of Naranattu *Bhrantan* [The madman of Naranattu] are popular in the South Malabar region. Naranattu Bhrantan seems to have authored

some tantric texts¹⁰⁸. There are many temples in Central Kerala attributed to have been built by Perumthacchan. Elamkulam¹⁰⁹ states that Perumthacchan is worshiped by the wood carvers of central Kerala. One of the twelve sons of *Parayi* known as Akavoor Chattan said to have died at a place called Ochira in Kollam district in South Kerala.

Kesari Balakrishna Pillai argues that the legend of *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam* is a rhetoric interpretation of the philosophical school of Kumarilabhatta and his disciples¹¹⁰. He identifies three other scholars who have been given the title Vararuci living in north India during the Mauryan, Kusana and Gupta periods. The Vararuci of *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam* according to Kesari is none other than Kumarilabhatta [c.610 – 682 AD] who was born in Tirumalpuram of Tamil Nadu. Kesari states that among the 12 proposed children of Vararuci, according to the legend, eight people belonged to Hindu religion [Melattur Agnihotri, Rajakan, Vayilla Kunnilappan, Vatutala Nair, Panan, Pakkanar, Akavoor Chattan and Naranattu Bhrantan] two are Christians [Perumthacchan and Uppukoottan] one Buddhist [Vallon] and one Jain through Karaykkal Mata. Kesari also identifies certain scholars among the 12 children of Vararuci like Mandana Misra [the author of *SPHOTA SIDDHI* and *BHAVANA VIVEKAM*] as Melattur Agnihotri and Prabhakara Misra the author of *Purva mimamsa* literature like *BRUHATI*, *LAKHVI*. Kesari considers Naranattu Bhrantan as Haridatta, the author of Astrological treatises like *GRAHACHARA NIBANDHANA*,

¹⁰⁸ Jayashanker S, *TEMPLES OF KERALA*, Directorate of Census Operations, Kerala, 1997, pp.166

¹⁰⁹ Kesari A Balakrishna Pillai, *CHARITRATTINTE ATIVERUKAL* [Malayalam] [Eng. Roots of History] Chapter 3 *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam*, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, 1984, Reprint.1995, p.103

¹¹⁰ Kesari A Balakrishna Pillai, *CHARITRATTINTE ATIVERUKAL* [Malayalam] [Eng. Roots of History] Chapter 3 *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam*, Kerala Sahitya Akademi, Thrissur, 1984, Reprint.1995, p.103

PARAHITAKARANAM. The Buddhist scholar Dharmakirti is Valluvan. Kesari argues that Thomas Knai who lead the migration of Christians from Central Asia to Kerala as Perumtacchan and Vayilla Kunnilappan as one of Hindu *Sastries* named Bhattanarayana who was brought to Kerala by Brahmins to debate with Buddhist philosophers. To Kesari Balakrishna Pillai the legend of *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam* is nothing but legendary congregation of the *nyaya* and *mimamsa* scholars who worked in Kerala prior to Sankaracharya, the famed *advaita* scholar, who led the philosophical resistance of brahmanical system against Buddhism. Another noteworthy aspect of *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam* legend is that the children of the Parayi are equally distributed among major castes and religion of Kerala which existed in medieval period, though the exception of Izhava and Christians¹¹¹ is quite curious.

Even if the legend is all about the Kumarilabhattacharya school of thought it clearly features the caste hierarchy, at times questioning it, analogous to the *chandala* who questions to Sankaracharya on the distinction between the untouchable *chandala* and the Brahmin. The *chandala* asks Sankaracharya, “*Viproyam Shvapachoyam ityapi mahan koyam vibhedabrahma*”¹¹² [What is this confusing distinction between a Brahmin and an untouchable. Is the body which is considered untouchable by the society or the soul which is same] Similar question is raised by a *Pottan Teyyam*¹¹³ performance in north Kerala performed by the *Malayan* Community in front of the

¹¹¹ If one discards the argument of Kesari Balakrishna Pillai who considers Perumtacchan as Christian

¹¹² As quoted by M V Nadkarni, *Is Caste System Intrinsic To Hinduism-Demolishing A Myth*, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, November 8, 2003, pp 4787

¹¹³ *Teyyam* is the folk performance of in north Kerala, popular in Kannur and Kasargode districts of Kerala. Performer impersonate the local gods and goddesses.

upper castes. *Pottan* asks the question that what the difference between me and you is as we have the same color blood oozing out when injured.

I am referring to the myth and legends of caste hierarchy here for the reason that it is through this myths and legends the castes find their identity as well as raise the question against the system. The myths and legends preserve the state of affairs and the popular perception of the historical juncture. For example Kottarattil Sankunni furnishing the devotion [*Bhakti*] of Col. Munroe as the reason for the complete trust demonstrated by Rani Gouri Lakshmi of Tiruvitankur to give the control of Devasvam affairs in Venatu¹¹⁴. Sanjay Subramanyam categorizes these legends as lying between fiction and history¹¹⁵. The legends often act as the popular justification. The Parasurama myth of Kerala expounded through the texts like *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI*¹¹⁶ by the Brahmins is good example where the myth of Parasurama is used to strengthen the legitimacy of land holding rights of the Brahmins. Another myth worth mentioning is creation myth of the Izhavas of Kerala, again propagated by the Brahmins, where the Izhavas are created by lord Siva primarily for the 'vocation' of toddy collection from the coconut tree. Here the myth justifies the traditional vocation of the Izhavas. The myth also reemphasizes Izhavas' position in the caste hierarchy through mythically attaching them to toddy, which is banned in the brahmanical injunctions as *SANKARASMRUTI*.

¹¹⁴ *Oru Europeante Swami Bhakti* [Devotion of a European] Kottarathil Sankunni, *EITHIHYAMAALA* [Malayalam], First Published (8 Volumes) in 1909-1934, 18th Special edition, November 2004, Current Books, Kottayam, Kerala. p. 576

¹¹⁵ Sanjay Subramanyam, *THE PORTUGUESE EMPIRE IN ASIA 1500-1700 – A Political and Economic History*, 1993, Longman, London & New York, p.8

¹¹⁶ Detailed study of these texts is in the following section

The caste hierarchy and the related atrocities are very much part of the Kerala history. The travelers who visited Kerala were appalled by the sight of the practice of the caste system. Duarte Barbosa, the Portuguese traveler wrote in 1516, "When [the Nairs] walk along a street or road, they shout to low caste folk to get out of their way, this they do, and if one will not, the Nair may kill him without punishment; even if he is a youth of good [high caste] family but poor and worthless, and he finds in his way a man of low caste who is rich and respected and in favor with the king, yet he makes him clear the way for him as if he were a king"¹¹⁷. Robin Jeffrey cites an English writer of late 19th century thus; "a Nair may approach but not touch a Nambutiri Brahmin; a Chogan [Irava/Izhava] must remain thirty-six paces off, and a Pulayan slave ninety-six steps distant. A *Chogan* must remain twelve steps away from a Nair, and a Pulayan sixty-six steps off, and a Pariar [Paraya] some distance farther still"¹¹⁸.

The statement made by Swami Vivekananda, who visited Kerala in the early 20th century, summaries all the other observations. "In Malabar" writes Vivekananda, "the lower caste was not allowed to walk on the same road which is used by the upper caste. But if he becomes a Muslim or Christian he can go move anywhere. This is happening in a country ruled by a Hindu Raja. This is quite ridiculous"¹¹⁹. TK Madhavan, one of the reformist leaders who fought against the caste hierarchy and caste atrocities remembers his childhood thus, "When I go to the school I see many Nair men and women. My first memory of childhood is that of giving way for them. I

¹¹⁷ Robin Jeffrey, *Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol.4, No.8, [March,1976] , p. 5

¹¹⁸ Robin Jeffrey, *THE DECLINE OF NAIR DOMINANCE, Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1976, Second Edition, 1994. p. 9

¹¹⁹ Vivekananda Sahitya Sarvasvam, 3rd Volume, pp 373. As quoted by Bhaskaranunny, *KERALAM IRUPATHUM NOOTANTINDE ARAMBHATTHIL* [Malayalam] [Kerala in the beginning of 20th century], Kerala Sahithya Akademi, Thrissur, 2005 p.15

used to go away from the path just be on safe side as I was afraid that Nairs will beat me up if I violate the system”¹²⁰. Bhaskaranunny, who dedicated an entire book titled *KERALAM IRUPATHAM NOOTTANTINDE ARAMBHATHIL* [Kerala in the beginning of 20th century] on the Caste atrocities in Kerala refers to a news item reported in the Malayala Manorama¹²¹ of June 1898 where the residents of Anjengo [Presently Anju Tengu in Kollam District] pleading to the British officers that Anjengo should not be seeded to Tiruvitankur because the people are happy with the British administration which provided them with opportunities without the consideration of caste hierarchy¹²².

The works of the 19th and 20th century reformers like Sri Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu, Ayyankali, TK Madhavan, Kelappan and AK Gopalan have not gone wasted as Kerala can boast of equality among its population as far as education, health, and social welfare. However the caste hierarchy is retained in the religious practices with the pretence of sanctity and purity of the temple. Probably Kerala is the only state [may be Puri temple in Orissa an exception] where non-Hindus are not allowed to visit the Hindu temples.

It should also be emphasized here that, **‘all Hindus are not allowed to enter all parts’** of the temples **even now**. This presents a challenge to the study of Kerala temples as the researchers are not permitted into certain areas of the temple. This

¹²⁰ Life History of TK Madhavan, 1936 pp10, As quoted by Bhaskaranunny, *KERALAM IRUPATHUM NOOTTANTINDE ARAMBHATHIL* [Malayalam] [Kerala in the beginning of 20th century], Kerala Sahithya Akademi, Thrissur, 2005. p.155

¹²¹ Daily news paper in Malayalam still in circulation.

¹²² As quoted by Bhaskaranunny, *KERALAM IRUPATHUM NOOTTANTINDE ARAMBHATHIL* [Malayalam] [Kerala in the beginning of 20th century], Kerala Sahithya Akademi, Thrissur, 2005 p. 215

also explains the disparity of the ground plan drawings of Siva Temple at Kaviyur published by Soundararajan and H Sarkar in their books TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE IN KERALA ¹²³ [Published by State Archaeology, Kerala] and H Sarkar AN ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY OF KERALA TEMPLES ¹²⁴ [Published by Archaeological Survey of India] respectively.

In the ground plan drawing published by Soundara Rajan, the temple has a circular shrine with a circular *Madhyani* around square *mulasthan* and the intermediate circular colonnade has ten columns. The additional *mulasthan* dedicated to Parvati is shown attached at the rear of the cardinal *mulasthan*. The ground plan of the same temple looks very different in Sarkar's book. The *mulasthan* is circular with eight pillared colonnade and the additional *mulasthan* dedicated to Parvati is mysteriously missing. Here I am not blaming the scholars for not scrutinizing it objectively. Even if these distinguished scholars had visited this site it would have been impossible for them to check it out personally as the interior of the *Sri Koil* is not accessible to anybody **except** the priest who is conducting the *pūja* on that particular day. While making the ground plans for the Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture¹²⁵ with the team from American Institute of Indian Studies, New Delhi [AIIS] I had to rely on the information provided by the *pūjaris* [designated priests] on the shape and measurements of the inner *Sri Koil* as me or anyone in our documentation team were not allowed to enter into the *Sri Koil* area as in Kerala temples only the designated priest who is a Brahmin is allowed to enter the *Sri Koil*.

¹²³ K V Soundara Rajan, TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE IN KERALA, Government of Kerala, 1974, Thiruvananthapuram, Fig. 9

¹²⁴ H Sarkar, AN ARCHITECTURAL SURVEY OF KERALA TEMPLES, Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi, 1978, Fig. 30

¹²⁵ ENCYCLOPEDIA OF INDIAN TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE, Volume 4, Lower Dravida Desa, Edited by George Michell and MA Dhaky, American Institute of Indian Studies {AIIS}, New Delhi

Unlike the temples in Karnataka or Tamil Nadu, the temple architecture in Kerala determines the behavioral pattern of the devotee and more importantly his/her caste position. When devotees are allowed to move around the *mulasthan* through the circumambulatory path in the temples of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, the same space is never used even by the Brahmins in Kerala temple. It is probably the dominance of caste system and the hierarchy and segregation in the society being reflected in the architecture layout of the Kerala temples where the dominant caste has been given all the freedom and the lower castes in the hierarchy is kept at a distance. The architecture members like the *namaskara mandapa* which do not feature in the Tamil Nadu and Karnataka temples are introduced in Kerala temple just to underline the preference given to the dominant caste.

The dominance of the higher caste in the society is in fact self - proclaimed through canonical texts along with mythic justifications. This journey of the dominant caste was also nurtured by the political and economic changes in history. It is an interesting passage where the bangle maker of the *Cankam* society rises to become the *Janmi* [landlord] in the medieval period. The rise of the dominant caste and the social scenario is the main focus of the present chapter.

THE MYTHICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE BRAHMIN DOMINANCE IN THE CASTE HIERARCHY - KERALA MAHATMYAM AND KERALOLPATTI

The legend of *Parayi Petta Pantirukulam* cannot be seen as a myth created by a particular caste to glorify their position in the society. In fact no other castes in Kerala

appear to have maintained a creation myth except the Brahmins. The texts like *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI*, in Sanskrit and Malayalam languages respectively, seem to be serving the purpose of a *jati Mahatmyam* [glorification of the caste]. They are very similar to the *Gaurava Gathas*¹²⁶ of Uttar Pradesh. Interestingly, *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI* pretend to be a historical document where the myths and legends play more crucial role rather than historical facts. In *KOCHI RAJYA CHARITRAM*, Padmanabha Menon writes about *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI* thus, “*KERALA MAHATMYAM* is smaller portion from *Agni Purana*. Except certain statements on the dominance of Brahmins this text has no historical value. *KERALOLPATTI* which is a composition in Malayalam has full of incongruous facts but certain historical data can be inferred from it. Both these texts are of a recent origin; however we have no clue about the authors of these texts”¹²⁷. *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI* attribute the genesis of Kerala to Parasurama, sixth incarnation of Vishnu, who said to exterminated 21 generation of the Kshatriyas. The texts claim that as repentance to the human slaughter Parasurama decided to give some land grants to the Brahmins but as belong to the priestly caste himself he did not possess any land. Parasurama then claimed a new land by throwing axe [*parasu*] across the sea. The land emerged thus, Kerala, was given as *dana* [alms] to the Brahmins.

¹²⁶ Badri Narayan explains the concept of *Gaurava Gathas* among the Pasi community of Uttar Pradesh where they believe that Pasi community originated from the sweat of Parasurama. Badri Narayan, *Dalit Mobilisation and the Nationalist Past*, Gupta Dipankar [Ed], CASTE IN QUESTION – IDENTITY OR HIERARCHY, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p.193-220

¹²⁷ Padmanabha, Menon KP, *KOCHIRAJYACHARITHRAM* [Malayalam], [History of Kochi] [1914], Mathrubhumi Edition [1989], [1996] Calicut, 1996

There is a fundamental difference between stating that an existing land given to the Brahmins and asserting that the land was in fact specially created for the Brahmins. According to *KERALA MAHATMYAM* Parasurama made Kerala **for** the Brahmins and the rest, the lower caste people were **brought in to serve** them. *KERALA MAHATMYAM* says thus:

*uttaradin dvijan atra godavaryupasevitan /
kalpayamasa devanam pujartham bhryugusattama //
tantrino dvadasa shreshtan pratishthartham akalpayat /
caturvimsasahasram ca devalayam akalpayat* /¹²⁸

Translation: Parasurama also established great temples [*dvadasa* (12)] and 24000 minor temples [*caturvimsasahasram*] the priest were invited to officiate the worship in these temples.

William Logan narrates the migration of Brahmins to Kerala as described in *KERALA MAHATMYAM* thus: “To people this land, Parasu Rama is said to have first of brought a poor Brahman from the shores of Krishna River. This man had eight sons and the eldest was made head of all the Brahmins of Kerala. Other Brahmins are next brought and located in sixty-four *gramas* or villages. Ships with seeds of and animals next came, also eighteen *samantas* [sons of Brahmins and *kshatriya* women] also *vaishyas* and *Sudras* and the lower castes”¹²⁹.

These texts and the local temple myths are eloquent about the role of Parasurama in creating the land and establishment of the temples in large scale, though, there is not

¹²⁸ *Kerala Mahatmyam*, quoted by N. P. Unni, *Tantrasamuccaya*, p. 6, cited from S.A.S Sharma The Eclectic *Paddhatis* of Kerala, *INDOLOGICA TAURINENSIA*, 35 (2009)

¹²⁹ William Logan, *MALABAR MANUEL*, 2000 edited version Edited by PJ Cheriyan, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 221

even one temple in Kerala dedicated to Parasurama. The folk festivals like *Onam* and *Vishu* which are Kerala specific festivals hardly acknowledge Parasurama. *Onam*, the main festival of Kerala commemorates Bali, the antagonist of the Vamana myth, as the legendary king of Kerala. May be for this reason, there are hardly any Trivikrama image under worship in Kerala. EMS Namboodiripad ridiculing the Parasurama myth using the same tool of myth states that in the *Dasavatara* myth Vamana and Bali comes before Parasurama so how can Parasurama create a land from the land which was ruled 'judiciously' by Bali? Both traditional and modern Kerala calendars, fail to even mention Parasurama *Jayanti*. Ironically Parasurama *Jayanti* is an official holiday in Gujarat and not in Kerala. In 20th century only organizations who seem to have remembered the Parasurama connection to Kerala were the Indian railway with a train running from north to south of Kerala called as Parasuram Express [from Mangalore in north to Thiruvananthapuram in south] and the management of Kerala Museum in Kochi [now closed] who installed a image of Parasurama outside the museum.

The scholars of early 20th century showing allegiance to brahmanical way of knowledge like Kunhikuttan Tampuran do mention the Parasurama myth. But, most of the historians like Padmanabha Menon of Kerala actually rubbished the Parasurama myth but tried to find some justifications of the myth in the geological nature of Kerala and argued that it a rhetoric description of the fact that the major land mass of Kerala emerged from the sea. The interest of the present thesis on the Parasurama myth is the reference of the migration of Brahmins and their territorial claim justified by the myth.

According to *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI*, along with many temples Parasurama established as many as 64 Brahmin settlements called the *gramas* of which 32 belong to Kerala proper. The other 32 which are in Tulu Nadu [Udupi and Dakshin Kanara districts of Karnataka State] having no Nambutiri population. Unlike the Nambutiri Brahmins, the Tulu Brahmins do not claim the ownership of the land. Logan quotes from *KERALOLPATTI* thus, “Thus Parasurama created the land of Malabar [Kerala] and bestowed the same upon the Brahmins of the sixty-four *gramas* as a poured out gift”¹³⁰.

The table below would explain the name of the 32 *gramas* as mentioned in the *KERALOLPATTI*¹³¹, present name of the *grama* and the current location of these *gramas*.

No.	Name of the <i>grama</i>	Present Name
1-32	<div>IN TULU NADU</div> <div>[Udupi and Dakshin Kanara Districts of Karnataka State]</div>	
KANNUR DISTRICT		
33	Payyanur	Payyanur
34	Perinchallur	Talipparambu
MALAPPURAM DISTRICT		
35	Karikkattu	Karikkadu
36	Alattur	Alattur [?] Nr. Tirur
37	Karintolam	Karantur [?] Nr. Manjeri
38	Chovaram/Chokiram/ Sukapuram	Sukapuram
39	Isanamangalam	Isanamangalam / Nedukanatu region

¹³⁰ William Logan, *MALABAR MANUEL*, 2000 edited version Edited by PJ Cheriyan, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 223

¹³¹ Based on the description provided by William Logan, *MALABAR MANUEL*, 2000 edited version Edited by PJ Cheriyan, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 222

PALAKKAD DISTRICT		
40	Panniyur	Panniyur
TRISSUR DISTRICT		
41	Trisivaperur	Trissur
42	Eiranikulam	Eiranikulam
43	Mushikkulam	Moozhikkulam
44	Iringatikotu	Irinjalakkuda [?]
45	Atappur	Atavur
46	Chamundha	Chemmanta
47	Avattiputtur	Avattipputtur/ Avittathur
ERANAKULAM DISTRICT		
48	Parappur	Paravaur
49	Cenganotu	Chengamanad
50	Uliyannur	Uliyannur
KOTTAYAM DISTRICT		
51	Ilibhyam	Ilibhyam
52	Katukaruka	Katamuri [?]
53	Karanallur	Karanallur
54	Ettunaliyur	Ettumanur [?]
55	Tiruvallayi	Tiruvalla
ALAPPUZHA DISTRICT		
56	Chenganiyur	Chengannur
PATTANAMTITTA DISTRICT		
57	Kitangur	Kidangur
58	Kaviyur	Kaviyur
60	Anmalam	Aranmula [?]
KOLLAM DISTRICT		
61	Anmani	Venmani [?]
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM DISTRICT		
62	Nilmanna	Niramankara
UNIDENTIFIED		
63	Kalutunadu	??
64	Kalachchur	??

As clearly evident from the above table the south Kerala region known as Venatu [including present day Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pattanamtitta, Alappuzha and Kottayam Districts] has most of the Brahmin settlements though the settlements are equally distributed through Kerala. The list given here is based on the traditional

distribution of the settlements but the reality is that many of these settlements faded off by the beginning of 20th century as the 1901 Census report reveals. The Nambutiri web site¹³² cites an article by Mathur Vasudevan Namboodiripad which reads thus, "The 1901 Census Report says that there are 19,279 Nambutiris in British Malabar, 5,290 in Cochin State and 5,326 in Travancore State. It shows that the net Kerala Nambutiri population is 29,895, a mere 0.47% of the population of Kerala"¹³³.

KERALOLPATTI justifies the land ownership of Brahmins in a way similar to the Divine Right theory of European monarchy. To quote Achuta Menon, "According to the traditionary account preserved in the *KERALOLPATTI*, a comparatively recent work, Parasurama, an incarnation of Vishnu, created the land of Kerala and gave it as a gift to the Brahmans, whom he invited from north and settled in sixty-four gramas. The gift, made with flower and water for their enjoyment is called the *janmam*¹³⁴. Parasurama then sent for Sudras from various countries and settled them in the land as the *Adiyans* and *Kudiyans*, or the slaves and tenants of the Brahmans"¹³⁵. Here *KERALOLPATTI* is assuming the role of a *Gourava Gatha* of the *Malayali* Brahmins as it serves the purpose of boosting the identity of the caste. Seneviratne observes that in the *Gaurava Gathas*, "the facts of the past interspersed with myth and fantasy to create a new perception of a past that is glorious, pure and exclusive. This in turn is

¹³² <http://www.namboothiri.com>

¹³³ Mathur Vasudevan Nambudiripad "Malayaala Braahmanar" in "Namboothirimaar" edited by Paarayil Raman Namboodiri, Mangalodayam Company, 1917, Thrissur. As quoted by <http://www.namboothiri.com/articles/1901-census.htm>

¹³⁴ From this originate the word Janmi and the whole system of janmi system, the Kerala version of feudalism. This issue is discussed in detail in the later part of this thesis.

¹³⁵ Menon, Achyuta C, COCHIN STATE MANUEL, 1911, Reprint Kerala Gazetteers, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1995

accorded historical status and imagined to have existed from time immemorial”¹³⁶. The 1931 Senses of Travancore reveal the fact that each Brahmins or the Brahmins household had in their possession average 28 acres of land. To quote P Sivanandan, “The pattern of land-holding seems to be an important factor around which the caste-class relations develop. Available data for the Tiruvitankur region show that during the 1930s the dominant caste Hindu sections controlled the largest share of the landed property in this region of Kerala”¹³⁷. The case in the Kochi and Malabar regions of the state was similar or worst than Tiruvitankur as sixty percent of the *gramas* mythically established by Parasurama belonged to the Kochi-Malabar regions of Kerala.

Apart from the land, by their own birthright as the head of the *gramas* which is called the *Brahmasvam* land, Brahmins also controlled the landed property of the temples namely the *Devasvam* land. Further discussion on this aspect will be done later in this thesis. Coming back to the ‘legitimacy’ of landed property as provided them in *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI*, it should be noted that the control over the land as *janmis* or landlords in reality enabled the Brahmins to dominate of the social hierarchy. Miller observes in the context of Kochi thus, “About one percent of Hindus are Nambutiri Brahmins, the highest caste. Until recently their influence

¹³⁶ Seneviratne, *IDENTITY, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PAST*, oxford University Press, 1997, p.5, cited by Badri Narayan, *Dalit Mobilisation and the Nationalist Past*, Gupta Dipankar [Ed], *CASTE IN QUESTION – IDENTITY OR HIERARCHY*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p.195

¹³⁷ P Sivanandan, *Caste, Class And Economic Opportunity In Kerala, An Empirical Analysis*, *ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY*, February 1979, p. 475

has been disproportionate to their number. Besides being the Hindu religious heads, many were wealthy landlords with numerous lower-caste retainers”¹³⁸.

KERALA MAHATMYAM further states that it were the Brahmins who brought the Perumal [the appointed king to rule the land with 12 year term which end with a *Mamankam* festival] to rule the land. The last Perumal known as the Pallibana Perumal divided the land among his kith and kin like Kolattiris [north Malabar - Kannur District], Valluvakonatiri [East Malabar – Malappuram District], Samutiri [South Malabar], Chonatiri [Kochi], Tiruvitankur [Venatu – South Kerala]. This reference itself shows that the texts are written in the late medieval period probably after the Cola Wars aftermath of which is identified as the period of brahmanical dominance in Kerala history. The text has clearly display the specific agenda of the propagation of the Brahmin dominance in the social and economic sectors of Kerala. EMS Namboodiripad states thus, “this legend used even today by certain people as a document to justify the feudal land system prevalent in Kerala”¹³⁹. Even Logan was using this legend with the understanding that the text is “full of the usual inflated Brahmanical legends, and is not worthy of serious analysis as it’s more popular, the *KERALOLPATTI*”¹⁴⁰ Whether or not caused by Parasurama or not there is one factor emerge from the legends that the element of migration of communities to which is acceptable to many historians. *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI* further complicate the muddled history of Kerala. One of the reasons for this haziness of

¹³⁸ Eric J Miller, CASTE AND TERRITORY IN MALABAR, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 56, No.3 [June, 1954], p.411

¹³⁹ EMS Namboodiripad *KERALAM MALYALIKALUDE MATHRUBHOOMI* [Malayalam], from P Govinda Pillai [Ed], *EMSINTE SAMPOORNA KRITIKAL* [COLLECTED WORKS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD Vol 9- 1948] [Malayalam] Chinta Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram 2000 p. 68

¹⁴⁰ William Logan, *MALABAR MAUEL*, 2000 edited version Edited by PJ Cheriyan, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, p. 221

history is the lack of available documents resulted probably because of the absence of stone temples and the stone inscriptions. Absolute localization of power structure, unlike Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, through feudal system and establishment of caste based governing system can be another cause.

As expounded by the 'brahmanical' texts like *KERALA MAHATMYAM* and *KERALOLPATTI* for a specific social agenda of the migration of Brahmins to Kerala is a historical fact as the early literal references especially *Cankam* literature do not specifically mention Brahmins as the dominant caste. Before we delve into the history of this migration in Kerala context it will be necessary to look into the caste system in north India prior to the Brahmin migration to Kerala.

CASTE SYSTEM IN NORTH INDIA PRIOR TO BRAHMIN MIGRATION TO KERALA.

"Caste in India means an artificial chopping off of the population into fixed and definitive units, each one prevented from fusing into another through the custom of endogamy. Thus the conclusion is inevitable that *endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste*, and if we succeed in showing how endogamy is maintained, we shall practically have proved the genesis and also the mechanism of caste" wrote Ambedkar¹⁴¹. As far as the caste hierarchy he maintains that "This sub-division of a society [based on endogamy] is quite natural. But the unnatural thing about these sub-divisions is that they have lost the open-door character of the class system and

¹⁴¹ B R Ambedkar, THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF B.R.AMBEDKAR, Ed. Valerian Rodrigues, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, Paperback edition, 2004, p. 245

have become self-enclosed units called castes. The question is: were they compelled to close their doors and become endogamous, or did they close them of their own accord? I submit that there is a double line of answer: *Some closed the door: Others found it closed against them.* The one is a psychological interpretation and the other is mechanistic, but they are complementary and both are necessary to explain the phenomena of caste-formation in its entirety¹⁴².

When did exactly this stratification of the society in India happen? Is it specially made to order social system for India? Ambedkar disagree on this by quoting Geiger¹⁴³ "The Romans had two classes. The Egyptians thought, three were enough. The Indo-Iranians also had no more than three classes: (1) The *Athravans* (priests) (2) *Rathaeshtar* (warriors) and (3) the *Vastrya-fshuyat* (peasantry)."

The intriguing fact is that while in those societies the system become irrelevant, may be due the arrival of religions as Christianity and Islam, India clung on to the structure more than it deserved to be. This is also due to the fact that it was made a religious law rather than social structure. Ambedkar statement is apt in this context too which reads, "Though the existence of classes is the *de facto* condition of every society, nevertheless no society has converted this *de facto* state of affairs into a *de jure* connotation of an ideal society. The scheme of the *Purusa Sukta* is the only instance in which the real is elevated to the dignity of an ideal. This is the first unique feature of the scheme set forth in the *Purusa Sukta*. Secondly, no community has given the *de facto* state of class composition a legal effect by accepting it as a *de jure*

¹⁴² [http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/Caste in India.html](http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/Caste%20in%20India.html)

¹⁴³ Geiger : Civilization of the Eastern Iranians in Ancient Times, Vol. II, P.64 as quoted by Ambedkar, Ambedkar, Part II, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

connotation of an ideal society. The *Purusa Sukta* is the only instance in which an attempt was made to give reality to the ideal by invoking the sanction of law”¹⁴⁴.

Here Ambedkar is referring to the verse from *Purusa Sukta* of *Rig Veda* [X 90] considered by the scholars as the prime evidence of the established caste/ *Varna* system in Vedic period which reads,

**yat purusam vyadadhu: | katidha vyakalpayan |
mukham kimasya kau bahoo | kavooroo pada ucyete | | Verse 11**

Translation: When they had divided him up, into what forms did they cast him, and what of his mouth, his arms, his thighs, his feet? What did they make them?

**brahmano asya mukhamaseet | bahoo rajanya: krtā: |
ooru tadasya yad vaishya | padbhyam shoodro ajayata | | Verse 12¹⁴⁵**

Translation: From his mouth came forth the men of learning [Brahmins] and of his arms were warriors [*Rajanya*, *Kshatriya*] made. From his thighs came the trading people [*Vaisya*] And his feet gave Birth to servants [*Sudras*].

Many scholars suggest that this verse in fact is an interpolation. MV Nadkarni argues thus, “It is essentially a metaphor taking the society to be an organic whole, of which the four *varnas* based on division of labor are intrinsic parts. There is nothing to indicate that they ought to castes or *jatis* as presently understood. The reference is evidently to occupations or work of respective *varnas*, which need not be based on birth”¹⁴⁶. To illustrate his view further Nadkarni cites the verse from *BHAGAVAT*

¹⁴⁴ Ambedkar, Part II, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/ml>.

¹⁴⁵ <http://www.ramanuja.org/purusha/sukta-4.html>

¹⁴⁶ MV Nadkarni, *Is Caste System Intrinsic To Hinduism- Demolishing A Myth*, ECONOMICAL AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, November, 2003, p. 4786

GITA [13th verse in Chapter 4] where the God himself takes the responsibility of the stratification of the society thus,

*“Caturvarnyam maya srushtam gunakarmavibhagasa”*¹⁴⁷

Translation: “Four Varnas were created by me on the basis of character and occupation”

Nadkarni argues that the *BHAGAVAT GITA* reference clearly illustrate that the *varnas* are not based on birth but on occupation. A distinguished Sanskrit scholar like PV Kane observes thus, “if Krishna wanted to make birth as the basis of his division of labor, he could easily have said ‘*jati-karma-vibhagashah*’ or ‘*janma-karma- vibhagashah*’ instead of ‘*guna-karma- vibhagashah*’ as actually stated”¹⁴⁸.

Nadkarni in his article on *Is Caste System Intrinsic to Hinduism- Demolishing a Myth*, states that even Ambedkar did agree on the theory that the Purusa Sukta in fact is an interpolation. Interestingly this is not the impression I got while reading ‘*Who were the Sudras?*’ Ambedkar did accept the interpolation theory for the sake of argument. To quote Ambedkar, “There are some scholars who maintain that the Varna system did not exist in the age of the Rig Veda. This statement is based on the view that the *Purusa Sukta* is an interpolation which has taken place long after the *Rig Veda* was closed. *Even accepting that the Purusa Sukta is a later interpolation, it*

¹⁴⁷ <http://sanskritdocuments.org>

¹⁴⁸ Kane PV, HISTORY OF DHARMASASTRAS [ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL RELIGIONS AND CIVIL LAW IN INDIA], Vol. I to V, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, 1990, First 1930, p.1635-36, as quoted by MV Nadkarni, *Is Caste System Intrinsic To Hinduism- Demolishing A Myth*, ECONOMICAL AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, November, 2003, p. 4786

is not possible to accept the statement that the Varna system did not exist in the time of the *Rig Veda*. Such a system is in open conflict with the text of the *Rig Veda*. For, the *Rig Veda*, apart from the *Purusa Sukta*, does mention *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* not once but many times. The Brahmins are mentioned as a separate *Varna* fifteen times, *Kshatriyas* nine times. What is important is that the *Rig Veda* does not mention *Sudra* as a separate *Varna*¹⁴⁹.

Ambedkar clearly noted the difference between the Vedic and that of *Purusa Sukta* approaches thus starting with *Rig Veda*, [i.113.6] which says, "That some may go in pursuit of power, some in pursuit of fame, some in pursuit of wealth, some in pursuit of work, *Usas* has awakened people so that each may go in pursuit of his special and different way of earning his livelihood." "This is as far as the *Rig Veda* had gone" observes Ambedkar, "The *Purusa Sukta* goes beyond. It follows up the notion of division of labor and converts the scheme of division of work into a scheme of division of workers into fixed and permanent occupational categories. Why does the *Purusa Sukta* commit itself to such a perversity? In propounding the doctrine of *Chaturvarnya*, the *Purusa Sukta* plays a double game. It proceeds first to raise the real, namely, the existence of the four classes in the Indo-Aryan Society, to the status of an ideal. This is a deception because the ideal is in no way different from facts as they exist. After raising the real to the status of the ideal, it proceeds to make a show of giving effect to what it regards as an ideal. This again is a deception because the ideal already exists in fact"¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁹ Ambedkar, Part I, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

¹⁵⁰ Ambedkar, Part I, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

Though the *Purusa Sukta* did not state it, the other texts propagate the hierarchy of this stratification. *TAITTARIYA BRAHMAN* [i.2.6.7] says that the “The *Brahman* caste is sprung from the gods; the *Sudras* from the *Asuras*”¹⁵¹. *MANUSMRITI* makes a statement clearly defining the hierarchy of the *Varnas* thus “Of *Brahmins*, superiority (is) by knowledge, but of *Kshatriyas* by valor, of *Vaishyas* by reason of property (and) wealth, and of *Sudras* by age”¹⁵².

While Scholars like Nadkarni could bring many references on the ‘equality’ of *varnas* quoting from *MAHABHARATA* like the verse from *Udyoga Parva*, [Ch.34. v.41] which reads:

*Na Kulam vrittahinasya
Pramanamiti me matilhi
Anteshwapi jatanam
Vrittameva vishishyate*

Translation: High birth can be no certificate for a person of no character. But persons with good character can distinguish themselves irrespective of low birth.

On the other hand the texts like *MANUSMRITI* strives to establish the Brahmin superiority through making dictums like “He who can claim to be a Brahmin merely on account of his birth, or he who only calls himself a Brahmin, may be, if desired, the declarer of law for the king, but a *Sudra* never. If a king looks on while a *Sudra* gives a judicial decision, his realm sinks into misfortune, like a cow in a quagmire”¹⁵³. When

¹⁵¹ Ambedkar, Part I, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

¹⁵² Ambedkar, Part I, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

¹⁵³ Ambedkar, Part I, Chapter I, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

such advisories are given to the king the status of the lower *varnas* cannot be very similar to the ideal equality which Nadkarni proposes.

Later texts like the *PURANAS* and *SMRUTIS* and *SUTRAS* do cut a sorry picture of the social system. The upper strata of the *Varna* system seem to have got control of the society and they did make changes in the religious texts suiting their own social positions like the indicted interpolation in *Rig Veda* through the *Purusa Suktas*. “Some critics have gone to the length of saying” writes Ambedkar, “that the *Purusa Sukta* is a forgery by the Brahmins to bolster up their claim to superiority. Priests are known to have committed many forgeries. The Donations of Constantine and Pseudo-Isidore Decretals are well known forgeries in the history of the Papacy. The Brahmins of India were not free from such machinations. How they changed the original word ‘*Agre*’ into ‘*Agne*’ to make *Rig Veda* give support to the burning of widows has been pointed out by no less an authority than Prof. Max Muller. It is well-known how in the time of the East India Company a whole *Smruti* was fabricated to support the case of a plaintiff. There is, therefore, nothing surprising if the Brahmins did forge the *Purusa Sukta*, if not the whole, at least the two versus 11 and 12, at some later stage, long after the fourth *Varna* had come into being, with a view to give the system of *Chaturvarnya* the sanction of the *Veda*”.¹⁵⁴

In the Upanishad period the caste hierarchy seems to have been under attack from the progressive philosopher who even dared to picture a procession of white dogs to that

¹⁵⁴ Ambedkar, Part I, Chapter 5, WHO WERE THE SHUDRAS ? <http://www.ambedkar.org/>

of the procession of Brahmins¹⁵⁵. In the time of *DHARMA SUTRAS* the brahmanical hierarchies become more structured. Though *BHAGAVAT GITA* tries to paint a picture of equality of castes and *Varnas*, it is very clear that the *Chaturvarnya* was already established as a social structure in India during period in which Buddha lived. The social stratification has been given religious sanctions through the establishment of taboos, especially on the mixing of the varnas through exogamy. "According to Manu," writes SM Michael¹⁵⁶, "untouchability is the punishment for miscegenation between a member of a high caste and that of a low caste or an outcaste". Ambedkar finds endogamy as the mechanism of keeping the purity of the castes and that remains even now greatest criteria regarding the castes. Ambedkar hits the right nail when he consider endogamy as the basis of caste system thus "As for myself I do not feel puzzled by the Origin of Caste in India for, as I have established before, endogamy is the only characteristic of Caste and when I say *Origin of Caste* I mean *The Origin of the Mechanism for Endogamy*"¹⁵⁷. The recent row over the caste *Panchayat* in Haryana which was planning a demonstration against the Supreme court of India to change the Hindu Marriage Act which do not recognizes the system of endogamy is a good example illustrating the caste system and endogamy in the 21st century. However it is not clear that when the Vedic system of *Varna* hierarchy did translates into the caste system. Megasthenes in his book *Indica* mentions seven different strata of society which divided based on the occupation.

¹⁵⁵ *Chandiyoga Upanishad*, as quoted by Shrirama, *Untouchability and Stratification of Indian Civilization*, in *DALITS IN MODERN INDIA – VISION AND VALUES*, Ed. SM Michael, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2007 [Second Edition], p 63

¹⁵⁶ SM Michael, *DALITS IN MODERN INDIA – VISION AND VALUES*, Ed. SM Michael, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2007 [Second Edition], pp 17

¹⁵⁷ <http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/ CASTE IN INDIA.html>

INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM ACCORDING TO MEGASTHENES

Megasthenes mentions at length about the caste hierarchy existed in India. He observed that the "Indians have been divided into seven castes"¹⁵⁸. Morton Klass¹⁵⁹ provides us with the full text;

- 1) **"The Sophists"**: To this class the knowledge of divination among the Indians is exclusively restricted and none but a sophist is allowed to practice that art. . .
- 2) **"The tillers of the soil"**: They form the most numerous class of the population. They cultivate the soil and pay tribute to the kings and the independent cities.
- 3) **"Herdsmen, both shepherds and neatherds"**: These people neither live in cities nor in villages, but they are nomadic and live on the hills.
- 4) **"Handicraftsmen and retail-dealers."**
- 5) **"Warriors"**
- 6) **"Superintendents."** They spy out what goes on in country and town.
- 7) **"Councilors of state"**: Advisers of the king, or the magistrates of self-governed cities, in the management of public affairs. In point of numbers this is a small class.

A group of people whom he mentions as 'wise men', with most esteemed in reputation and dignity must be the Brahmins as they did not do any bodily labor except to offer sacrifices to the gods on behalf of the people. Megasthenes later in description confuses the Brahmins with *sanyasins* whom he says "pass their lives naked; in the winter in the sun under the open sky, but in the summer, when the sun holds sway,

¹⁵⁸ Excerpted from Arrian, "The Indica" in *Anabasis of Alexander, together with the Indica*, E. J. Chinnock, tr. (London: Bohn, 1893), ch. 1-16, http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Indica.html

¹⁵⁹ Majumdar, *The Classical Accounts of India*, Calcutta, 1960, p.224-26 as quoted by Morton Klass, 'CASTES –The emergence of the South Asian Social System', Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1980, p.23

they live in the meadows and in the marshes under great trees”¹⁶⁰. Megasthenes makes observations about the caste hierarchy thus, “it is not lawful for anyone to marry a woman from another caste; for example, for herdsmen to marry from the class of artisans or the reverse. It is not lawful for the same man to exercise two trades, or to exchange from one caste into another”¹⁶¹.

However in the same period the situation was entirely different in South India. Many historians have observed the continuation of the tribal or even prehistoric system of society existing in South India while monarchic system already being established in North India under the Magadha rulers. Even Buddha’s observation about the political situation during his life as “*Kincit ganadhina kincit rajadhina*” [some under the tribes and some under monarchs] pictures the situation in north India. The Maski inscription of Asoka and the Megalithic dolmens of Rajankollur, Karnataka in fact are on the same level, and thus belong to the same date. Interestingly, the earlier literature from the region, the *Cankam* collection do mention about the castes but mentions no caste hierarchy as many *Cankam* poets themselves hailed from the castes which will be later categorized as lower.

¹⁶⁰ Arrian, "The Indica" in *Anabasis of Alexander, together with the Indica*, E. J. Chinnock, tr. (London: Bohn, 1893), ch. 1-16, http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Indica.html

¹⁶¹ Arrian, "The Indica" in *Anabasis of Alexander, together with the Indica*, E. J. Chinnock, tr. (London: Bohn, 1893), ch. 1-16, http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Indica.html

THE POSITION OF CASTES IN KERALA DURING CANKAM PERIOD

Cankam literature categorically mentions the ruling power under the Ceras or Villons in Kerala. I am not intending to enter into the political situation of *Cankam* period as it is being briefly described elsewhere in the current thesis. However, the social system of *Cankam* needs further investigation as the *Cankam* period witnesses the arrival and development of brahmanical system of worship and socio-religious structuring of the society. The references to *Aintinai* will be pertinent in understanding the socio-religious mapping of the population in *Cankam* literature.

AIN TINAI [FIVE TYPES OF LAND]

Cankam literature clearly distinguishes the landscape into five types, called as *Aintinai*. The names of each *tinai* [type of land] are based on the trees and flowers seen in abundance in those areas. The five *tinai*s are *Kurinji*, *Pala*, *Mulla*, *Marutam* and *Neytal*. Elamkulam explains the landscape thus, “The region with hills and mountains is called *Kurinji*. After *Kurinji* region appears a land devoid of rain which is named as *Palai*. *Mullai* region is lush green with steppes and shrub forest while the paddy fields crisscrossed with rivers and streams is called the *Marutam* land. The coastal region is *Neytal*”¹⁶². *Kurinji* region is named after a beautiful blue flower seen only in the mountain region of South India whose botanical name is (*Strobilanthes*

¹⁶² Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *ELAMKULAM KUNJANPILLAYUDE THIRENJEDUTHA KRITHIKAL* – Part I, [Malayalam] Ed. N Sam, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005, pp 9

kunthiana)¹⁶³. *Palai* region is named after the *Palai* flower (*Wrightia tinctoria*)¹⁶⁴. *Mullai* is the jasmine flower (*Jasminum sambac var*)¹⁶⁵ and *Neytal* stands for White water Lily (*Nymphaea Alba*)¹⁶⁶. *Marutam* [Tamil] (*Terminalia elliptica*) is a tree found in the south Asian region otherwise known as Asan, Saj in Hindi and: Satada, Shardul in Marathi

Each *tinai* was inhabited by people depending on the products of the land for their livelihood. The people living in the *Kurinji* region were *Kuravas*. They were also referred as *Punavar*, *Atavar* and *Kanavar*. They are called as *Punavar* because the *Punam* cultivation where the forest land is cleared to do the cultivation of millets. *Kanavar* denotes the forest region they belong to while *Atavar* [Dancers] denotes the dance performances they are known for. They were three *Cankam* female poets who belonged to *Kurava* community as *Ilaveyini*, *Vennikkayatti*, *Kuramakal Kuri Aiyini* and probably some of the Kings who ruled over Nanjinadu prior to 12th century like *Konankikkuravan*, *Nancikuravan* and *Bommaccha kuravan*¹⁶⁷. *Kurava* community still exists in Kerala who are considered to be snake charmers and soothsayers. In north Malabar *Kuratti* [females of *Kurava* community] is worshipped as a deity. *Kurava* community is presently categorized as belonging to the scheduled tribes of

¹⁶³ Neelakurinji (*Strobilanthes Kunthiana*) is a bush with several branches. The species name *Kunthiana* has been derived from the River Kunthi which flows through the rich expanse of the renowned Silent Valley National Park in Kerala. It means that the plant has been first described from the vicinity of this river. The plant grows profusely Shola grasslands and mountain slopes of the mighty Western Ghats and Nilgiris in India. Neelakurinji blooms in a clustered manner on typical inflorescence stocks once in every 12 years. From <http://www.neelakurinji.net/>

¹⁶⁴ *Kapar*, *Dudhi* in Hindi. *Kala Kuda* in Marathi. From <http://www.flowersofindia.in/catalogue>

¹⁶⁵ *Madan mogra* in Hindi. From <http://www.flowersofindia.in/catalogue>

¹⁶⁶ *Nilofar* in Urdu, also known as the European White Water Lily. From <http://www.flowersofindia.in/catalogue>

¹⁶⁷ Nellikkal Muraliedharan, *KERALA JATI VIJAYANAM*, [Encyclopedia of Caste System] Rainbow Book Publishers, Cengannur, Kerala, 2008, pp110

India. *Palai* area was inhabited by the dreaded hunters and robbers called the *Maravas*. As the landscape was predominantly barren they resorted to looting of the merchants who traveled through the land¹⁶⁸. Due to their skills with bow and arrow the kings recruited them in the army. “Martanda Varma King of Travancore in 18th century had a mercenary battalion of *Marava* soldiers”, says Nellikkal Muraleedharan¹⁶⁹. *Mullai* area was occupied by the *Itaya* or *Ayans* community whose prime occupation was breeding of cattle while the *Ulavars* as the name suggests did the tilling of the land in the *marutam* region. The inhabitation of the coastal *Neytal* was known as *Valayar* due to the fishing net [*vala*] which is crucial to their profession.

The people of each *Tinai*s also had their own gods/goddesses and individual worshipping system. For instance the ferocious *Maravas* had mother Korravai as their main deity, while the peaceful communities like the *itayas* of *Mullai* and *Ulavars* of *Marutam* had *Mayon* and *Ventan* as their deities. *Mayon* preferred only milk and milk products. *Kuravas* of *Kuringi* land had *Cheyon* [primitive form of Kartikeya] as their main god. Apart from the offering of food the worship was conducted through dance and oracles. No references have been made concerning image worship or permanent structures for worship except in the later phase.

The distinction between the communities living in the *tinai*s cannot be considered as caste distinction on the contrary as Elamkulam states, “Even we mentions them as

¹⁶⁸ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *ELAMKULAM KUNJANPILLAYUDE THIRENJEDUTHA KRITHIKAL* – Part I, [Malayalam] Ed. N Sam, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005. pp 11

¹⁶⁹ Nellikkal Muraleedharan, *KERALA JATI VIVARANAM*, [Encyclopedia of Caste System] Rainbow Book Publishers, Cengannur, Kerala, 2008, pp302

Itayas, *Maravas* and *Kuravas* it should not be taken as castes which exist today. If a *Kurava* or a *Marava* [hunter] settles in *Mullai* region and follow the cattle breeding he will be considered as *Itaya* [shepherd]. This was the situation till 10th century”¹⁷⁰. “Caste segregation”, says SK Vasanthan “was not that popular in *Cankam* period. *Panas*, *Kuravas*, *Vedas* and *Maravas* enjoyed high positions in the society. The *Cankam* poets like Parinar and Kapilar were *Panas*”¹⁷¹.

Tolkappiyam of the *Cankam* period mentions *Antanar*, *Arasar*, *Vaisyar* and *Velalar* as the four castes¹⁷². *Antanar* who had ‘*karaka*’ [pot of sacred water] and *yajnopavita* [sacred thread] were definitely Brahmins. *Arasars* were the kings and thus fit in as the *Kshatriyas* of the *Varna* system. *Vaishyas* were probably the trading class and the producers of agrarian artifacts as the symbols of the caste like the flower on the head and garland do not specify any occupational tools. Interestingly the *Velalars* were given weapons of war but they do not get the position of *Kshatriyas*. Subramanian traces the influence of north Indian *Varna* system on the author of *Tolkappiyam*¹⁷³.

REFERENCE OF BRAHMINS IN CANKAM LITERATURE

Though Nilakantha Sastri proposes the existence of Brahmins in the pre *Cankam* period in Tamil Nadu, many a scholars have reservation about the Vedic practices in

¹⁷⁰ Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *ELAMKULAM KUNJANPILLAYUDE THIRENJEDUTHA KRITHIKAL* – Part I, [Malayalam] Ed. N Sam, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005. Pp 13

¹⁷¹ SK Vasanthan, *NAMMAL NADANNA VAZHICAL* [The Path We Took] , [Malayalam], Cultural History of Kerala, Malayalam Research Center, Trissur, Kerala, 2006, Pp31

¹⁷² N Subramanian, *SANGHKALA BHARANA SAMVIDHANAM: SANGHAM TAMIZHARUDE BHARANAVUM SAMOOHIKA JEEVITAVUM* [Malayalam] [Translation of *CANKAM POLITY: THE ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE CANKAM TAMILS*, Madras, 1966.] ICHR and DC Books, Kottayam, 2003. p.242

¹⁷³ N Subramanian, *SANGHKALA BHARANA SAMVIDHANAM: SANGHAM TAMIZHARUDE BHARANAVUM SAMOOHIKA JEEVITAVUM* [Malayalam] [Translation of *CANKAM POLITY: THE ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE CANKAM TAMILS*, Madras, 1966.] ICHR and DC Books, Kottayam, 2003. p.246

South India prior *Cankam* era. Ironically Nilakantha Sastri himself quotes the *Cankam* text *PURANANNURU* to state that “there only four castes [*kudi*], viz., *Tudiyan*, *Panan*, *Paraiyan*, and *Kadamban*.¹⁷⁴ In fact the *Cankam* texts like *Adam* do mentions Brahmins not as a *jati* but as community of people migrated to South India as the early Brahmins were not in the profession related to religion. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai cites a verse from *Akam*, thus;

“*velapparppan valarantumitta Valai kalaintu olinta koluntin anna*”¹⁷⁵

Translation: *Velapparppan* (Brahmin who do not do *yajna* sacrifice) was making bangles out of conch shells.

The other group of Brahmins who arrived in south India was addressed as *Parppan* and *Marayor*. *Parppans* were listed among the castes who can act as mediators in the love fights along with *Panan*, *Koottar* etc. It will be interesting to note that *Koottars* were the *Kuruvas* of *Kurinji* region who in the later caste hierarchy could not even see a Brahmin with his eyes. Another word for Brahmins is *antanar* although many historians feel that it was generic term used for any virtuous person including the *acaryas* of Buddhism and Jainism¹⁷⁶. *TOLKAPPIYUM* mentions the six duties of *antanars* like learning, teaching, sacrifice, receiving alms, giving alms and good

¹⁷⁴ Nilakantha Sastri KA, A HISTORY OF SOUTH INDIA, Oxford University Press, Madras, 1976, P.131

¹⁷⁵ *Akam* 24. As quoted by Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *ELAMKULAM KUNJANPILLAYUDE THIRENJEDUTHA KRITHIKAL* – Part I, [Malayalam] Ed. N Sam, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005. Pp 240

¹⁷⁶ PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.163

deeds. *PATITTUPATTU* acknowledges the *antanars* as virtuous¹⁷⁷. *PURANANNRU* cites an incident here the Brahmin who came for the alms was duly rewarded by the Cera king Mavengo with golden flowers and money.¹⁷⁸ “The very strong presence” says Veluthatt Kesavan, “of the Brahman, with his Vedic sacrifices and even Agamic ideas, is hard to miss there; but sprawling Brahman settlements with vast areas of agricultural land under their command and the temple as the pivot around which they functioned had not yet taken shape in that period. Perhaps it was he who introduced these elements into this part of the country in the period that followed immediately”¹⁷⁹.

This complexity and chaotic of *Varna* system can be seen in the later or say existing caste system in Kerala. The present system is quite clear about the top and bottom of the *Varna* system as the Brahmins on the top and the *avarnas* at the bottom. In between space of *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* are occupied by a hoard of castes who claims themselves as *Nairs* who do the occupations of *Vaishyas* and *Kshatriyas*. For example the *vilakkittala* Nair is a barber, while *Chakkala* Nair of south Kerala who had the profession of making of oil is called *Vaniyas* in north Kerala similar to the merchant class of north India designated as *Baniyas*. Many historians attribute this confusion of *Varna* to the late arrival of Brahmins to the already established

¹⁷⁷ PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.163

¹⁷⁸ *Puram*. 367, As quoted by PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.185

¹⁷⁹ Kesavan Veluthat, *Religious Symbols in Political Legitimation: The Case of Early Medieval South India*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 21, Nos. 1-2, January-February 1993, p.23-24

caste/class system. *Tolkappiyam*¹⁸⁰ talks about the distinction between the *enor* or *uyandor* [for the elite class] and the *adiyor* or *vinainjar* [the lower class]. In conclusion one could say that in the *Cankam* period there existed religions like Jainism, Buddhism and early brahmanical system but they did not make any changes in the social hierarchy. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai summarizes the *Cankam* social system thus “The life of *Dravida*¹⁸¹ culture was the casteless of its society, [*sic*] *Panan*, *Parppan* and *Koottan* [all belonging to the lower castes in the later system] had access to the king as equals”¹⁸². Many historians attribute the establishment of caste system to the coming of Brahmins and the brahmanical system of worship. It will be interesting to understand the chronological placement of the arrival of major religions to Kerala as the region has a complex history of religious expansion.

OTHER RELIGIONS IN KERALA AT THE TIME OF BRAHMIN MIGRATION

Jainism

One of the first religions to arrive in Kerala and the Tamil region was Jainism as we get certain reference to Jainism in the *Cankam* literature. The author of *TOLKAPPIYUM* seems to be a follower of Jainism as the preface of *TOLKAPPIYUM* calls its author as ‘*Padimaiyon*’. The person who prepares himself to be a Jain monk

¹⁸⁰ PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.163

¹⁸¹ Here Elamkulam uses the word *Dravida* meaning Tamil/South India

¹⁸² *ELAMKULAM KUNJANPILLAYUDE THIRENJEDUTHA KRITHIKAL* – Part I, [Malayalam] Ed. N Sam, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005, pp 241

was called *Padimaiyon*¹⁸³. The Tamil epic *SILAPATIKARAM* was authored by Ilamkovadikal a Jain by faith¹⁸⁴. “In the story of *MANIMEKALAI*, for instance, we find the heroine advised to study in Kanchi the philosophical systems of the *Veda*, *Siva*, *Vishnu*, *Ajivika*, *Jaina* and of *Sankhya*, *Vaisheshika* and *Lokyayata*. But soon a great change came – particularly in the Tamil country – and the people began to entertain fears of the whole land going over to Buddhism and Jainism”¹⁸⁵. Huet Sang who visited city of Kanchi in the seventh century mentions the Jain centers in the city. Subramaniam illustrates the example from Tamil literature about the Jain temple at Uraiyur the capital of early Colas. This was also called the *Nikanthapalli*¹⁸⁶. The word *Nikantha* comes from the Sanskrit word *Nirgrandha* which is used to refer to the Jains. It should be remembered that Mahavira was called Nikantha Nathaputta in the Buddhist texts. The Cera capital Vanci too had a *nikantha matha*, states *SILAPATIKARAM*¹⁸⁷.

Historians attribute the spread of Jainism to the migration of Bhadrabahu and Chandra Gupta Maurya to Sravana Balgola in Karnataka. MS Ramaswami Ayyangar cites the Jain text *Rajavali Katha* to explain the missionary attempts of Jainism

¹⁸³ PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.85

¹⁸⁴ SK Vasanthan, *NAMMAL NADANNA VAZHICAL* [The Path We Took] , [Malayalam], Cultural History of Kerala, Malayalam Research Center, Trissur, Kerala, 2006, Pp36

¹⁸⁵ Nilakantha Sastri, *A History of South India, From Pre Historic times to the Fall of Vijayanagara*, pp 116, Oxford University Press, Madras, 1955, 1976 [fourth Edition]P. 423

¹⁸⁶ N Subramanian, *SANGHKALA BHARANA SAMVIDHANAM: SANGHAM TAMIZHARUDE BHARANAVUM SAMOOHIKA JEEVITAVUM* [Malayalam] [Translation of *CANKAM POLITY: THE ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE CANKAM TAMILS*, Madras, 1966.] ICHR and DC Books, Kottayam, 2003. p.336

¹⁸⁷ KP Padmanabha Menon, *KOCHIRAJYACHARITHRAM* [1914], Mathrubhumi Edition [1989], [1996] Calicut, 1996 Pp 51

through the efforts of sage Visakha who travelled to Cola and Pandyan regions¹⁸⁸. The horde of Mauryan coins found in Kerala [Trissur and Kottayam Districts] and the reference about Kerala by Megasthenes and Chanakya who mentions about the pearls of *Curni* River further expounds the Mauryan connection to Kerala. Naturally the expansion of Jainism and Buddhism under the Mauryans would have reached Kerala too. Gopalakrishnan observes that the *vadakkirikkal* ritual mentioned in *Cankam* literature where the defeated king starves himself to death is quite close to the *Sallekhana* practiced in Jainism. Historians also find Jainism as the reason for the popularity of mother goddess cult in Kerala as most of the *Bhagavati* temples were the erstwhile temples dedicated to Padmavati, the attendant *yakshi* of Parsvanatha.

Buddhism

Asoka who mentions Kerala in his Girnar edict would have definitely sent his missionaries to this region; however the route which Buddhism took Kerala may not have been through the land but through the sea from Sri Lanka. “Buddhism arrived in Kerala through south. Netum Ceralatan built a Buddhist Vihara following the advice of a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka”, writes Gopalakrishnan¹⁸⁹. The Cera King Utiyan Cheralatan of the *Cankam* had an epithet of *Vanavaramban*, which is usually translated as one who has sky as the border [*Vana* = Sky, *Varamban*=Border] of his kingdom, however SK Vasanthan¹⁹⁰ translate the name as [*Vanavar* = gods, *amban* =

¹⁸⁸ As referred by PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.186

¹⁸⁹ PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.187

¹⁹⁰ SK Vasanthan, *NAMMAL NADANNA VAZHICAL* [The Path We Took] , [Malayalam], Cultural History of Kerala, Malayalam Research Center, Trissur, Kerala, 2006, Pp 38

loved one] meaning the one who is dear to the gods which in fact will be Tamil equivalent to *devanampriyadarsi* the celebrated epithet of Asoka. Vasanthan stops one step away from identifying Utiyan as a Buddhist ruler. Padmanabha Menon¹⁹¹ cites *SILAPATIKARAM* and *MANIMEKALAI* which refers to a Buddhist *caitya* and a *nirgrandha matha* [Jain Vihara] along with a Vishnu temple in the city of Vanci. Nilakantha Sastri states the relation of some of the inscriptions of Kerala having a clear connection to some of the Buddhist inscriptions of Andhra. He also mentions some of the terms like *Atittanam* [*Adhithana*] and *Tamma* [*Dharma*] found in the inscriptions of rock cut caves of Kerala.

The most popular among the Buddhist shrine in Kerala was Sri Mulavasam. One of the Buddhist image found in Gandhara region has a caption which reads '*dakshinapathe mulavase lokanatha*'¹⁹². Though there are dispute about the exact location of Sri Mulavasam as Elamkulam staunchly believes that is in central Kerala as one of the Ay King does a renovation attempt to protect the monument from submerging in the sea while a north Kerala historian like Chirakkal T Balakrishnan Nair¹⁹³ would place the monument somewhere in the north Kerala due to the fact one of the Kolattiri kings Vallabha had been recorded as visiting the shrine. Even the popular deity in Kerala like Ayyappa seems to be a mixture of Buddhism and the folk form of Ayyanar. The use of the epithet *Dharma Sasta* for Ayyappa reveals the Buddhist connection¹⁹⁴

¹⁹¹KP Padmanabha Menon, *KOCHIRAJYACHARITHRAM* [1914], Mathrubhumi Edition [1989], [1996] Calicut, 1996 Pp 51

¹⁹² *ELAMKULAM KUNJANPILLAYUDE THIRENJEDUTHA KRITHIKAL* – Part I, [Malayalam] Ed. N Sam, International Centre for Kerala Studies, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005. Pp 311

¹⁹³ Chirakkal T Balakrishnan Nair, *Collected Essays* [Malayalam] Kottayam, 1982

¹⁹⁴ "*munindra Srighana Sasta muni sakyamunistuya Sasakyasimha sarvarthasiddha soudhodaniscasa*" – *Amarakosa*

along with use of the word *saranam* used by the devotees. The folk cult of Ayyapa/Ayyanar might have got appropriated by the Buddhist as a mode of expansion.

Scholars of Kerala history also acknowledge that the Buddhist settlement in Kerala propagated education, medicine in the region. The term *palli*, which denotes the non-Hindu places of worship [like Church and Mosque, which are still known as] originally used for Buddhist or Jain centers. The term used for school in Malayalam is *pallikootam* probably reminding us about its Buddhist past. Kunhikuttan Tampuran attributes the introduction of Kerala architecture to the Buddhists and identify the *tacchan* and *kamala* community originally Buddhists¹⁹⁵.

Christianity

It will be a surprise for anybody in India to know that Christianity did exist in Kerala prior to the arrival of Brahmins to Kerala. If one does not get stuck to Parasurama myth he/she will find it is quite convincing due to the trade connection to Kerala with the west. Prior to Christians, it was the Jews who migrated to Kerala and got involved with maritime trade on the western sea. The Kerala Christians or Suriyani [Syrian] Christians of the pre- colonial period had no similarity to the European Christians. Firstly they believed that nobody can be converted into Christianity and to be Christian you have to be born to Christian parents. It should be noted here that even now nobody can convert to become a Syrian Christian. When confronted with Malabari/Suriyani Christians, the Portuguese did not know what to do with them.

¹⁹⁵ PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERALA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.318

Completely confused with these bearded characters who call themselves as Christians, the Portuguese tried to convert them into Christianity, again! It is for sure that though the Portuguese was happy to see Christians in India, but they were least pleased to realise that these Christians believed in what the Roman Church considered as heresy. For the Portuguese and the Jesuits the true Christian was the one who accepted a True incarnation for Christ, the term "*theotokos*" for the Virgin Mother and who used the Roman doctrine of the mass; not to mention the authority of the Pope. The Syrian Christians did none of these, but they had wedding ceremony very close to the Hindus, churches looking like temples, priests were happily married, and they used Suriyani [Aramaic] language for their services.

The legend of St. Thomas maintains that the Apostle landed near Musiris in 52 AD and converted few families and established seven churches. To quote Nicol Macnicol,¹⁹⁶ "If it were possible to accept as historical the legend that is recorded in the apocryphal Acts of Judas Thomas (dated by Harnack in the 3rd Century AD), the Christian religion was first preached in India by the Apostle Thomas about 50 AD. Similarly the Tradition preserved by the Syrian Christian Church in Travancore claims St. Thomas as its founder and dates arrival in India in the year 52 AD". However, this legend is acceptable to only few believers and historians. When one consider the trade connection with East and West that might have passed through Jerusalem, it is not impossible for an Apostle or Evangelist to travel to East. St. Jerome who wrote in 4th Century observes "The Son of God was present to all

¹⁹⁶ Nicol Macnicol. THE LIVING RELIGIONS OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE [WILDE LECTURES, OXFORD, 1932-34]. p.269

places, with Thomas in India, with Peter in Rome, with Paul in Illyria..."¹⁹⁷ Another literary reference from Briton points towards the acceptance of St. Thomas as the Apostle of India. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reads thus. "The Year 883, in the same year Singhlem and Athelstan conveyed to Rome the alms, which the King [King Alfred] had vowed to send hither, and also to India to St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew, when they sat down against the [Danish] army at London: and there, God be thanked, their prayer was very successful after that vow"¹⁹⁸. Andrian Fortescue provide us with further information about these alms as, "He [King Alfred] sent Singhelm, the Bishop of Shireburn with gifts. Singhelm came to Rome and then went on to the Malabar Coast. He made his offerings here and brought back from his long journey jewels and spices; strange to see an English Bishop in India in 883!!"¹⁹⁹

It is still a mystery whether the Apostle Thomas himself or the descendants of the Church he established in the city of Edessa had come to India. Another tradition proposes that 400 Christians belonging to seven clans from Baghdad, Nineveh and Jerusalem migrated to Kerala in 345 AD to escape the persecution of the Sassanid Emperor of Persia. "A merchant called Thomas Cannaneo or Thomas of Jerusalem drew the attention of the Edessan Church to this neglected outpost and caused to succour to be sent to it in the year 345"²⁰⁰. In 522 AD a Byzantine Monk, namely Cosmos Indicopleustes mentions about a Christian Church in the port town of Kollam

¹⁹⁷ As quoted by P.Thomas. CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY IN INDIA AND PAKISTAN.London.1954.pp19

¹⁹⁸ As quoted by J.N.Ogilvie in THE APOSTLES OF INDIA,1915

¹⁹⁹ As quoted by Nicol Macnicol. LIVING RELIGIONS OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE. London

²⁰⁰ Nicol Macnicol. LIVING RELIGIONS OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE. London

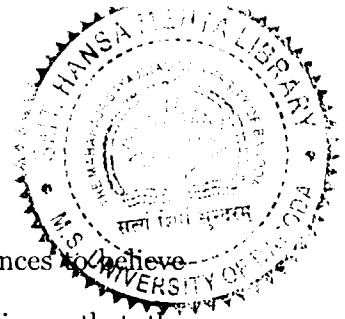
in south Kerala²⁰¹. When Sthanu Ravi Varma of the Second Cera Dynasty [12th Century AD] was ruling, a local chieftain Ayyanadigal Thiruvadigal issues the copper plate of Tarisa Palli giving concessions to the Christian merchant of Kollam.

The Kerala Christians were quite helpful to the Portuguese, not because of their Christian fraternity but for the common commercial interest as Syrian Christians were traders of spices. Pedro Álvares Cabral on his journey back to Europe in January 1501 took three Indians on board. Two of them were from the service of the King of Kochi namely Idikkela Menon and Parangodan Menon. The third was a Christian called Joseph of Cranganore. Joseph belonging to the Syrian Church was no novice in foreign travel as we were informed as he had travelled to Antioch in connection with the appointment of the Bishop of Malabar. Joseph travelled further from Lisbon to Rome and seems to have met the Pope.

COMING OF BRAHMINS AND THEIR DOMINANCE ON CASTE SYSTEM

If one accepts the Brahmin migration to Kerala then the question arises on when exactly that did take place. The reference of the migration of Brahmins comes from the myth of *KERALOLPATTI* which mention Parasurama who created Kerala to give land grants to the Brahmins as repentance for his human slaughter. The story says that he created the land and divided it into 64 *gramas* [villages] to be distributed among the Brahmins. There is no doubt that this myth is propagated by the Brahmins

²⁰¹ "Likewise in Male, where the pepper grows, and in the town of Kalleina there is also Bishop consecrated in Persia". Logan, William, MALABAR MANUEL, 2000 edited version Edited by PJ Cheriyan, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.203



of Kerala to assert their land ownership but there are enough references to believe that Brahmins did migrate to Kerala. Padmanabha Menon²⁰² believes that the Brahmin migration happened in 3rd century BC. Logan in his *Malabar Manuel* argues that Brahmin migration happened as late as 8th century AD. One of the inscriptions found in Irinjalakkuda dated to 855 AD shows that the priest group related to this temple might have settled in Irinjalakkuda by this time²⁰³. Fleet mentions an inscription of Mayura Varma of Kadamba country where it is mentioned the translocation of 18 Brahmins from Ahicchatra to Kuntala region. Logan too refers to the similar translocation done by Chandrangad, the son of Mayura Varma this time from Ahicchatra to Kerala, Tuluva, and Konkan regions. Logan goes further to establish Parasurama as the contemporary of Mayura Varma. *GRAMAPADHATI* a work in Telugu language testifies that the Brahmins had come to Kerala from Ahicchatra in Karnataka, most probably Aihole, as observed Gangadharan TK²⁰⁴. KR Pisharoty quotes a *kali*²⁰⁵ word '*yajna sthanam samrakshyam*' to state that it refers to the *yajna* [sacrifice] done by a Brahmin called as the Melattur Agnihotri in 4th century AD. Chattambi Swamikal²⁰⁶ finds the reference of Brahmin migration in *SKANDHA PURANA* where it seems to have mentioned that Parasurama converted some

²⁰² Padmanabha Menon, HISTORY OF KERLA, Vol.I

²⁰³ Kesavan Veluthat, BRAHMIN SETTLEMENTS IN KERALA: HISTORICAL STUDIES, Sandhya Publications, Calicut, 1978 as quoted by SAS Sharma, *The Eclectic Paddhatis of Kerala*, INDOLOGICA TAURINENSIA, 35 (2009)

²⁰⁴ Gangadharan TK, EVOLUTION KERALA HISTORY AND CULTURE, Calicut University Central Cooperative Stores, Calicut, p.92

²⁰⁵ Kali Vakya or Kali word is probably used in the inscriptions and texts where it denotes the year of its creation. This system is referred many a times by Kerala Historians though I am not aware of whether it can be used in any other regions. It needs further research but as it does not come in the current work I am not going into the details of it.

²⁰⁶ As quoted by PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages. Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.284

fishermen of Maharashtra as Brahmins and sent them to Kerala. Kunhikuttan Tampuran attributes the Brahmin dominance in Kerala to the conversion of Buddhists²⁰⁷. Whatever chaotic reference are available about the Brahmin migration to Kerala there appears a shimmer of historical fact the Brahmins did migrate to Kerala from north India. As mentioned earlier in the present chapter, some of the *Cankam* texts mention them as northerners.

Brahmins who migrated from the north or elsewhere brought with them some of the unconstructive aspects of Brahmanical religion as the *Varna* and *jati* system. To quote Logan, "The final organization of castes in Malabar probably took place about 8th century simultaneously with the rise of the Nambutiri Brahmins to power and influence. The Aryan Jains who had preceded the latter [Nambutiris] had probably already organized the community in the Aryan fashion into corporate guilds and it only needed the idea of caste as a religious institution to be imported into the country by the Vedic Brahmins to bring about the crystallization to the various caste elements"²⁰⁸. A question may naturally arise on why one should attribute the introduction of *Varna-jati* to the Brahmins only. The reasons for this conjunction are many, like the existence of *Varna-jati* system in north India and Deccan, and the absence of caste hierarchy in the *Cankam* period as mentioned in the *Cankam*.

As the caste system provided Brahmin the highest position in the hierarchy it is logical to conclude that the system was in fact propagated by the Brahmins

²⁰⁷ As quoted by PK Gopalakrishnan, *KERALATHINTE SAMSKARIKA CHARITHRAM* [A CULTURAL HISTORY OF KERLA] [Malayalam] 1974, 2000 [6th edition] State Institute of Languages, Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000, p.284

²⁰⁸ William Logan, *MALABAR MAUEL*, 2000 edited version Edited by PJ Cheriyan, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram p. 116

themselves. Max Weber observes about the Brahmin centric caste system thus, "Caste' is, and remains essentially social rank, and the central position of the Brahmins in Hinduism rests primarily upon the fact that social rank is determined with references to Brahmins".²⁰⁹ It may look absolutely incongruous in approving that a community, small in number, entering into a region and starts controlling the affairs of society with ease and the majority of the population submits to them without resistance, but when we look into the history of Kerala or elsewhere in India and study the dominance of British over India in one century, it may not appear a wrong hypothesis at all. What did the Europeans possess which the locals did not have? Is it the mastery over arms and ammunitions which the 'natives' did not have? In the Battle of Kolachel, Martanda Varma's army defeated the Dutch convincingly, but what did he do after the victory? He appointed two Dutch officers to train his army. The truth is that the elite class of India submitted meekly to 'a system' brought by the colonialists.

Karl Marx observed in his letter to *New-York Daily Tribune* thus, "England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating, the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying the material foundations of Western society in Asia".²¹⁰ The Brahmins migrated to Kerala seem to have done a similar process of destruction and regeneration in the Kerala society. In this process they were assisted by the dominant class of Kerala existed at that time. If we envisage Nairs and the Izhavas on equal level with rest of the population subservient to them

²⁰⁹ Max Weber, *THE RELIGIONS OF INDIA: THE SOCIOLOGY OF HINDUISM AND BUDDHISM*, Glencoe, Ill. : Free Press, 1958, p.30, quoted by Klass, Morton 'CASTES –The emergence of the South Asian Social System', Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1980, p.74

²¹⁰ Karl Marx, *The Future Results of British Rule in India*, 1853, Letters of Karl Marx, First published in *New-York Daily Tribune*, August 8, 1853, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1853/07/22.htm>

while the Brahmins enter the scene, we could logically conclude that the Nairs did align with the Brahmins against the others in Kerala. The result of this struggle is the stratification of the society into *savarnas* and *avarnas* where the *savarnas* divided the land between them leaving the *avarnas* landless workers.²¹¹

Unlike the British who believed in power through controlling the ruling class, Brahmins concentrated on the land acquisition and through it indirectly controlling the society. The question however remains on how did they manage to grab the land? Was it through introducing new tools of production as suggested by TK Gangadharan? Was it through introduction and expansion of religious beliefs? Arguments of EMS regarding the issue regarding the arrival of Brahmins and their dominance on the land through the establishment of *Janmi*²¹² system appear to be the most acceptable. The main points of his hypothesis can be summarized thus²¹³;

1. Individual ownership system of property did not exist before the arrival of Brahmins the in Kerala.

²¹¹ Namboodiripad, EMS *KERALAM MALYALIKALUDE MATHRUBHOOMI* [Malayalam], from P Govinda Pillai [Ed], *EMSINTE SAMPOORNA KRITIKAL* [COLLECTED WORKS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD Vol. 9- 1948] [Malayalam] Chinta Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram 2000, p.97

²¹² A simple translation of *Janmi* system can be Feudal system. However the *Janmi* system is specific to Kerala and needs further explanation. It is purely based on the rent [*Kanam* or *Pattam*] system, creating the owner [*Janmi*], overseer [*Karanma*] and farm worker [*Paniyal*]. The person in charge of *karanma* [usually a Nair] would cultivate land with help of *Paniyal* [usually Pulaya/Cheruma caste] and the yield will be shared as wages [for *Paniyal*] and *Kanam* [to the *Janmi*]. Till the Mysore occupation in Malabar the *Janmis* did not had to pay land tax. The word *janmi* /*janmam* comes from the word *jan* [meaning birth] showing that the *janmi* right was hereditary.

²¹³ Namboodiripad, EMS *KERALAM MALYALIKALUDE MATHRUBHOOMI* [Malayalam], from P Govinda Pillai [Ed], *EMSINTE SAMPOORNA KRITIKAL* [COLLECTED WORKS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD Vol. 9- 1948] [Malayalam] Chinta Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram 2000, p.86-87

2. By introduction of the *jati* system Brahmins could change the occupations stratification of the *jatis*. Each *jati* got their share from the yields of the land including the *jati* who are entrusted the job of cultivation.

[When observe that the surplus product extraction system which was well established in North India much before the Brahmins migrated to Kerala it is quite logical to attribute the introduction of that system in Kerala to the community which through their legends claim their ancestry to North India, as the Nambutiri Brahmins. Regarding the land ownership and shareholders of the yields, Irfan Habib²¹⁴ writes thus, "According to Megasthenes, the peasants paid to the king a 'land-tribute' as well as a fourth of the crop (by another version, three-fourths).²¹⁵ Kautilya indeed stressed that settlements in the royal lands should consist overwhelmingly of *sudra-karsakas* (Sudra cultivators/peasants) and other lower classes, they being more amenable to exploitation²¹⁶. The large land-holders with their own cattle and laborers as also the ruler's labor-tilled lands, significant still in the *ARTHASASTRA*, could not easily survive the new conditions. Even where ownership continued with the 'lord' or master (*svamin*), it was obviously becoming more convenient for him to lease out the land to *karsakas* rather than till it under his own direct

²¹⁴ IRFAN HABIB, *The Peasant in Indian History*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST. v 11, no. 118 (March 1983), p. 31-32 [All footnotes as referred by Irfan Habib]

²¹⁵ See accounts of Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, translations in RC Majumdar (ed.), *The Classical Accounts of India*, Calcutta, 1960, pp 237, 264, 287 (note 20). It is possible that the 'land-tribute' represents the king's traditional levy of one-sixth of the produce also laid down by Kautilya.

²¹⁶ R S Sharma. *Sudras in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1958. pp 146-149. Cf Kosambi, Introduction..., pp 219-220. Sibesh Bhattacharya (IESHR. XVI (1), pp 85-96) is right in pointing out that Kautilya does not recommend peasant ownership but Sharma, whom he criticizes on this score, seems quite well aware of the distinction between peasant cultivation and peasant ownership and also of the rather vague connotation of *karsaka*, which may mean peasant as well as agricultural laborer. But the *Arthasastra* in the present case uses the term clearly enough in the sense of peasant-cultivators

management²¹⁷. There would certainly remain some exceptions: even after the Mauryan period, we encounter in Patanjali (2nd century B C) a land-holder supervising ploughing by five laborers”²¹⁸.]

3. Equal portion of the yield was shared between the *jatis* for their services to the society like the Brahmins for religious services, Samanta caste for administration, Ambalavasis for their temple services, Nairs for the military and managerial services and so on for rest of the castes²¹⁹.
4. As the Brahmins and Samantas consolidated their position at the top of the caste hierarchy the demand of their portion of the yield increased. Moreover the sharing of the yield became compulsory and a situation arrived where it became impossible to produce in the land without the consent of Brahmins or Samantas. The Brahmins and Samantas acted as the virtual owners of the land. This lead to the creation of a small group of major shareholders [*janmis*] and the majority of population who are small shareholders [*kudiyans*].

²¹⁷ CF Sharma, Sudras..., pp 230-31; also Journal of Bihar Research Society, LXIV, iii & iv, 1958, p 8.

²¹⁸ CF Sharma, Sudras..., pp 230-31; also Journal of Bihar Research Society, LXIV, iii & iv, 1958, p 178

²¹⁹ This system still continues in the villages of Kerala. I remember that in my childhood, seeing the Malayans and Vannans, who are performers of Teyyam, collecting rice from houses soon after the harvest season.

5. Along with these changes, the religious system established by the Brahmins got popularity. People started dedicating their lands to the temples²²⁰ which in turn was controlled by the Brahmin families.

The above mentioned hypothesis of EMS unmistakably analyzes the process leading to the creation of *Devasvam* and *Brahmasvam* land properties. The land controlled by the Samantas came to known as *Cherikkal* or *Pandaram* lands. The land properties like *Brahmasvam* and *Devasvam* is dealt separately in the following portion of the thesis.

ECONOMIC BASE FOR THE CASTE SYSTEM – THE LAND DISTRIBUTION

Devasvam to Brahmasvam

Dipankar Gupta in reference to the *Vaishyas* of North India states thus, “Among these castes, it is not the notions of purity that mark out hierarchical positions (howsoever contentiously), but pure and simple wealth. The Oswals place themselves above the Shrimalis and the Porvals because they are easily the most affluent among the Baniya caste”²²¹. Looking at the land properties of the upper castes in Kerala and the landlessness of the lower castes, one can make similar analysis where it would appear

²²⁰ The dedication of the whole *Venadu Swarupam* [Travancore] to Sri Padmanabha [the deity of Sri Padmanabha Temple at Thiruvananthapuram] by Marthanda Varma called *Trippadi Danam* in 18th century is close to the *Janmi* system where the God Padmanabha [Vishnu] becomes the *Janmi* and the king his *Kanakkaran*. This process collapsed the *Devasvam* and *Pandaram* lands.

²²¹ Gupta Dipankar Editorial Introduction in CASTE IN QUESTION – IDENTITY OR HIERARCHY, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2004, pp xv.

that the possession of wealth/land is the key factor which separates the *savarnas* from the *avarnas*. For the Brahmans who migrated to Kerala, whenever that was, their prime task must have been the land acquisition. How they manage to do that remains still a mystery. TK Gangadharan's argument that the Brahmans brought sharper instruments made of iron which aided in clearing the land and establishing fields and thus gained the control of the land, cannot be taken seriously for the reason that in *Cankam* literature we have enough evidence of peasant communities. In fact the Brahmans were able to grab the land from this farming community. One of the possibilities is that the Brahmans introduced the new system of cultivation or new system of property. If the Brahmans migrated from Andhra region as many scholars believe they might have brought in new techniques of rice cultivation. Or they might have used their skills in astrology and natural sciences [here I am assuming here that they were better in *sastras*] to control the production cycles of the cultivation. Whatever it may be, it is quite definite that the Brahmans used their 'connection' or 'proximity' to the gods in their rise from the position of an immigrant to the *de facto* ruler of the land. Like they have Kshatriyas as the allies in North India for this process, in Kerala they found their partner for eternity, the Nairs of Kerala.

The acceptance in the society achieved by the Brahmans after they reached through the establishment of brahmanical system of worship and probable alliance with ruling class got further strengthened and structured in the medieval period as the probable consequence of the Cola wars. Cola wars fought for a prolonged period between the rules of Parantaka to Kulotunga the great grandson of Raja Raja. The skirmishes started because of support the Kerala rulers extended to the Pandyan and Sri Lankan rulers in their battle against the Colas. Many historians suggest that the Cola army

captured and destroyed the city of Mahodayapuram, the capital of Ceras [Second Cera Empire]. These Ceras should not be confused with early Ceras appearing in the *Cankam* literature. Colas, if they did enter Kerala would have tried as they did in Sri Lanka to convert the Buddhist structures into brahmanical temples and even establishing Brahmin villages. More over they also might have tried to restructure the society with Brahmin as the head of the social structure. Gopalakrishnan proposes another theory to explain the dominance of brahmanical system and the dominance of Brahmins over the land rights of Kerala. "In 11th century", writes Gopalakrishnan, "when the Cola incursions were at its climax, lot of peasants to protect themselves, gave their land properties to the temples and Brahmins. Another reason for this was the increase of land tax²²² which also prompted the farmers to give away the land to *Devasvam* and *Brahmasvam*. Altogether, by 12th century we can observe that most of the land was either under the Temples, Brahmins or *Naduvazhis* [local rulers]"

In the ensuing period we witness the rise of Brahmins achieving the land ownership in the majority of Kerala. The feudal system with its Kerala incarnation which can be called as *Janmi- Naduvazhi- Medhavitvam*²²³ [means the domination of the upper castes, the *janmis* and the local chieftains] got established in this period. The Nairs and the royalty who were busy fighting as well as routed by the Colas could not stop the ascendancy of Brahmins. Brahmins was already started acquiring the land through the route of *Devasvam* to *Brahmasvam* transferring of lands. *Devasvam*

²²² This observation is contrary to the commonly accepted fact that there was no land revenue system existed in Kerala prior to Mysore occupation and the British period. Here Gopalakrishnan probably intended to refer to the *paatam* [rent] which might have increased due to the invasion of Colas.

²²³ EMS Namboodiripad, *Once Again on Castes and Classes*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 9, No. 12(Dec., 1981), p. 18

lands are the lands donated to the up keeping of the temple expenses by the kings or donors or even the local people.

The *Devasvam* lands were primarily given to the temples for the general upkeep and salaries of the employees. However, for this purpose the temples needed only a portion of the income generated from the land. Rest was obviously enjoyed by the *uranmas* and this lead to financial misappropriation and squabbles among the *uranmas*. A look at the accounts given by Velupilla on the yield from the Devasvam land will give us the picture in Tiruvitankur. Col. Manro, the British resident Tiruvitankur ordered to access 348 Major temples and 1171 minor temples under the government control. "By the assumption of Devasvam the state took over 62,000 gardens [Plantations] and 5, 48,000 *paras*²²⁴ of rice land. The gardens yielded a rental of Rs. 50,000²²⁵ annually, while the wet lands Rs. 3,50,000 , thus aggregating Rs. 4,00,000. Besides these there were other sources of income of a fluctuating character which flowed into the treasury. These were fourfold. Firstly, offering received in money and things, the latter in shape of silk, silver, images etc; secondly, money put into the *Vanchi*²²⁶; thirdly the proceeds from the sale of boiled rice; and fourthly, succession fee on Pagoda offices such as that of *Santhi* or officiating priest, which varies according to the income. The gold and ornaments taken from the temples found their way into the government treasury and were used to mint coins for the benefit of the state"²²⁷. An interesting aspect to be noted here is that the Tiruvitankur rulers could well afford to do this as the titular sovereign of Tiruvitankur

²²⁴ Measuring system based on the yield of the crop; approximately closer to an acre.

²²⁵ This was when the salary of a top government official was given a salary of Rs. 200 per month.

²²⁶ Offering box

²²⁷ Sadasyatilaka TK Velupilla, THE TRAVANCORE STATE MANUEL, Volume II, History, 1940, First reprint, Government of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1996, p.520

was none but the God Padmanabha himself so the extension of *Devasvam* land to the state legally remain as *Devasvam* land.

Elsewhere the *Devasvam* lands gradually came under the control of the Brahmins who are usually the *uralas* [controllers of the temple affairs] of the temples. The land thus came under the control of the Brahmins are called *Brahmasvam* lands. EMS Namboodiripad critically analyzes the shift from *Devasvam* to *Brahmasvam* ownership thus, "Each caste assembly [in Kerala] had its own temple, the deity of which constituted the reflection and representative of the collective body of the entire caste. And it was in the name of the temple and its deity that the wealth accumulated through generations was held. Gradually, however, the control of the temple and therefore, of its property narrowed down, first from the entire caste assembly to the collective body and the heads of families [*uranma*] and then to the head of one family"²²⁸. These *Uranmas*, usually Brahmins, as they were not the cultivators of the land, leased them to the Nairs who manages these lands as *Karanma*. The rent they were supposed to pay back to the Janmi /temple is known as the as the *Kanam*. TK Gangadharan elucidates this system thus, "The land received in the temples through various sources was given for lease to the *Karalar* by the temple proprietors called *Uralar*. The *Karalar* then employed the *Paniyalar* in agricultural work and gave a fixed portion of the product to the *Uralar* or the temple. During those days most of the cultivable land in Kerala was *Devasvam* land. Hence the rent received in the temple in the form of paddy and other products was much more than what was

²²⁸ EMS Namboodiripad, *Once Again on Castes and Classes*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 9, No. 12(Dec., 1981), p. 19

actually needed in the temple”²²⁹. Needless to say that the *Uralars* were the Nambutiri Brahmins; Nairs the *Karalars* and the *Paniyalar* will be of lower caste, many times Izhavas. Here clearly one could observe the landlord castes and landless castes, alternately the upper castes and the lower caste Hindus. Economically upper class of the society became the upper castes in stratification of castes.

The following table based on the census of 1931²³⁰ would illustrate this point further:

	Land owned per owner in Acres [1931]	Renters of land Malabar [1921]	Cultivators	Agriculture laborers
Nambutiris	28.89	41.2	9.0	-
Nairs	4.66	5.9	50.4	17.2
Izhavas	3.60	-	20.9	44.4
Other Lower Castes	2.46	-	0.5	91.2

If we juxtapose the above table to the following table it will reveal the reality that economic power did impact on the hierarchical positions of the castes in relation to the pollution in the social system as well as religious spaces.

	Distance kept from the Nambutiris	Accessibility into temple in 1935 [in Tiruvitankur]
Nambutiris	0	Full Entry
Nairs	6 Steps	Partial
Izhavas	36 Steps	Nil
Other Lower Castes	96 Steps	Nil

²²⁹ Gangadharan TK EVOLUTION KERALA HISTORY AND CULTURE, Calicut University Central Cooperative Stores, Calicut, p.135

²³⁰ Based on the study by Sivanandan, P *Caste, Class And Economic Opportunity In Kerala, An Empirical Analysis*, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, February 1979

In conclusion I would like to quote EMS Namboodiripad which reads, “Class division, however took the form of caste division; those who were in a position to accumulate the greater amounts of wealth came to be considered the highest caste; the next in point of the accumulation of wealth became next highest caste, and so on, till we reach the class that is in a position to accumulate no wealth at all which became the lowest caste”²³¹.

DISTINCTION BETWEEN KERALA BRAHMINS AND OTHER BRAHMINS - 64 ANACHARAMS

Kerala Brahmins known as Nambutiris kept strict customs very distinct from that of the other Brahmins of south India. These customs are based on the dictum called 64 *anacharams* allegedly written by Sankaracharya in a treatise called *Sankara Smruti*. Some scholars attribute the 64 *anacharams* to Parasurama himself who constituted it as a deterrent against counter-migration of the Kerala Brahmins. Many rules of caste segregation were dictated by this *anacharams*. Here I would like to refer to some of those dictums.

- You must bath if you touch a Sudra
- You must bath if you happen to be near a Chandala
- You must bath if you touch polluted wells or tanks
- You must not accept funeral gifts from Sudras
- Sudras and others are not to touch an idol.
- Kshatriyas should avoid worshipping lingam

Anacharams surely states the social position of the Brahmins and their dominance of the populace through a master servant relation when it says

²³¹ EMS Namboodiripad, *Once Again on Castes and Classes*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 9, No. 12(Dec., 1981), p. 19

- Brahmins should not spin cotton
- Brahmins should not wash their own cloths
- Brahmin must not go out unless accompanied by women servants
- Brahmins should not bow to any other.

The dominance of the Nambutiri Brahmins is obviously felt by the British officers who endeavored to study them as a community. Fred Fawcett starts his on article on Nambutiris thus, "It is by no means easy to obtain information which is accurate respecting that exclusive caste of Brahmans of the Malabar Coast known as Nambutiris. Unlike the Brahmans of the remainder of the [Madras] Presidency, who engage in trade and in one may say every profitable profession and business, Nambutiris hold almost entirely aloof from what Poet Gray calls, 'the busy world's ignorable strife,' and more than any class of Brahmans retain their sacerdotal position, which is of course the highest. They are for the most part landholders. A very large portion of Malabar is owned by the Nambutiris".

Brahmins are called '*Bhudevas*' as to mean the representatives of gods on earth, but in the case of Nambutiri Brahmins it can be used as the lords of the earth [Landlords]. TK Gangadharan did not seem to be having any hesitation to credit Brahmans with origination of organized agriculture in Kerala and thus their landownership when he is writing thus, "They came with better iron equipments than that of the tools of the indigenous people. They could clear the forest more easily and start cultivation. The spread of agriculture naturally paved way for their settlements"²³². Gangadharan is completely forgetting here the *Aintinai* of *Cankam* literature where there are descriptions of beautiful maidens sharpening their sickles on tortoises by mistake and

²³² Gangadharan TK, EVOLUTION KERALA HISTORY AND CULTURE, Calicut University Central Cooperative Stores, Calicut, p.93

the hill people bartering the forest products in exchange of rice from the people of the plain land. More over an excavation in north Kerala in the last decade has brought out the possibility of iron equipments in Kerala even before the *Cankam* period.

However, Gangadharan's view that the Brahmins migrated to Kerala not exclusively as the religious people but in different capacities is worth a thought. Brahmins too might have migrated into Kerala due to some social/economic/political pressure in their motherland, wherever it may be. Like the Jews migrating to Kerala due to political/religious upheaval in Judea or Farsis migrating to India after the fall of Sassanid Empire, Brahmins also might have gone through some traumatic social situations which lead to their exodus. Kerala was great land of opportunity thanks to its isolation and opportunities of agriculture and trade. Gangadharan's observation about the Brahmins settlements in the most fertile lands in Kerala also need to be studied properly.

However the question remains whether they 'grabbed' and sanctified and structured the land through the religious/social system or did they acquire the landed property through the religious/social structure. The answer to the question depends on the situation of the Kerala society at the time of the arrival of Brahmins. Looking at the *mimamsa* literature tradition of Kerala prior to Sankaracharya it is quite obvious that the brahmanical system along with Brahmins have already arrived in Kerala in the early centuries of the Christian era. They cannot be coming in at the time of Pallavas and Chalukyans for the reason that these dynasties were contemporaries of Sankaracharya himself.

I am keeping Sankaracharya as a milestone for few reasons. First reason is that he is indisputably a Kerala Brahmin. Secondly there is a philosophical maturity in Sankaracharya was thanks to the corpus of studies happened earlier to him in Kerala. Lastly, the caste system was already been flourished in his time as it is evident from his composition called the *Manishapanchakam*. Moreover the text *Jati Nirnaya* is attributed to Sankaracharya reads thus,

Ashtou hi vipra dou nyunan
Duadasaivantaralikal
Ashtadasasya sudrashshaal
Silpinah patita dasa
Nica pruthakcatuara-
*Scatushshashtih jatayah*²³³

Translation: Brahmana Varna has 8 *jatis* and 2 are inferior. *Antarala jati* [workers at the temple] has 12. There are 18 *jatis* of *Sudras* and 8 *Silpa jatis* [craftsman castes] are there. There are also 10 *Patita* [Lower castes] *jatis* and *neeca* or the lowermost has 8 *jatis* in them. Altogether the *jatis* are 64.

EMS writes on the contribution of Sankaracharya to the caste system of Kerala thus, “In the first sight it may look ridiculous to consider the author of *Sankara Smruti* and the compilation of the erroneous 64 *anacharams* is the same Sankaracharya who through his *advaita* and philosophical expertise attracted the intellectual attention of whole India. But it may not look incongruous if accept the fact that through his *advaita* Sankaracharya has defeated the Buddhist system, which was a popular movement which stood against the brahmanical system of social stratification, beyond the point of no comeback. In the context of Kerala defeat of Buddhism and

²³³ As cited by Padmanabha Menon KP , *KOCHIRAJYACHARITHRAM* [Malayalam], [1914], Mathrubhumi Edition [1989], [1996] Calicut, 1996, p.79

triumph of *advaita* means the defeat of ancient Kerala system and the triumph of caste and feudal systems”²³⁴.

Brahmins who migrated Kerala completely forsaken their cultural behavior of their mother land and adopted a new system of existence and structured it through the 64 *anacharams*. This surely happened due to their contact with the existing communities in Kerala when they arrived in. The social situation of Kerala seem to be a fluid one when the Brahmins arrived in the land as it can be sensed from the ambiguous *Varna* system in Kerala.

AMBIGUOUS VARNA SYSTEM

One of the interesting aspects of the caste system in Kerala is its inherent ambiguity of the *Varna* system. The Brahmins who came into Kerala when the *Varna* system well established in North India could not enforce that in Kerala. It is a fact that in the case of Kerala the *Varna* system does not work as perfect as elsewhere in India. The Nair community is named as belonging to *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra* in many instances. Nairs are called the “Malayali Sudras” in the 1875 census²³⁵. The *Ambalavasis* or the *antarala* group of castes is not sure where they really belong to in the *Varna* system. In short, the castes in Kerala other than the Brahmins are sure of only the fact that they are not Brahmins. This point leads us to the hypothesis that the caste system already existed in Kerala before the arrival of Brahmins. Probably the already established social hierarchy got further structures in the *Varna* hierarchy proposed by

²³⁴ EMS Namboodiripad *KERALAM MALYALIKALUDE MATHRUBHOOMI* [Malayalam], from P Govinda Pillai [Ed], *EMSINTE SAMPOORNA KRITIKAL [COLLECTED WORKS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD Vol. 9- 1948]* [Malayalam] Chinta Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram 2000 , p.93

²³⁵ Jeffrey Robin, *Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940*, *SOCIAL SCIENTIST*, Vol.4, No.8, [March, 1976], p.6

the Brahmins. B Rajeevan argues that “The *Varna* system which was prevalent in all other Indian village societies had never been in existence in Kerala in the same pattern. There are no such groups of people in Kerala which include themselves perfectly in the four-fold division of *Brahmana*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Sudra*. If there is any section of people in Kerala which fully satisfies the concepts of *Varna* division, it is Brahmins. Originally there is not separate section of people in Kerala which practiced the *Varna-dharma* of *Kshatriya* and *Sudras*. The gaps of these two *varnas* came to be filled by the *Nair* castes. A section that functioned as the third caste *Vaisya* is totally absent in Kerala. How did this disagreement between theory and practice happen in Kerala? The only clear answer which is irresistible in this background is that in the pre-Aryan primitive tribes in Kerala the division of labor had not reached such an advanced stage as to divide itself to be fit in the four-fold division of *Varna* system”.²³⁶

When Brahmanism defined the caste system in Kerala they permitted the Nair to be ambiguous about the *Varna* they choose. In a society dominated by the agrarian system and maritime commerce, Nairs prefer to be land owners and agriculture producers and occasional soldiers while they left the commercial activities to the Christians²³⁷ and Jews who were settled/ converted much before the Brahmins

²³⁶ B. Rajeevan , Cultural Formation of Kerala, ESSAYS ON THE CULTURAL FORMATION OF KERALA - LITERATURE, ART, ARCHITECTURE, MUSIC, THEATRE, CINEMA P.J.Chcrian (Ed), Kerala Council of Historical Research, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, http://www.keralahistory.ac.in/cul_kerala.html

²³⁷ Some of the historians believe that Christianity came to Kerala way back in 52 AD when St.Thomas came to Kerala. Yet another tradition suggests that the Christians from Syria came to Kerala under the leadership of Thomas of Knai in 345 AD. During the 5th year of Cera king Sthanu Ravivarma's reign [9th Century AD], Ayyanadigal Tiruvadigal of Venadu region gives a land grad to the Teresa Church at Kollam. Jews seem to have migrated to Kerala in the pre Christian era itself. They probably controlled the trade of spices to Europe.

arrived in Kerala. "The early Christians," says EMS Namboodiripad "like Jews and Muslims in the earlier and later periods, carved for themselves a high and honorable place in Kerala society because of the useful social function they discharged, namely trade"²³⁸. The above statement by EMS can be a perfect explanation to the observation of Rajeevan which reads thus, "the absence of a trader caste in the Kerala model *Varna* system is highly significant against the background of the minute division of castes and sub-castes for each minor occupation"²³⁹.

EMS Namboodiripad suspects that the Nairs of Kerala had already achieved a position in the social hierarchy to dictate terms with the Brahmins when the latter entered Kerala. "If the Nairs could retain their social customs even after they came into the contact of Brahmins, it is quite clear that they possessed a culture equal to the Brahmins. Elsewhere the tribes were completely surrendered to the brahmanical culture or pushed away to the fringes of society as *avarnas*"²⁴⁰ says EMS Namboodiripad. There are many instances which prove that the Nambutiri Brahmins adopted the customs and practices of the original inhabitants of Kerala. To quote Govindan Namboodiri "The attitude and approach of Nambutiris towards the Non-Brahmins had been essentially different from those of Brahmins of other parts of India. In other parts like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu they, with their own tradition and culture, almost kept apart themselves from the non- Brahmins. In Kerala

²³⁸ EMS Namboodiripad, *Economic Backwardness of Harijan In Kerala*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 4, No.12 (Jul., 1976), p. 63

²³⁹ B. Rajeevan , Cultural Formation of Kerala, ESSAYS ON THE CULTURAL FORMATION OF KERALA - LITERATURE, ART, ARCHITECTURE, MUSIC, THEATRE, CINEMA P.J.Chcrian (Ed), Kerala Council of Historical Research, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, http://www.keralahistory.ac.in/cul_kerala.htm

²⁴⁰ EMS Namboodiripad *KERALAM MALYALIKALUDE MATHRUBHOOMI* [Malayalam], from P Govinda Pillai [Ed], *EMSINTE SAMPOORNA KRITIKAL* [COLLECTED WORKS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD Vol. 9- 1948] [Malayalam] Chinta Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram 2000 ,p.78

Nambutiris mingled with them at different levels. This fact had far-reaching consequences in the cultural and social set up of Kerala. A Nambutiri would take a plunge in water after touching his own son born to Kshatriya or Nair wife. But he would teach him Sanskrit and allied subjects except those directly connected with Vedas like *Vedanta* and *Mimamsa*. Their only aim seems to be to keep the Vedic tradition intact which determined their identity as a sect from Non-Brahmins²⁴¹. Even in the way of dressing Kerala Brahmins followed the same system of the Nairs but during the ritual performance they wear the *dhotis* in the way other Brahmins do.

Another aspect of *Malayala* Brahmins which distinguishes them from the other Brahmins is the property right within the patrilineal system they follow. It may be also noted here that not all the Kerala Brahmins follow the patrilineal system. The Brahmins of Payyanur²⁴² [the northern most settlement of the Brahmins in Kerala] follow the matrilineal system of inheritance adopting the local customs. The legends says that Parasurama instructed the Brahmins to follow the system of the local people and merge with them but the majority of the Brahmins refused to do so. Back to the inheritance system *Malayala* Brahmins follow a very distinct system where only the eldest son of the family is given the legal right to inherit the property and the hereditary rights [like the customary positions] from his father. The eldest son of the family also retained the right to marry the girls from the Brahmin caste. The rest of the sons were free to enter into marital relation with any castes, preferably from the *antarala jatis* or *Kshatriyas*. The other castes have found it convenient to have

²⁴¹ Namboodiri Govidan V, *SRAUTA SACRIFICE IN KERALA*, Calicut University Sanskrit Series – 13, University of Calicut, 2002

²⁴² In 2010 Payyanur Brahmins collectively made a decision to change into patrilineal system. There were elaborate rituals and celebrations to mark the occasion.

‘visiting eligible husbands’ in the *Sambandham*²⁴³ system. Here is a section society which adheres to the strict rules of endogamy in one case and prescribing the exogamy on the other. Why did the Brahmins accept exogamy? The answer is the possibility of equal powerful system existed in Kerala when they arrived.

EMS visualizes a clash of cultures where each culture trying to retain its identity and making certain changes to avoid direct conflicts. Even in the present times one can see the coexistence of these cultures. For example the marriage custom of Kerala Brahmins is based on the *gruhyasutras* with sacrificial rituals but the Nair or Izhava weddings even now do not need a Brahmin priest or sacrificial rituals. There are many temples which are called *Kavus* in south Kerala and *Aras* in north Kerala which are managed by the Nairs and Izhavas which do not follow the worshipping system of the Brahmins. Many of these shrines use the items like toddy [intoxicative drink tapped from the coconut or palm tree] and meat which are tabooed against in brahmanical shrines.

OTHER CASTES

Nairs

Can we consider Nairs and Izhavas as the original inhabitants of Kerala? Many historians deny the possibility of them being the aborigines of Kerala. Theorization about immigration of communities seems to be in vogue among the Kerala historians. The legend of *KERALA MAHATMYAM* which narrates that the first batch of Brahmins fled away from Kerala because they were harassed by the Nagas. Based on

²⁴³ In this system a non Brahmin lady can enter into marriage contract with a Brahmin. The husband in this system is merely a progenitor, having no responsibility or right over his off springs.

this legend some of the historians claims that the Nagas mentioned in legend are none but the Nairs of Kerala and the conflict referred was the first Nair –Brahmin confrontation. A person who has visited Kerala would know that the tropical climatic condition of Kerala is ideal for venomous snakes to breed. Definitely there is popularity of naga worship in Kerala where each family would have a grove or Kavay attached to it. Each of the temples in Kerala will have a tree underneath which one can see the carved images of nagas placed. I am not sure whether it will be right to link the Naga cult of north India to that of Kerala; moreover there hardly any evidence to link the Nagas to Nairs. Taking this route some of the historians claims that Nairs migrated from North India [some say Chhatta Nagpur!!!] or Nepal due to the closeness of Nairs with Newar community of Nepal who follow the matrilineal system like the Nairs. Fortunately nobody has claimed the Indian State of Nagaland as the original home of the Nairs. Padmanabha Menon concludes the discussion on Nairs thus, “The origin of Nairs as stated by each one historian and other are contradictory. Some of the historians claim that they were the aborigines of Kerala, but the opinion that they were migrants from North India who entered Kerala in ancient times seems to be more acceptable”.²⁴⁴

Izhava / Tiya

Similar theories also floated on the Izhava / Tiya community. For a change they appear to have come into Kerala from South. Many historians consider them as migrated from Sri Lanka carrying along with them Buddhism as well mascot of Kerala, the coconut tree. Indeed there are much historical evidences to prove the

²⁴⁴ KP Padmanabha Menon, *KERALA CHARITRAM*, as cited by EMS Namboodiripad *KERALAM MALYALIKALUDE MATHRUBHOOMI* [Malayalam], from P Govinda Pillai [Ed], *EMSINTE SAMPOORNA KRITIKAL* [COLLECTED WORKS OF EMS NAMBOODIRIPAD Vol. 9- 1948] [Malayalam] Chinta Publishers, Thiruvananthapuram 2000, p.76

connection between Kerala and Sri Lanka in the way of food habits²⁴⁵ and dynastical relations, but considering the whole population of Izhavas as migrants seems too far fetched. Another reason why some scholars consider them as migrants from Sri Lanka is due to the word Izhava, interpreted as the person from *Ilam* [meaning island]. Linking the whole community with coconut is also based on the vocation castes theory quite akin to the myth of the creation Izhavas. The myth states that, to stop Shiva drinking toddy, Parvati increased the height of the coconut tree. Shiva then created Izhava to climb the tree and bring him the toddy.

Izhavas definitely had some connection to Buddhism as evident from their involvement with medicinal practices. There are important Izhava families who practice ayurveda. The collaboration between Itti Achutan Vaidyar, a Izhava traditional medical practitioner and Hendrik van Rheede, the Governor of the Dutch administration in Kochi, in compiling the *Hortus Malabaricus* (meaning Garden of Malabar) an encyclopedia of medicinal flora of Kerala [compiled between 1674 and 1693, and published between 1678 and 1693] is quite well known. Itty Achutan Vaidyar belonged to the family traditional doctors namely Kollatt family of Kadakkarapally, near Cherthala town, in Alappuzha district of Kerala. In north Kerala the Izhava [known as the Tiya in Malabar] community practices *tarka* known as *Maruttu Kali* during the festivals of their *Kavus*. Here is a community who did not have the right education reciting Sanskrit verses. The hand gestures of the arguers called as Panikkers are quite similar to the present day Buddhist monks practicing *Tarka*. The knowledge of Sanskrit and ayurveda did not come from their proximity to Brahmins but from some other sources, mostly Buddhist. There are other non

²⁴⁵ There is a food item called "*Puttu*" shared by Keralites and Sri Lankans

brahmanical castes involved in the trades which are entirely brahmanical, for example astrology. The Kaniyan community of South Kerala and Poduval of North Kerala practices astrology based on Sanskrit texts like *HORA SASTRA*.

Whether the Nairs and Izhavas were the original inhabitants of Kerala still remain a point of contention, however it is quite clear that they were very well settled in Kerala when the Brahmins arrived. The society was already structured with certain social norms accepted by both communities. The Brahmins affiliated one of the group and upgraded their position to the higher strata of the caste hierarchy while the other who probably aligned with Buddhism fighting the Brahmin dominance were pushed to lower level. This social stratification got its religious sanction through the temples and economic support through the *Janmi* system based on the *Devasvam*, *Brahmasvam*, and *Pandaram* division of land.

Other Castes

Apart from Brahmins, Samantas, *antarala jatis*, Nairs and Izhavas there lot many caste in Kerala who constitute the lower portion of the caste hierarchy. Among them the Pulayan or Cherumas and Parayas do constitute the majority of the population. Interestingly these castes are spread all over Kerala without concentrating on any particular locality. Needless to state that their economical and social position remained distressed throughout Kerala. They definitely had an augmented social position before the *jati* system got established in Kerala. In north Malabar, the region where I belong to, it is the Pulayas, who announce the arrival of the season of festivals

with their *Teyyam*. Ananta Krishna Aiyer²⁴⁶ states that the word Pulayan comes from the root word 'pula' [Pollution]. This does not seem right as the interpretation of relating them to 'Pulam' meaning land/ paddy field appear more convincing²⁴⁷. Pulayas were definitely related to the land and this attachment with the land later became a legal bondage till they were released from this bondage in Tiruvitankur on 24th June, 1855²⁴⁸ and in 1862 in the regions of Malabar and Kochi. Though slavery lost its legality it continued as custom even in 20th century, at least in the first quarter of it. S. Subbarama Aiyer²⁴⁹ writes in his article, *Economic Life in a Malabar Village* [1925], "One peculiar feature of agricultural labor in Malabar is the existence of a class of semi-slaves. From time immemorial they were slaves under law as well as in fact. They are even now agricultural serfs attached to their masters' soil and actually transferred to the buyer of land to which they are attached. They are often lent out for services to another for a small *pattam*, or rent by the master. This is however legally prohibited, but persists in certain out of the way places. They are mere agricultural workers and have no sort of proprietorship in the land. They regard themselves as their masters' property. They behave well, are obedient, honest and loyal to their masters, very earnest about their work, but are completely illiterate." When the Munro Island in Tiruvitankur was granted to the Church Missionary Society [CMS] around 100 Pulayas also were transferred with the land. After certain altercation with

²⁴⁶ Nellikkal, Muraleedharan, *KERALA JATI VIAVARANAM*, [Malayalam], [Encyclopedia of Caste System] Rainbow Book Publishers, Cengannur, Kerala, 2008, p. 260

²⁴⁷ Nellikkal, Muraleedharan, *KERALA JATI VIAVARANAM*, [Malayalam], [Encyclopedia of Caste System] Rainbow Book Publishers, Cengannur, Kerala, 2008, p. 260

²⁴⁸ Velupilla, TK Sadasyatilaka, *THE TRAVANCORE STATE MANUEL*, Volume II, History, 1940, First reprint, Government of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1996, p.568

²⁴⁹ As quoted by Hunt WS, Rev. *Slavery in Kerala*, in Tankappan, KK [Ed], *KERALA SOCIETY PAPERS*, Volume. I and II [1928 – 33] Reprint, Government of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997, p.277

the local *savarnas* the missionaries were able to release the slaves, as the letter from Rev. Joseph Peet²⁵⁰ states;

“We the undersigned, acting as trustees of Munro Island, do hereby declare that.....who has hitherto been the slave of the soil, is from this time liberated by us and made a free man, and that his wife and offspring are wholly and forever free and are regarded by us only as hired servants, and that no one has any right to bring them into servitude again.”

There are many slave-sale deeds which brought out by the earlier editors of Kerala Society Papers like TK Joseph which states that the person who is sold [the Pulaya woman] “and the children to be born of her are sold so as to sold again, bound, put in stocks or killed if necessary”²⁵¹.

Other distressed castes like Parayas, Channars, Nayadis and many others had gone through the phase where they being the target of the *savarna* atrocities. The Paraya community’s main occupation was scavenging and thus considered to be polluting by the brahmanical system. The special privileges like the *Pulappedi*, *Mannappedi* and *Parappedi*, through which on a particular day these castes can claim a girl from the *savarna* castes by just touching them, or even throwing a stone at them from a distance and shouting “*Kande Kande* [I saw, I saw]” did not give these communities any relief on the contrary it increased the animosity between the *savarnas* and *avarnas*. By the coming of Christianity either through Portuguese, especially through

²⁵⁰ As quoted by Hunt WS, Rev. *Slavery in Kerala*, in Tankappan, KK [Ed], KERALA SOCIETY PAPERS, Volume. I and II [1928 – 33] Reprint, Government of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997, p.277

²⁵¹ TK Joseph, Appendix I, for the article of Rev. Hunt, *Slavery in Kerala*, in Tankappan, KK [Ed], KERALA SOCIETY PAPERS, Volume. I and II [1928 – 33] Reprint, Government of Kerala, Kerala Gazetteers, Thiruvananthapuram, 1997, p.280

the works of St. Francis Xavier or through the missionary organizations like London Missionary Society [LMS] or Church Mission Society [CMS] especially in Tiruvitankur most of these castes preferred to convert to Christianity which offered them better economical, social and pedagogical opportunities.

There are more than seventy *jatis* in Kerala and it should be noted that among them the number of *savarna jatis* are less than twenty who controlled the economy, social system, education and culture of the land. The cultural manifestations of Kerala like *Kathakali*, *Mohiniyattam*, *Koottu*, *Koodiyattam*, the temple architecture, exquisitely carved wooden panels of the temples, murals on the palace walls of Kerala, great Puram festivals [like Trissur] were banned for them, they were aliens in their own land. By early 20th century slowly this iron curtain based on the purity [*suddham*] and impurity [*asuddham* or *ayittam*] between the *savarnas* and *avarnas* starts fading thanks to the awareness of modernity and nationalist sentiments nurtured by visionaries and social activists.

PURITY AS THE PARAMETER FOR CASTE HIERARCHY

The caste system in Kerala and elsewhere followed certain customs and taboos to retain the social structure. The system of caste hierarchy aimed at the division of the society and created its own devices of segregation, namely endogamy, laws of inheritance, the laws of sharing the food and the most potent and worst of all, the untouchability. The word for untouchability in Malayalam language is *ayittam* and *Tindal*. *Ayittam* probably came from the Sanskrit word '*asuddha*' meaning 'impure', stands for the whole system of caste hierarchy and segregation based on the purity

and *Tindal* means the mundane practice of *ayittam*. The word *Tindal* originated from the Malayalam word *todu*, meaning touch. Even now visiting the Kerala temples one can get a glimpse of the *Tindal* when the *santhikkaran* gives you the *prasadam* or offering, he drops it into the receiver's hand leaving the distance of at least one foot between the devotee and himself. Here he is keeping the distance of *Tindal*. As mentioned elsewhere in the present thesis, in 19th century, a Nambutiri Brahmin has to take bath to purify, if touches his own son, through a Nair woman. At times even the economic empowerment did not help the lower castes who had to follow *ayittam* as a social behavior. To quote TK Madhavan, "My companion on my daily trip to and from school was a Nair boy ... whose poor mother was a dependant of ours. He could go straight along the roads, whereas I, in spite of being economically better off, had to leave the road every now and then [to avoid polluting caste – Hindus]"²⁵².

First reference about the *Tindal* comes from Sankaracharya himself in his *MANISHAPANCHAKAM*²⁵³. The legend says that Sankaracharya was walking in one of the by lanes of Banaras when he was confronted by a *Chandala*. Seeing untouchable, Sankaracharya's disciples were warning the *chandala* shouting 'go away, go away'. Instead of going away, Chandala stood on his ground and asked Sankaracharya thus,

*Annamayadannamayamathava caitanyameva caitanyat/
Yativara durikartum vanccasi kim bruhi gacca gacceti//*

²⁵² Quoted in A Aiyappan, "*Iravas and Culture Change*", Madras Government Museum Bulletin, V, 1, 1943, pp 45-6. Cited here from Jeffrey Robin, *Temple-Entry Movement in Travancore, 1860-1940*, SOCIAL SCIENTIST, Vol.4, No.8, [March, 1976], p.12

²⁵³ http://sanskritdocuments.org/all_pdf/manishhaa5.pdf

Translation: O, great ascetic! Tell me. Do you want me to keep a distance from you, by uttering 'go away' 'go away' taking me to be an outcaste? Is it addressed from one body made of food to another body made of food?

The *Sankarasmruti* a text erroneously attributed to Sankaracharya mentions the dictums based on untouchability like “You must bath if you touch a Sudra” and “You must bath if you happen to be near a Chandala”²⁵⁴ among the 64 anacharams. The text also prescribes the distance each caste has to keep from *auapasangni* the sacrificial fire. The table below would illustrate this;

Caste	Minimum distance from sacrificial fire	Minimum distance from Brahmin
Sacchudra / Samanta/ antarala	3 feet	3 feet
Sudra / 'Malayali Sudra'/ Nair	6 feet	6 feet
Rajaka / Washerman	6 feet	6 feet
Sutika/ Tailor	18 feet	18 feet
Carpenter, Black smith, Goldsmith, Brass metal worker	48 feet	48 feet
Toddy tapper, Svapaca, Pulkasa, Vyadha	64 feet	64 feet

“These rules were framed first for keeping the fire unpolluted from the polluted persons”, writes Govindan Namboodiri, “the pollution being caused by impurity or caste. Gradually these were applied to Brahmins who represents the Fire, the Fire being the representative symbol of Vedic tradition. When these rules were applied to Brahmins in case of the people of lower castes, it became an unchallengeable social custom called *Tintal*. It became a glaring symbol of their supremacy. This custom

²⁵⁴ Fred Fawcett , NAMBUTIRIS-Notes on Some of the People of Malabar, Madras Government Museum, Bulletin, Vol.III, NO. 1, 1900, [Reprint] Asian Education Services, New Delhi, 2001

developed in other castes relatively. This relative distance of inapproachability became a measure of relative status of each caste”²⁵⁵.

Ambedkar wrote in 1943, “Most parts of the world have had their type of what Ward calls the lowly. The Romans had their slaves, the Spartans their helots, the British their villeins, the Americans their Negroes and the Germans their Jews. So the Hindus have their Untouchables. But none of these can be said to have been called upon to face a fate which is worse than the fate which pursues the Untouchables. Slavery, serfdom, villeinage have all vanished. But Untouchability still exists and bids fair to last as long as Hinduism will last”²⁵⁶. The situation in Kerala is far better now regarding the vise of untouchability, thanks to the movements of social reforms enthused by education system starting from the fag end of 19th century, however the opening of public roads and government institutions to the the lower caste happened only in the first quarter of 20th century. Eventually these movements were succussful in breaking the pillars of orxodoxy and opening the Temples, through temple entry proclamations. The Temple entry procalmation however left certian spaces exclusively for the Brahmins - that is the ***Namaskara Mandapa*** which still remain as the vestige of a caste society.

²⁵⁵ Namboodiri Govidan V, *SRAUTA SACRIFICE IN KERALA*, Calicut University Sanskrit Series – 13, University of Calicut, 2002

²⁵⁶ Ambedkar BR, *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables* from <http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/.htm>