CHAPTER VII

SOCIETY AND ECONOMY UNDER THE ZAMORINS

Kerala of the medieval times had some peculiar socio-economic practices, which, in many ways, were uncommon to the other parts of the nation. This is gleaned from the hold the caste system and its attendant evils had on society. All infections of the Dharmasastras had a practical hold on the kings and their people of Kerala. This was made systematic by the caste Nambutiri Brahmins, their Kshatriya rulers and their Nayar military officers. Malabar was one of the early regions that came under the spell of the Brahminic codes and their concocted stories. One such story is that of Parasurama as narrated in the Keralolpathi and the other is the Mabali-Vamana story, the bedrock of the Onam festival.

Calicut, occupying the major part of Malabar, was closely associated with the customs and manners of the Malabar Province. The natives of Calicut adopted the same practices as in other parts of Malabar. The people had always been heterogeneous in character. The society itself was sharply divided on the basis of caste and kinship. These were the two fundamental principles of organization that managed the entire structure of the society. The caste system, the basis of social organization, acted as the medium through which the occupation of the people was regulated to a large extent. Groups of people having specific social ranks, defined generally by birth and descent, marriage and occupations, were widespread in India.

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3 T. Ramaswamy, Merchant Class South India, 1336-1665, Madurai, 1997, p.31.
Caste is rooted in a distant antiquity and even today it dictates to every person the orthodox section in particular, the rules, regulations and restrictions of social intercourse and occupation. Each caste has its own customs that restrict the occupations, habits and diet habits of its members and their social contacts with members of other castes. The Portuguese travellers in the 16th century first applied the word casta in 1525 to denote the Indian caste system. The Portuguese word ‘Casta’ means ‘breed’ or ‘lineage’. Everything brings back to the elements of the old family constitution; the true name of the caste is ‘Jati’, which means ‘race’. The terms here correspond very adequately to; gens, curia, tribe in Rome; family, paratria, phyte in Greece; family, Gotra, caste in India.

Most of the Indian languages mention it as Jati; however, this word, in fact, does not correspond to the word caste. The caste system not only determines the individuals social order on the basis of the group to which he is born but also differentiates and assigns occupational and economic role. It has been rightly pointed out that in actual operation caste affiliations take not the vertical homogenous class and status forms of varna but the horizontal heterogeneous and segmental form of Jati. Varna represents a ‘scale of values’. In Malabar certain sections of people were considered as high and some as low. The first group consisted of Brahmins, kings and their branches, and Nayars, who formed the social hierarchy of priests, kings and

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5 Emile Senart, Caste in India, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 188-189.

nobility.\textsuperscript{7} The other group consisted of the agrestic slaves, the fishermen, the artisans, craftsmen, etc. They were considered the low caste people, as their work was considered indecent. In the land which cradled Hinduism, life and thought were shaped and dominated by caste. No wonder then, that caste has been of interest to sociologists and anthropologists throughout the globe. The major implications of the hierarchical division are that the caste system functions through, “hierarchical birth status groups” and includes a “symbolic expression of social distance and privileges” – everywhere in India says Ghurye.\textsuperscript{8} H. Cooley says, “When a class is some what strictly hereditary, we may call it a caste”.\textsuperscript{9}

Religion too had its own share in maintaining this stratification. During the advent of the Europeans in Malabar, the various strands of indigenous beliefs and customs were collectively known to the Europeans as Hinduism.\textsuperscript{10} It was the principal faith of majority of the people of Malabar. Under the caste hierarchy, the low caste people were denied their rights and treated as outcastes. With the arrival of foreign missionaries in the soil of Malabar they gave asylum to the low caste people. So a large number of the segregated people embraced Christianity to escape from caste rigidity.


\textsuperscript{8} Rajendra Pandey, The Caste System in India (Myth & Reality), New Delhi, 1986, pp. 1-3.

\textsuperscript{9} S. Sen & G.S. Mansukhani, (eds.), Society of India, New Delhi, 2001, p. 44.

Brahmins and Nambutiri Brahmins:

The Brahmins, the uppermost ladder of the society, took it their duty to be on the super-structure of social hierarchy in Calicut. These Brahmins were otherwise known as Nambutiris in Kerala. These Brahmins are still divided into numerous groups differing in customs and manners. They considered themselves to be the Vedic Brahmins of the pure-Aryan type (blood), though it is impossible to maintain such a structural superiority in a heterogeneous society. There is a definite scheme of social precedence amongst the caste, with the Brahmin as the head of the hierarchy. The term hierarchy is derived from the Greek word “hierarchies” combining two words; heroes-sacred and arkho-rule. Hierarchy is a dharmic or metaphysically determined system. Dissemination of blood took place at all levels at all times. Therefore, pure-blood group cannot exist. The pure-blood Aryans used Sanskrit as their sacred language. The term Nambutiri is popular in Kerala that is used to designate a Kerala Brahmin. They were the caste of some inferior mixture of Indian blood, but in this context, it is to be noted that the term Nambutiri is essentially of Tamil in origin. The syllable ‘Nambu’ means ‘sacred’ or ‘trusted’ in Tamil Nadu. The syllable ‘thiri’ is an honorific suffix used in Malabar. The term ‘thiri’ when used independently means the ‘sacred lighting thread’. Thereby, the word may mean that the person can enlighten by performing the sacred duty in the temple. It is also

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claimed that the term **Nambutiri** is derived from the Sanskrit word of Nam, ‘knowledge’ and Purikka (to impart).\(^{16}\) But, it probably seems to be that the term is more of an indigenous Tamil derivation. In the social hierarchy the highest place was occupied by the **Nambutiris**. It is believed by some that they devised a well defined system of maintaining superiority over the other castes in order to keep the latter in a state of stupidity and ignorance.\(^{17}\) According to legends, as enunciated in the Kerala **Mahatmiyam** and **Keralolpathi**, the **Nambutiris** were brought to **Kerala** by Parasurama and they received more rights from him.\(^{18}\) Their traditional occupation was priesthood and thereby attained high social status. The **Malabar Rajas**, like their counterparts in other parts of India, though they wielded immense power, were but subordinate to the **Nambutiris**. The spiritual vocation coupled with the performance of rites and rituals enabled them to a considerable wealth. With the patronage of the rulers, the Brahmins emerged as a prosperous group. Separate villages and tax free lands were allotted for their secluded settlements. Such places were known as gramams or mangalams or brahmaswams. They had their own sabhas for transactions. Even the king could not wield political power within its limits and it enjoyed complete autonomy. There was another authority called the **Sanketam**, the administration of which was carried on by the temple officers who exercised great power over the local chieftains, as well as the kings.\(^{19}\) Corporations of such **Nambutiri** Brahmins often lived on the proceeds of large agricultural estates

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\(^{18}\) S.K. Nayar & C.A. Menon (ed.), “**Keralolpathi**” Malayalam Dept, Series, University of Madras, 1953, pp. IX-X.

transferred to them by the kings and chieftains. Many Brahmins became affluent and enjoyed great influence. However, all the Brahmins did not pursue the traditional and hereditary occupation, some were engaged in secular and commercial professions as well. Generally, in Kerala, the rulers spent large resources for the support and comfort of the Brahmins. But the Brahmins, who were not necessarily trained to teach Vedas or perform sacrifices, obtained high posts in government services.

The Venetian merchant traveller Marco Polo of the 13th century makes note of the customs and conventions that prevailed among the Brahmins. According to him, the Brahmins were very often referred to as abraiman. The ‘non Brahmins’, are the best merchants in the world and the most truthful, for they would not tell a lie for anything on earth. When the foreign merchants who did not know much of the country, approached them, dealt with them gently, sold their commodities in the most loyal manner without demanding any commission. They ate no fish and drank no wine, and lived a life of great chastity. On no account did they take the belongings of others. They maintained close association with the kings, who were eager to purchase precious stones and large pearls. The Brahmins had no hesitation in giving Brahmin girls to the Kshatriyas, who showered on these girls a lot of grace and sometimes sold their kingdoms to the Brahmins by hook or by crook. A branch of Nambutiri Brahmins, called Bhattar or ‘foreign Brahmins’ largely lived in the Malabar District and they generally adopted the same policy of the native Brahmins. They were immigrants from the Tamil Country, settled mostly in the neighbourhood of the

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22 Malabar Collectorate Records, V.4033-1, G.No.24562, p.29.
Malabar region. Among them were also Brahmins who came from the Tulu Country. Sheik Zein-ud-din, giving the earliest account of the social system, mentions that the thread-wearing group of “Brahmins and others of various degrees high, low and intermediate grade” formed the highest. During the period of Duarte Barbosa, the Malabar society was classified on the basis of occupational differentiation. According to him, the Brahmins were then the land owners.

The Brahmins earned properties for their service to the temples. It is a fact that the temples were centers of cultural life in Malabar as elsewhere during early to the medieval period. A board of trustees called uralars ‘the rulers of villages’ consisting Nambutiris were vested with the management of the temples and the landed property which belonged to them. Sometimes the Nambutiri family would have trusteeship right over more than one temple. With the religious performance and other rituals of the temples, the practice of granting land and other objects to defray the cost of maintenance also began. The grant of land during the medieval period sheds a considerable light on the nature of the society and the ruling class. In the meantime, the kings, ruling chieftains, men of respectable positions and even private individuals on several occasions granted land to the temples. The Nambutiris who

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acted as the trustees of these land grants and priests of the temples gradually got
control over these lands.\(^{27}\)

The Nambutiris commanded great respect on account of the services in the
temple and of enjoying political power in the locality. Because of their services in the
temples, large portions of land came under their control and a good number of them
became great land lords or influential rulers.\(^{28}\) It is learnt that the land of Malabar in
the 16\(^{th}\) century saw under certain corporation, classified as Brahmaswams,\(^ {29}\)
Devaswam\(^ {30}\) and Cherikal (‘special quarters meant for the high castes’). The land of
the Nambutiris came under the category of Cherikal lands and property rights were
held by the respective ruling families.\(^ {31}\) Such land owning class wielded greater
power in the society, which inevitably enabled them to control the revenue but they
did not spill even a single drop of their sweating on the land to cultivate it. In fact,
they leased the lands out to various tenants. The lands of the Nambutiris and their
tenants were popularly known as Janmam (birth right) and Janmi respectively in
Kerala. Rights have originated in the early ages, it prevailed only during the medieval
period between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D.\(^ {32}\) Their respectable position
in the society made their interference in the administration of the temple, namely

\(^{27}\) M.G.S. Narayanan, *Political and Social Conditions of Kerala under the
Kulasekhara Empire unpublished Ph.D Thesis*, University of Kerala, 1972,
pp.329-335.

\(^{28}\) L.A. Ravivarma, *Castes of Malabar, Kerala Society Papers*, Vol. II, Series. 9,
1932, pp. 182- 183.

\(^{29}\) Brahmaswam means ‘a land of Brahmin settlement’.

\(^{30}\) Devaswam means ‘land donated to the upkeep of temple’.


\(^{32}\) Walker Report on the Tenures and Forms of Transfer of Land in Malabar dated
20\(^{th}\) July 1801, Calicut, 1862, p. 65.
Samudayam (Sabhayogam). Even though they tried the cases of theft and offered expiation to their sins, the property of the offender was confiscated as it was the decision of the temple authorities.\(^3^3\)

The Brahmins followed some old traditional practices to maintain their superiority and separate identity in the society. At the age of seven, they put around their necks a leather strap two fingers width which they call Cressuamergan and their hair shape is like a wild ass. The young Brahmins were not allowed to eat betel when they wear that strap around their neck, passing under arm. When a young Brahmin attained the age of fourteen, the leather strap from his neck was removed and was declared a Brahmin. Then they put on three threads as a mark of being a Brahmin which he wore all his life. During this occasion, they did this with great paraphernalia which rite is called upanayana. This period of life was called Brahmacharya (period of strict training in the gurukula method). Thereafter he was allowed to chew betel,\(^3^4\) a kind of recognition of his attainment of maturity.

The Brahmins gave much respect to mid chastisement. Among them, only the eldest could marry from the same gotra and kula and the other brothers remained unmarried throughout their lives, but could have liaison (sambhandam) with Nayar girls or Kshatriya girls (‘clandestive sexual relations’). The Brahmins guarded their wives well but did not grant them freedom to move freely and if any of them died, they did not marry again but had illegal sexual relations with his wife’s sisters, who too remained unmarried. This was polygamy in another way. These women gave much respect to their husbands and never entertained ideas against their husbands.

\(^3^3\) TAS., Vol. IV, p.59.
On the other hand, the treatment meted out to Nambutiri women was third rate, for they had to move about in the Tarawad without upper garments.

A general custom that prevailed among was degrading and pitiable. It was cruel that if a Brahmin woman had wronged her husband, she would have been slain by poison. The Brahmin bachelors had the privilege of sleeping with and having frivolous sex with Nayar women at the medieval period. The vagabonds proclaimed this illegal insemination leading to the birth of men of wisdom. The Nayar women too considered this meritorious. This gave special privileges to the Brahmins contact many Nayar women and thus polluted the society. They told that this wise monstrosity of Nambutiri blood was meritorious and the off springs of such illegal license were held of ‘highbrain’. These vagabonds had neither respect nor responsibility. However, in the early ages, Brahmins were not allowed to mingle with Sudras or other caste women. A Brahmin family called Taravad, was under the control of the eldest son of the family called Karanavan, who was to legally marry a Brahmin woman of the same gotra and kula, but could have any number of women illegally. This system of marriage alone helped them keep the land undivided. The younger male line of the Nambutiri families had, in fact, no property rights and, therefore, could not marry from the Nambutiri Taravad. By general practice, he was forced to seek sexual relations with Nayar women. Since the Nayar men were in the army, their women had enjoyed the matrilineal rights and thus became polyandrous. Brahmins wrote some scriptures highlighting these privileges. This can be gleaned

from the practice of **Smartavicaram** a practice as stated by Sankaracharya.\(^{36}\) Sons born to such vagabonds and Nayar girls were treated as **Anulomar**. According to **Manu**, the Brahmins were strictly prohibited from having intercourse with other caste women and their children were given the status of **Pratilomar** (outcaste).\(^{37}\) In course of time, when the **Nambutiri** Brahmins and Nayars allied themselves and maintained a social and religious pre-eminence,\(^{38}\) this practice of illegal intercourse seems to have sprung up. When women of the **Nambutiri** families went to worship their gods or to visit a neighbouring area they were accompanied by their Nayar maid.\(^{39}\) The accounts of the later part of the 17\(^{th}\) and 18\(^{th}\) centuries A.D. clearly record the marriage customs of the Brahmins. Winter Botham of the **Malabar** Commission observes that the Brahmin **tali-tier** was a relic of the past when the Brahmin was entitled to the first fruits, and it was considered a high privilege of every Nayar maid to be introduced by them to womanhood. Justice Moor points out “while the **Zamorin** marries, he must not cohabit with the bride till the **Nambutiri** or chief priest had enjoyed her and if he pleases he may have three nights in her company, because the first fruit of the nuptials must be a holy oblation to the god she worships”.\(^{40}\) Generally, the Brahmins occupied a respectable place in the society due to their spiritual services and were honoured by the rulers. At present, the Brahmins followed a cordial relation with all people without any caste discrimination. The Tali-kettu ceremony is, it may be noted that,

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referred to by Kerr; who, in his translation of Castaneda, states that, “these sisters of
the Zamorin, and other kings of Malabar, have handsome allowances to live upon,
and when any of them reaches the age of ten, their kindred send for a young man of
the Nayar Caste, out of the kingdom, and give him great presents to induce him to
initiate the young virgin; after which he hangs a Jewel round her neck, which she
wears all the rest of her life, as a token that she is now at liberty to dispose of herself
to any one she pleases as long as she lives”.41

Nayars:

In the social hierarchy in Kerala, the Nayars ranked next to the Brahmins. They occupied this place due to their military service. If the Nambutiri Brahmins became great landlords through their exalted position in religion, the Nayars attained their position through their excellent military service. In the caste system, though the Nayars were considered of lower status as Sudras, in Malabar they ranked higher than agriculturists.42 They, in fact, not only acted as the feudal landlords, but performed the functions of Kshatriyas.43 Nayars became the dominant caste. After the Perumal rule, the highest position in the social and political life of the state came to be vested with ruling Kshatriyas and Nayars. The Nayars were the traditional Naduvashies and Desavashies having military administrative control over the areas under them.44

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Regarding the etymological derivation of the term ‘Nayar’, scholars have differing views. Some scholars consider it as the honorific plural of the word Nayan derived from the word Nayaka which means the leader of the people. While others think that it was derived from their custom of Naga worship. Some scholars believe that during the disturbed political condition in Kerala, due to the consequent attacks of the Chola ruler Rajendra I in the eleventh century A.D., the Nayars, who wanted to save their land from the Cholas, formed the famous Chavar army. Talikettu Kalyanam and Sambandham system of marriage to the Nayar ladies was there depriving the sanctity of conjugal life among them and to create an army of bachelors for protecting the land and their selfish interests. This peculiar marriage custom gave the Nayar ladies freedom. The introduction of Talikettu Kalyanam, Sambandham system of marriage and the matrilineal system of inheritance was for the formation of the feudal army called Nayar militia. Mr. Nagam Aiya refers to Talikettu Kalyanam as the “formal ceremony of tying of a tali round the neck of the girl” while he mentions sambandham or Pudavakoda (literally cloth giving) as the ceremony of actual alliance as husband and wife. Its modern counterpart may be tharkkolaipatai (the suicide army), who were compelled to dedicate themselves to the defence of the country. During the reign of the Zamorins the Nayars worked as


46 ‘Chavar army’ means one who found one self to death for the honour of one’s country.

47 G. Krishnan Nadar, Socio – Economic background of the Military History of Travancore, Trivandrum, 1993, pp. 131-133.

secretaries and treasurers, unit chiefs called Kaimals.\textsuperscript{49} According to the customs and conventions of the Kerala society, the Nayars were considered matrilineal community and a martial sect. They seem to have originated from the Naga tribe, who worshipped snakes, followed non-Aryan customs, divided into sections according to their vocations. They had a sense of pride in the clan and respect for their women.\textsuperscript{50}

In Malabar, the Nayars were mainly classified into three divisions.\textsuperscript{51} They were the ruling class, known as Samanthas.\textsuperscript{52} The Zamorins of Calicut are also known as Samanthas. The militia of Malabar consisting of agriculturists and the lower classes such as barbers, washer men, potters and weavers. The three divisions were commonly called Nayars but only the two divisions of arms race of Jati occupied the first two places in the society.

The Nayars were ardent lovers of Hinduism and in Malabar, their community followed the customs and manners of the Hindu religion. According to the Malabar Collectorate records, the Nayars of Malabar were a race of people, who are, in general, held in high esteem even by the Europeans. They were respected in the society because they were intelligent, active, intrepid and independent.\textsuperscript{53} Varthema mentions six classes or castes of Malabar in which the Nayars were


\textsuperscript{50} M.J. Koshy, “\textit{Genesis of Political Consciousness in Kerala}”, Kerala Historical Society Series, Trivandrum, 1972, p.9.


\textsuperscript{52} Papers Readoption and marriage in the Travancore ruling family, Trivandrum, 1932, p. 41.

ancient conquerors of the country.\textsuperscript{54} Under the matrilineal inheritance, they followed the system of \textit{marumakkatayam},\textsuperscript{55} which prevails in the family organization of \textbf{Malabar}. This term literally means “descent through sister children”.\textsuperscript{56} They adopted the practices of polygamy and polyandry in two forms, fraternal and non-fraternal. Under fraternal polyandry, the wife of one brother was shared by all the brothers. Generally, in the social customs a woman had a number of husbands, but none could have any claim over her children. Enquiry into this practice had resorted in various views. Some scholars raise the view as to whether polyandry was universal or practiced only in few regions. In the Nayar community, the practice of polyandry was less common.\textsuperscript{57}

The strength of Nayars lay in their being reorganized into a martial class.\textsuperscript{58} They were appointed the military men or found militia of the state and owned “very large part of the land”.\textsuperscript{59} Since the Nayars had all the time to spend in the battle-field, they seem to have liked the new system of inheritance. “If a man had no family obligations, he would have greater liking for martial life”.\textsuperscript{60} In \textbf{Malabar}, some of the Nayars were considered as cultivators, though land cultivation was not their major

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{55} Sukhdev SinghChile, \textit{Beautiful India – Kerala}, New Delhi, 1988, p.11.
\item \textsuperscript{58} F. Fawcett, \textit{Nayars of Malabar}, New Delhi, 1985, p. 286.
\end{itemize}
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occupation. Some left their lands to the lower caste people and slaves\(^{61}\) and collected rent.

The marriage and family organization of the Nayars followed the matrilineal system. It was a unique feature of evolution of the social system.\(^{62}\) Sheik Zain-ud-din, has written about the customs and practices that prevailed among the unbelievers of his period. In the Nayar society, polyandry and matrilineal inheritance existed.\(^{63}\) As to the desired effect of the practice of polyandry, the Nayars were released from the binder and labour of rearing children, and thereby their attachment to the family diminished. No Nayar knew his father; every man looked upon his sister’s children as heirs.\(^{64}\)

Another traveller Francis Buchanan, who visited Malabar during A.D.1800 - 1801 on Wellesly’s behest, gathered information about the daily activities of the natives of Malabar. He recorded the economic condition of the people, their practices and the status of women. According to him, the women of aristocratic Nayar families were in relation with a number of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, who were included in the list of their husbands.\(^{65}\) A general custom followed in the society was that the males of a whole race were to take up compulsory military service from the earliest youth to the decline of manhood. When a Nayar attained seven years, he


was immediately sent to learn in the gymnasium to use the weapons. Later, they were mainly trained in the militia. They were experts both in handling the bows, and arrows and fire arms. They were good fighters too. After completing military training, they earned the title Naya and entered the military service. They alone enjoyed the privilege of carrying arms. Only after they had been so equipped as to bear arms, they could call themselves Naya. They were also called Ayudhajeevins, which means ‘one who lives on arms’. During the war, the whole of the Nayar caste seems to have been on war footing. This does not mean that all the Nayars were soldiers. Their main occupation was to safeguard the country through their military service at the time of war. When peace prevailed in the country, many Nayars carried weapons to act as guards of the travellers in Kerala.

Owing to their dedicated services to the state, the Nayars earned the title Kaimal. They were assigned large estates by the king and had obligation of the Nayar militia to fight in support of the ruler. The Kaimals had a number of Nayar fighters under them. The collection of revenue was used to maintain the palace expenditure and the other portion was paid to the Nayars for the safeguard of the king. They were closely associated with the ruling chieftains because of their military

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service. They could wield considerable influence in the society. The rulers and the
chieftains granted them remuneration through lands, for it was a feudal practice then.
Subsequently, they became big land owners and large portions of land came under
their control. The divisions of big **nadus** into **Naduvazhis** and **desam** into
**Desavazhis** gave rise to a large number of Nayar feudatories. For instance,
Kavalappara Muppil Nayar, **anaduvazhi** defied the authority of the sovereign.\(^73\) As
political leaders of the respective regions, they could gain dominant position in the
society and economy of the village under their jurisdiction. Later, they asserted their
independence from the **Rajas** and made themselves overlords in their respective
areas. A portion of a village or a unit of an administrative organization was called
**tara**. The area of a Nayar family was called a **Taravad**. It also played a significant
role over the vast areas of land under its control.\(^74\) In the joint family under the
**Taravad** system\(^75\) the senior male member, known as the **Karnavar** looked after the
affairs of the family.\(^76\) The courage of the Nayars and their war against the landholder
of the State, earned them fame and glory, but in later days, they acted as chieftains.
Their meritorious services remind us of their names in the history of **Malabar,**
especially Calicut.

**Tiyyas:**

The Tiyyas occupied the social status next to the Nayars. They were called by different names in different regions: in far south as **Shanar,** in central Travancore


\(^75\) The joint families are called the **Taravad**.

as Ezhavas, from Quilon to Paravur as Chovgans, (Chevakas), in Malabar (Calicut) as Teers or Tiyyas and still further north as Billavas.\textsuperscript{77} Tiyyas were predominant in north Kerala. According to tradition, they were migrants from Ceylon to Malabar.\textsuperscript{78} However, recent understanding is that they are the original inhabitants, subdued by the Naga tribe (Nayars). The information available from records suggests that though the Tiyyas were engaged in labour connected with agriculture, there were skilled fighters, scholars and landlords among them. Some of them cultivated coconut trees\textsuperscript{79} and the Portuguese records describe them as the “growers of coconut”.\textsuperscript{80}

The Tiyyas planted or rear coconut trees. They tap toddy and distill arrack. Toddy tapping is their chief occupation. Some of them cultivated their own land while others worked as hired labourers of the Nayars and other people. They were treated as low caste in Malabar. It is learnt from contemporary records that a member of the Ezhava caste had to be away from a Nambutiri by a distance of thirty feet. He had no access to the house of Nambutiris or Nayars, their temples, tanks or wells. They had no freedom to use the road or foot path when a Nambutiri or a Nayar was nearby.\textsuperscript{81} The Tiyyas were also engaged in other works of hard labour like wood cutting. Some Tiyyas, known as Chevakas,\textsuperscript{82} learned the use of arms in the

\textsuperscript{79} Jacob Canter Visscher, \textit{Letters from Malabar}, Madras, 1862, pp. 127-128.
Kalari. Barbosa also says that “some of them learn the use of arms and fight well when they undertake it”. They followed certain practices such as talaikettu, kappukettu, makkatayam (patriliny) and also marumakkattayam (matriliny).

The Chettis:

The Chettis form the commercial community of South India. The word Chetti is derived form the Sanskrit word Sreshti (chief merchant) and is used to indicate a separate caste. Their business was to conduct financing, banking and to serve as trustees. They were the descendants of the present day Seths of North India and the Chettis or Chettiars of South India. The word refers to a trader and it is one of the occupational terms which were often used as caste names. The word is a generic name for Vaisyas. In the southern regions of Mysore, Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala the Chettiars are operating as the best known merchants and middlemen. Among the Chettiars, some migrated to South East Asia and there they continue their traditional occupation. The Malabar, Chettis migrated from the Coromandal Coast and were mentioned as Chatis by Duarte Barbosa. They appear to have disappeared from the places of Malabar.


The Chettis lived in towns and villages, and formed regular streets. They lived in small estates situated in the higher ground at a little distance from their fields. Their houses were surrounded by plantation of coconut, betel nut and jack.\textsuperscript{90} They traded textiles, precious metals and jewels.

The Vaniyans:

The Vaniyans existed only by trade. The word Vaniya is connected with Vanikam,\textsuperscript{91} meaning trade. Vaniyan is another form of Valanjayar; which means a merchant.\textsuperscript{92} They migrated to Gujarat and dealt with “goods of every kind from many lands”. They were prominent and were busying themselves in the port towns of Malabar.\textsuperscript{93} In Malabar, the Chettis were mostly concerned themselves with internal trade while the Vaniyans dominated overseas trade.

In the history of Kerala, during the medieval period, the real accounts about the Chettis are concealed by the historians. But the Chettis originally migrated from the neighbouring State, i.e the Coromandal Coast from very early stages. The accounts of Barbosa and the early records mention the real history of the Chettis and their descendants were commercial groups spread over the world. The Chettis and the Vaniyans retained their own regional, social and religious customs and enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. In some places, the Chettis enjoyed the position along with the fighting Nayars.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{90} Malabar Collectorate Records, Vol. 4033, G.No.24562, p.37.
\textsuperscript{91} TAS., Vol. IV, p.122.
\textsuperscript{92} M. Srinivasa Iyengar, Tamil Studies, Madras, 1914, p.64.
Calicut was glorified not only by native merchants but also by the foreign merchants, who took active part in the revival of the city. Generally, the Arabs were called the Paradesi Muslims. The foreign merchants came from Mecca, Egypt, Persia and Gujarat. They thronged the port towns of Malabar, especially Calicut and dominated the business scene as they were specialized in the immensely profitable spice trade between Malabar and the West. The native records mention the Paradesis as Toppas and Jonakas. They resided in a separate street known as Jonaka teru. The Arabs were also called the Moors and Mappilas. Their designation and the title Mappilas deal either with the great child or “a bride groom”, which is considered a title of honour. The Arabs, originally belonging to the Arabian countries, followed Mohammedanism and most probably they had engaged themselves in trade in the Malabar Coast, continuously before the arrival of European powers. They were treated as an autonomous community. The Arabs were industrious and enterprising plucky mariners and expert traders. Abdul Razzak, the Persian ambassador, who visited Calicut in A.D.1442 at the court of the Zamorin, describes the activities of the Arabs and the city of Calicut. He observes, “Security and justice are so firmly established in this city that the wealthy merchants bring

hither from maritime countries considerable cargoes which they unloaded and unhesitatingly send into the markets and bazaars, without thinking in the meantime of any necessity of checking account or of keeping watch over the goods. The officers of the custom house take it upon themselves the charge of looking after the merchandise, over which they keep watch night and day. When a sale is affected, they levy a duty on the goods of one fortieth parts, if they are not sold, and they make no charge whatsoever. In course of time, the Arabs mingled with the natives and were mostly engaged in export and import trade. Their prosperous trade attracted the native rulers. The Arabs got much freedom than others. The account of Duarte Barbosa clearly expressed the trade activities of the Arabs in Calicut. “They sail everywhere with many kinds of goods and have in the town itself the Moorish Governor of their own who rules and punishes them without interference from the king, save that the Governor gives an account of certain matters to the king. As soon as any of these Arabs reached the city, the king assigned him a Nayar to protect and serve him, and a clerk to keep his accounts and look after his affairs, and a broker to arrange for him to obtain such goods as he was in need of and they paid good salaries every month for these three persons”.103

The foreign Muslims were distinct in their social and cultural life from the Malabaris. But they imparted their trading experiences to the locals. The local Muslim merchants also carried out considerable business. The native Muslims were

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mentioned as Mappilas. They were the children of the Arab merchants by local wives. They originally belonged to the Hindu community and later converted to Islam. The native Muslims maintained cordial relations with the local population through inter-marriage. They were traders and cultivators. Duarte Barbosa mentions that the Mappilas spoke Malayalam and dressed like Nayars and had even partly adopted the system of matrilineal inheritance common to Nayars. They were spread over the Malabar region and thus he estimated that they formed twenty percent of the population, and they were very influential in trade and navigation. Later the Muslims occupied an important place in the administration of the Zamorins. These Muslims wholeheartedly supported the Zamorin and, in turn, they got some special privileges for the development of their commercial activities. Their military practices over the sea waters gave strong opposition against the European traders and the Muslim leaders served as the hereditary admirals of the Zamorins. Subsequently, they quarrelled with the Zamorin due to the peaceful policy favoured by the Europeans. Ma-Huan, the Chinese traveller was convinced that the majority of the people in the kingdom of the Zamorin belonged to this group. On the strength of the account of foreigners we can estimate the Mappilas who made a remarkable contribution to the prosperity of Malabar, especially Calicut. At present, in Kerala,

104 A. Sreedhara Menon, Gazetters of India, Kerala, Kozhikode, Trivandrum, 1962, p.137.


the Muslims were the major community to decide the fate of the Assembly election in the Malabar region. Thus, the Muslims of Calicut, along with the natives have been responsible for the commercial growth of the city from the very beginning to the modern period.

The Kammalas:

The Kammalas were the village community of smiths treated as one of the lowest caste people in Malabar. The word Kammalar is a generic one used for the five artisan classes of Tattan (goldsmith), Taccan (carpenter), Kaltaccan (stone mason), Kollan (blacksmith) and Braziar. They were the non-agricultural specialists. They were otherwise known as Panchala (‘five groups’). The carpenters or Asari played a notable part in the daily activities of the natives. Carpentary or wood work was a common industry, practiced as a hereditary profession. The skilled profession was fundamentally a village craft catering to the different needs of the society. In the ballad on Aromal Cevakar, the Asari is referred to as Viswakarma and Taccan. They used implements such as uli (chisel), mulakkol (stick of 24 inches), dantu (stick), kaival (hand sword) and sanchi (bag). The carpenters had acquired high knowledge in Tachin Sastram having the capacity to predict the future things on the basis of omens. They mostly concentrated near the temples and provided the agriculturists with implements and tools required for their occupation.


112 Ibid., pp. 120-122.
It happened that a **Malabarian** named – Joaodacruz, who had been in Portugal as an ambassador of the **Zamorin** of Calicut, found himself on the fishery Coast at this time. He advised the Paravas and worked for the advancement of socio-economic sphere in the society. He advised them to get to the Portuguese Captain of Cochin who was willing to help them. Paravas under the protection of the Portuguese followed Christianity. After that they gained more knowledge about sanitation, basic education, religion, and their upliftment in the society.\(^{113}\)

The lowest rung in the society was occupied by the Parayar and Pulayar or **Cherumar**. They were the absolute property of their masters. They worked hard in the soil and, enjoyed no privilege in the society. They suffered a lot due to low wages. They had a life below the poverty line.\(^{114}\)

The traditional society of Kerala underwent remarkable changes in the socio-economic sphere during the 18\(^{th}\) century. Thus, transformation was a gradual process like many other social changes in history. A society, dominated by the stagnant element of medievalism and feudal institutions like caste hierarchy and customary laws, now faced a serious threat from the historical forces released by the west.\(^{115}\)

