CHAPTER I

GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

Travancore, a country of hills and dales, has been the first and foremost among the Indian States.\(^1\) There are many States with larger area, larger revenue and larger military force. But no political unit in India presents a picture of such continuous history, cultural tradition and substantial welfare of the people as this ancient State.\(^2\) It is perhaps the only kingdom in India which preserves its traditional caste, religion, customs, manners and institutions.\(^3\) There is rather difficult to find a kingdom like this on the face of earth, where dynasty continued to exist in an unbroken line of succession, from time immemorial.\(^4\)

The name Travancore is an anglicized form of the Tamil word ‘Thiru-vithan-kode’ or ‘Srivalumkode’ which means “the abode of

\(^1\) Singh, V.B., *Nehru on Socialism*, New Delhi, 1977, p.91.
The State has been called by several other names such as ‘Vanchidesam’ and ‘Dharmarajyam’. ‘Vanchidesam’ means the kingdom ruled over by the descends of the ancient Chera Kings who had their capital at Thiruvanchikulam. ‘Dharmarajyam’ denotes the land of good laws, piety, truth and charity.

Travancore is richly endowed by nature with practically unlimited resources and has also evolved a typical civilization during a period of over two-thousand years of recorded history. The writings of foreign travellers are full of appreciation of the country and its people. Lord Curzon when he visited the State in 1900, described this country in his inimitable language. “Here nature has spent upon the land her richest bounties, the sun fails not by day, the rainfall in due season and an eternal summer gilds the scene. Where the land is capable of cultivation, there is no denser population, where it is occupied by jungle, or backwaters or a lagoon, there is no more fair landscape”.

Travancore is situated at the southern most western extremity of India. It is a long narrow strip of land measuring 174 miles in length and from thirty to seventy five miles in breadth, lying between the Malabar

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7 Nilkan Perumal, *The Truth About Travancore*, Madras, 1939, p.V.
Coast and the Western Ghats of India. The Western Ghats divided Travancore from the districts of Tinnevelly and Madurai. It was larger than the largest district in the Madras Presidency and had more than five times the size of the neighbouring state of Cochin.

Travancore had an area of 7662 square miles, situated between the 8° and 10° of North-latitude and between 76° and 77° East-longitude. Travancore was more strongly protected by its natural boundaries; the south and west being bounded by the sea; the east by the range of high ghats; and the northern parts being mostly covered with backwaters, rivers and lakes. Thus, the terrain of Travancore was unfavourable for the march of horses and elephants that formed part of the portion of the army in those days.

Travancore can be broadly divided into three natural regions, the Highland, the Midland and the Lowland. This physical configuration is responsible for the varieties in climate and vegetation. The area of the lowland is immensely fertile. The sandy coast in the lowland region is wonderfully suited for growing coconut trees. The breeze from the sea is very helpful to the growth of the coconut palms and the periodic monsoon

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feeds them with water. The fisher-folk live along this narrow belt. It is seen from the records that the annual yield of more than 90,000 tons of fish is equal to the catch in Sweden and Denmark put together with all their improved facilities for deep-sea fishing. Here is a source of wealth and the possibilities for immense development.

The region of Midland occupies more than a third of the State with an area of 2722 square miles.\(^{13}\) A mild temperature and bracing climate with plentiful rainfall make the midland so densely populated.

The highland region is mostly covered with thick forests. Out of an area of 3,566 square miles, only 496 square miles are under cultivation. The ever green forests present a variety of tropical vegetation.\(^ {14}\) In the North the mountains rise to a height of over 8000 feet. Anaimudy, is the highest peak about 8.841 feet above sea level.\(^ {15}\) The cool climate of the hills has attracted the Europeans. The major portion in this area is taken by tea, coffee and cardamom plantations, mostly under European management.

The three small isolated exceptions namely the Anchanaid Valley, the Shenkottai taluk and the eastern slope of the Mahendragiri hills, covering an aggregate area of 200 square miles, which project east-ward


\(^{14}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{15}\) *Ibid.*
into the adjoining British districts, the range of Western Ghats runs along the entire eastern extremity of Travancore and is the determining factor in its climate and irrigation. The range reaches its summit level of 8,837 feet at Anaimudi in the extreme north-east, the highest peak in India south of the Himalayas, round which are grouped several other peaks of fairly equal elevation.\textsuperscript{16} These hills, together with the base connecting them, from the elevated plateau commonly known as the High range. To the south of the High range lies the extensive table-land known as the Cardamom Hills, with an elevation of about 3,000 to 3,500 feet and with peak ranging between 4,000 and 5,000 feet.\textsuperscript{17} To the south of the Cardamom Hills the Ghats do not form a broad or elevated chain, but run in a series of ridges slopping on either side, with isolated peaks rising to a height of 5,000 to 6,000 feet.\textsuperscript{18} The range abruptly ends at the Aramboly Pass in South Travancore, though the hills further south, such as Marutvamalai, may also be scientifically regarded as an integral portion of the same system. From the main stem are thrown out several irregular rocky spurts on the western side which stretch into the interior, extending in some cases even to the seashore, and relieve the evenness of the plains below. The extensive hilly


\textsuperscript{17} Ward and Conner, \textit{Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin}, Trivandrum, 1994, p.28.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}
region of Travancore is one of her proudest and most invaluable possessions.

Due to the undulating nature of the land and its graduated altitude, Travancore has a well ordered system of natural drainage. There are more than 14 principal rives emerge from the hills and flow over an aggregate length of 700 miles, carrying fertility to the plains below. With the solitary exception of the Pazhayar in South Travancore, which takes a shortly southward course, all these streams with their numerous effluents and branches run in a westerly direction, interspersed with occasional windings towards the north and the south. A copious rainfall on an abundance of forest ensures a perennial flow and most of the large rivers carry down a considerable volume of water all the year round. During the wet weather, many of the streams overflow their banks and inundate the adjoining lands, particularly in North and Central Travancore, where the rainfall is heavy. The most important river is the Periyar, with a length of 142 miles.

One of the important features of Travancore is its extensive system of inland water-communication near the sea-coast. There are about twelve lakes along the coast separated from the sea by a narrow strip of

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land, and connected together by means of artificial canals constructed from time to time. Most of the lakes locally known as *Kayals* are really the mouths of the rivers that enter into the sea. When the currents of these rivers are not strong and swift enough to counteract the opposing action of the seawaters, the sea throws up deposit of sand across their mouths, which gradually become widened by the sediments deposited by the rivers themselves. In certain places, the bars so formed have to be cut open when the lakes are in high flood to prevent damage to the neighbouring lands. These lakes, with the canals mentioned above, and the two tunnels at Varkalai constructed at a cost of over seventeen lakhs of rupees and covering a length of 3,288 feet, provide uninterrupted water-communication from Trivandrum to Cochin, and even further north as far as Trichur in British Malabar.\(^{21}\) The superficial extent of the lakes is 157 square miles, the largest of them being the Vembanad Kayal which covers an area of 79 square miles.\(^{22}\)

Travancore is happily blessed with abundant rainfall which gradually increases from south to north and from west to east. The southwest monsoon winds begin to blow in May and take a north-westerly bend before they come in contact with the coast of Travancore. These winds bring in the largest quantity of rain. The north-east monsoon, which is no

\(^{21}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{22}\) *Ibid.*
more than the retiring and deflected current of the south-west begins towards the end of October. The rain it gives is lighter on the low country than on the hills, where it descends in sudden and heavy showers accompanied by thunder-storms. The morning during this monsoon are generally fine and the rain falls only in the evenings. The highest rainfall is in Peermade and the lowest in Ayikudi in the Shencottai Taluk beyond the Ghats. The year may roughly be divided into four seasons, viz., the dewy season from December to February. The hot season from March to May, the south-west monsoon season from June to September and the north-east monsoon season from October to November. The temperature generally rises from the middle of December to the middle of April and then falls up to the middle of July, remaining more or less stationary thereafter for the rest of the year. Owing to the effect to the sea breeze, the temperature along the coast is generally equable, seldom rising above 90° or falling below 70°.

At the foot of the hills, the variations range to a few degrees on either side of these temperatures, while marked diversities accentuating with the altitude are noticeable on the hills. On the High Range, the

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24 Ulloor S. Parameswara Aiyer, op.cit., p.7.
climate is that of the temperature zone, the thermometer falling to 50° or 60° in the day, and frosts at nights being experienced in wet weather.\textsuperscript{26}

The distinguishing features of the plants of Travancore are their extend, variety and beauty. As many as 700 trees indigenous to the state have been recorded, a phenomenon unparalleled in the flora of any other country.\textsuperscript{27} Teak is the most valuable of the timber trees in the forests, closely followed by rosewood and abony. The plains are deservedly famous for their coconut and arecanut plantations, while the palmyrah grows luxuriantly in the lowlands of South Travancore. The jack, the mango, the laurel and the tamarind are also grown in profusion. Bamboos cover the slopes of hills and the banks of rivers.\textsuperscript{28}

The animal kingdom of Travancore is no less diversified and wealthy. The carnivorous species are well represented in the forests, the tiger, and the leopard, both of the black and spotted varieties, being common. The elephants are among the most cherished possessions of these forests, while several other interesting species such as the bisom, the sambur and the ibex, not to speak of a variety of small game, are also found in abundance. As many as 330 species of birds and 67 species of snakes have been recorded.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{27} Ulloor S. Parameswara Aiyer, \textit{op.cit.}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{28} Velu Pillai, T.K., \textit{op.cit.}, p.280.
\textsuperscript{29} Ulloor S. Parameswara Aiyer, \textit{op.cit.}, p.10.
Travancore is not rich in mineral deposits. The only mineral products worthy of notice in the State are monazite, plumbago and mica. Monazite is a phosphate of the rare elements, cerium, lanthanum and didymium and is after associated with thorium silicate which gives its economic value. Thorium, however, is not an essential constituent of monazite and occurs in it only as an impurity. The value of the material may be much enhanced by eliminating the useless constituents by electromagnetic separation. The mineral is yellowish to reddish brown in colour, its luster being resinous. It occurs scattered in fine grains in gneisses and schists, the deposits that may be worked on a commercial scale being found in the sands derived from these rocks. Monazite is believed to exist in large quantities near the mouths of the rivers between Quilon and Cape Comorin.\textsuperscript{30}

The total population of the State as enumerated at the Census of 1911 is 34,975.\textsuperscript{31} Though covering only about one per cent of the entire area of the indigenous States of the Indian Empire, Travancore contains about five per cent of their aggregate population. This difference is the result of geographical conditions. In constancy of climate, capacity of soil, steadiness of water-supply and facility of communication, the littoral belt has decided advantages over the mountainous and these circumstances

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
mainly account for the congestion of population in the former returned from Cochin. There is a gradual flow of population from the congested seaboard to the interior tracts of the State.\textsuperscript{32}

Malayalam is the language of the State and 83 per cent of the total population speak Malayalam.\textsuperscript{33} Next to Malayalam, but at a considerable distance from it, comes Tamil, which is spoken by 5,54,618 persons or 16 per cent of the population.\textsuperscript{34} Tamil is the predominant language in the Padmanabhapuram Division, where 86 per cent of the people speak it, the percentage gradually declining towards the north till it falls to 2 in the Kottayam Division. In the taluks of Thovalai and Agasteeswaram in the Padmanabhapuram Division and in Shencottai in the Quilon Division, Tamil is the recognized vernacular. The other languages worthy of mention are Konkani, Marathi, Telugu and Hindustani, spoken by 11,052, 6,740, 6,452 and 4,647 persons respectively.\textsuperscript{35}

The entire population of the State stands distributed over seven religions. The three predominant religions are Hinduism, Christianity and Mohammedanism. The Hindus are divided into innumerable castes and sub-castes. Thirty four of them, however, are

\textsuperscript{32} Census of India, 1981, p.15.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
numerically important. The Nayars numbering 5,92,489 stand foremost, followed by the Ezhavas whose number is 5,46,265. These are followed a long way off by the Pulalas with a strength of 1,85,314 and the Channans with a strength of 1,66,195. The remaining castes number less than a hundred thousand. The Nambutiris whose strength is only 5,105.

The Ezhavas form a pushful and industrious community. They belonged to the depressed class of Hindu society, but their social disabilities are gradually disappearing. The Channans are analogous to the Ezhavas. The Pulayas and the Parayas are agricultural labourers and hold the lowest rank in the social scale. The Ezhavas and Channans constitute 21 per cent and the remaining depressed classes about 17 per cent of the total Hindu population. There is no keen sectarian difference among the Hindus of Travancore. Absolute toleration has been the dominating feature of the religious life of Travancore from the earliest times.

The Christians believe that the seeds of their faith were originally sown in the State by St. Thomas himself, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ in 52 A.D. The Syrian Christians are the representatives of the oriental church which flourished on the Malabar coast in the early centuries of the Christian era and though Christian by

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36 Elankulam Kunjan Pillai, *op.cit.*, p.311.
faith, are Hindus by race. The bulk of them, numbering 2,93,407 souls, still remain Roman Catholic. In addition to these Syro-Romans, there is a large body of Roman Catholics numbering 1,73,724, who follow the usual Latin rites. Some of these may be the descendants of Syrian Christians who adopted Latin rites; but the great majority are the descendants of converts from the Hindu fold during the last four centuries of the Christian era.

When the Dutch subplanted the Portuguese on the coast, about one-third of the Syrian Christians broke from the fold of Catholicism and passed under the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch after the Dutch power gave place to the British. A portion of these Jacobite Syrians, who came under the influence of the teachings of the Church Missionary Society, formed themselves into an independent denomination known as Fener or Syrian Christians, while some thousands went still further and formally embraced the Church of England giving up their Syriac liturgy. The Church Missionary Society was established in 1816 during Major John Munro’s Residency, with the object of assisting and supplementing the old Syrian Church, but from 1837 the society has been working independently.

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38 Ibid.
40 Thomas, P.J., *Syrian Christian Art and Culture*, Trivandrum, 1957, p.120.
Besides the Church Missionary Society, two other Protestant Missions, viz., the London Missionary Society and the Salvation Army have done some appreciable propagandist work in Travancore. The former, whose operations began in 1806, confines its activity to the places south of Quilon the places to the north of that line being within the area of influence of the Church Missionary Society.\textsuperscript{41} The number of Christians attached to this Mission, as per the last census, is 81,573.

The Salvation Army entered Travancore during this time and their Salvationists number was 16,794.\textsuperscript{42} The number of Europeans in the state is 399 of whom 183 are of the Anglican communion, the Anglo-Indians number 1,750 of whom 1,555 are of the Roman Catholic persuasion, being mainly the descendants of the Portuguese settlers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.\textsuperscript{43}

Islam is also an ancient religion in the country. The first batch of Mohammedans are believed to have come from Arabia to Malabar in 710 A.D.\textsuperscript{44} The commercial relations between Arabia and Malabar were so close and constant during the intervening years that before the

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\textsuperscript{42} Thomas, P.J., \textit{op.cit.}, p.120.
\textsuperscript{44} Sreedhara Menon, A., \textit{Social and Cultural History of Kerala}, Delhi, 1979, p.270.
\end{flushright}
fourteenth century the Mussalman merchants had, according to I-bin-Batuta, the well-known traveler been able to pervade every coast town of Malabar. Even to this day, the Mohammedans live more largely in the littoral than in the mountainous region. Before the advent of the Portuguese, the Mohammedans had monopolized the trade of the country. In the eighteenth century, Tipu Sultan of Mysore effected some conversions in a few of the northernmost taluks during his final and ineffectual invasion of Travancore, while, with the opening of the seaport of Alleppey, Mussalman merchants from Sind, Cutch and Gujarat began to settle in the State.

For general administrative purpose, the State was divided into 33 taluks grouped under five Districts, known as Divisions, viz., Padmanabhapuram composed of five taluks. Trivandrum of four, Quilon and Kottayam of eleven each and Devikulam of two. The taluks varied widely in extent from 53.9 square miles (Parur) to 926 square miles (Chengannur) Padmanabhapuram was the smallest Division with an area of 628 square miles and Quilon the largest with 2,564.3 square miles. Padmanabhapuram was the southernmost of all the Divisions.

From the point of view of progressive administration and of literacy, Travancore was second to no State of province in India.

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45 Velu Pillai, T.K., op.cit., p.394.
Regarding population and revenue Travancore was next only to Hyderabad and Mysore among the Indian States. Mysore, Gwalior and the neighbouring Ceylon were nearly four times as extensive, but their population was much less than that of Travancore. Baroda, though nearly of the same area had only less than half of the population of Travancore.⁴⁶