CHAPTER II
Kerala lies on the southern part of Indian peninsula. The western ghats separate the State from Karnataka and Tamilnadu on the east. On the west lies the Arabian Sea. Kerala in its present form comprising Malabar, Travancore and Cochin came into existence on 1st November 1956.

According to 1971 Census Report, population of Kerala is 212.8 lakhs among whom 60.16 per cent are literate. Density of population is 548 per sq.km.

Dravidians were believed to be the earliest settlers in Kerala. According to the occupations followed by the ancient Dravidians, they were divided into hunters, fightingmen, herdsmen, agriculturists and fishermen. But it was the early Aryan settlers who introduced distinction in caste hierarchy. The principle of treating each group following a particular occupation as a separate caste and of prohibiting intermarriage and interdinning between them was introduced in Kerala by Aryan immigrants. The type of occupation followed by and the degree of pollution

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2. Ibid., p.826.
conferred on different castes and their sub-castes were essentially associated with the geographical segregation of various castes.

**Caste and Sects in Kerala**

In traditional caste hierarchy, Nambuthiri Brahmins occupied the highest position. They are believed to have come to Kerala before the commencement of Christian era. They were the literate class of the society. Vedic education was entirely in their hands. They occupied the topmost rung of the social ladder. Devoted to learning and scholarship, the Nambuthiris maintained a highly literary tradition and in the period between twelfth and fifteenth centuries contributed a great deal to Sanskrit and Malayalam literature. Only the eldest member of the family alone could marry within the caste. The younger members had to take their mates from among the Nayars and Ambalavasis. Their main claim to recognition and authority was their spiritual eminence as the accredited representation of Brahmanism. But by the time of Perumal rule, the Nambuthiris were relegated to the third position in social and political life of Kerala.

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They were following Makkathayam (Patrilineal inheritance and Patrilocal residence). Now like others in Kerala they are having modern nuclear families.

Within the caste hierarchy Kshatriyas who constituted the ruling class occupied a position next to Nambuthiris. They appeared in Kerala during the Perumal rule. Kshatriyas entered into marital relations with the Nair women. This resulted in the emergence of the caste Samanthar, who by caste were Nairs differentiated by social position and observances of hypergamy with Nambuthiris and Kshatriyas.6

They followed Marumakkathayam and hypergamy. Like Nairs, they also had two marriages—the talikettu and sambandham. But there were a few observances and ceremonies among them which were like those of the Nambuthiris.

In the caste order next to Kshatriyas was the Ambalavasis. They include Nambidis, Adikals, Chakyars, Pushpakans, Thiyattunnis, Pisharodis, Variyars, Puthuvals and Marars. The traditional occupation of Ambalavasis was the performance of different services at temple.

Nambidis and Adikals were believed to be degraded Brahmins. Chakyars and Nambiar were supposed to be the offsprings of adulterous nambuthiri women. The traditional

occupation of Chakiyars were the recitation of passages from puranas at temples. Nambiar used to beat drums on such occasions. Pushpakans used to collect flowers and make garlands for temples. Pisharodis and Variyars were the sweepers in temples. Puthuvals were the stewards in temples and the Marars the musicians.

Except Thiyattunnis and Pushpakans all ambalavasis followed Marumakkathayam. Thiyattunnis and Pushpakans were following Makkathayam.

Now, most of the ambalavasis abandoned their traditional occupations. Majority of them are assimilated with Nayars.

In the traditional caste hierarchy next to Ambalavasis, were the Nairs. There are different views regarding the origin of Nayars. A few believe that they are of Dravidian descent. But some are of the opinion that they are of Turanian or Seythic origin. The similarity of names and certain customs has suggested that the Nayars may be linked either with the Nagas of Nagaland or with the Newars of Nepal, but it is much more likely that these groups derived their shared characteristics from the ancient Naga people... But for all practical purposes the

Nairs may be regarded as Dravidians. They appear to have been occupying Kerala from very early times. 8

During the princely rule, Nairs were given high status in the region. They were closely associated with the military power and defence of the princely states. The well-built physique of Nair warriors were well-known. It was the force of circumstances that led Nairs to develop martial qualities. 9 The Nairs thus provided the national militia... 10

With the rise of British power in the region, Nairs lost their political power and ceased to be the militia. Consequently, they turned to agricultural pursuits and quite a few of them entered government service. 11 There were a number of sub castes among the Nairs like Kiriyam, Illam and Swarupi. But these have now disappeared and no social prestige is attached to such distinctions.

Various titles used to be conferred on Nairs to denote their position in the society. Thus Acchan, Karta, Kaimal and Mannadiyar were among the titles of nobility,

10. K.M. Panicker, op.cit., p.10
while Panikkar, Kurup and Kurupal were the titles of those who run kalaries as their hereditary profession. Menon is the title which was in old days generally given to the Nairs who followed a literate occupation and which is now most in use among upper middle classes. 12

There were four intermediary castes between Nairs and polluting castes. They were Veluthadans (Washermen), Vilakkithala Nairs (Barbers), Chaliyans (Weavers) and Kadupattans (degraded Brahmins). The first three used to follow Marumakkathayam and other customs and usages of Nairs. The Kadupattans (also called Ezhuthachans) used to follow Makkathayam and customs similar to those of Brahmins.

Kammalans were the first of the polluting castes. Depending on the occupations they performed, they were divided into various endogamous sub-castes as Marassari (Carpenter), Kallasari (mason), Musari (Brazier), Kollan or Karuvan (Blacksmith) and Tolkollan (leather worker). Excepting Tolkollan all others were of the same social status. They would interdine, but could not intermarry. The Kammalans were polyandrous and used to follow Makkathayam. Now polyandry has disappeared among them. But many old customs and beliefs still persists among them 12.

because they have not yet made much headway in education. 13

Among the polluting castes Ezhavas were next to Kammalans. Ezhavas or Chogans, also called Thiyyas of Malabar are believed to have immigrated from Ceylon. Taking all the available historical and legendary information into consideration, the Iravas seem to have been the first settled agriculturists of Kerala. 15 They introduced coconut cultivation and their main occupation was toddy tapping. Although much transformation has taken place among them, the traditional occupation of tapping still persists. The emergence of the spiritual and social reformer--Sree Narayana Guru--and the SNDP Yogam founded by him had done a great deal in the uplift of this backward caste. Quite a sizable section among Ezhavas has now emerged as upper and middle classes. They used to follow Makkathayam excepting in Cochin region where there were many who used to follow Marumakkathayam. Vattis or Kavuthiyans, who are the priests and barbers of Izhavas, form a distinct sub-caste inferior in status to the latter. 16

Valans or Mukkuvans are traditional fishermen. Marakkans are the boatmen. They were concentrated to the coastal area. The Hindu Mukuvans and Marakkans are found mostly

16. Ibid., p. 204.
in the Cochin and Malabar regions. Their customs and ceremonies were more or less the same as those of Ezhavas. Now many of them have abandoned their traditional occupation and have assumed different occupational pursuits.

Other polluting castes in Kerala were Kaniyans, Panans, Mannans, Velans and Pulluvans. They were astrologers, exorcists, washermen and singers in serpankavus. Most of them have now abandoned their traditional occupations. They were all following makkathayam.

The slave castes included pulayas or cheramars, Kuttans, Vettuvans, Parayas, Valluvans, Tanda Bulayas and the hill tribes of Kadars and Malayars. They were mostly agricultural labourers. They were all following Makkathayam.

Among the foreign castes Tamil Brahmins had highest status in society. They were respected everywhere. In intelligence and education, they occupied the upper stratum of the society. "The Tamil Brahmins are as good Brahmins as the highest class of Nambuthiris from a spiritual point of view, but the latter will not admit such equality". Konkani Brahmins were immigrants from Konkan. They speak the Konkani dialect of Marathi and confined to southern taluks of Cochin. "The are said to have taken refuge in

Cochin and Travancore in the 16th century to escape from persecution, when the inquisition was established at Goa. They are mostly traders and shop keepers.

Embrans were Brahmin immigrants from south Canara and are treated on equal footing of equality by the Namuthiris. Gouda Brahmans were mostly religious medicants and were nomadic in their habits. They speak Tulu. There are a few Telungu and Maratha Brahmans also in the State, but their number is very small.

Chettans or Devanga Chettis and Kaikolans were weaving castes and are found only in the Chittur Taluk and in the eastern portion of the Talappilly Taluk. The former were immigrants from Mysore and speak Canares, while the latter hail from Coimbatore and have Tamil as their mother tongue. They wear sacred thread. Chettans are landlords and cultivators. Vellalas hold the highest position among the Tamil Sudras and agriculture was their chief occupation. Vaniyans, Konkani Vaisyas, and Kudumbi Chettis are Konkani Sudras. The former wear sacred thread and resemble the Konkani Brahmans in their habits. Some are gold and silversmiths and others are petty traders.

Muslims

Muslims came to Kerala during ninth century A.D.

18. Ibid., p.207.
They used to be engaged in sea route trade. They are mostly confined to Malabar and a few pockets in Travancore region. They are deeply religious minded, and most of the old customs, beliefs and superstitions still persist among them. They follow makkathayam.

Jews

Jews were believed to be in Kerala during the first century A.D. They were concentrated in Cochin. Numerically they were insignificant. Now most of them have migrated to Israel.

Christians

Christians are believed to have come to Malabar during the first century A.D. Francis Xavier is believed to have arrived in South Travancore about 1543 A.D. and sought to introduce Christianity on the West Coast. The arrival of the Portuguese paved the way to bring the Syrian Christians under the Roman Church. But in due course a large number of Syrians came out of the Roman fold and formed the Jacobite Church. 'Since then the Kerala Christians were divided into Romo-Syrians and Jacobites'. The Latin Catholics constitute the later converts to Christianity

by the Catholic Church. Later the Jacobites also split into Marthomites and Jacobites.

The Portuguese power in Cochin lead to an increase in the number of Roman Catholics through conversion in that region. Portuguese gave them preferential treatment by way of exemption from taxes and separate judicial jurisdiction. The Roman Catholics are now concentrated largely in the Central Travancore and Cochin regions of Kerala.

Group cohesiveness and deep religious mindedness is the outstanding feature of the Catholics. All Catholics use biblical names which make them quite distinct from the rest of the population.

The Catholics had no traditional occupation. Many of them were engaged in business and commercial activities in some pockets of Kerala viz., Kottayam, Ernakulam and Trichur districts where there is a large concentration of Catholics.

They got inspiration from the Church to work hard. Now large concentration of Roman Catholics can be seen in the high-ranges of Travancore region and the hilly tracts of Malabar region. "Post-independent land legislations gave them control over a very substantial part of the land holdings of Nairs leading to severe conflict between these two groups". 22

They were patriarchal and now they have nuclear families.

Besides Roman Catholics, the other major categories of Christians in Kerala are the Jacobites and the Marthomites. They have absolute freedom in the church government. They can elect their Bishops. They are concentrated largely in the Central Travancore and Cochin regions of the state. Like the Catholics they are also deeply religious.

Other categories of Christians found in Kerala are the Protestants and Chaldeans. They are numerically insignificant.

Social class in Kerala

According to Keralaolpathy and Kerala Mahatmyam, the country was divided into sixty four gramams (villages) and presented to Nambuthiry Brahmins by Lord Parasurama. Therefore, virtually, the status of landlordship first went to the Nambuthiri Brahmins. The Nambuthiris constituted the priestly as well as intellectual class.

By the 5th century A.D. Nairs emerged as the militia and secured economic and political control over the region relegating the Brahmins to the background. Thus Nairs and Brahmins, who together constituted only 17% of the population owned the entire land wealth and wielded political power, while the rest of the population consisting of
outcastes and slave castes remained as wage labours. This pattern of dichotomous class system persisted in Kerala till the advent of British rule in the region. Under the British, Nayars lost their political dominance and consequently their control over outcastes and slave castes. Large number of lower castes embraced Christianity. Under the patronage of British the new converts to Christianity monopolized the trade and commerce. Many among them became affluent and gradually new upper class among the Christians emerged.

By the time of political independence and subsequent to it a sizable section among Ezhavas and Muslims also became affluent. Apart from this there emerged a sizable section of middle class among Christians, Ezhavas, Nayars and other forward castes. Thus in contemporary Kerala society, the class stratification ceased to be dichotomy and what is now found is a multiclass stratification with majority falling in the category of middle and lower middle class.

Traditional Education in Kerala

In Sanghom period, Brahmins alone could pursue religious and vedic education. All others could secure only secular education. "But no class or community was denied the right to full education. Universal education was the
ideal of Sanghom age". 23

Ancient educational institutions of Kerala can be divided under three heads, viz., the Pial School (Ezhu-thupallis), the Kalaris (Military school) and the Vedic (Sanskrit) Schools. Each village had a pial school managed by an individual guru. He was a highly respectable figure in the locality. The teacher used to be called as 'kanakkayar'. After Sanghom period he used to be named as 'Upathiyayar' (Upathyayar).

The verandha of the house of the Asan (the teacher) was used as the school. Sometimes sheds were attached to the residence of the Guru. Students lived in manroms. Manroms were also used as educational institutions. In the pial schools basic lessons in language, literature and arithmetics were given. Learning was through memorising the lessons. The upper class used to pay fees in cash or goods and the lower class as service to teachers. After completing primary education in the pial schools, the children used to join the Kalaris for getting trained in gymnastics and the use of arms or took to the study of Sanskrit in Vedic schools under competent teachers. Each kara or sub-division had a Kalari where physical education was imparted and training in the use of arms was given.

"The Kalaris were gymnasiums or military schools at which the teacher imparted physical training and knowledge in the use of arms to the youth." 24

The Vedic schools were the higher educational institutions, where instruction in Vedas, the sastras and the Upanishads was given. In these institutions the people used to receive education at free of cost. They were located in the premises of temples and were generally known as Salais. Vedic discourse was a daily routine.

Young men who were desirous of becoming great scholars, physicians and astrologers had to live with the Guru. A high rate of literacy was attained during the ancient and medieval periods. Actually, the pial schools and Vedic schools were the forerunners of private educational institutions in Kerala. But this situation has changed by the time of Perumal rule in the region. Gradually formal education became the exclusive preserve of upper caste Brahmins and Nairs. The lower castes ceased to have any access to Kalaris and Sanskrit schools. This situation continued till the end of 18th century.

In 1817 A.D., the Travancore Government established several Malayalam primary schools in different parts of the state. As elsewhere in India, Kerala was also subjected to

evangelical work by the missionaries. Missionaries had established a net work of schools. The missionaries, especially the protestant missionaries were responsible for spreading English education in Kerala. "Though English Education was a monopoly of Christian churches in the early stages by the time of independence upper caste Nayars entered the field in a big way followed by the affluent sections among the Ezhavas and Muslims". 25 Now educational institutions in the private sector are owned and controlled by the Christian Churches, and the caste and sectarian organizations of Nairs, Ezhavas and Muslims.