Chapter II

Figures of Speech and Historical Description

In this Chapter the attempt is to dislodge some of the persistent unities and fixities to be found in the historical accounts of the southern most part of the western-peninsula of India, generally recognized as Travancore/Venad. The main epistemological and metaphysical categories that are reconsidered herein are Kingdom and King, with a view to giving materiality to the historically constituted categories swaroopam (self-form) and muppu (the eldest among a specified population). These categories are brought into the historical narrative to analyze the constituent variables in their organization and thereby to give form and substance to them. This would lend grater visibility to these categories that are generally side-tracked or misconstrued or dimly recognized due to the epistemological rigidities and metaphorical reductions characteristic of the historical representations of the so called late “medieval period”, that is, between the thirteenth century and the eighteenth century. The “encoding effect” of these categories on the historian’s craft is thus to be overcome and the patterns that are implicit in the historical representations are to be delineated.

An organizational form like the swaroopam could be clearly explicated only in use, but for the present purpose, as an initial step, it can be described as a diagram of social organization that no more requires the aid of categories like “raajyam”/ “kingdom”, “King”, “chief” “fragments”, “branches” and so on. They are metaphors that make possible certain arguments and conclusions. It is indeed these concepts or notions that made possible the constitution of the object named Travancore and in turn the representations of its past. These representations enter into present day discussions in the form of
taken-for-granted premises and arguments that influence descriptions of even the present. This is not merely a "technical", historiographical problem but a cultural and political question as well. Broadly speaking, from the turn of the nineteenth century, the models of kingdom or raajyam or some of its variants were given centrality in describing the medieval past of Travancore.

There were in fact two reasons for employing this model: one, a belief that an existing kingdom should have a history that is similar to the present unless the legitimacy of kingship has been challenged, thus emerged eulogies which do not overtly claim objectivity; two, the administrators believed that in order to rule well the administration requires the full knowledge of what it administers including the past, and if possible, the future. Thus emerged Administrative Manuals and Reports that projected, with claims of objectivity, contemporary models that were available to them on to the past. With few exceptions, of course, the metaphysical categories mentioned above continue to find a place not only in academic circles but also in textbooks, popular confabulations and tourist handbooks. Thus, before one can elaborate upon swaroopam, the arguments for the use of the above said categories and metaphors in the existing historical descriptions along with the findings that they engender needs to be examined.

The attempt in this chapter is to show how certain assumptions are implicit in the representations, arguments and conclusions present in the descriptions of medieval Travancore. The primary question taken up here is how the theoretical representations of medieval Travancore and certain conclusions about it are to a great extent, explicitly or implicitly, determined by figures of speech
(metaphors, analogies) and appeals to authority. Apart from tracing how historians reach conclusions, this project would also highlight how mutually contradictory statements co-exist within the supposed unity of any given text. Before getting on to the main points, it is necessary to dwell upon certain things that are excluded from the ambit of the present attempt.

There is no attempt to critically evaluate the historical texts by setting them against some “real history” or newly recovered/real “historical facts” and then proceed to depict what really happened in the past. No judgment is made about the validity or truth-value of propositions in the texts taken up for discussion. Further, historical criticism need not be skeptical of the texts that it seeks to objectify, although this is the mode of the Cartesian science or what is generally understood as modern science. Rather it could trace how certain assertions and conclusions are arrived at, and indispensably so, with the aid of textual strategies (intentional or unintentional) and rhetorical devices. Each text is treated independently in such a way that only statements that belong to a particular text are counterposed to highlight its rhetorical elements and internal inconsistencies. Thus it is not a comparative analysis of texts, nor an exercise in historiography. In the next section, categories like king, chief, ruler etc, are critically examined and the term’s kingdom and raajyam are retained as they appear in the texts under study. That is, territorial unities fabricated through “kingdom” are taken for granted and only king and his authority are treated critically, thus the title: “Travancore and the Authority of the King”. In the second section, some of the findings of the first section are conflated with categories like “Travancore”, “the kingdom” or raajyam and
metaphors like "tree", "branches" and "fragments"; thus it is titled "Travancore and the Exercise of Authority".

**Travancore and the authority of the king**

The so-called kings/rulers of medieval Travancore had been broadly formalized by historians and others in two different ways: one, which involves category displacement and the other, conceptual slippage.

**Category displacement:** The historical representations constitute the logos of king or sovereign by anchoring historical descriptions around them. In the case of king-centered narratives it is unproblematically assumed that kings ruled over the "territory and things" of Travancore from ancient times or, at least, throughout the medieval period. Sometimes, instead of "king" the word sovereign is used without any conceptual difference. In another example the rule of the king was identified not so much with the kingdom but with the dynasty. All these texts display the features of positivism, the credo of modern scientific inquiries. They appeal to the authority of the documents or facts when they speak of the king-centered history. Appeals to documents are made as if to ensure objectivity and ward off subjective/"interpretative" elements, under the assumption that the subjective and the objective are incommensurable at any level of operation. Even within this class of texts one could make a distinction between those that overtly claim modern objectivity and others who do not. The late nineteenth century histories on the medieval period were in general treated by the Manuals as inaccurate eulogies on account of subjectivity and lack of document-based substantiation. No doubt, the late-nineteenth century histories were, as is well known, eulogies of Kings and their dynasties. Now, let us take a look at the documents that are
supposed to substantiate the so-called objective descriptions of the Manuals.

All the archival documents that the above-mentioned historical accounts invoke refer to a position called *muppu* or *muuthathiruvadi*, which does not lend itself easily to the English translation "king". In the document-based histories, however, *raajavu* or king is the central descriptive category. Neither the *muppu* himself nor his contemporaries did recognize him by the term *raajavu*. This is the only word that can be justifiably translated as king. Moreover, the word *raajavu* was quite familiar in medieval Travancore and it is in spite of this that the word *muppu* had been repeatedly employed in the documents and other contemporary inscriptions. Again, it is interesting to note that the term *raajavu*, though commonly found in literary texts, was carefully kept out of the inscriptions and documents. These inscriptions and documents in their subsequent circulation had provided extensive materiality for the term *muppu*. That is to say, the distinction between the two terms, *muppu* and *raajavu*, is not, after all, a flimsy one. In spite of that, historical accounts tended to identify a king or sovereign wherever they could locate the term *muppu*. It indeed is impossible to translate this term, with exactitude, into English, but this issue is not that critical here.

The word *muppu* is displaced by another Malayalam word *raajavu* before retranslating it into English. This effacement of distinction between *raajavu* and *muppu* makes possible the super-imposition of the category King onto *muppu*. The critical issue is not the translation of *muppu* as King but the displacement of it by *raajavu*. This means that, more than the problems intrinsic to translation from one language to another, there is a "category
displacement" which erases the difference between *muppu* and *raajavu*. What is significant is that it is precisely from documents that resist the identification of the *muppu* as *raajavu*, that the Manuals have drawn their "objective" support for the constitution of Kingship. It is clear that document-based descriptions work rhetorically. The category displacement need not be understood as resulting from purposive rational tactics of the author or conscious textual strategy. Rather it is an example of the tendency to give excessive responsibility to descriptive categories and concepts or leaving them to think for us without self-reflexivity.

The ways in which the term king and its variants were formalized in these historical descriptions need to be highlighted with some more details. The formulations have in common the idea that authority could be found localized in the king, either as limited or unlimited. The kings were glorified and the notion of their continuous succession was sanctified; thereby the centrality of the *rajavamsham* was legitimized. For example, among those who find authority localized in king would make use of phrases like "those who ruled over Travancore", (it is implicitly assumed in their descriptions that, if there is "rule" then there ought to be a king).9 Another example, is the one that argues with the aid of documents, but casually accepts into the discourse the entity, medieval kings, as if it cannot be otherwise.10 Following phrases are other examples of the imprecise manner in which reference is made to thirteenth and fourteenth centuries: "Ravi Varma, the king of Travancore and the suzerain of Kerala" 11, and "the sovereign of Venad"12. They reveal a style of thought, considered to be scientific, unquestionably determined by adherence to some model other than one suited for
describing or conceptualizing *muppu*. There are other examples wherein the king in his singularity is not as central, but his dynastic origins are emphasized: "Travancore royal dynasty",\textsuperscript{13} "records relating to the chronology of the sovereigns of Travancore for the period 1544-1677"\textsuperscript{14} and "Travancore dynastic records". These examples would suffice to show the manner in which "kings" were fabricated from medieval documents.

Thus once an unproblematised king or sovereign is assumed in historical description, then the search for proper names which are most suited to be considered as king begins. Such searches often come up against several impediments like the difficulty in finding proper names, appearance of more than one proper name for one "king", unavailability of the initial and terminal years of "rule", appearance of mutually contradicting documents, difficulties in locating the capital of the "kingdom" etc. Definitely all these would lead to inconclusiveness. But the problem, as far as the medieval historians are concerned, could be that once indeterminacy or inconclusiveness is accepted into the text, this would tantamount to either an admission of imperfect knowledge on the part of the author or, a nullification of the painfully constructed artifacts, "medieval kings" and the "kingdom of Travancore". Kingdoms in history texts require the present king’s genealogy to stretch back into antiquity. This, of necessity, forces the historian to interpret the available documents with *a priori* assumptions and read into them meanings hardly permitted by the "evidence", to arrive at definitive statements about the identity of medieval kings. Further, they are led to take recourse to principles and norms that exist outside the document to isolate one from the jumble of names that are available. This
phenomenon is well exemplified by the two “Travancore State Manuals”. When induction fails, they resort to deductive systems that do not have the axiomatic and categorical foundation required of it. Such methodological problems lead to other inconsistencies like differences in the proper names that different texts identify for a period and the overlapping of the periods of different kings and, most importantly, differences in broader conclusions. The argument presented herein will be substantiated more elaborately in the following section.

Another methodological problem arising out of the assumption of existence of king during the medieval period is that, its validity never gets to be tested although their methodology, empirical positivism, warrants that. What is merely an assumption at the outset is without the due process of verification accepted as a conclusion. Further, it is commonly expected that a historical description has to show what really happened in the past; therefore it cannot be mere axiomatic statements without any goal other than itself, as in many branches of mathematics. History is not a normative science. Quite often explanatory schemes invoke “custom”, “tradition”, “social norms” etc, whenever empirical information is unavailable or relevant documents are non-existent. Also, at times, documents that are found to be not consistent with the assumptions/conclusions get overlooked. All this becomes imperative to fabricate the existence of medieval king and to visualize an unbroken genealogical continuity stretching to antiquity for the contemporary king.

**Conceptual slippage:** The second way of formulating kingship in medieval Travancore circumvents the explicit problems of category
displacement but commits a “conceptual slippage”. In some recent accounts, displacement of the category *muppu* to *raajavu* is not to be found and thus in them the “king” is not an inevitable category.\(^{15}\) They retain the term i.e., *muppu*, which is found in the documents of medieval Travancore. Historiographically speaking, recognition of the problems inherent in using terms other than *muppu* is a definite critical improvement. However, the general impression one gets is that they treat it to be a problem of mis-translation and not as a category displacement. This can be easily understood, if we look at the way they characterize the “figure” *muppu*.

This, in turn, leads one to look at the way in which the conceptualization of authority tends to posit a central figure whose authority permeates into the entire domain. They strive to find suitable signifiers for this figure. Even when the term *muppu* is retained and category displacement avoided, it is conceptualized with the aid of the models of kingship and rule. Each of the texts cited above will be treated separately in the following paragraphs.

Before getting on to them I wish to point out that what is more significant about the texts under analysis is not so much the category displacement but the conceptual slippage that is to be found in them. There is a clear recognition, in both the texts, of the difference between *muppu* and *raajavu* or king, and also its implications for descriptions of the past. However, *muppu* or “chief” is still conceptualized as if he were a king. The terms, phrases, categories and style of arguments in the descriptions of these figures still correspond to those in the descriptions of the king using the Western sovereignty model. It is not that the texts under reference are unawareness of terminological problems. But once the model is
employed, then the analytical process gets to be determined by it. Nevertheless, when conscious surveillance of the encoding effects of conceptual complexes becomes tenuous conceptual slippage is bound to take place.

For instance, it is stated that kings ruled Venad till the turn of fourteenth century, and from then onwards, there were no Venad rajas until the close of the medieval period. But, the text retains phrases like Deshinganadu rajavamsham (Deshinganadu dynasty) even for the description of Venad between the fifteenth and seventeenth century. What we see is a splitting of the continuum of medieval history into “pre-” and “post-” periods in terms of the alleged existence of kingship. For the post-kingship period when proper names are used then the term muppu is invoked either as a prefix or a suffix to the proper name. When it comes to classificatory schemes, categories like raajavu and rajavamsham (dynasty) seem to be indispensable. Raajavu or king, and muppu enter into the statements simultaneously as if they are mutually interchangeable entities, leading to constant tensions between the two. A self-evident example from the same text is the proposition that “there is an accurate genealogy available for the Thiruvithamkur kings who were the Chiravay muppu.” The tension between muppu and king as concepts in the above statement is manifest in the manner in which they are recognized as being entirely different and also being fused together as identical. The trajectories of descriptions using these two categories are quite divergent. This recognition does not seem to be present in the text. Mega-narratives like rajavamsham are time and again rising up from the unconscious of historical perception. So the unconscious aspect of the conceptual slippage is
better elucidated by these examples than the Manuals in which we encounter the graver problem of category displacement.

Another instance of the theoretical confusions that surround the representations of the ruler's domain also requires to be highlighted. According to one authority\textsuperscript{22} the \textit{Threppappur swaroopam} (one of the \textit{swaroopams}) was ruled by the \textit{muppu} of \textit{Chiravay} (yet another \textit{swaroopam}). He goes on to add that, since their residence and primary center had been \textit{Thiruvithamkodu}, they were known as \textit{Thiruvithamkodu rajas}. Immediately after this the author cautions that although \textit{Chiravay muppu} were the rulers of \textit{Threppappur}, \textit{Chiravay} was only a sub-\textit{Swaroopam} within \textit{Threppappur swaroopam}. If \textit{Threppappur} rulers are seated at \textit{Thiruvithamkodu}, which is within \textit{Chiravay}, and at the same time, they are the rulers of \textit{Chiravay}, then, why should \textit{Chiravay} be conceptualized as a "sub-\textit{swaroopam}" of the \textit{Threppappur swaroopam}, also ruled by \textit{muppu} of \textit{Chiravay}? If assumed that \textit{Chiravay muppu} is the ruler of \textit{Threppappur}, it would naturally follow that \textit{Chiravay} is the center of the realm as against being a sub-\textit{Swaroopam}. Hypothetically speaking, if \textit{Chiravay} is not another \textit{Swaroopam} like \textit{Threppappur}, but within its jurisdiction, then it wold be better to represent \textit{Chiravay} as the center of the rule and authority rather than as a sub-\textit{Swaroopam}. Alternatively, if \textit{Chiravay} is another \textit{Swaroopam} like \textit{Threppappur}, and \textit{Chiravay muppu} is the \textit{muppu} of \textit{Threppappur}, then the description has to be altogether different because \textit{Threppappur} comes within the fold of \textit{Chiravay}. The theoretical difficulty arises when inter-\textit{Swaroopam} relations are sought to be understood in terms of \textit{muppu/ruler}.

Conceptual tensions could be found in a different way in the translation of the term \textit{muppu} as the "eldest" and the
conceptualization of it as the "chief"/"ruler" of Venad\textsuperscript{23}. Here the tension is not so much between muppu and king but between muppu and "chief"/"ruler"\textsuperscript{24}. Now let us see how the figure of chief or ruler is portrayed. The way they centralize muppu is self evident in the statements like, "The elders of swaroopams thus held political and economic rights over the entire area under their control."\textsuperscript{25} Here right gets characterized and conceptualized as political and economic as against symbolic, or ritualistic or kinship-based or religious etc. The range of this right spreads over the "entire area under control", which means that right is over the territory, and authority is territorialized. This means that the right is exhaustive in the sense that it leaves no area un-territorialized; thus the entire territory is the domain for the rule of muppu. The depiction of the "elder"/"chief"/"ruler" and of his relation to what he controls becomes more or less the mirror image of what the king is and what he does. Conceptualization of the so-called "elder" through terminological apparatuses like the "political and economic rights", "entire area", "territory", "holding of authority" etc., would only result in another king. This statement assumes that political and economic rights involve a kind of domination and control intrinsic to what is varyingly termed as chief, ruler etc. Domination is then conceived to be global in the sense that one person or group exercises authority over another body in its entirety. It is also assumed to be the domination of the king, chief, or ruling family, from a central position, in such a way, that it ensures a smooth continuity of a kind of power which has the potential to permeate into any aspect of the territory/principality and subjects, whatever be the extent of territory or the size of population.
This portrayal of the chief owe allegiance more to sovereignty models used in the descriptions of European empires if not the Vijayanagar or the Pandya kingdoms. In other words, the formal cause for such descriptions of muppu with all the typical characteristic features of kingly authority could be the Euro-centric conceptualization of muppu. Preference for the terms “Chief”/ “ruler”, “the eldest”, instead of king or sovereign amounts only to a lexical substitution. Conceptualization is still haunted by sovereignty models. The obverse of the same conception is also to be found in the above mentioned text which singles out a swaroopam-muppu who controls only a restricted “region” within the territory of Venad, as if some others could posses control over the entire Venad.26 Here also, what gets foregrounded in the analysis or description is the Western model of sovereignty against which the specific historical situation is counter-posed.27 Although care, bordering on linguistic pedantry, is taken, conceptual slippage could not be avoided because of the unconscious imprint of the kingdom model. The primary search is for the presence and absence of an embodiment of authority and an originating source of power, be it king, or chief or muppu. What shimmers between the statements of the text is the presence/absence of the king. The thought process is driven by the metaphysics of presence and absence.28. That is, the existence of a unified power in a single “ruler” or single “ruling family”, with general power to command, or its absence, becomes the foreground of the theater of the medieval period. King as a descriptive category would be perfectly consistent with the portrayal of “chief” “ruler” and the main arguments appearing in the descriptions of medieval Travancore within the text under consideration. Even when the text
is conscious of the limits of the European kingdom models, for the description of Travancore's medieval period, self-reflexive representation of past relapses into conceptual slippage.

Another example could be cited from the same text. It starts from the premise that political structure was fragmented in Venad, which means that it was not centralized around any single unit. It goes on to affirm that the "political power of the ruling" family was distributed as "grades of rights" 29, i.e., it was never absolute. It is also asserted that territories were not well defined and bounded; this means that the authority structure did not objectify territory at that micro level. If these premises are true, then, it is important to ask a conceptual question that challenges the validity of the conclusion that "there emerged social" forces that threatened to disrupt the customary political authority of the ruling family 30. One serious problem with such an argument is that if the conclusion is true, i.e., the social change took place due to antagonisms to a single social unit, namely the "ruling family", the characterization of political authority as fragmented and the rights as decentered remains objectionable.

Within the description of a fragmented authority structure, how can any turbulent and visible social change be portrayed in terms of a single social unit which itself is premised to be decentralized? There should have been, at least, more than one unit to target at. What principle would have guided the analysis to identify only one unit as the source and target of change within the same text 31 that alludes to heterogeneity of rights, political authority and territorial spread? Any one who looks closely at this analysis and the manner in which the problems are dealt with in the text would be struck by
the contradictions between the premises and conclusions. The question posed above indicates the self-contradictions within the text and unsound premises on which the arguments and conclusions are based. Formatting descriptions within a single contradiction or antagonism or the opposition between a "chief" and a set of "people" can restrict the argument and produce mutually contradicting statements. If history is to be conceived as unfolding in accordance with the laws of conflict between the ruler and the ruled then, the text *ought to have* retained the category of "King" instead of the more restrictive terms like "chief", "ruler", "elder" etc., and dropped metaphors like the "fragment" and "grades of rights" from the description of the political economic authority of the medieval ruler figure.

Now let us move on to an analysis of the conceptualization of authority in these texts in general. Once continuity in the exercise of authority by the kings or chiefs over the entire domain of Travancore is accomplished, the inquirer proceeds to search for indications of authority in one or other individual. Whenever even remote signs of the exercise of authority as in Western sovereignty models are discerned, that too with great difficulty, they are linked to the inherited or acquired efficiency of the king or the absence of internal dissent and external threat. In brief, once the metaphor of a king is posited in the text, the signs that are proper to Western sovereignty models are stretched to infer the presence of *raajavu* or king, forgetting the specific historical context of kingship in the West. Further, the opposite situation is also described in a similar manner invoking subjectivity—but negatively—as in phrases like the "weak disposition of the sovereign" and the "ascendance" of a rival group
which "usurps all authority" from the king. The historians have to talk of the authority of the kings in terms of their biographical characteristics like sober nature and valorous aggressiveness. Whenever one talks of the presence or absence of the authority of the king or "chief", one is under the influence of Western models of authority and power. But the same histories say that there was a system of rule that was beyond the reach of conjecture and individual events. This is another example of inconsistency, with the former proposition being grounded on event and the latter on structure. When a system of rule is invoked to explain historical processes and events, then it follows that the system has already acquired legitimacy. But when the system of rule is insufficient to explain specific events, then historians have recourse to biographical explanation, which in turn validates both the methodology of interpretation as well as the events themselves. Once we keep in mind this distinction, then the tension between privileging either event over structure or vice versa and their implications in historical explanation become apparent.

All the texts that we treated, for our purpose here, could be broadly classified as socio-political history of medieval Travancore. What is objectified in this chapter is the representations of the authority of king or "chief" or muppu and their adherence to the metaphors of the sovereign-king and its variants. Apart from surface differences among the texts one could see a layer of unity when it comes to the conceptualization of power and domination. We have already seen this aspect, yet we can discern two politico-ethical positions in the conceptualization of the respective central figures in the texts that we have taken up.
Firstly, the power of the king and his domination over the kingdom is legitimate. The model that is employed assumes indivisible sovereignty of the king as an imperative. Necessity and naturalness of someone at the apex with power over the entire domain, whether it be the kingdom, *raajyam, naadu, swaroopam* or family, is taken for granted. Thus such representations do not address the question of what guaranteed, or what was the basis of, the right of the king or chief or *muppu* to exercise authority over their domain; they restrict the inquiry to the basis of the right for one to be the king or chief.\textsuperscript{34}

Secondly, the presence of a sovereign figure with absolute authority is not regarded as necessary for the description of “medieval Travancore”. Therefore they concentrate not only on the right for one to be the ruler but also on the grounds of that right. Legitimacy given by other political aristocracies is said to be a prerequisite, for example, there is an argument as follows:

Becoming an elder involved two major requirements. One, the acceptance of services from the landlords, *(madampikuur)* and the militia *(arisipadi janam)* attached to the *swarupam*.... The other requirement was the benediction of the tutelary deity of the elder.\textsuperscript{35} A methodological problem involved in the above statement could be highlighted here. If the above condition is a prerequisite, how can the same text maintain that “Venad chiefs exercised hereditary authority over their territory from Chera times.”\textsuperscript{36}. When one conceives succession of a ruler as hereditarily transformed, then the argument that succession is bounded on extra-hereditary aspects like ceremonies conducted at the temple and consent of feudatories would become a contradiction. This contradiction is the outcome of not clearly keeping in mind the conceptual difference between the
“right of one to be the elder” and the “right of one to exercise authority over the territory and things”.

While those who uphold the first position were overwhelmed by the idea of the naturalness and inevitability of a central figure and the domination that it entails, those who uphold the second position were driven by the negations that it actually engenders. To be brief, what they shared was a perception of the “limits” of sovereignty from ethical positions of differing relative preference regarding the ideal location of authority, be it in reference to past or present. Whether ornamented or not figure of king remains common to both.

We have seen how ontological existence of medieval kings result from category displacements, conceptual slippage and figures of speech. History is understood in the background against which the supposed king is posed. In the history of medieval Travancore either the absence of sovereign of the Western type is affirmed or a king of the sovereignty models is posited by assuming continuity either from the pre-medieval period or from the modern period of Travancore. The object of knowledge in all the above accounts is conceived within the metaphysics of presence and absence of sovereignty/authority of the king/chief/muppu over the “territory and things”. Once a king is there, then, some role and functions should be attributed to him; once again the concepts and categories of Western models of power and authority enter. They aid construction of a king who possesses power for oneself. This monolithic conception of the source and origin of power, which invariably and perpetually pushes itself in the opposite direction of the subjects, and perpetually remains, fixed without being affected by anything else. They are haunted by a conception of power that locates it in the domination of the king over
subjects; for some it is natural, for others it is not. In both what is common is the juridical notion of power as an instance of command and will, largely concerned with rights relating to the exercise of coercion and constraint, conventionally formatted within descriptions of authority by reference to territoriality, subjectivity, and the problematic of sovereignty. This “Modern” notion of power assumes that it can be possessed, that it has an original location, more power means more centralization and *vice versa*, it is unidirectional in its flow, it is intentional, and so on. The main metaphor at work in all the above texts which are the outstanding examples of modern historiography is a king with a ‘single will animated by singular body’; history progresses either to shield it, or to alter and subvert it.

**“Travancore” and the “exercise of authority”**

Now let us analyze synchronicity of the “king” with the “kingdom” that appears in several descriptions; how far does the “kingdom” and the “king” complement each other? The broader question taken up in this section is how unity of medieval Travancore/Venad is achieved in various historical representations; and how the unity and fixity of Travancore kingdom is made available to us today, either to accept it or to oppose it? The figures of speech, metaphors and concepts employed to construct for us a “medieval kingdom” would be highlighted. There seems to be some inspiration to find out meta-narratives to explain or establish the unity of Travancore in the domain of social and political history. May be the paradox of a king without a kingdom invaded the historians’ imagination. The word kingdom is conceptualized in such a way that if the state of affairs were not consistent with the kingdom-model that was used, then it was taken to mean the existence of abnormal or “chaotic events”.

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Representing the absence of kingdom seems to be treated as tantamount to a denigration of past. An indispensability of reference to the kingdom-model pervades the descriptions. One will have to objectify the basic unit of *Travancore* by laying bare the assumed foundations of its unity, and examine the appropriateness of this unity as a valid object of historical practice. Several concrete expressions of internal contradictions are highlighted as examples that resulted from the "imagined reality" of the medieval kingdom. An argument in this chapter is that most of the representations of the medieval days reveal a predicament. Descriptions do not find any model other than the kingdom-model and by-pass, if not repress, other possibilities in the name of coherence and avoidance of complication. Further, it will be shown how the unity and fixity of the so phrased "medieval *Travancore*" from pre-medieval period to medieval times is itself grounded in figures of speech. One argument is that there is a projection of the kingdom-model available to contemporary times into the past and at the same time another projection takes place which invokes "pre-medieval" unifying principles into the "medieval period".

A passage from which one can glean the modality of construction of the unity of *Travancore* runs as follows:

*Travancore* at that time was dispersed as five branches. Their names are Venad, Tiruvitamkode, Trippapur, Chiravay and Jayasimhanadu. Here the metaphors and referents are identifiable, *Travancore* the trunk separates or disperses as branches, the organizing metaphor is that of a tree. Once these *swaroopams* are aggregated, where is the trunk? *Travancore*, the trunk, does not even get transformed into one of the branches, for in the statement, *Travancore* is not identified with *Venad*. How can the non-existent trunk be analyzed in terms of
territoriality or sovereignty or exercise of authority? Once a unity is transformed into two, namely trunk and branches, then analysis of the branches will not yield any insight about the trunk. Apart from this problem, the narrative of the imagined trunk is spread over to the branches in such a way that the authority flows from the trunk into its branches. The metaphor of tree that organized the thought and framed the primary unity as trunk (Travancore) collapses the moment the trunk is searched for in the medieval period. This metaphor makes possible the interpretation that a trunk had once existed, before it branched off and subsequently relapsed into the remote layers of memory. If this is so, then the branches need to be depicted as if emerging from the soil and the trunk as something that remains to be unearthed. Perhaps, the trunk could be a monument that announced its disappearance at the very historical moment the branches had started emerging. The portrayal of the branches as emerging from the soil appears to anticipate surrealistic simulation.

Tree metaphor has repeatable materiality, there are different genres of representations of the Travancore-tree. One exemplary statement is as follows:

> Ravi Varma’s successors ruled over Kerala south of Kollam, and were known as the Thiruvadis’, the ruler being the eldest member among the five collateral (matrilineal) branches, into which the amalgamated royalty of Venad and Jayasimhanaad was apparently split up, at least from 1375. AD onwards. If in the tree metaphor we have analyzed we have one trunk that branches off, in some other representations there are two trunks to begin with, which are said to have “amalgamated” into one before branching. There is not simply one trunk that branches off but two, namely Venad and Jayasimhanad, they are separate as distinct royalties. They together branch off into five, namely, Venad, Tiruvitamkode, Thrippappur, Chiravai, and Jayasimhanad. It is
necessary to have a notion of "the moment of branching" to justify the splitting up of the "amalgamated trunks" into branches. The basis of the amalgamation of separate trunks, recognized as separate royalties, is left unexplained. The trunks are united within this unexplained combined force, both the trunks could thus be depicted within a totality that binds them. What is done in the statement is a repartitioning of the total unity into five distinct parts. The unexplained framing force continues here also. Explanation of such separation is also left unexplained and takes recourse to the metaphorical reduction of it into the process of branching. It may be that 'branching' is assumed to be a self-evident explanation. The illuminating event here is the "amalgamated" trunks giving rise to five branches. The unity of the branches is fabricated in terms of kinship relations. A mutation takes place in the field of kinship relations. It is no more the kind of kinship network that operated within the royalties or between the royalties in the pre-branching period. That is, kinship no more perpetuates the "collateral trunks"; it gives rise to the branches. Although inappropriate to the ongoing discussion, it can be said that the mutation is an important starting point in the history of kinship relations. The metaphorical reduction metamorphoses trunks into branches apart from deriving other branches from the trunks. Unless there is such a metamorphosis there cannot be five branches as in the above quoted statement; but strictly speaking only three of them can be said to branch off from the two trunks. If there were five branches then there would be no trunk. As both Venad and Jayasimhanad appear again as branches, it is impossible to retain the trunks in the description of the medieval period after the supposed branching. Thus, the unity of Travancore
cannot be logically maintained, even with the aid of metaphorical reduction.

If one were to talk of branches, then what would be the status of the ‘trunk’ and tree-trunk-branch metaphor. The branching marks a watershed in the historical process and its dating becomes crucial. The trunk then could only be characterized as the pre-history of the “branches”, but then this pre-history cannot be the active unifying presence in the history of the “post-trunk period” or the “branched state”. The trunk becomes visible only after branching! Once the branches have branched off the trunk is buried. If something invisible is said to be unifying anything, then it amounts to metaphysics. Either the trunks are metamorphosed into branches or they exist without a trunk. If trunk branches off into five, then, clearly there is a post-branching and pre-branching period with their own specificum. Otherwise there would not have been any need for metaphorical transformation. The post-branch period cannot be described with the help of the trunk that could at best be said to exist as a trace in the post-branch period. The descriptions applying the tree metaphor inherit such an internal inconsistency. Then, what is important here is to see how the trunk presents itself in the realm of what was believed to have happened during the medieval period as historicism in the twentieth century? The historical representation is found to use the trunk-branch metaphor to constitute the basic object of the inquiry as if it is substantial. History of the use of the “trunk” and “branches” is of recent origin, much after the period that they hope to capture.

The tree metaphor is charged up with temporal and spatial connotations. Let us look at how the tree allegorically refers to
temporality. The tree in its temporal dimension is cut into two, a trunk period and a period of the branches. It is obvious that there is no “former” until there is a “latter”. Characterization of “periods” in this manner is obviously a post festum act. The tree is temporized by making a fissure in time and two different periods are made visible, the moment of branching inaugurates the beginning of the new. Once a totally unified period of the trunk/trunks (Travancore) is posited, then it becomes something that fits well with the kingdom model. The trunk is the metonym for the undoubtedly unified kingdom. Then, we have the period when the unity gets dispersed, this period is metonymically reduced to “branches”. The metaphoric portrayal is not merely a shot of the period; rather it is an entity subject to change and transformation. The tree metaphor represents more the synchronic process than the diachronic situation. Now we can break open the conclusiveness that this metaphor achieves. If the tree metaphor alludes to two different stages in history, the first stage can be consistently characterized with the aid of the trunk, but in the next stage this should not be the organizing figure, but the branches in their singularity and differential relations among them, should become central. If the trunk is the fulcrum around which the description of medieval period revolves, then it leads to two difficulties. One, it is ahistorical and two, it is an example of self-contradiction for, by drawing out the branches out of trunk/trunks, it nullifies the need for metaphorical transformation itself.

In a temporal explanation this tree-metaphor is justified only so far as it is splinted into two. Once it is done, the tree is no more continuous, the continuum between the trunk and branches is ruptured with a fissure that separates present and past or surface
and depth. Then, it is an unnatural tree, an artifact that reinstates, wrongly, the trunk that is supposed to have been buried since the branching. If the trunk is used to represent the post-branching period, then it is tantamount to resuscitating the buried trunk. The discontinuity in the historical process that is brought into the description is left amorphous within the great continuity that the metaphor simultaneously fabricates. Once the metaphor enters into the description, it suppresses the difference between the periods and makes ambiguous what it attempts to clarify. That is, continuity is given primacy over the discontinuity that it tries to describe. The fact that only by metamorphosing the tree, the metaphor can find place in descriptions of the medieval period is conveniently left to oblivion.

Discontinuity appears only as shimmer at the instance of the great continuity annihilating the uniqueness of an epoch that presents itself timorously. How is the trunk given centrality by forcing its continuity into the description of the post-trunk period? The tree here is not merely a snap shot of family genealogy but an active one such that the trunk is no longer alone, but something that has branches as well. The trunk sustains and “contains” the branches. Branching does not alter the trunk, rather it retains it as in the snap shot of a tree without any fissure between trunk and branches. This branching is analogous to biological reproduction. But in any self-consistent historical representation, once a unit disperses into several, then the unit either becomes one among the new ones or it ceases to exist. It can no more exist as the maternal figure. If the trunk has metamorphosed into one of the branches then there is no centrality to it as the trunk that supports the branches. For example, when one talks of post-partition Indian
history, it is not treated as the single unit that it was during the "pre-period", but it is treated only as one of the two units. Another possibility is to imagine that if Travancore is one of the branches and the most powerful among them, having superior rights, then the relations are only among the branches. The trunk does not have to exist, an overarching branch would suffice. Thus the tree-metaphor is not appropriate for any convincing analysis of "medieval Travancore". It merely simulates a kind of unity among the branches with the hypothetical trunk. The purely metaphorical performativity is at its best when it is deployed in the above manner. This results in evoking an allegorically unified Travancore and giving it fixity from the ancient to the medieval period. Although the 'branches' are introduced to indicate the shift and show up what is new, the narrative of the transcendent trunk undermines it. Here, the unity of Travancore and its fixity across time are also achieved simultaneously.

Let us look at what more the "branches" do. The metonym of the branch does not stand for a "fragmented", "dispersed" situation. The figurative language succeeds in drawing the readers into its magic circle and generates consent. The branches, although mutually independent, are presented as belonging to the same trunk. A common origin\textsuperscript{45} is urged upon us so that those branches unite within the singularity of the trunk. There is a spatial unification that the branches accomplish as against the impression of a fragmented period. The ever-present trunk is the aggregating metaphor. Here the trunk is equated to an original family that enmeshes the branches with "family ties". So the kinship relation is made free of any effects of branching or dispersion. There is dispersion only for those who are
to wield authority over the partitioned territory as if branching only adds to the problems of distribution. There is a compulsion to describe discontinuity, but at the same time, that is compulsively deferred by attributing fixity to the unity of ancient Travancore. The tree-metaphor is at the same time spatialised and temporalised. The tree metaphor is given the burden of thinking of both continuity and discontinuity, although the first one is given maximum conclusiveness and positiveness.

To repeat, the unconscious skepticism about the adoption of the kingdom-model might have compelled the historians to deploy the tree-metaphor and describe the two periods in terms of trunk and branches. There is an implicit recognition of a discontinuity in the temporal movement. But the unity of the Travancore is achieved at the expense of overlooking this skepticism. Medieval history, even if we retain the metaphor, should be split into two, one with a united situation and the other, a description of a dispersed one, but without continuity between the periods. Fluidity of metaphor helps to create continuity and discontinuity simultaneously. The post-branching period or dispersed period is conceptualized within the framework of the pre-branch situation or the unified Travancore of post-medieval period. The essence of some pre-period is attributed to the 'post-period' and vice versa.

The foregoing scrutiny leaves us with the impression that once Travancore is the basic unit of historical analysis, then it ensues tremendous problems to be overcome unless we seek refuge in the ambiguities of figurative language or leave metaphors to do the thinking for us. When employed in history, it seems to be a unit that restricts the analysis from addressing the uniqueness of the period.
It makes the kingdom-model appear to be inadequate and forces descriptions to draw upon figures of speech. That restrictiveness would have given rise to the metaphorical charge in the descriptions that are discussed above. If Travancore can not be the primary unit of analysis and kingdom unsuitable as a category, then what is more important is not Travancore or Venad, but the swaroopam and the relationships between the various swaroopams. Political and territorial unity of Travancore, during its medieval days, adhere to the imagined reality of a kingdom with its metaphysical unity and fixity that encodes the early nineteenth and twentieth century historian's identification of the object of description. The textual strategy common to both the above cases is metaphorical reduction that makes the framing of unity possible. The unity that is particular to the metaphor is tagged on to an object of analysis, which resists this unity. That is how the anachronisms, pointed out above, are born and remain either unrecognized or its recognition consciously deferred. With this in mind, let us look at some examples from other writings, to see how fixity and unity are accomplished in them. The repeatable materiality of the tree-metaphor could be traced to see what it accomplishes as history and how it encodes thought.

I shall take up certain statements and expressions for analysis to show the manner in which descriptions, arguments and conclusions are arrived at. These conclusions are derived from a unified "medieval Travancore" and this reinforced the validity of it as an object of historical representation. The movement from the original assumptions to the final representation of medieval period is traced to highlight the play of language involved in it. The anachronisms and the self-contradictions, which are the result of
such projection, are also elucidated. First, an explanation given in order to resolve the problem identified as coexistence of two kings or the “co-kings problem” will be taken up. The specific issues debated by the historians in this connection are only incidental to our pursuit. For us the “co-kings problem” is only an exemplar that brings forth conceptual and theoretical issues.

Adithya Varma and Rama Varma Maharaja Varma Kulasekhara Perumal might have been co-kings, i.e., members of the same family in charge of different portions of the country, ruling on behalf of the head of the family under his authority. It is equally probable that Venad and Jayasimhanad which became one kingdom in the reigns of Ravi Varma Kulasekhara and his successors were again separated into two kingdoms ruled respectively by Marthanda Varma and Adithya Varma who according to the inscriptions belong to Threppapur (Jayasimhanad) and the Chiravay (Attingal and Venad) dynasties respectively. (Nagam Ayah, 1906:277, Vol.I)

The statement is tentative in nature and the explanation is not final, but it clearly opens up two different possibilities. It was possible to have “co-kings” in the kingdom, but not merely as a deviation from the norm in terms of possible numbers of kings for one kingdom. The situation is represented as a problem of “co-kings” for which two historical explanations are given. The first possibility maintains the “co-kings” by separating their respective territories but simultaneously posits an overarching authority identified as the head of the family who binds both from above. There is a territorial separation with kinship-based unification. There is no authority relation between the kings and thus they are mutually independent. If there is any relationship between them that is only through the superior authority that binds them equally. The overarching authority is localized in “some-one”, the head of the family, on behalf of whom the kings rule, and hence the possibility of “co-kings”. This is a strategy to find indivisible sovereign authority not as king but in terms of the head of the family, who strangely enough leaves no im-
prints of his pronouncements and acts that can be traced, not even the proper name.

It throws up an issue of interpretation. Kings are under the authority of the head of the family. If a king can rule on behalf of another mortal within his territory, what does Kingship mean in terms of authority and what prevents one from depicting the head of the family as the King or the King of kings. In other words, the question is, was the power relation that binds the head of the family with the Kings so different from the kind of relation that existed between the King and any of his subjects.

One of the historical problems the above statement poses is that if the 'Kings' are identifiable by an archaeologist or historian through the traces of distinction and authority left by them, why did the overarching authority over the same "kings" by the "head of the family" or super-king leaves no traces. Strangely enough not even a clue of his identity seems to exist so that at least archaeologists would have recovered it for historian's craft. The author identifies even the proper names of the kings but he is unable to identify not even an apt common noun for the position superior to these kings of the period. It is quite ironical for any present-day reader to confront such representations.

The second possibility that the statement opens up is that the two kings were absolutely independent of each other even without a common superior authority above them. Their territories were clearly divided into two kingdoms. They were respectively ruling Threppapur (Jayathunganad) and Chiravay (Attingal and Venad). Here the paradox is that *explanans* dissolves the *explanandum* that is the initial object identified for explanation, namely the existence of
"co-kings" is made to disappear. They are no more "co-kings" but kings with respective territories, two different kingdoms. Here the unity of the kingdom is forsaken but sovereignty of the kings over their territories is reinstated.

When we take up the above two alternative explanations together, it is surprising to see that the statement includes possibilities which are so diverging and opposing to the extent that the authority and identity of kingdom conceptualized in the alternatives are incommensurable. In one case, the *explanandum* consists of two mutually independent kings with their respective kingdoms. In the other there is co-existence of two kings and only one kingdom contained by a greater authority. Further it could be said that such mutually exclusive reasoning is the outcome of category displacement of *swaroopam* as kingdom and a conceptual slippage involving the reconstruction of several medieval *swaroopams* into a unitary kingdom. This in turn is on account of the excessive influence of a model, inconsistent with the "evidences", upon the period in question.

Another scholar tackles the "co-kings problem" and the unity of *Travancore* in the form of a response to the above quote.

Venad is a comprehensive name which included the territories ruled by all the branches of the Vanchi dynasty. We also find out in addition to Rama Marthanda Varma of Jayasimhanad succeeding to the sovereignty of Venad, Adithya Varma describing himself as an ornament to the family of Jayasimha, the Lord of Chirava and the king of Vanchi. The legitimate conclusion which arises from the foregoing facts is that the several branches were looking after the affairs of portions of territory, the eldest, and perhaps the fittest of all, assuming the title of the king of Venad and exercising a general authority over all. (Velu Pillai, T.K, 1940:130-31, Vol.I).

Here the possibility of "co-kings situation" is abandoned, the cognitive logic behind such a description of historical fact itself is questioned.
The premise of territorial distinctions is comprehensively undermined in the statement with the aid of the “tree” metaphor, the simulative functions of this metaphor, especially the branch metonym, are clear by now. Branching has taken place in the Vanchi dynasty, and still the Vanchi dynasty upholds the unity of the branches. A “comprehensive name” like Venad is introduced into the statement marshalling the branches into a unity and creating a well-bounded totality. To reiterate, in the passage cited, Venad is a comprehensive name for several “territories” ruled by each “branch” of the dynasty, and the king of Venad exercises “general authority over all”. What is meant by the terms “general” and “over all” refer to be not clear. Seniority of age is presented as the criterion ensuring the “fitness” of any king. The unique position of the Venad king, animated by the supreme sovereignty among kings of other territories, is articulated as the unifying figure. The emerging picture is clear; while the comprehensive name contains the territorial divisions, the “rulers” are united as branches of a dynasty. But what places Venad in a fixed relation to the dynasty is left unspecified. So also the question, how Venad is one of the branches and yet a comprehensive term is left unelaborated. Relative age makes a “king” with distinction (in relation to rulers of other branches) to draw complete allegiance from the territorial rulers. The fact that he is the head of the family or dynasty establishes his distinction as the “king of Vanchi”. Thus in the historical representation, a territorially united Venad and a dynastically united Vanchi achieves a grand narrative of unity with the sovereign “King of Venad” in the throne. The above passage is paradigmatic of many descriptions that are at stake in the present analysis. Therefore it is necessary to elaborate some of the
observations that we have made earlier. In the statement the need for a “comprehensive name”, as also the existence of different territories “ruled” by different branches, is accepted without question. Jurisdictional distinctions are recognized and therefore the plural “territories” instead of “territory”. The “branch metonym” stands more for territorial distinction than for anything else. But as the statement develops, there is a shift in the function of the metonym, the branch begins to stand as a symbol for groups that have descended from a trunk. Subsequently, there are references to only “portions of (a unified) territory” (there are no more territories); territoriality of the branch is displaced and already legitimized descent groups (thavazhies) are made to appear as branches of a single trunk. Let us try to dwell at some length over this rather vague and perplexing terrain mapped in the statement by invoking some hypothetical situations. (However, it should be noted that the attempt here is not to clear the ambiguity, but rather to highlight it).

Now, if Venad is a comprehensive name that combines all the particular territories and, at the same time, a proper name of one of the branches, then, for historians, the most crucial question is how one can decipher the authority structure in terms of a “comprehensive name”. Does a comprehensive name, which can equally be a post festum term, make possible the exercise of sovereignty over either the “rulers” of each territory or over territories and things? As Venad is the name of one of the territorial units, under what authority is this name made applicable to the entire dominion, consisting of several branches. When a single name is generalized by making it applicable to other territories also, one can find politics in action. Thus generalization of a name is not merely a
problem of linguistic convenience. How did this name guarantee the king’s sovereignty over the entire territory? Answers to these questions may help us verify the validity of using the comprehensive name Venad or treating Travancore as a unified object for analysis.

If Venad is merely a “comprehensive name”, then the genealogy of Venad as a kingdom would have had the most crucial turn, if not its beginnings, at the time when the name Venad became generalized. This is especially so for, the name chosen is not “Vanchi”, the unifying name for the “trunk”. If the name Venad, that refers more to the territorial and jurisdictional unity, is preferred over the name Vanchi with all its unificatory potential, then that event in history, rather than the overshadowing territorality of the Venad (the “comprehensive name”), should have been taken up for explanation. To put it briefly, the statement under examination evidences how the comprehensive name is taken for granted as an ontological object in historical analysis. Even in recent historiography this unity remains an undisputed category with definite ontological status. It is also equally important to “complicate” the validity of treating “comprehensive names that” one can only attribute, as a way of categorising, to be the outer bounds of the object of analysis. Does a mere comprehensive name require any king? When the “branch metonym” stands for “territories”, it affirms territorial divisions of “rule”. But when the same stands for descent groups, it dilates the territorial divisions and lets the dynasty (the trunk) to contain the branches and constitute unity ignoring the discontinuous territorality implicit in the first sense of the metonym.

Now let us see how the branches or swaroopams⁴⁷ enter into the history texts in spite of the unifying narrative. What is undertaken
here is an analysis of the conceptual implications of the intrusion of historical aspects that destabilize the unity of Travancore as a territorial entity and subvert the metanarratives of “kingdom and sovereignty” achieved through metaphorical reduction. Generally, swaroopams enter into the social and historical analyses as unities that are contained in a well-defined universe named Travancore. Swaroopams, taken as geographical and juridical entities exhaust the unity in toto. The problem then is where is the space for Travancore in terms of exercise of authority over territory or principality. If the term Travancore by itself does not refer to any geographical space, but calls attention to the boundary condition of the branches or to some analytical principle that ties the branches together, then it is a “meta” term that can exist only with reference to each of the territories of, the swaroopams. This term cannot be employed meaningfully to signify the authority that flows from one or more singular centers over the entire area that the term denotes. At times, in historical accounts, the unity of Travancore is deciphered in terms of the relations between the swaroopams. It is then represented as a “confederation”⁴⁸. But for this to be true, it should emerge from the relations among the elements through the active force of consensus generated among them. Then what is primary is not so much the outcome, that is, the confederation, or the unity, but the will of each swaroopam with its historic specificity (something that is absent in the text under reference). In this case what is more glaring is the distinctiveness of swaroopams in comparison with the unity named Travancore. The functions that the trunk achieves in the representation are contradicted by the prominence of the branches (swaroopams).
In another example of recent origin we see that the *swaroopam* is recognized as a basic unit. But the way in which it is conceptualized reveals that the trunk is still indispensable. To be brief, *swaroopams* could be conceptualized only as elements that can be represented exclusively in relation to the trunk or *Venad*. “In *Venad*, Threppappur, Deshinganad, Chiravay and later Elayadam were called *swaroopams*.” Here *Venad* is portrayed as container of the *swaroopams*. The *swaroopams* are said to be *in Venad* as if it defines them. The principle of aggregation is left unreflected as if it is a given. The primary category remains the same, namely *Venad*. *Swaroopams* are referred to only as elements belonging to this generalized category. That is, the conceptualization of the comprehending term remains same. Further, *Venad* in the study is only a medieval name for modern *Travancore*. It is as if everything else had remained same. Then centuries should have elapsed without anything happening except the change in name. According to this assumption the unity called *Venad* had been in existence from the early medieval to the modern period, except for the change in name and its so-called “fragmented character”. Two conclusions follow from this. Firstly, the so-called fragments are the derivatives of an already assumed *Venad* kingdom before the alleged fragmentation occurred, and secondly, the traces of the “trunk” that seems to persist cannot be dismissed as mere memory. The first conclusion veils the fragments with the “past” while the second one conceals it with “past”. The overwhelming presence of *Venad* during the *swaroopam* period, so to say, seems to be an ahistorical premise, which may lead historical studies to include only the relations within a meta-unity with a supreme central authority. In the study under
consideration there are frequent references to swaroopams in the
descriptions, but the trunk metonym, in effect, overpowers these. In
other words, in the historical representation there is a constant
tension between the “trunk” and the “branches” within the unifying
narrative of the “tree” that is to stand for the “branching epoch”.
Venad, as it were, surreptitiously encodes the trajectory of the
description. It excludes the all-important question how that unity
itself had come into being in the first place. What is the semantic
and ontological status of Venad in relation to the swaroopam
identities. How far is it legitimate for this unity named Venad to
“contain” the swaroopams? How did these swaroopams come to be
in Venad? These are the questions that are effectively shut out by
taking for granted the “comprehensive name” as an apriori ontic
entity and treating the swaroopams as its elements. Although this
study does not focus on the category displacement of swaroopam into
kingdom, it has perforce to deal with the inherited conceptual slip
implicit in the descriptions of swaroopams that squarely rest on the
language of the kingdom models. Had the term swaroopam been
subjected to the above queries before being accorded a place in
historical accounts as in the above passage, conceptual confusions
and internal inconsistencies could have been avoided. It seems that
terms or names like Venad and Travancore are used as though they
are defensible in any period and any historical process without
conceptual inconsistency. The term can mean so many things, and it
is overburdened with a surplussage of semantic layers.

In yet another example the overwhelming presence of the “disap­
peared trunk” is partially avoided by recognizing swaroopams and
their specificity from the mid-fourteenth century onward. Still the
figure of the branch persists. There is a struggle to escape the grip of the kingdom model and the category displacement between the swaroopam and kingdom that it engenders; however, it meets with sporadic success. It seems that the ghost of the trunk compels the "history of the post-branching" period to be written as if the "post"/"pre" difference did not exist in history. Even when the history of the branches are told, the ghost manifests itself through either the Deshinganadu or Chiravay getting identified as the locales of authority and thus Venad, the unifying theme, is perpetuated. Further, the unity of the branches is conceived to be in the religious sphere. The common devotion of the branches towards the God Padmanabha is said to maintain the unity of the branches even after the separation.53

Conceptualization of the unity of the kingdom or swaroopam is integral to the idea of totality. This totality is conceived in such a way that there is a center, which structures the unity. The center is thus indispensable for the retention of any unity, be it kingdom, swaroopam, dynasty, branch or family. To have the "unity, Travancore or Venad," it ought to have a center. Whatever be the metaphysics of the unity called Venad or Travancore in the historical studies, the location of the center of the unity in terms of power is identified differently in different cases. In one, eldest among the "rulers" of the territories assumes the title of king of Venad and this becomes the center of power. There is perfect consensus about this among the figureheads of territories, which results in the formation of a confederation.54 There is no territorial localization of the center of authority, all territories have equal chance to have a ruler within its domain depending on the age factor. In another example55 Venad is
only one among the five branches of Threppappur royal family, not of the Vanchi dynasty. Their mutual relationship is characterized by perpetual conflicts as against confederate situation in the other version. Generally speaking, in history books, location of authority is the clearest figure. What is striking about the histories of this region is the nature of the inconsistencies and contradictions. Their sources are to be sought in the metaphysics of unity, the way in which authority was conceptualized and the practice of understanding political history in terms of the “trunk” or kingdom.

The “title”, king in the fable of kingdom

Once a locus of power is identified either in one of the branches or family, then the description of authority extends it to the whole of the metaphysical unit called Travancore. History of Travancore becomes the history of, for example, Threppappur or some other swaroopam or family. This is the best example of how, literary tropes (particularly synecdoche) are employed to engender statements in objective historical studies. Once a Travancore kingdom is metaphorically arrived at, then there is the compulsion to create, not merely a center of authority, but an authority that is localized. The requirement, that is consistent with the kingdom model, is an individual king or chief for the entire Travancore who wields authority over every part of it. Requirements of a generalisable and at the same time centralizing figure need to be met. The frantic search that ensues provides the historiographers with the metaphor of the trunk and branches and an overarching meganarrative of a dynasty bound by family ties.

The unity is at times anchored on kinship. The heads of all the swaroopams are said to have a common lineage and seniority determines the supreme authority, although—paradoxically
enough—the name of that family is not Venad or Travancore. The unity thus constituted turns Swaroopam as an element of it, as something that it contains. The will that is exclusive to each swaroopam is secondary to the confederation of Venad. This would mean that forces external to the swaroopam operate from some center. This grand unity of kinship that stands in lieu for any real unity made possible by political or power structures is, by and large, the product of textual strategies. As a result, the forces that perpetuated the fixity of the unity remain unstated/unexamined in historical analysis.

So far we have been concerned, in the main, with the textual implications of the “comprehensive name” and the “name of the dynasty” and the part played by them in generating notions about the unity and fixity of Venad. Now let us go back to the statement cited above which unproblematically refers to two positions: the “King of Vanchi” dynasty and the “King of Venad”. Thus it can be said that there existed two “kingly positions” or “kingly functions” within the “kingdom”. Both the unifying terms, be they Venad or Vanchi, the comprehensive name of the territories or the dynasty, have their respective kings. Alleging it to be “misreading” and “unfactual”, the author had prima facie rejected the situation of co-kings. Yet we find the concept of “co-kings” entering surreptitiously into the very statement that had so diligently attempted to keep it out of historical descriptions. But the nature of the co-kings that emerges is different from that in the passage cited prior to the one under analysis. It is no more two kings for one kingdom with another overarching head of the family; here we have “rulers” for “territories” and an overall king of Venad and another for the Vanchi dynasty.
The statement contains within it “facts” (names of the both kings are given in the statement itself) to contradict itself. However the authority relation between the two types of kings or between them and the “rulers” are left unspecified except in the ambiguous words, “general authority overall”.

Once, through family ties, a single king/chief and kingdom are artifacted, then kingly position warrants some functions of distinction. The attempt then is to formulate functions that are convincingly consistent with the artifact, the ruler of a kingdom. His position as the wielder of authority, whether it be absolute or restricted, gets established. But the difficulty is that the kinship relation that exists between the king and the “rulers” cannot legitimize the authority that gets to be varyingly exercised between the “rulers” of swaroopams and the respective “subjects”. This is so because the “king of Venad” is only a “title assumed” by “the senior-most member of all the branches taken together”58. The statement cited is also definitive about who “rules” the branches; all branches have their own “rulers”. The critical question of how within each branch authority relations are conducted gets sidelined. Moreover the statement under consideration is also clear about the status of the king; the king of Venad is only a “title” that is assumed by one among the rulers. The determinism apparent in the statement is questionable. Although the position, king, is only a “title” that the kinship structure allows, he is given a function that goes beyond the kinship structure and the functional implications of any mere “title”. The activity attributed to the holder of this “title” is the exercise of “general authority overall”. The “title” and the exercise of authority get linked within the field of symbolic relations. The political and
juridical authority that a king assumes, it is clearly outside the
symbolic field. Thus the way the title is attributed with the function
of wielding authority over the rulers and, in turn, their subjects
(general authority) seems to contradict the characterization of
kingship as a mere title. Further, it may be possible that the period
under consideration had a politico-juridical space which was
overdetermined by symbolic relations, then obviously the models in
use, namely, variants of the kingdom or sovereignty models, would
not be consistent with this premise. In other words, within the
descriptive matrix using the concept of kingdom (overtly employed
here), the discovery that kingship is only a title (as in the statement)
is untenable. A king who wields general authority over the rulers of
the territories and the entire universe of Travancore cannot be
thought of as functioning within the symbolic relations alone.
Rather, his function would lie primarily in the realm of political and
juridical relations. Kingship is always a position, which combines the
maximum focal points of power relations within the kingdom. The
portrayal of the king as a mere titleholder would only be an excuse
for a king.

I am elaborating above point mainly because the same problems
are to be encountered even when one accepts, as in some of the
recent writings, that each swaroopam was ruled by a muppu/ruler.
Here also the muppu is again considered as a mere “position
occupied within the family”\(^59\). When historical descriptions of
political organization and its character revolve around such a
position, then it can be said that there is an internal contradiction.
At the same time the muppu cannot be posited within the
kinship/family domain and political and power relations cannot be
described in terms of the *muppu*. This is true not only for the descriptions of centralization processes of authority, but also for power struggles involving fragmentation, organized resistance against oppressive rules, or revolts against the rulers. Whatever be the focus of description and representation, a "title holder" or a "position occupied in a ruling family" cannot be the fulcrum around which such description can progress as in the statements that are analyzed here.

A closer look at some of the usages in the passage under consideration will be of help in elucidating the manner in which ambiguities of language in effect lead to a perpetual deferment of the act of description that it had initially set out to do. The phrase "general authority overall" may have two different meanings. While the "rulers" of the branches have authority over their own respective territories, the king of Vanchi or the King of Venad would have authority over the rulers of each branch. There need not be any delegation of power by the overall king to the rulers of the branches as in the sovereignty models. The titleholder still remains the ruler of the branch. Would not there be a difference in the nature of authority that the "Venad king" is able to exercise over his own branch and that over the territories and subjects of other branches? This question is especially important for all the branches are said to have their respective rulers. Answers to such questions would have opened the way to a more comprehensive and less ambiguous description of the past.

The second possible implication of the terms "overall" and "general" could be that the authority of the "king of Venad" extends directly over not only the other rulers but also their territory and
subjects. Given a situation of conflict the overall king could act on the subjects and territory directly as in the case of the kingdom or raajyam. But this in fact makes us aware of a contradiction within the argument: the characterization of the contemporary situation with the aid of “tree” metaphor with the branches existing as “territorial” units with its own “ruler” are invalidated by the “sovereignty of the King of Venad”. Within the statement we can see two strands of argumentation, which are mutually contradictory. Perhaps the model of sovereignty and the metaphor of the tree in which there is tension between the trunk and branches are mutually exclusive and this has lead to internal contradictions when the model and metaphor are employed together. The exercise of authority over any given territory and subjects through the “rulers” over whom the holder of the “title”, “Venad king”, and the direct exercise of authority over the same territory by the ruler, are different forms of exercise of authority. It is the failure to make this distinction that engenders the ambiguities in usage. The above analysis of the phrase “general authority overall”, wherein the attempt has been to highlight the amorphous nature of the description or the rhetorical nature of the representations, could be extended to several other phrases in other representations as well. Formulations like “rights over the entire area under their control”,60 are quite typical. Such formulations tend to evade the entire realm of political and power relations, by shrouding it with semantic ambiguity and project unproblematically the position of a ruler or king. In the ambiguity of such usages what is given visibility is the singular figure of the ruler whatever the boundary may be, whether it is kingdom or swaroopam, or “trunk” or “branches”. The question here is not whether one
should focus on the "branch" or "trunk" or "tree" in its totality. In other words, it should be further stressed that the problems discussed here have nothing to do with the determination of the level of aggregation or disaggregation of the basic unit of analysis. Rather the attempt has been to lay bare the thought processes that had paved the way to the emergence of the metaphysically conceived unity and fixity of the basic unit of analysis (Venad or Travancore kingdom) in historical and social science research. We have looked into conceptual foundations of, and the assumptions behind the taken-for-granted unities and fixities. The metaphors and other figures of speech that are involved in the fabrication of the unities and the localized authority centers have been isolated. We also saw how this has been repeated without much change unto the present.

If one is to be self-reflexive about the identity and unity of the object of study and the validity of the terms and concepts used, when analyzing problems of power, authority, state, sovereignty etc., one should not treat aggregating or comprehensive names such as Travancore or Venad ontologically or as valid classifications of the area under study, irrespective of time and space. What made swaroopams to appear as element of some other totality called Venad could be an alternate starting point. In that case metaphysical notions with regard to the fixity of the totality and localized power in a king or chief or ruler becomes unnecessary. Besides it could then dispense with the notion of a united "Travancore" projected across time and space. When we use the name Travancore to designate the area under study during the medieval times, we are projecting either the so-called "pre-medieval" or "post-medieval" phase on to it. If one
retains the basic unity of Venad as an analytical category, the unity and fixity achieved is bound to become metaphysical. For clarity of analysis it would be better to start with swaroopams in their uniqueness, rather than attempt a conceptualizing of Travancore as kingdom. The swaroopams should be viewed in their singularity and in relation to one another instead of regarding them in the context of their relationship with Venad or Travancore. It would then no longer be necessary to consider them as being “within” something. Otherwise the analysis will read like a fable of a king without a kingdom or a kingdom without a king.

1 Travancore and Venad are used interchangeably in this study unless printed in script format.
2 Pachumuthathu, (1867) and Shangoony Menon, (1878).
3 Nagam Aiya, (1906) and Vellu Pillai T.K, (1940).


5 Sundaram Pillai P, (1894).

7 One of the interesting ways to characterize positivism, which may appeal to historical sensibility, is to say that: It argues that knowledge is to be modeled on the early twentieth century’s understanding of certain pieces of nineteenth-century and especially seventeenth century physics [Macloskey D.N, (1996:5)].
8 The main texts that are treated as eulogies by the twentieth century scholars are the following: Pachumuthathu, (1867) and Shangoony Menon, (1878).
10 Rajaraja Varma M, (1941).
13 Sundaram Pillai, (1894, reprint, 1943:10).
15 For example, see, Ganesh K.N, (1990) and Shivashankaran Nair K, (1993).
16 I purposively use the term “conceptual complex” here for it is rarely the practice of social scientists in general, and historians in particular, to strictly follow the dictums of any one straight-jacketed method. What would guide the best of historians is a complex of concepts and methods located largely within the framework of positivism.
One of the examples would be that, there are references to rajas twice in consecutive paragraphs of Shivashankaran Nair, K., (1993:106-7) as if they really existed during the fifteenth century.

Shivashankaran Nair, K., (1993:110); emphasis added. The period under reference here is between 1532 to 1758.


In the text, the terms "chief", "eldest" and "ruler" are used more or less synonymously and conceptual differences, if any, are not recognizable.

Ganesh.K.N, (1990:20); emphasis added.

Ganesh. K.N, (1990:17). The swaroopam muppu, referred to here, is portrayed to be having only partial and restricted control is Chiravay muppu. But, note that, the same author states the following: "conventionally the muppu of Chiravay was the elder of Venad." There is an apparent inconsistency between this and what was said above.

For example see, Ganesh.K.N, (1990). Comparing two statements in this text, one could see an instance of the tension between the ruler and the eldest, and the resulting inconsistency. First, "The muppan of the Trippappur, Desinganad and Ciravay swaroopams could lay claim to being the ruler of Venad." (p.18) Second, "[Thus] accession to eldership (muppumura) signified the position occupied within the family and privileges associated with it, rather than the extent of territorial authority acquired." While the first one grounds itself on authority of the "ruler" within the territorial domain, the second one finds its domain within kinship relations and undermines the first statement. In the first, muppu is given the function of ruling, in the second it is given merely a position, without the function of ruling, within kinship relations.

Once the indispensability of any central figure possessing authority and power is in the unconscious, then it leads to internal contradictions of the following kind. At one place there is a statement which affirms that conventionally the muppu of Chiravay swaroopam was the elder/ruler of Venad (Ganesh.K.N:18, second para). But elsewhere there is the statement that Chiravay muppu was only a title assumed by the senior princes of the family which merely claimed a share of the income of a portion of the territory. The contradiction is self-evident.

From the texts it is not clear whether these rights were delegated or structurally determined in such a way that even the king cannot alter it.


I am alluding here to the Travancore Manuals and Shangoony Menon, (1878).

We know that the discourses of both theists and atheists center on god, and employ the metaphysics of presence and absence. It is the same kind of metaphysics that is at work here also.

I am alluding to the Travancore State Manuals and other pre-1989 literature.


Ganesh.K.N, (1990:17); emphasis added.

In fact, inspiring alternative modes for conceptualizing and analyzing power and authority have been elaborated in the works of Max Weber, Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt etc. It should be stressed that they are not giving alternative approaches to study any non-European regions but exclusively Europe and English speaking world. For a recent attempt to comprehend these alternative approaches to power and the modern juridical conceptualization of power see, Michael Dillon, (1995:323-368).

Whether Travancore has been conceived in consistency with the model or described residually with respect to the model as absence of the kingdom, they all centralize the model and the model directs the course of both the descriptions.

Parameshwara Aiyer S, (1968:124). This statement directly refers to the second half of the fourteenth century.
40 It has been brought to the acknowledgement that in modern medical science, a large part of the knowledge about “living bodies” has been achieved with the aid of “dead bodies”.

43 If some unities get reconstituted into several unities, then it is the moment of reconstitution that is critical to historical analysis. Here the historical conditions are clearly sidestepped through metaphorical reduction. Further the actual process of branching is similarly reduced to growth of the trunk into “branches” as though it were an organic process that requires no explanation.

44 Once again the metaphor preempts any inquiry into the historical conditions and processes involved in the so-called amalgamation.

45 It is quite surprising how one can decipher origins, for, it is not even clear whether patriliny or matriliny existed during the period under reference.

46 In general, kings make their presence felt by inscribing and leaving documentary proof of their acts, which in turn become historical documents and monuments. Keeping this in mind, it is very difficult to comprehend how the super-king’s traces remain undeciphered even though the proper names of kings are available in inscriptions. This seems to be an anachronism.

47 Although I equate swaroopam and branch here, this is not taken to be the actual situation. In fact swaroopam should be conceptualized without the aid of the tree metaphor.


51 Apart from these problems it also leads to internal inconsistencies. For example, compare the following sentences:
1. "The elders of swaroopam thus held political and economic rights over the entire area under their control."
2. "Thus accession to eldership (muppumura) signified the position occupied within the family and privileges associated with it...." (Ganesh.K.N, 1990:21), emphasis added.

If in the first statement the position of the elder is primarily in the field of political and economic powers, in the second, the same position is located in the family and distanced from political field. (It is only a privileged position within the family). They evidently contradict each other.


56 Another example is the argument, which locates general authority in Jayathunganad and its mooppu till the seventeenth century or so, and then attributes it to Chiravay for the period till the eighteenth century. There is yet another characterization wherein it is stated that "[c] onventionally the muppen of Ciravay swaroopam was the elder of Venad." (Ganesh.K.N, 1990:18).
matter of conscious choice, and it was intended to highlight the methodological potential that the present day advancements in historiography have made possible rather than to assess the truth value of the propositions in those texts. It should also be stated that the attempt was not to resort to empirical verification or falsification of the statements in those texts, but to deconstruct and lay bare the assumptions, premises and encoding effects of metaphors which lead to self-contradictions and ungrounded conclusions. My purpose was not to counterpose one statement of a text against another statement of some other text but to analyze texts essentially from within. Also we have tried to construct new objects and relations that seem to be more appropriate units of analysis.