E.H. Carr’s warning against the pitfalls associated with the selection of facts while writing history is remarkably relevant in the context of the Nambūtiri reform movement; a cursory observation would reveal several jigsaw puzzles in the studies relating to it for their undue focus on certain events and on the role of certain selected individuals. Carr has reminded us that it is the historian who decides which one is a fact and which one is not; but this discretionary right of the historian may cause considerable damage to historical objectivity. The stress upon certain sensitive ‘events’ and on the role of some prominent leaders, a trend equally visible in academic studies and popular narratives, has been occasioned by the difficulty in, and the indifference to, tracing out new facts; and in the search for trees, we miss the wood. The Carlylean craze for hero worship misguided even serious researchers and persuaded many to minimize the movement to the handiwork of a few individuals. It promoted an undesirable tendency of ignoring the inherent dynamics of the movement. The fact that the movement as such revolved around certain basic issues, than on individuals, and the role of the individuals was mainly confined to the part they played in radicalizing, or even softening, the modes of social action is largely left unnoticed. In fact, groups were the units of the work force, which were formed around a particular agenda and ideology, and individuals were representatives of one or the other of these groupings.

If the study of individuals in history is to be made on this ideological premise, it becomes an intricate and embarrassing matter. Highlighting the role of individuals has been made difficult by the scarcity, or non-availability, of primary data in the form of diaries or letters; autobiographies are not reliable evidences unless they are approached with an awareness of the censured kind of images they reflect. More important is the difficulty in analyzing the impact of the role of non-objective or non-material forces in shaping the thought processes of individuals; there is no satisfactory tool in assessing the way emotions work to determine one’s ideological position and the nature of his social interventions. In the context of several such factors working together in determining personal attitudes, no study on the role of individuals in history can claim to be perfectly objective. Nevertheless, individuals are by and large the products of their own
times and environment. The given material circumstances play a decisive role in
directing their responses, positively or negatively. Hence a study of the context
may reveal the individual and would help explain the forces behind his action.
The person shares the ideology and programmes of the movement. Objective and
serious history demands a study of the attitudes and ideological positions of the
individual than a panegyric assessment of the person and his deeds. The
strengths and weaknesses of the present study are justified in the context of these
premises.

More importantly, the present study focuses on reinterpreting the current and
established notions of the Nambūtiri movement and the role of VT in it. Paucity
of academic studies, the poor utilization of primary sources and overdependence
on the reformers’ narration of their own deeds at their face value has been highly
instrumental in reproducing the encomium all throughout. Most of the western
studies on the caste reform movements of Kerala were concentrated on the
Nāyar and Izhava movements. In the case of the Nambūtiri movement,
considerable share of primary sources is already lost; some of the remaining
materials are in the custody of a few individuals and are not available for
research purposes. The researcher has to rely heavily on the literature of the
reform movement or on the memoirs of the reform leaders.

Most of the existing studies on the Nambūtiri movement are noted for their
overemphasis on source materials of the late 1920s and a focus on the events
from that period onwards. This has led to ignore the fact that the foundation of
the movement had been laid earlier and the prominent areas of reform had
already been identified; this factor greatly obscured the dynamics of the
movement. Therefore scholars failed to take note of the greatly enlightening
debates of the early '20s, such as of the early articles of VT. It is equally
surprising to note that even the highly scholarly works have ignored the great
radicals of this period like V.S. Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiri, Mūthiringōd Bhavatṛātan
Nambūtiripād, Pāndam Vāsudēvan Nambūtiri, K.N. Kuṭṭan Nambūtiripād,
Pāṭiriśśēri Nārāyaṇan Nambūtiripād, Kapēṅgāṭ Sāṅkaraṇ Nambūtiri or C.K.
Nambūtiri. V.S. was the most prominent leader of the movement after Kuṟūr till
his death in 1924, Mūthiringōd was the true ideologue of the movement in the
1920s, Pāndam was the real spirit behind the Nambūtiri Yuvajana Sangham,
Kuṭṭan Nambūtiripād was the solid power behind the Uṇṇi Nambūtiri, Pāṭiriśśēri
was the brain behind the Nambūtiri Regulation, Kaplingāt was instrumental in the whole process of enacting the Nambūtiri Bill and C.K. Nambūtiri gave silent and steady support to all the activities of the Sabha.

For a historical analysis of VT, the present study examines his entire writings in two segments; the first one being contemporaneous, is known as the ‘literature of reform’; the other is the post-reform literature which includes both his responses to later developments and his reflective kind of literature on the reform process. The evidently contrasting perceptions traceable in the two categories of his writings may create considerable problems of interpretation; one would be embarrassed to meet many VTs in them. Panegyric literature has dismissed this fragmented personality as a natural antecedent to the unfortunate erosion of the great ideals envisioned by the reform movement, which had filled them with frustration and had forced them to retract from their radical and idealist positions. But the case of VT presents a different picture, there appears to be no break or retreat in his thought processes; his very radicalism was intended to reinstate his community to its old state of glory in conformity with the modern ideals; the failure of his mission and the indifference of his community to respond to his call forced him to keep aloof from his agenda for a while; but he was eager to make use of every opportunity to accomplish this end either on his own or in alliance with men of similar thinking. This assumption is confirmed by the numerous articles he had written in the post-independence years.

To draw a line of continuity between a person’s active phase and his ‘retired’ life may not be reasonable or justifiable; not simply because personal opinions would not be static but also because advance in age may force an individual to find solace in tradition and spirituality. Equally important was the slow development of a ‘return to tradition’ among many social reformers who did not move from social action to political movements. VT’s indifference to political nationalism in the 30s, his resignation from the Congress Party after independence and his later attack on party politics clearly revealed his apathy to all forms of politics. In an era of political culture, political passivity may lead to frustration and revivalist affiliation. But he could not retreat to a highly conservative position because of his past image as a humanist and as a fiery
radical. This exigency compelled him to exert great restraint in expounding his thoughts and ideals and his public interventions.

The present study contradicts greatly with VT’s popular image created along the model of a radical reformer and a noble individual. He is held to be the embodiment of the spirit of the renaissance in Kerala. This public image attracted people towards him and they came to love him as one of the founders of modern Kerala. He was also known for his simplicity, idealism, radical position and for his alluring literary style. Like Gandhi, he is believed to have communicated his messages through his idealistic life. He could attract feminine sympathy for his pioneering role in the movement for gender equality. Above all, he is known for his rare and unique personal traits: for his hospitality and his inclination in maintaining personal friendships. Even in the midst of poverty he used to feed the hungry and the destitute. He had an array of friends from all sections of the society – from the fiery radical young men to the highly conservative patriarchs. However, the fact remains that this ‘simple’ image of VT does not fully agree with the larger questions of historical research.

The present study consists of five chapters. The first chapter, Introduction, deals with the current notions on the Nambūtiri movement and on VT, the basic theoretical concepts upon which the study is based and the areas the study intends to explore into. Chapter two, Review of Literature, is a survey of VT’s works and of the important literature on him and the Nambūtiri reform movement. The third chapter, The Nambūtiris: Tradition and Change, briefly examines the social and cultural condition of the Nambūtiri community in the pre-reform days and the forces that had worked behind a slow transformation. The fourth chapter, VT: The Rebel and the Reformer which is the core chapter, analyzes VT in the context of the Nambūtiri movement and in the wider context of twentieth century Kerala society and tries to explore into the manifold dimensions of his social intervention. The last chapter, From Dissent to Consent: The Ideology of VT, examines the vision of VT and his attitude towards various issues of social and economic interest.