Introduction

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural awakening of modern Kerala has had its most salient expression in the rise of popular caste associations. The role of these associations in modernizing and democratizing the feudal and caste-ridden social order of Kerala and in realigning the existing social relationships has generally been acclaimed. Their role in community-building efforts has also been noticed. The lower caste movements had their focus on attaining upward social mobility at the expense of the privileges of the dominant caste groups. The building up of monolithic castes by eliminating sub-caste groups was a prominent agenda which most of the movements achieved to a great extent.

1 “The word ‘renaissance’ is old and stereotyped with European overtones, but that expressive term may still be used to denote the vast transformation that was quietly coming over Kerala in the 19th century”. Kerala through the Ages, Thiruvananthapuram, 1980, p.69.

2 See P.K. Gopalakrishnan, Kērāḷaṁhintē Sāṃskārika Charitam, Thiruvananthapuram, 1994, pp.525-26; A. Sreedharamenon, Kērāḷasamāskāram, Kottayam, 1992, p.181. Social change in these times has generally been characterized as an essentially liberating experience that freed the individual from enervating feudal, casteist and familial norms.

3 Modern community has been perceived as a product of colonialism, specifically of colonial modernity. See M. Muralidharan, “Hindu Community Formation in Kerala: Processes and Structures under Colonial Modernity”, South Indian Studies, 2, July-Dec.1996, p.251. The Census Report of 1931 remarked: “Most of them (i.e., the communities) have organized associations on caste or communal lines for the betterment of their social, economic, religious or political conditions. At present there is hardly any caste or community in the state without an association of its own for self-advancement in the social and political spheres”. Cited in Lewis Onwerkerk, No Elephants for the Maharaja: Social and Political Changes in Travancore, 1921-47, New Delhi, 1994, p.60.

4 But Fuller notices the efforts of the NSS in this direction as partially successful. He writes: “Arguing that only as a united community could Nayars form a powerful political force in the state, the NSS has always campaigned for the abolition of subdivisions among the Nayars. It has not only encouraged intermarriage between subdivisions, but has asked Nayars to refuse to reveal their subdivision membership to census enumerators. Partly because of this campaign, the 1931 Travancore Census Report (c: 364, 367) stated that the NSS campaign to fuse the subdivisions had been a success, and that there were now only two subdivisions remaining. However, the author of the 1941 census report was more cautious, noting that the correctness of the remarks made ten years earlier “could not be vouched for” (Census 1941:131). His caution was wise, for although there were commentators such as the author of the Travancore State Manual who claimed that “even intermarriages are now quite common and meet with the full approval of the society” (Pillai 1940:858), the validity of this claim is highly dubious. Even today, in Central Travancore.
Communities sought to restructure themselves in accordance with the new concepts of modernity—rational and scientific outlook and the capitalist spirit. Attempts were made to refashion customs and traditions in tune with rational social behaviour. Caste associations also alerted their respective communities of entrepreneurship as a tool of social mobility. Modern education was postulated as the medium for achieving the skills necessary for materializing all these objectives. If caste was the medium of association for the various Hindu communities, Christians and the Muslims united on religious, but of course on community, lines. The activities of all these movements were marked by their efforts to construct a respectable identity for their respective communities in the expanding public sphere. The ‘construction of Hinduism’, which was the focal point of the early social reform movements of North India, was only a succeeding agenda for the ‘reformers’ of Kerala.

Among the various caste categories of Kerala, the Nambūtiris were rather slow in imbibing the ‘caste cluster consciousness’ of the modern times and in realizing self-reform as the means for both revitalization and survival. As the


6 The system of matriliney, which acted as the support-base of samhãndham, was defined with modern patrilineal frameworks of interpretation, such as the 19th century anthropological theories from Europe and North America. Lewis Morgan, who marshalled the history of the evolution of the family, relegated matrilineal societies to the prehistory of patriliney. Cited in Praveena Kodoth, “Framing Custom, Directing Practices: Authority, Property and Matriliny under Colonial Law in Nineteenth Century Malabar”. in Shail Mayaram et al. Subaltern Studies XII, Delhi, 2005, p. 190.

7 The Renaissance intellectuals focused mainly on relieving Indian religion of the features most attacked by Christian missionaries and to remodel Hindu religion in accordance with the Judeo-Christian conceptions of monotheism and anti-idolatry. This process of shaping Hindu religion according to a totally alien concept is termed as ‘Construction of Hinduism’. For details see Gowri Viswanathan, “Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism” in Gavin Flood ed., The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism. Oxford, 2003, pp.23-44.

topmost rung of the caste ladder, as the group which enjoyed various kinds of privileges, as the foremost land owning class, as the custodians of most of the temples and religious institutions, as the repositories of traditional knowledge and as a section less dependant on other people for their livelihood, the Nambūtiris preferred to remain socially and culturally exclusive and obstinate. But once the very system that had sustained them began to subside, it had its disastrous impact in domains both religious and secular: this situation impelled them to associate themselves on modern lines and to form the Nambūtiri Yōgakṣēmasabha in 1908. Late entry into the arena of caste politics and the persistent pressures from outside combined with the aspiration of some overenthusiastic youths for getting an upper hand in the contemporary socio-political domain caused to radicalize the entire programmes of the Sabha in a very short span of time. Among these radicals, V.T. Bhaṭṭathiripād occupied a place of prominence and is treated as the one and only leader of the movement in most of the narratives.

V.T. Rāman Bhaṭṭathiripād, who is popularly known as V.T, was a firebrand radical of the 1920s and 30s. Although in the '20s his focus was mainly on communitarian issues, in the 30s he began to champion the cause of the entire (Hindu) people of Kerala and to concentrate on issues like temple-entry and Harijan welfare. He also led a crusade against religious superstitions and the priesthood and tried hard to secularize the Nambūtiri mind. He was highly motivated by the concept of an ideal community, to reconstruct the Nambūtiri identity as a role-model purging it of all those elements which had subjected it to popular criticism and ridicule. Some scholars maintain that he was the pioneer of feminist movement in Kerala. He had an aura of humanism and selflessness, which endeared him to the people and also misled them into believing that he

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was the force behind every radical social change that took place during his time. This overenthusiastic attitude led a few writers and certain interested groups to produce a plethora of hagiographic studies highly exaggerating V.T.’s role in the social development of Kerala. They were in fact indulging in a flagrant violation of the principle of historiography.

V.T. was a product of both modernity and the nationalist movement. His image as a secular, rationalist, radical, social activist; as an emancipator of women; as an unrelenting opponent of Brahmin priesthood and as a Gandhian helped in raising him to the position of one of the most prominent figures of modern Kerala, like Sri Nārāyaṇa Guru. His role in shaping the modern Hindu religion of Kerala also cannot be ignored since his attacks on priesthood and superstitions contributed much to instil a sense of rationalism in the realm of faith and rituals; and his campaign against distance-pollution roused the conscience of his community and helped to create a congenial atmosphere for temple-entry.

Modern science and reason had been decisive in shaping the personality and ideology of V.T. Despite being hailed from an aristocratic, patriarchal, priestly and feudal set up, he was imbued with a high sense of democratic, secular and rationalistic values which crossed communitarian boundaries. Of course, rationalist and scientific thinking had been a significant feature of the age and individuals and movements could not escape the impact. The Nambūtirī movement was highly influenced by the contours of the nationalist movement.

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9 See the kind of eulogy popular even among historians: "...Because of these rare qualities, VT is loved and respected by all, and is warmly accepted as one of the veteran social reformers of Kerala, who fulfilled a unique historical mission for the social progress of the state in general, and of the Nambutiri community in particular". K.K. Kusuman, "V.T. Bhattachiripad and the Social Transformation of the Nambutiris", Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol. XIII, Nos.1-4, March-December, 1986, p.198. Or again: "VT was one of the foremost in rightly analyzing and identifying the reason and he prepared a comprehensive programme of action in bringing up that community from its overall ennui and stagnation". K.K. Kusuman, Address of the Sectional President, South Indian History Congress Proceedings Volume, 16th Session, Gulbarga University, 1996, p.80.
especially in its Gandhian phase. Hence the Nambūtiri reform in general, and the career and personality of V.T. in particular, have to be studied against the concepts of colonial modernity and nationalist ideology. The profiles of religious/caste reform enterprises should also be analyzed along with the point how they perceived the nationalist politics. Equally importantly, a life-history narrative should not degenerate into hagiography.

1:1. Engagement with modernity:

Colonial modernity, as it unfolded in India, was structured by local contexts and actively shaped by Indian intellectuals. Different regions of India experienced colonialism differently, in accordance with the timing of colonial impact, variations of colonial policies and the specificities of regional societies. These variations – temporal and spatial – influenced the region-specific formulations of colonial modernity. As a result, social and community reform – itself a product of colonial modernity – came to incorporate differential responses to colonial critique of Indian society.

Modernity is expressed itself within the colonial societies in contradictory ways, with its rhetoric and practice at great variance. Ranajit Guha explores in

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11 It is the Marxist notion of ‘an incomplete transition to capitalism’ under colonial domination.

12 The term colonial modernity is vague in recent writing. It is never very clear whether it is a spatial term, that is, modernity occurring within the colony rather than the metropole; or a temporal term, that is, modernity experienced while under colonialism; or indeed some perversion of modernity occurring in the colonies. Dilip Menon writes that the specific contradiction between a rhetoric of universal modernity and a practice of accommodation with existing faultiness of power, tradition and custom is what characterizes colonial modernity in India. Dilip. M. Menon, “A Place Elsewhere: Lower Caste Malayalam Novels of the Nineteenth Century” in Stuarte Backburn and Vasudha Dalmia ed., India’s Literary History, Delhi, 2004, pp.485-86.

13 “The term modernity is used to refer to the profound process of cultural transformation which started with the introduction of printing and went on to develop the use of printing and subsequent communications media into a major way of organizing knowledge and culture”. Rajan Gurukkal, “Development Experience of Colonial Kerala”, in M.A. Oommen ed., Rethinking Development: Kerala’s Development Experience, Vol. 1, New
detail how colonial rule was characterized less by a reforming urge than by a ‘vast tolerance of pre-capitalist values and institutions in Indian society’. Indian experience of modernity was defective, and is still in a transitional stage; or is split between different arenas of experience, modern at work and pre-modern at home. Generally ‘modernity’ is associated with European-ness and it is presented as the ‘Other’ in most of the reformist and nationalist discourses and narratives. There have also been some recent attempts to posit multiple or alternate modernities. While ‘modernity’ corresponding perfectly to classical theory might never exist anywhere, concepts of something like ‘modernity’ stood to influence people’s economic endeavours, political projects and identity crafting. ‘Modernity’ is also taken to characterize the elements of rupture from tradition manifested in the colonial societies. In short, it addressed a troubled present in which questions of self, community and society had to be posed afresh.

Most of the exponents of social reform were convinced that India’s salvation lay in embracing modernity. This created a problem. The institutions they wished to adopt were all products of European civilization and hence ‘other’. For them, Indian civilization was plural, rural, socio-centric, spiritual, un-centralized, based on dharma rather than rights, on groups rather than individuals, whereas modernity had the opposite orientation. This raised the question of how modernity could be reconciled with tradition and the way of dealing with it if a conflict arises. Bhikku Parekh remarks that Indian leaders answered it in one of the three ways as can be called modernism, critical

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modernism or syncretism and critical traditionalism. For the modernists, Hindu society provided no hope for the future and yet its salvation lay only in its radical reconstruction along modern or European lines. The critical modernists pleaded for a creative synthesis of the two civilizations, whereas the critical traditionalists preferred to mobilize indigenous resources, borrowing from Europe whatever was likely to supplement and enrich them. Panikkar observes that the religious tinge of the national consciousness was a direct legacy of the cultural regeneration, and the revivalist element integral to this process, represented by the socio-religious reform movements during the nineteenth century.

Justifying cultural revival as the dynamics of anti-colonialism based on cultural nationalism, Ashis Nandy explained it as a reinstatement of the categories used by the victims, a stress on cultural traditions is a defiance of the modern idea of expertise, an idea which demands that even resistance be uncontaminated by the ‘inferior’ cognition or ‘unripe’ revolutionary consciousness of the oppressed. A stress on culture is a repudiation of the post-Renaissance European faith that only that dissent is true which is rational, sane, scientific, adult and expert – according to Europe’s concepts of rationality, sanity, science, adulthood and expertise. When the religious reformers of the nineteenth century India spoke of protecting cultures, it seemed an obscurantist ploy. But unmixed modernism is no longer fashionable, not even in the modern world. In our times, Gandhi has been by far the most consistent and savage critic of modernity and its best-known cultural product: the modern west. Ultimately, the choice is between critical modernism and critical traditionalism. It is a choice between two frames of reference and two world views. No theory of oppression can make sense unless it is cast in native terms or categories, that is, in terms and

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categories used by the victims of our times. As a corollary, no native theory can be taken seriously unless it includes a sub-theory of oppression.\(^{18}\)

Panikkar argues that the attempts to reinvigorate traditional institutions and to realize the potential of traditional culture that developed during the nineteenth century were responses to the challenges posed by the colonial culture and ideology. The initial expression of the struggle against colonial domination manifested itself in the realm of culture as a result of the fact that the principles on which the colonial state functioned were not more retrogressive than those of the pre-colonial state. All intrusions into the cultural realm were more intensely felt. Therefore a defense of indigenous culture developed almost simultaneously with the colonial conquest. Two features characterized this concern: the creation of an alternate cultural-ideological system and the regeneration of traditional institutions.\(^{19}\) A more definite articulation of this trend, however, was in the ideas and activities of later movements generally characterized as conservative and revivalist. Panikkar argues that strongly native in tendency, they were clearly influenced by the need to defend indigenous culture against colonial cultural hegemony. In this specific historical sense, they were not necessarily retrogressive, for underlying these efforts was the concern with the revival of the cultural personality, distorted, if not destroyed, by colonial domination. More so because it formed an integral element in the formation of national consciousness. Some of these tendencies, however, were not able to transcend the limits of historical necessity and led to a sectarian and obscurantist outlook. This was possibly a consequence of the lack of integration between the cultural and political struggles, resulting in cultural backwardness, despite political advance.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{19}\) Ibid, p. 89.

Partha Chatterjee points out that anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains – the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an ‘inner’ domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. This formula, Chatterjee thinks, is a fundamental feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa.

The period of ‘social reform’, Chatterjee continues, was actually made up of two distinct phases. In the earlier phase, Indian reformers looked to the colonial authorities to bring about by state action the reform of traditional institutions and customs. In the latter phase, although the need for change was not disputed, there was a strong resistance to allowing the colonial state to intervene in matters affecting “national culture”. The second phase was already the period of nationalism. The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the ‘inner domain’ of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launched its most powerful, creative and historically significant project: to fashion a ‘modern’ national culture that is nevertheless not western. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power.

Almost all the socio-religious movements of modern India, which were initially motivated by an intense impulse of modernism, soon began to dwindle into critical modernism once the immediate objectives were met or when

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22 Ibid.
contradictions started to emerge over the polarities of tradition and change, finally to end up with a retreat into critical traditionalism. They had to face the apparent contradiction of colonialism as a liberating and modernizing agency and colonial culture as the ‘other’. The succeeding history of the Brahmo Samaj is a case in point. Movements of later origin also have been strikingly cautious in their attitude to western ideals and attachment to modernity and generally are more lenient towards tradition and spirituality. But this skepticism appears to have haunted the movements of the lower caste flimsily since their cause of concerns were associated with real life and it outweighed issues of national interest or cultural self-defense.

Certainly, the generative force behind the series of social and cultural developments which went into the making of modern Kerala was colonial modernity. The impact was felt strictly along region-wise and on caste/community-wise; at different points of time and in varying degrees: but was definitely mediated by the urge for progress among the upper castes and for social mobility among the lower castes. It was also a response of various social groups to colonial critique of the Indian society.

In the case of the Nambūtiris a stress on culture and caste-based values was always there since as a community steeped in tradition and ritualism, unbounded fascination towards modernity was understood to be self-annihilating; and more importantly it was seen to wear away traditional and cherished privileges. Even radicals like V.T. who had taken up “a very advanced social position, even going so far as to propose a classless society” later began to drift away to a strictly orthodox position which transgressed even critical traditionalism. The slow development of a crisis among intellectuals towards modernity needs to be analyzed with reference to the very limitations of modernity under conditions of colonialism and which may lead us to the academic skepticism associated with

the so-called Indian Renaissance. Gyan Prakash gives us a very interesting estimate of the inadequacy of Indian modernity thus: "Navigating between the bank of Vedas and the bank of modern science and technology, but holding neither one nor the other fixed, India appears simultaneously as something altogether new and unmistakably old, at once undoubtedly modern and irreducibly Indian. Therein lies Indian modernity's pervasive presence and precarious existence".24

The notion of civil society was a corollary of modernity.25 Civil society is distinct from communal existence because it is based, not on birth or status, but on voluntary associations and contractual relations between individuals.26 The very ideological base of Indian nationalism was civil society: it represented the gradual and imperfect emergence of a civil society which had its roots in reason, science, secularism, liberalism and humanism. The Congress was a mirror of the emerging civil society. It represented the transition from the closed community to the open society: a transition from custom to law, from status to contract, from birth to merit, from privilege to justice, from hierarchy to equality, from

25 The term 'civil society' came into use during the Enlightenment in Europe, preceding the Industrial Revolution. In 1767 the British thinker Adam Ferguson in his An Essay on the History of Civil Society used the term in the sense of civilized society, especially as it had evolved in the West. It was the same phenomenon which Ferdinand Toennies condemned as gesellschaft and Gandhi rejected it under the name of 'modern civilization'. Hegel and Marx distinguished civil from the military and made a distinction between the state (with its armed forces) and civil society. In angry rejection of modernity, the post-modernists, including the subalternists, extol the virtues of 'community' (gemeinschaft) as against 'society' (gesellschaft). One may detect a striking echo of Gandhi's critique of civil society in the subaltern glorification of community, ethnicity and territorialis. For details see Rajat Kanta Ray, Nationalism, Modernity and Civil Society, Presidential Address, Indian History Congress, 67th Session, Farook College, 2007.
26 Conventionally, the concept of civil society was situated in three contexts. First, as associations that are posited between family and state. But family is increasingly recognized as a site of violence and hence it has also become a theater of interrogation by civil society activists. Second, as an agency which interrogated tyrannical states. But now it is recognized that even democratic states need to be constantly interrogated. Third, as the space between state and market, a product of the ongoing process of structural differentiation in society. T. K. Oommen, Nation, Civil Society and Social Movements. New Delhi, 2004, p.128.
communalism to individualism, from heredity to association: in short, from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft*. It spoke the language of rights instead of privileges. But the infatuation with modernity and civil society was brought in for critical analysis under the leadership of Gandhi whose *Hind Swarāj* represents one of the sweeping critiques of civil society in which modern civilization is the term that corresponds to 'civil society'.

Gandhi rejected capitalism, democracy, scientific progress and secularism, in the act by which he rejected civil society. He rejected progress as the prevailing system was not seen to represent backwardness. By focussing on culture and cultural nationalism, he relegated related issues into the background; he did not consider seriously the point that kinship would reproduce patriarchy, religion would reproduce authority, and caste would reproduce hierarchy. Gandhi's *Hind Swarāj* conceived a radically different social constitution from the civil society that had formed the cradle of the Congress. And, as a staunch Gandhian, VT was greatly influenced by Gandhi's approach to modernity.

1:2. Reform Process – Historiographic Issues

Considerable suspicion still looms large over whether the leading lights of social and cultural change in the 19th and the 20th century Bengal had praised their age as a time of renaissance. Sumit Sarkar has argued that the very construction of the so-called Bengal Renaissance raises serious historiographic issues. For him:

1. Earlier works on the Bengal Renaissance tended to study individual reformers or reform movements in isolation.

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27 There are social theorists who even identify Gandhi as the forerunner of post-modernism: that much before the discontents of modernity surfaced, Gandhi anticipated them and alerted all concerned. See Ibid, p.245.

28 Sumit Sarkar, ‘Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal’ in Writing Social History, N. Delhi, 1997, p.199. In support of this Sarkar refers to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee who reserved the term renaissance to the 15th and 16th centuries which for him marked the efflorescence of Hindu culture.

29 Sumit Sarkar, Bibliographic Survey of Social reform movements in the 18th and 19th centuries, Delhi, 1975, p.20.
2. These earlier studies also tended towards hagiography.
3. Historians relied too much on accepting elite reformers at their own evaluation.
4. Older studies had not given due attention to vernacular sources.
5. Historians had overlooked the entire context within which the renaissance took place, i.e., the ‘hegemony of colonialism’.

Barun De questioned the assumption that transition to bourgeois modernity had been accomplished in Bengal. Conditions of colonial despotism explicitly prohibited such a transition by preventing the true formation of a civil society. Susobhan Sarkar, who first used the term Bengal Renaissance in his *Notes on Bengal Renaissance* (1946), noted in a later essay “Problems of Indian Historiography” that at least in 3 senses the Bengal Renaissance was limited in comparison to European Renaissance.

1. The educated reformers failed to appreciate the exploitative role of colonialism
2. The gulf between the cultured *bhadralok* and the masses was never bridged
3. Bengal Renaissance betrayed an obsession with Hindu traditions that was to set a dangerous precedent for the emergence of Hindu Nationalism.

Denying such criticisms, Brian. A. Hatcher argued that Bankim and his contemporaries clearly viewed their time as one of momentous changes. These changes they interpreted using a variety of idioms: sometimes improvement, sometimes awakening, sometimes reformation. And even if the analogy to the European Renaissance was not explicitly invoked before the 20th century, it remains the case that these 19th century Bengali authors shared an important set of assumptions regarding the nature of the transformations they saw taking place in Bengal. At the core of such assumptions was the conviction that Bengal had

entered into a new age.\textsuperscript{32} In support of this argument Hatcher points out the following normative features which run parallel to European Renaissance.

1. Propensity to constrain discussion within a limited corpus of sources, primarily in the English language
2. Preoccupation with the Emphasis on the central role of individual reformers as agents of change.
3. The notion of a benighted, pre-colonial India from which a rebirth or awakening was required.
4. Concern to link the Renaissance of Bengal to the dynamics of the nationalist movement
5. Concerns of the English educated middle classes
6. Fascination for charting what might be called developments in the realm of theology or spirituality. (First 3 being essential features)

Similar Historiographic issues persist over the 'renaissance' of Kerala as well. Hatcher's assumptions of the crucial role of the English-educated middle class and of individual reformers in the new awakening, the link between reform movements and the nationalist ideology and the incorporation of a rationalist spirit in both spiritual and material realms, all would make sense in drawing a parallel with European/Bengal renaissance. But certain other issues are equally important, especially when the Nambūtiri movement is taken into consideration. Sumit Sarkar's charge of an undue focus on individual reformers, of studies collapsing to the level of hagiography chiefly due to the tendency to accept elite reformers at their own evaluation, disregard to primary sources, and above all the tendency to ignore the colonial factor (as a stimulant or as a decisive factor in the course of the reform process) makes the prevailing studies, and the current notions created by them, greatly insufficient and hence academically irrelevant. Sarkar's attack on the tendency to minimize reform movements at the level of individual initiatives is explicitly applicable to the Nambūtiri movement. The

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 135-36.
image of the Nambūtiri movement as the handiwork of V.T. Bhaṭṭāthiripād was mainly the creation of hagiographic literature.

1:3. Birth of the New Awakening

Charles Heimsath attributes the origin of social changes in modern India to the new economic environment including the technology of railways, ships, telegraphs as well as the growth of industry and markets; ideas about the worth of the individual and the evolution of societies propounded in missionary and government schools and universities; the privileges and opportunities newly afforded by the courts, legislatures and public administration. The functions performed by the social reformers were to direct these social transformations having revolutionary force on individual lives and on the social status of groups. They screened and interpreted for the people at large the powerful innovations introduced over the past two centuries and charted a course for a transformed Indian society that would accommodate them. The reformers felt the jostling of environmental pressures and realized that they would lose control of their own lives and that the local or national society would be unpredictably or chaotically shaken up unless they offered new guidance.

J.T.F. Jordens argued that the reformers themselves had no doubts as to the main stimulants of this new spirit. The British administration, English education, and European literature brought to India a constellation of fresh ideas which constituted a challenge to the new intellectuals. Rationalism as the basis for ethical thinking, the idea of human progress and evolution, the possibility of scientifically engineering social change, the concept of natural rights connected with individualism, were all alien to the traditional society. An equally strong influence was exerted by the ideas and the work of the Christian missionaries. He goes on to argue that although some later nationalist writers tend to discount


this influence, the 19th century reformers themselves starting with Ram Mohan Roy, did not hesitate to give credit where it was due and acknowledged their indebtedness in no uncertain terms, even while vigorously opposing certain aspects of missionary activity.\(^{35}\)

Jordons observes that it was among the English educated intelligentsia that several ideas of reform first arose. They were primarily trying to deal with a personal problem that affected their own lives very deeply: constant contact with Britishers and European ideas made them look upon some social and religious characteristics of their own society with horror and disgust. Social reform in this first stage was mostly prompted by the desire of these people to cope with the difficulties which they experienced themselves. There was not as yet any concern for the mass of the people, or any desire to transform the structure of society at large. What they wanted was to reshape their lives according to the new standards and values they were discovering. They sought to clarify their own ideas, and propagate them among their kindred intelligentsia. Thus this first stage was a time of propaganda rather than of organization, a time when the reformer was almost exclusively concerned with his own group, a time also when political concern was inchoative and when it was generally held that personal social reform needed to be passed upon the solid foundation of religious reform.\(^{36}\)

Considering the causative role played by colonialism in the socio-cultural regeneration in the nineteenth century, Panikkar points out that it was occasioned by the colonial presence, but not created by it.\(^{37}\) The British conquest and the consequent dissemination of colonial culture and ideology had led to an inevitable introspection about the strengths and weaknesses of indigenous culture and institutions. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction. The social base of the new changes which was generally, but not altogether appropriately, been called the renaissance was the newly emerging middle class and the traditional as well as western educated intellectuals.

While analyzing the reformist persuasions, the context of the learning of the reformers, which was more wrapped up with the family and the mother, has not been taken seriously. Nita Kumar argued that the stimulus to reform-mindedness as an adult came equally from the reformer's experience and his intuitive interpretation of the home, as from his later intellectual appreciation of it as injustice and oppression in the light of certain teachings. The experimental location of the child within a home conceptually structured on a certain philosophy aroused a mindset of reform. Thus, what are regarded as obstacles and inconsistencies in reformist thought must also be understood largely as the complexity of the encounter between experience and its plural theorization.

In the context of Kerala, the fast changing socio-economic milieu and the new value system introduced by the missionaries have been instrumental in bringing about the new caste movements. While some focus on the first factor, others treat the second as the prime mover. It is argued that religion as an external value system introduced by the western Christian missions gave birth to the new social outlook and accelerated the process of change. The nineteenth century saw the coming of economic enterprises in Kerala. Plantations and factories were set up, commercial activities on a large scale started. schools were opened, extensive public works began. English education, control over land and access to government office were the three variables affecting status and power of social groups. Nāyars, foreign Brahmin and the Christians benefited most from these changes. Since religious sanction was decisive in allowing or denying

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39 George Mathew, Communal Road to a Secular Kerala, New Delhi, 1989, pp.37-44.
opportunities and avenues of social advancement, communities like the Izhavas were greatly agitated over the prevailing norms of social ordering. The teachings and preachings of the Christian missionaries created a climate for cultural and social awakening. Values of liberal democratic humanism and a culture of individualism necessary for human creativity despite cultural rigidities had tremendous impact in heralding a new pattern of social outlook.

1.4. Social Reform Movements

“The cultural-ideological struggle represented by the socio-religious movements”, writes K.N. Panikkar, “was an integral part of the evolving national consciousness”. This was so because, he adds, it was instrumental in bringing about the initial intellectual and cultural breakthrough which made a new vision of the future possible. Second, it was a part of the resistance against colonial cultural and ideological hegemony. Out of this dual struggle evolved the modern cultural situation: new men, new homes and a new society.

Kenneth W. Jones defined the concept of socio-religious reform movements with reference to the three terms which the phrase contained. For him the term ‘socio’ implies an attempt to reorder society in the areas of social behaviour, customs, structure or control. A movement may have sought to reshape any one of these components or a combination of them. All socio-religious movements demanded changes, ranging from the relatively limited approach of defensive and self-consciously orthodox groups to radicals who articulated a sweeping condemnation of the status quo. The term ‘religious’ refers to the type of authority used to legitimate a given ideology and its accompanying programme. This authority was based on scriptures that were no longer considered to be properly observed, on a reinterpretation of doctrines, or on scriptural sources.

41 Kenneth W Jones, Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India, New Delhi, 1994, p. 2.
arising from the codification of new religious leaders' message. Here the term 'movement' refers to an aggregate of individuals united by the message of a charismatic leader or the ideology derived from that message. Such a movement might be loosely organized, especially during the lifetime of its founder, but if it was to last beyond his death, his disciples need to create and sustain a formal organizational structure. In short, a Socio-Religious Reform Movement advocated modifications in social behaviour, justified such advocacy by one or another form of religious authority, and then built an organizational structure it maintained over time. At the same time, Charles Heimsath defined a social reformer as an advocate of alterations in social customs which would involve a break with the past and an individual who had convinced himself that 'the altered ways of thinking and behaving were positive values'.

Jones identified two types in the category of socio-religious movements: transitional and acculturative. The first of these were pre-British in origin and pre-modern in their objectives and nature of functioning. The second group functioned within the colonial milieu and was led by individuals of cultural interaction. The leaders were English educated and were influenced by the specific culture of England. But the basis of such movements and many of their declared aims rested on the indigenous heritage of social and religious protest. In no way were acculturative movements totally new or without roots in the general high culture of South Asia and the specific cultures of a given region. Thus the difference between the two movements was primarily at their point of origin.

Charles Heimsath observed that conscious social change in India took two forms—social reform and social struggle. From the 19th century, movements supporting both forms had defined where the society wanted to go and the methods of getting there. Movements for social reform and social struggle joined

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43 Kenneth W Jones, op.cit., p.4.
in their adherence to the liberal democratic ideals of equality of opportunity for individuals and social groups and their freedom from oppression. In modern India social reform, which began in the early 19th century, preceded organized social struggle, which was a feature of the 20th century.

Movements of social protest and struggle more radical than social reform also were being organized during this time. Confrontations with the institutions upholding status quo by great number of deprived people large enough to create a threat became the chief means of bringing about desirable changes in social behaviour. While the educated middle classes might benefit from reform, low classes and backward castes saw no alternative to social protest and struggle for changing the oppressive features of the society. Such movements, according to Prof. M.S.A. Rao, were aimed at “middle level structural changes in the traditional distribution of power and in the system of differential allocation of resources, rights and privileges by attacking the monopoly of the upper classes and castes in different areas of life including religion”.\(^{45}\) The common bond among reformers all over India was their commitment to individual and collective freedom of opportunity, sometimes defined as personal fulfillment (e.g., female education), often as upward caste mobility (e.g., Izhava advancement in Kerala), and also as national progress (which would include for example, ending untouchability). Heimsath argues that social changes had to precede the attainment of any of these ends, and when these changes resulted in altered personal laws, or customs or transformed relations among castes or communities, they were called social reforms.\(^{46}\)

It is observed that although religious reformation was a major concern of these movements, none of them were exclusively religious in character.\(^{47}\)


\(^{47}\) K.N. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
not a part of their agenda; instead their attention was focused on worldly existence. But given the interconnection between religious beliefs and social practices, religious reformation was a necessary pre-requisite for social reform. Religion was the dominant ideology of the times and it was not possible to undertake any social action without coming to grips with it. And despite being regional in scope and content and confined to a particular religion, their general perspectives were remarkably similar: they were regional and religious manifestation of a common consciousness.

Social theorists, who see all associational forms between family and the state as belonging to the area of civil society, include religious reform movements into this category. These movements interrogated the ‘evil’ practices that came to be associated with Hinduism – the system of caste, the practice of untouchability, degraded status of women, and a host of superstitious practices. As civil society organizations, they contributed to positive social transformation through their agenda of equality, sought to be achieved through social reform and social development. Even caste movements have been a part of civil society: the ‘general interest’ is often the summation of interests of its different segments.

Since Ram Mohan Roy’s time reformers in general were convinced that religion was the ideological mortar that held together the different aspects of human existence; but thorough transformations are necessary in belief and behaviour. So reformers and their followers considered spiritual revitalization the root of India’s needs. But that was not a general rule. The Ḫavas, indeed, were inspired by Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru’s religious leadership, and he in turn was spiritually nourished by Chaṭṭambi Svāmikaḷ; all untouchables gained strength from Gandhi’s religion-based morality. But Ḫavas and other low and outcastes were discontented and were on the way up before those esteemed guides took up

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their causes. And the Nāyars, Nambūtiris and hundreds of other castes and communities organized themselves under non-religious leadership and gained their ends through legal means and careful secular organizations alone.

Amiya. P. Sen studied the socio-religious reform movements in the context of cultural resistance, a reaction to the colonial rule, among the Hindu people and identified them as the expression of an urge to design a single, nationalized religion. “In nineteenth century India, the Hindus were quick to realize that ‘reform’ was not just about altering beliefs or practices, but invariably touched upon deeper questions of self-identity. Their growing familiarity with modern disciplines like history, anthropology, politics and the natural sciences enabled Hindus not only to compare the state of their own society and civilization with that of the West but also to develop a deep self-reflexivity about their own tradition...Hindu religious thinkers of modern India, rather than abide by the highly pluralistic nature of Hinduism, promoted the idea of a single, nationalized religion for all Hindus”. Although there was considerable disagreement among various reformers over the focal points of reform (like anti-idolatry, monotheistic faith, emancipation of women or reform of caste) or over the varied terminology used to describe the reformer community (like the ‘Arya’ as in the Arya Samaj, ‘Brahman’ as in the Brahma Samaj or ‘Sanātan’ as in the Sanātan Dharma Sabha) or over the modality of reform (whereas Vivekananda recommended restraint and caution, Periyār consciously identified himself with the ‘destructionist method’) or also whether people switched from one area of activity to another mostly under the pressure of altered circumstances, Sen argues that social and religious reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a few things in common. For one, they were very largely led by the new, western-educated, middle classes and hence failed to notice the entirely different nature of lower-class problems. Their class character would

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explain why, barring a few exceptions, they were more on the side of structural adjustments than structural reorganization. These reform movements, irrespective of their ideology or interests, also adopted similar work methods. Interestingly, even those opposing reform itself were quick to seize upon these. The orthodox Dharmasabha of Bengal, which opposed the move to abolish sati, was the first to use the method of petitioning and counter-petitioning higher authorities.\textsuperscript{50}

Panikkar notices two important intellectual criteria which influenced the reform movements: rationalism and religious universalism.\textsuperscript{51} Social relevance of anything was judged by a rationalistic critique. It is difficult to match the uncompromising rationalism of the early Rajaram Mohan Roy or Akshay Kumar Dutt. This perspective not only enabled them to adopt a rational approach to tradition but also to evaluate the contemporary practices from the standpoint of social utility and to replace faith with rationality. In the \textit{Brahmo Samaj}, it led to the repudiation of the infallibility of the Vedas, and in the Aligarh movement, to the reconciliation of the teachings of Islam with the needs of the modern age. A rational and secular outlook was very much evident in posing an alternative to prevalent social practices. If religion did not sanction desirable social change (like widow marriage or abolition of child marriage and polygamy), religion itself should be changed as it was made by man and what was laid down in scriptures need not necessarily be of contemporary relevance.

The reform movements were important for their social implications as well. They contributed to the liberation of the individual from conformity born out of fear and from uncritical submission to the exploitation of the priests. The dissemination of religious knowledge through translation of religious texts into vernacular languages and the rights granted to the laity to interpret scriptures represented an important initial breach in the stranglehold of misinterpreted

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Ibid}, pp. 4-6.
religious tenets. The simplification of rituals made worship a more intensely personal experience without the mediation of intermediaries. The individual was thus encouraged to exercise his freedom. The socially debilitating influence of the caste system which perpetuated social distinction was universally recognized as an area which called for urgent reform. It was morally and ethically abhorrent; more importantly, it militated against patriotic feelings and negated the growth of democratic ideas.

Revivalism acted as a natural adjunct to reform in India. Some of the movements had an agenda of religious revival right from the beginning while some others soon fell into a revivalist mood. Amiya Sen looks at the question of reform that may lead to revivalism from two different, but related, standpoints. At one level, it was used as a corrective to reformist excesses and the ‘mischievous temperament’ of professional reformers. This kind of thinking is commonly associated with the relatively more conservative elements within upper-class Hindu society who were not averse to change itself, but wary of bringing this about much too quickly or under the shadow of alien rulers. Secondly, it is seen to represent a reactionary spirit, aiming to undermine the very logic of social change through a thoughtless attachment to old and obsolete ideals. Sen assumes that the apologists of the British rule and those who attributed every progressive change to the western intellectual impact on India were among the earliest to attach a pejorative meaning to the term ‘revival’. While some found ‘traditionalist’ to be a better term, others called the very term a misnomer since Hinduism, being far from dead, could not have been revived. She, however, holds that the revivalist must be separated from the reactionary. Under conditions peculiar to colonialism, rosy reformist moods could soon change into somber revival. Quoting Asok Sen, who had argued that “both Brahmo reformation and Hindu Revival were reflexes of a middle class, first of hopes at its birth and then, moratorium at its adolescence”, she concluded with

the statement of Panikkar\textsuperscript{53} that for colonized Indians it would be also important to remember that upholding the vitality of traditional culture was not cultural revivalism but cultural self-defense.\textsuperscript{54}

Despite the elements of anti-colonialism and cultural self-defence involved in revivalism, it had its serious consequences. It obviously contributed to the assertion of an aggressive Hindu identity. Not only had ‘modernistic’ reform movements been entirely Hindu in composition; with a few exceptions, they too had operated with a conception of ‘Muslim tyranny’ or a ‘medieval’ dark age from which British rule with its accompanying alleged ‘renaissance’ or ‘awakening’ had been a deliverance. This was not a theory which could ever hope to appeal to Muslim intellectuals, while the attempts to purge Hindu religion and society of ‘medieval’ crudities and superstitions in the name of ancient standards and an emerging code of middle-class respectability also at times involved attacks on syncretist popular customs, like the worship in common of Hindu and Muslim holy men or shrines. As similar movements were developing at about the same time within Indian Islam too, the two communities tended to drift apart both at the level of the elite and of the peasant masses.

J.T.F. Jordens identified two important tendencies which had begun to occupy the Indian scene around 1880 and which had its impact on social reform movements: nationalism and political action.\textsuperscript{55} From now on individuals and groups openly identified themselves with an Indian nation, a new concept in Indian history; and this elite group, consciously nationalist, conceived its function as being primarily one of political agitation and reform. This predominance of national and politics now began to exert influence on the ideas of religious and social reform which had previously prevailed. Nationalism


\textsuperscript{54} Amiya, P. Sen, op. cit., pp.33-36.

\textsuperscript{55} J.T.F. Jordens, op. cit., p.373.
itself developed two patterns, a religious and a secular one, and each school assigned a different place to social reform.

In the last two decades of the 19th century social reform was dominated by the nationalistic secularists. The revivalist extremists naturally opposed this approach vehemently, as being denationalizing and degrading because it was based on European ideas and inspired by European models. So an intense debate between the reformers and the nationalists ensued. However, most of the revivalists, except Tilak, were themselves very much committed to social reform in many spheres of life. “In their interchange with the reformers it became increasingly clear that, as far as the problem of reform was concerned, there was a very large area of argument between the two groups. The differences lay in inspiration, in motivation, and in the model of society they aspired to. The nationalists succeeded in demonstrating that a purely nationalistic notion and a Hindu model could be the inspiration for whatever reform the reformers envisaged. But they proved more than that: they showed that Hindu nationalism and an ideal Hindu society had a mass appeal that was absent in western type reform. These arguments were irresistible, and the reform movement as a whole changed its image and its model in the direction of revivalist Hindu nationalism, and veered towards a concern for the mass of the people.”

By the 1920s the Indian religious and social reform movement had lost its peculiar identity as an important and distinct phenomenon of Indian life. Many factors contributed to this. One of this was the appearance at the national stage of Gandhi, who was to dominate and often confuse it with his new ideas on politics religion and society. But it is extremely interesting to note that caste-based reform movements in Kerala gained their full vigour in the 1920s and in the special case of the Nambūtiris, its real efflorescence was in the '20s. In fact what differentiated the movement from others was the strong

nationalist/Gandhian influence upon which the movement functioned. But neither nationalist nor Gandhian influence did not drain it of its reformist or casteist affiliations.

15. Caste Associations

By the turn of the 19th century caste associations superseded general religious and social reform movements in India. Though they came into being with the narrow aim of enhancing the social prestige and economic welfare of their respective castes, their concerted efforts at reforming their members in personal behaviour, marriage practices, religious or secular rituals, and their attempts at arranging educational opportunities for their community vicariously benefited society as a whole. However varied were the bundles of reforms prescribed for different groups they could stand very well alongside any general social reform association's programme. Although the national Social Conference deplored the restrictiveness of reforms under caste auspices the Conference President, Ranade, observed in 1897 that caste conferences were carrying on most of the work of the national body.57

Because of the determination of the caste associations to improve the immediate condition of their communities by whatever possible means, their reformers could not find time or energy to spare for concentrating on matters affecting society in general nor did they have the inclination to do so. Such controversies as whether social reform should or should not precede political reform, whether or not reformers should enlist the administrative support of the government, whether modifications sought in ritual behaviour had the sanction of the śāstrās or not, all appeared to be too esoteric for them to interfere with the overcoming of caste bans on foreign travel, adopting new laws for marriage and divorce, fighting a census commissioner's varṇa designation, or breaking the

barrier to low caste admission to temples. If new laws might serve caste needs, it would seem irrelevant that the legislature and courts bore British seals of authority. If political campaigning could move caste representatives closer to the levels of power, then the budget and personnel of a caste association would be shifted from social to political work. The examination of caste-sponsored social reforms thus produces a refreshing sense of immediacy of grass-roots action. Heimsath concludes that modern India’s social changes have been largely group efforts—communities, not individuals, adopting en masse to changed economic and administrative conditions; furthermore, that caste reform, in Kerala and elsewhere, whether or not accompanied by religious reform, did not proceed according to a single formula.58

The Rudolphs interpreted caste associations as agents of modernity, a means by which the social entities of traditional Hindu India were being regarded as democratic pressure groups.59 They remark: “Caste, however, provides channels of communication and bases of leadership and organization which enable those still submerged in the traditional society and culture to transcend the technical political illiteracy which would otherwise handicap their ability to participate in democratic politics. Caste has been able to perform this novel role by developing a new form for political activity, the caste association.”60 Perhaps the most significant aspect of the caste association in the contemporary era, however, is its capacity to organize the politically illiterate mass electorate, thus making possible in some measure the realization of its aspirations and educating large sections of it in the methods and values of political democracy. Their ideas were elaborated by Hardgrave in his investigation of the once lowly Nādār community in Tamilnad. To Hardgrave.

58 Ibid.
60 Ibid. p. 448-49.
the Nāḍār caste associations were central to the process of social elevation and to
the accumulation of political influence by caste leaders during the early decades
of the twentieth century.61

Bailey and Srinivas have also noted the birth and proliferation of caste
associations as a modern adaptation of traditional caste forms. Bailey identified
the caste associations as playing a significant role in draining the catchment
areas of 'caste categories' – which he defined as “aggregate of persons, usually
of the same linguistic region, usually of the same traditional occupation and
sometimes with the same caste name…” He observed that the associations
“function as welfare and improvement associations and -notoriously in Kerala –
as political interest groups”.62 Srinivas suggested that the origin of caste
associations can be traced to Indian reactions to the recording and ranking of
castes in government census reports at the end of the nineteenth century. What
was intended as an exercise in the enumeration of a supposedly static hierarchy
in practice “had the opposite effect of stimulating mobility, and also increased
inter-caste rivalry.”63

Taking a position closer to Srinivas, Lucy Caroll has argued that caste
associations (with their 'caste cluster consciousness') were in fact the response
of various caste groups to the British official perception of Indian society.64 She
argued that the reciprocal relationship between official views of Indian society
and caste(s) organizations is eloquently illustrated in the founding of the Nāḍār

61 Robert. L. Hardgrave, The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in
A Comparative Analysis”, The Indian Economic and Social History Review. Vol. XIII, No.

62 Bailey, “Closed Social Stratification in India”, Archives europeenes de Sociologie, VI: 1,

63 M.N. Srinivas, Social Change in Modern India, Berkeley, 1966, pp. 94-100 cited in Arnold,

64 Lucy Caroll, “Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste(s)
Mahājana Sangham in 1910.65 She writes that "not infrequently, the classifications and categories into which the foreigners divided Indian society had important economic and political repercussions; the classifications were not mere academic speculations, and consequently the Indian response represented something more than idle strivings for social symbols".66 "The colonial government’s view of Indian society influenced not only the relationship between government and the bureaucratically defined groups, and the emergence of a caste-cluster consciousness to fit that official communal view; it also affected the inter-group relations among communal categories. Competition was stimulated along communal lines; the prizes were government patronage, jobs, and political appointments".67

In a review of Hardgrave’s study, Washbrook argued that caste associations were the creation of a few individuals eager to promote their own interests in local and provincial government by using caste appeals. For the organizers the associations were "not exclusive but, perhaps, merely another way of building up a constituency in order to raise their bargaining power both with other politicians and the government... Caste is certainly invoked with monotonous regularity but the more it is examined the more it appears to be propaganda unconnected with social reality and understood in so many different senses that it loses any specific meaning".68

David Arnold, Robin Jeffrey and James Manor, in a comparative study of the caste movements of the three areas of Travancore, Mysore and Kongunad, remarked that Washbrook’s observations were a corrective to those who, like the Rudolphs and Hardgrave, take caste associations at their face value, as embracing a large part of a relatively homogenous caste and expressing widely-

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65 Ibid, p. 234.
shared grievances and objectives. But he was too hasty. Even if a caste association had no more than a dozen members, who were concerned with their own and not their community's advancement, it might, nonetheless, express the embryonic ideas and aspirations of a far larger social group. It might, by its very existence, serve as a matrix in which previously distinct elements mix and solidify. It might be a response by part of a caste to complex economic and political forces invading the entire community.69

Arnold et al considered caste associations as a social adapter, improvised to connect two sets of social and political forms. It helped to reconcile the values of traditional society with those of the new order by continuing to use caste as the basis for social organization, but at the same time introducing new objectives – education and supra-local political power, for example – as the aims of that organization. It tried to relate the traditional geographical units – the marriage networks and petty chiefdoms – to the wider ones developed by the changing economy, by improved communications and tighter government control. The effective caste association thus constituted a stage on a continuum of development from the local jāti relationships and village dominant-caste politics towards class relations and the state level of political activity.70

The caste association can be considered as having two dimensions. Internally, it was designed, though unconsciously in many cases, to compensate for the differentiation which had been taking place with accelerating pace during the period of British rule in India. To combat occupational diversity and disparity of wealth within the community, the caste association stressed unity: it rediscovered (and if necessary, it invented) a common heritage; it exploited the grievances shared by the community. The caste association leaders did not however, come from the traditional caste authorities, but from the most enterprising of the misfits – the western educated, the lawyers, the urban

69 Arnold, Jeffrey & Manor, op. cit., pp. 353-373.
70 Ibid, p. 372.
businessmen, the retired government servants. These men were few in number; but they looked back over their shoulders hoping that the rest of their community supported them and would help the misfits to establish themselves more firmly in their non-traditional careers. Sometimes the gulf between the new elite and the majority of the community to which they claimed to belong was too great and there was no unifying grievance or sense of identity to unite the two. Nor did the caste unity achieved last very long. Once the first and second generation of the new elite felt more secure and had achieved their immediate social and political objectives, they tended to neglect their castemen and to identify to a greater extent along class lines or they split into rival factions.\(^{71}\)

Externally the caste association tried to convince outsiders that behind the leaders stood a united community. Backed by the devices of modern political agitation – newspapers and printed tracts, conferences, petitions and deputations to the government – caste leaders lobbied for concessions from the state or provincial authorities. Caste lobbies were at their best and most successful in the first quarter of the twentieth century, partly because they were a novelty, partly because they flourished in political systems which dithered between autocracy and a limited kind of representative government. They were often useful to the administration as a short cut to popular representation without the dangers of universal suffrage and democratic control. The constitution of 1935 in Madras brushed aside the caste lobbies and the extension of the franchise then or subsequently prepared the way for the supremacy of the numerically or economically dominant communities. They suffered one of the two fates. One was for the association leaders to abandon the organization as a political vehicle, either letting it disappear completely or keeping it solely as a philanthropic

\(^{71}\) *Ibid.* D.L. Sheth observes that while caste had lost its significance as a ritual status group it survived as a 'community', seeking alliances with other similar communities with whom it shared political interest and consciousness. D.L. Sheth, "Caste and Secularisation Process in India", in Peter Donald de Souza ed., *Contemporary India – Transitions*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 249.
agency. The transition to universal suffrage was often a decisive factor in the cross-caste alliances and state-wide political machines made the old caste associations obsolete. The other fate was for the caste association to evolve into a caste party. This was only likely with a numerically large community which could survive in the age of universal suffrage and had a lingering sense of grievance or isolation to encourage it to do so. But even these parties, as events in Kerala have shown, are vulnerable to the massive force of class. They cannot for long defy that social reality.

1:6. Kerala’s Uniqueness

Heimsath identifies Kerala’s social reform movements as having certain unique features. Unlike social reform in the British Indian provinces the movement began in nineteenth century Kerala among the low castes. The leaders of the society – Nambūtiri Brahmans, ruling Kṣatriyas, Nāyars – failed to see Kerala as a “land of depravity” or themselves as “deformed...bent in a hundred places” moral stances that incited the social reform movement elsewhere. Among the educated leaders of southern Kerala there was not the helplessness and guilt which comes from witnessing great calamities like famine, war, and social disruption which one notices in the writings of other Indian reformers. Kerala was a secure land for the most part, and a sense of stability, even timelessness, militated against the anxieties that in other parts of India resulted in destructive rebellion – and also creative analysis of social and religious institutions. The absence in nineteenth century Kerala of strong commentary from Brahmans, the most intellectually advanced communities in British India, was another uniqueness. The Nambūtiris held back from modern education and followed their orthodox style of life cut off in their great estates.

72 Ibid, p.373.
74 It was the charge made by Ranade in 1897 against all the Indian people, cited in ibid.
At the early stages of the all-India reform movements the 'evils' of society, mostly inflicted upon women –sati, the prohibition on remarriage of young widows, purdah, the custom of early marriage, and lack of educational opportunities for them –engaged the reformers’ attention, and crusades for laws to protect (mostly high-caste) women and the founding of institutions to support and educate them defined the practical reform programmes. In Kerala, women’s causes never caught on, for the obvious reason that society had been impregnated with mother-right cultural norms and thus women–except in Nambūtiri and some Muslim households–were already liberated. Sati, female infanticide, and the disfigurement of widows were never mentioned in foreign and local accounts of Kerala, and one may assume that these customs, which so enraged Indian social reformers, failed to emerge from the mother-right culture of Kerala. Widow remarriage, a highly charged issue throughout India, caused no ripples either, because most low caste and Nāyar widows freely remarried, as did high castes such as Ambalavāsis. Among the Nambūtiris mature marriage was the norm, not child marriage, and so widowhood could not claim major attention among their reformers. Infant marriages among all communities were rare.76 Kerala’s social evil was caste. Its social reform movements skipped the stage of individualistic and usually female-oriented reform and early in the nineteenth century confronted inequalities among Hindu castes, which were more glaring in Kerala than anywhere else in India.77

The mass movement of the Ízhavas and other castes in Kerala for radical social betterment was centered on breaking their reliance on rituals monopolized by the Brahmins. Reformed marriage rites and other domestic rituals, monogamy, marriage between sub-castes, inter-dining and above all education for girls and boys placed the SNDP Yōgam in the mainstream of social reform movements. Moving beyond reform to struggle for rights and for a higher ritual and economic status, the Yōgam and similar bodies raised the caste reform

movement to a popular struggle to transform power relations in the entire society.\textsuperscript{78} Nor were their vision confined to mere casteist and sectarian; they were captivated by the much nobler ideals of secularism and humanism.\textsuperscript{79}

Houtart and Lemercinier noticed that the objectives of different social movements in Kerala varied considerably according to their group composition, particularly whether they involved low-caste Hindus and outcastes, high-caste Hindus and non-Hindus. The first group laid stress on the abolition of the signs of social distance between the groups.\textsuperscript{80} The second devoted its attention almost entirely to the transformation of family relationships, in particular the matrilineal inheritance of property. The third demanded a share in government employment.\textsuperscript{81} And, these movements had three characteristics. First of all, these were all \textit{caste movements} rather than class movements; in other words, what was at stake was primarily the status relationship between the groups and their internal organization as communities rather than their position in the relations of production. The two aspects, of course, were frequently combined, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them completely, but the accent was definitely on the former.\textsuperscript{82} The movements functioned on the basis of caste solidarity, whether the members involved were rich or poor. The second proposition concerns the \textit{symbolic character} of the activity of these movements. Given the fact that the symbolic aspect of society\textsuperscript{83} was all important, it was quite natural that the reaction against this social reality should take on a similar character. Subversive activity was required in the religious order – that is, it was necessary

\textsuperscript{78} Charles. H. Heimsath, "From Social Reform to Social Struggle", p. 33.
\textsuperscript{80} Such as untouchability, restrictions on temple-entry, ban on wearing upper garments, etc.
\textsuperscript{82} Most of the upper castes were either landlords or having various kinds of governmental and social privileges. They monopolized education, government service, and temple properties. Whereas lower castes were landless agriculturists or bonded labourers.
\textsuperscript{83} They are the signs of social distance pointed out by Heimsath.
to break the existing rules of this order. Now the latter were for the most part expressed within the religious field. This is why the low-caste movements took on a religious aspect, especially among the Izhavas. (This should not be accepted in full, symbolic aspect was not a common trait). Finally, the alliance between the various movements was generally motivated by humanitarian objectives, and not by social objectives capable of transforming the class structure. It was possible to unite in order to obtain the abolition of the pollution codes, considered as going against the person as an individual. But it became much more difficult to create alliances around other goals. For that matter, even these goals rarely went beyond symbolic claims, or the possibility of every group’s enjoying the advantages of education and having access to public employment.

We must also note that these movements played a very insignificant part in the anti-British nationalist opposition. The outstanding enemies here were internal, and in any event the British colonist appeared to the depressed communities as an element favourable to their emancipation, since it was he who had been responsible for the abolition of slavery and for so many liberal reforms, which had already dissolved the cement uniting into a rigid structure the caste relations between social groups in Kerala. For the upper castes too the British offered opportunities for emancipation, since educational progress and changes in marriage rules were largely dependent on their consent. In general, thus, the attitude of the caste associations towards the emerging nationalist movement was


85 It is observed that their social role sharpened communal consciousness and communal tension in the twenties and thirties through their efforts to secure sectional advantages like share in the government posts, special representation in the legislative bodics, demand for special educational concessions etc. Louis Onwerkerk, No Elephants for the Maharaja: Social and Political Change in Travancore 1921-47, New Delhi, 1994, p.60.

one of distrust and caution but by the 1920s isolated individuals began to traverse from caste platform to nationalist movement still retaining their caste affiliations, and utilizing the nationalist platform they tried to endorse their caste/class disabilities. Thus when Nāyars (like Kelappan who was active in NSS) upheld the tenancy issue, the Īzhavas (like TK Madhavan of SNDP) fought against pollution rules and for temple entry. In both cases anti-British ideology was strikingly mild. The Nāmbūtiris, whose proprietorship over the landed estates was a gift of the British government, heavily depended on the latter for their economic power and this factor contributed much to their detachment from nationalist politics. The apparent cultural revivalism of the nationalist movement perfectly conformed to the attitude of the Nāmbūtiris – to their cultural exclusiveness and aversion to modern developments – but that too could not abrogate their landed interests and get them attached to the nationalist politics.

In this context, the Nāmbūtiri movement was not a simple assertion of pre-modern collectivity. Devika observed that the modern Nāmbūtiri community, which was its goal, was distinct in many ways. Its formation was clearly seen to depend on the destruction of pre-existing forms of knowledge and practices found characteristic of the older collectivities. It required its members to be subjects, participating in community-building processes, not simply born into it, or habituated to its practices and usage. It was further describable as a substantial entity with sets of features identified as 'characteristic of' or 'typical to'. It is not, as the pre-modern jāti, a set of hierarchically arranged groups interlinked through networks of sharings and obligations, arranged in hierarchy, with 'family resemblance' in practices, customs, everyday routines and life-style, often recognizable as a totality only from outside. Community reform required the breakdown of hierarchies between groups constituting the pre-modern collectivity, and active re-integration of the members of those very groups into

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the modern community as individuals. Here the shaping of the individuals and the building of the modern community need not be regarded as opposing tendencies. One consequence of either tacitly accepting the common-sense notion of liberation or failing to scrutinize it closely is the reinforcement of the idea that the project of liberation is somehow 'pure', free of all interest, not entangled in power.

1:7. Formation of the Hindu identity

The reform movements are also intimately associated with the notion of the 'construction' of modern Hinduism. Nineteenth century Hindu reformers, seeking to rid their religion of the features most attacked by Christian missionaries, are believed to have been driven by a will to monotheism in their attempts to make Hindu religion correspond more rigorously to the Judaeo-Christian conceptions of a single, all powerful deity. This new Hinduism borrowed features from European modernity and rational religion: most importantly it relied on the concept of the nation-state in order to claim a national, all-India character. This presumption got relevance in the context of the position of some radical western scholars who saw Hinduism not as a single religion but rather as a group of amorphous Indian religions.\(^88\) The formation of modern Hinduism, thus, involved Christian missionaries and Hindu revivalist organizations alike, which both contributed to the systematization of disparate traditions for their own purposes. In this context it has been observed that it is more appropriate to term the developments in post-1850 India not as renascent but as resistant Hinduism.\(^89\)

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\(^{88}\) "Hinduism...does not meet the fundamental requirements of a historical religion of being a coherent system; but its distinct religious entities do. They are indeed religions, while Hinduism is not". Heinrich von Stietencron, "Hinduism: On the Proper Use of a deceptive Term" in Gunther D. Sontheimer and Herman Kulke eds., Hinduism Reconsidered. Delhi, 1995, p. 20, cited in Gowri Viswanathan, "Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism" in Gavin Flood ed., The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism, Oxford, 2003, p. 27.

It was in the arena of law that Hinduism received its most definitive colonial reworking. This is one of the most complicated and dense aspects of Britain's involvement with Indian traditions, yet it is also the most far-reaching, as the texts that constituted the basis of legal decisions achieved a canonical power as religious rather than legal texts. This had a great deal to do with the consolidation of patriarchal power over practices involving women, such as sati, pre-pubertal marriage, and conversion to other religions. Each of these had a significant role in the construction of Hinduism. If modern Hinduism's practice is theoretically based on law, it is to that law that one must turn to examine how it was yoked to the interests of both colonizers and the indigenous elite, even as it showed the wide gap between them.90

The process of the 'construction of Hinduism', both as a desperate resistance against colonialism and as a prospective nationalist programme, forcefully advocated by religious reform movements, was not active in modern Kerala since here the medium of association was not religion but caste; from the 1920s, however, the caste movements began to mend their way towards moulding a modern Hindu community, particularly through the discourse and agitation on pollution and temple-entry. This phenomenon was brought about by two major factors. First, the humanitarian ethic embedded in the Gandhian constructive programme and second, the menace posed by the debates on conversion of the lower castes among the caste-Hindus by threatening their social aura and privileged status. Though not referring to these socio-economic pressures and the attendant discursive processes, Muralidharan noticed that the temple-entry movement of the 1920s had the ironic effect of weakening jāti in its old form and of strengthening the Hindu community consciousness.91 Many of the arguments against caste or at least the upper caste domination deployed during

90 Gowri Viswanathan, _op.cit._, p.38.
the temple-entry movement, appealed not to a tailor-made humanism of the abstract type, but to śāstraic norms and to the common ownership of a religion. In the guise of reclaiming this heritage, a new heritage was created. This also appealed to inter-dining which broke many barriers which stood in the way of a common Hindu community. By the mid-1930s social reform discussions had required an idiom that could pose the problems of responsibility only within the framework of a religious group. The temple-entry proclamation points to the paradox of people making a community by threatening to abandon it.92

1:8. The Women question

Historians have generally noted the centrality of what is now commonly known as the Woman Question, and an enormous literature has since been built upon the subject by men and women speaking with different voices. This was not a question of ‘what do women want?’ but rather ‘how can they be modernized’.93 It became the central question in nineteenth century British India because the foreign rulers had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. British writers condemned Indian religions, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women. For them women’s position could be used as an indicator of society’s advancement: “Among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted”.94 The imperialist perception was carried further by the missionaries and pronounced Indian disunity a consequence of the low status of women. Having linked military strength with the status of women, the British concluded that domination of India was natural and inevitable.

92 Ibid. Muralidharan argued that the SNDP resolution 1936 deciding to renounce Hinduism for denying them the freedom of temple-entry and the immediate response of C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer to this threat through the Temple-Entry Proclamation in fact shared the premise that the Izhavas were part of the Hindu community.
Indians responded to the colonial challenge by reshaping the imported ideas and institutions to fit their social and cultural milieu. The ideology that emerged to redefine gender relations was an amalgam of new foreign ideas, indigenous concepts and the response of Indian men and women to the foreign presence in the midst. But not all agreed that gender relations needed modification. Several Indians praised their own culture’s treatment of women or concluded that females in Europe and in India suffered hardships. Those who accepted the idea that society’s ills could be traced to the oppressed condition of women saw female education and female emancipation as the first steps towards progress. But both these groups—the traditionalists and the reformers—shared an ideology, later linked to the nationalist project, that separated the home from the world.

The ‘women’s question’ was the central issue during the so-called Renaissance. Ram Mohan Roy’s historical fame is largely built around his campaign against the practice of the immolation of widows and Vidyasagar’s around his efforts to legalize widow remarriage and abolish kulin polygamy. What has perplexed historians is the rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate toward the close of the century. From then onward, questions regarding the position of women in society did not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they did a few decades before; the overwhelming issues now were directly political ones—concerning the politics of nationalism.

Partha Chatterjee’s remarkable thesis on the “nationalist resolution of the women’s question” delineates how nationalism settled the so-called women’s question within the framework of the nationalist ideology. Nationalism did in fact provide an answer to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in ‘modern’ society; this answer was posited not on an identity but on a difference with the perceived forms of cultural modernity in the

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Therefore, the relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is to be explained not by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. The reason lies in nationalism's success in situating the 'women's question' in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state. This inner domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of 'tradition'. In the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity. The material domain was unimportant, since it was external and enforced but the spiritual, which lies within, is our true self. This completed the formulation of the nationalist project, an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of Western modernity. It was not a dismissal of modernity but an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.

The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized. It followed that the essential distinction between the social roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues must at all times be maintained. There would have to be a marked difference in the degree and manner of Westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation. This was the central principle by which nationalism resolved the women's question in terms of its own historical project. The new woman defined

Chatterjee refers to it as 'preferred goals'. He discusses an Eastern type of nationalism, trying to reequip the nation culturally to transform it but not being able to imitate the alien culture for fear of losing its distinctive identity, thus being both imitative and hostile to its model. See Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question” in Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid eds., Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, New Delhi, pp.233-49.
in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern Western society: it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition. Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman's newly acquired freedom. Chatterjee argues that this was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question.

Many later works on women, including on widows, were based on the assumption that the women's question disappeared from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the nineteenth century. But Charu Gupta questions this assumption and attributes the notion to two reasons – due to a focus on Bengal and the influence of Partha Chatterjee. She observes that the literature produced around widows in the early twentieth century far surpassed that of the previous century. In fact the 1920s and 30s in UP were marked by most extensive and intense public deliberations on women, including widows.

Sumit Sarkar has argued that the limitations of nationalist ideology in pushing forward a campaign for liberal and egalitarian social change cannot be seen as a retrogressive step from the earlier radical reformist phase. Those limitations were in fact present in the earlier phase as well. The renaissance reformers, he shows, were highly selective in their acceptance of liberal ideas from Europe. Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as the maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the

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98 For instance, Anupama Roy writes: “The domestic was the space where the retrieval of the national culture took place. Women, in their specific roles as biological reproducers, became the natural symbols of the continuity of the national culture and identity. The apotheosis of the idealized Hindu woman was an integral part of this process of recovery and rejuvenation of a national tradition. Produced and reproduced through extensive writings laying down behavioural norms for women, the body of the idealized Hindu woman, came to symbolize the ultimate, and even the last resort of resistance to imperialism in the nationalist discourse”. Anupama Roy, “The Domestic, Domesticity and Women Citizens in Late Colonial India”, Contemporary India, Vol. 2, No. 3, July-Sept. 2003, pp. 129-130.


100 Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial Reason, Calcutta, 1985, pp.71-76.
family, acceptance of the sanctity of śāstra, preference for symbolic rather than substantive changes in social practices – all these were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Sarkar also argued that reformers were concerned primarily with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only ‘limited and controlled emancipation of their womenfolk’. Women themselves were not partners in the schemes created for their regeneration; more often they were portrayed as opposed to their own liberation.101

In the nineteenth century, the entire social reform campaign virtually began with Ram Mohan’s efforts at abolishing sati and, thereafter, no single issue agitated the Hindu mind as much as that concerning man-woman relationship. In the early and mid-nineteenth centuries, young graduates in upper class families apparently took to educating their wives and other female members in the family in the belief that this would indeed reduce the cultural or educational differences between the two sexes and contribute to harmonious domestic life. Presumably, the problem of marital incompatibility between an educated adult (husband) and the usually illiterate, juvenile wife cut across ideological and social divides, and, over time, even conservatives were forced to acknowledge the greater need for female education. However, while there was wide agreement on the need to educate women, most men in fact appear to have taken education as a means to reinforce traditional, patriarchal102 values such as allegiance to the family and respectful obedience to the husband.103

102 Kumkum Sanghari uses the term patriarchy to denote systems of subordinating women – function simultaneously through coercion or the threat and practice of violence, through a wide social consensus drawn from the dispersed over many areas of social life and by obtaining in various ways, varying degrees of consent from women. Kumkum Sanghari, “Consent, Agency and Rhetorics of Incitement” in T.V. Sathyamoorthy ed., Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India. Vol. 3, New Delhi, 1996, p.467.
103 Tanika Sarkar wrote: “If the household was the embryonic nation, then the woman was the true patriotic subject. The male body, having passed through the grind of western education,
To an extent, educated Hindu men liked the idea of educated women advocating their own cause. This seemed to fit in with claims repeatedly made at the time, that women in pre-Muslim India enjoyed the benefits of education and public freedom. Further, such initiatives when taken by themselves, could be seen to reflect man’s noble intentions for the woman and used to silence European critics like Mill. Though it would appear that men were beginning to grant women, even if grudgingly, autonomous space and agency, in hindsight this was not the intention. Only a week after it applauded the efforts of Ramabai, the Kesari categorically denied woman’s right to intervene in the work of reform, which was man’s prerogative. Similarly, Vivekananda’s warning to men to keep their hands off woman-related issues may not so much mean allowing the woman to make the critical choices as the tendency to let matters drift until such time when she herself was fully capable of working out her own emancipation. This comes closer to the gradualist argument.

Another question to be critically debated in the third quarter of the nineteenth century concerned conjugality and man-woman relationships in day-to-day life. This touched on sensitive matters like the social and sexual fidelity of wife or the husband’s conjugal rights over his wife. Other issues that vitally

office, routine, and forced urbanization, having been marked with the loss of traditional sports and martial activities, was supposedly remade in an attenuated, emasculated form of colonialism. The female body, on the other hand, was still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the shastras alone. Tanika Sarkar, “The Hindu Wife and Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal”, Studies in History, 8:2, n.s. 1992, p.738.

Cited in Amiya P Sen, op. cit., p.40.

Vivekananda, in the 1890s, cautioned his followers against excessive meddling with woman’s issues. See, ibid.

The enlightenment had recognized the family unit as the primordial sexual space, with procreation and child rearing as its principal tasks. With modernity ushering in the sharp distinction between the public and the private spheres, sexuality became relegated more and more to the private realm. Scientific and rational analyses stressed the differences between the bodies of women and men and placed particular emphasis on women’s reproductive function in the eighteenth century. This highly gendered segregation in the development of capitalist societies was recognized into separate living spheres, with women’s lives organized around two realms, the private realm where women are most in evidence (where ‘natural’ functions like sex and the bodily functions related to procreation take place, where the affective content of relationships is primary) and a public realm where men are most in
relate to the conjugal life of the Hindu, were also debated from time to time. A long standing issue of this kind was ‘satitwa’ (female chastity). Sen points out that Rammohan’s campaign for the abolition of sati had itself glorified ascetic denial of the self and chaste widowhood. Men of a reformist disposition themselves took a serious view of sexual promiscuity developing in women and among widows in particular. Satitwa was sometimes also used to define and demarcate the Hindu woman as against her self-willed ‘libertine’ European counterpart. It was a virtue that more than compensated for her alleged lack of formal education or cultural finesse.107

1:9. Historical Biography

Among the many branches of Malayalam literature, that of historical biography is perhaps the most undeveloped one.108 Until well into the twentieth century no appreciable effort was made in this field and no significant biography was produced in Malayalam before the second decade of that century. Even afterwards, historical biographies have been so extremely limited in number and so deficient in quality that this branch of writing is still in its infancy in Kerala. This dearth of contribution to this area and the poor quality of the available works could mainly be attributed to three factors.109 First, prose literature in Malayalam is just a century old and prose writers were largely drawn towards creative writing utilizing historical themes than towards history and biography. Another reason is that Kerala’s contribution to the list of Great Men—‘creative individuals’ in Toynbean terms—is really very poor. Furthermore, even in the evidence, where ‘cultural’ (books, schools, art, music, science) is produced. Nineteenth century bourgeois femininity consisted of abstinence—from labour and sexuality—and reproduction. The function of the wife except in the working classes was to bear children, look after the house and keep her husband company. The social importance of the wife lay in her idleness and non-productivity was an indicator of social standing. See K.M. Sheeba, “From the Kitchen to the Stage and Back: Continuing Forms of Women’s Exclusion in Keralam”, *Journal of South Indian History*, pp.62-63.

case of locally significant historical figures, authentic source materials throwing light on their life and personality are oftentimes extremely meager. Their place in local history rests on tradition and popular belief and, therefore, the biographical historian's task has been made difficult by his dependence on unverifiable folk memory for his facts. Therefore, even the few works that belong to the category of historical biography are devoid of quality and critical perspective.

Even the available biographies in Malayalam are more of literary nature than historical. The reason is simple: the portraiture of personality is relatively easier with literary figures who are more articulate and self-expressive. The biographer's access to source materials in respect to them is also less difficult. It is therefore only natural that the best Malayalam biographies are those of literary men. Barring such biographies, what remains as historical biography is extremely small and even among them, those which made a substantial contribution to historical information as well as to biographical writing are again limited. With some rare exceptions, most authors have taken to biography as a kind of literary recreation and most of them are eulogists than biographers.

The subject of biography is the life of an individual, the account of an actual life. Biographies, by focusing on Individuals and their lives, become essays on individuality, personality and privacy. In fact, the purpose of the biography is to make the subject special, different and unique.\(^\text{110}\) The biography has been particularly Anglo-American genre and is knitted into a changing history of private life in the West over the past three centuries or so. However, biographies place the subject in a curious relationship with the historical context—in that sense they are both similar to, yet different from, the novel. Both deal with interiority, though their relationship to the 'real' is very different from one another. While the detail and the depth of personal history are meant to illustrate

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everything in a biography, a novel has a much more creative relationship with the context.\footnote{Ibid.}

Biographies also present an often untheorized problem for social historians—that of the relationship between the individual and the society. While social history has preferred to study the past in terms of wider and more general categories of class, caste, community, gender or race, the biography, exemplifies particular trajectory in history—that of an individual’s life. Biographies do however point to changes in wider social contexts—in the family, community, locality or the state. The emergence of a public sphere accentuated private lives, and the privacy of a life was as much a part of a changing private experimental domain, and an attempt at understanding this change, as a response to negotiating an emergent public world. Changes in consumption patterns, urban geographies and employment structures had an impact on notions of privacy. Everything underwent a change, be it clothing, hairstyles, eating habits, or leisure activities. Arunima explains that biography, in that sense, is also a way of tracking the manifestation of the social in the self.\footnote{Ibid. pp. 189-190.}

Biography can be seen as a branch of history, because it depends on a selective ordering and interpretation of materials, written and oral, established through research and personal recollection. It can also be seen as a branch of imaginative literature in that it seeks to convey a sense of the individuality and significance of the subject through creative sympathetic insight.\footnote{The New Encyclopedia Britannica. Vol. 2, 1997, p. 222.} It must be distinguished not only in terms of subject matter but also in terms of techniques and intention. Biography, as a history of a personal life, is thus precariously positioned at the intersection of history and literature. With its focus on the private and the personal, however differently interpreted, its story distinguishes the individual from the wider context. Yet, as a narrative it is at pains to
highlight its basis in truth as opposed to the functional world of the novel. In India, the earliest biographies seem to be either of political people or of literary/creative figures. Both these reflect a public persona rather than a private life.

It has been recognized that a biographer is not neutral but discloses aspects of his own personality in the presentation and interpretation of the biographee. This is much more the case with autobiography, indeed the manner may reveal as much about the subject as the matter. Though self-justification may provide the autobiographical impulse, so also may self-contempt, particularly when linked with some intellectual, religious or emotional crisis that precipitates change. Biographical and autobiographical writing can easily pass into fiction when rational inference or conjecture pass over into imaginative reconstruction or frank invention or when the biographical subject itself is wholly or partly imaginary.¹¹⁴

Contrasted with creative literature, historical biography is limited in number owing to a ‘technical’ reason. There is a fundamental difference between the two. While literary merit is a desirable quality in any work, it is only secondary in biography which is primarily historical. In creative writing, character delineation depends on the imaginative conception of the writer; the character, for example, in a novel or drama is the character of the author. The freedom of the creative writer is absent for the historical biographer. The subject of the biography is the real person; his personality is ‘fixed’ for the biographer. A biographer’s primary loyalty is to truth based on an appeal to evidence; any deviation from it in the interest of literary effect would be a distortion, and to that extent the biography ceases to be authentic. Technically therefore,

biographical writing is more difficult than creative writing; as Carlyle says, a well-written biography is as rare as a life well-lived.\textsuperscript{115}

The desire to leave to posterity the record of an impressive life is a natural craving.\textsuperscript{116} And this craving has been instrumental in highlighting the role of individuals in historical developments. In India, heroes are not only glorified in legends and narratives, but are also left to posterity through biographical sketches. Some of the prominent figures of the so-called Indian renaissance are fortunate in having been raised to the level of heroes through historical biographies. One commences of course with the role of Ram Mohan Roy, the so-called ‘Father of Modern India’.\textsuperscript{117} The elevation of a single figure like Ram Mohan to a place of such prominence reflects, among many things, something about the conception of history as biography that held sway in colonial schools. It is thus hardly surprising that from the second quarter of the nineteenth century anyone chronicling the course of cultural change in Bengal did so by concentrating on the work of exemplary individuals like Ram Mohan.

Apart from this normal paradigm, there was another tendency to see the historical narrative punctuated in terms of life-spans and active careers. Thus the departure of Ram Mohan in 1830 for England was a natural break in the timeline for hagiographers; the historical record must now await the advent of the next exemplary figure. A representative sample of this approach to the writing of history can be found in the essay on the Brahmo Samaj written by Keshub Chander Sen in 1865. Keshub announces his commitment to history as biography thus: “It is a truth which the world’s history has well verified that great men represent certain great ideas, the realization of which constitutes the

\textsuperscript{115} M.P. Sreekumaran Nair, op. cit., p. 530.
very destiny and mission of their existence”. These words are applied most immediately to Ram Mohan. He narrates the providential advent of Ram Mohan with special attention to his writings on Vedanta and his founding of the Brahma Samaj. Keshub found the hands of God at work in Bengal’s history when the leadership of the Samaj fell to Debendranath Tagore as soon as Rammohun left for England. Thus Keshub reminds us how God intervenes in history through the agency of those individuals Carlyle had dubbed ‘Great Men’. And needles to say, history was to find in Keshub the inspired prophet who was destined to inherit the mantle of Debendranath. Tagore’s epigram contained in *Charitra Pūja* perfectly conforms to this strand: “When Ram Mohan Roy was born, all of India was enveloped in blind darkness. Death wandered through the ether. Falsehood and death struggled to oppose him… In those days, the once vital Hinduism of the past ruled as mere ghost over the cremation ground. It had no life, no truth- only commandments and fear… (Ram Mohan) saw that there was still life within us. That life he worked to awaken”. The early fixation on a figure like Rammohun had, by century’s end, developed into what Tagore was to call hero-worship, or *Charitra-Pūja*. Such biographical *pūja* continued unabated right into the early twentieth century.

The renaissance figures of modern Kerala are portrayed in a similar manner along lines of ‘great men walking’. Often the reform movements of modern Kerala are identified with the biographies of great men like Sri Nārāyaṇa Guru, Mannath Padmanabhan and V.T. Bhāṭṭathiripād. By limiting the history of a movement to certain ‘eventful’ or ‘event-making’ men, these biographies expressed an obvious weakness for the subject person, and often ended up in an unmixed hero-worship. The narrative of a person’s life does not fully highlight

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120 Ibid, p. 137.
the age in which he/she lived nor does it necessarily unravel the ideologies and
the dynamics of social processes. If a biography needs to enrich the existing
corpus of historical literature, or to merit “a piece of historical research”, it
should not just highlight the significant milestones of the life of the individual,
but should place the individual in the correct historical context alike. In other
words, the context is as important as the individual. It alone would help intimate
us of the motives that might have persuaded the person for his social
involvement, the priorities that played in fixing or periodically re-fixing the
targets, the individual interests that worked along with the humanitarian/
philanthropic ideals, the reactionary or negative trends they represented even
while appearing as the champions of radicalism and reformism. It is an equally
important point to note that it alone would help us to highlight on certain areas
and issues on which they had kept a surprising silence.

1:10. The Nambūtiri Movement

Attempts to reform the Nambūtiri community did not start with VT, it had
its beginnings much earlier; but his entry into the movement had contributed
much to the radicalization of its programmes and methods. The Nambūtiri
reformism had its focus on two issues- marriage reform and equitable partition
of family property. Both these demands were in fact the two sides of the same
coin. It was the absence of a share in ancestral property that had incapacitated
the junior Nambūtiris to pursue endogamous marriages rather than the canonical
injunctions against it. Endogamous marriages were also seen as the means to
emancipate the Antarjanams from their pathetic life conditions. Later on the
movement acquired tremendous proportions; it went beyond demanding
endogamous marriages and the right of individual property -- it called for a
realignment of the existing gender relations, and embarked on a crusade against
the priest and the clergy. On the whole the movement imbibed the spirit of
science and reason and repeatedly took recourse to the forces of modernity.
Notwithstanding the numerous studies on the so-called renaissance of Kerala, there is a real dearth of research on the Nambūtiri reform movement, though the *Sabha* was an integral part of the so-called renaissance. Apart from a few doctoral, MPhil and MA dissertations, the movement has not been subjected to any in-depth study. Even the academic studies suffer from the lack of a critical analysis and hence do not differ much from popular literature. They are also disposed to overemphasize the role of a few individual reformers like V.T. Bhāṭṭathiripād, and by and large ignore the internal dynamics of the movement. There is a tendency to reduce the history of the movement to biography, almost closer to hagiography, to highlight the role of the individual reformers in the movement from their own perception, and to associate the reform measures indiscriminately with literary activity. The most striking point in all these works is the element of hero-cult and the inclination to

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12. For instance, Anandi's work places the social changes among the Nambūtiri women in the context of the land reforms of the post-independence era: the emergence of the nuclear family and the fragmentation of landholdings coupled with the deprivation of the Nambūtiris brought about a situation in which emancipation of the Antarjanams became a necessary step for survival. The much glorified Yōgakṣēmasabha movement was strictly male-oriented and hence did not help emancipate women considerably.

12. Even a renowned historian like Sreedhara Menon, in his study of the freedom movement of Kerala, carelessly wrote that the *Sabha* was founded in 1910-11 and that VT as the founder of the *Sangham*. See A. Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala and the Freedom Struggle*, Kottayam, 1997, p.61.

treat VT as the one and only leader of the movement. Similarly, the binary of
colonialism and nationalism strikingly do not appear in many of these studies.

Many persons were misled to concoct history chiefly on the basis of the
reminiscences of a few leaders who were personally associated with the
movement and were gifted with charming literary style to impress the people and
make them believe that they were the sustaining force behind the movement.
Moreover, media publicity had pushed some leaders to the top and helped them
to carve out an undue space in a social movement. Since in most cases a
movement had produced its own hero who could steer it in the right course, in
fair or foul weather, many mistook that VT, assisted by a group of able deputies,
had in fact taken up the hero’s role in the movement. VT’s autobiographical
writings, which started appearing in the late 1950s, have been a determining
factor in creating a kind of hero-cult around him and in projecting him as the
undisputed leader of the movement. This ‘tendency to accept elite reformers at
their own evaluation’ has become a vitiating factor to the objectivity of history
since, while obliterating the basic dynamics of the movement, it helped
courage an undesirable tendency towards reductionism. This tendency attains
harmful proportions in the popular narratives which highlight VT as the
redeemer, who saved the community from the deplorable and inhuman condition
of pre-reform days, and as the only leader who led the community towards
modern and secular life. He is the harbinger of the new civil-society-
consciousness among the Nambūtiris. All his radical engagements were seen as
attempts at introducing this novel consciousness.

But, at the same time, VT is vehemently denounced from certain quarters, as
the destroyer of the community from within. This image has been the product
of a brimming disillusionment brought about by the socio-economic changes in

126 Sumit Sarkar, Bibliographic Survey of Social reform movements in the 18th and 19th
Centuries, p.20.
47-48.
the twentieth century which caused to marginalize the Nambūtiris in the emerging new civil society. What enraged the critics was the alleged decline of the community from its privileged pre-reform position to the destitute post-reform condition. In fact VT does not deserve the criticism that he had ruined the community through his radical and secular measures since the real objectives behind all his involvements appear to be influenced strictly by communitarian considerations. He was just instilling an element of radicalism to the methods of the struggle; even this has been interpreted as a clever tactical measure to offset the late entry of the Nambūtiris to the realm of social reform, by a contemporary observer. The fact that VT was just one among the many leaders of the movement or that there were many radicals in the movement with even more extreme views than VT or though renowned for his radical attitude, VT took an extremely orthodox stand with regard to communism and land reforms, or that it was the land reforms introduced by E.M.S. Nambūtiripad that brought about the downfall of the community has not been taken seriously. Sub-caste divisions and nobility-status were determining factors among the Nambūtiris, which had been instrumental even in deciding excommunication from the caste, and which was used without any compunction against VT, but not against E.M.S. since he belonged to one of the eight noble Illams, and few dared to accuse anyone belonging to such noble houses because of their high status.

One of the important aspects of the caste-based reform movements of Kerala was their achievement-orientation and materialistic outlook. In the hierarchically ordained social system, movements of the lower castes had to clash inevitably

130 Even this could be disputed. The land reforms affected only a few Nambūtiris; partition of illam property had reduced the size of the feudal estates before. Only the lethargic and the inactive had to bear the burden of the new changes.
with the privileged dominant groups in order to rise up in the social ladder. In Kerala, social movements were accompanied by economic struggles, of which the agitation of the tenants was the foremost. While the social struggles destroyed the privileged status of the Nambūtiris, the tenancy movements and the subsequent land reform measures ruined their economic power. The natural outcome was the downfall of the community from the position it had enjoyed previously. Although the discourse on the ‘fall’ had started earlier, and had forced the Nambūtiris to unite, this issue acquired tremendous proportions in the post-independence era. The new Nambūtiri movement portrays the Nambūtiris as the unfortunate and helpless victims of the new mass awakening, isolated by all others and even cheated out of their properties without providing them any reasonable compensation through the land reform measures.

Taking advantage of the relative backwardness of a few Nambūtiris (poor Nambūtiris were there at all times) and the popular sympathy created by the setback suffered by them owing to land reforms, there has been considerable attempts from certain sections both to denounce the movement as a catalyst of ruin and to extol it for its idealism of self-abnegation which gave it the image of a model movement. The intense feeling of disillusionment was compensated to an extent through a sigh of relief in the supposed role it played in rescuing the Nambūtiris from facing the kind of opposition their counterparts had to face in the Tamil country. There is a general belief that the Nambūtiris are straightforward and absolutely honest in their dealings with others; they are free from deceit. Many writers pinpoint that it is this innocence bordering on foolishness along with their steadfastness to values, lack of competence and competitive spirit; and their undue attachment to spiritual life that led to their marginalization in Kerala; whereas in other parts of India, the Brahmins made

headway in leading the modernization efforts, while keeping their social supremacy intact. This assessment of the Nambūtiris is marked by two judgements. One, the lower castes are unjust usurpers and two, the Nambūtiris are steadfast upholders of noble and humane (i.e., brahmanical) values. It is striking to note that apart from the first generation of Antarjanams who were active participants of the movement, and who later became activists of the communist party, the second generation onwards not only did not participate in active public life but became silent over the issue of emancipation. Even the stories of Lalitāmbika Antarjanam written in the post-reform days are marked by the negation of some of the basic tenets of the reform movement.

1:11. The Construction of Identity

The true personality of V.T, as well as the real nature and impact of his intervention in the public sphere, has not been studied satisfactorily yet. From the 1920s, when he entered the public sphere, till his end in 1982. VT was active and enthusiastic but his life was marked by the different social roles he played in the course of this period. In the 1920s and early '30s VT was preoccupied with the Sabha movement. But in the '30s he began to keep away from it and associated himself with the constructive programme of Gandhian politics including the temple-entry movement. But it is striking to find that later he kept a distance from the active nationalist movement and championed Gandhian ethics in opposition to the Communist movement. In the post independent era he was preoccupied with literary activities and actively associated with the rationalist movement. On the whole the most active phase of his life was in the 1920s and '30s when he worked for the Sabha. A linear progression, comparable to that of E.M.S. Nambūtiripad, is strikingly absent in his career. Some people think that he was interested only in social and cultural activities and was not

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interested in political pursuits and this was the reason why he came to be sidelined in the post-independence era, which was dominated by party politics. Some people also think that like all other Gandhians, VT too was victimized by the communists who were not only bent upon demolishing the Gandhian tradition in Kerala but also silencing a whole generation of Gandhian activists. Thus the career of VT is split up into active and passive phases both of which were seen to be historically constructive and progressive.

The image of VT as is presented in the works of contemporary writers and in the works of VT himself (such as in his autobiography) is different from the image that emerges from the study of his actual life. Many of the prevailing attributes attached to him is the result of the after-thought that came through an intellectual exercise of the post-reform days intended to show VT in a favourable light. The serialized publication of his personal memoirs from the 1950s and his staunch anti-communist attitude have been instrumental both in raising him to the position of the one and only leader of the Nambūtiri movement and in posing him as a great exponent of the Gandhian-humanist values. Political exigencies of the time coupled with the impression created through autobiographical representation, consciously or unconsciously detached VT from the real historical context to be placed in an altogether different situation.

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134 VT’s greatness is held to equal those of Vidyasagar and Ranade. Perhaps he is greater than the other two because VT had to face stronger and more violent opposition here to accomplish the same deeds the other two did in their country. T.R. Raghavan, “Srīvīmōchana Prāsthānathintē Nētāvu”, Vivēkōdayam, Vol. 10, No.27, 28, May 23, 1976.

135 Mádamb pointed out that VT was almost forgotten by the people of Kerala. It was his memoirs and his association with the rationalist movement that retrieved his public image. Personal Conversation, Mádamb Kunjukuttan, Kirālur, 12-09-2005.

VT’s later image as a moral reformer, as a crusader against power politics and corruption, as an exponent of puritan life and as a staunch humanist, all of which greatly influenced the process of the construction of his past identity since they were handy for those who wanted to contain the belligerent left-wing politics.\(^\text{137}\)

The fact that such an image was an attribute attached with him, due mainly by reading him through his own eyes, was largely overlooked.\(^\text{138}\) A perusal through the contemporary records, however, produces a different picture.\(^\text{139}\)

All people in authority, Weber says, concoct myths about their own superiority and natural fitness to rule. These myths or inner justifications are necessary for their self-assurance and their sense of political propriety. Legitimations are the moral vocabularies of those who speak with the voice of authority. There is, though, an important difference between legitimations and legitimacy. Legitimations are the claims that dominant groups make about themselves—claims that they would naturally wish everyone else to accept. Legitimacy, on the other hand, refers to the condition in which such claims have in fact been accepted and endorsed by subordinate groups. That is, the grounds upon which obedience is claimed are accepted as valid by those who are...
expected to do the obeying. Legitimations emanate from on high, but legitimacy is bestowed from below. The play of both legitimation and legitimacy was crucial in making V.T. a great figure beyond the historical realities.

V.T’s popularity rests on many factors, all of which combined in a complex way raised him to the heights of renown. Going through the pages of the Yōgakṣēmam or the Uṇi Nambūṭiri, we find VT as not the only leader of the Nambūṭiri movement in the 1920s although he had gained repute as a great orator and a firebrand radical. He began intervening in the important issues of the Sabha from the middle of the 1920s and the resolution on “Nambūṭiris and Unemployment” which he presented in the 8th Annual meeting of the Sangham captured the attention of the community. But what made him truly popular was the staging of the drama “Adukkaḷayil Ninnu Arangathēkkku” in the 22nd annual meeting of the Sabha at Edakkunni in December 1929. Although it was a group endeavour, V.T. gained repute as the author of the drama and was appointed as the organizing secretary of the Sangham. He was also authorized to stage the drama at all suitable places. The staging of the drama at his own Illam in the midst of the strong opposition from his jyēstan was a great victory for VT. In a meeting arranged to congratulate him, Mōzhikunnam praised VT as the Nambūṭiri Patel and Mēzhathūr as the Bardoli of Kerala. The Yāchuna Yātra in 1931 raised his popularity. Though it was organized under the combined leadership of Pandam Vāsudevan Nambūṭiri and VT. his eloquent speeches, which were published by Uṇi Nambūṭiri every day, captured popular attention.

K.N. Kuṭṭan Nambūṭiripad, Mūthiringōd Bhavatṛātān Nambūṭiripad, Pāṇḍam, E.M.S. Nambūṭiripad and VT were the prominent figures of this time. Some of the later developments which made VT a celebrity were the episodes of the widow marriage in 1934, the inter-caste marriage in 1940 and the Ulbuddhakēralam project; but all these were performed at a time when he had practically severed all his connections with the Sabha and was totally banished from his community. VT’s greatest renown lies in his efforts at arousing the Antarjanams; instigating and provoking the piteous and servile Antarjanams was in fact a great endeavour.

After the decline of the Ulbuddhakēralam colony in 1937, and till the revival of the Sabha in 1944 under the leadership of EMS, VT kept aloof from the public sphere. He enthusiastically cooperated with the Ĭngallūṛ Sabha and it was around this time that Akkitham Achuthan Nambūṭiri compared him with Kamal Pasha of Turkey. In 1956 when he was 60, V.T. started writing his memoirs. It is interesting to note that E.M.S, his colleague in the movement in the late 1920s and early 1930s, became the first chief minister of united Kerala in 1957. The Russian travel experiences of E.M.S. coincided with VT’s earliest reminiscences. V.T’s 70th and 80th birthdays and his birth centenary were great

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144 M.P. Bhāṭṭathiripād later identified Mūthiringōd as the ideologue of the movement. He pointed out that E.M.S. was its life, Kuṭṭan Nambūṭiripād its head, Mūthiringōd its tongue and VT its hands. M.P. Bhāṭṭathiripād, “Pāṟvathi Nenninimangalam”, UN, 1:2, Edavam 1122 (May-June, 1947), p.64.


events among social and literary circles of Kerala. With the celebration of these events, his fame rose to its zenith. Though men like E.M.S. participated in these celebrations, the prominent participants were all from the anti-left camp or from the group of the radical humanists or rationalists. Certain very significant attributes were attached to his personality during this time. Thus he was elevated to a “philosopher-guide in the journey beyond Communism” and a “saint, not a mere revolutionary”. Some of the biographical works on VT appeared around this time. Most of these works eulogized him and elevated him to a legend and a cult figure, but at the expense of historical accuracy.

**1:12. Scope of the Study**

VT is well-known to every literate Malayāli, but he still remains an enigma to the layman and to the academician. For the layman he reigns as the legendary redeemer and reformer of the pitiful Nambūtiris, with his miraculous touch of radical and stubborn attitudes. He remains a paradox and a complex of apparently contradictory positions to an academician – despite being radical, he was extremely conservative in many spheres: despite being infatuated by Gandhism, he kept away from the Nationalist political agitation and held fast to the atheist-rationalist movement; despite being a philanthropist and a humanist, he strongly opposed Communism; despite being a radical social activist, he responded sensitively to many issues of religious and communitarian interests. The prevailing studies on him are greatly superficial for their stress on the hero-cult and their neglect of the historical context. The present study seeks justification from this premise; the absence of serious studies has been perpetuating the highly eulogistic and ahistorical impression of VT’s personality and ideology.

148 It is interesting to note that E.M.S. always held high esteem and wrote in great terms about VT. In an article, “Nammudē Yuvajana Prasthānām”, (UN 15:1. Sep. 29, 1933. p.9) E.M.S. wrote that VT was the true spirit behind the radicalization of the Sabha and it was he who brought it out from the highly narrow outlook of Kurūr and his followers. In many other occasions (See his Āmokatha, pp.177-78) E.M.S. repeated his great impressions on VT.


It is in the context of historical myth-making and of projecting personalities like V.T. as “deities and not actors circumscribed by history” that we will have to analyze his historical role in the Nambūtiri movement in particular and in the renaissance of Kerala in general. The present study intends to be a biographical dissection. Only by viewing a person in the right perspective and in the correct historical context can we understand the forces and the interests that worked behind his attitudes. There is a conspicuous lack of consistency and steadiness in the personal and ideological developments of VT. It is a wonder how an avowed atheist, rationalist, humanist and social reformer of lofty ideals could turn out to be an exponent of Brahmanical interests. His lack of interest in Congress politics compared to the enthusiasm evinced by him in social reform, his staunch opposition to Communism, his inclination to a liberal communal stand in relation to the Muslims, the clear revivalist ideology of his later life and his direct association with the RSS, all would reveal the working of his mind extremely well.

The Nambūtiri movement differs drastically from other caste movements in that the second generation of its leaders (after Kurūr) is not accepted wholeheartedly by the community later. While Mannam was the undisputed leader of the Nāyar movement then and now and men like Śrī Nārāyaṇa Guru, Mannam and Ayyankāḷi were recognized by their respective communities then and later, the Nambūtiris refused to accept any of their leaders (VT,

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152 We have similar parallels; an avowed radical like Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar presented his self as a case of Brahman identity. See Nita Kumar, “Language, Families and the Plural Meanings of the Nineteenth-century Intelligentsia”, *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 38:1, 2001, p.97.

153 Marx has categorically stated the nuances of identity-crafting in his *The German Ideology* fairly well: “Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real, active men as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to the furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process”. Cited in David MClellan, *Ideology*. Delhi, 1998, pp.14-15.
Müthingöd, EMS or Pändam) wholeheartedly. The Izhavas later recognized even the contributions of the ‘heretic’ Sahodaran Ayyappan by the close of the 1920s.¹⁵⁴

The reconstruction of both the historical time and VT’s life has been considerably helped by a variety of anecdotes taken from the biographies of his contemporaries. These anecdotes are useful principally for two reasons. One, some of them are on inter-personal relationships. Second, these are illustrative of certain events of the time, and therefore are of historical value. In the unavailability of private papers these are useful in illustrating his life. Moreover, these also reveal significantly how they perceived him.

The present work, as a historical biography, thus intends to explore the life of VT in both its public and private domains. It tries to analyze objectively the apparent dichotomy perceived in his personal reminiscences and public life. It also tries to reveal his ardent personal and communitarian interests that lurked beneath the surface of strong humanitarian and philanthropic ideals. It also explores the way in which the nationalist/Gandhian ideology worked in him both as a stimulating as well as restraining factor. Though modern science and reason had greatly influenced his thinking process and helped him in understanding the existing social reality, the limitations of colonial modernity coupled with the dynamics of socio-political forces drove him to a conservative position on many important issues like land reform. The class factor also has not been analyzed yet; though English educated, VT could not readily got enrolled into the ‘middle class club’ and this significant factor instilled in him a sense of deprivation which led to his falling back on to a kind of feudal nostalgia that bordered on revivalism.¹⁵⁵ The existing studies on VT attribute his conservatism to the moral

¹⁵⁵ Even the middle class in Kerala suffered many structural drawbacks. “Compared to the middle class in the western countries, the Kerala middle class is only proletariat. Despite all its tall talk about progressivism, it is basically of peasant stock, not urban, and essentially
decay of the post-independent era and to the increase of the vices of corruption and violence in public life.\textsuperscript{156}

The present study also attempts to reanalyze the existing notion that VT was a life-long radical activist.\textsuperscript{157} Barring the two decades of the Nambūtirī movement when he was active and vigilant, he had by and large kept aloof and in later life he was preoccupied with personal and family affairs. His inability to adjust with the left-wing politics (many of his earlier colleagues became communists) and his deplorable economic condition, following his excommunication and collapse of the Ulbuddhakhērālam, had all been determining factors in enforcing his social exclusiveness, but even more important is the fact that with the completion of the reform movement he seems to have exhausted his agenda and was disinclined to look out for new pastures because he might have considered himself a spent force and so resolved to wind up his public career. His left-wing critics denounced him for ending up his public career so early and abruptly because they thought that this was due to his blind faith in Gandhian ideals and his anti-communist predilections.\textsuperscript{158}

But neither his non-noble origin nor his economic deprivation determined his ideological position considerably. Despite being a humanist and a philanthropist, VT was not a socialist. He held fast to Gandhian concept of Trusteeship and continuously took a stand in favour of the landlords. Though conservative not radical. As the upper class ceased to be an enemy, and social reforms no longer an issue and political power secured, the role of the middle class as a revolutionary force is over. It is rather now concerned with consolidation and conservation of its position, power and prestige”.

\textsuperscript{156} Though Nambūtiris were not a homogenous community segregated by ritual hierarchy and economic power, class interest arising out of caste consciousness could not be ruled out on the basis of the theory of the plurality of the elites; for it was precisely these elites that formed the dominant class. See B.N. Ganguli, “Conceptualizing the Indian Middle Class” in K.S. Krishnaswamy et al ed., \textit{Society and Change}. Bombay, 1977, p.29.

\textsuperscript{157} It is observed that till his end VT had kept his radical bent of mind and his friendship and alliance with young men even in his old age stand testimony to this fact. See C.P. Sreedharan, preface to V.T. Bhaṭṭathiripād, \textit{VTyudē Jivitasmaranakal}. Kottayam, 1983, p11.

many believe that VT was a renouncer and was the upholder of the mantra “Agniṣaya Idam Na Ma Ma”, in fact he was not free from the middle class life ideals. His quarrel with his jyēstan in the name of property, his refusal to allot his two daughters of the sambandham marriage their share of his property, and his staunch opposition to communism evidently betray his ideological predilections.

The present study does not follow the paradigm of post-modern history which is now popular in the garb of ‘community history’. The post-modernist model – pre-modern, popular, non-western, homogenized and totally free of internal power structures – do not satisfactorily analyze the contours of the Nambūtiri movement and the social behaviour of its leaders; rather a class analysis would help explain the internal dynamics of the movement and the inclination of the Nambūtiris towards the civil society and communism. In fact, the post-modernist concern with the politics of identity has great relevance in the study of the modernization of the Nambūtiri community and of VT’s role in it but that would not invalidate an analysis along the politics of class and class struggle. Hence we cannot rule out discourses in history to retrieve it from what Lyotard called the abstract world of modern, professionalized, ‘scientific’ discourses that perpetually seek legitimation through argument and debate and to put it in a pre-modern fluid, free, popular universe of narrativization in the form of story-telling.159

The course of the research has been one of disappointment as far as the collection of primary data was concerned. The private writings of VT in the form of diaries and letters could not be utilized for the present study, not because they do not exist but because they are not available for reference. Most of the private papers of VT are in the custody of his son who seemed reluctant to cooperate with the research. Paucity of private information on his life, by way of letters,

159 Cited in Sumit Sarkar, “Post-modernism and the Writing of History”, Studies in History, 15, 2, n.s., 1999, p.302. Pre-modern narrative for Lyotard becomes a way of consuming the past, as contrasted to its ‘storage, hoarding and capitalization in science and scientific thought – an ‘accumulation’ inseparable from questions of power and domination.
diaries etc., may pose serious limitations in the proper evaluation of his person and ideology. Hence, the present attempt is based on a deductive reasoning: his works and his life are analyzed from the broader perspective of the dynamics of the Nambūtiri movement. In addition, a study of the changes of the times would help to understand the phenomenon that had influenced in shaping his person and ideology.

1:13. Hypotheses

1. To locate VT in the historical context. Existing literature on VT narrates his social role in terms of strong humanitarian and modernization tendencies with a total disregard of his personal and communitarian interests. The general attitude of the Nambūtiri radicals towards either the Nationalist Movement or the tenancy movement or even towards the question of distance pollution, including temple-entry, would evidently prove the 'defensive' nature of the movement throughout its course.

2. To trace the historic role played by V.T. in the modernization and radicalization of the Nambūtiri community. No other community in Kerala had undergone such a drastic and swift change to become the active partners and participants of the rising new civil society. Despite their late entry into the public sphere, the Nambūtiris had been able to compensate it through their ultra-radicalism which is evidenced by the fact that many hard core communists, including E.M.S. Nambūtiripad, grew up from among them.

3. To identify the crisis that was slowly developing among many Nambūtiris towards their approach to modernity in the 1930s and 40s. from the example of V.T. Patriarchal and communitarian interests had been strong among the Nambūtiri radicals in the reform days but they were obscured and not sufficiently traced out. The gender bias of many of the radicals began to surface once the male agenda was fulfilled. More striking is the fact that many of them withdrew to the shells of orthodoxy once the main demands of the movement
was achieved. Radicalism for many of them, except a few who were attracted to
Communist politics, was just a means to an end and not a life-ideal.

4. To distinguish between the active and passive phases of VT’s life. From a
firebrand radical, VT gradually turned into a moral reformer and an exponent of
the status quo in the post reform days. Most of his writings in the post-
independence period are marked by their ‘Nambūti-ness’ or a liberal Hindu
ideology coupled with a revivalist mood.

5. To trace out the ideal that inspired VT in moulding both his radicalism and
his ideological position. VT appears to be instigated by a temptation to refashion
the Nambūtiris as a model community purging it of features and traits which had
subjected it to popular ridicule and retarded its progress in the new social order.
He also wanted to recapture the dominant position the Nambūtiris had held for
centuries through a revitalization movement. His social interventions were
directed towards this end in view.

6. To spot out the ‘Other’ in VT. His memoirs reveal fairly well that VT had
tried to assert his identity as a Gandhian in opposition to Communism, as a
Hindu/Nambūtiri in contrast to other religious communities especially Muslims,
as a Caste-Hindu in relation to lower castes and as a male in relation to
women.¹⁶⁰ In personal contacts he retained a strong sense of intimacy and
friendship and a sense of equality, but in social relationships he maintained a
vague sense of ‘Nambūtiriness’ and caste pride.¹⁶¹ He deliberately tried to
uphold some of the Nambūtiri ideals, like vegetarianism and hospitality for
instance, which were not just innocent inheritance of tradition or simple acts of a
humane way of life, as is illustrated by his later writings and political
affiliations.

¹⁶⁰ Of late Devika has argued that the feminist thought in Kerala had its beginning not with VT
but with Lajitāmbika Antārjanam. See J. Devika, “Agniśākṣi Vindum Vāyikkumbōl”,
Samakāśina Malayālam, Feb. 2006, p.57: En-gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-
forming Early Twentieth Century Kerala, Hyderabad, 2007, Ch. IV.
¹⁶¹ J. Devika, “En-gendering Individuals: the Project of Nambūtiri Brahmin Reform in Kerala”,
Journal of South Indian History, 1:2, March-August 2004, p.86.