CHAPTER 7
SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

Writing local history has been by now accepted as a serious pursuit and has found its due place in academic studies. The interest in local history has grown in the wake of the recent spirit in decentralized governance. Local history builds up the history of a region or components of it. This study is essentially a local history and tries to bring out the evolution of the community life in Chengannur from early times to modern times with some chronological sense although due to paucity of information exact chronological recording may not be present invariably everywhere. As the title suggests building up the history of Chengannur has been made with focus on the institutional building blocks or frameworks of societal life and the social relations that existed here from time to time. These have been covered following certain classifications, although with the caution that fine delineation is impossible for reasons of overlapping, interlinking and interfacing of events and component elements. The classifications are: political, economic, religious and social including cultural (art) attainments, all in a background of the geographical setting of the location and its endowments. This last mentioned aspect covers many details on the land and the people. The section also covers the details regarding the different panchayats and hence the spread of the various important institutions, particularly social service institutions like educational institutions, hospitals, reading rooms etc. Special features of social relationship, myths and history of the localities are also given in this section. The classificatory approach is
resorted to not so much because of any particular interest in these aspects as such or any antecedent theoretical discussions in this respect but because of a feeling that the local history will be adequately brought out through a classified arrangement and presentation in the above manner. The interest is essentially and primarily in contributing to the building up of the local history of Chengannur which, it is hoped, can be a store of information for supplementing, confirming or contradicting hitherto inferences, conclusions or hypotheses at the mega level. In fact, the study is set with full awareness of the mega history of Travancore or Kerala or India and is not done in isolation. A possible extensive local history of Chengannur is attempted at for the first time although no claim is made that it is exhaustive. The study is descriptive without the rhetoric characteristic of narrative history. Since the canvas is wide it goes beyond the familiar single centred approach. No centre is foregrounded and no hypotheses made. However, while at the stage of collection of information, probe and presentation theoretical and ideological biases were eliminated an awareness of some of the theoretical positions were obtained as an exercise that ensured knowledge and alertness that would help in not missing historical elements of significance emerging from the hitherto academic interest and theoretical discussions. It is from this angle that a discussion is incorporated which traces some of the theories on cultural evolution of community life.

The above sums up the theme and approach of the work. The work descriptive in nature tries to capture the past in its reality as Ranke had hoped for, to the extent information has been available in the present. The sources of information consist both published and unpublished works and are: interviews
with knowledgeable persons, archaeological evidences; inscriptions on stones and copper plates, government publications, manuals, gazetteers, archive records, settlement registers, records from revenue and panchayat offices; census reports; travelogues; granthavaries; memoirs; biographies; family histories; and contemporary writings – both prose and poetry.

Chengannur in this study denotes the ‘Historical Region of Chengannur’ and does not conform to any particular official divisions like revenue division, developmental division etc. However by and large, intensive attention has been given to the present revenue division of Chengannur Taluk. Adjoining places, Alamthuruthy and Aranmula have also been included since they were historically within the fold of Chengannur region although the present day revenue division does not encompass them. An attempt has also been made to have a closer look at the various locations of this region which presents varying geographical features, occupational pattern, and historical peculiarities, historical events, legends and myths. They are brought out to the extent of their relevance and availability of information.

Megalithic finds excavated from Puliyur, Kodukulanji, Pandanad, Kallisseri and Budhanur date back probably to the earliest human settlement in the region in circa the first millennium B.C. The proximity to the ancient port of Niranam and the recent findings of Roman coins in Alamthuruthy the homeland of ‘Chiravai Swarupam’ from where the ruling dynasty of Venad originated are indicative of the significance of the region during the historical epochs. Instances of this kind which impart historical significance to Chengannur are numerous and emerge out in the study as it proceeds.
A riverbed flanked by two vital rivers flows viz. River Pampa in the North and River Achenkovil in the South and benefited by a third one viz. Manimalayar, Chengannur acquired a two pronged locational significance in history. One is that it was ideally suited for the life of a farming community. The undulating land terrain, varying soil types and the rich inland water bodies facilitate a multiple cropping pattern and impart the region its geo-bio diversity. Secondly, the cheap water transport facility, proximity to the ancient sea ports of Niranam and Purakkad and the locational advantage of relative nearness to and land continuity with the eastern hilly regions of Central Travancore rich in spices and forest produce enabled Chengannur to be a transit centre of trade between the sea ports and the hilly east for centuries.

The change in the composition of the population from time to time was of historical importance in the different stages of civilizational growth. The presumed Budhist presence in Budhanur and Puliyur of Chengannur and the links with Sastha of Sabarimala seem to indicate a process of Aryanisation in this region towards the end of the B.C. era.

The arrival of Christians on the scene marks another demographic development. Legend has it that St. Thomas landed at Niranam in the first century itself. Several Christian families in Chengannur claim their Christian descend from the days of St. Thomas. Their family histories give account of this. It is believed that St. Thomas on his way to Nilakkal in the east from Niranam port stayed in Chengannur, a trading centre of importance of those times, for preaching the Christian message. Another arrival of Christians is of foreign origin viz. the settlement of the families that came with Thomas of Cana.
the Syrian trader cum missionary in the sixth century. They spread to different parts of Kerala. Chengannur has a few pockets of their settlement. A third set of arrival was through migration of native Christians from elsewhere in Travancore. They initially came and halted for short duration for trading purposes but during a period which stretched over many years several became permanent settlers. The fourth source of increase in the Christian population was from conversions during the colonial period which was a relatively later period. In due course several Christian denominations came up on the scene.

The historical region of Chengannur has not much of a Muslim population. They are there in relatively large number in Mannar and Mulakkuzha although not very many. Reportedly some of them have arrived on the scene as traders, especially traders in metal products. It is also to be noted that any literature or account of the history of the Muslim population in this region is not available. In this context it may be remembered that Mannar is near Vadakkumbhagam in Kadapra Panchayat where Malik Dinar landed in a sail when the place was a seashore. The limited spread of Muslim population and mosques in Chengannur, which is a region by and large in the midland, supports the observation in the general context of Kerala that Muslims are largely settled in the coastal belt.

The demographic composition of Chengannur received a critical alteration from eighth century onwards when the large influx of Vedic Brahmins took place. It is an avowed part of history that Chengannur was one of the 64 Brahmin settlements in Kerala. History also tells that it was among the first 32 Brahmin settlements in Kerala. The talked around epithet of this settlement in
Chengannur indicating the number of Brahmin families who originally settled here is “Akathu Moovayiram, Purathu Moovayiram” (“inside three thousand, outside three thousand”). This Brahminical influx heralded the swelling of the Hindu population and in course of time its division into numerous sub castes. This period also witnessed migration of artisans and some specialized skilled workers to the region. However, in the post independence situation the Brahmin population thinned out. Today according to the local unit of the Yoga Kshema Sabha there are only 119 Brahmin Madhams as its members.

The Kshatriya community in Chengannur came prominently through the settlement by the King of Travancore of refugee Kshatriya families from Malabar during Tippu’s ‘Padayottam’. They became critical in certain areas as their subsequent marital relationship with the Travancore royal family made them powerful and big land lords.

Politically, it is presumed that Chengannur belonged to the Ay supremacy in the early centuries of the Christian era until, at the end of longdrawn wars with the Pandyas, they had to shrink themselves to the far south of Kerala. Then the Cheras who were not hostile to the Ays but were capable of resisting external aggressions took over the reigns of large tracts in the south which inferentially included Chengannur as well, it being south of River Pampa, a demarcation ascribed to the Ay region by ancient travellers and generally accepted by the historians. These, events were, however, the beginning of the periods of political processes and state formation in Kerala. One of the interesting features of political arrangement during the early times was the Nattukkoottams which governed certain localities which were, in effect,
independent autonomous republics. The area under a temple in such a locality was known as Mukkalvattom. Puliyur in Chengannur was such a Mukkalvattom. Chengannur occupied an important place in the subsequent medieval political developments in Kerala marked by sweeping Brahminic control in one form or other. It was one of the four ‘gramams’ in Kerala which was entrusted with governance that followed the failed direct Brahminical oligarchy. In the Kulasekhara age Chengannur Desam belonged to Odanadu and had an assembly of Munnuttuvar, and belonged to the comity of ‘nadus’ which enjoyed autonomy even as they belonged to a larger political unit. With the exit of the last of the Kulasekharas monarchy set in which marked a new phase of state formation. It was a system that prevailed for long. This period was marked more by external threats than internal strifes for power. Sometime during this long period of state formation Chengannur Desam came under the chieftaincy of Vanjipuzha family which alternately was known as Mampally and was related to the royal family of Travancore. The earliest information on this Brahmin family is obtained from the Mampally Plates of 10th century A.D.

However, the situation changed by the 18th century with the rise of Venad as a military power particularly after its war with the Dutch. At the end of Marthandavarma’s victorious battle at Mannar with Kayamkulam (erstwhile Odanadu) to which belonged sizable part of Chengannur the Mannar Treaty (1742) by which Kayamkulam became a vassal of Travancore was signed that made Chengannur an integral part of Travancore. A portion of Chengannur which was under the King of Panthalam who was a Pandyan royal refugee there, became part of Travancore after the King of Panthalam surrendered his
kingdom to Travancore on his inability to repay the debts he ran into at the time of the joint war efforts against Tippu Sultan.

Marthandavarma had confirmed the chieftaincy of Vanjipuzha family in Chengannur. The chief was honoured and rewarded by Marthanda Varma for saving the life of a royal couple of Travancore by Vanjipuzha Chief when they were attacked at Budhanur. (The incident described in detail in the section on Budhanur instances how a royal anger in those days could punish a whole area as happened to Budhanur which was deprived of its riverflow of Uthrappalliayar which was diverted by Marthanda Varma at Venmony.)

At some stage in this long period Chengannur Desam seems to have acquired the name ‘Vanjipuzha Principality’. A gate inscription carrying this name stayed at ‘Mundenkavu’ in Chengannur for long even after independence. The Vanjipuzha Chief had extensive wealth in the Chengannur region and beyond.

It is not that Vanjipuzha Chief was the only authority in Chengannur. He was the chief of a band of Desavazhies and there were different authorities for different purposes such as tax collection which was under the charge of five Pottis viz, Vanjipuzha, Uooru, Edavana, Punnariuttu and Muthathu. The Vanjipuzha Chief held the title ‘Uzhuthiru- Uzhuthiru’ and Edavana Potti was the ‘Desa Sreshta’.

The supremacy of the Vanjipuzha Chief continued until the post-independence land reforms after which he and the family disappeared from Chengannur, and before long, the Board at Mundenkavu bearing the inscription ‘Vanjipuzha Principality’ too. That marked the end of the ‘Madampi’ sway in
Chengannur and its socio-economic system which until then was what is generally characterized as ‘Janmitham’, a sort of ‘feudalism’. That takes us to the pre-independence and post-independence struggles and efforts for socio-economic emancipation and national freedom. Attention is focused on four rather related events (i) The freedom movement which was part of the movement at the national level; (ii) the movements for rights; (iii) the agitation against Sir C.P. Rama Swamy Iyer and some of the policies he steered; and (iv) the Communist movement. These accounts bring out the significant political events in Chengannur during the period and the activists involved. They also bring out some of the salient political aspects of the ‘Navothana Movement’ in Kerala although large part of it has been for social emancipation and securing rights buttressed by the spread of progressive ideas. Chengannur had significant contributions in this. Its activists were in the forefront of all these efforts. Events of great significance took place in Chengannur. Names and instances are too many to be recounted here. They have been incorporated appropriately in the study. The ‘Thokka Samaram’ at Kunnathukulangara in Budhanur reflects the early resentment against hegemony and estrangement in the religious and social spheres. The most remembered event is the ‘Mills Maithan Event’ which took place during an agitation against Sri C.P. in which one person died in the police firing. There were its men who were Gandhians, who were close to Gandhiji and were inmates of the Sabarmathi Asramam during the pre-independence days, and there were stalwarts who worked at the national and state levels. It was at Chengannur that the first meeting of the Congress in Travancore was held. In the pioneering efforts in Vaikom Satyagraha, spread of Gandhian ideas,
freedom struggle, progressive and emancipatory movements like Vaikom Satyagraha, agitations against the policies of Sir C.P. and the formation of the Communist Party in Kerala had men of Chengannur in the forefront.

A historical perspective of the economy of Chengannur is attempted at. The economy in the past presented a picture of combination of the natural endowments and the social organization that was mounted on it from time to time. Presumably the process of the transition closely followed what is generally modelled for the mega economy. It was a transition from the predatory, gift based, barter system to the more sophisticated mode of settled farm life which the migrant dominating people organized here and perpetuated for centuries. The structural pattern of the agrarian system resembled ‘feudalism’ in some respects but it was characterized by a caste hierarchy of a hereditary nature with not only discriminatory practices but also with abominable customs in social life.

However, apart from the agrarian production scene, Chengannur had acquired significance as a trading centre. It was already noted that this importance it acquired by its geographical position and features. Kerala did not have a ‘Vaisya’ component within the Hindu ‘Chathurvarnya’ system. This role was fulfilled by other communities. In Chengannur the Christian community dominated the scene. There was also a limited presence of Muslim traders in certain pockets of the region. The study also incorporates an assessment of the economic scene of recent times which shows that Chengannur has lost its significance as a main transit centre for several reasons which include growth in transportation modes other than the water transport, and growth of other trading
centres. The decline of the agricultural sector has also been significant. Therefore some of the earlier relative advantages which Chengannur enjoyed have diminished considerably. Except for the gulf boom with some salutary impact on the construction and tertiary sectors Chengannur does not possess any vibrant major employment generating internal economic activity now. Growth potentials are in sericulture, poultry (with the Central Hatchery located in Chengannur), fresh water fishing and historical tourism.

From here follows the social and religious scenerio. A combination of occupational divisions of the people and caste segregation grew reinforcing each other and acquiring a hereditary nature. In this the position of faith of the dominant caste prevailed. Traditional gods and goddesses were marginalized. However, some of the earlier forms of worship continued particularly the ‘Kavu’ based worship although the names of the deities got transformed in conformity with the religion of the migrant dominant groups.

Every Kavu and the pond attached to it has had a unique place in the life in Chengannur and is interwoven with myths and legends. Chengannur is surrounded by 28 Kavus and Chengannur Mahadevan is accompanied by 28 Kavu Devis in the main ‘arattu’. One reason identified for the decline of Kavus is believed to be the transformations that came about in the worship pattern in which worship became more and more temple centred which in its stride transformed several of the traditional ‘deity’ concepts and in several cases ‘deities’ were transferred from Kavus to the structured temples. The Kavu in earlier times was the meeting ground of tribes and occult practices and worship forms. The protecting deities of villages were always in female forms who were
worshipped in open groves. In these the mother goddess is represented symbolically in trees and stone symbols in the Kavus. Other nature based objects of worship were also present in them. The folk arts, cult rituals, worship trees, serpents and mother images attached to the Kavus drew their heritage from the above earlier cultural practices. Already mention was made about the Kavu based ‘Patayani’. The above pattern has been very much the case of Chengannur. Here some relics of the pre-domination phase remained. These are preserved in some forms of worship like ‘Nagaradhana’ and ‘Patayani’. Some of the rituals, beliefs, and myths still reflect the elements of the pre-domination phases.

Folklores preserve in memory many things ancient. Very many presently available ballads of this genre belong to a period that set in after the marginalization of certain communities by the migrant civilization. Chengannur has at least one folk song which commemorates a hero of the Paraya community who belonged presumably to a distant past, but one which was after the marginalisation had set in. It, however, points to the fact that at some stage in history the Parayas had a role in offering themselves as a ‘physical force’. There is a claim that a good number of ‘Kalaris’ belonged to them. The ballad supports it. This is the ballad on ‘Chengannur Kunjathi’ who is depicted as a hero of great achievements. It also speaks of the prevalence of a society that grew up here from the 8th century onwards.

Yet another exception to the general pattern, and which is in the case of structured temples, is the Pulikunnu Temple where the Pulayas have their own
temple and where they themselves are the priests. The temple was consecrated as a revolutionary step in the cause of the downtrodden.

One basic structural element that remained outside the usually described temple centred general socio religious and socio economic system which was temple centred was trade and in this respect the case of Chengannur region offers itself as a classic example. Christians who constituted the main trading community got several land assignments which eventually made many of them part of the landed aristocracy. The other trading community was the Muslims, but they were and are very limited in Chengannur.

Socially the St. Thomas Christians were an honoured community and its members enjoyed several privileges and rights otherwise exclusive to the upper castes. The Brahmins were in need of the settlements of these Christian families near their homes so as to fulfil a special role. This was the purification role in which the pollution of things touched by the lower castes got removed by a touch of the St. Thomas Christians. By and large, the impression one gains is that there was harmony in the relationship between the two communities of Christians and the Hindu communities during the major part of their long history. However, some tensions and skirmishes developed in the later periods especially in the changed situation of the presence of the colonial powers. Yet in Chengannur such tensions and skirmishes were limited and whatever of the kind occurred due to the hasty and unthoughtful actions of a few miscreants were prevented from flaring up by the timely intervention of enlightened elders and leaders. This is particularly borne out by the event known as ‘Puthenkavu Lahala’.
Chengannur got its fame and recognition as both a religious and a market centre. The study brings out the history, legends and myths, practices, festivals and architectural features of important religious institutions — temples, churches and mosques. From very early times it acquired fame as both a Vaishnavite centre and a Saivite centre. Chengannur town was known as a temple town with its numerous temples, some of which came into being following the Bhakthi Movement and had enjoyed royal patronage, as well as recognition and praise from celebrated saints like Nammalwar and Viralminda Nayanar.

Chengannur presents a true profile of the Christian institutions in Kerala. Every Christian denomination generally found in Kerala is represented here. Some of the early churches are pointers to certain historical developments. The Old Syrian Church at Chengannur speaks many a history. Believed to be of 3rd century origin it points to the existence of organized Christianity in the region at least by that period which is earlier than the period of the coming of Thomas of Cana and his group of Syrian settlers in the 6th century. Its early history tells of the relationship that existed between the Malankara Church and Christian Church in the Middle East. A relatively recent history of the rift in the Malankara Church following the Naveekarana Movement is also writ in a unique arrangement between the Marthoma Church and the Orthodox Church for sharing the facilities of the church through an agreement. It is noted for its local traditional Travancore architecture. The church also has a history of its relationship with the Hindu community particularly the Brahmin community in its vicinity. The Parumala Church is another institution bearing historical
significance. It is a centre of pilgrimage for many. The birth of the seminary here is also linked to the Reforms Movement of the 19th century and its aftermath in the Malankara Church.

The very limited spread of Muslim Population has limited the Islamic religious institutions in the region. The old mosque at Mannar is one of the earliest mosques in Chengannur region. In the absence of any firm records it may not be far off the mark in linking the origin of this church to the early works of the Muslim missionaries.

The impression one gets from the religious scenario is that the approach to religion among the people of different communities is growingly becoming thaumaturgic rather than theological.

The social milieu in Chengannur shared many things common with that in Kerala in its long history. Even at the mega level what has attracted the attention of historians most has been the type of social set up characterized by a hierarchical caste system with very many abominable oppressive and inhuman practices and the resistance movements and the final overthrow of it. Having been one of the important Brahminical settlements in Kerala Chengannur too had such a history of hierarchical caste system in the medieval period. It also had several activists who contributed to its removal. In those days all those who were on the political front participated in the movements for social emancipation of the oppressed as well. Several social organizations came up with the aim of carrying out the emancipatory works.

One feature of such organizations was that either they were started and continued to strive for the upliftment of a particular caste or community or even
as they were started with a general inclusiveness, in course of time they became organizations catering to the interests of one particular caste or community.

On the cultural front (art) the heritage of Chengannur consists of literature, folk songs, performing arts attached to worships, rituals and festivals or linked to myths and legends. Most of the performing art forms grew out of the native forms of worship and its representation in art forms.

On the literary scene the mainstay has been poetry. The earliest identifiable influence was that of the poetry of the Kannassa poets who belonged to the nearby region of Niranam which belonged to Bhakti cult. Even to relatively recent times the Bhakti cult had its influence on the poetic works by several local poets. The celebrated ‘Venmony Prasthanam’, with its ‘Champu Kavyam’ born in the soil of Chengannur Region and had ‘Sringara’ as its dominant characteristic feature, failed to have any lasting influence. Another noteworthy feature of literary works can be associated with the influence of the efforts for social emancipation. A noted turning point in this respect is attributed to Sarasa Kavi Mooloor who belonged to Chengannur. The upper caste domination on the literary front waned out and several writers from other communities in various literary fields including poetry, criticism, fiction and journalism came up. Reference to several of the celebrated writers in this respect has been incorporated in the study.

The study brings out the several events that took place in Chengannur and the actors in them during about the two millennia over which, the institutional and structural arrangements in Chengannur society in spheres of political, economic, religious and social activity underwent several changes. Along with them came the transformations in social relations.