The State: Its Land and People

The name Travancore is the anglicised form of Thiruvithamcode of Srivalumkode, the abode of prosperity. The fact was that Thiruvithamcode, now a village situated thirty miles south-east of Trivandrum, was the royal residence. The State of Travancore was known by several other names each of which emphasised a particular fact of history. The name Venad, is a corruption of Vanavanad, the land of celestials. The other names such as Vanchidesom, Dharmarajyam and Tiruadidesam indicated one or other aspect of its great antiquity.

Situated between $8°\ 4'$ and $10°\ 21'$ north latitude and between $76°\ 13'$ and $77°\ 38'$ east longitude, Travancore was the most southern of the Indian States. Washed by the waters of the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean in the West and South, Travancore State was bounded on the North by the state of Cochin and the district of Coimbatore and on the

East by Western Ghats and the districts of Madurai, Ramnad and Tinnevelly. The State had a long coastline of 180 miles and was the largest maritime State in British India. There are some good ports like Alleppy, Quilon, Trivandrum and Colachel. Parallel to the sea runs a bewitching continuity of lakes, backwaters and canals.

The area of the state was 7625 square miles, of which more than 2500 were covered with forest and backwater. The extreme length of the State from north to south was 174 miles and the greatest breadth from east to west, seventy five miles. Thus, in area, Travancore occupied the nineteenth place among the Indian States. The mountains which separate Travancore on the east from the adjoining British districts and which at some points rise to an elevation of 8000 feet above the sea are clothed with forests. The westcoast has the dampest and the most uniform climate, in India. The seasons in Travancore are controlled by two periods of rainfall, the South-West Monsoon between June and August and the North-West Monsoon between October and December. The rainfall was generally heavy, the average being eighty nine inches per annum.

Protected by British imperialism and supported by a ruling clique and dedicating themselves to Lord Padmanabha, the rulers systematically exploited the people, partly for their own extravagence and partly in competition with fellow Princes for gaining the favour of the British. What the common people experienced in their day to day life were the evils arising out of oppressive taxation, forced labour, social degradation, exclusion from temples, streets and services, starvation and torture. 4 Among many states of British India, no other political unit presented a picture of such continuous history and cultural traditions as in Travancore.

Travancore presented the diversity of races and religions. While the caste Hindus lived in amity and mutual confidence, the Tamil Brahmins occupied a position of influence. The enterprising Ezhavas and the industrious Nadars had a prominent position. The Christians of all denominations represented about one-third and the Muhammedans nearly one-fourteenth of the total population. In fact Travancore occupied an advanced position in education. 5

As compared with the other States in British India, women occupied high positions in public services and activities. Female literacy in Travancore had attained a high standard. Its total population according to the Census Report for 1931 was 50,95,973. The fact was that Travancore occupied the third place in population as compared with the adjoining British districts. Being the religion of the ruling house, Hinduism was the most predominant in the State. The Hindus, divided into various castes, constituted nearly two-third of the entire population.

Economy and Occupation

The economic condition of the people of Travancore was better than that of the average Indians. According to the Census Report for 1881, the total number of labourers was 3,10,229 or nearly thirteen per cent of the whole population. By 1891 the total number of people engaged in work connected with land was 10,56,600. Of these 5,49,956 were males and 5,06,644 were females. However, the Census


8. Ibid., 1891, Madras, 1894, p.588.
Report of 1911 gives the number of persons who have returned to agriculture as their primary occupation as 5,60,357. Of these 35,508 have also started some other occupations. 9

In Travancore caste and occupations were often closely related. Significantly the main occupations were distributed among the several castes and races. If each religion is viewed separately, it is found that the employment which attracted the Muhammedans mostly was agriculture. They also took largely to textile industries, trade in textiles and in foodstuffs. The Christians, in addition to agriculture, largely resorted to work in wood and also engaged themselves in food industries. The Hindus engaged themselves mostly in agriculture, food industries, textiles and public administration. 10 The most prominent fact brought out by the return was the marked extent to which traditional occupations were being gradually departed from by all classes.

By 1940 nearly fifty four per cent of the average population, workers and non-workers taken together, was supported by agriculture. 39,000 persons were engaged in

10. Ibid., pp.293-294.
fishing, more than 8,000 in cashew nut industry, over 1,06,000 in coir yarn industry and over 18,000 in rice husking. Of the total industrial population, ninety three per cent were engaged in cottage industries, the remaining seven per cent being factory workers. In fact judged from the proportion of non-working dependants to the total population, there was more unemployment in Travancore than in any other State or Province in India except Bengal. The illiterate labourers in the State, however, had the least unemployment problem.

Caste and Class Structure

The Hindu society in Travancore was based on the caste system. The castes were heading hereditary occupations. And so the agrarian relations in Travancore were also based on caste. People polluted not merely on touch but on sight! The society was divided, more than any other region of India, into many compartments. The Malayali Brahmins, the Kshatriyas

12. Ibid.
and the Nairs enjoyed the privilege of high caste and ruled over the vast majority of low caste people like the Ezhavas or Tiyyas, the Pulayas, the Parayas and the Shanars. The Ezhavas were basically a cultivating class, traditionally associated with the growing of coconut and with the tapping of trees. The community as a whole was in a state of social and economic depression. The other low castes constituted the main body of agricultural labour. By the twelfth century A.D. the Namboodiri landlords and caste hierarchy became powerful factors in Travancore society. The lowest sections of the society like Ezhavas and Shanars were taxed in the name of their castes. The result was that there was a series of inequitous taxes and cesses which imposed a heavy burden on the underprivileged working people of the society. Even the wages were determined by the caste of the labourers. Native Hindu rulers in general thought it their sacred duty


15. Usha Muraleedharan, SNDP Yogam and Kerala Politics, Ph.D. Thesis in Politics, University of Kerala, 1979, p.10. In Travancore house-tax was imposed on Ezhavas, Shanars, Parayas and Pallars. Grass cutting, a special tax, was paid by Parayas only in Nanjinad. (Samuel Mateer, Native Life in Travancore, London, 1883, p.292.)

to protect the rights and privileges of the Savarnas and any attempt on the part of the Avarnas to question the sanctity of the Varna System was looked upon as treason and put down with heavy hand. The principle of pollution was very rigid that the Nair was obliged to kill those who violated the rule of untouchability. 17

The land tenure in Travancore just before the twentieth century was very complex and unique when compared with those in other parts of India. The tenure system in the state explained the extent to which private property was recognised in Travancore. The growth of jenmi system within the framework of a feudal polity was also a historical development rendered inevitable by the very logic of things. 18.

Public activities in Travancore proceeded to rest on a conglomeration of confused ideas and concluded that all lands in the state belonged originally to Brahmin jenmis. From Brahmin jenmis the land came to be handed over to sub-castes like naduvazhis or chieftains, Nairs and others, creating various tenure rights. Thus the land tenure system in its final setting had three distinct phases; the holders

of Devaswom lands, the holders of Jenmom lands and the holders of Sircar lands. These land tenure system developed a new form of feudal land relationship in Travancore. The actual cultivation was done by the lower caste slaves. The Namboodiri Brahmins represented the highest strata as jenmi or landlord, the Nairs represented the second strata as the kanamdaars or holders of a higher level tenancy right and mainly the Ezhavas represented the lowest layer as holders of verumpattom or simple lease. In the areas of Kuttanad, Syrian Christians often were both kanamdaars and verumpattom tenants.19

The peasant proprietorship is the result of recent developments in the character of the tenurial system in Travancore. In theory the Government was the largest landowner. The position of Government as the chief jenmi was further enhanced by Col. Munro the Resident cum Dewan of Travancore, in acquiring the properties of 378 important and wealthy temples for the state in 1912.20 The jenmis were mostly absentee landlords, getting their dues through


their Karyasthans and having all their business transacted by their agents. The kudiyans or tenants had to obey the behests of jenmis, reasonable or unreasonable.\textsuperscript{21} Even amidst all feudal and complex nature, the land tenure system in Travancore throughout the nineteenth century was much lighter than in Malabar and Cochin which had to pay a much higher subsidy to the British in relation to its income. A notable feature in the development of tenurial system in Travancore was that by the beginning of the twentieth century the tenants had become independent and powerful. The Pattom proclamation of 2 June 1865, hailed as the Magna Carta of Travancore ryots, assured full ownership rights to the tenant-cultivators of Sircar lands. The Jenmi Proclamation of 1867 positively banned the landlords from evicting tenants as long as they paid the stipulated rent and other customary dues. Encouraged by the favourable factors, tenants in Travancore continued to have hold over the lands leased to them even after the termination of the lease.\textsuperscript{22} Thus in the second half of the nineteenth century, Travancore forged ahead in creating a

\textsuperscript{21} Tip Jenmi Kudiyan Regulation II of 1896. D.Dis.89/1914/Judicial.

\textsuperscript{22} Madhava Rao, Dewan of Travancore, No.63, 7 January 1868, Letter to N.Neurill, Resident, Section Book of Revenue letters, 1867-1868, Government Secretariat, Trivandrum, p.2.
broad base of peasant proprietorship. Under the variety of tenurial rights the condition of agricultural labourers remained unchanged and out of this feudal society an aggrieved slave class began to emerge in Travancore.

Extremely poor and backward in education, the agricultural workers were more or less treated as slaves. Many of them had servile status and the Malayalam term adima, verbally translated as slaves, is frequently found in the literature. The hill tribes of Travancore were particularly the bad case. In the earlier times the murder of slaves was scarcely considered a crime. In fact the Government of Travancore themselves owned slaves mainly as a result of the confiscation of estates and the resumption of temple lands. In about 1850 the price of a slave was on the average between six and ten rupees. There were well established rules for assigning the wives and children of these slaves. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Travancore Government had no public works department but exacted free labour from the low castes of Ezhavas, Nadars, Parayas and Pulayas. Even as late as in 1812, Col. Munro,


British Resident in Travancore and Cochin, discovered a number of half-starved and naked natives in iron chains as slaves at the Dutch Settlement of Changanassery.\textsuperscript{26} Temples were also entitled to free labour namely \textit{uliyam} or forced labour, rendering the lot of the backward communities more unenviable. Thus in Travancore slavery existed in all its hideous forms.

In 1812, on the advice of Col. Munro, Maharani Lakshmi of Bai (1810-1815) of Travancore issued a proclamation prohibiting the purchase and sale of slaves.\textsuperscript{27} However, as slavery continued to exist, the Christian missionaries in Travancore presented a petition to Maharajah Swati Tirunal (1829-1847) on 19 March 1847 pleading for the entire and immediate emancipation of all slaves.\textsuperscript{28} In response to this petition and under pressure from the Madras Government, Maharajah Utram Tirunal (1847-1860) issued a royal proclamation on 24 June 1855 abolishing slavery altogether in Travancore.\textsuperscript{29} As part of liberalising the slave castes of Travancore, \textit{uliyam} or forced labour demanded by the Government was also stopped in 1865.\textsuperscript{30} Though slavery was abolished by law in Travancore, the slaves continued to work as dependent labourers.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p.55.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Memorandum of the Missionaries, 19 March 1847, cited in Daniel, D., \textit{op.cit.}, p.22.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Kusuman, K.K., \textit{Slavery in Travancore}, Trivandrum, 1973, p.53.
\end{itemize}
Another notable feature of the Travancore society was the peculiar family system. The caste Hindus of the State had practised and benefitted from a matrilineal system of family and inheritance called the Marumakkattayam. The Namboodiri Brahmins were instrumental in introducing the Marumakkattayam system in the Royal House of Travancore. This system of inheritance or the pattern of succession was unknown to Travancore prior to the twelfth century A.D.\(^{31}\) The traditional theory of the origin of Marumakkattayam, the Brahminical theory, attributes it to a mandate of Parasurama, the legendary founder of Kerala. But this theory is not a rational explanation of the origin of Marumakkattayam. The Namboodiris, in order to ensure continuous support of the Nairs, contrived to control the destiny of the latter by linking both the social groups by the institution of Sambandam. The strict Namboodiri rule enjoined that only the eldest son in the family should marry formally from his caste. The junior members were condemned to life-long bachelorhood. Thus they directed their attention, in large numbers, towards the women of the Nair families which settled around their illoms. Moreover, the Namboodiris interpreted the law and banned all valid marriages among the Nairs. The more lovers a Nair woman had, the greater was her honour.\(^{32}\) Indeed none of the members

\(^{31}\) Pillai, K.K., "The Traditions and History of the Nanchinad Vellalas", Proceedings of the First Annual Conference, South Indian History Congress, Madurai, 1980, p.94.

\(^{32}\) Ibrahim Kunju, A.P., Medieval Kerala History, Ibid., pp.139-140.
of the Nair families dared to question this peculiar family system.

The basic intention behind the introduction of matri-lineal system was to keep the property of the Nair tarawads intact. Under a system of valid marriages and patrilineal inheritance, the family properties faced the threat of partition and destruction. Thus the people who introduced the matrilineal family system declared family as impartible. The old Nair had no existence separate from his tarawad. Mainly the Hindu communities like the Kshatriyas, the Ambalavasis and the Nairs practised the Marumakkattayam system. The Ezhavas, the Pulayas and other castes had no uniform system of family. In the matriarchal family every member had the right to maintain the property, but none was entitled to partition. The consent of all the members of the tarawad was essential for effecting partition. This peculiar family system gradually strengthened a feudal society in Travancore.

Study of the Sources

The Government records preserved in the English Records Section of Kerala Secretariat, Trivandrum are the most important

33. Extract from the Proceedings of the Legislative Section, 14 September 1917, D.Dis.30/1915/Legislative.


35. The Travancore Partition Bill, 24 April 1930, D.Dis.121/1930/Legislative.
source materials for constructing the history of the Working Class Movement in Travancore. Varied in character, these records reveal the primary informations dealing with the development of a class conscious workers' movement in the princely state of Travancore. Even though not properly catalogued, the Cochin and Madras files in the Trivandrum Secretariat narrate the outside political influence on and leadership of the working class in Travancore. The reports of the Enquiry Committees appointed by the Travancore Government from time to time also reveal the different stages in the growth of a militant unionism among the workers. The administrative reports, the Travancore Legislative Proceedings and the Census Reports come next in importance. The dissertations, articles, personal interviews, journals, newspapers and the government and private publications provide a plethora of information on the topic.

The files preserved in the Government Secretariat, Trivandrum are varied in nature and theme. The records dealing with the history of Working Class Movement in Travancore come under the Confidential Section and Judicial, Development, Industries and Control Departments. These files contain mostly correspondence between the police and the administration, telegrams from labour leaders and memorandums submitted by the labour associations. The resolutions passed by the labour associations periodically disclose the growth of unionism and the rise of radicalism among the workers. While the weekly and daily bulletins of the Police and the magisterial reports speak of the policy of
the Government on the labour force, the petitions from labour unions and speeches of labour leaders detail the reactions. The Report of the Board of Conciliation or the George Committee Report, as it was generally called, gives a detailed account of the sufferings of the working class and the spread of unionism among coir workers. Interestingly, all these records throw light on the emergence of the leftist movement in Travancore and their ascendancy on the labour. The Press Notes and Communiques dictate the efforts of the Government to face the growing labour power. Simultaneously, the pamphlets and leaflets circulated by the labour leaders show the determination of the Working Class.

The official reports contain a large volume of information relating to the emergence and spread of trade unionism among the industrial and agricultural workers. The Kuttanad Enquiry Commission Report of 1972 deal with the condition of agricultural labour in the State. The Travancore Administrative Reports form the next major document. The administrative reports of Police, Development, Judicial and Industries departments contain much information on labour conditions in Travancore. The proceedings of the Travancore Sri Mulam Assembly and Sri Chitra Council are useful to gauge the discussions on labour conditions in the State at various levels. Significantly, these proceedings furnish information on the speeches of many members of the State Legislature who cautioned the administration about
the brewing struggle between the workers and the administration of Travancore.

A number of dissertations and articles on labour movements and industrial relations in Kerala have been useful for the study of the Worker's Movement in Travancore. The personal interviews with the prominent labour leaders, though mixed with biased conceptions, disclose some rare turns in the political leadership of the workers. The journals in English like the Commercial Review, Commerce, Capital and Economic and Political Weekly contributed largely on the labour situations in the State. From 1940, The Travancore Information and Listener had published the labour policy of the Government. This provided lot of information. Meanwhile, the Golden Jubilee Souvenir of the Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union, published in 1972 from Alleppy, furnish a wide range of informations on the experiences of the labour force in their attempts to achieve class solidarity. Newspapers, mainly in Malayalam like Thozhilali, Karshakan, Malayali, Prakasam, Kerala Bhashanam, Poura Prabha and Powradhwani give many references to the condition of workers and often cautioned the administration in their labour policy. The Indian Labour Year Book for 1947-1948 confirms the chronology for most of the labour legislations in the State. An unbiased and patient perusal of these sources bring to light the growing power of workers, as a class, in Travancore. The comprehensive study of all these data give a detailed history of Working Class Movement in the erstwhile state of Travancore.