Chapter 2

Problematising and Periodising the Proto-history of Modernity in Kerala: Some Critical Negotiations

The image of Marthanda Varma is inextricably linked with the formation of a particular kind of modernity in Kerala. This image, ceasing to exist as a simple referent of a personal entity, emerges as a persona in accordance with the discursive field in which it has been portrayed. As a result, the image conveys different meanings to different people. To some, this image evokes ideas of modernity such as centralised administration, territorial expansion and efficient governance. Others disagree with this and construct a different image which may even appear to contradict the ideal of modernity. To these people, the image brings to mind a slew of primitive elements such as unusual cruelty, superstition and theocracy. What is important is that each of these constructs has evolved out of a rejection of alternative forms of image-making. Generally speaking, the advent of modernity in Kerala is seen to coincide with the ascension of Marthanda Varma to the throne of Travancore. This story of coincidence and the discontinuity noted earlier constitutes the context of the ensuing discussion. The apparent coincidence is often referred to by historians on Kerala modernity as a field of continuities and necessities. However, when we examine this field, a series of ruptures, discontinuities and contingencies reveal themselves.
The meaning and being of Marthanda Varma as “modern” is intelligible only within certain grids of discourses and practices. Outside those grids of discursive reference, any meaning framed in any other way is reckoned invalid. Three such discursive grids are mapped here. The first is the ensemble of colonial historic descriptions representing Marthanda Varma as an Oriental Despot. The second discursive paradigm under consideration relates to that constructed by native historians, elevating the same person to the pedestal of modernity. It is seen that this group functions merely as an extension of the first. The third grid embraces those writings that came out with the rise of historiography in its true academic and professional sense. This particular representation of Marthanda Varma is two-fold—he is equated with modernity and with tradition. The chronicle of Marthanda Varma’s travails of pursuit to the royal palace of Travancore has been transformed into the historical story of modernity. This movement of chronicle to story is in no sense either fortuitous or natural. Instead, it is a deliberate fabulation which can be described as nothing but “tongue’s atrocities” (Hill 84). Significantly, modernity has itself contributed a share to the stock of these atrocities. Here an attempt is made to chart the history of these atrocities of modernity by mapping the genealogies of events and texts.

The tactic used here avoids the essentialist engagement with modernity. While talking about modernity, a persistent tendency among scholars is to deploy modernity as an ever present moment in history. That is, modernity is
always present from time immemorial. Another tendency is to discover the feudal underpinnings of modernity. In such a practice, feudalism is tacitly given an upper hand over modernity. An illustration of this can be noted in the description of the Indus Valley civilisation in history text books, boasting of yet unparalleled achievements in matters of irrigation, drainage and granary. However, such “modern” elements of these civilisations are never given a “post modern” status. By calling them better than “modern” it is evident that the modern stands for a peculiar temporal category.

In this study, modernity makes for a clear discontinuity in terms of historical change. The ploy of putting the feudal bluff in the mouth of modernity has been abandoned. Modernity has a definite spatio-temporal abode which cannot be dissipated into any age. The discontinuities, breaks and ruptures of modernity should be highlighted before making a criticism of modernity. The term “proto-history” in the title of this chapter owes its discursivity to the context of nineteenth century linguistics, in which it stood for a common parental and originary language from which many sibling languages sprouted. Likewise, as far as some historians are concerned, the reign of Marthanda Varma functions as the proto-historical or originary-parental source from which all other variants and features of Kerala modernity emerged.

The career of modernity in Kerala, according to its various historiographic reproductions, started with the accession of King Marthanda
Varma to the throne of Travancore. This erroneous periodisation was a descent and retrogression into the bad old days of antiquity rather than an ascent and leap forward to the good days of futurity. It inserted the first ever Brahminical and elitist thrust into the modern historiography of Kerala, a thrust from which it is yet to recover. It can be seen that the tendency of equating modernity with the rule of Marthanda Varma was absent in the administrative writings of colonial officials and the narratives of missionaries. Ward and Conner, who together conducted the statistical and geographical survey of Travancore and Cochin states during 1816-1820, were of the opinion that the episode of Marthanda Varma was synonymous with “cruelty and superstition” (92). Samuel Mateer, missionary and author of the monumental work *The Land of Charity*, also held the same view. These two representations signal that the modernity in Travancore historiography was not a foreign import. When did modernity make its appearance in the historic accounts of Kerala?

The cunning “passage” of antiquity into modernity was invented, contrived and charted by two native administrative historians V. Nagam Aiya and T.K. Velu Pillai in their *State Manuals* published in 1906 and 1940 respectively. The former was well versed in the art of “doing anything with words” and he believed that mere words could create the modern world. He constructed the pro-forma of a putative “Modern History of Travancore” in his *Travancore State Manual* and inserted the period of Marthanda Varma into it. Velu Pillai seems to have added even more “modern” ingredients to this
apparently antique pro-forma of modernity. The word “modern” in Nagam Aiya’s book has not been defined, explained or elaborated upon. To be precise, the term is seen nowhere except in the title cited. No systematic argument in support of the term is found in the text. However, Velu Pillai’s text bridged this gap between the title and the text. He furnished certain naïve arguments to substantiate his use of the term “modern.” This movement of the word “modern” from being a hypertext in Nagam Aiya’s manual to a fully autonomous text in Velu Pillai, could stimulate much critical debate. These two native intrusions effectively sliced off the forward looking visage of Janus-faced modernity and made it a backward glancing gaze into the feudal bastions of the ancien régime.

In consequence, the multifarious conditions of the process of modernity were neglected. And in their place, a “metaphysical conceit” emerged. Here the political and cultural orders of the pre modern past are clubbed with the term “modern.” Is this merely a rhetorical sophistry? Or a slip of the tongue? Can history, after all, be reducible to that moment in which the court poet lisped some panegyric nonsense into the ears of the king? The aim of the present study is to map the ideological bases of this discursive sleight-of-hand.

There are at least two discontinuities in the history of Travancore which Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai hesitated to acknowledge and sought to undermine. First was the discontinuity inserted into the soil of Travancore by Colonel Munro and the other was the discontinuity brought forth into the
habitus of Travancore by its subaltern communities. The hiatus between two historical accounts, that of colonial-missionary and the so-called native historians has already been noted. The magnitude of this perceptual divide depends on how these accounts negotiated between the time of the event (Marthanda Varma’s reign) and the time of its historical record. This dichotomous terrain of interpretation could be made trichotomous by adding a later trend in the interpretation of modernity in Kerala. This interpretative current, mainly represented by Dalit historians and Christian Liberation theologians, traces the origin and spread of modernity back to the period of Munro. And the picture is complicated further by an addition to the second genre, an early variable in the history writing on Travancore. The second grid, the native school of modernity, makes its historic “modern” task more antique with the unexpected entry of its own parent variable. The reference is to Thiruvithamkoor Charithram (“History of Travancore”) by Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu compiled in 1867, and Travancore History: From Earliest Times published in 1878 by P. Shungoony Menon, the first history of Travancore to be written in English, which predate them. Strangely enough both these writings resemble the colonial-missionary view in relation to the question of modernity. They regard the period of Marthanda Varma as another mundane episode in the uninterrupted course of Travancore history.

Moothathu and Menon see no considerable rupture or break in relation to the advent of Marthanda Varma. According to them, the Travancore state
might have made some great achievements with Varma as the ruler. These achievements, however, make his rule more mundane, but not modern. The writings of Shungoony Menon shed light on the fact that even the temporal classification “Medieval History” was non-existent in his time. And it is a telling fact that the term preferred by the author for Pracheena Charithram was “history of the earliest times” and not of the “ancient period” which enjoys common currency now. Another noteworthy thing is that Shungoony Menon stumbled upon the threshold marked by the ancient period in the history of Travancore and he was groping in darkness for an appropriate nomenclature to designate the period that broke the caesura of ancient history. The only viable option before him was to recount the dynastic genealogies personified by various kings of Travancore in order to fill this gap. It is this lineage of the Travancore dynasty that acquired the stamp of modernity in the manuals of Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai—an unwarranted jump to the modern, overriding the hurdle of the “medieval.” This fake citadel of modernity would crumble into pieces if a question was raised regarding the medieval origins of Travancore. These descriptions show that the consciousness of time in the modern sense of the term was absent in the writings of Moothathu and Menon. For Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu an era started (Yuga Piravi) with the ascension of an Heir Presumptive or Heir Apparent to the throne of Travancore and it came to an easy end with the King’s death (Yugaanthyam or Kalpantham), even if his life span were as short as a mere twenty-four hours. The two
temporal indices prevalent in those days were *Kshanikatha* (“transience”) and *Anaswaratha* (“eternity”). Time travelled, oscillated and crisscrossed between these two extreme polarities. Time flowed rather uninterruptedly towards the unknown. And as a corollary, the discharge and exit from either pole would lead to entry and reception in the other. Shungoony Menon’s vision of time can be considered an improvement over Moothathu as he could also scan the ancient era of Travancore history. But his historic optics became increasingly myopic in chronicling later developments. Sensing and recording the passage of time as it is conceived today was apparently unfamiliar to these writers. This is a clear variant of what Walter Benjamin calls “Messianic time” (265) and it underscores the fact that modernity is more an invention than a discovery. Placing modernity within this trichotomous field of interpretation would reveal the imaginary and at the same time, institutional character of the phenomena called “modern.” It is very rarely that the writing of history transcends its own historicity. One cannot make modernity by merely stitching the sartorial pieces of antiquity into a modern cloak. Any such attempt, to put it poetically, “is but a dim-remembered story of the old time entombed” (Poe 47). Thus, Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai can be held ethically responsible for the logic of inclusion which they applied to another epoch.

Thus, following Benedict Anderson, Cornelius Castoriadis and Sudipta Kaviraj, the strange case of modernity in Kerala may be called the “imaginary institution” of modernity. It is imaginary because it is a theorisation in the
void. And it remains instituted since it owes its genesis to the forfeiture of an epochal difference, made to satisfy certain institutional demands. There is much debate on the question of appropriating the past both positively and negatively. However these debates fail to take note of another tendency pervasive among historians, the reverse of the process discussed earlier. Here the past or tradition attempts to revert and transfer what is new, modern and present into its fold. More tersely, it can be described as a desperate attempt on the part of bygone eras to beget, reproduce and capture the essences, origins and authenticities of succeeding ages. This essentialist strategy has its deep roots in Brahminical epistemology. Thus, the past is configured and legitimised as the progenitor of all that postdates the originary tradition. And it will further enable historians to bury the elements of discontinuity. The hermeneutic paradigm of dharmaśāstra presupposes that the aim of any exegetic practice is to retrieve the originary truth of the ancient past and not to exalt contemporaneous values of truth. In that sense the contemporary pronouncement of any historical discourse is supplementary in relation to its antique predecessor. Thus the historical discourse, in effect, becomes a banal search for lost values of truth and authenticity. In terms of Hayden White’s tropology it is a strange mix of metonymy and synecdoche. It is metonymic in the sense that it reduces the achievements of modernity to the level of territorial expansion, annexation, conquest and consolidation. Modernity is a
synecdoche when the tradition or past takes and integrates the constructive aspects of the former within its circuit.

Marthanda Varma came to power in 1729 and the legacy of his ancestors was a bundle of feudal rivalries accumulated over a long period of time. Many battles, petty squabbles and feuds were fought between the feudal chieftains. Among them Ettuvittil Pillamar (“the lords of the eight houses”) led the most prominent group. They had almost complete sway over the affairs of the state. Having achieved the status of rulers de facto these warring lords, very often, scuttled the princely designs of order and decorum. The king had to kneel before these lords for mercy. Thus, Travancore circa 1729 was a “lunar” region where the insane and dark forces of dissent, discord and disorder reigned over almost every walk of life. We can find historic representations of Travancore as revolving aimlessly and hopelessly without a definite and stable centre. Marthanda Varma could put an end to this state of affairs. With diplomatic excellence and militaristic prowess he overcame and subdued the forces of chaos. And he was successful in bringing order, harmony and peace. Then his eyes fell upon the neighbouring states and principalities of Travancore. His well-equipped army penetrated the neighbouring frontiers and consolidated them into the fold of Travancore. At the battle of Colachel in 1741 he crushed the imperialist aspirations of the Dutch East India Company in the Malabar Coast. Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Travancore became one of the most powerful states in Kerala. As a strategic
move he dedicated the land to the tutelary deity of Travancore, *Sri Padmanabha*, through *thrippadidanam*.6

The life and times of Marthanda Varma were, later recovered from the historical trash heap of a feudal period and the fabric and the texture of that tradition were trimmed and pruned so as to make them fit the force field of modernity. What is the immanent logic behind this modernisation? It is none other than the bifurcation of modernity into spirit and letter. This logic argues that the spirit of modernity made its appearance before its letter and vice versa. The spirit of modernity gives much more importance to the ethos that shot off in pace with the growth of the modern age. The “literal modernity,” on the other hand, tries to explicate its historic position in terms of modernisation, progress, centralisation and development. In the context of Kerala modernity we have a situation which justifies the proverbial saying “the letter killeth the spirit” and within this domain the letter of centralisation undermines all others. Agnes Heller in *A Theory of Modernity* has redeployed the same issue as the dichotomy between the dynamics of modernity and modern social arrangements. The dynamics of modernity, of course, preceded the modern social arrangements since its roots can be unearthed in ancient Greece. But it had to wait for the emergence of modern forms of social arrangements in the eighteenth century to stamp its differential signature of authenticity on the *realpolitik*. Heller upholds the view that the interrelation of the two constitutes the “essence” of modernity. In a similar vein Perry Anderson is also adamant
in his stand against Marshall Berman’s attempt to obliterate the lines of
differentia between modernisation and modernity. In “Modernity and
Revolution” he argues that each term owns a specific periodicity which is
irreducible to any other term. He strongly contests Berman’s tracing of
modernism back to the age of Goethe. For Anderson, modernism represents a
movement that came out of the situations that persisted in the early 1900s. He
also emphasises that the forms of modernism that originated in France, Italy,
and Russia were different from those that originated in England in scope and
nature.

There was a time when the will, reason and fate of European men and
women had been controlled and organised around the age old conventions and
practices as laid down in the holy scriptures, strict adherence to which was
vehemently insisted on by the dogmatic institutions of the church and the
feudal polity. A battery of three key historical events: the Renaissance, the
Reformation and the French Revolution put an end to this plight. Renaissance,
harking back to the classical texts, tried to regenerate a new ethos. The
Reformation led by Martin Luther contested the orthodox claims of the
Catholic Church. The Lutheran movement bracketed off both the praxis and
theory of Catholicism. The influence of the French Revolution was more far
reaching and the slogan “liberty, equality, and fraternity” opened up new vistas
of thought and praxis.
During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries some new concepts dawned on the horizon of European thought. The period is usually considered to be the beginning of the modern. The birth of modernity was, however, not a casual incident like the dawning of a day. Modernity, to put it plainly, is a product that emerged at the point where the process of rationalism and secularism commingled. From then on, European societies began to develop from a rationalist point of view. This is in accordance with what Max Weber calls the process of disenchantment that blew away the stumbling blocks of tradition and ushered in a secular culture. The traditional forms of life were dispersed by cultural and societal rationalisation. The life world got emancipated from the religious dictates of the past. Communicative action became freer from the restrictions of superstition and irrationality. Jürgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* adds with an emphasis that with the appearance of the concept of modernisation in the 1950s, this socio-political thrust of modernity was hijacked.

Habermas makes the following comment on the process of modernisation:

The concept of modernization refers to a bundle of processes that are cumulative and mutually reinforcing: to the formation of capital and the mobilization of resources; to the development of the forces of production and the increase in the productivity of labour; to the establishment of centralized political power and the
formation of national identities; to the proliferation of rights of political participation, of urban forms of life, and of formal schooling; to the secularization of values and norms; and so on.

(2)

It is clearly evident from the Habermas extract that the logic behind modernisation is simply a reductionist-symptomatological misreading of modern forms of thought and institutions. Habermas observes that this leads to two-fold abstractions. It dissects modernity from its European contexts and legitimates it as a spatio-temporally neutral model for social development in general. As a consequence, the internal linkages between modernity and the streams of western rationalism are deftly hidden. Cutting off the contacts of modernity with its umbilical locales distils a false consciousness that it could take place anywhere and at any time. This everywhereness of modernity, in effect, is a farce performed in nowhere-no when.

Habermas reminds us of the fact that European modernity’s resistance to the forms of the past was somewhat more violent and severe than one would imagine. The authors of *The Communist Manifesto* have aptly metaphorised it as the melting of the solid and the profaning of the sacred. Initially it started with the marauding of the relations and obligations that accumulated over time in institutions like family and clan. Then it turned to the socio-political milieu which paid no attention to human beings as such. The core of these involvements could be gleaned from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and
the Napoleonic Code. Both rejected the earlier notion that legitimated the base of the state, and began to consider right and social morality as having foundations in the will of man. Thus the ancient practice of referring to scriptural dictates was eschewed outright. These developments in the political arena of Europe point to a major shift in the philosophy of praxis. In the past the strife between two parties for power, say for example, the king and his rivals, lingered on the question of who shall succeed whom. This struggle for power never interrogated the forms that structured and maintained power. But with the ascendancy of parliamentary democracy, the intimations of which already appeared with the Renaissance and the Reformation, the very forms and structures of power and governance were at stake. Now the revolt against the king was not merely restricted to the person alone but the very foundations that established his right to govern the people. In their violent reactions against the papal monarchy, the people of the Reformation demanded the burial of the theocratic bases of the Pope’s autarchy. These paved the way for the “new age.” The rendering of “the new age” (nova aetas) as “our own age” (nostrum aevum), the reversal of Reinhart Koselleck’s question, lies at the root of the case for modernisation. The Habermasian concept of “public sphere” epitomises and crystallises these changes. His *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* charts the formative stages in the full-blown growth of the public sphere in Europe, especially in Germany, France and England.
Frederic Jameson has paid keen attention to the ancient vs. modern debate in his *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. To summarise his argument it would be useful to reproduce two quotes in his book, the first from Walter Freund and the other from Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling:

In the case of the new, the thus predicated subject is distinguished from its predecessors as an (isolated) individual with no particular reference or consequence; in the case of the modern, it is grasped in connection with a series of analogous phenomena and contrasted with a *closed and vanished phenomenal world of a different type*. (18) [Italics mine]

How few people really know what a past is: There can in fact be no past without a powerful present, a present achieved by the disjunction *[of our past] from ourselves*. That person incapable of confronting his or her own past antagonistically really can be said to have no past; or better still, he never gets out of his own past, and lives perpetually within it still. (24-25) [Italics mine]

The four italicised phrases stress the notion that modernity should be different and disjunctive in the sense that one must get rid of the shackles of the past and engage antagonistically with one’s own past. These focus upon the aspect of rupture or break. And here modernity is, contrary to the empiric modes of historiography, reflexive to accommodate the subjectivist point of view. Those
persons of history who unashamedly came to compromise with their own past and those moments of time associated with them never can be “modern.”

Hegel was the first to respond violently against the claims of the past over modernity. When modernity became a historical entity the Church tried to make this new moment of history their accomplice and accomplishment. It was a tacit move on the part of the orthodox to render modernity historically indebted and bound to the wisdom of *anciens régimes*. Hans Blumenberg theorised the proper right of modernity. Like Hegel he was acutely aware of the responsibility of creating new norms out of modernity itself. The message of the hour was that the new phenomenon called modernity can no longer draw models and criteria from the past. Instead it had to discover new lands of wisdom and invent new forms of knowledge. Hegel placed the principle of subjectivity at the core of modern mode of thinking. The principle of subjectivity functions by means of freedom and reflection that in turn give way to four hypotheses: “(a) *individualism*…, (b) *the right to criticism*…, (c) *autonomy of action*… and (d) *idealistic philosophy*” (Habermas, *Modernity17*). These eventually led to the separation of the spheres of knowledge from the spheres of belief. Consequently, the legitimising institutions of faith lost its sway over the fields of knowing. Now the subject making adept use of freedom and reflection begins to infuse meanings and implications into the word and the world. At the time of Kant the separation of faculties caused a severe crisis in epistemology as it had set loose the forces of anarchy and chaos. Hegel realised
that the principle of subjectivity had failed in the task of unifying the divergent elements. Kant’s system of philosophy failed to see its own inherent “diremptions [or divisions: Entzweiungen]” (Habermas, Modernity 16, 19). According to Hegel the philosophical systems of Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte displaced freedom and reflection in lieu of reason, thus elevating the finite to the status of the absolute. Hegel accused their systems of being vulnerable to positivity, by which he referred to those religions based on authority alone and reluctant to include human values into their system of morality. Christianity got rid of some of the positivities of Judaism, and Protestantism cured those of Catholicism. With Kant positivity appeared philosophically clad. Drawing a contrast between wild Moghuls and the children of modernity, Hegel argued that the former have their lords outside themselves while the latter carried theirs within. He further rejected the possibility of reconciling the religion/reason dichotomy through primitive Christianity. Then he came across the idea of civil society which is incompatible with societas civilis or polis. The Aristotelian conception of politics as encompassing both state and society was challenged in the nineteenth century. Exchange value and power separated the social domain from the clutches of the political realm and a depoliticised economic society emerged, dissociating itself from the bureaucratised state apparatus. Hegel was indeed the first to separate the political sphere of the state from civil society.
However he tactfully denied the ethical quality of *polis* and primitive Christianity in solving the crisis of separation. ¹⁰

The logic that prompted Marthanda Varma to dedicate his kingdom to the tutelary deity was purely theocratic. ¹¹ By making this move it was possible for the king to accuse anyone who challenged his authority of being irreligious. Thus, treason masqueraded as blasphemy. Even a cursory glance at the functioning of modern nation state would reveal that treason is a wide ranging concept encompassing many anti-modern, non-secular and non-modern traits. In a modern state the very concept of blasphemy has withdrawn to the background and only appears clothed in the attire of treason. As Habermas via Hegel has pointed out modernity being recent in origin is bound to generate its own logics and models. This is not seen in the case of Marthanda Varma. The maker of a modern nation is liable to invent new territories of reason and praxis. Otherwise modernity will have to be erected on the pedestal of antiquarian ruins. A “modern” state with theocratic foundations can never be the carrier of modern elements. The argument developed here is not of an essentialist kind. Of course modernity has its limits and pitfalls. And it is also true that it has to compromise with traditional and feudal values. But it does not mean that modernity is completely reducible to tradition. If tradition is self-grounding, the same is applicable to modernity also. The reasons for the illegitimate and secret alliance of modernity with tradition should be sought and solved within the jurisdictional sphere of modernity.
In *King Lear* there is a famous line “Nothing will come of nothing” (6). The critics have spilled much ink over this to map out the different possibilities of meaning embodied in Lear’s metaphysically tinged remark. One school of critics suggests that the state of nothingness gives way only to nothingness, while another interpretation is that nothing could generate anything. This Shakespearean quote is very relevant to our context since the historical representations of modernity discussed so far seem to produce a double bind. On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the native construction of Kerala modernity, being based on groundless truths, proves nothing except its nothingness and therefore, there is no need to engage with it. However another equally feasible position may be that those reconstructions of modernity, though erected on the foundation of baseless assumptions, present a specific sense of modernity that cannot be easily overlooked. The Lear quote could imply that it may be easier to write off the fabrication of Marthanda Varma’s modernity by Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai as nothing but nothingness. Nonetheless, there is the very compelling argument that no fabrication would be transformed into reality unless supported by a set of concrete and well defined narrative manoeuvres. Even for making a discourse of/on nothing from nothing, historiography has to discover, formulate and contrive certain patterns of imagining and ordering the narration of the past. Bearing this fact in mind it is proposed here that Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai devised certain definite patterns of historical thinking and narration to reconstitute the image of
Marthanda Varma in a modern way. The rest of this chapter seeks to unravel those patterns of historical thinking and narration embedded in *The State Manuals*. Hereafter, Nagam Aiya’s *The State Manual Vol. I* will be denoted as M1 and that of Velu Pillai as M2. The following passages have been extracted from the manuals for the purpose of exegesis:

M1

In expiation of the sin incurred by war and annexation of several petty States, the Maharajah convened a meeting of all the learned Brahmans of Malabar, Tinnevelly and Madura and under their advice inaugurated the *Bhadradipam* and *Murajapam* ceremonies in the Trivandrum temple, the prayers adopted for them being those prescribed in the Vedas as followed by Kartaviryarjuna, a powerful Kshatriya king …. It has to be borne in mind that a *Murajapam* costing two lacs of Rupees in Travancore one hundred and fifty-four years ago, must be a very magnificent one compared to the *Murajapam* of 1899 which cost about Rs. 3, 17, 000, for what a rupee secured in those semi-civilised [emphasis added] days could not be promptly got for a rupee and a half now. (361)

From this day forward he styled himself *Sri Padmanabha Dasa*, meaning “the servant of Sri Padmanabhaswamy.” This stroke of policy had the desired effect and the people of
Travancore have ever after regarded the country as the possession of the God and the person [emphasis added] of the sovereign as His representative to them on earth. None of them would dare to do or speak ill of their sovereign for by so doing they would be guilty of Swamidroham or blasphemying the deity. Thus the kingdom of Travancore became Sri Pandaravagai; and the State servants Sri Pandara Kariyam Chaivargal and the denomination of the Taluqs was changed into Mantapathumvathukkal, literally the door way of the God’s mantapam, for the first revenue Cutchery was held in front of Sri Padmanabhaswamy’s mantapam. (362-63)

M2

The march of events for which Marthanda Varma was responsible has been shown to be the outcome of a steady policy of national political expansion. (viii)

Mārt'handā Varma is generally regarded as the Maker of Modern Travancore. He was more than that. He had a considerable share in shaping the history of south India which was being made by the English East India Company. (262)
Mār'thandā Varma realised that, if the Malabar princes were permitted to remain in a state of war against all, the country would soon pass to the possession of some superior power, Indian or European …. It was in 1741 A.D. sixteen years before the Battle of Plassey, that the Dutch were compelled to abandon their projects of political supremacy on the Malabar coast. (265)

This aspect of the contribution made by Travancore to the success of British arms in India has not, however, been clearly understood even by careful writers ….. The reign of Mār'thandā Varma is thus of exceptional importance in the history of Travancore. It is also important in the general history of India. (266)

It is however stated by some historians that the standing army was composed of Maravas. This is not correct. The documents preserved in the Trivandrum temple show that Mār'thandā Varma’s soldiers were men recruited within Travancore itself. (269-70)

It is difficult to appreciate the argument that an intelligent ruler like Mār'thandā Varma would court trouble by enlisting soldiers from tracts outside his state, when the memory of the trouble in Thrkkanamkuti was fresh in his mind, especially when he had excellent fighting material in his own kingdom. The conquests of
Mār'thandā Varma were made with the help of armies composed of his own subjects. (270-71)

The basic unit of analysis would be discourse; not sentence. This initial proposition comes from the semiotic typology of A.J. Greimas who in contrast with the conventional school of linguistics switched the focus from sentence to discourse. His concept of “seme” stands for “the minimal meaning unit” in a discourse; while the “sememe” represents the cluster of “contextual semes which corresponds” with the “seme” in a particular utterance (Lechte 132). So, the conventional linguistic approach is rejected outright in favour of a more politically oriented model of discourse analysis as it appears in the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. They explain their model in the following manner:

…we will call articulation any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse. The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, we will call moments. By contrast, we will call element any difference that is not discursively articulated. (105)

From the conventional linguistic point of view, it is easy to assume that M2 is a natural corollary and therefore, a palimpsest or even an imitative reproduction of M1. The equation that proceeds from such a proposition would be M1=M2.
However, the idea to be elicited here is M1→M2, which advocates the idea of a linear path of progression from M1 to M2. The equation M1=M2 seems to suggest that if M1 looks into a mirror it will see its image in M2. But the second proposition, M1→M2, presents the notion that both M1 and M2 are independent and autonomous discursive units, and stresses the fact that there may be some lines of progression that start off from M1 and culminate in M2. And there is another viable equation that is (X= - (M1, M2). Here X refers to the discursive practices of the subaltern communities and the logic of this equation is the logic of equivalence according to which any particular term of reference in a discourse could be disbanded by the deployment of another discursive marker that exists in opposition to the other terms of reference represented in the formula. Here, M1 and M2 correspond to the indigenous elitist perceptions on modernity while X stands for the subaltern perspectives on modernity. So, M1 and M2 combine and mutually reinforce each other to form the elitist version of modernity. By means of equivalence, both M1 and M2 are made equivalent (M1=M2) in relation to X and then X totally negates M1 and M2 (X= - (M1, M2). As a result, all the discursive units in the elitist system of modernity have been disrupted by the discursive exterior of subalternity represented by X.\textsuperscript{12} This equation underscores the idea that the authors of the Manuals could not articulate modernity. Instead, they merely mediated between modernity and tradition. Actually, the articulation of modernity was made possible by the timely intervention of the subaltern
people. The following passage from Laclau and Mouffé has been quoted to explain the difference between *articulation* and *mediation*:

In the type of theorization we wish to analyse, the elements on which articulatory practices operate were originally specified as fragments of a lost structural or organic totality. In the eighteenth century, the German Romantic generation took the experience of fragmentation and division as the starting-point of its theoretical reflection. Since the seventeenth century the collapse of the view of the cosmos as a meaningful order within which man occupied a precise and determined place – and the replacement of this view by a self-defining conception of the subject, as an entity maintaining relations of exteriority with the rest of the universe (the Weberian disenchantment of the world) – led the Romantic generation of the *Sturm und Drang* to an eager search for that lost unity, for a new synthesis that would permit the division to be overcome. The notion of man as the expression of an integral totality attempts to break with all dualisms – body/soul, reason/feeling, thought/senses – established by rationalism since the seventeenth century ….

Given that the elements to be rearticulated were specified as *fragments* of a lost unity, it was clear that any recomposition would have an *artificial* character, as opposed to the *natural*
organic unity peculiar to Greek culture. Hölderlin stated: ‘There are two ideals of our existence: one is the condition of the greatest simplicity, where our needs accord with each other, with our powers and with everything we are related to, just through the organization of nature, without any action on our part. The other is a condition of the highest cultivation, where this accord would come about between infinitely diversified and strengthened needs and powers, through the organization which we are able to give to ourselves.’ Now, everything depends on how we conceive this ‘organization which we are able to give to ourselves’ and which gives the elements a new form of unity: either that organization is contingent and, therefore, external to the fragments themselves; or else, both the fragments and the organization are necessary moments of a totality which transcends them. It is clear that only the first type of ‘organization’ can be conceived as an articulation; the second is, strictly speaking, a mediation. But it is also evident that, in philosophical discourses, the distances between the one and the other have been presented more as a nebulous area of ambiguities than as a clear watershed. (93-94)

In M1 Nagam Aiya appears to be willing to strive for modernity but afraid to strike at the age-old ideals of the past. The “seme” in M1, of course, is
modernity. But it becomes meaningful only when exposed to the “sememe,” that is the contextual “seme” added to the particular “seme” provided by the traditional contexts. Precisely speaking, the implicational gestures of modernity would be clear only if scrutinised through the lens of traditional values, thus making modernity a derivative form of traditional ideology. Therefore, the differential element of discourse is modernity and the traditional norms constitute its moments. Under the locus of “Modern History of Travancore,” Nagam Aiya goes on to narrate the glorious episodes in the history of a state which seems to have founded itself on traditional forms and myths of feudal statecraft. It is not too difficult to comprehend the fact that his description of the modern state falls short of the ideal-typical version of modernity. It should be evident that an era of “semi-civilised days” can never be modern in the proper sense of the term. Here we have a God fearing king who, in order to avoid pandemonium, seeks the counsel of Brahmin priests who are supposed to be the wisest of all. Moreover, his description of Marthanda Varma’s self-ascription as Sri Padmanabha Dasa reminds one of the Divine Right theory of sovereignty. This enables us to conclude that the term “modernity” in such a context is a misnomer. The practice of naming wrongly is in no way extraneous to modern historiography, but rather a norm rooted within its structure. This practice is based on the principle of repetition according to which any presupposed meta-category or transcendental a priori fact would naturally be replicated in all subsequent discursive milieus
irrespective of the socio-cultural contexts. The logical universe of colonial-modern historiography, being based on the steady-state laws of cosmogony, sometimes appears to turn a blind eye to the real truths of history, in order to subsume any inconvenient departures from its orbit.

It will be fatuous to sanction the classical view regarding negotiations between native rulers and British colonisers that both parties always defined their relations in terms of complete antagonism. But the fact remains otherwise that there was a considerable degree of exchange and agreement between these two parties. The native elite in the colony, seizing the opportunities presented by the spread of modernity in education and other spheres, constructed their own versions of history and nation. The British rulers and intellectuals in their turn always authorised these historical and nationalist accounts. To put it more specifically, the British historians could have countered the validity of modernity as described by Nagam Aiya in his *State Manual* but that never happened. Instead they supported such reconstructions of the past. Even a missionary like Samuel Mateer in *The Native Life in Travancore* has acknowledged the contributory role of Brahmins in making a proper historical study on Kerala society and it is worthwhile to note that he has omitted any reference to the participation of the subaltern communities in the same effort. It is also worth mentioning that the title of Mateer’s work on Travancore—*The Land of Charity*—was actually a distorted translation of the term “Dharmarajya,” often used to denote the reign of Marthanda Varma. Here,
Mateer was offering a compromise between Christological and Sastric traditions. Mateer merely replaced the concept of “dharma,” which is considered to be the crux of the Hindu theological fortress, with the Christian idea of charity. He never took pains either to question the propriety and aptness of such a term or to contest the claims of Marthanda Varma’s kingdom to any such title. Hence, Nagam Aiya’s concoction of modernity in M1 is the outcome of the collaboration of the native elite and the colonial administrators.

In M2, however, the discursive milieu is rather complex and variant. Here, the author has to reconcile two contradictory streams of political discourse; the colonial ideology, on the one hand; and the nationalist thought as legitimised by the elite class whose political monologue was at its most vocal in the forums offered by the Indian National Congress. During the 1940s the native elite ideology acquired new dimensions and trajectories of emergence when Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyar put forward the idea that Travancore as a state should be assigned separate and autonomous status. The pangs of Travancore’s unfulfilled aspirations to nationhood begin from this period. So, the mediatory role of the author should be seen in the backdrop of these political developments.

The term “national political expansion” echoes the reverberations of the nationalist discourse in general. A close perusal of the passage would reveal the fact that Velu Pillai presupposes some definite actors and performers in the making of nationalist consciousness. From the indigenous elite perception the
idea of “national political expansion” seems to exist as part of the nationalist ideology promulgated by the Indian National Congress. But the reference to “South India” appears to negate this because the concept of “South India” was inconceivable within the domain of the nationalist discourse of the Indian National Congress. One is reminded of the criticism of Periyar Ramaswamy Naikar that the Indian National Congress was a caucus of Hindi speaking north Indian Brahmins.\textsuperscript{14} Those leaders associated with the Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu and other South Indian states refused to identify themselves with the version of nationalism propagated by the Congress party. Then by stating that the history of “South India” was essentially a British invention Velu Pillai goes against the grain of his own system. Here, the author invites the alien rulers to act out their roles in the performance of nationalist consciousness. So it can be concluded that the insistence of the nationalist “letter”\textsuperscript{15} in \textit{The State Manual} of Velu Pillai has been undermined by its loyalty to two parties, the colonial elite and the nationalist elite.

In the next two passages quoted he again resorts to the nationalist rhetoric by alluding to the “battle of Plassey” and the “general history of India.” The intentions of the author are clear enough—he tries to find a place for the battle at Colachel in the general history of India. For this purpose, he draws parallel connections between the battle at Colachel and the battle of Plassey. The process of equating the battle at Colachel with the battle of Plassey in the history of Indian nationalism can be called a “trace” in the
Derridean sense, since both nationalism and its opposite are simultaneously evoked. The battle of Plassey, as is well known, was fought by Siraj ud-Daulah against the English East India Company led by Robert Clive. The idiom of this combat was defined against foreign dominion. But Marthanda Varma’s fight against the Dutch cannot be considered as a battle contra foreign powers in the proper sense of the term, since it was a collaborative effort on the part of Marthanda Varma and the British to rout the Dutch. So, the attempts of Velu Pillai to carve out the image of Marthanda Varma as a hero of Indian nationalism falter because he could not establish proper linkages of identity and equivalence between Marthanda Varma and other referential terms in the discourse of Indian nationalism.

One of the leading hypotheses of the present study is that no textual representation of any incident or person in literature or history could be achieved unless it is reflected in the field of political action. Any attempt to explicate the writings of Rousseau, Montesquieu or Voltaire without taking into account the factors that led to the French revolution could be nothing but defective. Likewise, the historical representation of Marthanda Varma as a modern ruler cannot be limited to the field of historical investigation, but should be viewed in the context of the continuous process in which the political sphere infiltrates into and takes hold of the historical imagination. So it is strongly argued that the historical reconstructions of Marthanda Varma by Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai should be seen as the consequence of a political
agenda. This naturally calls for a review of the historical accounts of the political happenings in nineteenth century Kerala. Historiography has thus been used by “historians” as a tool to validate their ideological bias.

It was again in nineteenth century Kerala that the educated middle class of Travancore tried to climb up the power hierarchy. The incident usually referred to as the Malayali Memorial can be said to have originated as a response to and a reaction against the mounting influence of the Non-Malayali Hindus, otherwise called the Paradesa Brahmanas in government service. The prime agent of this political movement was the Nair community, and a petition signed by ten thousand and thirty-five men claiming to be the loyal subjects of His Highness was submitted in 1892. The roots of the movement can be traced back to the formation of the Malayali Sabha which served as a meeting place for educated Nair youth, and the writings and speeches of G.P. Pillai who vehemently criticised the presence of foreign elements in Travancore society. The core of the Memorial argument was that due to the influence of the Non-Malayali Hindus, the Nair community of Travancore, the real sons of the soil, were not getting the opportunity and importance that they desired and deserved. The stalwarts of the community began to clothe their demands and dreams in terms of nationality and nativity, thus questioning the native identity of the Paradesa Brahmanas. In order to strengthen their position they invoked the Muse of Clio and began to narrate and circulate stories of historical importance in which the vital and key roles were played out by Nair heroes like
Kesava Das, Velu Tampi, Aiyappan Martandan and Chempaka Raman. Besides, the main activists and the proponents of the Malayali Memorial tried to re-install Marthanda Varma who by that time had become a rather worn-out figure in the historical consciousness of Malayalis. Thus, a political movement which is said to have gained its energy and vigour from the ideals of modern democracy began to navigate associations with the subterranean remnants of a bygone era. This ambiguous (not ambivalent) connection with the past engages our attention. Therefore the Malayali Memorial will be examined as a document of historical writing rather than as a monumental representation of political mobilisation or political consciousness.

The ancient connotations of the Malayali Memorial have been acknowledged and widely discussed by conventional scholars like Robin Jeffrey. Actually it was a cluster of traditional values, emotions, domestic affairs and communitarian sentiments that goaded the Nair community to embrace the ideals of colonial modernity. However the exact link between modernity and its others remains unexplained in Jeffrey’s classic work *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*. Three incidents reported by Jeffrey may be mentioned. The first relates to the challenge posed by the Desastha Brahmin community against the Nairs by means of communal and emotive threats. Jeffrey’s account of the Memorial movement begins with such an occurrence in which a Desastha Brahmin declared “that he would cut off his moustaches, if a Nayar ever passed the
Master of Arts examination of the Madras University. For a Desastha Brahmin the removal of the moustaches would have been an “emotional and humiliating gesture” (157). This is followed by a letter published in certain newspapers like Paschima Taraka and Keralapataka:

[ ‘Keralam maid’] informs the Editor that a Brahmin has tied on her ‘Tali’ [sic] (marriage badge) and taken his departure, and she now requires someone to look after her. What is she to do? Is she to remain single with the badge of marriage round her neck. Or is she to be the lady of all who make her a present? If she happens to have children on whom are they to be fathered? Her elder sister has ten children, and ‘the maid’ herself has twice that number of brothers and cousins, but she has never yet heard of their having a male parent.

‘The maid’ is indignant that women should be compelled to play the harlot, and go about with bosoms bare to catch a lover as a fish is caught with bait. (158)

The third one is an episode of cuckoldry. The Standard accused Saravanai, a royal official of “arranging women for the Maharaja’s pleasure; one was said to have been the young wife of an official member of the Malayali Sabha. When he learned of it, the husband immediately ‘put his wife away” (161).

The ups and downs of the Malayali Memorial were heavily dependent upon the charismatic personalities of two Nair leaders, P. Thanu Pillai and G.
Parameswaran Pillai, both of whom had rigid and visible communal positions. The history of the movement was interlaced with the personal and public lives of these Nair leaders. For them the Sabha offered a forum to translate their personal relationships into political and communitarian terms. All the members of the Sabha were intimately known to each other as teachers and students or friends and companions. One might even read into this a kind of caricature of the simple virtues of amity and camaraderie embodied in the prose pieces of Addison and Steele. These defenders of Malayali nationalism had no qualms to acknowledge and accept the support and patronage of the English intellectuals and the Maharaja of Travancore.

Coming back to the question of connivance with the tradition revealed in the extracts, it is possible to contend that the Memorial movement was split between tradition and modernity. This divide is more explicable if the imagological use and abuse of Marthanda Varma is taken into account. It was at this moment of time that the icon of this feudal chieftain gained much political momentum.

The political habitat of the Malayali Memorial was two-fold in nature. On the one hand, the Memorialists, claiming to be the votaries of modernity, pictured the influence of foreign Hindus as a hindrance to the development, progress and growth of Travancore society. On the other hand, they revered the image of Marthanda Varma with utmost devotion. For example, C.V. Raman Pillai, who was to later become one of the greatest historical imaginers of the
Malayali society, started his career as a novelist by re-telling the story of Marthanda Varma and was deeply involved in the off-stage activities of the Malayali Memorial. C.V. is said to have carried the preliminary draft of the Memorial on his return from Madras to Travancore. It is even rumoured that he sold the jewels of his wife to fund the visit of G.P. Pillai and Sankara Menon to Travancore in December 1890 for the purpose of raising the morale of the Memorialists. So, the double bind logic shows that the Memorialists’ affiliation or rather, obsession with the ideals of modernity could not dispense with the reactionary elements in the alluring narratives on Marthanda Varma’s reign. This becomes more problematic when one considers the fact that the ascendancy of Tamil Brahmins in Travancore began in the era of Marthanda Varma. It was he who brought forth and lodged Ramayyan Dalawa, a Brahmin settled in Nagercoil, at the pivot of power. Later, it became an established practice for the Maharajah to appoint a Dewan who was either a Rao from Maharashtra or an Aiyyar from Tamil Nadu (except for the interludes of Kesava Das, Velu Tampi, Aiyappan Martandan and Chempaka Raman). Superficially this stand seems to be incongruous and paradoxical. However, if the logic of nationalism is applied in the context it is clear that the Malayali Memorialists were really opposing the positive sides of colonial modernity. For them, Ramayyan Dalawa was the seat of ancient native wisdom, while all other Rao Dewans trained as civil servants by the British government were the emissaries of colonial power and knowledge. Ramayyan’s interventions caused
no serious threat to the Nair community as his policies were not powerful enough to bring about any structural shift in the traditional fabric of the Hindu society. But the Rao Dewans had to work under the colonial conditions of governance.

The State Manuals were attempts to put a political past into current terms of historicity. The Memorialists, however, attempted another kind of translation. For them the task was to render the historical past into the domain of political mobilisation. Thus, while the State Manuals tried to translate the political events and personages of the past into the historical present, the Malayali Memorial attempted the political translation of the same events and personages. This attempt was an open-ended narration since the difference between politics and history was washed away at the very moment of its articulation. The champions of the Memorial were never confident of gaining any political victory. So it is clear that their intention was merely to create and construct a history. Ironically however, these Nair leaders had to espouse the logic of universality for the gratification of their historical ambitions.

Much has been written about the history of Malayali Memorial describing it as a movement of political mobilisation. According to such estimates, by the end of the nineteenth century, the process of modernisation had stamped its powerful sway over nearly everything that remained traditional. The Nair community, neglecting the impact of modernisation in the contemporary world, was left content with its ancestral belongings. Later on,
this community realized that it would be no longer possible to turn away from modernity. Compared to the achievements of backward classes like the Ezhavas, the Nairs were in a pathetic condition. The dissolution by law and practice, of the matrilineal pattern of succession and inheritance aggravated the plight of the community.

The standard account of the Memorial has two functional principles. They are structural causation or determination by economy, and overdetermination. These two principles practically combine and give birth to a product that arises from the misapprehension of the relations between the two. Precisely speaking, structural causality is mistaken for overdetermination and consequently both interactively replicate each other. As an off-shoot of this misapprehension, colonial modernity is pictured as marching into feudal enclaves.

Laclau and Mouffe have clarified that the notion of overdetermination in social theory is not a literal concept but a metaphoric usage with symbolic underpinnings. Beyond the frame of its symbolic universe it has no literal claims. The argument which one finds in the sociological writings of Robin Jeffrey, that colonial modernity overdetermined the social field of nineteenth century Kerala, becomes valid only on the precondition that the reader is confined within the symbolic universe provided by Jeffrey. Jeffrey takes for granted that matriliny is a piece of the by-gone past and that modernity has now solidified its stronghold. In such a situation how could a letter such as the
one quoted by him be possible? And as a corollary, one has to conclude that the relations between the two concepts mentioned do not necessarily reflect the relations between two objects. The matrilineal mode of social organisation and the colonial mode of modernisation function as two distinct categories of the conceptual universe, that is, true to the principles of structural causation. But the writer of the letter, a victim of matriliny, occupies the space of an object of the matrilineal concept. Hence, there are two concepts, that of the matrilineal system, and that of modernisation. We can talk about their interconnected relationship in terms of structural causality or determination in the last instance by a single causative force. It is also possible to hypothesise that the matrilineal system has been overdetermined by the colonial process of modernisation. And this logic has to assume that there will no longer remain any vestige of matriliny. But the fact of the letter disproves this contention. It is at this stage that the problem of relations between conceptual categories and their objects becomes prominent. It is possible to chart out the relations between concepts and their objects by examining the formative aspects of the aesthetic sphere of modern Kerala. Here also one is baffled by the inconsistent portrayal of woman as an object of aesthetic contemplation. In *The Slayer Slain*, a novel by Mrs. Richard Collins published in 1877, Mariam, the heroine of the novel, observes:

“What, father! after I have told you all this, will you still persist in sending me there? Is it not enough that one child should be
killed by cruelty, but that you also should wish to follow your child to the grave? That boy is sly and wicked now, what will he be when he is a man? He will be a monster, and I shall hate him. Father, I *dare* not marry him. My temper is gentle and yielding when it is influenced by love and kindness, but without that influence, it would become fierce and unmanageable, and I dare not think how wicked I should become. Father, I will not marry that horrid boy. I would rather you would make me one of your slaves to work in the fields.” (87-88)

“And would it be a very great loss, father? Is there nothing in the world but *Chuckrums* and Rupees, that give happiness? I have heard my grandmother say, my mother had no dowry, yet you never beat her. I never saw you pull her by the hair when the vessels were not clean, or tear her books when you found her reading. And I never saw my mother snatch anything from you and in a passion fling it away, and look and feel as if she could crush you by contempt under her feet. Yet, father, I have felt that. I did not know it was in my heart, until it sprang out suddenly and overpowered me. And unless I am married to some one to whom I can look up for guidance and wisdom, someone much cleverer, much wiser, and with more grace and gentleness, in the heart than I have, I shall be, I know, very wicked.” (89-90)
The speech-act of Mariam functions as a nodal point for the annunciation of some of the favourite themes of modernity, such as the right to self-determination and individualism. Mariam, resisting the persuasive tactics of her father, asserts her female individuality and at the same time insists on her right to choose her own life partner. Moreover, one should note that this debate on modernity takes place within the domestic atmosphere. The conventional familial world run on the restrictive principles of coercion and silence, gives way to a modern version maintained by persuasion and dialogue, seeking to elicit and generate consent. Mariam’s speech clearly highlights the fact that forced marriage is worse than bonded slavery. The split in the relationship between father and daughter could be sutured by methods not necessarily modern. However the appearance and engraving of a split on the social body of the conventional family remains irreducible to any other instance. The resistance of Mariam might be quelled by other means of persuasion that could force her into a compromise with the traditional household values of family life. However, the posture of her resistance can never be contained or concealed within any such fabric of persuasion.

Now it is possible to conclude that the emergence of the aesthetic sphere in nineteenth century Kerala has been a direct result of the engagement with modernity. However, the influential sector of modernity is plural and blurred rather than singular and bounded. The point can be explained with reference to the representation of woman in Ravi Varma paintings. The appearance of the
Ravi Varma woman with her buxom bosoms and buttocks still regulates the libidinal flights of the Malayali male imagination. With her captivating smiles and seductive looks, she lasciviously invites the perceiver to participate in the process of constructing her feminine subject position. If the perceiver yields to the temptation and participates in the activity, he will merely be reproducing the stereotypical patterns of traditional womanhood.

The woman as an object of the colonial-modern concept of novel is entirely different from the woman who appears in the domain of painting. The ideas of self-determination, civil polity and autonomy have positively and actively contributed to the making of woman as an object of conceptual categorisation in the modern novel. The modern reader too is trained to derive pleasure from these ideas. One needs to remember that the author of *The Slayer Slain*, Mrs. Richard Collins, was the wife of a missionary activist, and was herself very active in the mission. Ravi Varma’s ambitions and aspirations were, however, developed within his palace. Besides, the eye of the beholder of a painting is schooled in a different milieu. If both these domains are subsumed under the category of the modern aesthetic sphere it would be a blunder similar in nature to the sociological enquiries on modernity in Kerala discussed earlier. The letter of the victim of the matrilineal system was conceived and composed outside the norms of modernity. Some of the machineries of the modern made it possible for such cases to be highlighted *before* modernity but they could never be conceived either *in* or *within*
modernity. The Malayali Memorial was also such an instance of pleading before modernity. However its occurrence was not completely within the field of the modern. On the contrary, its foothold on the terrain of modernity was rather tenuous. Though the Malayali Memorial had certain negotiations with modernity, it cannot be said to have either explored or exhausted all the resources of modernity.

The presages of the Memorial had a quotidian and unglamorous beginning when G.P. Pillai was expelled from the Maharajas College, Trivandrum. However he was successful in painting his expulsion with the colours and hues of an exile. After the expulsion from the college he settled in Madras and made acquaintance with the political and intellectual leaders there. At the outset he was not confident of representing the cause of Malayali nationalism to the government machinery. So he turned to the press for help and tried to form public opinion on the Malayali question. Thus the political antecedents of the Malayali Memorial were sown within the domain of circulation and dissemination. In that respect it can be affirmed that the Memorial as a movement owes its origin and diffusion to the genre of writing. The extent to which the movement was glued to the practice of writing is discernible from the prose pieces of G.P. Pillai. His prose style is fissured between two realms of expression: politics and literature.

By symbolising his expulsion from the college as an exile from his country, G.P. Pillai was able to construct a clear-cut agenda for the activities of
the Malayali Sabha. This ultimately contributed to the formation of the Malayali nationalist consciousness. However the nationalist consciousness thus formed was largely repetitive in nature and therefore, parodic in form. As seen in the textual analysis of Velu Pillai’s State Manual, the ephebe of the Malayali nationalist consciousness had to mimic, on the one hand, the manners, norms and rhetorical tropes of the colonial elite and on the other hand, it had to repeat the political agenda of the nationalist elitism as preached and practised by the leaders of the Indian National Congress. It is inferred here that the ambitions of the Malayali ephebe differed from that of the colonialists and the nationalist elite. This is attributable to the difference of the theatre of representation in which each of these performatives was dramatised. The colonial intellectuals and administrators had to deal with a large populace over which they did not have complete command or control. Besides, their professed ideology being based on modern thought made things go out of their hands. They often failed to impose well defined designs of governance and guidance on the activities of the subject population. As a result, many of the colonial elite had to administer issues and problems of a varied nature. So, it still remains an enigma why the British intellectuals like Eaderly Norton extended support and patronage to the defenders of the Malayali Memorial. The case of the nationalist elite offers a different story because they could carve out and define an identifiable enemy, Britain. So it was easier for the nationalists to operate upon the India/Britain dichotomy. It is not forgotten that the nationalist movement was formed
against the interests of the subaltern people, but the point stressed here is that the proponents of Indian nationalism could cover up those subaltern antagonisms by positing the label of binary opposition between India and Britain. At this point the nationalist discourse of the Malayali Memorialists proves to be a failure on account of its inability to conceal its own inherent contradictions. In other words, those elements which were antagonistic to the discourse of Malayali nationalism emerged into visibility without any prolonged delay. And it can even be argued that the antagonistic elements were pre-existent to the discourse of Malayali nationalism. In that respect, the originality of the Malayali nationalist articulation was vested not in the way in which they defied the discursive practices of the colonial and national elite, but in the mode by which they excluded and marginalised the subaltern communities in Kerala.

The narrative of colonial modernity in Kerala had two absent anti-heroes. One is the British administrative-missionary dyad, and the other, the subaltern communities that include minorities and other lower caste strata of the Hindu society. The stalwarts of the Memorial feared unity among them. That is why they opposed them. Hitherto all historical studies on the Memorial have projected Memorialists as the heroes of the narrative and “foreign” Hindus as villains. However this narration is far from the truth. The interaction and alliance between the British and the subaltern communities was a nightmarish reality for the middle class Hindus whose plaint became audible
through the Malayali Memorial. This strain is evident in C.V. Raman Pillai’s *Videseeya Medhaavithwam* (“Foreign Dominance”):

The period up to that of Sir Madhavarayar was characterised by the absence of class conflict in Travancore. Before that the chiefs of the *prajas* used to inform the King about the state of the people when they went to visit him bearing gifts (*thirumulkazchakal*). The kings of the times were familiar with the family histories of these chiefs. So their advice was considered in resolving the grievances of the people. But, with the induction of Madhavarayar’s reforms based on the western model of administration, the palace court was replaced by a caucus fortifying the minister’s office. Until then the relation between the Maharajah and his subjects were like that of parent/guardian and dependents. The new fangled offices, the new system of writing of petitions and suchlike rendered the influence of the Dewan a virtual nullity. With the ascent of the *Huzzur Cutchery* under the protection of the police the greatness attached to the idea of “paramountcy” had been eroded. (1)

[Translation mine.]

Here C.V. is lamenting the disappearance of a particular kind of governance which was mainly based on the principle of patronage. And the orders setting the system into motion were invariably oral rather than verbal. But the oral
way of communicating with the centre of power had to fulfil a condition which was unthinkable within the framework of the caste-ridden Hindu society, that is the physical presence of the petitioner before the patron. This remained an everlasting impossibility in Hindu society. With the Munroean negotiations the traditional system of power based on patronage and orality had been disbanded and its place was taken over by modern forms of power and the institution of writing. This change prevented the political subjects represented by C.V. and his confederates from acquiring any consubstantiality with the centre of power. It also helped the subalterns to fight the hegemony of the caste Hindu society, by making appropriate use of the changes in governance. In reality it was against this that the Malayali Memorial was formed and fashioned.

The Memorialists like G. P. Pillai, Sankara Menon and C.V. Raman Pillai were all English educated. Their political and non-political writings bear witness to their command and control over the English language and the ideas of English thinkers. However these people failed to undo their association with the heroic past of Travancore. Even when they demanded liberty and freedom on the lines of constitutionalism and modernity, they could not wean themselves from the influence of the autocratic practices of Marthanda Varma. Moreover, these champions of modern democracy and parliamentarianism even tried to bring back that demonic past. What they meant by the progress of Travancore society was actually a nostalgic regression into the past rather than a prospective look into the crepuscular regions of the future. Thus the debates
on the ideas of modernity such as freedom, civil rights and progress and the consequent efforts to materialise them remained inextricable from the nostalgic narrative of the heroic past. Why did the past appear so endearing to these champions of modernity?

When the princely state of Travancore became a subject territory under the protectorate of the British Resident, the existing form and locus of power was dislocated. During the reign of Marthanda Varma it was possible for the political subjects of Travancore to perceive and identify the person who held complete sway over the locus of power. With the ascent of colonial-modern institutions the locus of power underwent a drastic and dramatic change. Now the locus of power happened to be empty. While the position of Marthanda Varma was defined as the legitimate heir to the locus of power, the status of the colonial rulers was that of usurpers. Besides, the inherent checks and balances of the colonial system prevented the upper caste Hindu elite from installing themselves in the vacant locus of power. Thus modernity offered an open-endedness of the Social, which the Memorialists resisted and in its place they stood for the closure of the Social. This can be explained in the Lacanian terms of the Real and the Symbolic. The colonial forms of modernity signified the moment that altered all manifestations of power into symbolic equations. This simply meant that no one could be the Real agent of the power hierarchy. But the Memorialists claiming to be the sons of the soil wanted to occupy the position of the Real performers of power. The very idiom which
they proposed proved antithetical to the structural edifice of colonial modernity. This situation created both political and psychic blockage to the Nair community who projected themselves as the protectors of the locus of power. In order to overcome the political blockage they framed the narrative of the Malayali Memorial and to come out of the psychic trauma they rejuvenated the myth of Marthanda Varma. The argument developed here can be extended to explain the strife between Nairs and “foreign” Hindus. The contention was not between two groups with fixed and regimented identities. Instead, the prevailing conditions, social and political, prevented both parties from acquiring their specific traits of identity. In other words, the clash between Nairs and Brahmins arose out of the inability of both parties to constitute themselves as such. This is a case of identity blockage. It was to come out of this blockage that these groups invented the myth of modernity.  

What has been attempted hitherto is a kind of reading which turns modernity against modernity, or a re-evaluation of modernity in terms of modernity itself. At the same time much attention has been given to the danger of being trapped in naïve essentialism. The twin components of such logic, of course, are temporal and spatial. It is a matter of time when it is argued that the period of modernity is constructed overlooking the ancient and medieval thresholds of history. This seems to be clinging to a dogmatic vision of time that insists upon the linear and homogeneous unfolding of historical events on the platform of secular historical time. Even the most sensitive and sensible
defenders of modernity in the era of post modernity may not concede such a rigorous tripartite classification of history. After the “orientalist” dawning on the horizon of intellectual history it is well known that the division of time into ancient, medieval and modern is essentially a colonialist ploy. By constructing and inventing dichotomous terrains like “despotic/constitutional, medieval/modern, feudal/capitalist” (Chakrabarty, *Europe* 32) the colonial regimes of power and knowledge have put their policy of “colonization or inferiorization” into work (16). This ultimately enables the historian to conclude that modernity is exclusively a European project. And the logic of space intrudes into the context when the instances of Kerala history are interposed with the events of European modernity such as Renaissance, Reformation and the French Revolution. In that context, any discussion of modernity has to take Europe as the reference point. As a result European modernity becomes both originary and original. So any other modern phenomenon occurring elsewhere is repetitive and supplementary.20 The British colonial historians, while making modernity their monopoly, left space for the natives to construct their version of modernity provided that the native reconstruction of their past be modelled after European history. The right to write history conferred on the native subject population was the product that came out of the power- knowledge liaison between the colonial rulers and the elite class in the subject territory. A closer examination of British historiography in India reveals that the negotiable sectors between the
administrators and the elite class were highly flexible. The ideologues of the Raj were compelled to look upon the present of India as “Europe’s past” (Metcalf 66) or a facsimile of Europe’s racial infancy. The founding moment of the Asiatic Society signalled that the past of India could no longer be conceived only in negative terms. Sir William Jones’ invention of the Indo-European family of languages was a step in that direction. He drew parallels and comparisons between Indian and Greek conceptions of time. Moreover, for the reconstruction of the Indian past, such Indological scholars mainly relied upon Brahmin informants. The nexus between the colonial power and the Brahminical knowledge acts as a pointer towards a new aspect of colonial modernity, a colonial modernity that was exclusively a product of the elite-Brahminical collaboration with the western officials. However, an attempt will be made later to chart an alternative form of modernity which arose out of subaltern negotiations with colonial administrators and missionaries, contrary to the one mentioned here. As a preliminary to that trajectory it is argued here that it is possible to cast doubts on the views of subaltern historians like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Cambridge historians like Thomas Metcalf. Specifically talking about the prevalent conditions of modernity in Kerala, it is not difficult to comprehend that modernity was not a colonial construct as such. But it was a product that was established with the ascendancy of professional academicians and Marxist politicians in the enclaves of historiography. If Munroe’s “Reports on the Affairs of Travancore” is considered as a historical
narrative, it is possible to find that his tone is quite different in comparison to
the embodied nature of the historical productions of academic and Marxist
perspectives. Munroe’s narrative stand is remarkable for its double bind
articulation of modernity. As far as he is concerned, modernity had an
accidental birth with the arrival of British rule in Kerala. Munroe’s tone is
quite clear: We, the enlightened and the reformed, have brought freedom,
progress and development to you who are unruly and unreformed. But at the
same time he is cautious in not assigning the birth of modernity to a particular
era or age in the almanac. Munroe’s thoughts can be considered a symptom of
solipsistic historicisation. However, one might leave this question to subaltern
historians for further interpretation. Another interpretation of Munroe forms
the theoretical basis of the present discussion. Munroe’s disinclination to
attribute any particular age to the birth of modernity exhibits his commitment
to realpolitik. For Munro the feudal realities of the past do not exclusively
belong to any moribund period. They constitute a living reality in the present
that needs to be reckoned with and fought by the progeny of modernity. So in
the historical narratives of some of the British officials and missionaries, one
can find the sparks of this commitment to realpolitik. On the other hand, the
historical narratives of the academic-Marxist scholars are markedly
characterised by the eclipse of realpolitik. By pushing the feudal other into the
back pages of the Chronos, they were relieved of the task of acknowledging
and fighting the feudal other in the present.
The discipline of narrating history in this context gets transformed into an opposition between the diachrony of the past and the synchrony of the present. So the picturing of Marthanda Varma as modern has nothing to do with the structural ensemble of modernity. Likewise it does not mean that Marthanda Varma is intrinsically modern. Instead as modernity made its triumphant march into the present abode of temporality, it became impossible for some people to establish a healthy intercourse with the modern without the help of some logic opening up avenues to the modern world. So the Malayali Memorialists of nineteenth century Kerala turned to the myth of Marthanda Varma to comprehend the present in which they lived. That is why we find Marthanda Varma as a constant point of reference in some of the historical productions. Without the presence of this image some people would fail to get a meaningful grasp of the present. However this process cannot reduce the synchronic aspect of modernity to the diachrony of its antithetical form.

India, as told by the western raconteurs of history, is a land devoid of history. The most prominent of these narrators was Hegel who in his *The Philosophy of History* propounded the idea that the Indian mind is incapable of either responding to or arranging things and events historically, being too much preoccupied with the faculty of imagination. The provenance of historicity, according to Hegel’s system, is the direct outcome of a coincidence that weaves the state and history together into an organic whole. Thus, stateless societies can never be historical. This Hegelian legacy has been bequeathed to
the colonial practitioners of history in India. So, the colonial administrators and the evangelical missionaries propagated the view that the Indians lacked history in the proper sense of the term and further, these ideologues of the Raj instilled the false consciousness in the Indian mind that the institution of historical writings was essentially a colonial invention. This can be illustrated by a quotation from Bishop R. Caldwell’s *A History of Tinnevelly*:

> Very little is known with certainty of the early history of most districts in India. It is a singular fact that the Hindūs, though fond of philosophy and poetry, of law, mathematics, and architecture, of music and the drama, and especially of religious or theosophic speculations and disquisitions, seem never to have cared anything for history. The original meaning of the word “history” is investigation, and the Hindūs never appear to have cared to investigate. There is hardly anything in the Indian Epic poems or Purānas that can be dignified by this name. (1)

This passage shows that the missionaries and the administrative officials had identical views on the historical sensibility of the Indian people. Both were equally indifferent to investigate the existence of any other form of narration to record and engage with the past.

However, the Hegelian view on the historical consciousness of the people in Asiatic regions has been widely contested by recent South Asian scholars who belong to diverse intellectual quarters. Ranajit Guha in his work
"History: At the Limit of World History" has systematically demonstrated the fallacies set in the project of world history as envisioned by Hegel. Guha calls for the excavation of pre-historical narratives which have positively contributed to the formation of historical imagination. In that direction he attacks the Hegelian privileging of prose over poetry as the medium of expression. Guha considers this as the fallout of Hegel’s rationalist orientation towards the discipline of historical writing. As an alternative to the western models of historical narration, Guha invokes the *ithihasa-purana* forms rooted in Indian tradition. He observes further that these forms are aligned with the *katha* tradition of Indian narratology. This raises another possibility that is quite absent in the West; that is the prioritisation of the listener over the storyteller. The Western style of narrating history gives prominence to the storyteller, thus undermining the participatory role of the community of listeners. The anti-Hegelian leitmotif of South Asian studies takes a different trajectory in Daud Ali’s “Royal Eulogy as World History: Rethinking Copper-plate Inscriptions in Cōla India.” In this article Ali takes issue with Hegel on another plane, concerning the Hegelian dichotomy of rationality/imagination. By making a dialogical re-reading of the copper-plate inscriptions of the Cōla dynasty, Ali reaches the conclusion that the medieval Indian mind was in no way bereft of the rational faculty of arranging things into systematic orders and structures. This he proves by enquiring into the various conceptions of *kala* as present in those inscriptive edicts. These concepts of time have been used to
construct a well-ordered system out of fragmentary portions of historicity, perhaps even excelling Hegel’s vision of world history. However the argument developed here, countering both these historians, is that their endeavours to reinstate historicity to the “ahistorical” plight of the Indian society were made at the cost of assuming an apolitical stance and thereby merely replacing “No History” with “No Politics.” The process of charting non-modern forms and versions of history does not necessarily mean that they are acceptable to those people who are denied both historical and political representation.

It is in the wider context of these debates on South Asian history that the discussion of Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu’s Thiruvithamkoor Charithram is undertaken. From the rationalist view of history as sanctioned by the dictates of modernity this work would appear to be ahistorical and superstitious. Even Shungoony Menon, whose work on Travancore was heavily dependent on Moothathu, opined that it was full of errors and ironies. And it would be hardly possible to find any references to or appreciations of this work in the historical literature canonised by the English historians on Travancore. However, the extent to which this work had influenced the later historians on Travancore has already been pointed out. Though written in prose its language is more poetic than prosaic. Set against the norms of the Hegelian worldview, the book is a historical chronicle without a meta-narrative. However, when this initial/infantile Hegelian disorder is surmounted, it would become clear that this work has its own meta-narrational code which is an amalgam of four
different strands of Indian thought: the *ithihasa-purana* conventions of quasi historical literature, *katha* style of narratology, *rasa-dvani* modes of *kavyasastra* and finally, the *kali* conception of time. The book is divided into three segments, and the first among them is a prefatory statement that attempts to describe the aims, objectives and purposes of writing the book. This is followed by a section in which the author recounts various sources from which he managed to gather facts and materials for reconstructing the history of Travancore. The final segment entitled “Thiruvithamkoor Charithram (Travancore History)” is subdivided into eight sections narrating the history of the state from the point of its inception to A.D. 1867.

Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu was born in a *Saivite Brahmin* (*Siva Dwijan*) family in Vaikkam, in 989 K.E (1813 A.D.).

“Pachu” is the abbreviated form of Parameswaran. He gained fame and name for proven excellence in diverse fields such as medicine, astrology, grammar and painting. Actually he came to Trivandrum to cure the illness of the king. Later on he was appointed the apothecary of the king. He is also said to have run the first ever lottery in Kerala. His interpretation of *Rajasooyam* is reckoned as unrivalled in its tradition. His main works in Sanskrit are *Sreeramacharitham, Kasi Yathra Prabantham, Nakshatra Mala, Artha Vimarsini* and *Hridayapriya*. The works written in Malayalam include *Mucukunda Moksham, Sukha Sadhakam, Kasi Yatra Varnanam Thullal, Bala Bhooshanam, Kerala Basha Vyakaranam, Thiruvithamkoor Charithram* and *Atmakatha*. Mahakavi Ulloor S.
Parameswara Aiyar in his *Literary History of Kerala* described Moothathu as one of the early reformers of the modern Malayalam prose style.

Even while ruminating upon the task of rendering his life in words, Moothathu was fascinated by something akin to history but at the same time slightly removed from the rules of similitude observed in the discipline of historiography. This strain of historicity could be grasped from the autobiographical piece which he wrote in 1047 K.E. (A. D.1871):

“Parameswaran...in the proper order....in/for memory....wrote” (qtd. in Sharma). The fragment begins with the proper noun “Parameswaran,” and it is followed by a sequence of two phrases and a verb. In this context the verb “wrote” functions transitively. But it appears like an intransitive verb. This deployment has the advantage of creating the feeling that the author is going to narrate his own story, thus converting the non-linear scheme of narration into a linear one. If presented transitively it will yield the reply to the question “What did Parameswaran write?” and the answer would be that he wrote the story of a region. The strategy of placing the proper name at the outset gives the feeling that the self is going to narrate its own story. The self-narration is a trait often associated with the ascent of modernity. However, the narrators of modernity have no qualms in telling the tales of other people. And further, they have never concealed the fact that they told someone else’s stories. In our context the author by employing the technique of self-narration is evading the responsibility of composing the story of a nation and its people. However the
space separating the noun from the verb is filled by the main idioms of historiography; that is, by “order” and “memory.” That means the proper name is about to fashion an orderly narrative extracted from memory. The use of “in/for memory” shows that the author’s preoccupation lies not only with his memory but with memory that could exist outside the consciousness of the author, and begs the question, “Whose memory?”

The preface of the work is important as it imparts the main tenets of indigenous historiography in contrast with the western kind of historical writing. The prefatory observations made by the author in a way show the exit from and entry into the later mode of historical representation. Here, a rough translation from the piece is attempted:

Boys should know the histories of noble persons since such histories would gradually promote their abilities and their well being. It was to serve this purpose that great men, in their books, narrated the stories of great deeds and events that took place in diverse places at different times. It is highly laudable that these descriptions of greatness imparted pleasure and happiness to the people who read them. Travancore is one of the major kingdoms in Malayalam and most of its kings were renowned for their dedication and benevolence. Though their histories were referred to by the people in everyday discourse, an orderly genealogy of the kings had not been properly conceived. This small book,
based on the records like *Granthavarikannaku* and the words of elders, attempts to delineate that history from a realistic point of view for the people’s knowledge. It is hoped that this would provide happiness to those people who are in Malayalam rather than elsewhere in the world. The function of history can be defined as the truthful elaboration in words of the demeanour and the feats of great persons. (13-14). [Translation mine]

Two conventions adopted by the author are heterogeneous with the empiricist and positivist styles of conceiving history in terms of the European imagination. They are the conventions of alluding to and acknowledging the responses of the people to the historical composition and relying upon oral sources of historical knowledge. In the section following the preface, he clarifies the means by which he managed to get the sources he needed and how the oral sources were given a graphic pattern. He asserts that the history up to 898 K.E. (A.D. 1722) was written from the materials provided by Mukkambalathu Ummini Pillai. However, these two differential practices in no way guarantee that they are better means of getting in touch with one’s own past in comparison with the western modes of historical narration. The reference to the “people” may be looked upon as an instance of reciprocating the roles of structural agency involved in the process of reading the historical text. The reader/audience community is bound to elicit pleasure from the process of reading the historical narration; otherwise they will be placed
outside its narrative circumference. Any reader who is dissatisfied with the narrative will have to meet the fate of a rebellious subject in the feudal polity. That means, as a rebel has to face the impending doom of being silenced through death, the reader will have to encounter the silence of not being mentioned in the text. Thus the persistent trait of acknowledging the people or the audience does not nullify the possibility of the historian allying himself with the power hierarchies. The same can be said with regard to the motif of orality. Assigning credence to the orally transmitted facts of historical knowledge is a practice that is quite strange to the western forms of historical representation. From the functional point of view, the oral aspect of history has a different story to tell. This story highlights another medium of transmission through the process of filiation in which the father symbolising the paternal authority of knowledge passes on historical facts to his son, to be later picked up by the author. But these differences should not make us blind to the caste biases of oral knowledge. Any layman cannot provide materials for the author to reconstruct the history of Travancore. Instead, only a few belonging to those caste lines such as unnithan and valiathan, who were customarily entrusted with the task of collecting and preserving facts and figures regarding the royal family, could be the donors of relevant data for the author.

The author conceiving boys and old men as the two extreme polarities of the historical didactic assigns two different roles, but identical and unitary in effect, to them. The boys in his system are taken to be the receptors of
historical knowledge and the proper exposure to correct learning of history would transform them into dignified personalities, while the old men would carry out the duty of appraising those further “qualifications” to be included in the historical description. Whereas the boys are constituted as the receivers of historical truth, the old men are the purveyors of truth.

Commenting on the meta-narrative frame of Moothathu’s work, it is possible to discern a clever application of the precepts laid down in the kavyajnana. This tradition is based on the tripartite classification of structural agency into parijnanta (“knower”), jnana sadhana/karana (“means of knowledge”) and jneya (“object of knowledge”). So, here, the object of historical knowledge is that corpus of histories which deals with the lives and times of great personalities, and the polarity of the knower is partially taken by the historian/reader pair. However, Moothathu’s cleverest move was to populate this polarity with a horde of innumerable informants and informed. Thus, as already mentioned, the boys and the old men become carriers of knowledge in one way or the other. The inclusion of the knower who is taken to be representing the referential world into the textual architectonics of history is indeed a great achievement on the part of the author. The author thus succeeds in legitimising the dominant discursive practice.

Inserting Moothathu’s work within the matrices of current debates on post modernity, one is able to pinpoint and appreciate the qualities and the heterogeneities of the text. But it does not mean that the text is outside the
compass of a dominant ideology. If one makes conclusions based solely on the theoretical elements of post modernity, one fails to reflect upon the realpolitik elements of the text. The danger inherent in this kind of post modern historical narration is obvious.

It is to be remembered that both Nagam Aiya and Velu Pillai were English educated and well-acquainted with the tools of historiography available at the time. Besides, the major portion of their writing was based on the existing literature compiled and documented by the British officials and missionaries such as Sir, William Wilson Hunter and Samuel Mateer. So, the problem with their methodology and logic of historiography is that they failed to detect the origin of modernity. It is in that context the arguments raised against the compilers of the State Manuals become significant. While adopting such an approach, however, one cannot be oblivious of the fact that Nagam Aiya was among the few who passionately defended the emancipatory potential of colonial modernity and remained crucially aware of the indigenous centres of Hindu colonialism. To quote from Nagam Aiya’s response to modernity as Director of the Census Report of Travancore in 1891:

“By the unceasing efforts and the self-denying earnestness of the learned body of the Christian missionaries in the country, the large community of Native Christians are rapidly advancing in their moral, intellectual and material condition… … The working castes among Hindus, particularly those embraced within the
operations of missionary labours, have received a fresh impetus in the matter of education since the Census of 1875. Those who have directly come under their influence, such as the Native Christains, have already doubled the number of their literates since 1875. But for these missionaries, these humble orders of Hindu society will for ever remain unraised. Their material condition I dare say will have improved with increased wages, improved labour market, better laws, and more generous treatment from an enlightened Government like ours; but to the Christian missionaries belongs the credit of having gone to their humble dwellings, and awakened them to a sense of a better earthly existence. This action of the missionaries was not a mere improvement upon ancient history, a kind of polishing and refining of an existing model, but an entirely original idea, conceived and carried out with commendable zeal and oftentimes in the teeth of opposition and persecution. I do not refer to the emancipation of the slave, or the amelioration of the labourer’s condition; for these always existed more or less in our past humane Governments. But the heroism of raising the low from the slough of degradation and debasement was an element of civilisation unknown to ancient India. The Brahmin community of Southern India are not doing to the lower classes what the
casteless Britisher is doing to them. I do not mean that our cultured Brahmins, like the late Rajah Sir Madava Row, or the living Sir T. Muthuswamy Iyer or the Honourable Sashiah Sastri, are a whit less sympathetic to them than the most refined or the most kind-hearted Englishman of the day. But what I mean is that our organization as the chief caste of the Hindu community does not provide systematic help, or means of relief to them. We have regular institutions all over India, for instance, doing charity to Brahmins, but none such either inculcated in books or practiced by recent ancestors to the Chandalas. This is an undoubted defect. The credit of this philanthropy of going to the houses of the low, the distressed and the dirty, and putting shoulder to the wheel of depraved humanity, belongs to the Englishman. I do not think the Brahmins, or even the high caste non-Brahmins, can claim this credit. It is a glory reserved to this century of human progress—the epoch of the happy commingling of the civilization of the West with that of the East.” (qtd. in Vol. II 117-8)

Aiya has erred in two dimensions. First, he has failed to examine the private selves of the Dewan and Rajah as revealed in the public spheres. Second, he has forgotten that history is also institutional in character. The violation of
modernity had actually taken place within the jurisdictional sphere of one of modernity’s favourite domains, namely, modern historiography.

Why should one make a defence of modernity in the heyday of its post modern detractors? It may even be observed that a proper judgement of modernity is still out of reach. It can perhaps be demonstrated that the critique of modernity developed here is not particularly firm and solid. By invoking the Muse of Clio it can be proved that this apparent aberration need not be considered a rarity in the domain of theoretical engagement. It is in this regard that an encounter with Marx’s theory of Asiatic Mode of Production becomes inevitable. The seminal observations of the theory are reproduced here:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution. (17)

Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresting and unchanging society…. 
England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia. (26)

The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world – on the one hand the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. (31)

The post modern negotiations with modernity have detected many of the pitfalls of modern historiography. The foremost of these is the lack of self-reflexivity that accrues from the misapplication of critical faculty. The term “critical faculty” usually refers to that collective of abilities and sensibilities that prepares one to critically engage with any problem or issue and it is theoretically presumed that such a faculty should make its practitioner aware of the inherent limitations of her/his approach towards a specific problem. However, in the case of most European intellectuals, one will hardly find a single instance in which the critical faculty was exercised in its real sense and form. Can one attribute this fault to Marx too? Certainly, one can do so, and such an evaluation of Marxian theory in general, conforms to truth. Usually a line of distinction is drawn between the spheres of legitimising a theoretical
position and articulating that theoretical position. However, the separation of these spheres is nowadays considered to be awkward and illogical. This is mainly due to the non-existence of a singular agency which is entitled to licentiate a position as either legitimate or illegitimate. As a result, the difference between the legitimation of a theoretical stand and its articulation is erased and the two are made equivalent. So legitimising a particular standpoint is very similar to taking up that position. To be more precise, it can be said that legitimising a position basically refers to the activity by which we prove or disprove a theoretical perspective through textual histrionics. The veracity of this approach relies upon and remains within the textual matrixes of that position. But taking or articulating a position largely relies upon the contextual milieu in which the subject is inserted and hence, some patterns of interaction between the subject and the ambience come to play the vital roles in fixing the meaning of that position. In other words, the process of legitimising the rightness of a critical position is too textual to allow room for the subject positions and contrary to this, the action of articulating a particular stand would provide space for narrating various subject positions as well as different discursive contexts. If one reads Marx’s theory from a Dalit position one might accept his views on Asiatic regions even without considering the conventional parameters and requirements of legitimacy. Moreover, the strict division between the processes of legitimation and articulation being weakened, s/he can easily legitimise her/his theoretical posture.
It goes without saying that Marx was far-sighted enough to foresee the impending dooms of colonial appropriation of India by Britain. At the same time he remains stuck on to the other pole; that of considering the positive aspects of invasion that may prove beneficial to the Indian subcontinent. He is aware of the merits and demerits of British rule in India. However he is splintered between these two poles; the pole consisting of the negative aspects of colonial rule and the pole that is inclusive of the beneficial sides of modernity. This prevents him from making a balanced judgement of colonial modernity. The position of Marx can be viewed through the lens of Eurocentrism by which we can conclude that he is playing the role of a European white-male patron. The interwoven nature of history is too labyrinthine for any observer to have a clear view and grasp of the entire situation and in such circumstances, anyone may be trapped in the very same subterfuge that s/he may be trying to evade. This may be applicable to Marx too. So when a Dalit subject encounters the present political conditions in India s/he may realise that those persistent evils which engaged the attention of Marx still have their incarnations in India either as forms of tragedy or farce. Under certain circumstances, a Dalit reader/subject of Marxian writings may generate her/his versions deviating from the so-called dominant or hegemonic interpretations if s/he aspires to comprehend the social surroundings in which s/he is placed and positioned. So, her/his position cannot be reckoned as an anomaly of post modernity, but an in-built property of that discourse. In other
words, in the case of historical narratives no meaning or interpretation of them can be considered as final and essential. Rather each and every meaning may change and vary in accordance with different subject positions. So, what we often describe as the “Truth of History” is not an essential fact or reality but a construct mediated by means of narrative techniques and devices.
NOTES

1 The notion of hypertextuality as used here is put forward and developed by Gerard Genette in *Palimpsests*. He defines it as “every relation uniting a text B… to an anterior text A… onto which it is grafted in a way that is not that of commentary. Text B could not exist without text A, but it does not speak of it.” See John Lechte, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1994) 61.

2 The picture of Kerala history as drawn by P.K.Gopalakrishnan in his *Keralathinde Sāṃskārika Charitram [A Cultural History of Kerala]* (Trivandrum: The State Institute of Languages, 1974) is entirely different from all these three accounts, as he allows no room for modernity as such in the cultural evolution of Kerala. Instead, he prefers the term “the age of transition (Parivarthana Yugam)” which, according to him, matured in the first half of the twentieth century from the seeds disseminated by the missionaries towards the end of the nineteenth century, 503-92.

3 All the three authors discuss the imaginary constructedness of nation, nationalism and society. Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983) is considered to be a masterpiece in this area, while Cornelius Castoriadis’ *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Massachusetts: MIT, 1988) represents a psychoanalytic approach towards the imaginariness of

4 The idea of dharmaśāstra and its relation to the process of truth-making have already been discussed by Mikael Aktor in “Smrtis and Jatis: The Ritualisation of Time and the Continuity of the Past,” Invoking the Past: the Uses of History in South Asia, ed. Daud Ali (Delhi: Oxford UP, 2002) 258-79.

5 Hayden White’s radical re-readings on the epistemological foundations of history appear in his much celebrated work Metahistory: the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973). He later reviewed and re-defined some of these earlier ideas in Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

6 This event took place on January 3, 1750 by which the Travancore state was declared to be the property of Sri Padmanabha Swami.

7 For a systematic exposition and delineation of the same theme; the transition to modernity from ancient periods, see Perry Anderson, Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism (London: Verso, 1985).

8 In the writings of Hegel, the concept of modernity appears “as an epochal concept: The “new age is the “modern age.” This corresponded to
contemporary usage in English and French: “modern times” or *temps moderns* denoted around 1800 the three centuries just preceding. The discovery of the “new world,” the Renaissance, and the Reformation – these three monumental events around the year 1500 constituted the epochal threshold between modern times and the middle ages.” According to the view developed in “Schelling’s *Philosophy of the Ages of the World* – the secular concept of modernity expresses the conviction that the future has already begun: It is the epoch that lives for the future, that opens itself up to the novelty of the future.” As a result of these discursive transactions the “epochal threshold” demarcating the ancient period from the modern times is fixed as somewhere around 1500. “To test this, Reinhart Koselleck uses the question of when *nostrum aevum*, our own age, was renamed *nova aetas*, the new age.” However in the context of the present situation, this question appears to be reversed; that is, here the attempt is to make the “new age” as “our age.” For an enlightening discussion of these debates and controversies on the transition phase of modernity, refer Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1987) 5.

9 For a detailed discussion of the idea of positive religions, see Habermas, *Modernity*, 25-6.

10 Most of the views expressed in this passage are taken from Habermas 25-27.
It is worth mentioning here that even a conventional historian like A. Sreedhara Menon in *Social and Cultural History of Kerala* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1979) has discussed this aspect.

For an elaborate discussion on the logic of equivalence, see David Howarth, *Discourse* (New Delhi: Viva, 2002) 106-07.

Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar was the Dewan of Travancore (1936-47). Like Hari Singh in Kashmir and the Nizam of Hyderabad, he too tried to obtain autonomous status for Travancore. But owing to resistance from various loci of power he fled to Madras.

Periyar E.V. Ramaswamy Naikar (1879-1973) began as a Congress follower, but protesting against the Brahmin-biased policies of M.K. Gandhi he left the party and became actively involved in the political programs of the South Indian Liberal Federation, popularly known first as the Justice Party, and later as the Dravidar Kazhagam. Against the nationalist ideology of the Indian National Congress he advocated a Dravidian world-view based on the egalitarian principles of Tamil tradition. See V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1999).

The term 'letter' occurs here with its post-structuralist psychoanalytic connotations as revealed in the classic essay of Jacques Lacan, “The Agency of

16 All the four figures mentioned were Dewans of Travancore.

17 The distinction between ambiguity and ambivalence is important here since ambivalence, in the writings of post colonial thinkers like Homi K Bhabha, refers to experiences that cannot be contained within the format of representation. See *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998) 85-92.

Ambiguous events, however, stay within the radar of representation. So, it is taken for granted that the causative forces of the Malayali Memorial are explicable with the aid of representational logic.

18 Slavoj Žižek in *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991) makes similar arguments based on the Hegelian notion of monarchy and Claude Lefort’s thesis of democratic invention to explain the difference between the pre-democratic societies and modern democratic societies, 267-8.

19 For a discussion of Laclau’s concept of myth, see Howarth, 111.


K.E. refers to Kollam Era; the method adopted by the Malayalis to record the passage of time.