Chapter 3
Caste, Body and Colonial Modernity: The Shanar Revolts, 1822-1899

The traditional approaches to the caste-body phenomena tend to conceptualise the issue within the confines of a well-knit cause and effect paradigm. Therefore, caste is usually deployed as the pre-determinant which regulates and orders the behavioural practices and everyday actions of the body into fixed and regimented categories. Here the body is represented as a *tabula rasa* or a grid of invisibility on which the legible and visible codes of the caste are inscribed. Biologically speaking, the body is conceived as a passive recipient or receptacle subject to the domestic and non-domestic inseminations made by the caste.

With the supplementary insertions and advances of colonial modernity, the originary-paternal authority enjoyed by the caste is being contested and many of its foundational precepts have been interrogated. Even in this much altered conceptual universe the body is assigned the same conventional role, that of the processual residue of colonial modernity. The silent histories of nineteenth century Kerala testify that within the interstices of caste and modernity, the body had found its own voices and forms of resistance. The episodes of the Shanar revolt speak such silent histories. The Shanar revolt graphically portrays how a people belonging to the fold of subalternity made political use of their bodies to combat the dominant ideologies. It also tells us
that the body can no longer be displayed as an ahistorical exhibit in the
discursive representations of historiography.

With the outbreak of the Shanar Revolt, the people belonging to the
legions of subaltern origin and descent made two kinds of withdrawals: first, a
withdrawal from the traditional fold and then, a withdrawal into the modern
terrain. In that context, the first withdrawal implies an “exit” or “exodus” from
the traditional domain of Hindu “doxa” and “praxis.” The other withdrawal
indicates an “entry” into a promised land as signified by the luminous regions
of colonial knowledge. But it should be borne in mind that this “entry-matrix”
was always leading a long drawn-out afterlife in the shadows of adumbrated
nostos.¹ Literally, nostos means a return to one’s own originary roots, but here,
it implies a return to one’s own source as imagined and imaged by the other or
a return to the origin in terms set by the other.

Now it is time to ruminate upon the “state” of the Shanar revolt. Is it
primary or primal? The posing of this question itself is, as far as one is
concerned, an event; a privileged happening that compels one to respond to a
historic situation with responsibility. The descriptive memoir of the event goes
somewhat like this: in 1822 some Shanar women agitated against the caste
Hindus to gain freedom to cover their bosoms. This act of these Shanar women
provoked the caste Hindus to react and this reaction culminated in a series of
sexual molestation, robberies and lootings. But for the official historians this
“breast cloth controversy”/ “dress disturbance” like the act of the Shanar
women was merely a pretension i.e. far removed from the Ideal of genuine struggles and responses. By making adept use of feudal/modern/post modern techniques, these historians have edited, censored and dumped the “simulacra-phantasms” of the Shanar revolt into the maelstrom of oblivion along with other “copy-icons” of feudal modernity (Deleuze, *Logic* 294).

However this memoir shows that the event takes its place in the nineteenth century. So, its epoch is nineteenth century Kerala. But, the above-mentioned historians diffuse the site of its origin into “elsewhere.” This “elsewhere” is the starting point of the present investigation. As mentioned earlier, though this event is a socio-historically orphaned one, it has a clear epochal footing in the nineteenth century Kerala. But, an encounter with any epoch can be done only at the expense of undergoing a process of *epoche* which calls those inquisitorial categories of historical epistemology into question. If a historian is subjectively oriented to this event, s/he will realise that the site of the Shanar revolt is a primal ground (*Ur-grund*). But the princely historians of the Travancore nation state and their intellectual progeny (now represented by the neo-Marxist and post modern schools of historiography in Kerala) document that the revolt failed to give any solid material foundation and therefore, existed in an abyss (*Ab-grund*). In this context, one has to make a penetrative journey into the underlying ("zu-grunde" *liegend*) structures and domains of this event so as to find the reality.
An attempt is made here to reproduce the event as narrated by so many interpreters and simultaneously find a way into that zu-grunde.²

While trying to reconstruct the episode of the revolt as an event genealogy one has to negotiate with its genesis, documentation and explication. These can be reformulated rather interrogatively:

(1) When and where did it originate?

(2) How can we learn of its details?

(3) What ideology legitimises it?

At the outset the first question possesses the status of arche; in the sense that it occupies the primal ground from which the event derives its origin and existence. So, this question can be described to have access to the ontological kernel of the revolt and hence, the two other questions may appear to be mere detours leading to the first one. A closer examination would reveal that it is merely a matter of quibbling since the first question has no self-grounding logic to prove its ontological status. We become aware of its origin and existence only when we sort out and seek after avenues for learning and documenting the originary point. It is actually the process of learning and documentation that fixes and determines the point of emergence and occurrence. So it can be argued that the very existence of the first question is a derivative of the second category. However the second category is there because of its close connection with the third category. It is not difficult to see that the process of enquiring into and learning of a particular incident heavily
relies upon the ideological formats. Usually it is the existing ideological patterns and apparatuses that determine and legitimise the modes of learning and the methods of documenting a historical event. And the third one has to base itself on both first and second categories so as to furnish evidence for its sustenance. No form of ideology could exist in a vacuum; it has to find some objects for the purpose of formulating ideological patterns and contents. The questions regarding the origin of an event and the process of documenting act as the objects of ideological structuration. The conceptual distinctions between and among these questions are more imagined than real; blurred rather than bounded. No unilateral concept of identity exists to lump them together into a homogeneous whole. Therefore, each and every question that we have come across can be considered individual, as well as one in a set of interrelated units.

The present discussion, however, is arrayed in such a manner that would mainly include the vast repertoire of missionary narratives, administrative writings and interpretations. Missionary narratives include travel writings, letters and correspondences between the missionaries, and the reports despatched to their head quarters. Gazetteers, census reports, administration manuals and glossaries, statistical surveys and memoirs, police reports and proclamations, form the corpus of administrative writings. The category of interpretations refers to those studies that occurred in various disciplines such as historiography, sociology, anthropology, social anthropology and political science. And some interpretative elements may be gleaned from biographies,
autobiographies and personal memoirs. The missionary narratives and administrative writings can be further divided into discursive representations and non-discursive practices. The above mentioned writings and documents belong to the discursive category. However the category of non-discursive practices needs special attention. These practices are frequently employed to concretise the ideologies embedded in their discursive representations. According to this definition, the missionaries had conversion and education as non-discursive instruments at their disposal while the administrators resorted to intricate and complex machineries like enumeration, tabular representation, the conduct of anthropological measurements, field work and administrative reforms. These processes have been successful in constructing and maintaining identities and selves based on religion, caste, community and gender. This is rather an unexplored area in the historiography of Kerala. Credit goes to M. Muralidharan for having shed some light on this terra incognita. However his conception of non-discursive practices remains homogenous as he analyses them only in reference to the making of communal identities. Thus he could only enumerate their negative aspects. He leaves the responses of the subaltern communities to these practices, especially to the administrative reforms, unexplained. In this regard, the present study makes a departure from the earlier studies in this field. Here an attempt is made to recover the practices and technologies of the subaltern people which they developed through an interaction with the administrative practices. An exegetic study of the
missionary writings in the conventional sense of the term is not undertaken. Instead of that, attention is paid to the image of the Shanar rebellion as it has been constructed and maintained by means of missionary discourses. Whenever a reference to the Shanar revolt is made, the reader would see in her/his mind’s eye the image of the missionaries enacting the lead roles. So, the image of the Shanar revolt in the historical narrations appears as inseparably linked to missionary work. And, the discipline of history writing could legitimise this image as the normal parlance of historiography.

Rejecting the Foucauldian model of the body which categorises body as a site for discursive appropriation, a method that gives primacy to the autonomy of the body is preferred. In a way, this perspective could be described as historical, since such an approach believes that the body available to us at different points in time would also be different. Based upon the above-mentioned temporal classification of the Shanar revolt, it could be argued that the body in 1822 was entirely different from that which was present in 1899. This historical change was due to many factors: economic, political and administrative. But at the same time, it should be noted that the personality structure of the individual subject was also functional in making this change possible. Here the re-production technologies of the subject are emphasised. Instead of merely being confined to the reception technologies of the body as subject (wherein the body gets ideas and patterns from external sources to structure and position itself), the emphasis is given to those aspects of the body
which produce and reproduce the social structure. So, concepts of Pierre Bourdieu like “habitus” and “reproduction strategies” are given prominence.  

While negotiating with the event of Shanar rebellion it is no longer possible to subscribe to those views that project it as an effect of colonial modernity. It is true that the “socius” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Oedipus* 139-40), the ensemble of modern institutional devices that could bring about effective changes in the field of the social, got unleashed and had its complete discharge during this era. However the caveat that there are so many other factors, non-modern and non-secular, which have had a part in putting the “socius” of modernity into motion may be necessary. The purpose of the present chapter is to explore those non-modern causes of modernity. One of these is of course constituted by the chief protagonists of the disturbance, the Shanar women. Women, especially those belonging to the lower rungs of the Hindu society, when agitating against civil discrimination, could never be mapped within the regions of modern historiography because most of its leading assumptions have been defined in masculinist and patriarchal terms. Hence, it could never address or document any incident that is extraneous to its legitimate domains. However, the fact remains that so many non-modern and non-secular elements like religious sentiments, communitarian interests and domestic affairs could be added up to the vast inventory of colonial modernity in Kerala. The most important aspect of non-modernity is constituted by the bodily aspirations and dreams of a community. It is marked by the ascent of the “desirant” into the
field of the social. “Desirant” a term adopted from the writings of Deleuze and Guttari, in this context, refers to that kind of subject who desires her/his bodily dreams, hopes and aspirations to be translated into and inscribed onto the political body of colonial modernity. In other words, the people who participated in the rebellion demanded that the existing political systems should concretise and replicate the bodily needs and desires of a community. The leitmotifs of the rebellion are very much clearer now; they are body, community and desire. Most often this rebellion is represented as a part and parcel of either nationalist consciousness or colonial modernity. The discourses of nationalism and modernity are integrative and incorporative in nature. So, these discourses aim to conceal the *realpolitik* forms and contents of the revolt. It is argued here, however, that both nationalism and modernity are, at least in part, the effect of the Shanar revolt. At the outburst of the revolt a multiplicity of connective linkages has been released. The body of the Shanar woman desires to be connected with the liberative forces embedded in the project of colonial modernity. And these bodies congregate into an assemblage that would drive the entire community of the Shanars into the circuit of this desire. So, the thematic of the nation was absent in their desire. It is proposed here that the site of the Shanar revolt is also the site where the “consciousness of contingency” (Heller 6) emerged. It is at this point that the people began to realise that they were not eternally or naturally bound to perpetual slavery. So it is presented here that the Shanar revolt is neither a grand event nor a national
struggle for independence but rather a minor event. Minority status is attached to the event so as to disrupt the master codes of modernity.

In the nineteenth century, the people belonging to the legions of subalternity in Travancore began dreaming, imagining and imaging a new region; a region where their civil, human and communitarian rights were assured and protected. These communities began to look forward to the machineries of colonial modernity with an “angry fix” (Ginsberg 1946). Whether their aspirations were fulfilled or not is indeed another part of the story. The episode of the Shanar revolt bears testimony to such an instance in which the subaltern subjects sought to overcome their eternal bondage as vindicated by religious norms through modern instruments of progress, development and freedom. Many eminent scholars ranging from Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., R.N. Yesudas and Dick Kooiman to N.K. Jose have already described and narrated this aspect of the revolt. According to these historians the Shanar revolt is nothing but an effect of a trace left by the Grand Colonial Modern Cause. And the major protagonists of this narration, in their view, are missionaries. In all these accounts, a deviation from the orbit of modernity is taken up, reduced and restored onto that orbit. This hermeneutic fallacy is here termed as fixation syndrome; the varied elements of resistance are fixed and integrated around and into the locus of colonial modernity. However the present advancements in the fields of historiography and other social sciences render this kind of monocular vision a thing of the past. So, now it is time to
call that time a day. In this section an attempt is made to reconstitute the event
of the Shanar revolt through the narrative registers of missionaries,
administrators and historians. Here the missionaries and the administrators are
conceived as two separate entities. The old interpretive current of forging
affinity between these two agencies is eschewed.

The historians on the revolt can be grouped into two: those who belong
to the nationalist-modernist paradigm and those belonging to the post-
nationalist and post-modernist school. N.K. Jose, Robert Hardgrave and R.N.
Yesudas represent the former, while Koji Kawashima and M.S.S. Pandian
represent the latter. And Dick Kooiman occupies an in-between position
among these historians since he has anticipated some of the postist
interventions, even while working with modern tools. However it is impossible
to consider either school a self-enclosed unit. The dissensions and differences
among the authors belonging to the same school are great and varied in nature.
Robert Hardgrave, the pioneer researcher in this area, in his much celebrated
work The Nadars of Tamilnad: The Political Culture of a Community in
Change, employed the techniques of conventional sociology. The arguments
he developed in this book were reworked and elaborated further in the article,
entitled “Political Participation and Primordial Solidarity: The Nadars of
Tamilnad.” This appeared in 1970, in Rajni Kothari’s anthology on Caste in
Indian Politics. In 1975, R.N. Yesudas made a brilliant study on the same topic
in his A People’s Revolt in Travancore: A Backward Class Movement for
Social Freedom. In this work he elevated the Shanar rebellion from a breast cloth controversy to a People’s Revolt. N.K. Jose while complaining about the lack of political orientation in these books tried to reconstruct the historical perspectives of the Shanar rebellion in his Channar Lahala (“Shanar Revolt”). However, with the publication of Dick Kooiman’s *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the 19th Century* many of the shortcomings of the earlier works have been rectified. In order to shatter the myth of close association between missionaries and the English officials, he has dwelt extensively on the historical details that determined the relations between these two parties. In *Meanings of ‘Colonialism’ and ‘Nationalism’: An Essay on Vaikunda Swami Cult*, M.S.S. Pandian, has initiated a discussion on the impact of non-modern and non-secular factors in the making of colonial modernity in India. The focus of his study is the enigmatic political personality of Vaikunda Swamikal. Koji Kawashima in her book *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore, 1858-1936* tries to look upon the social changes in Cochin and Travancore in the backdrop of the dynamic royal dynasty of Travancore.

One can, in no way, deny the role and participation of the missionaries in the making of this event. The act of attributing prime agency to missionaries in the history of a resistance movement has been unthinkable within the framework of the nationalist consciousness of history. For example, national heroes like Gandhi and Nehru have always condemned the missionaries as the
accomplices of the British imperialist project. And professional historians such as K.M. Panikkar have furnished historical approval to this nationalist logic. However, as mentioned earlier, recent scholars like Kooiman and Kawashima have proved that the nationalist portrayal of the missionaries as villains is far from the reality. Kooiman in his work *Conversion and Social Equality in India* has argued that taking the policies of the colonial administrators towards missionaries into consideration it is hardly possible to fashion any kinship between the two parties. Kawashima, on the other hand, relying on the documents of the mission work done in the erstwhile states of Travancore and Cochin, has clarified that the missionaries had always stood with those people and problems that had a footing in the minority locations and communities. This happened while the colonial officials often took sides with the upper caste/class elites of the Hindu-Brahminical fold.

The entire narrative structure of the Shanar rebellion could be encapsulated within a three-fold temporal schema. As per this time-frame, the revolt can be divided into three different moments of time; 1822, 1828 and 1858. The year 1822 can be described as the first phase of the revolt. This period is characterised by the act of refusal on the part of Shanar women to be gratified within the permissible codes of dressing prevalent at that time. The second stage is striking for another denunciation; this time Shanar men refuse to perform *ooliam* (“unpaid labour”) services and the final phase of 1858 is centred around the Proclamation of Queen Victoria. These debates finally
satisfied some of the dreams of an aspirant community. Finally, one more moment of time is added up to the inventory of temporalities as a separate entry; 1899, which shows the changed and altered aspirations of the same community.

However taking this classification as pre-given, one is validating the linear and homogeneous logic of temporality sanctioned by modern historiography. Actually, in the history of resistance it is not possible either to fix or take up any moment of time as given and self-enclosed. On the contrary each and every moment is often a disrupted continuity of some other period and therefore it should be looked upon as a nodal point at which so many other points of time accumulate. A period of time is a conflux of multiple and diverse zones of time. So one moment of time must be handled in such a manner that would expose the differential nodes embedded in that moment.

At the heart of the contention that took place in 1822 there were decrees, orders and circulars and great personalities who arduously took initiative and pain to translate the ideas proclaimed in them into practice. Col. Munro, Rev. Mead and Rev. Mault were three of them. However the people belonging to the Shanar community remained nameless. In the past they had been subserviently linked up to the dictates laid down in the Hindu scriptures and now they were easily overtaken by the colonial norms of governance. So far as the traditional historian is concerned, this was an apology for him to presume that the revolt broke out somewhat like a volcanic eruption in May
1822 in the Kalkulam district. In the nick of time, the great saviour Rev. Mead appeared on the stage with a horde of complaints, appeals and prayers. Most of the historical studies on this phase of the disturbance mainly engage with the source from which the Shanar women acquired the consciousness that enabled them to realise that they were naked. In the parlance of these historicising procedures, that consciousness emerged with the advent of colonial modernity. For arriving at this much expected conclusion, these studies heavily relied upon the bi-polar diagram of cause and effect according to which any effect could be referred back to an originary and primal cause; here, it is the colonial modern cause of progress, development, enlightenment, emancipation and liberation.

As mentioned earlier, the year 1822 cannot be considered as a self-referential node of time, but only as an interpolated unit in a vast network of temporalities. Once this observation is taken for granted, some other phases would emerge from the interstices of darkness. One such moment takes us back to the era of Mukilan, a Mughal Sardar, who invaded the southern parts of Travancore in 1688. It was he who introduced reforms in the field of dress in Travancore for the first time. This Mughal ruler, though projected as an epitome of evil and wickedness by Hindu historians, could not brook the sight of lower caste women roaming through the streets with their breasts bared. So he enforced a decree that women should cover their bodies when walking in public places. The important thing to remember in this context is that these
reforms occurred even before the coming of L.M.S. (London Missionary Society) to Travancore. But after the departure of the Mughal ruler, the age old ways of tradition were restored.

The second phase is connected with the coming of Tippu Sultan\textsuperscript{7} to Kerala during the eighteenth century. Tippu, though branded a religious fanatic, made a highly devastating and progressive critique of the prevalent customs of Hindu society in his proclamation that annulled all restrictions on one’s style of clothing:

> Since it is the practice with you for one woman to associate with ten men and you leave your mothers and sisters unconstrained in their obscene practices and are thence all born in adultery, and are more shameless in your connections than the beasts of the field: I hereby require you forsake these sinful practices and to be like the rest of mankind; and if you are disobedient to these commands I have made repeated vows to honour the whole of you with Islam and march all the chief persons to the seat of Government. (qtd. in Yesudas, *Revolt* 115)

And the third stage is related to a Circular Order\textsuperscript{8} issued in 1812 during the reign of Munro according to which women who converted to Christianity were allowed to cover their bosoms.

While dealing with the Shanar rebellion the historians have subsumed the other two moments into the third moment, that is, the moment of colonial
modernity. These historical accounts failed to address the Muslim factor in formulating the consciousness that looked askance at traditional belief systems of the Hindu religion. As far as these historians are concerned, consciousness could emerge from nowhere but from outside. That is, the conditions which define and surround a specific society would be revealed only if these conditions, along with the society, are exposed to some exterior principle belonging to an exterior universe. So it is not possible for a community to make either a critique or practical intervention within its own bounds. This idea has gained wide circulation among the scholars of the “subaltern studies” collective. For instance Ranajit Guha in his seminal work *Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography: History and Power in Colonial India* has endorsed this view without any misgivings. According to him, the antique Greek and Roman cultures were positively supportive of slavery. Philosophers like Aristotle and historians like Herodotus have extended intellectual justification to the practice of slavery. However, during the nineteenth century, slavery came under the scathing attack of Montesquieu and Hegel. Their critique of slavery is marked by the ascension of a new ideology; the ideology of wage labour. So Guha argues that the process of critiquing the slave mode of production became possible only because of the emergence of a different and external paradigm characterised by wage-labour. Another strand of this argument could be found in the contemporary debates on Dalit issues. Gail Omvedt in *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit*
Movement in Colonial India drawing extensively from the writings of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe has made the proposition that the slave becomes aware of her/his slavish position only in reference to an external ideology that defines slavery as illegal and inhuman. So the slave has only one option, that is, to remain in the state of perpetual bondage unless and until rendered to the scrutiny of an outside agency. All these discourses presuppose the idea of nation at the very core of their argument. Modernity being defined as colonial, these writers identify Britain as the originary source of consciousness. It is not possible for us to presume that the colonial practitioners of modernity were critical about the pre-modern conditions prevalent in India. They always chose a phraseology that can be called a compromise between two contradictory ideologies. But, in the case of Tippu, he could develop a perspective that was highly critical of the practices inherent in Hinduism. The problem with him as perceived by modern historians is that it came from crude vision of realities. But the fact remains that this crudeness could be a more effective critique of indigenous practices compared with the alien critique of modernity. As far as thinkers like Guha and Omvedt are concerned, they take it for granted that India is a symbiotic and holistic entity. So, for them it follows that it is not possible to make a critique of Indian situations from and within that entity.

The limitations of Guha and Omvedt are revealed further if another source of consciousness is taken into account. Most of the writers on this topic agree that the Shanar migration to Tinnevelly and the subsequent marriages
with people there had a significant impact upon the mind of the Shanar community. It is often argued that Tinnevelly came under the rule of Madras Presidency and therefore, no restrictions upon dress were imposed there. And hence the Shanar victory is the victory of colonial rule. However, it should be pointed out that the colonial machinery failed to impart the message of modernity to people. The subaltern subjects happened to come into possession of the knowledge about the benefits of modernity through the traditional institution of marriage. Modernity functioned on the principle of exclusion, according to which the fruits of modern rule were restricted to a few who were considered the most eligible candidates. Those who were excluded had to rely upon some other agencies to gratify their modern needs. This underscores the fact that modernity never came to the subaltern communities naturally. Instead they had to make their own efforts to come into contact with modernity.  

The revolt broke out for the second time in the middle of 1828 and the reverberations of this were audible till 1830. Compared to the first phase of the revolt, this had certain variations both in form and content. Here the Shanar men, in place of the women of 1822, were the figure-heads of the rebellion. In his report to the L.M.S., Rev. Mead clarified the reasons for the occurrence of the revolt:

At first threatening language was used to deter the people from attending Christian worship. Men were seized on the Sabbath for public works, schools were occasionally interrupted, the books
were thrown into the streets or torn to pieces and the women were beaten in the public bazaar for wearing the upper-cloth over their bosoms and the clothes were stripped from their bodies. (qtd. in Yesudas, Revolt 118-9)

An organised attack was planned and unleashed against the Shanar converts under the leadership of Isvara Pillai, who worked in the local revenue department. This stage of the revolt assumed a religious hue. In 1822 the clash had occurred within Hindu society based on caste affiliations. But now it became more or less a conflict between Hindus and Christians. Besides, the feudal mode of production had to face a scathing attack from the modern concept of labour. In those days the practice of ooliam or viruthi was a prominent feature of the local economy. By ooliam the system of forced or unpaid labour is implied. This was not a phenomenon purely based on the class structure of the society. Instead, it was founded on caste lines. So, the people belonging to the lower caste strata of the Hindu society had to perform ooliam services for the state. However, with the spread of missionary activities in Travancore the practice of ooliam underwent some drastic changes and in consequence, the concept of labour was altogether redefined. It is at this point that the rudimentary forms of secular labour histories came into being.

Conversion is usually looked upon and treated as an instance of religious transformation in which the subaltern subject bade farewell to her/his native and normal religion represented by the Hindu fold of faith. This view
can be problematised, for example, contesting the presumption that Hinduism is the true and natural religion of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. However, dropping the religious controversy, here the focus of analysis is taken to be an issue in which the terms of social, political and historical realities are confabulated into an interlaced web. So, conversion is not the end-product of any kind of religious transformation. Rather it is a process of becoming towards a socio-political transformation and in that context, conversion refers to that rare moment of time that is testimony to the act in which the slave becomes a wage labourer. It witnesses a member of a caste, whose identity is defined in terms of collective existence, acquiring individual status by becoming a citizen. Thus, conversion offers a way out from the terrain of tradition.

While querying the conditions for the possibilities of the emergence of conversion it is imperative to address the religiously biased criticisms levelled against conversion. B.R. Ambedkar\textsuperscript{10} has succinctly captured the origin of such detractions. According to him, these diatribes against conversion accrue from the separation of the domain of religion from the social. The critics of conversion have conveniently forgotten that the process of embracing a particular religious conviction confers upon the convert the prospect of changing her/his social position.

Taking the socio-political circumstances prevalent in nineteenth century Kerala, one could go a step further and draw the conclusion that the conversion
process had nothing to do with religion or theology at all. It was religious only in the sense that it devastated the very foundations of the Scriptural authority in the field of the social. The scriptural tradition of Hinduism has adumbrated the roles, images and parts of each and every person in the everyday activities in social life. In other words, scriptural dictates have already pre-determined the way one should walk, dress, speak, eat and dine. In that respect, one is merely replaying the life that has been already foreshadowed and foretold in religious texts.¹¹ So, the real life one was leading at present on earth was nothing but the afterlife of the scriptural edict. However, this condition underwent a sea-change with the upsurge of the conversion movement. The people belonging to the lower rungs of the caste-ridden Hindu society ceased to be conscious of their past and began to concentrate on their life in the present. As a result, the practice of referring back to an originary tradition contained in the religious books faced a severe setback. Whenever a social exigency occurred, people began to look to the machinery of the colonial administration for help. The vast plethora of historical interpretations on the phenomenon of conversion in Kerala fail to give a satisfactory answer to the question of how it was possible for a religious-theological movement to bring about such changes initiated by colonial modernity.

The year 1858 can be described as the final moment of the Shanar revolt. The most remarkable point to be noted regarding this stage is that the Hindu Shanars became actively involved in the rebellion. The previous
moments of rebellion, to some extent, were confined within the segments of Christian converts. The change of 1858 was mainly due to the influence of the Vaikunda cult launched by Muthukutty Swamikal. The final phase of the Shanar revolt is usually depicted as the victory of colonial modernity owing to the Proclamation made by Queen Victoria in 1858. However, the meanings of the Proclamation were not univocally fixed. Subsequently, clashes of interpretation ensued. The Shanar community thought that the proclamation was in their favour. So they began to imagine their images being contoured in the Proclamation. On the other hand, caste Hindus believed that the proclamation justified their position. However, the caste Hindus were at a disadvantage because they could not make out the ultimate meaning of the Proclamation. So they referred back to the proclamation issued in 1829 and demanded its reinstallation. At this point the Shanar community determined the meaning of the Proclamation. They saw it as an autonomous one and found no need to refer back to any pre-existing order. Here, the meaning of the Shanar revolt got fixed. Their demands for the right to cover the upper parts of the body were recognised and the existing legal system incorporated those demands and rights into its domain.

It may now be possible to negotiate with a non-modern event that would invalidate some of the claims and pretensions of modern historiography. It is to that end that a discussion on the Vaikunda cult is undertaken. This movement refers to a particular form of belief practice initiated and launched by
Muthukutty Swamikal who exerted a powerful influence on the empowerment of the Shanar community between 1831 and 1851. His very name seems to have anticipated some of the motives of the Shanar rebellion. His parents had named him *Mudisudum Perumal*. The nominal suffix, *Perumal*, attracted opposition from the Hindus since it was exclusively reserved for upper caste men. Due to pressure from upper caste Hindus, his parents were compelled to rename him as Muthukutty. Taking these factors into account this incident can be charged with the implications of a primal scene. The desire to be clothed like upper caste Hindu women was the force behind the Shanar revolt. Likewise, here, the parents who were from subaltern communities, desired their child to be named after the Hindu fashion. The history of this strange desire can be unearthed without much difficulty. And this history is mainly mediated through M.S.S. Pandian’s path-breaking study, “Meanings of ‘Colonialism’ and ‘Nationalism’: An Essay on Vaikunda Swami Cult.”

Muthukutty was rumoured to have divine inspiration and powers. He was well-versed in Tamil scriptures like *Naladi, Moodurai, Thirukural* and *Thiruvasagam*. His knowledge of Hindu mythologies was far ahead of others of his caste. Besides, he read the Bible and it was claimed that he had embraced Christianity for a while. However it is difficult to detect the origin of these rumours, as many of them were invented and circulated by Muthukutty himself. His emergence as a saintly figure before the public was due to this kind of gossip. In order to cure a skin ailment from which he had been
suffering for a long period, he took a bath in the sea at Suchindram. And thereafter he made the claim that he was reborn as the son of Vishnu and styled himself as Sri Vaikundar. After making and spreading this myth of re-incarnation, Muthukutty’s standing rose in the eyes of the public. This technique of Swamikal may appear to be a kind of weak mimicking of the Hindu God. However, by this move he could amalgamate the story of Jesus as the son of god into the Hindu fabric. At that time the people, especially belonging to the lower castes, were well acquainted with Christological chronicles. However, this aspect of the myth was cleverly hidden from the people.

The episode of Muthukutty Swamikal offers a striking contrast or foil to the imagology of Marthanda Varma. The former was very active in uplifting the subaltern masses, while the latter used all his energies to establish a system of governance which was beneficial to the dominant communities. But, Muthukutty Swamikal is conspicuous by his near-total, glaring absence in modern historic accounts. The reason for this, according to the modern historians, is that the Swamikal was irrational and superstitious. We have already seen that the same accusations can be levelled against Marthanda Varma, but he is placed well within the edifice of modernity. This incongruity compels us to view the claims of modernity regarding subaltern empowerment and resistance with suspicion.
From the example of Muthukutty Swamikal discussed above, a couple of questions arise regarding the exact nature and structure of resistance; is it really the act of resisting the oppression one suffers from her/his superiors? Or is it merely a notion that has to fulfil the conditions of a specific epistemological system? From the historical records at our disposal, it is easily deducible that the Vaikunda cult initiated by the Swamikal had helped the Shanar people to combat the oppressions and sufferings which the other dominant communities had been thrusting upon them. But still it has not received proper attention from the modern historiographers of political resistance. The problem with modernity is that it is a systematic model of knowledge which presupposes and prescribes various normative conditions and criteria for everything, but it does not account for anything that happens in its marginal regions and provinces. The practitioners of the Vaikunda cult movement tried to build up their resistance narratives from the contextual and situational milieus with which they were familiar and exposed to. It is obvious that it was never possible for them to come in touch with the logics of modernity as envisioned by its great European proponents. However, the \textit{realpolitik} experience of the movement cannot be belittled simply on that account.

Now it is time to consider the exegetic practices through which the event of the Shanar rebellion has been arranged into a historical narrative. By exegetic practices, the ensemble of ideological configurations and the narrative
devices is implied. The foremost conceptual instrument in this regard may be described as the binary of necessity/contingency. The historians of modernity have often argued that emancipation, liberation, progress and enlightenment form the necessary kernels of modern experience. For them, these would naturally emerge out of the necessity of modernity. Thus, solely based upon the European experience of modernity, these theorists have evolved a universal model of modernity. However it is conspicuous that this universality of modernity is nothing but an extended form of Europe’s provinciality. And their final solution for putting this universal model into practice is the introduction and insertion of capital into the antiquarian structures of non-European societies. As a result, the non-European obstacles that come in the way of fulfilling the universalist ambitions of modernity would be swept away by the impact of capital.

The concept of contingency, on the other hand, refers to the failure of capital. In other words, contingency is the accumulated store of those hindrances that blocked the ambitious journey of capital. In the field of historiography, it stands for all events that escape the logical compass of modernity. Subaltern revolts, in this sense, assume the position of being contingent. The administratively empowered historians have always been perplexed by these revolts since they have always failed to link them to the chain of historical necessity. So, contingency is always considered an anomalous frame of modernity. These arguments can be re-articulated by using
the terms of Saussurean linguistics. In these terms, it is possible to recast necessity as the *langue* of modernity while contingency is considered as its *parole*. So, it is no longer possible for us to dismiss or read down contingent events as anomalies. Now they become more imperatives than anomalies. It is argued here that it is the hybrid of contingent actions and events that makes the necessity of modernity possible. According to this dictum, liberation and emancipation become contingent rather than necessary. It is no longer possible to indulge in the idle talk of valorising abstract liberation and emancipation in the name of modernity. If one wants to prove that emancipation is possible within the modern lexicon of political resistance, one has to cite Shanar rebellion and other instances of contingency as evidence. A history of modernity without a history of its contingencies would appear as the history of oppression and domination minus historical necessity. And finally, that history would become a history of dominance.

The second important tool that is used to narrate the Shanar revolt is the concept of cause and effect. This is an essentialist paradigm which bears biologically determined properties. According to this model, any deviation or aberration on the part of the subaltern people from the accepted norms and practices could be traced back to a definite and primal cause which is always colonial and modern. So, the Shanar revolt is merely an effect caused by the grand modern – colonial cause. The Shanar revolt is validated only because of the prior existence of the colonial intervention. Administrative writings and the
missionary narratives abound in such cause-effect interpretations. However, the reverse position is also possible, that the Shanar revolt caused the inception and production of colonial modernity in Kerala. It is very obvious that modernity does not exist as a concrete and material unity, but one comes to know of its existence only through its so-called “effects” like the Shanar revolt, the emergence of the novel as a form of expression, and the spread of English education. The nodal points of cause and effect pairs do not converge in a singular source of causality; instead it is diffused and proliferated in multiple ways. In the absence of these effects and traces, it is no longer possible to chart modern territories. Hence, the causal links of modernity cannot be held apart from their effects.

Another important technique of historical narration is the idea of perception, which denotes the process employed by the colonial administrators to evaluate the character and mind-set of the colonised people. For observational purposes, the colonial officials often took cues from the visible/invisible matrix. R.N. Yesudas is close to truth when he describes Munro as “a very keen observer of men and things” (Yesudas, Munroe 13). This circuit of observational perception gave Munro the privilege of watching and seeing others without being either seen or perceived. The lack of perceptual interaction coupled with the sense of obliviousness regarding the rightness and wrongness of one’s own words and deeds constituted the Achilles’ heel of colonial modernity in Kerala. It is evident that the mode of Munro’s perception
was cognitive. To his administrational gaze, men, things and nature were merely outward objects for appropriation. The cognitive mode of perception was not without its parallel in the Brahminical epistemology which also treated men and women, things and nature as objects for the perceiver’s appropriation.

Against this cognitive model, the Shanar community made use of a reflective mode which contested the priority and validity of the cognitive apparatus. This new mode enabled the Shanars to question the role assigned to them in the Brahminical cartography. However they failed to problematise this model. That is why they failed to interact reciprocally with other subaltern communities.

When we start talking about a particular kind consciousness, say for example, the colonial consciousness of modernity, we tend to overlook the “spaces of resistance” created by modernity, thus reducing emancipation to mere domination. It is to avoid this trap of consciousness that much primacy is given to the process of reflexion in the constitution of modern consciousness. Drawing heavily upon Agnes Heller and Mark C. Taylor, an attempt is made to envision a hybrid version of reflexion and consciousness. It is possible to find three different types of reflexion:

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Here, the mode of perception of colonial administrators like Munro and Macaulay is cognition since their task was to objectify those things and men that came within their perceptual compass. The same can be said about the Brahminical tradition. Against this, the Shanars tried to problematise this model by interrogating the processes which made them objects for others. However, they conveniently left out the question how other people like Pulyans and Parayans became their objects. It is hoped that making use of a self-reflexive paradigm could relieve this reflective aporia.

The subaltern people were living in a heteronomous world where their will and reason were guided and determined by other extrinsic agencies. Colonial modernity claimed to have granted autonomy to these people. However, this claim to having given autonomy is undone by the theory/praxis dichotomy of modernity. While the practical sphere of modernity seems to have given freedom to the subaltern communities, its own theoretical protocols try to effect a violent seizure/erasure of the autonomous elements.

The English language had played a prominent role in articulating and representing the needs and desires of nineteenth-century people. In those days this language assumed an objective and scientific position in negotiating with
and narrating political events and crises. But its self-acclaimed scientificity concealed its political and ideological moorings. For example, this language described the Shanar revolt using terms such as “cloth disturbances” and “breast-cloth controversy.” Why “disturbance” and “controversy” in the place of words like “revolt” or “resistance?” Given such terms, how is the describing of an event taken to be an objective process of naming?

On the southern territorial fringes of nineteenth century Kerala there appeared a horde of deviant and invisible forms of life. Though the nineteenth century discourses were reluctant to recognize and acknowledge the heterogeneity of these forms of life, it took a liberal attitude in devising and attributing various nominal identities for them. Thus, the native tongues dialectised them as “Nadans,” while the more sophisticated tongues of the English officials and anthropologists called them “Shanars.” However the fact prevails beyond doubt that this transliteration or rather distortion on the morphemic level failed to bring out any semantic changes in relation to the historically specified conditions of the people signified by that name. From a Marxist point of view, the sources of their appearance can be traced back to some economic origin and it can be argued that these migrants came to Kerala for the production of surplus value for the feudal lord since there was a shortage of labour supply. This view tactfully undermines the fact that no labouring bodies could remain as such in colonial Kerala. They had to be assimilated into the Brahminical mode of being and existence. But, this process
of incorporation and assimilation was not so easy, as the Shanars themselves claimed allegiance to a superior Dravidian origin. This clash between the Brahminical origin and the Dravidian origin constitutes the crux of the Shanar revolt.

The main point of the present proposal is that colonial modernity had a real though unspoken pact with the ideologemes of the dominant Brahminical tradition. This contractual treaty was negotiated not merely in terms of material referents, but it had a solid base in the ideological mindsets that produced ethos and mentality. This point can be illustrated by examining the modes through which the colonial regimes responded to the Tinnevelly riots in 1899. In the sixth volume of *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Edgar Thurston records the following responses made by the English officials.

The first response comes from the Inspector General of Police:

“These were,”… due to the pretensions of the Shānāns to a much higher position in the religio-social scale than the other castes are willing to allow. Among other things, they claimed admission to Hindu temples, and the manager of the Visvanathēswara temple at Sivakāsi decided to close it. This partial victory of the Shānāns was keenly resented by their opponents, of whom the most active were the Maravans. Organised attacks were made on a number of the Shānān villages; the inhabitants were assailed; houses were burnt; and
property was looted. The most serious occurrence was the attack on Sivakasi by a body of over five thousand Maravans. (364)

And the second response is that of the census superintendent:

…the claim of the Shānāns to enter the Hindu temples, in spite of the rules in the Agama Shāstras that toddy-drawers are not to be allowed into them; but the pretensions of the community date back from 1858, when a riot occurred in Travancore, because female Christian converts belonging to it gave up the caste practice of going about without an upper cloth.” (364-5)

Here we have three different responses belonging to three different disciplines which in turn become two regimes. The three different disciplines are: penology, demography and anthropology—anthropological response is embodied in the very act of Thurston quoting and thereby validating the other two responses as data for his study. The first two responses can be grouped under the rubric of administrative regime and the third one as representing the regime of positivist and empirical social science. The leitmotifs that occur as tokens of resemblance in all the three narratives are “pretension” and “claim.”

The Shanars appear as claimants for a “pretentious title.” And the first two respondents consider “pretension” and “claims” as the causal and originary sources of the riot. But actually, the opposite is the case; the claimants are Shanars, and that is why the claims become pretensions. The originary position of “pretensions” and “claims” lies in the supplementary activity of Shanar’s
claiming those “pretentious claims.” The administrative authorities take this logic of origin as given. But the regime of empirical social science leaves the issue unquestioned since that discipline is pledged to the production of objective and positive truths. The very act of leaving the issue unquestioned presupposes and at the same time, validates the norms of the other two responses. In these responses, the nominal category called the “Shānānn” is directly related to the occurrence of revolts, riots and strives. And therefore, the Shānān ceases to exist as a community name and becomes a linking verb that points at a particular active agent behind revolts and riots. However, the universalist assumptions of colonial discourse undermine this transitive logic of colonial grammar and rhetoric.

Thus instead of,

Pretensions + claims → Shanars + revolt

(The pretentious claims of the Shanars caused (led to) the revolt).

We have,

Shanars + revolt → pretensions + claims

(This can be verbally explained as: The Shanars revolted and it caused [led to] the pretentious claims).

The first equation represents the locus of pretensions and claims as a genitive or possessive case of the Shanar community and therefore, the pretensions and claims are congenital to that community. But in the second equation, the locus of pretensions and claims functions as an additive
component and hence, the pretensions and claims can be divorced from the being of the community. This equation shows that revolt is pretentious only because it is initiated by the Shanars.

However it is possible to identify a two-fold temporal schema here. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century (more precisely, 1859) the revolts had been anti-Brahminical to the very core. And in this process, the Shanars took their sides with the constructive aspects of colonial modernity. But, during the 1890s there is a visible shift from the domain of colonial modernity to that of Hindu-Brahminical mould.

In this concluding section, the devices and practices by which the event of Shanar rebellion has been integrated and incorporated into the historical narration of modernity would be examined. So far as the administrative historians are concerned, this event was merely a “dress cloth controversy” lacking the intrinsic properties either of a civil rights’ movement or a freedom struggle. So, without any qualms, they opined that it was a symptom of contingency and therefore should be omitted from the official history of modernity. Foreign and native historians alike accepted and valorised this account. Though the missionaries were supportive of the cause of the revolt, the epistemic strategies which they employed to represent that cause almost outdid the moral and practical support which they extended to the victory of the revolt. This paradoxical situation came to a period when the academics belonging to diverse disciplines began to engage with the problem. It is the
interpretive accounts of these scholars that are dealt with the passages that follow.

It has already been observed that the first ever attempt to understand this event as a part of the political history of a community came from the field of sociology when Robert Hardgrave published his work *The Nadars of Tamilnad* (1969). And most of the working hypotheses of this work appeared revised and re-defined, in “Political Participation and Primordial Solidarity.” In the preface to the earlier work, Hardgrave opines that his aim is twofold: to study “the relationship between political sentiment and behaviour, on the one hand, and the structure of society, on the other” (vii). For this, he takes the case history of a single caste, Nadars in the present case, “as the unit of his analysis.” However, he intends to concentrate upon the aspects of change that came over time to this community. These changes occur to them as a result of the community’s interaction with society. In consequence, his work turns out to be both diachronic and synchronic at the same time.

Then, an attempt is made to analyse the change in terms of three structural types; parochial, the integrated and the differentiated. The parochial political culture is identified with tradition. The second type, the integrated, shows some signs of departure from the first model. This stage of development in the career of a caste is announced and maintained by the mounting emergence of cohesion and solidarity within that caste itself. Due to the horizontal accumulation of caste ties over a wide geographical area, the
economic dependence on other castes is minimal and makes differentiation within a caste possible. This model is characterised by the formation of associations and unions for the up-liftment of that community. But in the advanced stages of growth, these associations disappear on account of having achieved their aims. The third type, the differentiated, represents the political ethos which is most compatible with that of modernity. At this stage, most of the rigid patterns of casteism get eroded. This stage is mainly characterised by inter-caste interactions. Now the meanings attached to the concept of ritual purity and the device of caste ranking get lost.

To prove these types empirically, Hardgrave takes four separate geographical segments; Tiruchendur, Kamudi, Madurai and Madras as the objects of his sociological enquiry. The first among them, according to Hardgrave, shares the characteristic traits of a parochial society. While the second one, Kamudi, is representative of an integrated political culture. The Nadars belonging to this region have been placed well in the history of that community’s fight for social up-lift. The people here being merchants, had to face competition from the Maravar community. Madurai, which is usually identified as a major centre of the Nadar community, shows the early stages of a differentiated political culture and the city of Madras offers the more advanced fruits of the self-same culture.

Hardgrave tries to analyse all these components with the help of two devices; caste and change. However his views on caste are highly controversial
since his analysis pre-supposes the separation of caste from the sphere of the political system and life. So he draws the picture of Indian politics as being intruded into by casteist positions. For endorsing this position he resorts to the sociological views on caste as promulgated by M.N. Srinivas, the eminent sociologist. In the oeuvre of Srinivas, caste is sanitised as being free from the political life of the nation. Such a view accrues from the meritocratic logic of liberal humanism. According to it, caste can never be the determinant of the political milieu. However, it is palpable that the political scenario prevalent in India is very caste oriented. Besides, the political history of India bears testimony to the fact that the existing structures of Indian polity have contributed immensely to the making and maintenance of casteist practices in our daily political life. This shows that the political system in India has determined the bases of caste. So it is impossible to say that the casteist sentiments have unilaterally corrupted political life. Politics has itself reactivated and regulated diverse elements of caste. To a very great extent, for Hardgrave, caste functions as a cipher for tradition. And he takes pains to chart the progress of that tradition from its caste foundations to that of modern society. He tries to strengthen his position by resorting to the concept of change. By change he means the transformation that came to a community over time. So his approach can be said to have founded itself on the transformation narrative. The narration of transformation is slightly different from the narration of transition. The process of transition is somewhat a result
of spontaneity and unforced energy. It can be compared to the world of flora where change from one state to the other is described as natural and symbiotic. But when we come to the description of transformation all these natural attributes get annulled. Instead the metaphors of force and artificiality loom into prominence. And these metaphors of un-natural force are represented in human form. Here, the missionaries take the forms of human agency in bringing about modern transformational changes. Hardgrave endorses the view that the missionaries were highly supportive of low caste people. At the same time, he fails to take the epistemic strategies of the missionary narration into account. If such an attempt is undertaken it would be clear that the techniques of representation used by the missionaries were in no way better than those of the administrators. So, the intention of Hardgrave is evident here. By positing the political system as free from casteist considerations, he wants to legitimise the point that modernity was completely divorced from the milieus of Indian tradition. The pitfalls of this position are revealed in his discussion on the issue of upper clothes. Like everyone else, he is perplexed with the desire of a subaltern community aspiring to be attired in the fashion of upper caste Hindus. The explanation which he finds for this phenomenon is the symbolic value of interactional recognition. According to this idea, the people belonging to the subaltern sectors of the society have to elicit and generate recognition from those who belong to the upper strata of the society. In India, the parameters of recognition depend upon dress styles, food habits and likewise.
It is for the sake of gaining recognition from the upper castes that the Nadars desired and fought for the upper clothes. However, Hardgrave remains silent upon the question regarding the styles which the subaltern people are likely to desire and imitate when modernity replaces tradition as the agency of recognition.

We may now turn our attention to an excellent work by R. N. Yesudas on the same issue. His *People’s Revolt in Travancore* can be said to have corrected many of the problems embedded in the work of Hardgrave. For Hardgrave, the Shanar revolt was merely a “breast cloth controversy.” He failed to unearth the political kernel of the revolt. As a result the very act of naming that event lost track of its political trajectory. However, describing the event as a “people’s revolt” Yesudas could restore the social reason to Shanar revolt which his predecessor’s work lacked. Besides, his work seems to be a compendium of almost all archival materials on the revolt. Like Hardgrave, Yesudas too confers the agency for the revolt on the missionaries. But the conferring is done under the backdrop of civil and fundamental rights. The limitation with his approach is that his views on the revolt are mainly mediated by the categories of sameness and resemblance. As a result, he has drawn parallels of semblance between the people’s revolt in Travancore and other political movements which appear in world history and Kerala history. According to him “the Pugachev Rebellion in Russia, the Lofthuus Affair in Norway, the Wilkite and No Popery Riots in London and the Peasant Revolts
in Austria” (4) are all similar or near identical to that of the People’s Revolt in Travancore. This line of similarity among these revolts is drawn on account of “the revolutionary mentality of a people craving for rights and privileges” (4). So, the revolutionary fervour of the people who participated in the Pugachev Rebellion was all the same as that of those who fought for the right to cover the bosoms in Travancore.

In the concluding section of the book, Yesudas, applying the same logic of similarity and sameness, put the Shanar revolt along with other incidents in the history of Kerala like the Malayali Memorial, the Ezhava Memorial and the Vaikkam Satyagraha. He fails to realise that the Malayali Memorial was not initiated in the lines of Shanar rebellion. It was actually launched to exclude underprivileged classes from the fruits of modernity. And the same case is extendable to Vaikkam Satyagraha, since it was conducted with a view to channelise the desires of subaltern masses into the loci of Indian National Congress. It was a dominant masquerade invented and circulated by the nationalist leaders to beguile the subaltern masses. So it can be observed that Yesudas’ historical construction of the Shanar rebellion as the People’s Revolt has trapped that event into the domain of nationalist historiography.

The work of N. K. Jose, who is better known as Dalit Bandhu, has demolished many of the conventions which have been used by the earlier historians in dealing with the Shanar revolt. He considers this event the first chapter in the history of Kerala renaissance. And he has approved the
contributory role played by the missionaries in forming the narrative of renaissance. In *Channar Lahala*, Jose has paid glowing tribute to the work done by Yesudas in this field. But at the same time he has criticised Yesudas on the ground that the latter has only collected and recorded certain facts and thus, failed to explicate the political attitude that germinated those facts and the events. And he has wittily passed a comment on the general nature of history, that history can never be an “exhibition stall of facts” (foreword). Now it is clear that compared to the other two scholars in this field, Jose could make a sense of historicity which the others lack.

Like Yesudas, Jose lingers on the differences in nomenclature given to this event in various historical narratives. But in contrast with Yesudas, he could find out and explicate the implications and underpinnings, of various acts of naming it. He observes that the *Lahala* (revolt) was in reality instigated, sponsored and performed by the religious fanatics belonging to the Savarna communities. And the Channars were the victims of these atrocities. However, it was referred to as “Channar Lahala” in historical parlance. And he could further trace the continuity and the reason for this kind of counter-transference in historiography. The reason is that the historical construction of the subaltern pasts of Kerala was mainly authored by Savarna historians. By making this observation about the agency of historical narration, he gave a death blow to the hitherto accepted belief that historiography is free from caste based affiliations and associations. Jose then goes on to point out that even the
concept of legality is misperceived and counter-transferred. The Channans, by putting upper clothes on their bodies, were trying to reinstate the freedom granted to them on legal lines. But they are represented historically as “law breakers.” On the other hand, the Savarnas tore the Shanars’ upper clothes and took law into their hands. However, this atrocious action received the appreciative appellation of being “the maintenance and protection of law” from historians. The praiseworthy contribution of Jose would be that he could explain the process of transitivism well. He was able to perceive, to some extent at least, that the truth of history is always away from the grasp of the historians. Events like this come to the domain of historians as forgotten scrolls of historical amnesia. However, this amnesia is not really amnesiac, since, it stems from some dominant memories which are eager to subdue and burn the scrolls of subaltern memories to ashes. So, no historian can quarantine her/himself from her/his subjective moorings. That is why he makes the striking remark that the history of Kerala is the history of its forward communities.

There are points, however, where Jose stumbles in the way of his professional forbears. He nurtures nostalgic orientations for the zones of semblance and sameness. He equates the Channar Lahala with the Mappila Lahala and Pulaya Lahala. Of course, he is very sensitive to the communal stigma stamped on Mappila revolt. But, he fails to recognise and acknowledge the differential elements of these revolts. For example, the chronotope of the
Mappila rebellion is placed elsewhere. It was fought against upper caste Hindus and Englishmen at the same time. While it is easier to subsume Channar Lahala within the trajectory of colonial modernity, the episode of Mappila Lahala offers innumerable coefficients of adversity to that trajectory. That the Mappila Rising developed in response to the clarion call of the Caliphate still remains an obstacle for modern history to surmount. The Pulaya Lahala, though it shares the traits of the Channar Lahala, has to tell a different story. When that event occurred, the people like Channans and Ezhavas had already climbed up the social ladder. So they refused to extend a helping hand to Pulayas in their efforts to rise from their pathetic conditions.

Besides, Jose has maintained the model of dissemination while discussing the source from which the consciousness to cover one’s body is emanated. Like Hardgrave and Yesudas, Jose also gives credit to the missionaries for having inculcated and distilled that consciousness into the minds of the Shanars. Here, the missionaries function as parental authorities providing and disseminating wise counsel to the progeny; the Channars. So, the Channan is pictured as a tabula rasa on which the scripts of modernity were inscribed. For Jose, terms like “Renaissance” and “Reformation” have appealing values. These terms function as irreducible. He leaves unanswered the doubts concerning the fructifying nature of these terms in delivering subaltern societies from their inherent conditions. Instead of questioning the very validity of Kerala history, he is eager to gain an entry into its pantheon.
In the work of Dick Kooiman, however, the essentialist attributes attached to the notions of liberation and the subalternity of the lower caste people are somewhat overcome. Though the Shanars fought vehemently for their civil rights, they refused to distribute those rights to other people who were placed below them in terms of caste ranking. They demanded due deference from Pulayas and Parayas. So, the intention behind their association with the mission work was not initiated with view to establishing social equality as such, but for their own material improvement within the narrow confines of the existing social fabric. For example, in the fight for gaining the right to wear clothes, the Shanars demanded it only for their women. They never wanted to apply these rights to the women of all other downtrodden communities. Another peculiarity of Kooiman’s approach is that unlike many of the scholars in this area, he refuses to share the view that all missionaries were die-hard opponents of the caste system. He says that William Tobias Ringeltaube, the first protestant missionary to land in South Travancore in 1806, to some extent, adopted a liberal attitude towards the institution of caste.

The main contribution of Kooiman’s writing is that he has been able to draw a distinction between orthodoxy and orthopraxis. The Hindus were not that much against the idea of conversion. As a system of belief, they had no problems with Christianity. But what they insisted upon was that the converts should adhere to the practices which they had done while they were within the fold of Hinduism. The history of the Shanar revolt proves his argument true.
The caste Hindus rose up against the Shanars only when the latter violated the continuance of an older practice, of Shanar women not covering the upper parts of their bodies.

All these historical accounts portray the event through the lens either of modernity or of nationalism or both. Such an approach draws its theoretical sustenance from the system of modern thought that ascribes primacy to the notion of historical necessity. According to which the project of modernity, even in its colonialist version, is a model of the essentialising and universalising process. The modern tools of governance can potentially eliminate all the antediluvian forms of traditional society. In order to give this perspective a progressive dimension, the narratives of transition and transformation have been introduced. Here, transition works as an extended mode of transformation. The mode of transformation belongs to the domain of praxis while the other is an intrinsic property of theory and, in the present context, it is the field of historical writing. In the phase of transformation, the agents like missionaries and administrators are presented. And as a result of their activities and interventions, a particular change is being forcibly brought into being. Accordingly, the event of Shanar rebellion is a practical force of modern transformation. But when that event is transferred into the field of history it would be projected *normally* as a process of transition. By this move the force field of that event is erased and omitted from historical narration. In the stage of transition, the event would appear without agencies and agents.
However, the prime actors of transformation, here it is missionaries and administrators, would retain their hegemonic position as absentee lords. This is what happens to the analytical world of Hardgrave.

In Yesudas and Jose, the process of historical narration takes another direction. It is the direction of nationalist appropriation. Both these historians believe that the history of Shanar revolt would be legitimated as a freedom struggle only if it is incorporated into and put along with other instances of struggles for national independence. Such a fate befalls these writers on account of their unwillingness to question and contest the claims and norms of colonial modernity. It has already been observed that Jose had an obsessive nostalgia for terms like Renaissance and Reformation. However, he fails to notice that these terms have nationalist and casteist biases. The renaissance of Bengal as launched by Raja Ram Mohan Roy was entirely different from the Renaissance that took place in Italy and other European nations. In the case of Roy, it was a tacit move to reinvent the Brahminic tradition to ensure its continuance. So, the very act of referring to that Renaissance in connection with an instance of subaltern uprising like the Shanar rebellion, is almost a sign of undoing that event.

It can be said, to some extent, that Dick Kooiman’s interpretation is free from these pitfalls. He takes pains to describe the process of transformation rather than the results and effects of that transformation. Consequently, he could show the agencies, agents and forces of transformation. And in that
narration, he has avoided the convention of giving undisputed importance to a single agency. However, the interplay of colonial modernity and nationalism in subaltern historiography is almost a shadow-substance conundrum; even if a reference to modernity or nationalism is omitted from the substantial part of a historical discourse, these two terms would re-appear through other garments and thus exerting their shadowy impacts upon the substance. This he fails to take notice of.

The limitations of these modern oriented sociological and historical investigations are exposed in the work of M.S.S. Pandian. His paper on the Shanar rebellion starts with the emergence of a particular consciousness, a consciousness that insists on the fact that the history of modernity could no longer be written without taking into account its non-modern counterparts. For this, he juxtaposes an episode of modernity, the history of the LMS, with the episode of a popular religious cult (the Vaikunda cult). This strange amalgamation of two heterodox elements accrues from the awareness that neither the domination of colonialism nor the hegemony of nationalism could include the political life of the nation in its entirety. For Pandian both these moments, the moment of domination and the moment of hegemony, are incomplete. The Shanar rebellion, he believes, came into reality because of the disruptive force exerted by some external force. So he denies the very existence of a single history of nationalism and modernity. And in that place,
he proposes the need and desire for “multiple histories” of both these phenomena (167).

In the historical narration of modernity, Pandian introduces some new notions like temporality and race. For him, unlike for other scholars in the field, change is not eternal and static but, rather temporal and dynamic. The Shanars espoused Christianity only for their temporal aspirations of change in the existing network of power relations. In this espousal, they could not jettison all their community traits into the past. Instead they tried to renovate their cultural past in new forms. As a result, a heathenised Christianity emerged. For this, the Shanars tried to invent stories of a glorious originary past. Besides, the native subjects always feared negotiations and contacts with the white man. Because in those days the fact of being associated with a white man naturally lead to the loss of one’s identity. Hence, they always preferred “alienation within the society” to “alienation without society” (176).

However, Pandian’s description of Vaikunda Cult is not without pitfalls. On the one hand he fails to be cautious of the use of Hindu mythology in the context of liberation. And on the other, he labels it as a mythic incursion from modernity. It is quite clear that the very idea of modernity is more imagined than real. So is the idea of much coveted modern developments like progress and liberation being translated into the realpolitik by means of Christian theological tactics.
It is possible to read the history of the Shanar revolt as a history of desire, how it came to happen that the lower caste people began to aspire to the dress codes of upper caste people for gaining an equal share in rights. Likewise, the parents of Muthukuttikal wanted their son to be named like a Savarna. And Muthukuttikal aspired to establish the age of Dharma seen in Brahminical scripture. From these, it is quite palpable that what we commonly understand by the term “subaltern resistance” is not an easily definable concept. It is here that the logic of difference and repetition comes to our rescue. The pervasive tendency among most of the scholars on the Shanar revolt is to provide formulae equating the desires of upper caste and lower caste people. But the dress which is usually referred to as the conventional dress of the upper caste becomes different when it is used by subaltern people. Hence, the fact of being repeated would not make something the same thing, but instead such repeated acts would make it different. Historians, whether modern or post modern, make their readings of the past on a temporal plane completely divorced from the spatio-temporal constituents of the past. The concepts and categories of history belong to a life-world which is not coeval with that of the events it tries to narrate and represent. The conceptual categories thus formed would be ineffective and inadequate to deal with the resistance of people belonging to another era. Moreover, how these people perceived and defined the meanings and significations of resistance may remain completely outside our historical compass. Hence it can be concluded
that no historical narrative can offer an essential and total description of the past as such.
NOTES

1 The Greek concept of nostos; home-coming, in opposition to the Biblical notion of exodus is crucial to the system of Emmanuel Levinas, the French phenomenological thinker. See his “Trace of the Other,” *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Massachusetts: MIT, 1985) 345-59.

2 All the italicized terms in this paragraph are taken from Martin Heidegger’s *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999) 3.

3 Michel Foucault’s representation of body as it is portrayed in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995) has been subject to vehement criticisms from various quarters accusing it to be too passive and submissive. See, for example, E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj c1800–1947* (London: Oxford, 2001). Collingham reworks the idea of Norbert Elias on personality structure as an alternative to Foucauldian model.


5 The historical account of R.N. Yesudas follows this kind of narrative pattern; that is, presenting the event of Shanar revolt as if it were an instance of natural
phenomenon or catastrophe. This kind of historical writing has been critiqued by Ranajit Guha in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1983) and “Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, Vol. II (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1983) 1-42.

6 For more details, see Yesudas, *Revolt* 115.

7 Yesudas 115.

8 Yesudas 115.

9 Yesudas cites the emigration of Shanar families from South Travancore to British province of Tinnevelly in search of employment as another reason in this regard. *Revolt* 114.


11 See Mikael Aktor’s paper cited in the previous chapter.

12 See Pandian, 177.

13 Pandian 177.

14 Ranajit Guha charts out the reasons and factors that contributed to the failure of capital in *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998) 13-20.