Chapter 6

THE ORGANIZATION OF MUKKUVA RELIGION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapters have shown how the complex world of Mukkuva rituals and beliefs weave together to provide a coherent universe of meaning to the community, as perceived from the latent plane of religiosity. The community's attempt at reconciling the divergent elements both from its neithal past as well as from the Catholic tradition, has been evident. The Mukkuva Catholicism as the outcome of this process appears inherently capable of resonating with the life context and concerns of the community. An area yet to be explored in this process is the manner of their organizing the religious life within their universe of meaning.¹

Every religious tradition tends to give rise to specific forms of organization, usually referred to as the process of institutionalization. It ensures continuity of the tradition and its ethos, besides strengthening the cohesion of the community. In the words of O'Dea,

There are two chief kinds of religious organization found in human societies. In primitive and archaic societies religion is a diffuse phenomenon; many forms of human association from the family to the work group have in some important respects a religious character. In these societies religion is one aspect of the life of all social groups. .... The specifically religious organizations are found generally

¹ The conceptual frame of rituals, beliefs and organization has been employed here. See chapter 1, section 4, above.
in societies in which an internal differentiation of function and consequent stratification have developed.\textsuperscript{2}

World religions like Christianity and Islam usually emphasize the latter, namely the specifically religious organizations.

In Catholicism the organizational form is highly institutionalized and uniformly applied, more or less, everywhere. But this is the realm of manifest religion, which is not the focus of this inquiry. At the latent level the organization of Mukkuva religion is considerably a diffuse phenomenon; it can hardly be distinguished from the structures and mechanisms of the socio-cultural or economic life of the community. This is a feature it shares with many archaic societies, where the material culture has a close correspondence to the form of social or religious organization. In fact, the notion of \textit{religious organization} as a distinct category itself may appear anachronistic. It is the neithal culture, rather than any religion as such, that would better explain the organizational features that find expression at the religious realm.

The sense of solidarity, or the clan ethos, that characterizes the neithal heritage does have an overwhelming influence on the organizational realm of Mukkuva religion. This is evident in the phenomenon of \textit{sabhakal} (associations) which provides an interface between the two religio-cultural traditions. The first section of this chapter discusses this interface. The following sections highlight some dimensions of religious control that operate in the community, with special emphasis on leadership functions.

The Mukkuvar of Vizhinjam take pride in the multiplicity of devotional associations, locally called sabhakal (sabha - singular) in the parish community. Fourteen sabhakal are found to be existing and operating today, all with Church approval. Some are affiliated to diocesan federations. While the existence of devotional associations is universal in the Catholic Church, their multiplicity and social significance at Vizhinjam is phenomenal. This calls for a closer look at the sabhakal. [see An Overview of Sabhakal.]

As is clear from the chart each sabha has its own characteristic features, both in the social base and in the ritual pattern. Each has its own costume/uniform, its special days and manner of devotional practice, its own patron saint and leadership structure and style of functioning. For example, the first Friday of every month is a 'holy' day for members of Thiru Hrudaya sabha; none of its members go fishing that day, and holy mass and communion is insisted upon for them. Today the whole community has taken to this practice, and the church is packed to its capacity on a first Friday, and the beach would bear a deserted look. Meetings and devotional practices of sabhakal are held either in the church or in selected houses. Some sabhakal can be seen having their devotions in the church before or after mass, or even while the mass is in progress. It would appear that the ritual practices of the sabha mean more to its members than the official liturgy of the Church. The parish priest is the official patron of all sabhakal, but in practice each sabha is an autonomous entity.

Sabhakal become more alive during parish festivals and whenever a death occurs in the village. At the death of a member of a sabha all members as a group visit the family and join the funeral procession in their uniforms. There is also a prevalent custom of inviting certain sabhakal for the
### Chart 5: SABHAKAL AT VIZHINJAM - AN OVERVIEW
(Data valid for November 1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name of Sabha</th>
<th>Members (approx)</th>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Patron Saint</th>
<th>Uniform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Carmalamatha sabha</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>men-adult</td>
<td>B.V. Mary</td>
<td>white cope, brown waist band, brown shawl, crown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Jnanaprakasiar s.</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>St.Aloysius</td>
<td>white mini-cope, blue shawl, crown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Thiru Hrudaya s.</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>men&amp;women</td>
<td>Sacred Heart</td>
<td>white dress, red ribbon &amp; medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Mikel malaka s.</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>youth(m)</td>
<td>St. Michael</td>
<td>green shirt, white dhoti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Geevarghese s.</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>youth(m)</td>
<td>St. George</td>
<td>white dress, red ribbon, medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Ouseph Pithau s.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>youth(m)</td>
<td>St. Joseph</td>
<td>white dress, white ribbon, medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Antoniyar sabha</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>youth(m)</td>
<td>St. Antony</td>
<td>brown cope, cincture, picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>AlmayaCarmalita s.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>men</td>
<td>B.V. Mary</td>
<td>white dress, scapular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>do</td>
<td></td>
<td>women</td>
<td>do</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Vanakamatha sabha</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>women</td>
<td>B.V. Mary</td>
<td>white dress, blue ribbon, crown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Vincent de Paul s.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>men&amp;women</td>
<td>.....</td>
<td>white dress, scapular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Maria Goretti s.</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>girls(-18)</td>
<td>M.Goretti</td>
<td>white skirt, red blouse, white veil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Sodality</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>women&amp;girls</td>
<td>B.V.Mary</td>
<td>white dress, green ribbon, medal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Legion of Mary</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>men, women</td>
<td>B.V.Mary</td>
<td>skyblue dress or blouse/shirt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
funeral of any person in the parish on payment of a stipulated amount of money; it is both a prestige issue for the family and a source of income for the sabhakal. At present only a few sabhakal respond to such calls. The rate is Rs. 105 for men's sabha, and Rs. 51 for women's sabha.

During the parish feast all sabhakal become fully operative; in their attractive costumes members of each sabha line up for the main event of the sapram procession in the evening. The position of the sabha in the procession reflects the ritual status of the sabha. The compiria sabhakal have always the privileged position. Carmalamāta sabha stays closest to the sapram, followed by Jñānaprakāśiar sabha. Any change in the determined order could lead to a riotous scene, as has happened in the past. There had also been a prolonged conflict between the two compiria sabhakal in the past over the right to primacy. The sabhakal reflect the status positions within the Mukkuva society in more ways than one.

Almāya Carmalita sabha and Vincent de Paul society are considered ‘rich men’s sabhakal’ by non-members. Some sabhakal, eg. Antoniār sabha, are counted the monopoly of certain lineage families. Most of the youth-dominated sabhakal are of recent origin, mostly copied from other coastal parishes. Their social base is very much area-bound: Geevarghese sabha is confined to Karimpallikara, Mikhēl mālāka sabha to Thulavila, Ouseph pitha sabha to Charuvila, and Antoniār sabha to Pallithura areas. Seen this way, sabhakal of the youth have more of the

3 Compiria or compiri is a term coming from the Portuguese Catholic tradition, and is found being used widely both in the Latin churches as well as the Syro-Malabar churches in Kerala with minor variations. It refers to the Confraternities or pious associations of lay persons having their own system of functioning. The main offices traditionally are those of Pirusenti (president), Procurador (procurator), Iscruman (scribe or secretary), Chemmador (thurifer). The functions vary from place to place. Pirusenti, in many places today, is the person who is elected to take charge of the parish feast for a year. At Vizhinjam, Carmalamāta sabha and Jñānaprakāśiar sabha are Compiria sabhakal. The pirusenti is elected for a year, but has no responsibility for the parish feast.
characteristics of social clubs than devotional groups. The membership of these sabhakal also is confined mostly to the sea-going, little educated fisher youth. The socio-cultural or political groupings, though few in number at Vizhinjam, are conspicuous by the absence of the above category of youth. It can be argued that it is the 'religious appeal' of the sabhakal that draws these youth, but in response to their unmet need to belong to clubs.

6.2.1 Office of the Pirusenti

The compiria sabhakal, Carmelamāta and Jñānaprakāśiar, have special status as ancient, and have their system of leadership and associated rituals. Among their specific ritual celebrations is the Pirusenti kalyāpam; it is the ritual of the Pirusenti assuming office. The 'royal' celebration includes the solemn escort of the designated person, wearing a jewel-studded crown and a decorated scepter, by the sabha members with the accompaniment of crucifix, bell and hand-set. During holy mass the priest celebrant crowns him and hands over the scepter. A dinner follows hosted by the outgoing pirusenti. The ritual has other embellishments of the parish feast like hoisting the flag ten days in advance, and having special solemn rituals on all the ten days. Pirusentis are entitled to use the honorific title with their name all their life.

There are indications to believe that the office of Pirusenti meant more than being the leader of one sabha. It is likely that this office had in earlier days close links with that of Pradhāni, the community leader. 'Śeṣadima Pirusenti D'Costa' is still remembered as a community leader. He was also one of the Pradhānis, and a grand uncle of Renkayyan, the last of the Pradhānis still alive. It is probable that in the past the office of Pirusenti had substituted/ assimilated many functions of a community leader, which in course of time got reduced to the present role of a
sabha leader for a year. More historical research is required to throw more light on this area of community leadership.

6.2.2 Evolution of Sabhakal through Confraternities

The roots of these sabhakal can easily be traced back to the confraternities of the medieval European Catholicism. Confraternity is a term used usually to designate societies of lay people, canonically set up under ecclesiastical direction, for the spiritual welfare of its members. General or particular works of apostleship also are often associated with them. A confraternity usually has its origin in, and association with, devotion to some particular mystery of religion, some saint, or some special religious observance. Members wore capes of different colour to distinguish themselves. Many confraternities were promoted or directed by religious orders or congregations. Most of the older confraternities came into being during the later middle ages; but the majority of the present Marian Confraternities date from the Catholic revival after the Protestant Reformation.4

Confraternities played an important role in the Christian missionary expansion in India and elsewhere. When Francis Xavier landed at Goa in 1542, there already existed the Confraternity of Mercy (Santa Casa de Misericordia) composed of the Portuguese, taking up the relief of the poor in Goa.5 Friar Diago de Borba in Goa developed an institution for training young boys who

4 Rosary Confraternities were started in 1470 at Douay in Flanders, and were promoted by the Dominicans. The Scapular Confraternities arose in the 16th century under the patronage of the Carmelite friars. The Sodality of the Bl. Virgin Mary was founded in 1563 at the College of the Society of Jesus, Rome, by Fr. John Leuvis, a Belgian Jesuit, mainly as a gathering of pupils; soon it spread to all Jesuit educational centres and parishes everywhere, and became the model for other confraternities that arose later. See Donald Attwater, A Dictionary of Mary. London: Longmans, 1957.

were later banded together into the *Confraternity of the Holy Faith*. This played a key role in the organized conversion of the natives in Goa.\(^6\) This grew in power since the Portuguese government set aside the income of the property of the destroyed temples to support confraternities and churches. Even the duty to maintain law and order had been given to them in some cases. *Confrarias* were set up often along caste lines, thus reflecting the very caste composition of the Goan society. In "*the Confraternity de Santissimo de Nossa Senhora de Socorro*", started by the Jesuits in Goa, the *Gauncars* (=the land-owning and ruling caste) alone had membership; they wore red cape, and they alone had the right to carry the cross on Good Friday.\(^7\)

Along the fishery coast, the *Confraternity of Charity* was the earliest, started by Fr. Henriques in 1575 at Punnaikayal. Later, in 1648, the *Sodality of Our Lady* was formed in Tuticorin in 1648, and gradually spread to other fishing villages too.\(^8\) The roots of the ‘culture of *sabhakal*’ in Vizhinjam should be seen against this background. What originally started as an instrument of religious renewal later became a tool for conversion, then a symbol of caste status in the religious hierarchy, and finally, as it exists at Vizhinjam, a form of cultural association or club. As it stands, the *sabhakal* presents a good example of a harmonious synthesis of Portuguese confraternities and the Mukkuva clan orientations, on a religious plane.

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\(^8\) See chapter 2, section 3.5, for more details.
6.2.3 Sabhakal as Substitutes for...

The sabhakal flourished at Vizhinjam in a proportion unseen in Goa or Tuticorin or elsewhere in India. Two reasons may be ascribed to this phenomenon; one, the vacuum created by the destruction of the pre-Christian clannish affiliations of a `maritime tribe' provided an easy environment for the sabhakal to grow rapidly; the Mukkuvar found in them a sort of Gemeinschaft over against the highly cerebral Catholic catechism and Church liturgy. Second, pre-Christian art forms and social entertainments were done away with by the missionaries as pagan and devilish, without proper substitutes.\(^9\) The elaborate costumes and the `performative scope' of sabhakal came in handy to respond to the void created especially in the young. This latter reason will be more clear if the Mukkuvar of the Travancore coast are compared with the Christians in the rest of the Kerala coast, especially from Kollam to Kodungallur.

The Christian fisherpeople in Alapuzha and Kochi have a background similar to that of the Mukkuvar, and their Catholic history goes back to the same Portuguese period. Here the devotional associations are neither very numerous nor socially very significant. A strong tradition of performative art forms like chavijju nāṭakam and paricha muṣṭu kali, with a specifically Christian content and flavour had evolved in these areas. Chavijju nāṭakam was a Christian form of dance drama promoted by the Portuguese missionaries after the Synod of Diamper (Udayamperur) in 1599, as a technique to dissociate the coastal Christians from `pagan' rituals and practices like kūthu, kūdiyāṭjam, mantravādam, chāthanseva and animal sacrifice. It combined the martial arts of Kerala and the classical Indian dance movements with the Greek convention of drama. A single performance would last 15 nights continuously; the time and

\(^9\) Mudiyēṭṭu was a very popular form of folk art in villages near Vizhinjam, and continues to be performed associated with temples. Pūrakkali was another ritual art form, being held in Bhagavathy temples in the month of Meenam.
expense involved in such a task may be one reason why this art form has gone down in popularity in recent times.¹⁰

No such attempt at a religious art form seems to have been made among the Mukkuvar of Travancore. The vacuum thus still persists. The parish festivals and sapram processions, the magnificence of church buildings and shrines, the proliferation of sabhakal with its performative side in colourful costumes... all these represent attempts by the Mukkuvar to find a creative outlet for their suppressed heritage. ‘Do the sabhakal act as escape mechanisms that hinder a cultural resurgence of the Mukkuva community?’ is a question that may be asked.

6.3  DIMENSIONS OF RELIGIOUS CONTROL

The notion of sabhakal as an interface between the neithal and the Catholic traditions does not stand in isolation; this has to be situated in the cultural matrix of the community. Seen thus, it points to other related dimensions of the same interface. An insightful area is that of the control mechanisms and structures of leadership that are operative in the community. Some concrete instances may illustrate the point.

After the communal riots of 1995, the parish council issued a directive to the following effect:

i. “except for June, July and August, fishermen from other villages should not come to Vizhinjam for fishing”. (This was because the riot was said to have sparked off with a quarrel involving fishermen from elsewhere).

ii. No Catholic at Vizhinjam may enter into trade transactions with the Muslims of the area. Fish caught may not be sold to them, nor ice blocks bought from them.

These were announced at Sunday mass. People adhered to these norms without a murmur. One fisherman who came from another village for fishing was beaten up. Two Christian petty traders who tried to sell fish to Muslim merchants through the back door was given a ban order for two weeks. That these were not isolated events, valid only in a riot situation, was made clear by oral history as well as related Church documents.

Some excerpts from the entries in the minutes book of the Parish Committee meetings, during 1982 - 1984 reads as below:

22.2.82 : Thankappan Raju is fined Rs. 101 for misbehaviour.
27.2.82 : If anybody sells arrack to outsiders after 6.00 pm, he will be fined Rs. 101.
27.2.82 : If anybody brings arrack from outside and sells, he will be fined Rs. 501. The one who informs it will be rewarded Rs. 101.
21.3.82 : Forbids sale of arrack within the parish area.
21.3.82 : If anybody goes out and makes a quarrel, he will be fined Rs. 501. If it happens to be a Committee member, the fine will be Rs. 1001.
11.4.82 : Thulavila Antony Christadima is fined Rs.101 as punishment for riotous behaviour after drinking.
27.5.82 : Damayan Joseph, a member of the Parish Committee, is fined Rs. 1001 for quarrel after drinking.
22.6.82 : Rethinam Mary is fined Rs. 501 for selling arrack; Rs. 101 given to those who caught her.
25.7.82 : Patrose Devadas is fined Rs. 501 in arrack case.

20.11.82 : S. Devadas, a member of the Committee, failed to pay the fine of Rs.1001; so he is removed from the Committee.

23.6.83 : Catching fish with craft brought from other places, or selling that fish at Vizhinjam during three months is forbidden; fine for violation is Rs. 1001. Informants will be rewarded Rs. 10.

18.2.84 : Decision to pull down the unauthorized house put up at Valia kadapuram.

26.3.84 : Decision to collect kuthaka at the rate of 5 paisa per rupee. (This was later abandoned due to resistance from the people).

The extract reads more like a judicial document or a police case diary.

6.3.1 The Power of Üruvilakku

This extract illustrates the powerful custom of Üruvilakku (community sanction) still prevalent among the Mukkuvar. In earlier days it meant banishment from the village territory (üru). Other forms of community sanction included a) tying the culprit to the flag post in front of the old church on the sea shore, and beating him or her, b) parading the culprit through the village after shaving his/her head off, and after tying coconut shell or bone-pieces around the neck. These measures existed as late as 30 years ago. A woman ‘caught in sin’ some 40 years ago was tied to the flag post and her head was shaven in public. The same year a lightning struck the post and destroyed it. “This was the result of God’s wrath since the post, which stands for the cross, was defiled by such a woman!”, says an elder. Since then that custom was replaced by the accused holding a cross during mass in front of the congregation.
Similar practices appear quite common in the past in most coastal villages. The newspaper, *The Latin Christian*, of April 25, 1935 reported that a man at Valiathura was fined and asked to hold the cross during Sunday mass for violating a woman. This custom is still in practice in some parishes, though slowly vanishing. Present day forms of *āruvilakku* include ban on work, fining and cancellation of membership in social bodies. A 'sinner' is denied the sacrament of marriage in the parish church, though he is permitted to go to another church and get married, in order to avoid scandal.

*Āruvilakku*, being such a powerful instrument of community control, illustrates how strong the religious influence is on the daily life of the Mukkuvar. In fact *āruvilakku* combines within it not only religious but also social and judicial control systems, but what gives it the sacred aura is the element of religion. It has helped the community to maintain its identity and cohesion in an alien milieu over centuries, by affirming the ancient wisdom and moral codes it had inherited, with all the accompanying ill-effects.

### 6.3.2 The Economic Base of Religious Control

Economic control mechanisms play a central role in the area of religious controls and sanctions. This section discusses two major economic mechanisms that are closely related to fishing, the *sales tax* (S.T.) and the *donation*.

**Sales Tax**: This is a sort of compulsory church tax on all trading operations connected with fish in the village, and is popularly called S.T. or sales tax. Other names to refer to the same are:
kuthaka,₁¹ kāṟu (share), mahima (glory), etc. At Vizhinjam the rate is one paise per rupee, and hence the popular name ‘one paise collection’. Since it is collected at the sale stage it is to be paid by the one who buys. Besides, ST is also applicable to all sale of fishing craft and gear at Vizhinjam which involves an outside party. This applies also to the private boat-building yard which builds boats of plywood and fibre glass, if sold to outsiders. The collection right is given in auction every year (October 25 to next October 24) by the parish committee and is collected daily by over a dozen collection agents on the beach. The auctioned amount for 1995-96 was Rs. 11,52,000.

**Donation:** Every Sunday the kapakkapitta reads out a long list in the church after mass: it is the weekly contribution of a share of the catch to the church by the fishermen. This contribution is purely voluntary, and is called nercha pirivu (sacred share). The amount per week may range between Rs. 3,000 and 30,000. The amount that is entrusted with each boat owner by the crew is handed over to the church every week; no one is appointed to collect it from the beach, unlike in the case of S.T.

The traditional pattern of fishermen's contribution in Mukkuva villages was kuthaka or kāṟu, compulsorily collected at the rate of 5 to 10 per cent. The kuthaka becoming 'donation' at Vizhinjam has its own history. Until 1968 the kuthaka system continued at the rate of 5%, and at times even 10%. But elders say that there had always been problems with kuthaka, either in terms of default by the auctioneer or getting caught up in legal fights. Some auctioneers had to be even excommunicated. The communal clash of 1968 helped the reorganization of the system;

₁¹ kuthaka is the short form of malsya kuthaka. Literally the term kuthaka means a contract or lease of a commodity or facility, implying a monopoly right to the contractor. The term originally comes from the system of taxation that existed in the kingdom of Travancore. The current usage of kuthaka in Mukkuva villages refers to the tax levied by the Church on the catch of fish. Usually the right to collect the tax is auctioned. In some villages the rate is as high as five percent, or even more.
new thinking emerged that *kuthaka* was a kind of slavery to be rid off. Fr. Peter Borgia, the vicar from 1972 onwards, articulated the new thinking: "Let us do away with *kuthaka*; let each one contribute as he wishes". With this the new system of 'donation' came into existence, and continues even today. The ST system at the rate of 1% was introduced simultaneously to ensure a steady income for the church. Church records show that even in 1984 the church committee made a futile attempt to collect *kuthaka* at the rate of five percent.\(^\text{12}\)

In the initial stages the Travancore clergy used to receive stipends from the Goa government. The royal treasury at Goa paid a subsistence allowance of Rs. 750 to the ecclesiastical governor of Cochin, and the 28 vicars on the coast of Travancore and Coromandal received Rs. 108 each per annum, and 15 missionaries in Ceylon also received similar salaries.\(^\text{13}\) However, these stipends were not sufficient to support the churches, and so other sources of revenue were devised; fishermen "were taxed with what was called *tiñes* on the fishing nets, ie. one tenth of the fish caught in every net was given over to the church and the sale proceeds realized.... And this has become a national custom with them, and prevail to this day in all the coasting villages".\(^\text{14}\) In Goa too the Portuguese government used to extract *donativos* (euphemism for compulsory payments) from the natives for maintaining Church institutions.\(^\text{15}\)

History shows that *kuthaka* used to be a tool of religious exploitation of Mukkuvar in the past. Old issues of the newspaper, *The Latin Christian*, carried a series of articles on the *kuthaka*

\(^{12}\) See the minutes of the parish committee meeting held on 26.3.1984, under section 3, above.


\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) Teotonio R. de Souza, *Goa to Me*, p.73.
system way back in 1935, and concluded: "The main reason for the troubles in the Portuguese missions of south Travancore is the *Matsyakuthaka*. Whatever be the term used or the way it is extracted, the Mukkuvar feel the inner compulsion to keep aside the share for the church. "We get fish only if we make contribution to the church" appears to be the general belief. The words of Markos is noteworthy: "To take the money due to the church is as good as being hit by a thunderbolt." The gang members of a boat will alienate the owner if he fails to pay to the church their collective contribution on time. "Let the defaulter be cursed by losing his craft and gear in the sea" is a common curse. Some also observe that voluntary contributions to the church shot up suddenly after the 1995 riots.

The Mukkuvar equate *kuthaka* with the 5th commandment of the Church. The offering of a tenth of all produce to Yahweh was a revered Old Testament custom (Deut. 14:22-29; Lev. 27:30; Neh. 10:37, etc.). The belief that the 'impurity' of a substance will be removed only if a tenth of it is removed is also a strong New Testament motive (Mt. 23:23; Lk. 11:42). These Biblical themes, together with their traditional attitude to the divine, have served well in effectively establishing the Church control over the Mukkuvar at the economic realm.

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17 Personal interview with informant.

18 The 1995 communal riots involving Mukkuvar (Catholic) fishermen and Muslim fishermen at Vizhinjam occurred first on May 14, followed by a second outburst on July 10. Starting with a small quarrel on the beach the incident took on a communal turn in which six people, two Muslims and four Mukkuvar, got killed, and over 200 houses and 100 peeling sheds were set on fire. Vizhinjam has a history of repeated communal riots; there had been riots in 1959, 1968, 1972, and 1982 during the latter half of this century itself.
The affairs of the church and of the Christian community, today, is almost exclusively within the hands of the parish priest and the parish council. The priest, though appointed by the Bishop, has a primordial role and authority in every matter pertaining to the community. His word remains the last word, and the Sunday pulpit provides him the platform from where decisions and directives are proclaimed to the whole congregation in an atmosphere of sacred awe and unchallenging submission. The clearest example was the ban on the production and sale of arrack at Vizhinjam in 1993; in the words of Fr. D Stephen, the then parish priest.

I do not know how it happened. I spoke out openly in the church about the evil of liquor and how it is destroying many of our families. I spoke vehemently against those at Vizhinjam who make liquor and sell it as a cottage industry. I gave a call to give an end to this evil in our parish; I do not know where I got the courage from. The impact it made was so great that immediately after the mass the whole congregation rushed to those houses and centres where the business was going on. They smashed all the pots filled with liquor in violent fury. Some men of the liquor lobby tried to resist, but did not succeed; they found the whole mood totally against them.... Of course, the anti-liquor campaign by the Bishop at the diocesan level, and the enthusiasm of the newly formed BCC's had their role to play....

No wonder that people in many a village refer to their parish priest as kūṭi rāja (petty prince).

This stands in clear contrast with the phenomenon in Tuticorin where the Jāti Talaivan, not the priest, was being referred to as the Little King.

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19 Personal interview with Fr. D. Stephen, the parish priest.

20 Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women*, p.34.

This opens up the complex world of the religious control mechanism of the Mukkuvar vis-a-vis the socio-political control and leadership. Scanty historical records and comparative observations are our sole guiding posts.

The pattern of ecclesiastical controls and offices that is inherited from the time of Mukkuva conversion, survived with minor changes till recently. There are ample references that show the nature of the control structure implanted by Francis Xavier and his companions. The pattern, systematically developed among the Paravas of the Coromandal coast, gave the basic pattern for the Mukkuva parishes too. Xavier had appointed kañakkapiḷḷas in the Travancore villages to supplement the work of priests. Today at Vizhinjam the Kañakkapiḷḷa is both a sacristan and custodian of sacramental registers. Meliṇchi may be a corrupt form of meirinho which Xavier refers to in his letters and instructions. Meirinho is the short form of meirinho do monte in Portuguese, meaning a warden or Portuguese law officer. Meliṇchi’s work, today, is that of a church attendant, and consists of ringing the bell, informing the village if there is a death or a special mass (going around ringing a bell and announcing it), and running errands for the parish priest. He lives on the customary share of fish, known as chevunta. The mūsk used to be the solo ‘singer’ in the church for mass and other ceremonies till recently; with the advent of vernacularisation his role has been taken over by a choir.

12 See chapter 2, section 3.5, for details.


15 Ibid., p.106.
Traces of other specific roles like modom (overseer of ecclesiastical details), ubadesiar (sacristan) and vathiar (teacher) do not exist at Vizhinjam today. The kapakkapilla is also doing the work of the ubadesiar. But an important office having no reference in the missionary records is that of the Pradhani.

6.4.1 Pradhani - the Vanished Community Leader?

Until 1976 a parish committee was administering the affairs of the parish; (the committee was dismissed in 1976). But the actual executive powers were in the hands of an elite group of people called Pradhânis (at times also called pramânis). The last group of Pradhânis 'ruled' over the community for a long period of 27 years when they were replaced by a committee, and later by the parish council. With the setting up of the BCCs which try to decentralize power, the office of Pradhânis disappeared totally. Of the team of the last three Pradhânis, Renkayyan Gera is still alive.

Pradhâniship was confined to a few traditional families. Renkayyan recalls the old days when Sešadima Pirusenti D’Costa, his grand uncle, was the reigning Pradhani and the unquestioned leader of the Mukkuva community at Vizhinjam.26 "Thiru vāyku ethirvāy illa" (no utterance against his royal dictates) was the rule of the day. The kapakkapilla was like an assistant (šešakâran) to the all-powerful Pradhani (sarvâdhikâri). Recalling his own days Gera recollects: "The priest had no power; he simply had to do what we asked him to do. We nominated even the committee members".27 This is confirmed also by Alexander, another elder; "those days the priest was a nobody; his duty was limited to offering mass and to spending the money as the

26 Personal interview with Renkayyan Gera, the Pradhani who is still alive.

27 Ibid.
Pradhānis dictated. The authority of the priest was only nominal. The Pradhānis were like village chiefs; they decided every matter related to the community, whether buying property or putting up a church or settling disputes or fighting the Muslims. They were decisive in executing āruvilakku and other community sanctions. The office of Pradhāni, together with related customs like āruvilakku, appear remnants of a Mukkuva past where a different set up of community leadership existed relatively independent of the formal structures of Catholicism.

However, some explanation is necessary here. The picture of Pradhānis given above is in no way comparable to the office of the Jāti Talaivan who remained the total leader of the Parava community. He presided over wider political and commercial affairs of the community, not merely the social and the religious. In contrast, the Pradhānis appear to be mere shadows of the all-powerful religious leader, the parish priest. The legitimacy of their power came from their affinity to the priest and the religious structures. There is little indication to show that they exerted significant influence in commercial or political matters affecting the community.

6.4.2 Crisis of Leadership in the Mukkuva Community

Today, through a long process of elimination and displacement, the institution of Pradhāni has become extinct, and the office of the parish priest has become pivotal. Three observations make this transition clear:

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28 Personal interview with informant.

29 For a good description of the institution of Pradhaniship as it exists at Poovar, a nearby Mukkuva village, see J. Murickan, Religion and Power Structure in Rural India, Jaipur: Rawat Publ., 1991, pp.54-55.
a) At the communal riots in 1995 the people were rushing to the priest for the leadership role to fight the Muslims. Many were seen complaining that they lost so many lives just because the parish priest (and the parish council) did not provide them with bombs. It was the priest and a team of the parish council that was carrying on the negotiations with the government.

b) A perusal through the minutes book of the parish council meetings would show that most of the deliberations referred neither to spiritual matters nor to Church affairs. They read more like a police case-file, giving details of disciplinary action against persons on complaints of misbehaviour, violation of fishing norms, etc.

c) The thickness of the "Petitions File" in the parish office betrays the steady flow of petitions (most of which should have been dealt with in the village office or fisheries office or police station). The file for 1995 has (till August) over 150 complaints or petitions to be dealt with by the priest or the committee. No wonder "the parish committee has become a parathi (petitions) committee", laments one committee member.

Thus the socio-political, legislative as well as the religious and liturgical leadership of the community have come to stay in an official set up centred around the parish priest. The religious leadership remains so identified with the socio-political that the latter is hardly visible. Looking at it differently, the religious leadership structure might have replaced systematically or destroyed consciously the socio-political and cultural leadership of the Mukkuva community during their Christian history. The mass conversion to Catholicism, simultaneously, has also wiped out every element of community leadership likely to pose a threat to the Christian hegemony. This might
have taken ages to settle the power struggle between the two strands of leadership: the community leadership and the religious leadership. In a reversal of history, the parish priest today assumes the role of a 'tribal chieftain' controlling every aspect of life affecting the community, quite oblivious of the fact that this can be suicidal to the community in the changed political climate of the country. This collapse of leadership is haunting many a thinking person within the Mukkuva community today.

A contrast with Goa and the Coromandal coast (the two major Portuguese centres in India of the same period with similar history) may throw more light on this. It is true that these two places, unlike the Travancore coast, had been political, commercial as well as military headquarters of the Portuguese on the west coast and east coast respectively. Goa was captured by the Portuguese in 1510, and was made the administrative, commercial and ecclesiastical headquarters of the Portuguese India by 1930; later the Court of Inquisition too was added to it. This intermixing of commerce and religion was further strengthened by the worldview of feudal Catholicism with which the Portuguese came. Robinson writes: "In the feudal worldview religion (Catholicism) was the dominant force, politics, kinship and economics all found their place in relation to it".\(^{30}\) This Goan situation explains in part the mental make-up of the missionaries, and later of the Goan

\(^{30}\) Robinson, "The Cross...", p.94.
clergy who held control over the Paravas and the Mukkuvar. According to the Padroado system\textsuperscript{31} which continued in these areas until very recently, the parish priest had been conferred the triple powers over the caste, the village, and the church, if a declaration by a Goan priest at Manapad is proof enough.\textsuperscript{32}

However, among the Paravas of the Coromandal the Portuguese maintained the office and status of the Padjankatins, the Adappans and the Jati talaiyan (caste headman) as central to the social structuring and cohesion of the community. Instead of getting destroyed as a result of conversion the Parava caste institutions got strengthened in their association with the Portuguese, and later the Dutch and the English. The same caste institutions and status system were carried over into the Church context. Although there had been a long history of conflict over this state of affairs, the community leadership maintained its relative autonomy vis-a-vis the religious leadership. True, the Paravas had the advantage of a strong tradition of a system of status and authority even before their conversion.\textsuperscript{33} In Goa too the Portuguese were careful to incorporate the existing caste structure with the domination of the Gauncars (the land owning and ruling caste), thus consolidating the Goan feudalism.

\textsuperscript{31} Padroado or patronage was a form of benefice or reward granted by the Holy See to Portugal (and also to Spain) in return for their active role in the propagation of Catholic faith in the newly discovered territories during the colonial period. The patron had the duty to protect the Christians in countries under their control. The benefice included the right of Portugal to present candidates for bishopric or other ecclesiastical offices in these territories. This privilege was first granted in 1481 by the papal bull \textit{Aeterni Regis}; in 1497 this was extended to the territories in India by Alexander VI by his bull \textit{Ineffabilis}. In 1950 Portugal renounced the Padroado in Indian territory, though the final settlement came only in 1953. The coastal villages of Trivandrum Mission extending from Pallithura to Thengapattanam remained under the Padroado diocese of Cochin until 1955 when this area was annexed to the diocese of Trivandrum which was erected in 1937. See New Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. "Padroado of Portugal" by A. Da Silva Rego.

\textsuperscript{32} Susan Bayly, Saints, Goddesses and Kings, p.376.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp. 321 ff.
Among the Mukkuvar, in contrast, the Portuguese had little commercial or political interest, and the missionaries were left to themselves. The initial interest in Vizhinjam was only to use it as an outlet for shipping their pepper from Travancore. Having little economic or political base as a community, the Mukkuvar, with little resistance, came to be absorbed under the religious leadership that was thrust upon them. The situation continues even today.

6.5 CONCLUSION

Every people tends to evolve forms of religious organization as they find appropriate to their cultural context and worldview. These forms are significant as they unfold the collective consciousness of the community in a concrete religious context. This chapter has been an attempt to see the structure and meaning of certain Mukkuva religious organizations at the latent level. The institutional forms of Catholicism, as a result, have remained outside the purview of this discussion.

One cannot miss the proliferation of sabhakal (devotional associations). Their roots are traced to the confraternities of medieval European Catholicism; their great 'appeal' is founded on the clan orientation of the community (Gemeinschaft) that got destroyed at conversion. The performative dimension of sabhakal also becomes clear; the vacuum created by the total elimination of pre-Christian art forms and cultural performances by the missionaries has been filled by the community through sabhakal to a large extent. Sabhakal, thus, has come to take the role of social clubs and cultural forums.

The traditional mechanisms of brukootam, donation, the office of Pradhāni, etc., indicate a strong heritage of community structures and processes. Their present-day survival reveal the powerful
hold anything religious has over the affairs of the community even today. These have far reaching ecclesiological implications for a contextually relevant Mukkuva Catholicism. Closely linked is the crisis of leadership that is experienced by the community. The systematic displacement of the traditional structures of leadership by the all-powerful ministerial priesthood seems to have adversely affected the organic growth of the community and its leadership.

The chapter opens the door to a re-examination of the structures and processes of religious organization in a Mukkuva context. A reverential approach to the nlithal heritage will be rewarding in this endeavour.