Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND ITS BACKGROUND

This study has emerged out of the researcher's close association with the coastal fisherpeople for over a decade. The insights from observing not only what was happening to the fisherpeople in Kerala in the changing socio-political scenario, but also the shift in the concerns of development workers and social activists have led to the present study.

Much has been written about the condition of the fisherpeople - particularly from a socio-economic or technological perspective. The fact is that after several years of planned development the overwhelming majority of the traditional fisherpeople are getting increasingly impoverished. The story of subtle exploitation and systemic marginalization touches upon the problems of trawling, deep-sea fishing, monopolization of new technology, and export-controlled fisheries management. The fisherpeople have become victims of a system that leaves little breathing space for their survival. In addition to these, the very occupation of marine fishing daily reminds them of the impending danger of death before the mighty ocean.

If so hopeless is the situation, then the inevitable question is what motivates them to continue living? Why do they carry on in the face of a certain and gradual death?...Still they find life worth living; and this is puzzling. What does make it so? What is it that provides them with

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1 The gender-sensitive term fisherpeople has been used consistently, except when referring to a context of fishing which still remains a male activity.
meaning in life? And through what process? ... Here it becomes not merely an economic or political question but deep down a religious question.

The present study is designed on the assumption that the human condition of the fisherpeople cannot be understood or explained purely in terms of economics or politics or technology. These variables alone are inadequate to explain the complexity of the reality. Religion is found to be operative as a key variable. For, the existing human condition is vitally linked up with the inherent capacity of the community to find meaning even in adverse circumstances. Therefore, the present study takes up the religious dimension as basic variable.

This centrality of religion is further exemplified by the experience of social activists and development workers in the recent past. How effective was the vast pool of resources, in money, manpower and in organization, that was pumped into by change-agents? Have they touched only the periphery, or the real core? Many activists are raising these questions, and gradually becoming aware of the central role religion plays in the life of the fisherpeople. The following statement is indicative: "Given the importance most persons in our countries attach to religion, social change is not possible if it remains a purely secular enterprise that can even go against their religious ethos." ²

One cannot miss the dual role religion plays in the life of the fisherpeople: the lethargy and passivity leading them to be resigned to their fate have their roots often in religion; on the other hand, the courage to face the ocean, and the urge to resist powers of oppression also has its roots in religion itself. It is this aspect of ambivalence that would make this study a stimulating exercise.

There is also an additional reason for undertaking this study. There still exists a wide gap between the discipline of theology and the social sciences. Nurtured in the tradition of rational philosophy, the discipline of theology finds it difficult to come to terms with the concrete human reality in which the fisherpeople find themselves. The time has come to view both theology and the social sciences not as divergent disciplines, but as inevitable partners in a common task. Only that will make any attempt to respond to the human paradoxes and challenges really effective. This insight gives further motivation for the study.

1.2 AN OVERVIEW OF PAST ATTEMPTS

The past three decades have seen a spurt of research studies and publications on various aspects of the fishermen's situation in India, and significantly in the state of Kerala. Most of these studies have been concerned either with developmental economics or with fisheries management; some are specifically techno-economic in nature.¹ The complexity of the fisheries situation in the state has forced the state government to appoint a series of commissions to study the issues and make recommendations.² The major thread running through these studies is the introduction of new technologies and their impact/consequences on the fisheries economy and the fishing communities.


in the state. The Indo-Norwegian Project started in 1952 remains the base reference point by and large.\footnote{The Indo-Norwegian Pilot Project was started in 1952 in the twin fishing villages of Saktikulangara and Neendakara in Kollam district in Kerala. It aimed at fisheries development in the state through modernization of technology. When the initial attempts to mechanize the traditional crafts failed, the project resorted to the construction of fully mechanized trawler boats, which became instant success due to the foreign demand for prawns. This technology of mechanized trawling became the core of later controversy as it was said to result in fast depletion of fish wealth, besides destroying the sea-bed itself. The crisis remains still unresolved, in spite of certain control measures.}

Some others, however, have tried to study the fishing communities from the perspective of \textit{culture} or \textit{social change}.\footnote{See P.R.G. Mathur, \textit{The Mappila Fisherfolk of Kerala}. Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1977; J. Velacherry, "A Study of a Fishing Community in Kerala", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delhi, 1982; F. Houtart and Nalini Nayak, \textit{Kerala Fishermen: Culture and social Organization}, Thiruvananthapuram: P.C.O. Centre, 1988; Nalini Nayak, "Continuity and Change in Artisanal Fishing Communities", Thiruvananthapuram: P.C.O & SIFES, 1993; Kalpana Ram, \textit{Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community}. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991; K.M. Udayabhanu, "The Dheevara Community and Social Change in Kerala", Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Kerala, 1990, etc.} These are mostly micro studies of specific fishing communities. Most of these researchers emphasize the vital role religion plays in every sphere of fisherpeople's lives, including economic and political. In the process some even deal with aspects of religious beliefs and practices of the fisherfolk. Yet, so far nobody has directly studied religious phenomena among fisherpeople in a comprehensive way.

A brief overview of attempts made in the past by various researchers will be helpful in opening the doors to the complex world of the religion of the fisherpeople.
The study by Klausen (*Kerala Fishermen and the Indo-Norwegian Pilot Project*)\(^7\) has been a landmark in fisheries studies. As the very name reveals the context of the book is the *Indo-Norwegian Project* (INP), started in 1952 at Saktikulangara/ Neendakara in Kerala, with focus on fisheries development.\(^8\) Though the project had been techno-economic in nature, Klausen's interest takes him to a social-anthropological analysis of the villages where the project had been launched. It is this viewpoint that makes the book relevant to the present study.

The study is "an analysis of the reaction of few local communities to various technological - economical stimuli". At the same time it is also a contribution to the ethnographical knowledge of an unexplored field - ie, "the relation between the Hindu communities and one of the relatively great minorities which are so typical of the South of Kerala, namely, the so-called Latin Catholics". Taking into account the religious factor he tries to find out the structural characteristics of these two communities - the *Arayās* and the Latin Catholics - that have brought about an economic growth.

Klausen analyses the reactions of both the Latin Catholics and the Hindu fishermen (called *Arayās*) to fishing and mechanization in terms of its adequacy. He discovers that the reaction of Latin Catholics to fishing is adequate, while it is less adequate to new distributional system. The reaction of the *Arayās* is inadequate to mechanization, but adequate to the contributions of INP in health sector and administration.


\(^8\) See foot note 4 above on Indo-Norwegian Project.
Klausen brings out forcefully the relevance of knowing the 'value-transformation system' of a community in any change project, and shows how its inadequacy has hindered the INP from achieving its goals. The same insight is relevant to any change oriented strategy - whether of a social activist or a religious agent. However, Klausen does not venture to study the 'value-transformation system' of either community, since it falls outside the scope of his study.

The work by P.R.G. Mathur (The Mappila Fisherfolk of Kerala) is one of the pioneering yet comprehensive ethnographic records of any fishermen community in Kerala. It is an attempt, as the subtitle reveals, to understand certain structural relations between the habitat, technology, economy, society and culture, with regard to the Mappila fishermen of Tanur in Malappuram district.

The Mappila fisherfolk of Tanur are Mukkuva converts to Islam. The chapter on "Fishing in the Ritual Complex" (ch.8) is of special interest to our investigation. His subject of inquiry is the "pattern of persistence and re-interpretation of folk Hindu beliefs by the Mappila fisherfolk". He analyses a number of rituals and magico-religious practices prevalent among them, and argues that these fishermen, though Muslims by religion, still retain many cultural and religious elements from their pre-Islamic tradition, namely that of Hindu Mukkuvar. They even retain their Mukkuva clan names.

The complex body of rituals he analyses fall mostly within the frame of general rituals in the Muslim milieu in Kerala, though acquiring a 'coastal colour'; the prayer pattern (Ancholahatu Niskarams), the fast (noimbu) as well as the celebration of the two feasts (Idul Fitr and Bakrid), fall in this category. He discusses in detail the practices of healing, sorcery and magic, for curing

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diseases and for getting bumper catches. Often Hindu sorcerers are invited to perform them. He also illustrates their belief in the non-Koranic spirits to show that the Mappila Muslims have not abandoned the magico-religious ideas of the local Hindu fishermen. Traditional ideas about certain Gods and Goddesses like Bhagavathy, Gaṇapath and Guḻikan also are still retained, besides belief in the spirit of the departed. Weaving all these together the Mappilas "have developed elaborate rituals and supernaturalism to insure the risk of uncertainty" closely associated with their occupation. So Mathur concludes:

Islam has been superimposed upon a primitive culture; it has not helped the mappilas to give up their own peculiar shades of mystical-magical feelings. Thus, we find that there is co-existence and integration of the beliefs and practices of the Hindus with the Islam tradition. The local tradition is very much syncretised with universalism of Islam. (p.350)

The account of Mathur is relevant on two counts: it focuses on a community of Mukkuva fishermen who happened to shift their religious affiliation a few centuries back, very similar to the community that the present study proposes to investigate. Secondly, though the present religion of both are different, the pre-conversion roots are very similar, in spite of the geographical distance. In addition, the very approach of Mathur indicates a way to approach the complex world of Mukkuva religion. That he keeps away from delving deep into the religious belief system does not make the book less valuable; its objective was not purely religious or theological. However a certain caution is required when he tends to reduce whatever is non-Islamic in the ritual life of the Mappilas as Hindu. Other cultural traits like Jainism, Buddhism, as well as Pre-Dravidian tribalism also are present in the present day coastal culture.
Velacherry’s research study (A Study of a Fishing Community in Kerala)\textsuperscript{10} is specifically focused on the fishing community at Vizhinjam, near Thiruvananthapuram. He charts out a good socio-historical background for study of a complex phenomenon like religion. He analyses the fishermen community at Vizhinjam from 1900 till 1982, with focus on social conflict that characterized the social relations in the village. He examines in detail the areas, the issues and the main determinants of conflict by applying the Weberian model of stratification at the micro-level. Concretely he focuses on the two main groups of fishermen, the Christianis and the Muslims (among the latter he includes both Marakkans and Methans), who are differentiated by religion, caste, ethnic background, and even material culture. He points out how the former relationship of domination and subjugation has given way to relationships governed by principles of equality and co-existence.

While analyzing the institutions of economic organization, the study discusses in detail the operation of udampadi, kāru, and kuthaka, all of which have also a religious bearing. He narrates a total of 37 cases of conflict in the village, 31 of which were inter-communal. Together with these the two intra-community conflicts among the Christianis themselves give a vivid insight into the consciousness of the Christian community regarding its self-identity and its boundaries.

Another significant study of interest in the present context is that of Patrick A. Roche (Fishermen of the Coromandel).\textsuperscript{11} The geographical setting is the Tamilnadu coast, but the occupational and


religious commonality of the Paravas with that of the Mukkuvar makes the book of special interest.

Paravas constitute a major fishing caste in the South-Eastern coast of India, numbering about 1,25,000. Besides the Coromandel they are also found on the Rannad Coast, the Travancore coast as well as in Sri Lanka. They were converted to Catholicism in the first half of the 16th century under the influence of the Portuguese, only a few years before the conversion of the Mukkuvar. The book is a study of this community and the transformation it has undergone during the period C.E.1860-1960.

The book is basically a caste study, and an attempt to reconstruct the social history of the Paravas during the 19th and 20th centuries. Roche discusses various aspects of their religious life, especially the religious leadership and organization of the Paravas. Religious beliefs and practices as such are not a major concern of the book. However, occasional references to many a religious aspect provide a general idea of the Parava community, and in a sense of all fishermen. The coastal stretch extending from Vizhinjam to Kanyakumari, besides, find both Paravas and Mukkuvar living and working intermingled.

Roche discusses how Roman Catholicism emerged as a base of identity and affirmation among the Paravas during the Portuguese period. The first three chapters give a neat historical presentation of the transformation of the Paravas into Catholics, and its impact on the Parava perception of their own identity, using valuable historical documents. It brings out the way Catholicism gradually replaced the Hindu idols, brahmin rituals and temple festivals, by statues, rituals and festivals of a Christian colour thus creating a Parava Catholicism that is part-Iberian and part-Tamil in flavour.
Fisherwomen on the Kerala Coast by Gulati\textsuperscript{12} is also related to the Indo-Norwegian Project. It focuses on the economic and demographic impact brought about by the major changes - technological, economic and demographic - introduced by the Project, over three decades. She takes up three fishing villages for case study, with specific focus on women, and supplements with macro surveys. What makes the book useful is the detailed case-histories of ten women which give an insight into the inner world of fisherwomen. The book highlights the importance of taking the women's dimension fully into account in any developmental programme.

The research study by Houtart and Nayak (Kerala Fishermen - Culture and Social Organization)\textsuperscript{13} takes the whole coastal scene of Kerala as its canvas. The book takes as its point of departure "the importance of religion as the major traditional differentiation among the fishermen of Kerala".

The study focuses on the process of sudden transformation that has been taking place among the fishing groups during the past thirty years, from a socio-economic point of view. Acknowledging the central role religion has played in strengthening the differentiation among fishermen, the study investigates them in terms of the three dominant religious communities: Hindus, Christians and Muslims, as they exist in Kerala today.

The book tries to get a general picture of the cultural universe of the fishermen through an elaborate questionnaire; it uses a stratified sample of individuals distributed equally among the three religious communities, in Alappuzha, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram. It surveys about


20 villages and interviewed 750 persons. The authors specify that religion is understood in the study not as giving "a general meaning to human existence", but as "a function contributing to the reproduction of social relations or to their transformation". They analyze the religious basis of cultural differences in terms of three types of sacrality it envisages: a) a cultural model centred on the conviction that God intervenes in the world and that man is dependent on him; b) the divinity seen as diffused among men; c) God envisaged as the master of history.

All the three religious groups are examined in terms of the above frame. What is relevant to the present study are the findings about the Catholic fishermen; it says that the first two models of the conception of God are shown to be typical of the Catholic fishermen; they assemble 57% of this community. This means that their perspectives are quite sacred and traditional. The social vision is also sacred and practically non-existing at the macro-level. It also shows that the degree of dependence on the religious institution is very high, and the central place of the Church in the entire social life of the group is given as a key explanation for its behavior. It concludes:

Being a minority, who was marginalised and vulnerable...it had to affirm its identity which was best defended by the religious institution.... Exterior signs of identity were important and the function of the totem was replaced by the impressive church buildings erected all along the coast. (p.71)

The book is certainly a bold attempt at understanding the 'cultural universe', and the central place of religion in it with regard to the fishermen of the Kerala coast. Any true search in this area has to go beyond the sectarian view of religion. However the study takes a comparative approach, instead, which yields only superficial results, since it tends to take religion out of its natural setting and worldview of a community. The analytical schema also appears too alien to the thinking and being of the coastal people. The study recognizes the impact of the pre-capitalist forms of existence on the shaping of ideas and representations of the fisherpeople, without analyzing it or without sufficiently relating it to their tribal background before the 9th century.
Probably these indicate the limitations of a purely sociological method if applied to a complex realm like culture and religion.

The work, *The Dhīvara Community and Social Change in Kerala* (1990) is a Ph.D. thesis by K.M. Udayabhanu, submitted to the University of Kerala. It is an attempt to examine "the origin and development of the Dhīvara community, their social transformation and their valuable contribution to social change in Kerala in general." He makes abundant use of historical documents to understand the nature and composition of the community, but also supplements it with primary data gathered through a survey of a few fishing villages selected at random: viz. Quilandy, Friyad, Purakad and Poonthura.

*Dhīvara* is a modern term, meaning 'clever fishermen', says the author. The term has come into current use only recently to refer to the conglomeration of all Hindu castes engaged in fishing occupation. It was in 1984 that the government accepted the term officially to include all these sub-castes in the OEC category. The Dhīvaras of Kerala consist of Arayas, Mukkuvas, Niḷayas, Muγeyas, Paravas and others, says he. Analyzing the legend of Dhīvara origin he discusses how Arayans got dispersed into Kadal Arayan, Mala Arayan and Oṭṭarayan in course of history. The term *mukkuva* had also been used generically to refer to all fishing castes, he makes clear.

Udayabhanu places the Dhīvara community within the broad matrix of social change that has been taking place in Kerala for over a century. His point of reference is the emancipation movements of the different communities and classes. The focus of the work is the caste organization of the community that has served both communal and political interests. One chapter

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14 In fact Dhīvara is an ancient term coming from the Vedic period. Dhīvara and Kaivarta were fishermen groups, probably counted among the dasa of the Rg Veda.
deals with 'the Dhivara community and agitational politics', and highlights the role of Dhivara Sabha.

Being a study done within the discipline of Political Science, the work contributes only minimally to an understanding of the culture or religion of the fishing communities. There are some references to the worship of Bhadrakali, considered to be the caste deity, besides touching upon some rituals, beliefs and some funeral practices.

Vimalakumari's work (*Infant Mortality among Fishermen*)\(^{15}\) also has focus on the fishing village of Vizhinjam. This is basically a comparative study of the two religious communities of fisherpeople - Christians and Muslims - at Vizhinjam; she inquires into the causal factors of infant mortality. She discusses briefly the characteristics of each community, but does not take the religious factor for a serious analysis. Therefore the study does not offer much help for the present investigation.

The theme of the book by Kalpana Ram, (*Mukkuvar Women*)\(^{16}\) is social change and capitalist transformation, though the cultural construction of gender occupies a central place in it. The book has the strength of integrating well both the theoretical concerns of Indian sociology and the ethnographic rigour of an empirical study.


She begins by exposing the inadequacy of both the Marxist economicist views of Indian society, as well as the global culturalist studies that see hierarchy and caste as a total paradigm of Indian society. Instead, she argues for a more complex dialectical theory of culture, and says that culture is mediating the process of capitalist transformation among the Mukkuvar. Emphasizing the cultural construction of meaning she touches upon caste, the landscape, the female body as well as the labour process. The thrust of the book is the exploration of the lives of Mukkuva women as social subjects, as members of an occupationally polluted community.

Her focus on religious phenomena in her treatment of the cultural construction of the Mukkuva community is of great importance. After stating that the self-image the Mukkuvar have constructed is based on their relation to the sea rather than to the land, she writes:

...their relation to the sea is not a material relation as such: it is dominated by a religious conceptualization of the sea and of nature in general. Such conceptualizations are remote from the mind-body dualism of Western philosophy. Mukkuvar religion is this-worldly, without being merely pragmatic; it focuses on the physical environment without ceasing to be mystical and transcendental. (p.232)

She finds an investigation of the religious framework essential to evaluate Mukkuva ideas of the female body.

Discussing the religious consciousness of the Mukkuvar, she highlights the tensions not only between them and the Hindus, but also between popular Catholicism and the official Church. She illustrates, referring to the cult of the Virgin Mary, the way popular Catholicism of the Mukkuvar borrows from certain strands of Hinduism and oversteps the boundaries of the institutionally-based doctrines of the Church. Their concept of the Māta is not merely the valorized form of femininity as found in the official representations of the Church, but also acquires certain features which closely resemble the Hindu village Goddess. Both the nurturing mother and the Eseki-
model of female power are juxtaposed in the Māta. "The Church's representations of the Māta are further challenged by the subterranean presence of Hindu spirits and the malevolent Eseki who brings disease and misfortune."

Ram does not go in depth to other aspects of the religious consciousness of the Mukkuvar, as they are not directly related to her topic. However, her analysis of the Māta provides easy access to the religious world of the Mukkuvar. She appears too naïve when she categorizes whatever comes from outside the official Catholic Church as Hindu.

The monograph by Nalini Nayak (Continuity and Change in Artisanal Fishing Communities)\textsuperscript{17} is a complementary volume to the study by Houtart and Nayak (1988). It is a collection of case studies of five fishing villages along the south-western coast, four of which are in Kerala, and tries to investigate the socio-economic aspects of the artisanal sector following the stage of motorization in the 1980s. The special focus of the study is the role and participation of women.

While assessing the impact of social institutions on women's consciousness, the study indirectly reveals the central role of the religious institutions in their lives. It observes that in most areas of the coast the major influence is that of religion; the institution with which the people interacted most frequently was the mosque or the church or the temple, although the temple remained less institutionalized than the former two. "In both the Christian and Muslim areas religious institutions are considered great sources of succour.... Religion is the force that has continued to sustain the day-to-day struggle of the women, and cannot and should not be denied

\textsuperscript{17} Nalini Nayak, Continuity and Change in Artisanal Fishing Communities: A Study Report, Thiruvananthapuram: P.C.O. and SIPFS, 1993.
and negated in the process of change". It also mentions how the male-dominated religious institutions normally use and manipulate women; but this is not probed in depth.

The study makes an attempt to examine the worldview of the fish workers and to determine the underlying reasoning, using 'factor analysis'. But the attempt remains very preliminary. However, one recommendation the study makes is a valid one: "A deeper understanding of the role of religious institutions, practices and taboos in determining the worldview of the fish workers will help understand further how the community sustains itself."

1.2.1 Some Conclusions

The above discussion shows clearly that considerable amount of work has been done already on various aspects of the life of fisherpeople along the Kerala coast. The major conclusions arrived at by the researchers during the past three decades can schematically be summarized as follows.

The predominant identity of the fisherpeople, including the Mukkuvar, is a religious one. It is difficult to understand their cultural universe except in relation to religion which plays a major influencing role in their lives.

The religious conceptions of the fisherpeople seem to be constructed basically on their relationship to the sea rather than to the land; in other words, the marine habitat and the fishing occupation play a key role in shaping their religious worldview.

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18 *Factor analysis* refers to a category of statistical techniques used for analyzing data, especially of a qualitative nature. It examines the internal structure and inter-relationships of a set of variables and 'reduces' them to a smaller set or *factor*, to simplify the procedures of analysis. The factor provides a higher level of abstraction than the set of variables in question.
Even though fisherpeople have been converted to Christianity or Islam during the past few centuries, religious elements of the pre-conversion heritage persist in their present-day religion.

The studies and monographs that have been examined throw much light on one or another aspect of the life of fisherpeople. At the same time they seem to fail in perceiving the inner world and thought patterns of the fisherpeople, and the influence of these on the process of organizing and orienting their life. This has happened because these studies have not paid enough attention to the religious factor. The academic gap in this area is a fact, and is felt deeply by planners, researchers as well as change-agents. The present study is a partial response to this urgent need, and intends to build on the findings of the past.

Two aspects would make the present attempt significant. Content-wise it tries to enter the religious belief system of the fisherpeople as it is closely bound up with their life context and occupation, and as it is revealed in their rituals and practices. Since religious belief system operates only within the worldview of specific cultural groups, this study delimits the investigation to one such group, namely the Mukkuva Catholic community of fisherpeople. The Mukkuva community is taken as a cultural category, having common traditions and a common religion, besides following a traditional occupation and way of life.19

The second aspect is methodological. Any study of religious phenomenon is likely to superimpose an alien conceptual frame of religion onto a primitive or backward people. It is not easy for a researcher to avoid the pitfall of carrying along one's own inherited religious categories and presuppositions. The history of the discipline of theology, with its accent on written

19 Different authors are found to spell the term Mukkuvar differently, viz. Mucua, Mukkuva, Mukkuvan etc. This study prefers the local usage of the term, according to which Mukkuvan is the singular noun, Mukkuvar, the plural, and Mukkuva, the adjective.
scriptures and a rational articulation, is specially culpable in this regard. Knowing these limitations, the present inquiry attempts to view religion from the stand-point of fisherpeople themselves, grounded in their everyday life and practice, to the extent possible.

1.3 THE OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The overall objective of the present study is to explore the religious phenomena as they exist in a community of fisherpeople, namely the Mukkuvar of Vizhinjam. It intends to better understand the elements and the pattern of beliefs and practices that guide them in their life, and to reflect upon the theological significance of these for the Indian Christian community.

The study is meant to be a deeper search into the religious question mentioned earlier. The fisherpeople may be Hindus or Muslims or Christians in terms of religious affiliation; but the experiences and processes through which they find meaning can hardly be reduced to these credal distinctions. What would be common between a Christian in coastal Vizhinjam and a Christian in Western Europe or Central Africa? In spite of being united by a common creed as a Christian or a Hindu, one's religion gets conditioned and coloured by the nature of his/her life context and the demands it makes on him/her. The religion of fisherpeople can not be understood if detached from the coastal habitat or the fishing occupation. This exploration, thus, aims at grasping the rich religious heritage of the fisherpeople through which they sustain themselves amidst misery and death, or through which they discover meaning and strength to fight for a better tomorrow. In this sense it will be a study of the underlying theology of the fisherpeople, and in the process, an attempt to understand the very method of their theologizing in their everyday life.
More specifically the above objective could further be articulated as follows:

1. to discover the major streams of religio-cultural influences that have contributed to the present day Mukkuva Catholicism;

2. to see how the life-context and the worldview of the community go in to determine their practice of religion;

3. to get a view of the ritual practices and their underlying beliefs, with special focus on the notion of the divine;

4. to chart out the manner in which the community organizes the religion of its everyday life as suited to its life-context;

5. to explore the underlying theology and its method, and to reflect upon their significance for practice of Christian religion in India.

1.4 CLARIFYING THE NOTION OF RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON

The reality denoted by the term religion eludes precise definition. It connotes different meanings for different people, and attempts at definitions succeed to highlight one aspect or another. In the Western tradition study of religious phenomena, was caught up for long in the web of rational speculative thought, with focus on studying ideas about religion, God, and related matters. With Rudolf Otto (1917), in his stress on the experience of the numinous, the non-rational, or rather trans-rational, aspect of religion came to be recognized.
It may be appropriate to recall here, that at a time when religion had been viewed either as characterized by the supernatural, or as emphasizing the subjective experience of the believer, Durkheim presented religion as being essentially a social fact. He developed the sacred-profane polarity to explain religious phenomena. Further he explained how religious phenomena are arranged in two fundamental categories: beliefs and rites. Beliefs express representations of sacred things and their relations among themselves and with profane things. Rites are the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should perform in the presence of sacred objects. Accordingly Durkheim defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things...which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."\(^{20}\)

Later theoreticians embellish Durkheim's substantive definition, and speak of rituals, beliefs and organization as three components constituting religion in the process of institutionalization.\(^{21}\)
Rituals refer to patterns of worship or cultic practices, continuing and re-presenting original religious experiences in symbolic forms. They may consist of words, gestures or other symbols. These are 'acts of expression', expressing inner feelings, attitudes and relationships primarily in relation to what is sacred. Originally spontaneous, these become standardized later in a religious tradition and become 'normative' eliciting certain behaviour in the presence of the sacred. Beliefs are patterns of ideas and definitions articulating the faith of the community at an intellectual level; creeds and theologies emerge from this. Organization refers to forms of association of adherents centred around their beliefs. Christian Church and Buddhist Sangha are macro


The immediate context for his developing the set of concepts was the existing tendency in sociological literature to confuse the subjective categories of motivation with the objective categories of function. The terms had been put to use earlier by Freud and Francis Bacon, but in other contexts; Merton adapted the terms to suit his orientation of functional analysis. He applies them in analyzing the functions of different institutions in contemporary society. While not subscribing to a purely functional orientation, these concepts can become useful conceptual tools for studying religious phenomena.

In the present study the *manifest mode of religion* would refer to the socially recognized and sanctioned elements of religion that exist within conventional and official structures and norms. The *latent mode* refers to those elements of religion that are not recognized and approved by the community, and hence operate outside the official structures and norms. Lesser visibility would go with the latter. The main focus of the present study would be the latent mode of religious phenomena with reference to a fishing community.

Other theoretical constructs also are brought into the analysis when required. The distinction made between *credal religion* and *neithal religion* is one such. *Neithal* refers to the coastal zone in the five-fold geo-social categorization of ancient Tamilakam according to the *Sangam* literature. Each zone reflects its own norms of social living, protector gods and religious practices. The study would use the category *Indice/neithal*, to acknowledge the layers of influence of various Indian religious traditions upon the neithal culture over the ages. The *Indice/neithal* heritage has been contrasted with *credal religions* like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for which a definitive creed is the hallmark. The specific *worldview* of both neithal and credal shows

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25 Ibid., p.115
marked difference. Studies show that it is the worldview of a community that largely determines the behaviour of its individuals, particularly religious behaviour.

The religious beliefs of the Mukkuva community can be ascertained only indirectly from the behaviour of its members; for, the beliefs are not codified as in credal religions, and lie hidden within rituals and practices. Hence, the ritual theory, as well as insights from the Sociology of Everyday Life become useful in the analysis. Care is taken, however, that these theories do not impose themselves on the Mukkuva context, instead allow the context to speak for itself.

1.4.2 The Perspective: Socio-Theological

A historical overview would reveal three distinct perspectives for the study of religious phenomena.26

a) religion considered as an autonomous, self-regulating aspect of human experience that is beyond the influence of material and social environment - a purely transcendental phenomenon. This is a purely dehistoricized theological perspective, and would place religion outside the scope of sociology; The prescriptive definition of religion by Paul Tillich is one example: "God is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately". 27


b) religion understood and explained purely in terms of economic and social environment. It excludes, by implication, those understandings of religion which imply a belief in a transcendent divinity (eg. Marx, Durkheim, Yinger, etc.). This approach is reductionist and finally explains religion away.

c) religion recognized as a social phenomenon, where religious beliefs and experiences are treated as social facts, yet admitting its transcendental dimension as central to it. This may be called "socio-theological" perspective. Robert Bellah, Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger are exponents of this outlook. The present study may be considered socio-theological in this sense.

The social sciences are essential tools in the attempt to understand what is, which is the realm of the empirical. Sociology of Religion shows clearly that the religious phenomena are essentially social facts, linked to other social facts. At the same time it admits of a non-empirical, transcendent dimension in religion. The area of human motivation and life orientation in suffering or poverty, amidst frustration or chaos, is a point to note. The social sciences cannot exhaust the multifarious complexity of the phenomenon of religion or of human life. An approach that incorporates effectively the discipline of theology with the social sciences alone can effectively deal with this complexity and contribute to a proper understanding of religious phenomena.

1.5 METHOD OF INQUIRY

Fisherpeople in Kerala belong to one of the three religious groupings, namely Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Over the years, each group has developed a subculture of its own within a broad coastal culture, with its natural impact on the religious phenomena. This study does not intend a general survey of religious phenomena among all three groups, nor a comparative study of the same, as both are in danger of superficial generalizations. Religions are incomparable. Each
religion, being built on specific worldviews, do not have any common yardstick with which they can be compared. To its adherents each religion is a perfect and complete whole that would satisfy them. To get a valid insight into the religious phenomena among fisherpeople it is necessary to base on one religious grouping, which at the same time has the identity of a specific cultural community.

The choice of the Mukkuva Catholic community at Vizhinjam in Kerala is prompted by two reasons: first, the Mukkuva community constitutes the major fishing segment in the district; second, the village of Vizhinjam has been one of the main fishing centres in South Kerala coast from ancient times, with a natural fishing bay and a vibrant fishing community. Besides, Vizhinjam is less isolated, unlike many other fishing villages, and thus would provide a sample of a complex fishing community that is subjected to various socio-cultural forces. The researcher's familiarity with the locale as well as the community also facilitated the choice.

1.5.1 Case Study Method

Being exploratory in nature the case study method appears more appropriate for the present purpose. Quantitative methods such as sample surveys would depend heavily on the verbal behaviour of the respondents. But in the case of social segments like fisherpeople whose level of literacy is still low, reliance on verbal behaviour is not likely to yield reliable data. Besides, areas like religious phenomenon, where the issue is not one's opinions but deep-rooted beliefs and practices, are not intrinsically attuned to a strictly quantitative method of study.

Case study, traditionally, is a method of qualitative analysis in social research, an in-depth study of a given social unit from a given perspective. In the words of P.V Young, "a comprehensive study of a social unit - be that unit a person, a group, a social institution, a district, or a
community - is called a case study". It seeks to determine social processes, by revealing the complexity of factors and indicating their sequences and interrelationships. The definition given by Yin can be accepted as a standard:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that:
- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which
- multiple sources of evidence are used.

A cross section of social scientists have always objected to accepting case study method as a scientific tool. However, many of them later revised their views more in favour of case method, mostly because of the improved techniques developed by the method, besides the greater competence of those who applied it. There is a wide agreement today that

... case data, more so than any other kind or that secured by any other means, are capable of revealing the interests, motives, and inner lives of persons and the meaning the social world assumes in their outlook on, and reactions to life. Case data tend to represent the natural development of a life-cycle of a person or of an evolving process of a social situation with all complex interrelated factors.

Case studies should not be confused with qualitative research either. According to Yin the essence of qualitative research consists of two conditions: (a) the use of close-up, detailed observation of the natural world by the investigator, and (b) the attempt to avoid prior

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30 Young, *Scientific Social Surveys*, p.271.
commitment to any theoretical model. But case studies need not be limited to these; they can be quantitative too.\textsuperscript{31}

The main disadvantage of case study method, some point out, is that its findings cannot be generalized. External validity, one of the tests of social science research, is closely linked with this question. Can a study's findings be generalized beyond the immediate case studied? Critics point out that single cases often are a poor basis for generalizing. The meaning of \textit{generalization} is to be understood correctly, though; Yin refers to two types of generalization: \textit{statistical generalization} is inference made about a population (universe) on the basis of empirical data collected about a sample; the goal is to enumerate frequencies. This is the most common way of generalizing. \textit{Analytical generalization}, on the other hand, refers to generalization "in which a previously developed theory is used as a template with which to compare the empirical results of the case study. If two or more cases are shown to support the same theory, replication may be claimed."\textsuperscript{32} Case studies employ the latter mode; cases are not 'sampling units', every case is equivalent to a survey or an experiment. The goal is to expand and generalize theories. In other words, it is the 'replication logic', not sampling logic that is at work in case study design.

With reference to the Mukkuva community at Vizhinjam, the case study, by providing a total view of the 'case', can give valid insights into the religious phenomenon as is operative there. Even though individuals are singled out for gathering data, he/she is considered essentially as member of the community. The maxim that "acquaintance with particulars is the beginning of knowledge - scientific or otherwise" is valid not only for psychological sciences but also for matters religious.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{31} Yin, \textit{Case Study Research}, p.25.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p.38.

\textsuperscript{33} Allport, quoted in Young, \textit{Scientific Social Surveys}, p.261.
1.5.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Intensive field work was done during the period of eight months from October 1995 to May 1996. During this period the researcher mostly stayed with the Mukkuva community in the village itself as a participant observer. Besides, data was gathered from a wide spectrum of Mukkuva informants through focused interviews; this was supplemented by data from family histories, parish records and other historical documents. Since 'oral documents' remained one major source of information, a tape recorder was used especially for recording eilamidal and mantric formulae. A supplementary survey of the community was undertaken, in collaboration with the Basic Christian Communities during November 1995. Visits to other fishing centres helped immensely to supplement as well as to cross check the data gathered.

One main difficulty faced during field work was the limited access to the 'religious world of Mukkuva women'. The researcher being a male had little access to interview women respondents at depth, or to observe rituals specifically pertaining to women. This has certainly hindered the attempt to explore Mukkuva religion in a comprehensive way, and hence the outcome remains very much a male perspective.

Religious phenomena is too complex a reality that no single discipline or theoretical frame can exhaust its richness of meaning. The inter-disciplinary approach used in the present study is basically socio-theological in perspective. Every attempt is made to allow the Mukkuva reality to speak for itself, even when other theories are used in the analysis. Theoretical perspectives from different disciplines, it is hoped, will help to understand the religious phenomena in the Mukkuva community in the right perspective.
1.5.3 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis has been arranged in seven chapters.

Chapter 1 formulates the research problem in the context of a detailed review of works done in the area during the past three decades. It also clarifies the theoretical concepts as well as the method of inquiry.

Chapter 2 is an attempt to situate the Mukkuva community in the socio-historical context of Vizhinjam, with a view to trace their religio-cultural roots.

Chapter 3 tries to chart the contours of the Mukkuva worldview, and its influence on the rituals and practices of the community.

Chapter 4 is a descriptive study of certain rituals - both occupational and religious - at the latent level, with a view to understand the pattern of beliefs these would reveal.

Chapter 5 discusses certain symbols and related practices that remain important to the Mukkuva religion at Vizhinjam; the focus is on the community's conception of the divine.

Chapter 6 takes a close look at the organization of Mukkuva religion in the latent mode, highlighting the structures and agents of religious control.

Chapter 7 explores the underlying theology and its method in the Mukkuva practice of religion, and reflects further on the important questions that emerge, from a theological perspective.

Chapter 8 is a brief resume of the study highlighting the significant points and suggesting areas for further research.