

## *Pre-Feudal Kerala : Some Problems and Hypotheses*

As for India in general, so for Kerala in particular, history-writing begins with the consolidation of British power. The *Malabar District Manual* prepared by the British civilian, William Logan, was the first attempt to trace the evolution of Kerala society. It was followed by the *Travancore and Cochin State Manuals* written by Nagamayya and Achutha Menon respectively.

These early works of Kerala history, however, depend heavily on the mythological story of Parasurama for the origin of the land and people of Kerala. That hero of many battles is supposed to have wanted to atone for his 'sins' and so created a new land out of the ocean. He is then credited with giving the whole of this land as a gift to the Brahmins who were settled on the land. The great hero then fixed the rules of conduct for these newly-settled Brahmins as well as for others, making Brahmins the lords of the land and others their loyal dependents. The descendents of the Brahmins are supposed to be the present-day Nairs and other castes.

This mythological story of Kerala's origin was obviously invented by the landlords, most of whom are either themselves Namboodiris or very close to them in caste hierarchy. They had the advantage of being the only educated people in medieval Kerala. They put down the whole story in writing, *Kerala Mahatmyam (Greatness of Kerala)* and *Kerala Pazhama (Antiquity of Kerala)* being the two most notable works in this regard. The story thus got wide currency not only by way of passing from mouth to mouth but with the authority of the written word.

The mythological story was later taken over by British historians and their Indian followers. The authors of the three *Manuals* mentioned earlier, for instance, based themselves on the story, though in a modified form. While rejecting the obviously absurd part which relates to Parasurama having created the land out of the ocean, they argued that behind the mythological story of the creation of Kerala lies the truth that Kerala had been submerged in the ocean but was later thrown up by geological processes. Furthermore, behind the mythological story of Parasurama having given the land as a gift to the Brahmins lies, according to them, the truth that Brahmins came to Kerala and settled themselves as the lords of the land.

This, however, is no longer accepted as the beginning of Kerala's history by the present generation of historians. They on the other hand, point out that Kerala is a land of great antiquity. For evidence, they rely on some archaeological findings which show that human life had started here during the Stone Age; structures built during this period have been found and are being studied for their significance in social evolution. Evidence is, in the meanwhile, accumulating to show that this part of the country was having regular trade connections with Babylonia, Phoenicia, Egypt, etc., in the second and third millennia before Christ. References to Kerala found in such works of the early Aryan period as the *Mahabharata* as well as in Emperor Ashoka's inscriptions are also sought to be interpreted to discover the place of Kerala in the ancient history of India.

All these facts may enable us to draw the conclusion that Kerala was in existence as far back as 3000 B. C. Teak and ivory appear to have been exported from Kerala to Babylonia. We, however, have yet to know how these commodities were produced, what was the mode of living of the people who produced them, how far the mode of production had advanced, whether field cultivation had developed, what were the instruments used in production, etc. Nor do we know the stage to which the arts and crafts had developed, or the manner in which family and social relationships were regulated.

However, the facts brought together so far do not show that

in that epoch of great antiquity, Kerala had a distinct existence of its own. This part of the country was part of the Chera Empire —one of the three South Indian empires. The other two were Chola and Pandya, the three together constituting a system of the political-administrative consolidation of the emerging ruling classes, existing and developing parallel to the Mauryan Empire in the North. This consolidation, as we noted earlier, reflected itself in a distinct language and its literature, Sentamil and the Sangham works which ran parallel to Sanskrit with its epics, works of fiction, science, etc.

The Chera Empire was, of course, more extensive than Kerala, but for some time it seems that one of the coastal towns of Kerala, then known as *Muziris*, the present Kodungalloor in Trichur district, was the headquarters of the emperor. The author of one of the works of Sangham literature is said to have been the ruler having his capital at *Muziris* or Kodungalloor. It, therefore, appears that Kerala had its place in history not as an independent entity but as part of the Chera Empire.

While thus an integral part of the Dravidian social order which was developing in the South as a parallel to the Vedic society in the North, Kerala had, down to the modern age, features of social-cultural life which marked it off from both the northern Aryan and the southern Dravidian pattern. A peculiar Kerala version of the *varna*-caste society, of social and family life, of land relations, etc., marked Kerala off from both the North and other parts of South India.

Various explanations have been given for this peculiarity of Kerala. It is to this job that eminent historians of Kerala from the authors of the three *Manuals*, mentioned above, through such eminent authors as Padmanabha Menon, down to the authors of the recently published two-volume work brought out by the Kerala Association, have dedicated themselves in their researches. The present writer too in his earlier works had dealt with some of the problems posed by these historians. It had been stated there that what was being offered in those works was nothing more than certain hypotheses whose veracity

should be established by further study. The author has since had the opportunity to make further studies based on which the hypotheses made then are being subjected to radical revision. It is hoped that this would help expose some of the baseless 'theories' to which many historians appear to be still clinging.

## II

One of the 'theories' propounded by the historians of Kerala which is hardly challenged is that the Vedic civilization of the North was brought to Kerala by the Brahmins whose descendants are the present-day Namboodiris, who not only established the authority of the *Vedas* and other scriptures among the people of Kerala but made their own distinctive contributions to the further development of Vedic culture. The Vedanta philosophy developed by Sankara is cited as a standing example of this.

It is, however, interesting that the original division of society in the North—into four *Varnas*—did not repeat itself in Kerala. In fact, only one of the four *Varnas*—the *Brahmana* has become part of Kerala's Hindu society. The next one—*Kshatriya* is of course there; many of the erstwhile ruling families (the most important being Cochin) belonged to this caste. But the bulk of those who carried on the profession of the *Kshatriya*—warfare—were drawn from outside this caste.

The traditional warriors of Kerala in historical times are the Nairs who, by occupation, combined the functions of *Kshatriya* with those of the *Vaisya* and *Sudra*: they were simultaneously the backbone of the military system, stratum of the cultivating population and did service to the Brahmin and ruling families. Added to these are two other facts :

First, many of the ruling families of Kerala in historical times are non-*Kshatriyas*—including the two most powerful on the eve of the coming of the British and other foreign companies—the Zamorin of Calicut and the Maharaja of Travancore.

Second, the third caste, *Vaisya*, is totally absent in the caste hierarchy of Kerala.

The conclusion is thus irresistible that the break-up of primitive Communism and the emergence of class-caste society took place in Kerala later than in the Gangetic plains. The division of labour had not reached such an advanced stage as to separate the functions of administration, warfare, cultivation and unskilled labour. Only the profession of the *Brahmana*—priest-craft and intellectual pursuits—separated itself from the rest.

The absence of any caste in Kerala's Hindu society whose traditional occupation is trade is particularly significant. Even in historical times, the castes who perform the functions of the *Vaisya* elsewhere are outside the fold of Kerala's Hindu society—the Jews, the Muslims, the Christians and later on the Chettis from Tamil Nadu. Seen against the background of the minute division of castes and sub-castes for each minor occupation, the absence of a caste enjoined on to do trading can lead us to no other conclusion than that the development of trade in Kerala coincided with the coming of foreigners.

It is natural under these circumstances that Kerala should not have thrown up its own conquerors and empire-builders in ancient days. The Gangetic plains had their empires like the Maurya. In the south too, there were the Chera, Chola and Pandya Empires and Kingdoms. They could rise and develop only when the mode of production and technique had developed so far that it became worthwhile to fight and conquer more and more lands, subjugate more and more people. This had become possible in the northern Gangetic plains as well as in the Kaveri delta, but not in Kerala. As a matter of fact, Kerala itself came to be subjugated by the Chera emperors.

Culturally, too, Kerala appears to have been lagging behind the Gangetic plains and the Kaveri delta. The former had its *Vedas* and other literature. The latter had its Sangham literature. The former had thrown up a refined literary language (Sanskrit) which stood over and above the various bulk languages (*Prakrits*): the latter too had developed its own Sentamil which stood over and above the various *Kodum Tamils*.

The division of labour in social life, the formation of kingdoms and the empires and the emergence of an elite (intellectual, administrative, military and other sections) of the society were accompanied by the development of a more developed culture out of the various tribal or other folk cultures, the emergence of a written literary language out of the various unwritten folk languages.

Kerala, however, had no such development. Its intellectual elite of historical time depended solely on the products of either this or that culture—Sanskrit or Sentamil.

A section of them (obviously the majority) were the followers of the Northern (Sanskrit) culture; they studied the *Vedas* and other sage-produced (*rishi-prokta*) works; they followed the injunctions of these works, applied them in their daily lives; they popularized the teachings contained in the holy books in such forms as are appropriate for the 'low caste people'; some of them even added their own contributions to the knowledge of and discussions on the subjects dealt with in these works.

At the same time, there were others who engaged themselves in the development of the Southern (Tamil) culture. They were the products of the Chera Empire, including some of the emperors themselves. The contributions made by this group to the development of a genuinely Kerala culture can be seen from the fact that the earliest work in Malayalam (acknowledged as such by the historians of Malayalam literature) is written in a language which resembles Sentamil.

In short, Kerala was lagging behind the Gangetic plains as well as the Kaveri delta in point of social (class-caste) divisions, political system (emergence of kingdoms and empires) and cultural advance. But this backwardness was being rapidly overcome. The soil had already been prepared before the Chera emperors had subjugated Kerala: class-caste division had made its appearance with all that it implies. The question was, how will it develop? What form will it take?

### III

Still another feature which marked Kerala off from the rest of (northern and southern) India is the continuity of the patriarchal and matriarchal joint family system, the matriarchal being far more widespread than the patriarchal. The break-up of this joint family system in fact did not start till the early decades of the present century. The traces of both can still be seen, though the system is very fast breaking up. Engels in his celebrated work *Origin of Family* had in fact referred to the Nairs in India as having the system of group marriages. He said :

At least, among the Nairs in India, the men, in groups of three, four or more, have, to be sure, one wife in common; but each of them can simultaneously have a second wife in common with three or more other men, and in the same way, a third wife, a fourth and so on.... This marriage club business, however, is by no means real polyandry; on the contrary, it is a specialized form of group marriage, the men living in polygamy, the women in polyandry. (Engels, *Origin of Family, Private Property and State*, in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977, p. 491).

He added that 'the certainly not uninteresting origin of this form of group marriage requires closer investigation.' (*Ibid*, p. 491)

Engels was entirely correct on the main point—the existence of group marriage in this part of India. The above statement, however, requires certain modifications.

1. It is not so much among the Nairs, but among some of the more backward castes, that the type of group marriage which Engels describes was universal in his day and prevails, to some extent, even today. (The present writer has himself come across cases of three or four brothers having one wife in common but not among the Nairs, among whom the custom has by and large become extinct for a few generations.)



2. Nairs do not have polyandrous marriages but used to have polygamy and easy divorce. It was only in the 1920s that polygamy was prohibited by law and divorce controlled among Nairs. Even today, however, either the man or the wife can get a divorce if he or she wants it, though it involves procedures more complicated than before.

3. This system of free marriage and easy divorce prevailed, however, not only among the Nairs but among most other Hindu castes in Kerala, the only notable exception among the Hindus being the Namboodiris who have no right of divorce.

4. Even among the Namboodiris, there is a peculiar type of marital relationship that cannot be rationally explained in any other way than that it is a transitional form from group marriage to the patriarchal family. The system is as follows : only the eldest son marries a Namboodiri girl but he takes more wives than one (three is the usual number). The younger brothers take wives from other castes including Nairs. There is a particular stanza in *Sankara Smriti* (the authority quoted in support of all customs prevalent among the Namboodiris) which says that the birth of a son to the eldest brother will relieve the younger brothers of 'the sin of sonlessness', the elder brother's sons being as good as the sons of all the brothers. Only if the eldest brother has no son (even after taking two or three wives) does the younger brother take a wife from his own caste—that too, only in order to beget a son and relieve the family of the 'sin of sonlessness'.

Add to these the fact that impartible joint family is the normal practice in all Hindu castes. The only difference is that, while some castes have the family arranged on the basis of patriarchy, others have it on the basis of matriarchy. Thus, while the Namboodiri has his joint family property passed on from father to son, the Nair has it passed on from mother to daughter. As a matter of fact, if only a decision was made 'that in future the descendents of the male members should remain in the gens and transferred to that of their father' (Engels), the Nair joint family will become the Namboodiri kind—leaving aside of course the additional difference that,

while all the children of the sisters in the Nair family, are members of the family, the children of only the Namboodiri family belong to it.

Looking at these mystifying types of marriage and family relationships from the Marxist point of view—development from group marriage to monogamy—the whole thing becomes clear ; the polyandrous family whose traces are still to be found in certain backward castes is the more or less pure form of group marriage Engels calls the Punaluan family ; the type of marriage which has polygamy and easy divorce but which is dying though not yet completely dead, among the Nairs and several other castes, is one form of transition from group to pairing marriage ; while the type of marriage in which only the eldest brother marries within the caste (and he marries several women) is another form of transition from group to pairing marriage. While the first shows, as Engels says, 'a certain pairing for longer or shorter periods taking place already under group marriage', and gradually 'being supplanted by the pairing family', the second shows a gradual exclusion of the younger brothers from the marital ties that they had under the earlier group marriage.

It thus becomes clear that what seems to an outside observer the strange and mysterious ways of the Malayalees are nothing but the various stages of development of the earlier system of group marriage about which Engels had wisely suggested 'the certainly not uninteresting origin...requires investigation.'

This explanation of the marriage and family system of Kerala down to modern times, of course, requires further investigation. For the moment, it is suggested as nothing else than a hypothesis to work upon. But, even as a hypothesis, it cannot be accepted unless we take up for discussion some basic ideas universally accepted by all the acknowledged authorities on the history of Kerala. We will, therefore, now turn to these ideas and see how far they are correct and how they conform to the above explanation of the marriage and family system of Kerala.

## IV

According to a 'theory' accepted by all the acknowledged authorities on the history of Kerala, Malayalees of all castes, except the scheduled castes and tribes, are immigrants. The highest caste, the Namboodiri, it is said, came and colonized Kerala some time between the second century B.C. and the eighth century A.D.; the Nair is supposed to have come earlier than the Namboodiri, though in his case there are some historians who argue that he is not an immigrant at all; the Ezhava too is said to have come some time just before or just after the beginning of the Christian era; the Jew, the Christian, the Muslim, etc., are all, of course, immigrants themselves or converts.

These basic assumptions of the history of Kerala are so universally accepted that it is considered to be fantastic to challenge them, to suggest that these people also may have been the descendants of the earliest inhabitants of Kerala. The author of the latest edition of the *Travancore State Manual*, for instance, complains that 'the notion of the migration of peoples has gained such great currency among ethnologists and historians that, in writing the history of a country, they proceed from a fundamental assumption that the earliest people inhabiting any part of the civilized world must have come from some other part.' (Vol. II, *History*, p. 11) Even he, however, agrees that at least the Namboodiris and Ezhavas are immigrants, the former from the North and the latter from Ceylon.

The assumption, however, cannot stand the severe test of criticism from the point of view of the similarity and dissimilarity of social life. For, the organization of family life and property relations of the Namboodiri in Kerala is so similar to that of the Nair, and so different from that of the North Indian Brahmin that it is difficult to accept the theory that the Namboodiris are Brahmin immigrants from the North. As a matter of fact, if one were to examine the problem from the point of view of the organization of social life one would be forced to come to the conclusion that the Nair and the Namboodiri belong to the same racial stock, evolved the same

form of social and family organization, the only difference being that the Namboodiri adopted the social and cultural make-up of the North Indian Brahmin to a slightly greater degree than the Nair.

We have already seen that the mystifying complexities of marriage and family in Kerala cannot be explained except on the assumption that there have occurred a series of transformations in the original family, leading up to the large number of forms of transition from group marriage to the patriarchal family. There are, therefore, very strong reasons to believe that all the castes that are considered caste Hindu (of which the highest is the Namboodiri and the lowest the Nair) were once of the same caste, that there was free intermarriage among them; that they were all following a type of group marriage (nearer to what Engels calls the Punaluan family than to any other); that certain of these castes began to impose restrictions on the freedom of marriage and to make the transition from mother-right to father-right; that the caste which imposed the maximum amount of restrictions on the freedom of marriage and the sharpest break from mother-right to father-right (the Namboodiri) became the highest caste, while that which retained the maximum amount of freedom in marriage and divorce and preserved mother-right intact became the lowest of the caste Hindus or *Savarnas* (Nairs).

The difference between the North Indian or even the Tamilian Brahmin, on the one hand, and the Namboodiri of Kerala, on the other, is so manifest that the very tradition, accepted as basically correct by historians, says that the Nair resisted the Namboodiri so much that the latter thought it wise to adopt some of the former's customs. It is, however, highly improbable that a vedic Brahmin taught for generations to observe the strict injunctions of caste rules when getting married should agree to make the taking of a non-caste wife a regular practice in the case of all but the eldest son.

This is as fantastic as the 'theory' advanced by one historian that the Nair had in fact adopted the patriarchal family but

was forced by the Namboodiri to go back to matriarchy. Is it imaginable that either the North Indian Brahmin who came here and became the Namboodiri or the original Nair will, for any reason, give up the pattern of social life to which he had been accustomed for generations? The only rational explanation for the family organization of the Namboodiri and the Nair can be that the previous system of Namboodiri and Nair boys and girls marrying one another freely was changed to the system under which Nair girls are married to boys belonging to any of the higher castes but not *vice versa*.

The question arises; if that is the case, how is one to explain the universally held belief that the Namboodiri is an immigrant, coupled with the fact he is the only one to represent, though inadequately, the culture of the North Indian Brahmin? This author for his part does not consider it necessary to dispute that small groups of Brahmins came from the North and settled themselves in Kerala. Nor need it be disputed that it was they who brought the culture of the North Indian Brahmin to the people here. What is disputed, and should be disputed, is that all or even the majority of the Namboodiris are descendents of Brahmins from the North. The development of the original Nair (we will use this term for that caste which comprised all the castes that are today included in the caste Hindu-Savarnas) to the present-day Namboodiri and Nair may probably be as follows :

1. The original Nair was following the system of group marriage and matriarchal family. Since, however, the forces of production were going through such transformations as to lead to the development of economic and social life, the family also must have been subjected to transformations, though we know little about their character. It was brought from the North by the immigrant groups.

2. The Brahminical culture brought by the immigrants from the North influenced certain sections of the original Nairs. Some of them gave up the system of group marriage, introduced strict monogamy for the woman, but continued to allow

loose marriage and concubinage in the case of men who were allowed to participate in the system of group marriage where that was retained. These sections also changed over from mother-right to father-right. Furthermore, they began to study the *Vedas*, etc., but still retained some of their earlier practices like post-puberty marriage of the girls, keeping the tuft of hair not in the rear of the head but in front, etc. These sections of the original Nairs plus those North Indians who came here became the Namboodiris.

3. Certain other sections of the original Nairs were also influenced by the culture of the North Indian Brahmin but not to the same degree or in the same manner. Some of them restricted the freedom of marriage to this extent that their girls were not allowed to marry except within the caste or a Namboodiri; they, however, retained mother-right. Some others went a step further and changed over mother-right to father-right but did not take to the study of the *Vedas*. All these castes, numbering over a dozen, are together called *antharala jatis*, i.e., castes that stand in between the Namboodiri and the Nair. Each of these castes does, of course, stand in a particular order in the caste hierarchy, performing a particular job fixed by custom—jobs which are either connected with temples or are of service to Brahmins.

4. The present-day Nair is that section of the original Nair which made the least change in the ancient organization of family and social life, the section which adopted the Brahminical culture to the least degree. But even they accepted it to the extent that they began to consider the sections which made bigger changes, to be superior castes.

It may be mentioned in this connection that what actually happened subsequently in the case of Christians and Muslims makes the above process look probable, even logical.

What happened in the case of Christians was that small groups, beginning with St. Thomas according to tradition, came to Kerala, propagated their cult, and converted the local people, beginning with the high-caste people. In this process of con-



version, however, they made such adjustments in the social life of the new converts that the Syrian Christian of Kerala is even today as different from his brothers of other countries as the Namboodiri of Kerala is from his brother Brahmin of other parts of India. The Syrian Christian of Kerala is so proud of his independence from Christians outside that the Portuguese who tried to dominate over him in the sixteenth century had to face stiff resistance, as was witnessed in the memorable incident known as *Koonan Kurisu Satyam* (pledge taken with the Cross of Koonan Hill). Nobody suggests that anything more than a microscopic minority of the present-day Christians are the descendents of those who came from outside.

This is true also of the Muslims ; only a very small or insignificant number of Muslim families came from Arabia. The rest are converts.

If this is how Christianity and Islam penetrated Kerala society, why should it be assumed that Brahminism could have come only along with hundreds of Brahmin families who have continued to remain the sole inheritors of Brahminism ?

Equally unhistorical is the theory that Ezhavas are immigrants from Ceylon. For, it is most improbable that a section of the people constituting nearly 25 per cent of the Malayalee Hindu population today should have come from outside during the last 2,000 years without leaving behind them any trace of their having come and settled here. (Ezhavas are supposed to have brought Buddhism from Ceylon. Hence they could not have come here before the beginning of the Christian era.) And yet historians accept the 'theory' with no other evidence than the extremely far-fetched interpretation of certain words like *ilava* and *thenkai*.

Here again, it need not be disputed that some people came from Ceylon and they had very much to do with the propagation of Buddhism. What is disputed and should be disputed, is that all or even the majority of the Ezhavas are the descendents of Buddhist immigrants from Ceylon. The manner in which the Ezhavas of today evolved themselves is probably that,

as Brahminism brought from the North by small groups was influencing certain sections of the people of Kerala, Buddhism brought from Ceylon by some other small groups was doing the same thing in the case of other sections; and that, while the sections influenced by Brahminism became Namboodiris, *antharala jatis* and Nairs, the sect influenced by Buddhism became Ezhavas.

We, therefore, come to the conclusion that the so-called colonization by the Namboodiris and the Ezhavas is nothing more than a figurative expression for the penetration of the Brahmin and Buddhist cultures brought by small groups of Brahmins and Buddhists and the consequent transformation of the social organization of Kerala. But the penetration of Brahminism and Buddhism has taken place not in Kerala but in other places also. And yet we find that, while Brahminism dealt a crushing blow to the ancient form of social organization in other parts of India, it is only in Kerala that remnants of the earliest form of social organization—group marriage, mother-right, etc.—continued more or less unimpaired even under Brahminism and Buddhism.

## V

These differences between the North and the South and between Kerala and the rest of the South do not mean that the Vedic civilization, its off-shoots in the form of Buddhism and Jainism, the impact of Islam and Christianity, the furious debates among the various philosophical systems developed by the Brahminical, the Buddhist and Islamic scholars, etc., left South India generally and Kerala in particular unaffected. On the other hand, the big turmoils on the military, economic and intellectual planes that rocked North India when successive waves of invasion came from outside, with the consequent conflicts and confrontations between the invading and defending forces, had their echo in the South.

Even though the invasion in their military-administrative form were not so strong and penetrating in the South as in the North, Kerala being still less affected by them, other forms of invasion and aggression did reach the South. At least from the



days of Buddhism, the messengers of the faith reached all corners of India (and even several foreign countries). Their influence was felt on the habits and beliefs of the original inhabitants or tribes everywhere. This, in its turn, was connected with the trade drive launched by the class of *shreshhtis* who developed their Southern version of Chettis. These cultural-intellectual and trade contacts between the North and the South completely changed the character of Southern society as it was in the days of Sangham literature.

Kerala, which remained the farthest from the sources of Vedic civilization was also caught up in this intellectual invasion. Its top elite adapted itself to and made its own contributions to the development of Tamil literature in the early epoch as well as to its Sanskrit counterpart later. Many are the authors from Kerala who produced high quality works in poetry, philosophy and various fields of the then developed sciences. By the time of the middle ages, as we shall see in the next chapter, Kerala had developed a highly organized system of land relations and military-feudal administration. The land and people of Kerala were thus not a small island in the vast ocean of the Northern dominated Vedic civilization and its successors. Influenced by the latter to begin with, Kerala became very much a part of it and made its own contributions to it.