

ECONOMIC UNDERCURRENTS OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY KERALA

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Abstract: This article is a look at the structural economic changes which transmuted the social sensibility and habits of Kerala in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the next.

The institution of caste has been the most significant motor force in Kerala society ever since the Chera-Chola war, when the transition from tribe to caste occurred. It happened due to the breakdown of kinship which had prevailed in the tribal society, and the consequent use of non-kin labour in production (Sudheerkumar 12). Caste structure in Kerala was entirely distinct—both historically and socially—from that in North India. The Malayali Brahmins (Namboothiris) constituted only 0.5% of the population while the foreign Brahmins constituted another 1.2%. Kshatriyas presence was marginal while Vaishyas were non-existent. Owing to lower population of higher *varnas*, Brahmins had to depend on Nairs (who are classified as *Sudras* in the four-fold *varna* system) for warfare, defence, military and land administration. Hence the social order in Kerala during medieval times is characterised by the dominance of Namboothiri and Nair communities. In a predominantly agrarian society, trading functions were carried out by Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims. Generally speaking the social status of Christians and Muslims was analogous to that of Ezhavas (Kerala Gazetteer 430), though the latter had to face more discrimination in matters of education and employment. Caste hierarchy was strongly characterised by untouchability. By the second half of the nineteenth century, there occurred a host of changes in the social sphere which led to the weakening of the caste-based economic system. This paper tries to see this upheaval in economic terms or find the reasons for the social change which occurred in Kerala.

Economists have given scant regard to the study of caste, arguably because of the western origins and bias of the discipline. Moreover, behaviour of agents and actors in a caste-based economy defies the traditional economic logic. They may not be able to positively respond to incentives or strive to realise selfish goals even if they wish to do so since caste precludes all forms of competition and prevents any attempt at upward social mobility. Economists of classical school, in contrast, base their analysis on the idea of self-interest. As Adam Smith, generally considered the originator of modern economics phrase it, “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” But this is unlikely to occur in a caste-based economy. It is evident that players of such a system are inherently unable to act out of self-interest measured in monetary terms. This happens primarily because caste is a system which predates capitalism, and hence its internal economic relations are not strictly defined on a monetary basis.

Neoclassical paradigm in economics is based on the Pareto Optimality principle. In such a system, there should be efficiency in the distribution of commodities among consumers, efficiency in the allocation of factors among firms and efficiency in the allocation of factors among commodities. It is easy to see that the caste system is blatantly against all these principles. As an institution, it allows a few elite members at the topmost social strata to own or consume all commodities while those at the bottom are left out to face crushing deprivation and subjected to abject living conditions. Moreover, it tends to be a labour-intensive system with no regard for investment in capital. Dr B.R. Ambedkar perceptively observes that “caste does not result in economic efficiency. It has completely disorganised and demoralised the Hindus” (Ambedkar 18). Then how did the system survive for a long time? George Akerlof, a Nobel laureate in economics and noted for his work in information economics, argues that the mechanism of social ostracism is the main deterrent for people in emancipating themselves from the customary practices and normative structures embedded in caste relations. In such an ideational environment the greatest rewards go to those who do not break social customs, never to rebels and iconoclasts. In fact those who try change, let alone destroy, existing customs are bound to face social ostracism or even physical punishment (Deshpande 47). *Smarthavicharam* is one locus which combines the superordinate nature of caste, fears of racial purity and excessive obsession with status quo.

If the institutional mechanisms preserving the system were so strong and solid, how did social changes happen in Kerala in the later decades of the nineteenth century? The economist James G. Scoville lays down three fundamental conditions for the survival of the caste system. One is impermeability—workers cannot leave their caste; the next is

permanence—the feeling that the existing social system is supposed to be permanent; the last is inevitability—lack of alternative sources of supply or demand for the goods and services provided by the community(Scoville 387).It can be observed that all these conditions were seriously challenged in the nineteenth century Kerala society, which led to the weakening of caste hegemony and prescriptive rules.

Protestant missionaries who reached Kerala significantly dented the impermeability of the caste system. They used a variety of measures aimed at massive proselytisation which included financial as well as social privileges. A large number of people from the agrestic slave and other depressed castes in Kerala zealously converted to the new faith. Though their social status didn't substantially change, they were able to enjoy better and unprecedented mobility. Though Ezhavas did not convert *en masse* due to the higher earning potential of their traditional occupation and the condition that a neophyte had to forsake his family property, they used the threat of conversion as a bargaining tool (Jeffrey 109). Spread of modern education had a pivotal role in demolishing the belief that the caste system is supposed to be permanent. As people gained skills and started escaping from traditional occupations, the survival of the system came into question.

Coming to the third condition—inevitability—one can say that caste essentially operates within and as part of a closed economy. Prior to the nineteenth century, Kerala economy was hermetically sealed except for the overseas trade in spices. Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy and the land for cultivation was owned by Savarna castes as a non-transferrable hereditary possession. What Karl Marx defines as surplus in the process of agricultural production would be invariably abrogated by the Savarna castes. In the absence of effective external demand or supply, which could leverage aspirations of lower social groups, the whole system was doomed to remain stagnant.

The British wanted to open up the economy to serve their own interests. Local rulers, given the asymmetry in armament and information, had no option but to relent to colonial interests. In this situation the indigenous economy was gradually but unmistakably opened up which led to greater interaction with the capitalist world economy. The changes which occurred due to this were profoundly impacting and overflowing. The long and short of the process was that the financial tectonic plates of Kerala ceased to move within the innate restraints of a crop economy and began to work in a much more dynamic cash economy. There appeared huge external demand for commodities produced in Kerala and there was some amount of external supply too. The new scenario benefitted various social and caste groups in radical ways. The changes on the minds and priorities of the people were also

serious. Robin Jeffrey in the book *Decline of Nair Dominance* portrays this change in the following words:

In Travancore in 1847, it was as if the various groups were seated at a table with stacks of poker chips in front of them. Nairs had more than most others, while Malayali Brahmins had so many that the ensuing game lacked interest and they disdained playing at all. For others, there was no option but to play. In the course of the game, new rules were made, new chips came into play and the values of some of the old chips were drastically reduced. By 1908, when the players looked up, they found that the chips in many cases has been redistributed. Some groups had gained from others or have won some of the new counters. Other groups have found that not only had they lost chips, their chips have turned worthless. (33)

The most important of these ‘poker chips’ that the Savarna castes had possessed was land. Certain legislations enacted during this period reduced the Savarna monopoly on land. In 1818, a government regulation encouraging conversion of waste land into agricultural land was issued. The regulation guaranteed the enjoyment of such lands tax-free for first ten years and light taxation afterwards. In addition, abandoned lands were assigned to those who were willing to cultivate them. The shift in policy opened up the possibility of Syrian Christians and Ezhavas acquiring tracts of government on lease for cultivation which was almost impossible earlier as the distribution of land was largely governed by traditional caste structure (Tharakan 1959). This laid the groundwork for later government regulations on land. In 1865, the Diwan of Travancore, Madhava Rao, issued a proclamation granting full ownership rights to holders of two lakh acres of government *pattam* land. The landowners thus got the right to sell their land consequent to which Rs. 1.5 crores of land value was created (Jeffrey 80). As land became a saleable commodity, it boosted the emergence of the cash economy and more importantly sustained the new order of things. Predictably the new monetary value of land fueled partition disputes in Nair families. In 1867, the royal government of Travancore issued a second proclamation allowing the tenant security of tenure and automatic renewal of licences at the end of twelve years. Nair and Namboothiri *janmis*, as a result, lost their hitherto unchallenged and inviolable economic leverage against the tenants who were mostly Christians, Ezhavas, Muslims or Nairs of a lower sub-caste group (Jeffrey 81). With cash value being added to land, family arrangements which permitted efficient management of earnings became important. So did familiarity with cash transactions. In the changed circumstance traditional feudal communities like Nairs and Namboothiris suffered while the traditional trading communities like Ezhavas and Christians prospered (Jeffrey 82).

In addition to the alienation of land, decline of agriculture, especially that of paddy, led to the waning influence of social groups which historically depended on agriculture. Till 1840s, Travancore was an exporter of rice. In 1880, it began importing rice worth Rs. 14.5 lakhs annually. Traditional wisdom in economics, like the theory of Comparative Advantage¹, hypothesises that a region will import a commodity that it cannot produce cheaply compared to other regions. Logically it will export the ones which it can produce cheaply compared to other regions. While expansion of demand due to increase in population and increase in purchasing power by the lower strata of the population had a role behind Travancore becoming an importer of rice, supply side conditions too could have had a role. Production of paddy was slowly becoming unprofitable. Population density of Kerala at that time was hundred people per square kilometre, which was definitely one of the highest in India. This further increased the opportunity cost of land². Making the scenario bleaker for feudal lords and large farmers, slave labour was abolished in Travancore in 1843. Now, workers had to be paid wages in money, though the wages were low. This prevented *Savarnajannis* from extracting much surplus as they used to do in the past.

Plantation crops and coconut products, during the same period, had a brighter tale to tell. Kerala was an exporter of these products as they were in huge demand in the West. Being the only place where such commodities could be cultivated, Kerala had a comparative advantage by default. On the supply side, there were no labour problems in the plantation sector. Plantations were located in hilly areas where there was a state of dependence of labourers on the planters, a condition which was not only akin to, but outright unimaginable in feudalism. The planters provided labourers all basic facilities like residence, medical care and education, and hence the monetary component of pay was very less and thus the planters were able to extract better surplus (Rammohan 33). Since the cost of production was less thanks to cheap labour, planters were able to sell the produce at attractive prices. This was conducive to British economic interests as they needed the products at the cheapest possible prices so that they could extract their share while selling them in the

1. ¹ Theory of comparative advantage is a theory in the field of international economics propounded by David Ricardo. According to this theory, a country will export goods over which its opportunity cost of production will be lesser compared to that of other countries. As a corollary, it will import goods over which its opportunity cost of production will be higher.

2. Opportunity cost is the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen.

international markets. As a religious denomination Syrian Christians, who owned most of the plantations, experienced an upswing in their fortunes.

The abolition of government monopoly in the trade of agricultural products like pepper in 1860 also led to the prospering of Syrian Christians as a whole. Local traders were now free to buy pepper from inland and sell it the way they preferred. As a result, export of agricultural products doubled from Rs. 35.45 lakhs in 1861-62 to Rs. 72.76 lakhs in 1868-69 (Jeffrey 88). The increasing integration with the capitalist world economy provided trading communities like Syrian Christians an upper hand in social sphere.

By 1870s, there evolved a huge demand for coconut and coconut products like coir and copra outside India, especially in the U.S.A. Export of coir rose from Rs. 9.27 lakhs in 1871 to Rs. 26.22 lakhs in 1891. Likewise, the export of copra doubled from Rs. 21.06 lakhs to Rs. 42.37 lakhs over the same period (Jeffrey 95). Toddy and arrack trade also doubled between 1860 and 1880. This huge external demand for the items they produced helped the Ezhava community to come out of the shell of caste-based economic order. Soon there emerged a middle class in the Ezhava community who became assertive of their rights.

Large scale use of wage labour by the Public Works Department (PWD) in Travancore also helped unshackle labourers from their age-old dependency on caste superiors for their livelihood. Diwan Madhava Rao started large scale construction of roads in Travancore. Caste-based indentured tenure, which was the prime source of manpower till then, proved inadequate to meet the huge demand for workers. By 1865-66, nearly ten thousand Ezhavas and slave caste coolies were employed on a daily basis by the PWD. The wage was four *annas* and a meal per day. The reward may sound insignificant in hindsight but it was handsome compared to the regular payment of one *anna* or so by the feudal overlords. Thus, works initiated by the PWD ushered in a huge class of proletariat devoid of caste ties and thus questions were raised on the inevitability of caste system. Building of public infrastructure helped in strengthening of a middle class which included contractors and entrepreneurs. Easier access to roads helped in marketing of agricultural commodities, which further integrated Kerala's economy with the capitalist system. On the whole, one can say that towards the end of the nineteenth century, intermediate castes found themselves in a social position which can be called structural marginality (Gazetteer 436). Structural marginality was primarily reflected in their relative independence. That is, their existence and livelihood was not curbed by any traditional ties. This has been facilitated mainly through occupational diversification.

[illegible]

Source: Census of India Vol XIII, Madras, Part I, Vol XXI 1931, and Vol XIX 1941, Cochin, and XXV 1921 and Vol XXVIII 1931, Travancore

As one can see in the above table, the proportion of people who depended on traditional occupation assigned to each community is very less for Ezhavas while the ratio is steep in the case of Nairs and Pulayas.

Why the Pulayas and other scheduled caste groups in general did not see an upswing in fortunes is an interesting question. In all probability they were still dependent on agricultural labour and were not exposed to the nascent capitalism in the world economy. Also the modern education deluded them because untouchability proscribed them from attending classes. In addition, intermediate castes like Ezhavas were antagonistic to them. This prevented the formation of a middle class and rise of community leaders which further reduced their bargaining power. Namboothiris, quite interestingly, faced a downturn in their fortunes.

Table 2: Percentage distribution of households in each caste/community according to land owned, Kerala 1968

Community/Land state	No land	Below 0.5 acre	0.5 to 2.0 acres	2 to 5 acres	Above 5 acres
Brahmin	28.4	28.2	17.9	26.6	13.0
Nair	16.2	33.4	33.4	12.4	4.2
Syrian Catholic	27.7	22.7	23.9	17.8	6.8
Jacobites	13.4	26.5	36.5	18.4	5.4
Ezhava	33.4	39.0	21.2	5.1	1.4
Muslim	32.6	35.5	23.10	6.9	1.9
Scheduled caste	53.2	40.0	5.90	0.7	0.1
Scheduled tribe	57.7	20.4	11.0	6.7	3.1
SC converts to Christianity	51.6	37.9	9.8	0.5	0.2
ST converts to Christianity	92.1	--	2.6	2.6	2.6
All communities	32.8	34.8	21.9	7.7	2.8

Source: Report on Socio-Economic Survey on caste/communities in Kerala, 1968. Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Trivandrum, 1969.

As we can see in the table, the Namboothiris were still the largest landowners in Kerala on per capita basis. Yet the community was losing its influence on the socioeconomic sphere in Kerala. It was primarily due to the reluctance on their part in embracing modern education which would have equipped them with the knowhow to tread in the new capitalist regiment. The belief systems also prevented them from entering the realm of modernity. For instance, it was believed that a Namboothiri would lose his caste status if he crossed the sea. The interdiction prevented the Namboothiris in Kerala from going abroad for the sake of higher studies or job. But Brahmins elsewhere did not hesitate to search for their fortunes crossing the sea. There are many famous examples like Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajaram Mohun Roy. This antagonistic attitude towards modernity cost them dearly.

Nair community was also in a state of constant flux during this period. The Tharavad system came under serious threats due to the increasing aspirations of the youth to join the capitalist system and the desire to have independent families which, not coincidentally, was very much a product of modern capitalism. Partition disputes became common leading to rapid fragmentation of holdings and thus reducing the profitability of agriculture. Soon the matrilineal system collapsed. Nairs had to join the clamour for modern education and consequently the rat race for government jobs. As we can see in the table given below, the proportion of Nairs in technical, professional and administrative professions were more than those in the community who were dependent on agriculture. This transition actually helped the Nair community from decline.

Caste/community distribution of workers in various occupations in Kerala: 1968

Caste/community	TPA	TR	FR	CR	STC	AG&A	UL	TE
Nairs	26.5	11.9	23.2	7.4	19.2	7.3	7.2	13.2
Christians	25.1	18.1	25.6	15.3	13.6	12.2	16.6	17.1
Ezhavas	17.9	19.3	16.6	31.0	21.0	26.1	26.4	23.5
Muslim	10.0	36.5	17.7	11.0	17.4	15.4	20.6	16.8
SC/ST	3.60	2.30	6.00	9.00	10.4	29.3	15.5	15.3
Others	16.9	12.8	10.9	26.3	18.4	9.7	13.1	14.2

TPA= Technical, professional and administrative, TR= Trade FR= Farming CR= Crafts

STC = Service, transport and communication

AG&A= Agriculture and allied labour UL=Unskilled TE= Total earners

Muslims also had undergone a dramatic reversal in fortunes. The Muslims in south Kerala, those part of Travancore and Kochi kingdoms, were traditionally traders. Muslims of Malabar or the Mopla Muslims were traditionally agricultural labourers.

Caste and occupation (proportion of workers in each category of occupation)

(i) Malabar—1921 census

#	Occupation	Namboothiri Brahmin	Nair	Thiyya	Mopla Muslim	Cheruma
1	Rentiers	41.2	5.9	—	1.8	—
2	Cultivators	9.0	50.4	20.9	33.4	0.5
3	Agricultural labourers	—	17.2	44.4	23.8	91.2
4	Today drawing & selling	—	—	7.0	—	—
5	Trade & commerce	—	—	—	23.7	—
6	Public administration, learned & artistic professions	35.4	18.5	9.3	11.6	—
7	Others	14.4	8.0	18.4	5.7	8.3
Total		100	100	100	100	100

(ii) Cochin—1931 and 1941 census

#	Occupation	Malayala Brahmin		Nair		Christian		Muslim		Ezhava		Pulaya	
		193 1	194 1	193 1	194 1	193 1	194 1	193 1	194 1	193 1	194 1	193 1	194 1
1	Rentiers	66. 7	44. 9	5.9	6.4	—	0.9	—	0.8	—	1.3	—	—
2	Cultivators	22. 4	33. 9	51. 6	45. 0	25. 3	33. 6	18. 9	16. 2	2.7	23. 0	1.1	3.1

3	Field labour	—	—	10.7	10.4	15.6	10.1	23.3	14.7	19.1	20.6	87.6	86.1
4	Industry, trade & transport	3.1	0.9	12.8	15.7	42.7	35.0	40.4	46.5	68.3	41.4	4.9	3.2
5	Public administration, learned & artistic professions	3.9	16.7	12.2	7.3	3.4	4.1	2.4	3.5	1.1	2.3	—	0.2
6	Others	3.9	3.6	6.8	15.2	13.0	16.4	15.3	18.3	8.8	11.4	6.4	7.4
Total		100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The transition to a capitalist economy immensely helped the Muslims of the south but the conditions of Mopla Muslims deteriorated. The aftermath of the change can be visualised from the data on literacy rates of Muslims in Travancore, Kochi and Malabar.

Table 4: Literacy rates and educational performance among selected communities during 1931

	Proportion of literate in			Proportion of pupils under instruction in total population	Percentage of children (6-12 age group) attending schools
	Travancore 1931	Cochin 1931	Malabar 1931	Travancore 1931	Cochin 1931
Brahmin	50.9	68.0	57.0	16.0	82.0
Nair	35.5	55.7	37.4	14.5	67.5
Christian	35.7	40.1	40.5	13.4	68
Ezhava	21.3	26.2	NA	10.5	46.0
Muslim	14.4	13.7	7.5	3.5	29.0
Pulaya	3.3.9	5.3	1.9	6.9	23.0

Source: Census of India, 1931, Vol XXVII, Travancore, Vol XXI, Cochin, and Vol XIV.

As we can see in the above table, literacy rate of Muslims in Travancore and Cochin are 14.4% and 13.7% respectively while in Malabar it is 7.5% only. The overall impact of all these changes in the social fabric of Kerala was profound. The lower castes got their own leaders and those castes which were fortunate enough have assertive leaders saw further progress. Vertical ties between castes, characterising the feudal order weakened. There occurred conflicts and at times riots between various caste groups, which was indicative of the increasing aspirations felt by newly empowered caste groups. Nair-Ezhava disputes became highly common by the 1920s. On the other hand, 'horizontal stretch'—the coming together of cognate Jatis (Srinivas, 241)—has also taken place. All kinds of *Shudra* castes like Nair, Menon, Pillai, etc., came together as a pressure group. Ezhavas, Thiyyas and all other analogous castes merged into numerically stronger groups which were with greater political bargaining power.

Consequent upon the change in the economic sphere, the thought processes and the priorities of people also changed. Access to modern education became the priority of each community. As modern education helped community members to tread in the capitalist world economy and access to well-paying government jobs, in a state where agriculture has become unprofitable, its appeal was irresistible and indispensable. Each community collected money from the community members and established schools and colleges. Given other strengths and assets they had already acquired Christians, Ezhavas and Nairs were at the forefront in this project.

The upward social and economic mobility of intermediate castes due to the change in the economy to a capitalist one occurred all over India, though much later. But curiously, those intermediate castes came to adopt Brahminical practices like ritualisation, vegetarianism etc. Eminent sociologist M.N. Sreenivas terms this process as 'Sanskritisation'. The case of the Patidar caste in Gujarat is a perfect example. Patidars were originally a low cultivator caste known as Kanbis. Some members of this caste migrated to Kenya between 1911 and 1939 and came to acquire huge amounts of wealth. After returning to India, they adopted Brahminical practices and a new name (Deshpande, 53). The social change which happened in Kerala cannot be termed Sanskritisation as such even though it is true that there has been some amount of ritualisation, especially burial practices. Ezhavas now cremate all the dead members of families upon death; earlier only the eldest son would be cremated and the rest buried (Jeffrey 133). They began building houses imitating Nair style. But, there has not been a strict adoption of ritualisation or vegetarianism.

Literary works of the period mirror this social transformation. O. Chandumenon's eponymous novel *Indulekha* (1889) bodies forth the new sensibility. Indulekha rejects SooriNamboothiri and accepts Madhavan, who is a well-educated and employed Nair youth and a beneficiary of modern education. This reflects the changed priorities of individuals. Modern education is worth more than the position in caste hierarchy. P Kesavadev's *Ayalkkar* set in the 1930s also portrays the volatile period. Nair-Ezhava conflicts form a constant motif in this novel. Nair aristocracy is in tatters. The only hope for the Nairs was modern education. Christian community taking the helm of the nascent banking system in Kerala is brought about by the character of Kunjuvareeth and his expression of *anchaarukash*. Pothery Kunjambu's *Saraswatheevijayam* (1891) tells the story of a lower caste youth who acquires modern education and takes his revenge upon the caste overlords while serving as a judge in his own village.

It can be concluded that the nineteenth century in Kerala witnessed a radical reconfiguration in caste dynamics and caste relations. The subsistence economy dependent on *jati*-based division of labour weakened and started to show signs of death. As elsewhere, "the improvement in communication, the spread of education, a host of governmental policies favouring the weaker sections, political mobilisation of people, and technological changes had the effect of greatly weakening the link between *jati* and traditional occupations" (Srinivas 457). In the case of Kerala, the relation with the global capitalism also played a major role in this process. It unleashed a social upheaval which impacted on various castes/communities differently. The way each community reacted with modernity and capitalism had a bearing on their fortunes. The change is still visible in the occupational structure and demographic indicators of each community.

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