The princely state of travancore history essay

Transition to Modernity in the Princely State of Travancore, Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Travancore society underwent far-reaching changes in the pre-colonial economic, social and political institutions, especially in traditional social systems. The basic force of this evolutionary change was colonial intrusion into the region since AD. 1800s (975. ME). Colonialism brought in what historians call the factors of social change- modern education, western values, Christianity, homogenization of culture and local practices. However, the most profound form of social change was reflected in restructuring the indigenous economy under colonialism by which the bucolic region of Travancore was connected to the capitalist world economy through a chain of plantations, factories and labour migration. [3]The establishment of colonial economy changed the pre-colonial economic patterns and restructured Travancore along modern lines. Such new variants of capitalist production included factories, other work spaces and created new bourgeois, working-class and middle-class identities. In addition, colonialism brought new notions of time, space, market and labour, and largely replaced the old feudal society and its values.[4]This social transformation laid down the foundation for Travancore's entry into modern social systems, with the vestiges of tradition reflected in many social forms and cultural discourses. At the material level, nearly hundred years of colonial interventions changed the basic patterns of life with new social stratifications and divisions of labour coming into existence. These new material factors totally transferred the old patterns of social functioning by indirectly attacking the foundations of social life. At the ideological level, the all encompassing supremacy of caste domination was challenged , but the recovery of religion gained prominence. However, along with these changes,

by the second half of 19th century, numerous social groups vis-a-vis communities gained economic and educational prominence and their rise to prominence ensured the withering away of old patterns of life. Many factors contributed to the development of such social changes, and the commonality of these factors was that they often brought caste domination into question.

Based on these assumptions, this paper seeks to explore the colonial transition of Travancore and its reflections in the spheres of society. Our approach attempts to situate the transition of Travancore from a rural/feudal to a colonial/industrial society, and examines the reflections of this transition. While the present paper does not rigorously examine the factors that played a major role in giving new standards for both social institutions and thereby individual identities in the region, it examines the various forms of historical perplexities in the light of the development of the plantation economy[5]and modern education, the two important forces of social change in the state.

As observed, the emergence of colonial economy, new social identities, English educated people modelling themselves on the ' European world view',[6]marked the change towards modernity in Travancore. Simultaneously, the creation of a public sphere in the context of Travancore was slowly occurring at this point. Earlier, even in 1820 itself, a printing press was introduced in Travancore,[7]helping the circulation of information and ideas more systematically. By the close of 19th century, the process leading to the rise of modernity was taking place and in October 1888, postage stamps were introduced in the state for the first time.[8]The emergence of new institutions modelled totally on the dominating colonial

values seemed to attack the traditional sphere, helping to propagate the modernity-project in the state. The subjectivity of Travancoreans underwent transformation into a new consciousness. The family, law, state, civil society and relationships had been problematized to understand the ambivalence between tradition and modernity.[9]In the new social consciousness, customs and practices of tradition were considered as fetters to social progress. In other words, the ability of customs and traditions to stand the test of time was what really mattered, and this formed the whole idea of making changes in ' traditional customs and practices'.[10]

Many factors helped Travancore in her path towards modernization. The emergence of newspapers played an active role in shaping the social consciousness in Travancore along modern lines, and by the close of the 19th century, ' janam', meaning people, had been transformed into ' pothujanam', meaning ' general public' through the various processes of socialization.[11]The formation of a public sphere by the late nineteenth century provided spheres of interaction and interventions in society, cutting across regional and caste stratifications. The missionary records of this period often indicate the rise of a ' general public' who had hitherto been never existed. Further, this general public, missionary document argues, have started showing a new spirit for modern times in accepting progressive changes.[12]Of course, one of the new spirits that missionaries praise had been the willingness of parents to send their girls and boys to schools irrespective of caste or creed distinctions. However, this new spirit was only part of the story as practicing untouchability continued in rural and urban areas in different forms. Many schools for savarna students alone were

constructed and girls were demoted in attending schools. Also, at this time we see the rise of many debating societies, reading clubs, social movements, etc., discussing the ideas of change to modernity. Newspapers kept on reminding the pothujanam of the importance to follow the progressive institutions, ideas and practices.[13]By the late 1890s, efforts to bring new forms of literature, such as novels and short-stories, were attempted and the importance of reading space in society was repeatedly expressed in the newspapers.[14]People like Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai, editor of many leftist newspapers, ' examined and understood' the radical fervent of revolutionary practice and suggested their relevance in Travancore society. [15]Interesting to note, the first Malayalam biography of Karl Marx, [16]emphasizing the revolutionary side of Marxism,[17]was published in 1912 and in the same year schools were opened to untouchables. The year 1912 also witnessed one more radical change- Ayyana Kali, a prominent lower-caste leader, was appointed to the Sri Moolam Praja Sabha.[18]

The Caste Question: Institution and Identity

By 1900, the masses in Travancore were divided into class and caste lines with people identifying themselves as belonging to the categories of Nair, Izhava, Christian, Pulaya and then to the classes of entrepreneurs, factory owners, middle-class and workers in plantations, construction industry, coir factories and ports.[19]Since the end of 19th century, educated members of different castes in Travancore had sentiments for organized social and political activism to debate the future of social transformation and the plight of their respective castes. In 1884, an organization called Malayali Sabha was established by the young Nair men of Travancore to register their

protest against the domination of foreign Brahmins in state services.
[20]Though started against non-Malayali Brahmin domination, the movement slowly showed its antipathy towards the Malayala Brahmins as a whole in Travancore. As twentieth century began, Malayala Brahmins called Nambudiris or Nampoothiris, constituted very few percent of the total population, but still enjoyed unlimited power in social and spiritual matters. [21]As time passed by, the new middle-class- educated men and depressed youths- belonging to various castes of Izhava, Nairs and other lower-castes enquired the possibility of forming united political and social action among their masses to overcome the Brahmin domination and to negotiate with the changing social life.[22]The establishment of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (The Society for the Propagation of the Teachings of Sri Narayana Guru), in 1903, Nair Service Society in 1914 and Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (Society for the Protection of the Poor) by Ayyan Kali in 1905, etc., were products of these aspirations.[23]Unlike SNDP and NSS, the SJPS was purely for social reforms and annihilating caste oppressions. It worked as an organization for the marginalized lower-castes of Travancore. These organizations also made use of the emerging public sphere in Travancore. For instance, in 1904, SNDP Yogam and especially by the efforts of Dr. Palpu, a magazine called Vivekodayam was started. Though abusively called by higher castes as ' Izhava Gazatte', Vivekodayam helped uniting the Izhava men.[24]Converts to Protestant Christianity had already started a South Travancore Church Union in 1874, though with the main aim of developing the pastorates.[25]Earlier, a teacher training institute had already been established at Kannetti near Karunagapalli in 1871, to train young teachers from untouchable castes.[26]In 1909, a Women's Sangam

was established at the Kannan Thavan hill native church and Travancore, [27]and Cochin Christian Association conducted the Travancore and Cochin Christian Congress in May, 1910.[28]The Christian Congress of 1910 aimed at promoting the community and debating the problems affecting the well-being of Christian people in the state. Taking inspiration from NSS and SNDP, the Christian Congress of 1910 urged the Christians to unite for the cause of community.[29]Subsequently, inspired by SJPS, the Poor Christians Society was formed in 1909.[30]However, it is interesting to note that the Syrian Christians were agitated to accept the out castes into their churches and feared that such activities would degrade their position in society. Thus, Rev. CA Neve wrote in 1908, " The Syrians who enjoy a good social status and are recognized as having a respectable position by their Hindu neighbours have been rather fearful lest the reception of out-castes into the Christian church should degrade them".[31]Also, religious preaching and sentiments were coming in Travancore by the close of 19th century. For the propagation of Gospel, a native Evangelistic Society was formed in 1901 and started work among the un-evangelized but backward classes of Quilon area.[32]The ambivalence between class and caste interests gave advantages to these middle-class men who used caste organizations as a pressure group to achieve more social status.[33]In the case of Izhavas, the neo-rich middle-class social, economic and political aspirations worked hand-in-hand with the religious activities of Narayana Guru, whose charisma drew the lower-class Izhava masses to his teachings and thereby to the SNDP Yogam's decisions. And, at times, Narayana Guru was also inspired by the material possibilities of a new society. For instance, in one of his speeches, Guru appealed to the

rich members of his community to give support to the community by taking initiatives to build companies at either individual level or as groups.[34]

In the context of radical social transformation, many caste groups could rise in the social hierarchy by making use of the changing socio-political conditions in society. However, many castes could successfully respond to the newly emerging social space in Travancore in the early 20th century by organizing themselves.[35]Izhava, Nair, Pulaya and various other upper and lower-castes formed their respective caste organizations and located their social role as modernizing their castes in the new social order. The Malayali Memorial and the Izhava Memorial represented the birth of social and political activism in obtaining social status through organization and unity. In 1882, an Izhava youth became the first man to have completed the Bachelor of Arts graduation in Travancore, but was also denied Sirkar jobs. In this context, under the leadership of Dr. Palpu, Izhava middle-class men understood the need to challenge the Brahmin hegemony in determining the condition of all Hindus of Travancore. The next few years witnessed unparalleled political activity in the state.[36]Dr. Palpu, the first graduate in western medicine from the Izhava caste[37]had already published a report titled Treatment of the Tiyas of Travancore.[38]He organized a society called the Izhava Mahajana Sabha (I. M. S) in 1896, but did not draw popular attention.[39]Accepting Swami Vivekananda's vision that " there must be a sanyasi at the head, for no movement can be successful in India unless it possesses a religious colouring,"[40]Dr. Palpu also sought ways of spiritual awakening as a method to challenge the caste hegemony. Meetings, conventions, pamphlets, letters, articles in newspapers and complaints to

British government officials to press the Travancore government to the path of modernization in its treatment of lower-castes united the Izhavas. Barrister G.. P. Pillai, who owned the newspaper Madras Standard, was a close friend of Dr. Palpu. He published many articles criticising the Travancore government's treatment of Izhavas.[41]The organizational activity was so strong that the case of Izhavas in Travancore was raised in British parliament by Colonel Henry Yule.[42]An era of political and social activism was born in Travancore region and masses were gradually absorbed into the process of social change. The Malayali Memorial organized Izhavas of Travancore for a common cause for the first time and it proved the necessity of a unified struggle to achieve political and social power.[43]The reply to ' Malayali Memorial' from the state administration indicated the helplessness of Travancore state to bypass the religious codes to provide the requirements of Izhava caste, but it helped the Izhava leaders to unite their members across the state. The state had used religious codes as a barrier to provide Sirkar jobs to Izhavas and justified the government promotion of Brahmins as natural. For instance, Maharaja Vishakham Thirunal asked the first Izhava graduate in Travancore to think of the possibility of becoming Christian to get Sirkar jobs.[44]However, as pressure was raised in society for stopping the unequal entry of foreign Brahmins to Travancore Sirkar service, the government argument turned to be a strategic play of words. For instance, a review of the administration of Travancore stated that:

".... we make use of minnal (word meaning untraceable), and telegraph–and we also want products made in foreign countries-but we don't agree them as

rulers…. if the government of India or small other states agree to expel foreigners, a large number of people must be ousted from the land…"[45]

However, Lord Curzon visited Travancore in 1900 and remarked, having reference to the grievances raised by Ezahava, that " in the history of states, no rulers are more esteemed by posterity than those who have risen superior to the trammels of bigotry and exclusiveness and have dealt equal mercy and equal justice to all classes…. including the humblest of their people".[46]Travancore followed a succession of reforms by the state administration, responding to the concern raised by Lord Curzon, but still the state had maintained certain restrictions and bans on caste basis, calling further attention from social reform movements.

Parallel to the non-violent political movements- practising methods of complaints, pamphlets and meetings to achieve social justice- some movements had adopted organized armed resistance to meet their goals. Ayyan Kali's movement was one such organized movement which used both violent and non-violent ways of protests simultaneously to achieve social justice. In 1893, he started to challenge caste oppression by rejecting the ban on untouchables to walk on roads by travelling on his own bullock cart with his well armed brothers and friends. As a man of strong will power and well-trained in martial arts,[47]Ayyan Kali could even physically manage the caste Hindu violence against him. After some initial failures, caste Hindus never dared to challenge him.[48]As peaceful approaches to get admission for Pulaya children in schools failed in 1907, he organized a strike of the untouchable agricultural labourers, protesting against the caste oppression. [49]One of the demands of the strike was admission to schools. In 1910, a

trained group of men called Ayyan Kali Pada (Army) was formed to resist the cultivation carried out by the Pulayas loyal to landlords. The demand for admission to schools flared violent clashes between caste Hindus and untouchables in Travancore and a compromise was finally reached in 1910 with the government order directing schools admitting Izhava students to also admit Pulaya students.[50]In the same year, Ayyan Kali requested the government to make primary education compulsory to the depressed classes and the government was forced to agree to the demands of Ayyan Kali and made primary education compulsory for backward castes.[51]However, this period also witnessed the violent rivalry at the local level between the two prominent castes of Travancore-Nair and Izhava. The opening of a school in Harippadu in central Travancore in 1904-05 to Izhava students angered Nairs and it was followed by violent clashes, as something like Rama-Ravana war in C. Kesavan's imagination.[52]Irrespective of the violent protest and clashes, caste Hindus objected to admission of lower caste children in schools throughout the 1900s, and Pulaya students constituted the most oppressed section in Travancore.[53]Many times, the schools for lower castes were burned down and caste Hindus boycotted pastors and their people, leading tense situation to prevail in the society.[54]The outcome of these clashes between communities was that it constructed the community bond strongly; it also provided the opportunity for strong socialization and political activity among the masses as the further events showed. The leaders of both Nair and Izhava castes called for compromise talks at the Malayali Mandiram in Kollam and it was decided there to work together for the benefit of everyone in the country.[55]Most importantly, this meeting

saw the birth of Nair-Izhava Mythry (friendship) as an ideology in Travancore and a new relationship started, at least for some years.

As noted, the structural transformation of production-relations created new forms of social identities, setting off strong tensions within the traditional patterns and identities.[56]The domination of caste in the theocratic state of Travancore as the determinant of social life started to wither away by the end of 19th century, replacing caste with material position and organizational power. The decline of caste hegemony created progressive social transformation in Travancore, paving way for the emergence of lower-caste assertion. Most importantly, Travancore witnessed the birth of communities in the region as castes melted to communities, and divisions of sub-castes had been slowly erased. Many lower-caste groups rose to prominence within a short time and the number of untouchable children attending schools doubled. Of many lower-castes, Pulayas could rise to prominence by the end of 19th century from their status as a slave caste to one of the prominent castes of society.[57]One of the reasons for the development of Pulaya caste was the missionary care for them. Since 1840s, both CMS and L. M. S. concentrated in areas of Pulayas and attempted to raise their social status. The pace of changes that colonialism and missionary education brought to Pulaya caste would be evident if one could understand their miserable plight in the 19th century. For instance, one missionary wrote about the condition of Pulayas in early 1850s as;

" the condition of these unhappy beings, is, I think, without a parallel in the whole range of history. They are regarded as so unclean, that they are thought to convey pollution to their fellow creatures, not only by contact, but

even by approach. They are so wretchedly provided with the necessities of life that the most loathsome things are a treat to them. Their persons are entirely at the disposal of their masters, by whom they are bought and sold like cattle, and are often worse treated. The owners had formerly power to flog and enchain them, and in some cases to maim them, or even deprive them of their lives. . . . They were everywhere paid for their labour at the lowest possible rate".[58]

Travancore being Transformed: State and Society

Due to the missionary efforts and by the expansion of colonial economy, the slave status of Pulayas[59]had undergone radical transformation. For instance, the number of Pulaya students rose to 17, 753 in 1917 from 2, 000 in 1913[60]and in 1916 alone nearly 7000 Pulaya students attended schools. The development to the capitalist system created spaces of interaction for various sections of society and women and newly educated middle-class gained pre-eminence. The changes in the material relations of production demanded changes in family too and property relationship came under examination. In the new social set up, old forms of social life no longer seemed productive and the withering away of unproductive social pattern seemed inevitable. These changes led to the rise of individual spaces and what historians call the rise of individuality beyond the limits of caste barriers started evolving in Travancore.[61]The emergence of individual spaces of interaction resulted in the demand for separate ownership of properties, relations, social life and as a result of all these, the struggles for a new social life assumed an intense pace.[62]

If one of the main categories of social organization was that of caste, other categories were also identified by the end of nineteenth century as potential boundaries of social divisions. The formation of gendered spaces in the early 20th century in Travancore identifies this trend of new spaces. By this period, Sthreesamajams (Women groups) were formed and notions of gendered identity and women's spaces were frequently debated.[63]Earlier, a medical centre had already been established in Trivandrum for providing medical facilities for women. Though established to serve the needs of women in the royal circle, it indicates the new concern of women and their grievances as a special category. The birth of gender as a category can also be understood from the statement that the construction of a bridge across river Thiruvallar would serve the poor women who came to the town of Trivandrum for various purposes.[64]We observed that the emergence of a public sphere in Travancore was helped by the establishment of new institutions of schools, courts, reading clubs, etc. One of the most important public institutions that helped Travancore's journey towards social progress was public health system. Since 1870s, many dispensaries were started in Travancore, and became centres of socialization. In the western regions of Travancore, a dispensary was established on a boat in the form of a floating dispensary.[65]Men and women belonging to both upper and lower castes made use of the services of these dispensaries; western medicine or English medicine as known in Kerala, became accessible to Travancoreans, introducing them to more western systems of life practices.[66]

Further, in representative political activism, Travancore state had established a debating body called the Travancore Legislative Council in

1888 and in 1904, the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly was established. [67]These two institutions tried to negotiate with the emergence of modernity in Travancore society by differently engaging with the social transformation. Earlier, the state was forced to move all judicial courts from the vicinity of temples and to allow lower castes to courts. Opposition to lower castes' entry into public roads or courts had become a crime since 1870s.[68]Though the Travancore Legislative Council was limited in its power, the representative progress towards democracy was experienced in Travancore for the first time with the establishment of the Council. Subsequently, in 1898 and 1904, the council passed Regulations for increasing the number of members and finally the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly was established with more democratic rights. Interestingly, a former untouchable shared seats equivalent in social status to that of upper