

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of regional studies in providing a comprehensive framework for the writing of Indian History has been recognised for a long time. The Indian subcontinent displays considerable diversity in geography, language, culture and economic conditions. It is not surprising that a general theory which can explain all the regional variations in the social and economic development of India has proved elusive. However, detailed regional studies that have been undertaken recently are useful in throwing light into a number of problems that a student of history faces while analysing the socio-economic structure of a particular period or the character of a social movement. Such studies have also demonstrated the complexities involved in applying an accepted historical concept or category in a specific regional context.

Studies in Kerala history have reached maturity only during recent years. Students of south Indian history have treated Kerala merely as <sup>an</sup> adjunct of the Tamil country. Even such a reputed historian as K.A. Nilakanta Sastri in his 'History of South India' devotes only a few pages to the history of Kerala. On the other hand, the students of Kerala history themselves have implicitly accepted the legends and traditions and gave importance only to the political history of Kerala of the last two hundred years or so. The study of social and economic conditions, particularly in

pre-british Kerala were limited to the repetition of the observations made by Logan and other British or Indian officials. The usefulness of such observations are beyond doubt; at the same time they have not been subjected to careful analysis with the help of available document from pre-british times. All this implies that a definite and coherent picture of the development of social and economic conditions of Kerala is yet to emerge.

A beginning in this direction was made by Elamkulam P.N. Kunjan Pillai, who made use of the stone inscriptions and copper plates that were being collected and transcribed from 19th century, to reinterpret the social and political developments of early medieval Kerala<sup>1</sup> (8th -12th centuries A.D.) His arguments that the region now called Kerala came under a centralised monarchy, which was called by the name 'Kulasekhara Empire' during this period, gained acceptance as it was substantiated by some rigorous reasoning using primary sources. Kunjan Pillai continued his extremely useful studies by providing explanations for the peculiarities of the pre-british Kerala society, such as Janmi system matrilineal of inheritance and the role of the temples thus apparently filling a large void in the studies of Kerala hitherto undertaken. Even some of the weaknesses and inaccuracies of his arguments were ignored because his studies, for the first time, put Kerala in the map of the students of Indian History as a separate region with its distinctive features. The social ethos in Kerala during the 1950s and 60s (Kunjan Pillai did most of his work then) when Travancore-Cochin and Malabar

were combined to form a new state and strategies for the development of Kerala were being discussed and popular movement organised, also helped Kunjan Pillai's arguments gaining acceptance.

Kunjan Pillai's studies also created a wave of enthusiasm for the study of Kerala History. Fresh studies on pre-british Kerala society and polity discovered inaccuracies and sometimes faulty reasoning on the part of Kunjan Pillai; The much glorified Kulasekhara Empire was brought back to the earth in form of a more modest, later Chera kingdom and the idea of centralised monarchy was replaced by the idea of kings governing with the approval of the brahmanas. Similarly Kunjan Pillai's ideas on the origin of the Janmi system and Matrilineal system was also discussed resulting in fresh studies on the role of the brahmanas and temples and the nature of agrarian relations during the early medieval period.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to characterise the social formation of pre-british Kerala were also made, which generated discussions on the emergence of the feudal mode of production in Kerala. Problems of the relation between caste and class in pre-british Kerala also has become a controversial subject.<sup>3</sup>

Studies in the history of Kerala during the late medieval period i.e. 16th - 18th centuries along similar lines as early medieval times, are still in the infant stage. Historians of Kerala have treated the late medieval Kerala in terms of the European powers who established control over the West Coast, such as the 'Portuguese period'. The Dutch

Period and the "British Period".<sup>4</sup> The importance of the relations of the people of Kerala with European powers is unquestionable but studies on the subject are conducted without an adequate understanding of the changes that were taking place within Kerala society. Even crucial questions like the growth of landlord-tenant relations in Kerala particularly the evolution of Janmam and Kānam which was studied by the British administrators have been relatively ignored. Although considerable importance is given to the political history of this period, the structure of late medieval Kerala polity with emphasis on the process of State formation has been rarely discussed. Even Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai has been able to provide only a sketchy account of the growth of the Janmi system in the late medieval period.<sup>5</sup>

The absence of detailed studies on late medieval Kerala has resulted in speculation on the stagnant, degenerate society ridden by endless political conflicts which fell easy prey to the European powers. The political crises in Cochin and Vēṇād during 17th century and Calicut during 18th, have been cited as evidence, for such a perspective. Although the problems faced by the three major kingdoms in Kerala during late medieval period were serious, a systematic attempt has not been made to study the problems and explain why they occurred. This has led to the general impression that the rulers of the West Coast were passive, financially weak kings dependent almost entirely on overseas trade and hence, susceptible to the machinations of the cunning and ruthless European traders.

✓ Similar problems are also at the root of the arguments on the modernisation of Kerala society. The accession of Martanda Varma in Travancore<sup>and</sup> of the British domination of Malabar are regarded as events that ushered in a new epoch in the development of the social and economic relations in the respective regions.<sup>6</sup> Modernisation has been explained in terms of administrative changes and economic reforms from above, without a serious examination of the economic and political setting in which such changes are brought about; This can be seen as a weakness of the political and administrative history which deals with society and economy as an adjunct of the political framework. Hence, the british settlement of the janmis and tenants of Malabar appear suddenly as an administrative act, so does Martandavarma's suppression of the Mādampi nobles and survey of lands. ✓ Social change is not an administrative act, and hence, the antecedents of such administrative acts will have to be examined carefully before pronouncing judgements on such reforms. A systematic examination of the growth of Kerala society and its transformation, if any, during later medieval period will be necessary.

It is also necessary to develop a coherent perspective on the relation between the social and economic structure of late medieval kerala, and the nature of political authority in order to explain why certain administrative reforms were carried out at a given moment in history.

#### The Problem

Travancore is one of the major subregions in medieval Kerala. The history of Travancore from early medieval times

has preserved a certain continuity, as the kingdom of Vēñād until late medieval times and as the kingdom of Travancore which continued as a native state under the british. It also displayed most of the features characteristic to the medieval Kerala society, such as domination of temples and brāhmanas, militarism, matrilineal system of inheritance and a hierarchical order of landlord-tenant relations. It went through a political crisis like other parts of Kerala in late medieval period and the crisis was brought to an end by the reforms of Martanda Varma, the founder of the modern state of Travancore.

Details of the political events in medieval Travancore and a general idea of the social and economic conditions in the region are already available.<sup>7</sup> However, an examination of the works on Travancore shows that they give importance to the course of events from the time of Martanda Varma: As a result, the account of the conditions prior to Martanda Varma are at best very general and confined to political events. Many events that require careful analysis are mentioned as episodes in a narrative and explained way. For example, the rise of Attuveetil Pillaimār, the group of nobles suppressed by Martanda Varma is treated merely in political terms i.e. the resistance of a group of dissident land lords against royal authority. Although it is stated that conditions of anarchy prevailed in Travancore before Martanda Varma, no effort has been made to analyse the origin and growth of the conditions of anarchy. Moreover, the link between the economic activity in Travancore and the growth of anarchy in the late

medieval period, is not focussed at all, which means that there is almost complete ignorance regarding the social basis of the disintegration of political authority and the growth of the Mādampi nobles who defied the royal authority so successfully for almost a century.

It appears that fuller understanding of the reforms of Martanda Varma is possible only with an examination of the social and economic basis of political authority in medieval Travancore and such an examination has to concentrate on the agrarian relations, although the nature of internal and overseas trade in the region cannot be ignored. The growth of agrarian relations in Vēṇād has displayed a certain continuity and the later developments in the agrarian relations can be accounted for only with an understanding of the earlier phases. Hence, the object of the chapters that follow is to trace the growth of agrarian relations in the region of Travancore (here described as the Vēṇāḍ region) from early medieval times, and then to take up the developments in late medieval times for a more detailed examination. It is also proposed to trace the evolution of political authority in the region and to demonstrate the interlinkage between the agrarian relations and political authority during the medieval period.

Primarily three focal points for the interlinkage between agrarian conditions and political authority can be found in medieval Venad, viz. the temples and brāhmanas in which the Padmanabha temple in Trivandrum held the crucial position, the

royal family with its branches and the non-brahmana landlords. All these classes mainly subsisted on income from land, realised in various forms. The nature of land holding and the means used for realising the share of land produce from the cultivator by his overlord has been of crucial importance not only for organisation of economic activity but for political authority as well. The changes in the relations among the three classes mentioned above were based on the changes in the organisation of productive activity. The main problem is to describe the complex relationships involved in the economic organisation. Only then would it be possible to show how with a given change in the production of relations, certain social groups hitherto holding an inferior or unimportant position became important. Such an exercise is necessary in the case of late medieval Travancore, where the three groups referred to above, came into conflict, resulting in the period of criss stated by all historians.

Naturally, such an analysis would involve the nature of rights over land, economic and extra economic features in land relations and the problems of customary ties and proprietary rights. Political authority in pre-british Kerala was a combination of the use of force and customary obligations and how far these two features were linked to economic relations also, will have to be explored. The conditions of land-ownership especially those denoting overlordship will have to be assessed. The ties of dependence among the various categories of landholders including those described as Janmis and



Kudiyāns (tenants) also have to be considered.

On the basis of the available evidence the factors that led to the crisis in Vēṇād during late 17th and early 18th centuries, and its resolution by Martanda Varma has to be studied. It will be argued in the following chapters that the period of Martanda Varma was the culmination of the politico-economic conditions that was developing during 16th-18th centuries in the region of Travancore. Instead of finding a discontinuity between the period prior to Martanda Varma and the times of Martanda Varma, the argument is developed to emphasise continuity and change, where one form of economic organisation was replaced by another but at the same time many features of the economic relations continued.

### The Sources

The records from medieval Travancore, which form the basis of this study are mainly of two kinds; 1) Stone inscriptions and copper plates 2) Palmleaf manuscripts. Majority of the stone inscriptions and copper plates from the Vēṇād region were collected and published by the archaeology department of the State of Travancore, in their Travancore Archaeological Reports, and they were transcribed, edited and published with detailed comments in the Travancore Archaeological Series between 1916 and 1938. Since then, more inscriptions have been brought to light in the Annual Reports of Indian Epigraphy and Archeological Survey Reports from time to time.

Inscriptions from Tirunelveli District, included <sup>in</sup> the Annual Reports of Indian Epigraphy contain several inscriptions that refer to the Vēṇād princes. The Epigraphy Department of the Government of Tamil Nadu has transcribed and published all the inscriptions that have been discovered from Kanyakumari District, as Kanyakumari Kalvettukal.

Most of the inscriptions refer to land or money grants to temples made by rulers or private persons. Such records contain useful information on the types of land, irrigation, land tenure different forms of realisation of dues on land and the forms of transactions among rulers private persons, and temples. The records also give information on temple management. Since most of the records give the date in Kollam Era, it is also possible to trace the changes that were taking place in land transactions with chronological accuracy. Compared to other parts of Kerala, more inscriptions have been discovered from the Venad region, which means that a careful study of the inscriptions of this region may be more rewarding.

Palm-leaf documents have been discovered from a number of temples. Mathas and some private houses, apart from the documents kept in Travancore palace, (Chellam vāḡa). The largest corpus of documents is preserved by the major temple of the region, Padmanabha temple of Trivandrum, called the Matilakam Records. The records are preserved in about 3000 palm-leaf rolls or curunas and each roll contains a number of leaves. The earliest records now preserved date back to 13th century A.D. A large number of leaves, especially

of 14th and 15th centuries are in a tattered condition, which means that much of the valuable information cannot be used. However, the archives department has preserved a summary of all documents and the transcripts of important ones, which have been used in this study. Some of the records have been published in Selections from Matilakam Records, edited by Ullūr S. Parameswara Iyer, Travancore State Manual by T.K. Velu Pillai and in Chronicles of Trivandrum Pagoda by K. Maheswaran Nayar.

The Kerala state Archives have preserved a number of miscellaneous documents from various parts of Travancore which were transcribed and preserved as Show-case Records. The show case Records also include documents of the family of Ramayyan Dalaway, the minister of Martanda Varma. A collection of documents pertaining mostly to the land surveys under Martanda Varma in 914 K.E. (1738 - 9 A.D.) and 926 K.E. (1750-1 A.D.) can be found in the Travancore Land Revenue Manual Vol. V. Vol. IV of the Manual also contains a useful account of the history of land Revenue. A collection of records selected from the Travancore Palace Records have been published by M. Rajaraja Varma Raja as 'Some Travancore Dynastic Records' in Kerala Society Papers.

Another important collection of records, useful for the study of land relations in the region of Nanjinadu and the activities of merchants, are the Periaveetu Mudaliar

Manuscripts. The collection has been preserved in the Kerala State Archives. Some of the documents have been transcribed and published by S. Desivinayagam Pillai, in Kerala Society Papers, and more documents from this collection are being transcribed. A useful summary of all records in this collection has been preserved in the state Archives.

Two other collections of documents have been recovered recently one collection is from the house of Vanjipula Mādampi, the overlord of the highlands and forests, now coming under the Pathanamthitta District in Kerala. The second is from Munchira Matham in Kanyakumari District which controlled the Tiruvattār temple. Some of the records in the Vanjipula collection have been published by K. Maheswaram Nayar as Pattu Kalpanakal. Most of the records in these collection have not been transcribed and they have not been fully used in this study.

Information given by most of the travellers who visited Kerala during medieval period has been used in this study, particularly those visiting Kollam. Notices of Travancore given in the Dutch Records, and also the descriptions given by the Nieuhoff on Kollam and the surroundings have been used. Similarly, records and diaries kept by the factors of Anjengo and their letters to Tellichery and Fort St. George have been used particularly for the period of Martanda Varma.

A number of literary sources on the medieval period are available, in Sanskrit and Malayalam. Some of them are historically useful like Syānandūra purāna Samuchahayam, Martandamahatmyam, Iravikuttupillaipōru, Rāmappayyan Ammānai,

Kunjuthampi Rāman Thampi Katha and Unnunīlisandēsam. This study does not rely heavily on the literary sources as it is primarily concerned with the links between agrarian relations and political authority. However, they are used whenever necessary.

However majority of the material used this study come from two sources. The Travancore Archaeological Series and Matilakam Records. Reliance on these sources was basically because most of the information on agrarian relations and political authority in Trivandrum and Kanyakumari can be obtained from these sources. However, it is possible that the picture given on the land relations and political structure given in these documents may be value-loaded, as they refer mainly to transactions by the temples and brāhmanas. The account of political affairs of Vēṇād given in the Matilakam Records is the point of view of the authorities of the Padmanabha temple, and hence, an element of prejudice in their statements cannot be ruled out. Similarly, the agrarian relations portrayed in the inscriptions and records do not give a complete picture as we get practically nothing on the activities/ <sup>of</sup> non-brāhmanas landholders, not attached or obliged to the temple, or the condition of the actual cultivators. This point is clearly demonstrated in the absence of detailed references to cultivations of cash crops, and the activities of merchants, which can be obtained only from the accounts by foreigners. Hence, the study based on the present set of evidence cannot hope to be comprehensive and nor be free from prejudice, because of the inherent limitations of the evidence.

The secondary sources also are not useful in filling this void. As pointed out earlier, most of the histories of Travancore deal mainly with modern Travancore, and mention only some crucial political events during medieval period. Even the chronology of Vēṇād rulers available in the secondary works is not free from problems.

However, there is a wealth of secondary material on the period of Martanda Varma, from the histories of Travancore by Pachu Muthathu and Shungoony Menon to the study of Martanda Varma by Ibrahim Kunju, which have been used in this study. However, Very little has been added to the observations by Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai on the medieval social and economic relations by the other historians.

Hence, this study is mostly based on primary sources, with secondary material used whenever necessary. Since the transcripts and translations of primary material are not free from error, in accuracies may have occurred in some of the descriptions and the interpretations based on the material.

#### The Method and Scheme of Study

The proposed study concentrates on the agrarian relations and political authority in the Vēṇād region between 14th and the first half of 18th centuries which may be defined as the Medieval period in the history of Travancore. Both continuity and change in the medieval political and economical conditions are under consideration, it is important to provide the background to the growth of medieval conditions.

Hence, the study begins with a description of the geography, the resources and the production conditions in the region and then traces the economic conditions in early medieval Vēṇād, particularly of the centuries that immediately followed the decline of the later Chēra Kingdom. (i.e. 12th - 13th centuries).

This is followed by a description of the land tenures and the modes of realisation of the share of the produce. Since the tenorial forms in the region are complex, all the subdivisions of each tenure and the variations within each sub.divisions are described with examples. Since the data is not adequate to calculate the amount of the share of produce realised, no quantification has been done and the information on the amount realised has to be treated as separate cases. Hence, only the general features of the tenorial forms are outlined. Modes of realisation sometime appear in the form of taxes or tolls to the rulers, and sometimes as rent or share of the produce. There are many instances where the realisation appears both as tax and rent. No attempt has been made to characterise the forms of realisation; instead they are described as they appear to be in the course of examining the whole transaction.

An understanding of the tenorial forms is necessary to understand the medieval agrarian relations, as some tenures such as Otti are crucial in understanding the changes that were

taking place in the medieval times. Since the problem tackled by the study is the developments in the late medieval times, the tenures that have been recorded in the documents of late 17th and early 18th centuries have been used as the basis for the study of medieval land transactions. As far as possible, changes in the nature of landholdings under each tenure in the medieval period, will be traced.

In the subsequent two chapters, an attempt is made to trace the growth of agrarian relations from 14th to 17th centuries. This part will be divided into two sections, the first will be to study the land transactions and attempt to arrive at a few general conclusions regarding the changes that were taking place in the conditions of agricultural production, and the organisation of agriculture. The problems that developed in the realisation of the share of the produce and service obligations to the temple and the ruler will be studied and attempts to resolve the problems at each stage by the dominant classes of rulers, brāhmanas and non-brāhmana landlords will be outlined.

The next section will study the impact of the changes in agrarian relations on the three crucial sections, the temple the ruler, and the non-brāhmana landholders. The effort will be to show the changes that were taking place in the relations among the three classes, and to find out why the development of a stable agrarian system and political authority in medieval Venad was impossible.

The last two chapters take up the political and economic crisis in the later medieval period and changes in the economic



organisation under Martanda Varma. The crisis is explained as the result of the stresses and strains developing in the medieval political and economic relations developing during earlier centuries. The various features of the crisis, its impact on the political conditions, relations among the dominant social classes and the conditions of agricultural production and trade are outlined, in detail. In this chapter, the effort will not be to outline the events as such but to show how events were shaped by medieval economic relations.

The final chapter will be devoted to a re-assessment of the administrative reforms by Martanda Varma. The response of various social classes to the crisis of late medieval period provide the background to the reforms, and an attempt will be made to find out the allies and enemies of Martanda Varma in his effort to resolve the crisis. Martanda Varma's reforms are seen in connection with the medieval agrarian system and the elements of continuity and change will be ascertained. It is important also to understand the changes in the function of the state in organising the economic activity in the region, and hence, an attempt will be made to study <sup>the</sup> structure of state power under Martanda Varma.

The chapters that follow are not intended to provide a detailed political history of the region. They do not contain a detailed examination of the growth of trade in medieval Vēṇāḍ, except in the last two chapters, where some information is given. Political events are only treated in connection with economic conditions, particularly agrarian relations and and therefore the details of some major political events, like the Nayaka invasions of Travancore and the relations of

Travancore with the European powers are not considered in detail. The succession of princes in the Venad family similarly is discussed as far as it is relevant to the subject under discussion, and mostly the traditional chronology, given in most of the histories of Travancore is used, unless there is serious doubt on the order of succession. The dates of events and transactions are generally given in the Kollam Era, the traditional calendar used in the documents, which commenced in 824-5 A.D.

A comment should be made on the use of sources. It may appear that some parts of the chapters that follow are stuffed with too many details. Details are given to illustrate the complexities in land tenures and transactions among various social classes, and care is taken to give sufficient examples for all variations in the transactions. Some significant documents are examined in detail, mainly because they are the only available evidence that illustrate a particular feature of the agrarian system. Such a procedure, although cumbersome had to be adopted in the absence of any previous discussion of the sources in the secondary works.

Finally, the study does not attempt to use the generally accepted characterisations of medieval social, and economic relations. However, some attempt is made to arrive at a characterisation which seems to correspond to the evidence presented. Similarly, the evolution of state in medieval Travancore is also discussed, but without confining the

discussion within the frame of an accepted model. The generalisation are at best tentative, which may be confirmed by detailed studies in comparison with the developments in the rest of Kerala and South India.

### References

1. The studies of Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai came out in articles which were collected and published between 1950 and 1970. They include Kērala Charitrattile Iruladanja Edukal (1953). Chila Kērala Charitraprasnangal (3 Vol. 1954-6), Chērasāmraiyam Ompathum pathum Nūttāndugaḷil (1957) Charitrathinte Paschāttalathil (1958) and Janmisampradāyam Kēralathil (1953). The major articles have been transferred and published as studies in Kerala History (Kottayam, 1970).
2. Studies by M.G.S. Naryanan, Kesavan Veluthat, Rajan Gurukkal and others, referred to in the course of present study, can be cited as examples.
3. Much of the discussion is at a popular level. However, a paper presented by T.K. Ravindran in a seminar at Calicut University (1980) and published in the popular weekly 'Mathrubhūmi' entitled "Indian Feudalism Enna Mithya" can be cited as an example whether the author challenges the application of the term 'Feudalism' for Medieval Indian. For another point of view on medieval Kerala see P.K. Balakrishnan Jāativyavasthayam Keralacharithravum (Kottayam, 1983).
4. An example is the treatment by the famous historian K.M. Panikkar in his Malayalam work Keralaswātanthrya Samaram (Trivandrum, 1957) which is a history of Kerala that primarily deals with the realtion of Kerala rulers with the portuguese the Dutch and the British.

5. See his Janmisampradayam Keralathil (Kottayam 1953).
6. A.P. Ibrahim Kunju. The rise of Travancore - A Study of the Life and times of Martanda Varma (Trivandrum, 1976).
7. Ibrahim Kunju, Ibid., also see P. Shungoony Menon.

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