

THE EZHAVAS: A CALL TO RELIGIOUS CO-EXISTENCE

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1. The Homeland

The traditional habitat of the Ezhava caste in modern Kerala, the land of Malayalam-speaking people, was the former princely states of Travancore and Cochin and the British Malabar district. The British first established themselves in Malabar and then in Travancore and Cochin. When the British Parliament took over the government of India by the proclamation of Queen Victoria after the Sepoy revolt in 1857, Kerala became part of the British Empire with the rest of India. The three constituent parts of Kerala, however, had separate political histories because of the separate administration Travancore and Cochin had under local rulers, and in Malabar under the direct control of the British. The British power over Travancore was firmly established when they crushed the first local revolt against them under Diwan- chief executive of the King, - Velu Thampi in 1809. After the reign of Saktan Tampuran (1790- 1805) the British appointed Col. Munro as Diwan in Cochin in 1812 in order to reorganize the administration of the state and Cochin remained under the direct rule of the British until independence. The Malabar district of Kerala was making progress in judicial organization, communications and in local self-administration under the direct control of the British. These political dispensations were instrumental, to a certain extent, in maintaining the diversities in the manners and customs and religious practices of the Ezhavas spread in the northern, central and southern parts of the State.

2. Historical Roots

According to the census of 1951 there were 37 lakhs of Ezhavas constituting the single largest community in Kerala with strength of 23 % of the total population of the state. The Ezhavas in Kerala are the counterparts of the Mahar in Maharashtra, Nadars in Tamil Nadu, Billawas in Karnataka and Indigos in Andhra Pradesh. In the south of Kollam they are called Ezhavas

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and from Kollam to Cochin they are known as *chokavans* and to north of Cochin as *Tiyans*. They are also called *thandans* in south Malabar.

The primitive tribes such as Kadar, Vedar, Malayar found in forests and hills and the Cherumen, Pulayar who were working in the fields, the first ancestors of the Nairs and the Ezhavas, are regarded anthropologically as a mixed race of Proto-Australoid and Nigritos. One of the theories, which has strong support among scholars, is that the Ezhavas are a race that originated from the primitive tribes of the land. As to the primitive tribes and their occupation we have copious references in Samkham (Cankam) literature, the only earliest available Tamil classic. Scholars differ in fixing the Samkham age, but at any rate it cannot be brought down much lower than 2nd century AD, though some scholars fix the period of its composition between 300 BC and 200 AD. An attempt is made here to draw a picture of the occupational distribution of the people in the Samkham period.

The collected works of Ettuttokai (eight anthologies) and Pattupattu (ten songs) which contain references to the people and their kingdom, include a total of 2389 poems by 443 poets. Based on *Tolkappiyam*, an ancient treatise on grammar, the poems in the anthologies are divided into two broad categories called Akam and Puram, the former limiting itself to the micro-world- nearly seventy five percent of the poems in five anthologies of this section are love poems- while the latter unfolding into the macro-world of politics and problems of the community. The two anthologies of Puram and Pattupattu poems celebrate the valour of kings, lament the death of the heroes, for at that time the Tamil country was a war devastated land. These poems also speak about the happy life enjoyed by the various sections of the people engaged in different occupations.

The term Ezhava as caste name is not found in Samkham literature or in *Manimekhala* and *Chilapatikaram*, the great epic poems in Tamil. It is reasonably believed that at that age the caste order was not even in existence. The southern strip of the peninsula, including the present state of Kerala, had been divided into five *thinās* (dwelling place/ habitation), inhabiting territories and the whole population had been divided into five groups on the basis of occupations during the time of Samkham literature. The Ezhavas occupied the Marutha region and were engaged in agriculture. The Neithal region was inhabited by the fisher folk. Those who eked out their life by feeding the cattle in Edanatt region were known as Aayar. The occupation of

the Kuravar from Kuriji region was hunting. The Maravar from Pala region were warriors and they lived on goods, including cattle, they plundered from other regions. Besides these occupational groups there were Chanttor, Panar, Vanikar, Parayar, Villor, Thiraiyar, named after the manual work they were involved in the society. The caste names of Nair and Ezhavas were no where mentioned in this literature. The Ezhava community is believed to have evolved from Uzhavar, Chanttor, Villor, Thiraiyar and their occupational groups.

It is from the 9th century AD that we come across the term Ezhava. The first clear reference to this caste is found in the edict of the King Sthanu Ravi to Therisappalli in 848-49 AD. In his work *A Few Problematic Issues in Kerala History* Elamkulam Kunjanpillai (1963, p119) holds that the term stood for a profession rather than a caste till the 12th century AD. Since in the inscriptions of Thanchavoor by Rajaraja Cholan (985- 1013) the term had been used as referring to a caste engaged in a special occupation, it seems safe to hold that this caste was in existence at least in the eleventh century AD. Logan in his *Malabar Manual* (Vol.1, p.117) on the basis of the reference to the four families of Ezhavas as independent agriculturists in the decree given to Therisappalli concludes that the Ezhavas were well organized farmers, the descendents of the Uzhavar of the Samkham period. The clan-occupation of the Chanttor was toddy- tapping. Since it is one of the main callings of the Ezhavas, their association with the Chanttor ilk could naturally be affirmed. It is believed that Chekavar, the warriors in the Ezhava caste belonged to Villor- fighting man- from the tribes of Maravar and Kuravar mentioned in the Samkham literature.

The story of the origin of the Ezhavas from the primitive ilk is based on a number of historical assumptions. As noted earlier it was in the Therisappalli decree given in the 9th century AD that the term Ezhava appeared for the first time. It is argued from this fact that the caste-division in Kerala society had its origin in the 9th century AD, after the Brahmanization or Hinduization of the country. There is agreement among the historians of ancient Kerala that the descendents of the primitive tribes of Samkham period first embraced Jainism and from the time of King Chenguttavan they turned in great numbers to Buddhism. According to the Kerala-history, the 7th and 8th centuries were a period of the Bhakti movement of Saivism and Vaishnavism. When Sri Sankara well established the religion of Brahmanism

(Hinduism) on philosophical foundations in the 9th century AD, the fourfold division of the society (*Chaturvarnya vyavastha*) also evolved and a section of the Buddhists became the fourth class (*sudras*) in Hinduism. Today scholars claim that the Ezhavas evolved from those who stayed in Buddhism and were regarded as untouchables by Brahmanism.

The practice of medical profession, a long-standing tradition with the Ezhava caste, is said to have been inherited from their Buddhist ancestry. The same could be the reason why great poets, thinkers and Sanskrit scholars arose from this untouchable community.

3. Social Discrimination¹

The ancestors of the Ezhavas who were occupying a high position as land owners, trained warriors, Sanskrit scholars and medical practitioners were thrown to the bottom of the social rung as Brahmanism established itself in Kerala. When the land was taken over by the King and was allotted to temples and Brahmins, as with other sections of the people, the Ezhavas also were reduced to landless agriculturists.

Counted as *avarnas*, they were also kept away from the upper strata of the society, which owned wealth, ownership of the land and power to rule the country. The social discrimination and economic exploitation and the very cruel punishment for the so-called violation of the unjust laws and the system of slavery made them a people not to be reckoned with. Through the theocratic feudalism of the Brahmins in Kerala from the 12th to the 19th centuries AD the kings were obliged to protect the Brahmins and especially cows. This is the long dark period of Kerala history when all the low castes and outcastes, including the Ezhavas, had to suffer an inhuman and miserable life under the wring of the then prevalent Hinduism.

4. The Ezhavas and the Tiyans :

Because of the presence of a foreign political, the Tiyans in the north were able to preserve a set of customs and social traditions distinct from those of the south. The *marumakkatayam* system (inheritance through the female line), which obtained in North Malabar, favoured temporary sexual unions

¹P.S.Velayudhan (ed.), Kerala Charithram, Vol. 1, The Kerala History Association, Kochi, 1973, pp. 962- 991, 1973; Vol. 11, 1974.

between European men and Tiyan women, the children belonging to the mother's *taravad* (family). Due to strong community bond women of respectable families did not enter into such alliances with Europeans. L.K. Anatha Krishna Iyer writes in his *Survey of the Cochin State*: "Happily, the progress of education, and the growth of a wholesome public opinion have made shameful the position of a European's concubine; and both races have thus saved from a mode of life equally demoralizing."² The traditions of a caste or sub-caste used to serve as the moral guardian of the community, and their societal values have to be recognized.

The State regulations kept the Ezhavas of Cochin and Travancore in a position of marked social inferiority. On the other hand, the Tiyas of Malabar have provided magistrates, sub-judges, and other officials to serve the British Government. It may be noted that in 1907 a Tiya lady matriculate was employed as clerk in the Tellicherry post-office.² E.Thurston's article in the seventh volume on Tiyas states: "It is a custom of the country for a man of a superior caste to pretend complete ignorance of the caste of an individual lower in the social scale. It is quite possible, therefore, that though Tiyans were written down as Ezhavas, the two were not supposed to be identical."³

For the purpose of comparison between the Tiyans and Ezhavas, differences in the practice of purification, dining, marriage, and inheritance are referred to here in a very brief way. What is known as *Vannathimatt* among the Ezhavas is *mattu* (exchange) for the Tiyans. It is said that this practice not known to the Ezhavas as it is practiced among the Tiyans. The *mattu* is a purificatory ceremony to remove the impurity caused by birth, menstruation, death by receiving a clean cloth from the washerwoman, and giving in exchange ones own soiled cloth to be washed. Theoretically, the Tiyan has the power to give or withhold *mattu* and thus keep any one out of the caste in a state of impurity. It is a privilege, which is, however, seldom, if ever, exercised. Yet it is one, which the Tiyan woman admittedly holds, and thus Tiyan is in a position to exercise considerable control over the Nambutiri and Nair communities, which also observe this purification ritual. It must be

²Quoted from, Edgar Thurston, *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. 11, Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, (first pub.1909) 1975. pp.393- 418.

³Ibid., p.38

done on the last day of pollution after birth and death ceremonies, and menstruation, or the person concerned remains outcaste.

An Ezhava will eat rice cooked by a Tiyān, but a Tiyān will not eat rice cooked by an Ezhava, a circumstance pointing to the inferiority of Ezhavas and the superiority of the Tiyāns. The line is drawn at rice. One of equal caste or class or by a superior caste must prepare it. An Ezhava may eat the cooked rice in the *Varandha* (outer shade of the house) and not in the house, for it would cause pollution to the Tiyān. After the meal the Ezhava himself has to wash the plates and clean up the place where he has eaten.

Another area where we find customs different from that of the Ezhavas is the family tradition and marriage of the Tiyāns. "One should be able to answer the question about ones *illam* (father's family) and *kulam* (mother's family) satisfactorily. If he cannot give a proper account of himself he gets neither water nor food from the south Canara Tiyāns."³ Marriage is strictly forbidden between two persons belonging to the same *illam*. The *illams* are exogamous. Certain *illams* are superior to others and so they enjoy some privileges over others. The men of *Varakat illam* were in the olden days permitted to travel in *mancheel* (a hammock-cot slung on a pole). They were allowed to wear gold jewels on their neck; to don silken cloths, to fasten a sword around the waist, and to carry shield. The well-known Mannanar belonged to the *Varakatt illam*. He started the institution for accepting the outcaste Nambutiri women on the charge of sexual promiscuity. A legend known among them says that when the chief Mannanar of the palace is destitute of heirs, the Tiyāns of Kalattanad go in procession to ask for a virgin Brahmin girl to be adopted as the sister of the Mannanar, who follows the *marumakkkatayam* rule of succession. It was generally admitted that it was formerly the custom among the Tiyāns in south Malabar for several brothers-in fact all of them – to share one wife.

From what has been said above it is evident that the life style of the different sub-castes coming under the common title of the Ezhavas is not uniform throughout the modern Kerala and so the present study will be confined to the life and activities of the Ezhavas in the erstwhile princely states of Travancore and Cochin.

5. The Ezhavas in Travancore and Cochin

There is in fact no undisputable theory regarding the origin of the Ezhava community or other communities in Kerala. There are scattered etymological, literary and historical evidences, and various traditions to substantiate the claim that Ezhavas migrated to Kerala from Ceylon. G. Rajendran writes; "There are various views expressed by different historians. William Logan, the author of *Malabar Manuel*, and oft quoted authority held that Ezhavas were not the aborigines of Kerala but a people migrated from Ceylon in between the first and the fifth century AD. Historians, sociologists and anthropologists like E. Thurston, L. K. Krishna Iyer, C.A. Innes, Nagam Aiya, T.K. Velu Pillai, C. Achutha Menon and A Sreedhara Menon subscribe to this view. Prof. Elankulam Kunjan Pillai, a scholar in Kerala history is of the view that the Brahmins are the only caste from outside Kerala and all other communities of Kerala are indigenous. E.M.S. Namboodiripad disagrees with Prof. Kunjan Pillai and maintained that all Keralites, including the Brahmins are natives."⁴

The present most common understanding of the historians is that like the Nairs the Ezhavas are also natives of Kerala. Yet it is not difficult to accept that, except the lowest strata of the society, all other dominant groups, including Christians and Muslims have sections of people that have come from outside at one time or other.

Though it is not possible to trace an exact history of the social and religious evolution of the Ezhavas in Travancore and Cochin, we can reasonably guess that they were also subjected to the general effervescence taking place in their home state. Kerala became a meeting ground of all the Indian religions, namely Jainism, Buddhism and Brahmanism as well as foreign world religions such Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Besides these, the natural animistic religions of the Dravidian group also were a decisive formative force in the society. One of the indelible marks of this religion found in the Ezhava community was its worship of demons. Referring to this element Sreedhara Menon writes in his *Kerala History*: "Their religion was a

⁴G. Rajendran, *The Ezhava Community and Kerala politics*, The Kerala Academy of Political Science, Trivandrum, 1974, p.21.

mixture of primitive rites and practices which included worship of totem gods and spirits, local guardians and demons of destruction.”⁵

While the aborigines of Tamil *thina* (regions) were following the Dravidian religious practices, the religions from the north such as Jainism, Buddhism, and Brahmanism entered Kerala even prior to the beginning of the Christian era. Sreedhara Menaon writes: “In the course of time all these religions made steady progress within the framework of a free and open society and left their indelible impress on Kerala culture.”⁶ During the period of Sri Sankara in the latter half of the 8th century AD Brahmin dominated Hinduism completely overpowered Buddhism. “According to William Logan, the beginning of a well established, clear-cut caste system may be traced to the 8th century AD when Namboodiri Brahmins finally came to power.”⁷

6. Caste and untouchability

During the period between the 8th and the 11th centuries the Nambutiri Brahmins established cultural dominance in Kerala. They have sanctioned several hundred castes and sub-castes, divided from each other by rigorous rules against inter- and inter-dining and by a pattern of pollution taboos. “George Woodcock has neatly arranged these divisions into nine principal groups, which range downward in the following order: 1) Brahmins, 2) Kshatriyas (rulers), 3) Ambalavasis- the temple attendants and musicians, 4) Samantans – the local chieftains, 5) Nairs- the traditional warriors and feudal land holders, 6) Kammalans- the group of five craft castes (Kollan, Asari, Musari, Tattan, Veluthedan), 7) Ezhavas (also called Tiyas, Chokavans, Iravas), 8) Mukkuvans- fishermen caste, 9) the outcaste- miscellaneous group of highly untouchable communities mostly dedicated to menial work.”⁸ The first five classes are called *savarnas* and nos. 6.7. constitute *avarnas* and the last has no relation to caste, that is, they are outcaste.

The Ezhavas were victims of the exploitation by the high caste Hindus, and they, it was the social system, in turn exploited the classes below them in

⁵Quoted from, V.T. Samuel, *One Caste One religion One God; A Study of Sree Narayana Guru*, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1977,p.12.

⁶Ibid. p. 12.

⁷G.Rajendra, op.cit. p. 22.

⁸V.T. Samuel, op.cit. p 22.

the hierarchy. In Travancore and Cochin they were treated as untouchables. T.K.Madhavan summarily describes their condition as follows; "They (Ezhavas) have no admission to Government schools. When they are educated, no jobs were available to them. They are not allowed to walk through the public roads...They had no right to enter the temples and have to stay half furlong beyond the outer walls. When it became impossible to worship properly, they were forced to absorb superstitious worship practices and thus became followers of devil worship. Unnecessary rituals and customs were celebrated with great pomp and gay... Family life became unstable. Polygamy and polyandry were common among them."⁹

7. Religious Practices

In the beginning of this century the religious practices of the Ezhavas were a kind of animism. They also believed in the doctrine of *karma* and rebirth. Since entry in the temple was denied to them in Kerala they undertook pilgrimages to Benares and other distant temples. Worship of the higher gods such as Vishnu and Siva, was forbidden to them. They had to embrace the worship of the lesser gods such as Ganapati, Subramanyan, Ayyappan, Sastha, Virabhadran and the demons such as Bhadrakali, Madan, Chudalamadan. Bhadrakali's statues were made with two wings, surrounded by snakes and tearing a child. Worship included magic, sorcery, witchcraft, divination, and other aspects of Dravidian religion. To propitiate evil spirit blood sacrifices of cock, hog, sheep or goat was made. Since Bhadrakali is fond of snakes, images of snakes were made in the groves and temples. Ezhava-women served as barbers and as priests, for these services were denied to them from the high castes. Sivaratri, Navaratri, and Onam were common feasts for all Hindus. In the temple Ezhavas had no place. Polygamy and polyandry were common among them. Many were thinking to convert themselves to Christianity or Islam to escape the scourge of untouchability. This was the situation when Sri Narayana Guru emerged as the religious leader, teacher and social reformer in Kerala.

8. Religious Reforms of Narayana Guru

He did not establish any religious sect, nor did he teach any new dogma. His reform activities reveal the nature of his religious beliefs. The reforms he

⁹*Ibid.* (Samuel) p.34.

introduced were: 1) He founded temples for common people (more than 60). 2) Consecrated temples for higher gods such as Siva and Vishnu. 3) Appointed dedicated *sannyasins* from his community as priests in the temples. 4) He instructed his followers to build new temples in simple and less expensive way. 5) The following inscription was written on the wall of the first temple he established at Aruvipuram as its purpose: "Without difference of caste, nor enmities of creed, all live like brothers at heart, here in this ideal place." 6) There was a growth in the form of image worship. In Trichur in 1920 he consecrated a huge oil lamp (*Nilavilakku*) instead of an idol, with the words 'Let there be light.' At Murukampuzha, in 1922 he consecrated a plain stone. At Kalamangatt in 1924 a large mirror was consecrated and it in the sanctuary of the temple. 7) He did not encourage the old idea of *sannyasa*. A *sannyasi* should be a man of renunciation, whose life is dedicated to the service of humanity. 8) *Social reforms*: In these activities Dr. Palpu and the great poet Kumaran Asan helped him. In one of the meetings of SNDP at Paravoor in 1905 the following three customs were abolished: 1) *Thalickettu* (mock marriage): It is a ceremony in anticipation of real marriage of a girl child of tender age i.e. from the age one to nine. This was an economically burdensome social custom for the parents of the girl. 2) *Thirandukuli*: It is bathing ceremony held at puberty so that all might know that a girl has reached maturity. 3) *Pulikudy*: It was a ceremonial drinking of a juice when a woman becomes pregnant, for the first time after the marriage. 9) In 1920, on his birthday Sri Narayana Guru vehemently attacked the practice of drinking toddy. 'Liquor is poison', he declared. 10) He taught his followers not to ask another's caste and not even to think of it.

9. Philosophy of Human Equality

1) His View about Caste:

There had been critics of caste system in the long history of India such as Buddha, Mahavira, Sankara, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Tukaram, Dayanda Saraswati, Vivedananda, Gandhi etc. Gandhi seems to have shifted his position on caste from time to time. Although he refused to call the caste Hindus Harijan, God's people, as long as they practised untouchability. He was against destroying the ideology of *varna* system as a whole. For him revival of the true *varnashramadharma* would mean true democracy. *Varna* means the following, on the part of us, all the hereditary traditional calling of our forefathers. Sri Narayana Guru was firmly against the caste system for he

was speaking to the untouchables. In his *Jati Mimamsa* he wrote: "One of caste, one of religion, one of God is man; Of one womb, of one form; difference therein none."

II) The concept of One Religion:

"Whichever the religion, it suffices if it makes a better man." He did not advocate a harmony of all religions. Unity of all religions is a doctrine taught by many Indian writers such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Radhakrishnan, Tagore and others. Narayana Guru did not believe in the emergence of a single 'universal religion.' He spoke to an audience that was disgusted with its religious tradition. In *Mata Mimamsa* he wrote: "All men at every time make efforts every way, Aiming at his Self-happiness, therefore in this world, Know religion as one, understanding thus, Shunning evil, the inner self into calmness merge."

He did not establish a model for a new unitary religion. For him there was no need for making an artificial division between the mundane or profane and the sacred. Similarly he did not adhere to the view that all religions are equally true and that they lead us all to the same goal. We have to recognize the existence of various religious traditions; each religious founder emphasized a few truths neglected by the prevailing dogmas; none of them has ever agreed to merge itself in another. Moreover the founders and great teachers of religions have not said that all of them are same.

No religion can be conquered by might or argument. All religions satisfy the needs of those who seek truth. Fighting against a religion only can strengthen the root aspect of that religion. One who fights a religion hurts the cause of his own religion. Those who have realized the essential goal of all religions would not enter into futile religious rivalry. For those who have realized this truth, religion is no authority. They themselves are the tutors of religion. For the seekers of truth, religions are the finger posts to man's essential goal. This essential goal is spiritual happiness. In this single motive we can find a single religion.

Narayana Guru left the choice of religion with the people and their individual taste. All religions are dynamic and therefore conversion from one religion to another religion is meaningless. Through social conversion only his outer religion changes. Change in the inner religious direction is to be

effected by the conversion of the heart. Hence he concludes "whichever the religion, it suffices, if it makes a better man." He was advocating an ecumenical spirit, which could bring out a beautiful unity in diversity. Vivekananda advocated *advaita* as one religion, which can save us from sectarian controversy. . Narayana Guru, however, never mentioned Hinduism or *advaita* or any other religion as the only means of salvation for mankind.

If there should be an end to religious quarrels, all religions should be studied with a free mind. Then only the understanding of one's own religion becomes richer and purer. This seems to be the essential message that emanates from the life and writings of Sri Narayana Guru.

10. Struggle for Social Democracy:

In the past the Ezhava community has shown great dynamism and undergone extraordinary transformation.¹⁰ It is remarkable that a community which was confined to the gutter of untouchability till the first quarter of 20th century has put up a heroic and valiant fight against upper caste Hindus and produced political administrators such as governors, chief ministers, chief justice, leading medical practitioners, chief engineers, eminent scholars and professors, great poets, businessmen and the like in the society within the span of half a century. With the beginning of the twentieth century, signs of restlessness and awakening were noticed in all communities in Kerala especially among the Ezhavas. Several reliable authorities have vividly and accurately narrated the miserable conditions of the Ezhavas in Travancore even in the twentieth century. The first record perhaps was the Malayalee Memorial of 1891, which expressed the grave concern of the memoirists at the discrimination of low caste sections of the people, especially the Ezhavas. Dr. Palpu, who was denied a government job in Kerala because of his Ezhava ancestry, together with his friend G.P.Pallai was the pioneer in Travancore in the works for the social emancipation of the Ezhavas. Under the tutelage of Sree Narayana Guru, the reform leader of the community an association, called Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was formed in 1903 to work for the social emancipation of the community. Several illustrious members of the community like the great poet Kumaran Asan and the political activist T.K.Madhavan and many other men of prominence came

¹⁰For more details refer G. Rajendran, *op.cit.* Pp. 5-7.

forward for the uplift of the community and within the span of half a century it was redeemed from most of its social, economic and religious inequalities.

The SNDP Yogam played a decisive role in this spectacular transformation of the community, giving a spirit of emulation to other community associations to fight for their rights. In the initial stages, SNDP Yogam worked in collaboration with the Nair Service Society (NSS) in their encounter with Hindu orthodoxy. However, by 1930s the Yogam joined hands with Christians as the NSS developed an anti-Christian bias. The State Congress was supported by SNDP. The Christians and the Muslims demanded, in their political programme, allotment of communal representation in civil service and in legislature. The concession of these demands and the proclamation of temple entry issued by the Maharaja in November, 1936 removed some of the disabilities of the Ezhavas and as a result, the SNDP leadership severed its connection with Congress in 1939, and came closer to NSS in an attempt to organize a Hindu front in 1952 against the alleged Christian domination. They went even to the extent of defending the government under Diwan Sir C.P.Ramaswamy Iyer, the chief executive of the local king, against Travancore State Congress to form 'Hindu Mandalam' with a view to establish Hindu dominance in politic. They indulged in acerbic campaign against the Congress Party, which they denounced as a Christian party, and sided with the Democratic Congress, the political wing of Hindu Mahasabha to oppose the Congress. But when in 1957, in the first all India general election, after the reorganization of the states on linguistic basis, the Communists came into power, the SNDP and NSS leadership sank their differences and joined together against the communists to organize a political liberation struggle financed mostly by the Christian community.

11. The Politics of Caste in Kerala

What began as a genuine collective bargain for social democracy has, in the wake of democratic government, in the recent times, vitiated into the power politics of the so-called subaltern groups or the former untouchables. It is true that under the leadership of SNDP Yogam the Ezhava community made phenomenal progress. From the position of being a community of backward class, called untouchable Hindus, it has come up as a significant force to be reckoned with in the social and political life of Kerala. Though in the past it had rendered incalculable services, at the moment its influence is

on the decline. Today it does not represent the majority of the Ezhava community, for the majority of the community is still poor people –the agricultural and industrial workers and toddy-drawers. In spite of the emergence of a very prosperous minority, which forms its upper and middle class, the community as a whole has not attained the economic liberation it looked for. There is wide gulf between the political attitudes of the Ezhava middle class and the Ezhava working class, supplying the recruits for the communist parties and the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS), the communal outfit of the high caste Hindus (*savarnas*).

In the form of Peoples Movements the leaders of SNDP Yogam is making a bid to arrest the erosion of its influence on its community and it is trying to rally together all the Ezhavas under one banner and to unite all socially backward communities under their leadership, except the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes which have their own sufficient constitutional protection. Its strategy is to raise the bugbear of reaction of Nairs and Christians against backward communities.

The complaint of the Nairs and the Christian community, is that the system of reservation in public services, originally meant for all those who were made backward by the practice of untouchability, is now used by the forward section of the Ezhavas to exploit all other backward communities. Therefore the forward sections demand for a more just reservation scheme in which special consideration is given to all economically backward people. The upper classes of the Ezhavas who now enjoy benefits of the reservation today interpret the counter move as one directed against all the members of the backward communities. But the leaders of other backward communities have seen the game and are now refusing the SNDP the right to champion their cause.

These communal divisions of the society in Kerala put most of the political parties in dilemma. The communist parties can neither ignore the poor from the forward sections, nor can favour the discontinuation of the reservation for backward communities, which in fact are their true supporters. They cannot also ignore the argument in favour of reservation of seats in job and education for the weaker sections from the forward communities. The rival political parties are also groping in darkness in their search for a way out from the mess created by the constitutional and administrative norms based on caste and religion, to determine the backwardness of a community.

The caste polarization and their organizations are becoming increasingly anachronistic in Kerala with the rapid spread of education and political articulation of the will of the people. The general tendency among the new generation is really one caste or community, an ideal proposed by Sree Narayana Guru, the undeniable leader of the Ezhava community. It seems that today very few people are making conscious efforts to fight openly for the interest of a particular community. Kerala is rapidly moving towards social democracy, where liberty, equality and fraternity reign supreme with one prime religion, the religion of humanity, as Sree Narayana Guru would have it.