

Rupture from Tradition-Kerala's Road to Modernity

P. JINIMON

ABSTRACT: The present study, Rupture from Tradition-Kerala's Road to Modernity, is an attempt to examine the historical process and multifaceted forces that worked behind the formation of modern Kerala society. It discusses the transition of Kerala from rigid traditional beliefs and customs to a more advanced society. This transition has been facilitated by adopting modern concepts and ideologies from colonial worldviews. As a result, Kerala has progressed in education, healthcare, and social welfare. The state has prioritised education, leading to a high literacy level and other parameters of the upward mobility of Kerala society, which has contributed to the development of an economy centred around knowledge. Additionally, Kerala has invested in healthcare infrastructure, improving health outcomes. Kerala has also implemented strategies and programs focused on social welfare, aiming to uplift marginalised sections of society and promote inclusivity and equality. Overall, the departure from tradition has brought about a promising future for Kerala. It has not only improved the welfare of the people but also challenged entrenched customs and beliefs that hinder societal advancement. Understanding the historical transition of Kerala provides insights into the effectiveness of progressive policies and the potential for societal change achieved through the multiple engagements of social reconstruction in the colonial period.

KEYWORDS: traditional society, reform initiatives, challenges, modernity

Introduction

The social transformation of Kerala was the result of innumerable movements nurtured by ideological nuances that took a firm position against outdated customs and practices deeply rooted in society, which were against social solidarity and human dignity. Kerala, a linguistically constituted political unit developed later, was known for its traditional beliefs and customs. It has transformed into a more advanced society due to the emergence of modern concepts and ideologies from colonial worldviews. This shift has allowed Kerala to embrace change, adapt to emerging technologies, and foster progress in social and economic domains. The state has emerged as a prominent state in education, healthcare, and social welfare, with a highly literate population, a skilled workforce, and a knowledge-based economy. Kerala has also developed strategies and programs focusing on social welfare, aiming to uplift marginalised sections and foster a more inclusive and equal society. Colonialism in India has been a catalyst for modernity, shaping human culture, institutions, and politics. Kerala's transition from a caste-ridden society to a progressive, secular, modern one has been a subject of interest in academic, social, and political circles. Colonialism offered structural readjustment of traditional society, which paved the way for socio-religious reform movements and the struggles of unrepresented and under-represented communities facing resistance from the privileged sections.¹ The reform movement had a progressive and emancipatory character, with the role models and values redefined by the hegemonic ideology of society.² The mentality of the people and society changed during this period, emphasising an egalitarian state, social justice and democracy. The reform movements gained a broader character, developing into anti-colonial, anti-feudal, and anti-elite movements. The lower strata of society gained a considerable share of the power and strength through these movements. The development in Kerala has been unique compared to other regions. The early anticaste movements and the efforts of the communists to promote equality have played a significant role in shaping the state's developmentalism. This has resulted in the integration of developmental goals with egalitarian political objectives.³

Socio-Political Settings

The princely states of Travancore and Cochin were governed by Hindu Maharajas, whose authority was characterised by a theocratic system.⁴ The individuals in question assumed the role of protectors for the traditional system, and remnants of a feudalistic history were evident within the societal structure.⁵ The impetus for the modernisation and secularisation of the government originated from the populace, but the reaction from the colonial authorities proved to be unsupportive. In response to the influence exerted by the British Indian government, as well as caste and community organisations, the governments of Travancore and Cochin were compelled to undertake administrative modernisation. Through negotiations with the relevant stakeholders, these governments gradually implemented a series of reforms. The various caste and religious associations undertook the task of educating their male members and equipping them with the necessary skills to thrive in a secular democratic socio-political framework.⁶ The laws underwent a process of unification and were thereafter administered in a systematic manner. The principles of legal equality and the rule of law significantly altered the higher castes' perception of the lower castes. The phenomenon of judicial activism threatened the privileged status held by the higher castes within society.

The judiciary functioned as an agent of social transformation. The district of Malabar, under direct rule by the British government, aligned its administration with the secular policies of the British Indian government. The realm had a peaceful social revolution through the reduction of inequities and the provision of social justice. The unifying power of nationalism played a significant role in minimising conflicts and creating a favourable social environment for developing the nationalist movement in Kerala. Historically, Kerala was renowned for its steadfast commitment to conventional beliefs and customs, a tendency that frequently impeded advancements and growth. Nevertheless, the state has experienced a transformation towards a more progressive and contemporary society due to the emergence of novel ideas and beliefs. The departure from traditional practices has facilitated Kerala's ability to embrace and accommodate changes, adopt new technology, and promote

social and economic progress. Consequently, Kerala has emerged as a prominent state in domains encompassing education, healthcare, and social welfare. The prioritisation of education has resulted in a populace with a high literacy level, hence contributing to developing a proficient labour force and a prosperous economy centred around knowledge. Furthermore, the state's dedication to healthcare has yielded enhanced healthcare infrastructure and improved health results for its populace. Kerala has developed a range of plans and initiatives with a specific emphasis on social welfare, aiming to uplift marginalised populations and foster a society that is more inclusive and equal.

In general, the departure from conventional practices has moved the state of Kerala into a more promising and affluent trajectory. The importance of this subject in comprehending Kerala's cultural and societal metamorphosis cannot be overemphasised. Kerala's emphasis on healthcare and social welfare has not only enhanced the overall welfare of its populace but has also confronted entrenched traditions and ideas that impeded societal advancement.⁷ This transition exemplifies the state's commitment to fostering a society that prioritises the well-being and equitable treatment of its whole populace. Gaining an understanding of Kerala's journey towards adopting these reforms might help one see the possibilities for societal development in other locations as well as the strength of progressive policies. Nationalism as a cohesive force united the people after reducing the conflict and provided a congenial social background to the growth of the nationalist movement in Kerala.⁸

Colonialism: A Catalyst of Modernity

Modernity refers to the historical period and socio-cultural norms developed in post-medieval Europe, impacting human culture, institutions, and politics. Indigenous perspectives offer insight into how Indian society navigated colonialism's challenges and opportunities, shaping their own destinies and resisting colonial rule through cultural changes.⁹ Colonialism in India led to increased exploitation of both material and mental resources, resulting in colonial modernity. Scholars disagree on its nature and content, with some viewing it as 'Our Modernity'. This ambiguity is due to the need to reject other modernities,

as the value of modernity has also made the colonised victims of it.¹⁰ The public sphere in India originated in the early 19th century through educational institutions, debating societies, social organisations, and literary clubs established during colonial rule. These institutions facilitated the debate of liberalism and democracy and provided space for the emerging middle class to envision their future. This bourgeois public sphere acted as a harbinger of modernity within colonial limits.¹¹ In any case, protests are just part of the murmur which greets anything new, noises the crowd makes, noises off. According to this attitude, the new - the modern - has its supporters and opponents, filed under 'up-to-date' or 'old-fashioned'. Passionately accepted or no less passionately rejected, modernity should require no theory.¹² Kerala's transition from a caste-ridden society to a progressive, secular, modern one has been a subject of interest in academic, social, and political circles. The transformation, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was complex and involved constant negotiations in public spaces.¹³ The conceptual categories of modernity are explained in the context of Kerala and analyse the imaginations and articulations of the notion(s) of equality in the context of caste slavery, missionary activity, and socio-political transition in pre-colonial and modern Kerala.¹⁴

The working of colonial political-administrative institutions and representative bodies provided opportunities to the people to involve themselves in the administration and law-making. The ruling powers made conscious efforts, not injurious to their interest, to encourage sectarian tendencies to prevent socio-political unity. Membership in the legislative bodies was considered as the status symbol and recognition of various social groups. However, the political authorities used the legislature and electoral politics as a device to divide the people along communal lines.¹⁵ The people of Travancore were given the opportunity to associate themselves with legislative work since the last decade of the nineteenth century.

Modernity is the result of the drastic change that occurs in society; a rethinking or rearrangement does not exist in any society. A conscious effort worked behind the social transformation was pertinent to Kerala

society. The existing formulation of the theories of modernity owed much to the advent of colonialism, but the will of the change came to Kerala as part of the political change and administrative reorganisation. This resulted from Mysorian interlude in Kerala society due to political reasons; Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan introduced a set of reforms to (or “intending to”) restructure the captured region of Malabar. These reform initiatives, treated as revolutionary steps, were able to ring the death knell to traditions and its worldviews.¹⁶ The repercussions were not limited to Malabar; the fear of Mysorian attack also smelt the feudal principalities in Malabar, Travancore, and Cochin.¹⁷ ‘The Mysorian fever’ was a source of structural readjustment of society, where traditions were conducive to the feudal social imagination, which faced tensions and subsequent conflicts in society.¹⁸ The element of force from the newly entered political authority effectively worked out in the society,

The colonial rule had made a tectonic pressure at the bottom of society with the help of modernist ideologies, which ripened when they sanctioned the claims of the society.¹⁹ They also provided the chances of unification through laws and simultaneously brought about the dissolution of other unities, like the breaking up of joint families.²⁰ The reform movement defined the role of caste in society, and it provided the identity of the same within Kerala society. Later, it became a political force, and the political authorities could not reject the importance of caste in statecraft.²¹ The colonial categorisation and the efficient use of administrative machinery fragmented the castes from their traditional dependence.²² The caste associations advocated a small family system and separated living for the betterment of the communities concerned. They argued that the per-capita share of the *tharavad* property would give the considerable individual freedom of economic action and would improve his financial condition.²³ They emerged as a significant socio-economic and political force and acted as a powerful instrument of social change.²⁴ There was hardly any caste or community in the princely states of Kerala without an organisation and organ of its own. They worked as pressure groups by emphasising caste identity to secure government concessions, appointments, nominations to the legislature, etc. Newspapers and periodicals established under their control helped in propagating

their ideologies. Through the press, public meetings and debates, their members were educated, and their disabilities were popularised.²⁵ These could instil in the members an awareness of the present and thus work as a unifying force.

The internal differences with the caste or community that were prominent earlier could thus be avoided to forge a unity hitherto unknown and thus make them a political force to reckon with. The newly achieved caste solidarity emboldened them to demand proportionate representation in public services and the legislature.²⁶ The Nairs, the Ezhavas, subsequently the Vellalas, the Kshatriyas, and the Brahmins required legislative enactments on marriage, succession, and partition of ancestral properties. In response to the demand, the government appointed committees and, by their recommendations, enacted laws one by one.²⁷ Both polyandry and polygamy were declared illegal.²⁸ The impact of reform movements came to be felt in every sphere of social life and obliterated some of the objectionable features of the customs and practices that prevailed. These social legislations helped to make the communities well-integrated with the uniform laws regarding marriage, maintenance, succession, and inheritance.

There were several reasons why caste organisations failed to gain a firm hold in Malabar. Firstly, in Malabar, the castes did not suffer from any discrimination so far as the fields of government services and education were concerned, which was a glaring issue in the princely states. Secondly, unlike in the limited areas of native states, there was no scope for forcing the Madras government to admit communal representation for each caste. In Malabar, the caste movement was challenged by the nationalist movement, which was weak and late to come up in the native states. By the time Malabar came under the influence of the SNDP Yogam the political scene in Malabar had undergone radical changes, and the Thiyyas themselves became part and parcel of the nationalist movement.²⁹

Socio-Religious Reform Movements

Social movements are central to modernity. They are central both because modernity connotes movement and because modernity involves new political alliances and allegiances in which mass movements

play a significant role. However, social movements are more than the spontaneous gathering of masses of individuals. They are a distinct form of collective behaviour. They are purposive and relatively structured forms of collective behaviour. Unlike crowds, social movements are composed of groups of individuals gathered with the common purpose of expressing subjectively felt discontent in a public way and changing the perceived social and political bases of that discontent. What makes social movements modern is not their collective but their distinctly political character.³⁰

The socio-religious reform movements initiated by various agencies during the colonial period were in a way the expression of new awareness based on liberal Western ideas. They were radical in its spirit but, on the whole, peaceful and non-violent in action.³¹ In the social sphere, these movements conducted a restless campaign for the abolition of caste, equal rights to women, against child marriage, widow remarriage, and crusade against social inequalities. These social movements in varying degrees, emphasised the principle of individual liberty, social equality, and democratic rights. They sought to establish equal rights for everyone regardless of caste or sex.³² The reformers believed that such democratisation of institutions and social relations was necessary for building up national unity and achieving political freedom and socio-economic and cultural advancement. The awakening found expression in all fields of national life. In politics, it reflected the demand for administrative reforms, self-government, Home rule, Dominion status, independence, etc. In the social field nationalism adhered to the principle of individual liberty, equality, freedom of travel and self-advancement. It attacked undemocratic policies that existed by caste.³³ The new socio-economic and political situations that emerged in Kerala paved the way for the emergence of social organisations in different parts of Kerala. The princely states, Travancore and Cochin, were the nerve centres of their activities. By using their organisational strength, they claimed a fair share in government services and the Legislature. The struggle of unrepresented and under-represented communities for their legitimate claim met with stiff resistance from the privileged sections of society. It is observed that “Our world as far as politics is concerned, will be a desert, and we will

wither away without a bomb, that is to say, without community deprived of our finite existence.”³⁴

The reform movement had a progressive and emancipatory character in many respects. The hegemonic ideology of society redefined the role models and values. The images and identity of the Malayalis were constructed during this period. The mentality of the people and society changed during the period of the reform movement when the modern discourse on social change came into effect. This phase deserves importance in many respects in the history of modern Kerala. Its political content and social relevance laid emphasis on an egalitarian state either directly or indirectly. It raised the question mainly of social justice and democracy, which were unknown to Keralites. Social reform movement and leaders of the movement sowed the seeds of political consciousness, which grew and ripened and, in turn, prepared the people for a political movement. The reform movements gained wider character, which developed in the direction of anti-colonial, anti-feudal and anti-elite movements. The enormous power and strength of the movements of the lower strata of society gained an overwhelming majority of the other such movements. It is true that the reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave great momentum to the unprivileged classes-politically, socially and economically. They came to the forefront of mainstream political activities, which paved the way for the development of nationalism and national movement in the colonial background.

Conclusion

Kerala, underwent a transformation from a caste-ridden society to a progressive, secular modern society. The Hindu Maharajas, who had a theocratic system and feudalistic history, influenced the British Indian government, caste and community organisations, and the British government to undertake administrative modernisation. Kerala implemented reforms, educating its male members and equipping them with the necessary skills to thrive in a secular democratic socio-political framework. The judiciary played a significant role in social transformation, with the district of Malabar aligning with the British Indian government's secular policies. Kerala's commitment to traditional beliefs and customs

impeded advancements and growth, but the emergence of novel ideas and beliefs has facilitated its ability to embrace changes, adopt new technology, and promote social and economic progress. The state's emphasis on healthcare and social welfare has enhanced the overall welfare of its populace and confronted entrenched traditions. The colonial rule in Kerala led to the reform movement that defined the role of caste in society and became a political force.

Dr. P. Jinimon holds the position of Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram.

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