

## MENTALITIES OF DEVELOPMENT THE CASE OF TRAVANCORE, SOUTH-WEST INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper focuses on the south-west Indian princely state of Travancore where the development question was inextricably linked with the issue of social equity. It argues that the local communities, rather than being passive subjects of a monolithic developmentalism propagated by the West, sought to negotiate and make development their own.*

**Keywords:** Modernity, Development, Mentality, Agency, Civic rights

### Introduction

Contemporary scholarship adheres to a critical stance on modernity and views development as false consciousness. The colonisers exhort the colonised people to take to the development path as they themselves wisely and successfully did; the colonial subjects enchanted by the idea miss the exploitative aspect of the development project and pursue it. The latter are thus viewed as passive subjects of the universalising, Western ideology of development.<sup>1</sup> Distancing itself from this view, this paper unravels how the colonised people negotiate with the super imposed project of development seeking to make it anew and their own.

The paper focuses on the development processes in the princely state of Travancore, south-west India, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It argues that in the caste-divided society of Travancore the development question was inextricably linked with the issue of social equity and civic rights, including access to public roads, conveyances, government offices, courts of law, educational and healthcare institutions for the lowest social groups. The paper is structured as follows. Following this introductory note, the paper traces the material processes of development in Travancore and the welfare implications thereof. The paper then proceeds to explore how development was imagined by different social groups and how each of these negotiated with the idea. It is argued that such negotiation was shaped by the given social and economic conditions of each group and the perceived possibilities in the new development scenario. Drawing on these, the concluding section re-affirms the hypothesis of colonial subjects negotiating development even while legitimising it.

## Of Production and Exchange

Some of the pet hypotheses of economic historians of nationalist and Marxist persuasion on economic change in India under colonial conditions – like de-industrialisation, agricultural stagnation and policy-induced famines – fail to fit the Travancore case. While some of the cottage industries like weaving of coarse towels and making of iron implements met with decline, nineteenth and early twentieth century Travancore presents itself as a buoyant economy. At once, however, the economic change occurring in Travancore was more nuanced than what the Cambridge economic historians – with their ‘sustenance, if not improvement’ hypothesis – would have us believe with regard to India. Travancore economy indeed grew but the benefits thereof did not trickle down to the people upon whose toil and misery the growth was attained.

While the world-market had forged systemic links with the Malabar hinterland of production beginning from the Portuguese imperialist expansion of the early sixteenth century, the post-1850s is especially remarkable. On a world-scale, the period was characterised by the rapid collapse of barriers to trade and transport and the unprecedented expansion of imperial capital. World-trade expanded by around ten-fold between 1850 and 1910. The replacement of sailing ships with steam vessels reduced cost and time of shipping: tramp shipping freight fell by half; shipping time was reduced to one-fifth. More goods could be carried and over longer distances with the aid of steam technology. Consequently, freight carrying capacity at the global level expanded five-fold. The Suez Canal, “a high road to the Indian Empire” as Disraeli described it, effected a saving of 40 per cent in the shipping distance between London and Bombay. Transit time between the two centres was five to eight months in the eighteenth century. With the opening of the Suez Canal, this was brought down to one month by 1870. The advent of steam ship brought it further down to two weeks by 1914. In the early nineteenth century, a traveller from England would have taken a year to reach south-west India; by the latter part of the century, he/she would take just about a month, and by the early twentieth century, even less.

Within India, railways played a major role in condensing time and space. By 1870, three major trunk routes – between Calcutta and Delhi, Bombay and Allahabad, and Bombay and Madras — were laid. In 1902 Travancore was linked by rail to Madras and thus to the rest of India. For Travancore, the improvements in land and inland-water transport too were crucial. Besides the already existing trunk routes of trade with the Tamil country — through Nanchilnadu and Shencottai – the south-north land route within was extended

and expanded in 1877-78 and re-christened as the Main-Central road. It followed a course along the hills and gave ready access to the various routes leading to the Highlands. By 1880s, with the Varkala cliffs tunnelled through, the state attained an uninterrupted inland water-transport route connecting north and south. Telegraph brought places further close. In 1854, Bombay and Calcutta were connected; within a year the line was extended to Madras. During the same decade, telegraph reached in Travancore. By 1870 India was linked to Britain through submarine cable. This marked an amazing change from the earlier decades when it took five to eight months for a letter from India to reach Britain and the writer could not expect a reply in less than a year and a half from the date of his/her letter.

Between 1850 and 1914, while world-trade expanded by about 10-fold, the external trade of Travancore grew over 20 times. Value of exports from Travancore rose from British Rupees [hereafter, Bh. Rs.] 17.5 lacs in 1857-58 to over Bh. Rs. 421 lacs in 1913-14 (at current prices). Imports which stood at Bh. Rs. 10 lacs at the beginning of the period rose 27-fold to Bh. Rs. 283 lacs by 1913-14. The expansion in trade surplus was about 20-fold. This was remarkable considering that the population of Travancore had increased only by about three times during this period.<sup>2</sup>

Two components of the colonial policy regime were critical to Travancore's trade expansion. Neither was to the liking of the princely government but it had to give in under the weight of the paramount order. The first critical component was the trade and tariff reforms. Beginning from the 1850s, pressure was exerted on Travancore to lift the state monopoly of trade. Eventually, in 1865, the princely government was forced to sign a customs agreement – the Inter-portal Trade Convention — that entirely dispossessed it of the monopoly of external trade and the right to frame the schedule of tariff. The second component of the colonial policy regime was monetary reforms. In line with the uniform customs area created through the Inter-portal Trade Convention, the British sought to create a uniform currency area for increasing the trade within the subcontinent and with the outside. Travancore was allowed to retain its currency but denied the right of issuing coins of the value Re. One. The notional Travancore Re. was pegged at a lower level than the Bh. Re; while 28 *chukram* would make a Travancore Re., the British Re. cost 28.5 *chukram*.

During the post-1850 period, besides a substantive increase in the volume of external trade — both exports and imports — a definitive change occurred in the commodity structure of trade. Traditional agricultural produce and spices formed the major item of export at the beginning of the nineteenth century. While the absolute volume of its exports continued to rise during the

course of the century and its position as the most important commodity group of export was never challenged but the relative significance declined. This was in the context of the rise of new agricultural commodities – plantation produce – and new industrial goods — especially coir mats and coconut oil – in the export basket. The value share of the traditional agricultural produce in total exports declined from 83 per cent in 1857-58 to 56 per cent in 1913-14. The decline especially owed to the rising share of plantation produce which increased from less than one per cent to 22 per cent. The rest 22 per cent of the value of exports accrued from industrial goods. Travancore's import basket at the beginning of the nineteenth century comprised opium, tobacco, arms and ammunition, cotton goods and yarn. The most significant change that occurred was the growing value share of paddy and rice in the import basket. Together, these formed a quarter of the import basket in 1870-71; by 1913-14 the share had risen to nearly one-half. The rising value share owed to increased quantities imported rather than increased prices. With better connectivity to the rice-growing regions of Bengal and Burma and creation of new paddy fields through reclamation of backwaters, the price of paddy and rice in fact declined during the period.

Considering that there was no unprecedented demographic expansion what explains the steep rise in import of paddy and rice? Foremost, this was consequent to the shift of labour from the production of food crops to cash crops and to manufacturing. A good part of labour in the highland plantations was drawn from the Tamil country but it imposed a new demand on paddy and rice in Travancore. On the coast, the emergence of coir weaving factories and innumerable spinning units implied the withdrawal of labour from agriculture, especially from food-crop cultivation. Such re-location placed an incremental demand too on paddy and rice because in their earlier location in the countryside, their diet was not rice-centric but comprised alongside, a large variety of tubers. Further, the assignment of highlands for plantations and the associated ban on hill-cultivation of rice – restrictions began in 1870 and bringing in new lands under cultivation banned in 1911 – cut into internal supply. Besides importing paddy and rice and augmenting internal production by encouraging reclamation cultivation, the government sought to propagate the cultivation of a new food crop, cassava. By 1921 half the food needs of Travancore was met by cassava.

The fact that the export volume of Travancore expanded by over 10 times and its trade surplus grew by over 10-fold between 1850s and 1910s should not lead to hasty macroeconomic conclusions. While the stated growth broadly indicates a buoyant economy, there are other facts worthy of consideration. First is the question of balance of payments, although this is

not easy to calculate. The annual tribute (subsidy) to the Crown was a pressing charge in the initial period but the burden lessened over time in the context of growing revenue from land and trade. At once, however, there were new, 'home charges'. The profits drained out by the plantation companies and coir weaving mills and exporters constituted a severe drain on the economy. Plantation companies paid out dividend on equity at about 30 per cent on the average. The net out-flow of annual profit after posting reserve was over 70 per cent in the case of major plantation companies. Over 60 per cent of the value generated in coir accrued to sterling capital. As succinctly put by the author of *The Travancore State Manual*:

The salaries of the European servants of the State as well as their pensions, interest and profit on the foreign capital invested in the Quilon Railway and the plantations on the hills, the cotton and oil mills, the coir manufacture and other industries due to foreign enterprise may all be taken to form a tribute which this country pays to British India or the United Kingdom (Aiya 3, 1984: 193).

Such drain was occasioned by the near total dominance of foreign capital in the new, globally interlocked economy of Travancore. Until the first decade of the twentieth century when rubber began to be cultivated, the plantations were entirely monopolised by sterling capital. Even in the case of rubber, the local peasants established a clear presence only by the 1930s. Their holdings were, however, relatively small. In 1911, eleven of the 12 major tea plantations, and nine of the 10 major rubber plantations were owned by sterling capital. Even those plantations not held by colonial capital were controlled by European managing agency houses. Again, six of the eight coir weaving factories, all four mining companies, the three cotton weaving mills, and the lone cotton spinning mill were owned by foreign capital. The only domain of significant presence of local capital in the factory sector was in coconut oil-milling. It was only after the First World War that local entrepreneurship emerged from the pores of coir yarn manufacture and trade and small-time banking, and expanded, albeit slowly, and moved into the factory sector. Yet, by and large, local capital continued to prefer investment in plantations and internal trade. They occupied only the third tier of the capitalist class, next to sterling capital and the Western Indian immigrant capital who held the reins of sub-continental trade.

By the time of the First World War, Travancore had been turned into a production machine for the world-market. Within Travancore no site was left untouched: the highlands, the port-towns, the backwaters and the backwater-side villages all came to be linked with the world-market. An overwhelming share of the labouring population was drawn from lower and out castes,

especially women. Women of depressed castes formed the majority of workforce in tea plantations and reclaimed rice-fields. Their share in the factory work-force was as high as 30 per cent in 1897-98. This figure excludes women employed in tea-factories which if included would perhaps post the share even higher. Child labour was high in the Travancore factories: about 40 per cent in 1897-98. Women workers in factories were paid only half the wages paid to men, and children were paid only one-third. While coir weaving mills were worked mostly by male labour, the entire spinning sector comprised female labour. Both male and female labourers in coir were mostly Ezhavas, a low caste, while the pre-spinning activities were a preserve of out caste Pulayas. Toddy-tapping again was exclusively undertaken by Ezhavas. All major operations involved in reclaiming the backwater for growing rice were performed by Pulaya and Pariah labourers. The global production machine of Travancore thus owed its working to the cheap labour of lower and out castes, especially women.

### **Imagining Development**

The first seeds of the idea of progress in Travancore were sown by the Anglican Protestant missionaries during the early nineteenth century. They established the first schools patterned on the English mode and introduced Western kind of healthcare among the lower-castes who had opted for the Christian path. This inspired the government to set up schools and healthcare facilities patterned on these. The state acting through the British Resident ever-insistent on social and economic reforms, the ‘enlightened princes’ trained in sciences and political economy, and gentlemen officials who appreciated ‘the modern views of Englishmen’ cast the development net even wide. The avowed aim of a Travancore dewan was to “provide for every subject within a couple of hours’ journey, the advantages of a Doctor, a Schoolmaster, a Judge, a Magistrate, a Registering Officer and a Postmaster”(Aiya, 1984: 564). While eventually these offices were established across the state, it was only with the powerful articulation by lower-caste social movements that these became accessible to “every subject”.

Providing development infrastructure crucially depended on national wealth. The state identified hard work and industry as the way to increase wealth — of the nation and of the individual. “The hand of the industrious heapeth wealth”, so began the first prince’s lecture ‘Our Industrial Status’ at the podium of the Trivandrum Debating Society on September 26, 1874. He noted that “the happiness, prosperity, power and glory of a society or a nation may always be measured by its well-directed, well-conserved

and progressive industry.” Travancore combined “within so narrow [geographical] limits... so many, so varied and so precious natural blessings”, but the contentment that sprang from it had “stunted the spirit of progressive enterprise and industry”. While acknowledging that “it may be long before we could see Travancore converted into an industrial bee-hive of manufactures like Bengal and Bombay” he consoled that the people “need not despair”. There was a great potential for commercial cultivation and export of edible roots, plantains, indigo and jute besides the expansion of coir and coconut oil milling industries already in place. He exhorted the moneyed-classes to spearhead industrialisation.

What a vast quantity of coconut fibre is wasted or burnt as fuel in spite of all our coir exports and the very enterprising American firms at Alleppey! Why should not coir manufactories arise at Trivandrum and Quilon?...A large quantity of coconut and other oils is exported. Why should not soap and candles be locally manufactured?(Tirunal 1874:8-9).

The prince emphasised the potential for individual self-advancement through industry and labour. He sought to illustrate this by advancing a real-life example. PD Devasahayam of southern Travancore was born into a poor, lower caste Nadar family. He turned to Protestant faith and attended the London Missionary Society’s Boarding School. Subsequently, he worked as a catechist, went to Ceylon and served as a supervisor in a coffee plantation for many years before returning to Travancore. Back home, Devasahayam bought a large expanse of rice fields and soon emerged as a leading coffee planter. Clearly, the princely portrayal of the individual life of a ‘self-made man’ marked a definitive break with the traditional Hindu notion of human life as entirely determined by caste-position and destiny.

The various caste-based social movements that emerged from the late nineteenth century articulated specific development demands. The central concern of each caste — whether high or low — was how best it could adapt to the challenges and possibilities of the new economy and society. The emphases in the development agenda of different castes varied. Yet broadly, these were influenced by two factors: first, the position of the caste in the prevailing social order and the specific set of needs arising thereof, and second, the organisational features specific to the caste and the extent to which these conformed to the attributes of development.

For Pulayas and other depressed castes – mostly wetland agricultural workers — gaining access to roads, schools, hospitals, courts, government offices and markets was the foremost need. The government had notified in 1865 that public roads shall be accessible for wheeled carriage by people of all castes. It was as if neither the government nor the social elite accepted “all



castes” to include Pulayas and others who were regarded as ‘out-castes’. The half-heartedness of the government and the resistance from the caste elite combined to ensure non-implementation of social legislation, often introduced under the paramount pressure. In an open challenge to the upper-caste elite and the state, Ayyankali — who subsequently emerged as the most important leader of the community — heroically rode a decorated cart along the village road; he formed a militant band to resist the attack from the upper-caste elite; the band marched to the market-place, asserting the legitimate claim to public space that was denied to the members of their community. In 1904 Ayyankali opened a primary school for Pulaya children but the upper-caste elite burned it down. In an attempt to force the government to offer school admission for Pulayas, the members of the community, most of whom were agricultural workers of the upper-caste landlords, struck work for nearly a year in 1907. The strike was called off only when the government agreed to issue a notification throwing school admission open to Pulayas. As the resistance of the upper-castes persisted the government had to re-issue the notification in 1910 and 1914.

During the second decade of the twentieth century the movement took a developmentalist turn. The earlier militant band had given way to a formal organisation in 1907. As the community gained representation in the legislature through nomination by the government, the demands were articulated more on the legislative floor and much less outside. Education was recognised as a key resource to the modern. Ayyankali pronounced that his life-ambition was to see a member of his community graduating. He saw the possibility of linking up the skill-background of his community with modern manufacture and sciences. Speaking at the Popular Assembly on February 28, 1916, he pointed out that along with general education Pulaya children shall be trained in some kind of work or manufacture. He requested the government to set up special technical schools for Pulayas and to award scholarships to trainees; to release special grants for weaving schools run by the community; and to impart training in science, agriculture and industry to teachers from the community. Further, given their traditional association with agriculture, he perceived the socio-economic gains to be had by command over the new agricultural science and requested the government to include agronomy in the curriculum of Pulaya students.

The Ezhavas – a step higher in the social order but reckoned as low — were engaged in a range of occupations: agricultural work, coir spinning and weaving, tapping and sale of toddy, and petty trade; there were teachers and traditional doctors too. While they had access to education including university education, most of them lacked resources to invest in higher education; for



the few who could afford, the fact that government employment was closed to them was major disincentive. In 1903, the Ezhavas established the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (the Yogam, for short) which aimed at “the progress of spiritual and worldly education and industrial habits”. The Yogam perceived development as a means of overcoming the ‘backwardness’ imposed on the community by the traditional social order. The Yogam activists were expected to lecture on austerity and the best methods of developing agriculture, trade and manufacture, to convince men and women that living upon laziness is against the interests of the community, and thus to excite them to action, and to set up industrial units wherever necessary, to encourage people to make a scientific study of industries and propagate ideas thereof. A vocational training centre was integral to most of the Yogam establishment. The central monastery had a weaving centre attached to it. At its Sanskrit School, ‘mechanism’ and ‘agricultural science’ were part of the curriculum.

Spiritual progress and material development were perceived as mutually complementary. When the Yogam established a nunnery, Narayana Guru, the spiritual leader of the movement insisted that it should aim at imparting training in sewing and other handicrafts, nursing and child welfare. Again, as the members in Cochin approached him for consecrating a temple, he suggested that in its stead, a weaving centre and an industrial school may be set up. Even as he consecrated temples – in a militant defiance of the Hindu scriptures that disallowed lower castes doing so — the occasion was often used to deliver the message of materialism. For instance, on consecrating a temple in Cochin in 1912, the Guru observed:

The economic condition of our community is sickly. Economic progress cannot be secured other than through industry. This demands special attention of the rich. They alone are better equipped to introduce various kinds of machines and conduct manufacturing activities. If a single person is unable to undertake this, a group of people should come together to float joint-stock companies and act courageously in such matters. While paths of progress lie straight ahead, unfortunately, our people are weary of treading on these (Vaidyar, 1972: 154).

The inaugural address delivered by Dr P Palpu, a leading activist of the Yogam, at its first annual meeting held in 1904 is reflective of the development concerns of the community:

We should display more love and interest in buying and using things produced by our community and our country. An ordinary English citizen buys with pride the goods produced in England and by the English, even if these are priced slightly higher. Japanese and Americans act likewise. We should try to emulate this as far as possible. If our goods are not quite up to the mark, we should not dismiss them with contempt. Our

attempt should be to improve them. Members of our community should enthusiastically engage themselves in different kinds of business ventures (Madhavan, 1986: 199-202).

Following the example set by the Crystal Palace exhibition 1851, and various exhibitions in India, often organised out of a nationalist fervour, the Yogam held an exhibition in 1905. About 3000 Ezhavas from across the Malabar Coast attended the exhibition. The king and the dewan of Travancore made a financial contribution for its conduct. Interestingly here, alongside products of traditional crafts persons, modern industrial products were also displayed. (Ibid, 144-54) The exhibition seems to have left a deep impact on young minds as the childhood memoirs of C Kesavan, the chief minister of the united state of Travancore-Cochin, suggests:

I saw Dr Palpu's younger brother, Mr Tanuvan, using a typewriter. The ceaseless play of a single finger on this machine was quite amazing. It left everyone there wonderstruck. It was only recently that the machine had come into use in Travancore. Ezhavas of Kottar and Balaramapuram had displayed fine woven cotton goods of the first grade. A loom with warp frames was also on display. A saucer made of candy-sugar by an Ezhava from the Tirunelveli district attracted much attention. Another interesting item on display was an engraved vessel with a lid, made out of a large sized coconut shell. These were some things that aroused one's curiosity and are still vivid in my memory; as also the presence of Kumaran Asan displaying his phonetic skill in English, which he had just learned to speak (Kesavan, 1968: 410).

Besides organising industrial exhibitions to propagate the message of industry and labour, Yogam activists themselves invested in trade and industry. In 1906, Palpu and a few wealthy Ezhavas jointly floated the Travancore Weaving and Trading Company with a capital of Re. One Lac. The Yogam directly initiated a cooperative, the Weaving and Trading Association, in 1909. In 1914, it floated the Malabar Economic Union with a capital of Re. One Lac. The company, formed specifically to generate employment opportunities for the members of the community, had Narayana Guru as one of the directors. Asan was not merely a great poet and a leading activist of the Yogam; he was a successful industrialist who owned and operated a roofing-tile factory. It was not that the Guru and the Yogam were supportive of all economic activities. While the consumption of toddy was spread across social groups, the upper-castes often chose to denigrate the Ezhavas for being its producers and purveyors. Guru pronounced alcohol as 'poison' and commanded: Neither produce nor supply it.

The Nayars were privileged by their higher social status and control over land. They had access to university education. While the higher levels of

employment in government were a designated niche for Brahmins from Maratha and Tamil country, the middle and lower levels were open to Nayers. They sought to capitalise on education with a view to attain a larger share of the government jobs. The Malayali Sabha, a pioneering organisation of the community, offered financial assistance to Nayar students at Madras, patronised Malayalam schools in the state, and established an English School at Trivandrum. The educational efforts of the Sabha were ably continued by its successor organisation, the Nair Service Society founded in 1914.

Not that the Nayers were unaware of the gains to be had from trade and manufacture, but their traditional family property structure and lack of experience were a hindrance to mobilisation of capital. The Malayali Sabha therefore sought to promote community-industrial collectives. On its own, the Sabha formed a trading company, which was a successful one considering that the company had an annual earning of Rs. 5000 in 1887 (Jeffrey, 1994:158-9). The Sabha also established an industrial school for giving training to the members of the community. Besides the steps initiated by the Sabha, there were localised attempts at trade and industry by the members of the community. A news report of October 14, 1905 indicated the efforts of Nayers in central Travancore to mobilise a capital of Rs. 10000 through individual subscriptions of Rs. 20 each from 500 people to conduct various trading activities on a large scale (*Manorama*, 14 Oct. 1905).

Yet, except in the cashew nut processing industry, Nayers could not rise to economic prominence. M.L. Janardanan Pillai, perhaps the lone Nayar industrialist of any significance at Alleppey, lamented in the 1930s:

The various high-rise monuments, trading and industrial establishments that dot the skyline of Alleppey belong to other communities. Nayers are said to be heroes, but ironically they show no heroism in this matter [trade and industry]. Agriculture is not profitable. It is not easy to get employment ... We [Nayers] are not used to saving money ... If we start anything [business] we quarrel and split our ways. The expenditure of Nayers is on the increase. But we do not care to increase income. We have no bank of our own... (*Deepika*, May 1, 1939).

At the apex of Travancore's social hierarchy was Nambudiris or Malayala Brahmins. Forming less than one per cent of the population, they were predominantly non-cultivating land owners. Their education was of the traditional kind, in Sanskrit and the Vedas, and aimed to equip them to undertake priestly tasks. Constrained as they were by the conventions of distance pollution and the exacting requirements of everyday worship, their mobility and therefore access to schooling were restricted. The author of the *Travancore State Manual* writing in the early twentieth century noted that "a Nambudiri is at his best in his quiet and secluded retreat, remote from

towns and cities which he instinctly dreads. He would be entirely out of his element in a large town where one can easily detect him by his queer looks and awkward manner” (Aiya, 2: 251-2).

Even this long insulated community could not escape the influence of the sweeping changes in the economy and society. As the twentieth century wore on and other caste groups made advances along the path of modernity, the community found that it had been almost entirely left out. This prompted self-reflection by the community:

Look at other communities. Agriculture, trade, employment, positions of honour — all these are in their hands. We merely receive rent and are quite content to have our meals thus. The goodies offered by servants and tenants we take, without ourselves doing any labour. Basking in ancient glory, we have no idea of what happens outside Kerala. We have not cared to study the dynamics of science. We practically offer nothing to the nation (Bhattatiripad, 1983: 66).

Consistent with this self-critical stance, was the attitude of a section of the Nambudiris who began to feel ashamed of charities bestowed on them by the State. It was also felt that such incentives impaired the community’s efforts to encounter the new challenges. This is revealed in Mathur Vasudevan Nambudiripad’s appeal to the Travancore Raja in 1911:

Well-versed as he is in the Science of Economics, His Highness does not need to be advised that the resources used in extravagant expenditure for Murajapam and other ceremonies of this kind [in which Brahmins were bestowed with charity] could be more fruitfully utilised for the education of the Nambudiris. Economic theory informs us that a nation’s wealth should, to the extent possible be channelised into paths of progress. To aid the leisurely, stifles their incentive for industry. It would be useful if the money now spent on satisfying the voracious needs of idle Nambudiris is used instead, to set up a school that would be a thing of permanence. It should go without saying that the main curriculum of the [proposed] school should consist of English and sciences taught in vernacular (*MalayalaManorama*, April 8, 1911).

In 1944, EMS Nambudiripad, an early activist of the Nambudiri reform movement and subsequently a leading communist, addressed the community thus:

These days there are many Nambudiris who have secured their share of family property and are living separately. Many of them are capable of starting industries, at least on a small-scale. But most of them continue to depend on the tenants’ rent; very few take up trade and agriculture even in a small way. Not one factory of significance, or an estate where cultivation is carried out on scientific lines, initiated by Nambudiris have come to my notice ... If we are to survive in the changing

economies of the world, India and Kerala, instead of spending our time exacting rent in the capacity of landlords, we should try to increase our wealth and the wealth of the people by entering the spheres of trade and industry. Unless we do this, all those social reform activities undertaken so far would prove to be infructuous. (Priyadarsan, 1982: xxxi-ii).

What was the economic status of the non-Hindu communities in Travancore? How did they respond to the new economy? The most prominent among the non-Hindus were the local, Syrian Christians. The Syrian Christians were largely a monolithic church connected with the oriental churches till the Portuguese arrived and inducted them into the papal fold; but they retained many oriental rites. The Syrian Christians were engaged in wetland cultivation of rice, cash crop cultivation in the garden land, agro processing and trade. Many of them were royal tenants and enabled by the 1865 land reforms became absolute owners of land. They further rose in prosperity with the expansion in rice-fields through the reclamation of backwaters. Even those who were not owner-cultivators attained economic rise by acting as farm-managers with a share in the produce. Many moved to the midland and established cash crop gardens, invested in trade and money-lending or set up agro processing units – coir and coconut oil milling ventures – in the port-towns. With the spread of rubber cultivation, especially in the post-First World War days, some of them established small and medium-sized plantations and acquired further wealth.

The case of P John is illustrative of the relatively richer capitalist – though in no way comparable to the sterling capitalists – among the local, Syrian Christians. His first venture was a coconut-oil mill in Alleppey in partnership with his brothers. John got involved in rubber planting soon after the crop was introduced in Travancore, becoming a partner in a rubber syndicate managed by the British in 1903. Subsequently, along with his brothers and a sterling partner, he floated a new firm; land was bought specifically for planting rubber; but it was a non-starter and the land was sold to a sterling company. From 700 acres in 1910, the operated area rose to just less than 2000 acres by 1917, but the economic depression, the increasing use of synthetic rubber, and the Second World War proved trying and by 1961 the acreage was a little more than 2000.

The Syrian Christians had access to village schools; some of them were teachers too. From the late nineteenth century many schools were opened in the church premises or at the initiative of the church. With access to university education and backed by economic power to invest therein, many of them could join the ranks of the small but growing class of professionals. The

combination of higher education and economic surplus also facilitated their rise as 'print capitalists'. Both the major newspapers *Nazrani Deepika* and *Malayala Manorama* in Travancore were captained by Syrian Christians. Enlightened in the matters of modern polity and economy by virtue of university education and enthused by their rising stake as investors in the new economy, the Syrian Christian proprietor-editors fashioned the press as a platform for articulating a range of development themes. The themes included, foremost, accumulation of wealth, reforms in agriculture, drain of economic surplus, promotion of cash crops, value-addition in industry, scarcity of capital, state intervention, and technical education.

On July 16, 1888 the *Nazrani Deepika* gave a clarion call: "Oh, Malayali, the most important thing for human beings in this world [as distinct from the other world] is wealth and the principal means of acquiring it is through trade. These being so, at least from now on, strive to achieve this goal". A two-part editorial, "Nammude Aalochanakkuravu" (Our lack of reflection), which appeared in September 19, 1900 issue noted thus:

In trade and manufacture, we [people of Travancore] have not attained eminence. This country which is so richly endowed with a variety of cereals, plants, fruits and tubers, ought to have outshone other countries in trade and manufacture. The present situation appears to be the outcome of a certain lack of capacity to reflect and to invest commensurate efforts. The prosperity that accrues to a country from trade and manufacture would indeed be great. Countries [sic] like Europe and America have, by employing this principle, grown richer than us ... It is now our turn to pursue routes of progress.

The second joint-stock company floated in Travancore was the *Malayala Manorama*. Its stated aim was, besides publishing a newspaper, "to demonstrate how income could be reaped by forming joint stock companies". In 1910, its promoters launched a rubber planting company that was the first locally-owned planting company in the state. Through editorials such as the one published in the July 7, 1906 issue, the paper made a strong case for the formation of joint stock companies.

First, there are only very few amongst us who have sufficient capital to run a proper business. Second, the [sole proprietary] business enterprise runs the potential risk of incurring setbacks because of proprietor's follies. Third, in the unfortunate eventuality of any possible misfortune, the proprietary concern may become insolvent. If on the other hand, several individuals come together, subscribe Rs. 100 or 1000 each, float a joint stock company and run the business none of the problems cited above would affect it.

Among the other major non-Hindu communities were the Nadar Christians and Muslims. The former were concentrated in southern Travancore and had chosen Christian faith under the lead of the Anglican missionaries. While education helped many of their members to gain upward mobility the vast majority continued to be agricultural labourers and palmyra-toddy tappers. Muslims were scattered across the state with some settled in the river-side trading towns in the midland and many more on the plains and coastal tract. Some were large traders; a few were involved in cashew-nut processing industry but by and large the economic status of the rural masses was not very different from that of the Nadar Christians and the lower-caste Hindus.

### **Negotiation and Legitimation**

Admittedly, in its origins, the idea of development is Western but the project of development as it unfolded in Travancore was not a one-way imposition. To assume so would be to miss the agency of the colonised people, who explored the idea, accepted it in parts, and modified it to suit their existing status and needs. The people of lower and out castes especially viewed and represented the idea of development as inseparable from the idea of social equity. Against the terrain of the colony the idea of development thus ceased to be monolithic and assumed a multiplicity of meanings. Yet, in appropriating development in so many different ways, the colonised people also legitimised the idea of development.

### **NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Ferguson (1990) and Escobar (2011).
- <sup>2</sup> Except where specifically attributed to other sources, all figures and quotes are drawn from Rammohan (1996).

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