
Deeply Enmeshed in Colonial Notions about Aryan Superiority: Revisiting the Kerala Histories on Brahman Settlements

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Abstract: *The paper re-examines the writings of historians on the early and early medieval Brahman settlements to understand whether colonial notions about the Aryans as a civilizing force in the Indian sub-continent have been influential on them. The author is fully convinced that the Indian historiographical tradition has not come out of a tradition which had its roots in the necessity to justify foreignness of the British. The paper has been written based on an analysis of the approaches of the historians towards the establishment of Brahman settlements in Kerala. It has now been revealed that their claims that these settlements had begun to be established in the centuries preceding the Christian era do not have the support of archaeological evidence. The arguments in favour of the sprouting of nucleated settlements in the State in the early centuries of the Christian era have also been put forward based on references in the early medieval inscriptions, not earlier than the mid-9th century A.D. Equally relevant is the issue of using temple inscriptions in Brahman settlements and keeping silent about the society at large.*

Keywords: Aryanisation, Colonial Notion, Chellur, Brahmakshatra, Keralolpatti, Parasurama Legend, Brahmaswom

Introduction

History and archaeology represent disciplines which attempt the reconstruction of the past with the help of literary sources and material remains respectively. Neither a historian nor an archaeologist can lay claim to the absoluteness of truth about the past for which there is no witness to narrate what had happened. As the renowned historian of Kerala, M G S Narayanan noted in a recent work, 'history writing is possible only with the support of evidences. However, subjectivity creeps in depending on the sources used.' (Narayanan 2018: 42). John Tosh noted that 'The nature of historical enquiry is such that, however rigorously professional the approach, there will always be a plurality of interpretation.' (Tosh 1983: 125).

As in history, archaeology also does not allow one to make claims about things supported by very thin evidences. Scholars like Roberta Gilchrist have been successful

in using archaeological data derived from excavations to reconstruct the settlements of religious women in medieval Europe. (Gilchrist 1997: 25-30). Unfortunately, there have been very little attempts at integrating historical sources with archaeological data in the study of the early medieval Brahman settlements in Kerala. The charge levelled against historians that they 'are often driven ...by considerations of ideology' applies to the historians in the country, including the state. (Black & MacRaild 1997: 12).

Archaeology is very specific in the matter of identification of settlements. Paul Bahn has succinctly stated that a settlement is 'any spot on the landscape with detectable traces of human activity.' He asserts that even short term dwelling places provide us evidences. (Bahn, 2000: 55). S J Knudson also states that a habitation site leaves behind 'traces of a wide variety of daily activities.' (Knudson 1985: 55) Archaeological studies into settlements can enable us to interpret 'the lay out of several households, the space between households, variations in size of households, communal areas, structures and activities' (Drewett 2001: 170). Peter L Drewett observes that: *The local landscape, hills, valleys, rivers may predetermine the shape of a settlement, while its location may be partly determined by access to resources* (Drewett 2001: 170).

There are of course instances wherein 'communal activities took place away from settlement sites'. (Drewett, 2001: 171). Grahame Clarke observes that excavation alone can help us establish 'the actual plans of settlements, the disposition of buildings, roads and tracks.' (Clarke 1960: 198). Excavation could provide clues into settlement patterns in sites going back to as early as 25000 years ago (Ember et al. 2007: 144).

Indian archaeologists such as Shereen Ratnagar have also studied settlements, including villages and towns, and their 'relation to rainfall, river regimes, ground water, soils and mineral resources (stone, wood, shell, metal)'. (Ratnagar 2006:18). Settlement sites often maintain continuity. Dilip Chakrabarty, for example, points out that with a very few exceptions, continuity of occupation has been confirmed in most of the sites in West Bengal and a large part of the Ganga plain 'from prehistoric to the modern period.' (Chakrabarty 2013: 325). He has also pointed out that the major chalcolithic sites of Malwa 'are located within or in the periphery of modern village boundaries.' (Chakrabarty 2006: 305). According to him, 'the neolithic-chalcolithic settlers laid down the basis of a settlement location which persisted not merely in the early historic period of their respective areas but also till today' (Chakrabarty 2006: 305). This means that Kerala's Brahmin settlements should also be having continuities from the early times onwards if they were really old. Archaeological studies into the early historic phase could also offer us lot of insights into the distribution of settlement spaces. (Chakrabarty 2006: 350-1). Chakrabarty also points out that excavation of the 7th-10th century site of Ambari in Assam could reveal remnants of settlements in the early phase. (Chakrabarty 2006: 437). Structural evidences could be gathered from many other early medieval sites in the country.

It is said that the Brahmans who had begun migrations from the Konkan area to the south at the beginning of the Christian era established agricultural villages on the

banks of rivers in the state (Ganesh 1997: 42). Habitations along the banks of rivers and ponds were not exclusive to the Brahman settlements alone. The landscapes influenced the settlement patterns of human populations in the neolithic-chalcolithic contexts as well. (Chakrabarty 2006: 305) The Neolithic settlements were also located on the banks of rivers. (Pal 2008: 62). South Indian archaeologists like K Rajan have, through their studies into the Iron Age settlements, including burials, found that they were mostly situated 'on the banks of the rivers or rivulets.' (Rajan 1992: 131-2). It was even found that agriculture using irrigation by constructing tanks had also been practised by the Megalithic people. The excavated sites such as Kodumanal could also uncover traces of house floors, post holes, etc (Rajan 1992: 132). Kerala's archaeologists have not so far made any break through in identifying the settlements of Iron Age (Gurukkal & Varier 1999: 129).

Given this fact, archaeological investigations may uncover settlement remains in the early levels of the so-called 32 Brahman settlements mentioned in the 18th century text *Keralolpatti*. So far, historians have tried to locate these settlements based on a few inscriptions and temples at some sites. As the first chief minister of Kerala E M S Namboodirippad wrote, the evidences including inscriptions were created by those close to people in power. (Namboodirippad 2014: 54). Even these are not sufficient to reconstruct the early history of the Brahmans in Kerala. Historians have written on the early settlements based on some preconceived notions about the Aryan legacies, early heroic poems, medieval literature and early medieval temple inscriptions in Kerala.

Aryan Brahmans used to be clubbed together with the groups such as Nairs, Ezhavas, Jews, Syrian Christians, Muslims and Konkanis as 'foreigners' as compared to the 'indigenous' groups such as Cherumas, Pulayas, Kadars, Malayas, Nayadis, Kurumbas, and Kurichyas. (Padmanabha Menon 1912: 5). No historian has been in a position to exactly determine the period or periods in which the Brahmans came and settled down in Kerala. Despite this, we have histories which tell us that Brahman settlements had existed here from the early historic period onwards. There has not been any marked progress from what Logan said about the period of the emergence of the Brahman settlements as dominant centres– 8th century A.D. (Namboodirippad 2008: 19, Logan 2009: 116).

This paper calls for a fresh look at the existing literature on Aryan Brahman settlements in the state. It attempts to unravel how historians have not been in a position to shed the burden of colonial-nationalist notions about the Aryan-Brahman elements as the civilizing force across the sub continent and are therefore reluctant to avoid claims unsupported by archaeological evidences.

Hindus, Aryans and Brahmans as Synonyms of Civilization

Histories of ancient and early medieval periods have been focussed on the civilizing role played by the Aryan settlers in the country. This way of looking at the country's past had its origins in the colonial historiography. In the colonial histories, there are

references to the 'Aryan-speaking conquerors,' who could leave behind 'indelible traces of their influence' once they were 'absorbed in the population of the country.' (Rawlinson 1937: 21). The British portrayal of the Aryans as conquerors fitted with their colonial interests as they had to gloss over their foreignness. It was colonial histories which stated that a noble people called Aryans drove the non-Aryans who were 'of a lower type' into the mountains, or reduced to servitude on the plains.' (Hunter 1984: 39). The non-Aryans were described as 'primitive peoples.' On the other hand, the Aryans were glorified. Hunter describes the Aryans thus: 'This race belonged to the splendid Aryan or Indo-Germanic stock, from which the Brahman, the Rajput, and the Englishman alike descend.' (Hunter 1984: 52). Let me cite one more scholar's statement on the Aryan greatness. Sir Valentine Chirol states as follows:

India owes her own peculiar civilization to the gradual fusion of Aryan races of a higher type that began to flow down from Central Asia before the dawn of history upon the more primitive indigenous populations already in possession (Chirol 1921: 15).

The colonial scholars used the terms *Aryan* and *Hindu* in the same sense. The earliest use of the term Hindu was with 'a geographic, linguistic, or ethnic connotation.' It must be pointed out here that Aleberuni was the first person to use the term in a religious sense. (Jha 2007: 216). The use of the term *Gentoo* preceded the wider use of the term *Hindu*. It was in 1548 that the Portuguese used the term *Gentoo* to describe the non-Muslim and non Christian groups living in India. In the late 17th century, the term *Gentoo* began to be used by the English. In the 18th century, they used the term *Hindoo* to represent a religion. Among the *Hindoos*, the Brahmans were considered as 'the true representatives of the *Gentoo* race.' Halhed used the three terms *Gentoo*, brahmans and *Hindoo* as 'interchangeable categories' (Srivastava 1998: 1181-89).

In the 19th century, the term Aryan became closely associated with the Brahmans though the term was originally used by the European scholars to mean 'the Indo-Persian languages and peoples,' and 'a designation for the so-called Indo-Germanic peoples' (Dalmia 2003: 24). Colonial histories dabbled in the Aryan-Dravidian dichotomies to the extreme level. The Orientalist scholars had portrayed the non-Aryans as very primitive (Chatterji 1975:8). Bishop Caldwell, on the other hand, took great pains to reconstruct the pre-Aryan past of the Dravidians. The idea of Hinduism as the 'religion of the Indo-Aryans' had become deeply entrenched in the minds of the educated Indians by the early 20th century. (Abhedananda 1940: 54). Swami Abhedananda even goes to the extent of describing the Brahmans the Aryan group 'who were white in colour' (Abhedananda 1940: 102).

The belief in Aryan as a civilizing agency was shared and perpetuated by the nationalist and post independent Marxist histories. R K Mukherji and other nationalist historians had equated the Vedic tradition with the 'Hindu India.' Mukherji was of the view that the Indo-Aryans laid the foundations of the 'Indian civilization' by 'colonising and civilizing the Indian continent' (Mukherji 1996: viii-1). R S Sharma

observes that the 'brahmanical order spread from Madhyadesa into Bengal and south India as a result of land grants to the brahmanas, many of them migrating from the north between the fifth, sixth and later centuries.' (Sharma 2001:34).

As early as 1923, S Krishnaswami Aiyankar stated that south of the Krishna-Tungabhadra frontier, history starts with the coming of the Aryans. (Aiyangar 1923: 1). He too believed in the 'march of civilization from the north into the south, and under northern guidance and influence.' (Aiyangar 1923: 45) Colonial writers including Sir Monier Williams used the expression 'Aryanising the primitive inhabitants' with the meaning of 'civilizing.' (Padmanabha Menon: 1). According to him, the 'Hindu Aryans' settled down in the north-western regions as 'agriculturists.' The Manual of the Tanjore District contains the idea that the Aryans had been well established in the south by 'about five or six centuries B.C.' (Padmanabha Menon: 2).

The native scholars seem to have blindly copied from the British writings. There were scholars who had recognised that a mixing of Aryan and Dravidian cultures took place in the wake of the migration of the Aryans. Sivaraj Pillai had asserted that when compared to that of the north, Aryanisation in the south 'assumed a milder form.' He said:

"Except for its pre-historic remains, of which the recent finds of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa form probably but a part, North India has been literally swept clean of its Dravidian antiquities by the great Aryan flood. That did not and could not happen in the South" (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 3-4).

Pillai also noted that 'the Jains and the Buddhists seem to have been the earlier batch.' (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 9). It was asserted that before 'new beliefs and practices' of the Aryans were imposed, the south had housed 'village communities' consisting of 'peaceful agriculturists, traders and artisans'. It was stated by Pillai that the Agam poems contained most of the 'later interpolations.' (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 38). According to him, the names of the poets were lost by the time the poems were redacted at a later stage. He places the Purananuru before the Agananooru. (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 43). Pillai uses the terms 'Aryan Hinduism' and 'Aryanism' to mean the Vedic religion of the early historic times. (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 196). It was asserted that the Aryans had not got 'a strong hold on the people at the time.' Aryanisation, Pillai argued, 'is a much later phenomenon.' The Vedic religion began to be more influential from the time of the Pallavas onwards. (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 196). It must be stated that Pillai had also suffered from a strong conviction that the Tamils had developed a 'Dravidian civilization.' Despite this, Pillai's work stands out as a pioneering one in responding to efforts to portray the early period as Aryan in character. He stated thus:

"They rely on the occurrence of a few Sanskrit or Prakrit words here and there in the language of this literature and, on that foundation, go to build such astounding propositions as that the whole literature is pervaded by the spirit of Aryan culture and that the entire Dravidian life also cast in that foreign mould" (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 212).

He held that there were very few Brahmins in the beginning. A large number of Brahmins was made to settle in the south by the rulers' land-gifts and other donations. Pillai has cited the references to the Yajna posts in some poems and expresses doubts in these words: "Could these not have been inserted at the time of the Hindu religious reaction to give the impression that Aryan Hinduism had come into the Tamil country even before the Aryan heterodox systems and had secured the support and patronage of ... the ancient kings?" (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 135). In his view, the Sangam poems bear 'a faint impress of the contact of Aryan Hinduism.' (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 187). His conclusion that the Tamil poems 'cannot be taken beyond 250 B.C.' is based on his knowledge that 'Jainism and Buddhism had also reached the south by about the same time. (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 187). Pillai rejected the colonial scholars' attempt to establish that the literary culture of the south derived from the Jains and Buddhists. He also uses the term *Kalabhra interrugnum* for the four centuries period from the mid-third century A.D onwards. He too describes it as 'the dark period of Tamil history' though from a different perspective' (Sivaraj Pillai 1932: 194).

K A Neelakanta Sastri treated Aryanisation as a 'vast and important cultural movement' which engulfed the whole of the sub continent by the close of the first millennium B.C. (Sastri, 2000: 61). He argued that 'Dravidian culture becomes articulate and enters the field of authentic recorded history only after its contact with Indo-Aryan.' (Sastri 1963: 4). The Vindhyan forests, the Satapura ranges and the Narmada river, argues Sastri, had not posed a barrier to the Aryans to branch out to the south. (Sastri 2000: 70). It is said that the Narmada could have been crossed at Maandhataa. Sastri was prepared to accept that descriptions of Aryan migration were more speculative. He also favoured the Aryans moving to the south and the south east along the western and eastern coasts. According to him, south India was being Aryanised in the seven or eight centuries preceding Christian era. Sastri had stated that civilization reached the south through the Aryans. According to him, Aryanisation of the south had started as early as 1000 B.C and reached its completion by the fourth century B.C (Sastri 2000: 69). Sastri has observed that the term Cherapadah, mentioned in the Aitareya Aranyaka could be a reference to the Cheras. Based on this, he infers that Kerala's traditions began to shape distinct from other parts in the south at a very date (Sastri 2000: 62).

It was Sastri who gave us the picture of the Vedic Aryans initiating 'a process of slow and peaceful permeation.' (Sastri 2000: 62). He also tells us that the fourth century B.C grammarian Katyayana mentions Kerala. According to him, the movement of the Aryans to the south was steady in the subsequent centuries. Aryanisation was represented as a 'large movement' happening in the centuries prior to the Mauryan period itself. (Sastri 2000: 63). Sastri had used the terms Aryan and Brahmin in the same meaning. The evidence of punch marked coins found in the Deccan, South India and Ceylon is cited for arguing that contacts between the north and the south continued into the period of Magadhan rule under the Nandas. On the other hand, the Jains are said to have moved to the south during the time of Chandragupta Maurya. It

implied that the Brahmins had migrated to the south earlier than the Jains. Sastri was a nationalist historian who envisaged the Mauryas as the empire builders who had tried to unite the whole of India politically. (Sastri 2000: 80) He regarded the age of Sangham as one in which the Vedic religion 'had struck root in the south.' It was also his idea that though there were 'rival sects' such as Jainism and Buddhism in the period, they could become prominent only 'in the succeeding age.' More significantly, Sastri proclaims that 'Hinduism was the dominant creed in this age.' (Sastri 2000: 129). His was an attempt at integrating the history of the south with that of the north. It is also important to note that Sastri equated the Vedic religion with Hinduism.

The idea that the Aryans got an upperhand in the south through a peaceful process was conveyed by Bishop Caldwell when he said:

The introduction of the Dravidians within the pale of Hinduism appears to have originated not in the conquest, but in the peaceful process of colonisation and progressive civilization (Padmanabha Menon: 12).

The same idea was endorsed by K P Padmanabha Menon and other Kerala historians. Menon said:

The Aryan colonisation of Southern India was effected, not by force of arms, but by the arts of peace. The Dravidian races of the South had to submit to the superior intelligence and administrative skill of the Brahmans from the South (Padmanabha Menon: 12).

According to Padmanabha Menon, Menon, 'the Brahmans had settled in Malabar long before the Chalukyan or Rashtrakuta conquest of the country' (Padmanabha Menon: 25) He was under the impression that the Brahmans left 'their hearths and homes in the north' seeking 'fresh fields and pastures new.' (Padmanabha Menon: 25). Scholars have raised the possibility of the south having received Dravidian speakers centuries before the Tamil language and literature attained perfection. According to them, the earliest stratum of Tamil poems goes back to the second or first century B.C. (Chopra ETL 1979: 9). They acknowledge that the south was known to the north from the time of 'Katyayana, Patanjali, Kautilya and Baudhayana' onwards. (Chopra ETL 1979: 15).

The reference in Aitareya Aranyaka to the Cheras as the Cherapada and Katyayana's mention of the Cheras are, according to them, 'early and dim glimmerings of Aryan knowledge' of the south. They mention the Asokan edicts which also mention the Cheras as the earliest epigraphic reference to the south. Agastya, in their writing, represents 'one of the earliest to cross the Dandakaranya into South India.' According to them, 'Agastya was perhaps an epitome of ancient memories of proto-historic struggles, movements etc., in the minds of later generations.' In their view, the 'Aryanisation of the natives of South India' coincided with 'the reciprocal Dravidianisation of the immigrants.' (Chopra etl 1979: 15). As for the presence of Brahmins, these scholars held that they 'have been a part of Tamil society at least about five centuries before the Sangam Age began' (Chopra etl 1979: 55).

Historians of Kerala were inspired by the concept of Aryanisation as a civilizing process expounded by Sastri. M G S Narayanan had argued for a much earlier tradition for the Aryans in Kerala in a paper titled Co-existence of Creeds and Communities. M G S said:

The first Aryan pioneers must have peeped into this Dravidian country some five hundred years before the Christian era in the course of their southward migration. They were mostly agriculturists lured by the possibility of cultivating virgin lands, and traders who risked everything for money, and a few missionaries who carried forward the banner of Vedic culture (Narayanan 1972: 1).

This shows that the scholar looks at the migration of Aryans as a part of expansion. The chieftains of the 'semi-tribal' society of the state are said to have welcomed them. They Aryans are also described as 'men of peace.' Post independent historians like D D Kosambi had shared the idea of a 'peaceful wave of' Aryan intrusion in the north and the south. (Kosambi 2000: 91). M G S Narayanan has characterised the expansion of the 'Aryans race' as a 'civilising mission' (Narayanan 1972: 2).

The term he uses for this Aryan race is 'Parasurama Brahmins.' According to him, the Brahmins 'might have established their 32 settlements to the south of river Netravati between the 3rd and the 8th centuries of the Christian era in the fertile valleys of the West coast' (Narayanan 1972: 2).

Even the name Nannan had inspired him to speculate on its links with the Nandas of the Magadhan kingdom. (Narayanan 1994: 74). M G S Narayanan also showed a keen interest in establishing that there was no basis in treating the Dravidian and Aryan societies as separate. (Narayanan 1994: 79). In his view, the Mauryan empire influenced the kingdoms and tribes in its frontier. Narayanan, while subscribing to the Aryanisation idea of Sastri and other previous scholars, even claimed that the Sangam age represents 'only one culture, the Vedic-Puranic-Sastraic culture, which exhibits a south-ward movement through migration of Brahmin-Jain-Buddhist missionaries, through Mauryan conquest and the opening up of trade routes.' This implies that Narayanan had a vision of a pan-Indian culture reaching all parts and civilising all kinds of people. The Tamil culture, according to him, is a product of post-Sangam processes. (Narayanan 1994: 133). It was argued that instead of the Dravidian elements which were 'near-primitive' and 'semi-tribal', the 'more advanced and dominant' 'Vedic-Puranic-Sastraic or Aryan culture' had shaped the early historic society of the south. (Narayanan 1994: 134). M G S Narayanan has clearly stated that 'the Sangam culture has to be looked upon as expressing in a local idiom all the essential features of classical 'Hindu' culture.' (Narayanan 1994: 146).

Y Subbarayalu, however, has pointed out that 'both early Tamil and Prakrit poetry appear to be refined developments of a common, popular, pre-Aryan oral tradition that must have flourished in the first millennium BCE in the Deccan.' (Subbarayalu 2017: 46). According to Kesavan Veluthat, the 'brahman community' was the 'agency

which affiliated Kerala to Indian civilization, reorienting the semi-tribal society and polity in Kerala on the “classical” Hindu lines. (Veluthat 1978: 10).

Regarding the acceptance that the brahmanas are said to have enjoyed in Kerala, Gurukkal noted as follows:

The status of the brahmanas as the custodians of the Vedic, Sastraic, epic, and Puranic ideas, the higher wisdom about life, the various systems of knowledge about the universe, practical know-how about the cycles of seasons and their calendrical measurements enabling prediction of natural changes, and the like, added to their charisma. This expanding socio-political influence and growing control of means of production, supplementary and complimentary to each other, were what made their worldview to be acceptable to the social aggregate (Gurukkal 2010; 250).

Kerala’s historians have been trying to establish that the Brahman presence in the State was considerable right from the early historic period onwards. That explains why even the Jaina practice of Sallekhana (in Tamil poems, Vatakkiruttal) was interpreted as the practice called *uttaragamanam* among the Brahmanas. (Gurukkal and Varier 1999: 219).

Aryanisation Process in Kerala

Aryanisation and Sanskritisation of Kerala are said to be part of a process that took centuries. Legends in Canara spoke of reverence with which the Brahmanas were given encouraged by the Kadamba rulers like Mayurasarman and son Chandrangatan to settle in Kerala, Tuluva, Haigiri, Concana and Corada. (Padmanabha Menon: 3). Although M G S Narayanan too believed that the process began in the pre-Christian era itself, he subscribed to Sastri’s view regarding the post Sangam era. This is evident from his statement that the entire State had remained thickly forested until the 8th century A.D. He made it clear that it was after the coming of Brahmanas and the establishment of their settlements that these forests were cleared for wet rice cultivation. It was his view that until the 8th century, Kerala was peopled by megalithic societies (Narayanan 2016: 72). The same scholar had cited philosophers like Bhavarata, Matrdatta and Sankaracharya who had lived in the early 8th century to the beginning of the 9th century. (Narayanan 2013: 385). There were scholars who had argued that the period from the fourth to the sixth centuries was noted for a Buddhist phase in Kerala (Gopalakrishnan 2000: 213).

M G S found a close follower in Rajan Gurukkal who had also subscribed to the idea that the Tamil heroic poetry gives us evidences of a ‘gradual ideological constitution of the political power drawing heavily from Vedic-Itihasic-Puranic-Sastraic brahmanism.’ (Gurukkal 2010: 231). A Sreedhara Menon blindly copied the versions of Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai and M G S Narayanan regarding the migration of Brahmanas and their settlements. A Sreedhara Menon Menon said the Kadamba king Mayurasarman had settled the Brahmanas in Kerala, although there is no direct reference to it in any record. (Sreedhara Menon 2017: 89). He too repeated that the ‘Brahmanical Aryan culture’ was superimposed over the ‘Dravidian culture’ of Kerala. (Sreedhara Menon 1996: 14) Veluthat has stated that:

The early Brahman settlements developed rapidly, and the Brahmans expanded all over Kerala, in such a way that by the 10th or 11th century A.D, they could claim ownership over a large part of the arable lands of Kerala as well as a dominant role in social and political institutions (Veluthat 1978: 39).

He lists Cellur as the earliest Brahman settlement in Kerala. (Veluthat, 1978: 12-17). Veluthat also says that 'The history of the brahman community in this part of the country is the history of the transformation of a society as a result of the contacts with and superimposition of a more advanced material culture.' He is suggesting that, before the coming of Aryans and throughout the long period taken for the establishment of 'Brahman colonies', there had existed people having a different tradition and culture. He elaborates the point as follows:

The success with which the brahmans met in Kerala was the success of better agricultural techniques and better organising ability in a society which was yet to emerge from tribal status (Veluthat 1978: 10).

Kerala as *Brahmakshatra*

K. P. Padmanabha Menon spoke of a Namboodiri age upto 1600. (Elamkulam 1956: 37). That seems to be a reflection of a historical tradition focussed on the dominant role played by the Brahmins in the shaping of society in the south, including Kerala. Some of the historians were very eulogising in describing the 'great' role played by the Namboodiris in transforming the state. (K K Pillai 1960: 102). Pillai had observed that the Namboodiris might have come to Kerala in the fourth and fifth centuries. That the Brahmans had spread to different parts of the south by the fourth century was an idea put forward by scholars like R C Dutt. The same was upheld by K P Padmanabha Menon and others (Namboodirippad 2014: 54). The important historians who have reconstructed the history of early medieval Brahman settlements are M G S Narayanan, Rajan Gurukkal, and Kesavan Veluthat. Even before them, Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai had portrayed Kerala as a land dominated by the Brahmans in the period from the 11th century to the 16th century. (Elamkulam 1956: 86). The inscriptions gave him the impression that half of Kerala's population comprised of Brahmans (Elamkulam 1956).

Scholars like M G S Narayanan represented the Brahman villages as centred on temples. (Narayanan 2013: 263). His Perumals of Kerala was in a sense a detailed account of the Aryan settlements. His was a powerful counter to what he perceived as a 'total rejection of the Keralolpatti tradition regarding the Perumals' on the part of Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai. He criticised Elamkulam for his inability 'to correctly assess the role of the Aryan Brahmin settlements in the socio-political set up of ancient Kerala.' M G S believed that his was 'an impartial study of social evolution.' (Narayanan 2013: 36). It was M G S who argued that:

The original charters or endowments of the major Brahmin settlements ... have not come down to us probably because most or all of the settlements were in existence even before the Cera kingdom of Makotai (Narayanan 2013: 208).

He has also stated that the pattern of the brahman settlements of the Chera period could have been similar to that mentioned in the inscriptions dated to the 'immediate post-Chera period' (Naryanan 2013: 209). This makes it clear that there are no details of the actual pattern of the Brahman settlements which might have existed in the period from the 9th century A.D or even earlier. M G S tells us that the Brahman settlements of Kerala 'must have sprung up during the post-Sangam period since none of them is mentioned by name in the vast portions of Sangam literature dealing with the kings and people of Kerala' (Narayanan 2013: 262). He, however, was prepared to accept much of the legends in the *Keralolpatti* and held that the Brahmins had played a role in the foundation of the second chera kingdom. According to him, all the 32 settlements must have been existing even before this kingdom was established. It is the late medieval texts written by the Namboodiri Brahmins which are used by M G S Narayanan to give a frame work for the pattern of Brahman settlements. The epigraphs do not give us any clarity on the 'nucleated' settlements which are said to have existed in the early medieval period. The most significant aspect of his description of the settlements is that he made a lot of generalisations without literary or archaeological data to support. Although there were large tracts of land which were covered by settlements other than the 32 Brahman settlements or their subsidiary settlements, M G S has claimed that the Brahman settlements could be dominant in areas other than the coast and mountains of the State (Narayanan 2013: 264-5).

Rajan Gurukkal shared the view of M G S Narayanan that the brahmanas were able to exert great influence over the rulers of Kerala. He believed that 'the tradition of royal land grant' was absent in the state. He made an attempt to link the rise of paddy cultivation in wet lands to the brahman settlements as he was of the view that the earliest paddy fields were in the highlands. (Gurukkal 2010: 245). Brahman households, he argued, had existed 'within the domains of hunter chieftains.' (Gurukkal 2010: 247). Gurukkal elaborated the arguments of M G S in the following words:

It was not possible for the period to expand plough agriculture to low lands that were marshy and water-logged, because the absence of royal-land grants to brahmanas in Kerala and the claim of the brahmanical origin legend assigning to Parasurama's axe the credit of reclaiming 160 katam ... of land that lay between Gokarnam and Kanyakumari, are clear indications of the direct acquisition of the arable land of Kerala by the brahmanas without being obliged to anybody (Gurukkal 2010: 247).

Gurukkal rejected the Parasurama legend merely as a myth created by the Brahmins (Gurukkal 2009: 13-21). In a jointly edited book on Kerala, Gurukkal and Raghava Variar traced the beginnings of brahman settlements back to the 7th-8th centuries A.D. The evidence cited is the occurrence of an inscription mentioning the first king of the second cheras as adhiraja (Gurukkal & Varier 1999: 263). They also hold the belief that the individual Brahman households that had existed in the early historic period grew into centres of Brahman migrants in the post Sangam period. These emerged as Brahman settlements. (Gurukkal & Varier, 1999: 262).

Archaeological Evidence for a Long History of Brahman Occupation

It is temple inscriptions of the early medieval period which are listed by Veluthat as evidences for the existence of Brahman settlements. Some of the 'settlements' have Brahman households. Some of them do not have any Brahman households. The evidences cited are very sketchy and they mostly include the presence of a temple or its remains or inscriptions in the supposed settlement. In addition to the early medieval and medieval temple inscriptions, the medieval Manippravalam works, legends and the continuing Brahman tradition have been cited. The inference with which some 'settlements' have been identified is of a speculative nature. Same is the case with regard to the question of the date of creation of Brahman settlements.

No archaeological evidence is listed for the Payyannur settlement. Instead, the practice of matriliney followed by the Brahmans, is said to have been imposed on the residents by Parasurama. (Veluthat 1978: 22). For Perumchellur also, no archaeological or epigraphic evidence is cited for establishing that it is Cellur, mentioned in a poem composed by Marutan Ilaganar. The poet refers to the erection of a pillar by a god wielding axe. (Veluthat 1978: 12-3). The literal meaning of Cellur being 'prosperous place' and the fact that there are villages with the name Sellur in many parts of Tamil Nadu, it can't be taken as the earliest village founded by the Brahmans. The inscriptional and literary evidences cited date back to the period from the 11th to the 16th centuries. From his own account, traces of the earliest temples in the vicinity are of the 11th century. (Veluthat 1978: 14). Even if we admit to his argument that there were Brahman residents in Chellur in the age of Sangam, there is no archaeological basis for his claim that it had remained a prosperous Brahman settlement upto the medieval period. Veluthat does not stake claim for a continued existence for settlements other than Chellur.

References in the 15th century Manippravalam work, 'the structural temple and continuing Brahman tradition,' are cited as the basis of identification of Alattur in Tirur as an early Brahman settlement. (Veluthat 1978: 23). The identification of Karathola has been done based on an undated Visnu image 'of Pallava tradition', some place names and a reference in a recent palm leaf record. (Veluthat 1978: 23-4) Early medieval and medieval inscriptions, the temple there, medieval work Chandrolsavam, and local tradition have been used to identify Sukapuram as a Brahman village. Same is the case with regard to the identification of the Panniyur settlement. (Veluthat 1978: 24). He cites inscriptions dated to the period from the 11th century onwards while listing Karikkatu as a Brahman settlement. The exact location of Isanamangalam is not even clearly determined. The sources for the determination of this settlement are references in medieval Manippravalam works, Tiruvalla copper plate, and a Tamil Nadu inscription. References in the medieval and later medieval Manippravalam works to 'some Brahmans of this village', 12th century inscriptions, and the temple there are used as evidences for determining Thrissivaperur (Veluthat 1978: 25).

It is references to a few Brahmans from Peruvanam in the Tiruvatur and Kollurmatam inscriptions, Peruvanam temple inscriptions, and praise of the temple in Chandrolsavam that are taken to establish that it was an early Brahman settlement. (Veluthat 1978: 25-6). Chemmanta near Iringalakkuda is considered as Chamunda citing the 13th century inscriptions and temple ruins found there. A mid 9th century inscription was found at the temple in Iringalakkuda. References to this village in the manipravalam works and Talakkad inscription of the 11th century, mention of Brahmans from the village in the 11th and 12th century inscriptions found at Tiruvatur and Kilimanur and tradition have been used to identify Irungatikkutal. (Veluthat 1978: 26).

Mention of Brahmans, and families in Tiruvatur inscription and the early 10th century inscriptions found at Avattipputtur has been used in identifying Avattipputtur. Paravur is identified from references in inscriptions in other places such as Cennamangalam and Tiruvatur and Manipravalam work Kokasandesam. Airanikkalam is considered as an early Brahman settlement based on inscriptions found in the temple there and references to Brahmans from the place in Kilimanur inscription and mention of the village in Kiltali and Kondungallur inscriptions (Veluthat 1978: 27).

Though Mulikkalam is one of the most known early medieval temple sites, the evidences cited for this place are also in the form of two 10-11th century inscriptions found in the temple there, references in the Kilimanur inscription and Chandrolsavam and tradition (Veluthat 1978: 27-8). The continuing Brahman tradition and two medieval inscriptions found at the temple in the site makes Kulur, Kulavur of the early period. Veluthat is citing legends, temple ruins and place name for establishing Atavur as a Brahman settlement. Apart from tradition, there is only the temple and an inscription at Chennamanatu to be identified as Chennanatu of Keralolpatti. (Veluthat 1978: 28). Ilibhyam has not been clearly established though Veluthat claims to have done so. The sources used are Kokasandesam, Sukasandesam and the references in Keralolpatti to Muppattumuvarkkalam as an alternate name for Ilibhyam and its similarity with the name of the temple near Aluva, Tirumupattu. (Veluthat 1978: 28-9). Uliyannur has been determined based on the temple there and an inscription found in it. Kalutanatu has not been identified. Errumanur has been identified based on references to the Manipravalam work Unnuneelisandesam. At Kumaranallur, a temple and a 11th century inscription could be found. Kitangur is said to be an early Brahman settlement citing Brahman tradition in the locality and a temple there. (Veluthat 1978: 29).

A village near Kottayam, Katamuri, is identified as Katamaruku based on the name Katamaruku for a Brahman family living near Thodupuzha. Tiruvalla settlement has been determined on the basis of inscriptions found in the temple there, references to a Brahman from Tiruvalla in Kilimanur inscription and praises of the temple in Tiruvaymoli and Periya Tirumoli. Praises of the Aranmula temple in Tiruvaymoli and

reference to a Brahman from the place in Kilimanur inscription are cited to refer to Aranmula as a Brahman settlement. References to Tiruchengannur in the Mampalli plates of the late 10th century, a Siva temple at the site and references to two Brahmans from the area in the late 12th century Kilimanur inscription are cited as evidences for the Chengannur settlement. There is a temple at Kaviyur (Veluthat 1978: 30).

Venmani is considered as an early Brahman settlement based on the presence of a Vishnu temple there and 'the continuing orthodox Brahman culture.' (Veluthat 1978: 30-1). Veluthat considers Niramankara as Nirmanna of Keralolpatti and the evidences cited are 'photographs of a ruined temple and Visnu image of c. 14th century enshrined therein' in a book written by Stella Kramrisch. (Veluthat 1978: 31). According to Veluthat, the similarity of the temple inscriptions implies that

'The neighbourhood of all the temples of the ancient and medieval periods served as Brahman settlement' (Veluthat 1978: 31).

In the very next paragraph, he remarks that 'we are utterly in the dark' about 'the constitution or pattern of constitution of these settlements"! He tells us that 'later records of the 11th and 12th century (*ies*) A.D typify cases which can have been the pattern in the immediate past also.' (Veluthat 1978: 31). Though there is no epigraphic reference to the creation of settlements before the mid-9th century, Veluthat remarks that 'there is no reason why it should not have been the same.'" (Veluthat 1978: 53). He quotes a 10th century inscription which mentions the establishment of a Brahman settlement comprised of 23 families. (Veluthat 1978:53). He cites the 1020 Tiruvatur inscription to say that 24 Brahmans from five older settlements were shifted to areas around the newly constructed Vaikom temple. (Veluthat 1978: 54). These indicate that the ruling groups had played a key role in the establishment of settlements in the early medieval period. That does not mean that the Brahmans would not have got any patronage from the rulers in the period prior to the mid-first millennium A.D. Brahmans might have come to Kerala in the pre-Makotai period. The idea of the so-called pattern of nucleated settlements seems to have been derived from the temple inscriptions mentioning the creation of settlements with a few Brahman families. The Brahmans thus shifted might have been settled in areas where there were other groups of people already in existence. We do not know whether these Brahmans or Brahman families were settled in different areas. Also, there is no clarity regarding the character of the settlements existing in the period before the temple inscriptions were issued. References to older settlements indicate that Brahmans were living in some parts of the State. Their spread could have taken place under the patronage of rulers.

The nature of the Brahman settlements is surmised on the basis of the prosperity that some of them had achieved by the 9th century A.D. Citing the formation of subsidiary villages such as Valappalli and Tiruvattuvai of the 9th century, Veluthat points out that the original settlement Thiruvalla could have come into existence as early as the 8th century. (Veluthat 1978: 40-1). Though the inscriptions refer to the management of

lands and those associated with the performance of rituals in the temple, Veluthat uses the term 'temple-oriented Brahman settlements.' (Veluthat 1978: 47-87). The inscriptions of the temple, therefore, are thus read as documents on the administration of the Tiruvalla settlement. (Veluthat 1978: 47). There is no denying the fact that the temple records detail the functioning of a temple. A temple-dependent community had existed in some parts of the state. The inscriptions also indicate that Brahmans were settled with Brahmaswom at the time of granting lands to the newly established temples. (Veluthat 1978: 53).

If the inscriptions are to be followed, It must be stated that the early medieval temples were the pivot around which social relations were organised. The Brahmaswom lands are given to those who were in charge of some responsibilities in the management of the temple affairs. (Veluthat 1978: 53-4). Temples had served as a medium through which the right to hold vast areas of land was entrusted to the Brahmans by the local rulers. The number of Brahmin residents in the early medieval temple surroundings does not seem to be large. The inscriptions do not give us details regarding the pattern of Brahman settlements. The rulers seem to have exercised control over the affairs of the temples and their dependents as they had collected protection money and maintained forces called munnoottuvar, annuttuvar, arunoottuvar and elunoottuvar. The inscriptions, from this perspective, do not throw much light on the non-cultivating people who were living in the villages. The description of the 32 Brahman settlements does not complete the full picture of Kerala society in the early medieval period.

Unresolved Mystery

K N Ganesh acknowledges that Brahmans had lived in the early historic period itself. However, he has observed that the origin of Brahman settlements remains a mystery. According to him, the Parasurama legend, quoted in the 18th century text *Keralolpatti*, is part of the *Sahyadri Khanta* in the 8th century text, *Skandapurana*. (Ganesh 1997: 42). He is of the view that the riverine tracts which were suitable for habitation were settled by the Brahmans. Ganesh tells us that the local chieftains would have granted lands to them in addition to spending for construction of temples. (Ganesh 1997: 46-7). He shared the views of Gurukkal and Varier regarding the development of wetlands along the rivers under the leadership of Brahmans. According to Ganesh, 'Brahmans, with their knowledge of the calendar, agricultural technology and ritual power, might have facilitated' the process of transformation of 'tribal society in Kerala into a stratified agrarian society' (Ganesh 2016: 25).

Archaeological Traces of Early Settlements

In colonial times, scholars had not used the term settlement to describe places where the Brahmans resided. Logan, for example, used the traditional term *Gramam* or village. and therefore, had no liability to produce material evidences for settlements (Logan 2009: 120). Rajan Gurukkal has observed that the brahman settlements developed in areas 'adjacent to the pre-existing human settlements' (Gurukkal 2010: 210). If this has to be accepted, we would have to locate Brahman settlements in every

nook and corner of the state. It is not archaeological evidence but literary allusions that have been accepted by scholars including him to give a long history going back to as early as 'the closing centuries of the first millennium B.C,' and to argue that there was no 'equally ancient Jain and Buddhist presence in the region.' Gurukkal argues that the Jain and Buddhist ideas would have spread to 'those areas accessible through exchange routes.' (Gurukkal 2010: 210).

Varier and Veluthat, in a recent work, observe that nucleated settlements began only from the period of the establishment of Brahman villages along the banks of rivers. The settlements prior to this were said to be in a scattered manner. These settlements were said to comprise various social groups. (Varier & Veluthat 2018: 102-3). Even this is not supported by archaeological data. M G S Narayanan cited 'the rigours of climate with a heavy monsoon, the use of laterite, brick and timber in construction, and the continuous habitation of the old sites' as the reason for the absence of 'palaces and dwelling houses' of the second Chera kingdom. (Narayanan 2013: 366). The latest position of this scholar regarding the rise of Brahman settlements is that they came up in Kerala in the 8th century. (Narayanan 2015: 10). He has also stated that only megalithic communities had existed in the period prior to the 8th century. (Narayanan 2016: 65). The question is whether we have adequate archaeological evidences to either accept this or reject this hypothesis.

Conclusion

Historical research on the pre-early medieval period has not progressed much so as to throw light upon the supposed dark age before the establishment of the second Chera kingdom. Scholars have not completely ruled out the possibility of settlements being set up in the first eight centuries of the Christian era. However, an underlying premise among them is that the Aryan Brahman settlements had played a central role in transforming the environment of Kerala and society in the early centuries. Such a theory would carry weight only if we have a clear idea of human occupation in the state in the period. Archaeological explorations and excavations would help much in this regard.

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