

Chapter II

A PEEP INTO ANCIENT HISTORY

(1)

It is a fact accepted by historians of South India that what is today Kerala was, in pre-Aryan days, part of the Chera Empire—one of the three empires that flourished in South India in those days.

Historians have also discovered various facts which go to show that Kerala had regular trade connections with Babylonia, Phoenicia, Egypt, etc., in the second and third millenniums before Christ.

References are also found to Kerala in such works of the early Aryan period as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharatha*, etc., as well as in Emperor Asoka's inscriptions (Nos. II and XIII).

While the antiquity of Kerala is thus undisputed, it is however true that there is no reliable scientific history of ancient Kerala. While it has been proved that, as far back as 3000 B.C., teak and ivory were exported from Kerala to Babylonia, we have yet to know how these commodities were produced, what was the mode of living of the people who produced them, etc. We do not know how far the mode of production had advanced, whether field cultivation had developed, what were the instruments used in production, etc. Nor do we know the stage to which the arts had developed or the manner in which family and social relationships were regulated.

This lack of a scientific understanding of ancient Kerala society was sought to be remedied by a mythological story of the origin of Kerala. The story runs as follows: Parasurama, the mythological hero of many battles, wanted to atone for his sins and so created new land out of the ocean; the whole of this land was then given by him as a gift to the Brahmins who were settled on the land; the great hero then fixed up the rules of conduct for these newly-settled Brahmins as well as for others, making Brahmins the lords of the land, others their loyal dependants; the descendants of

these Brahmins are the present-day Namboodiris and the others are the present-day Nayars and other castes.

Needless to say that this story of the origin of Kerala was invented by the landlords, most of whom are either themselves Namboodiris or very close to them. These landlords had the advantage of being the only educated people in mediaeval Kerala. They therefore put the whole story in writing—*Kerala Mahatmyam* (Greatness of Kerala) and *Kerala Pazhama* (Antiquity of Kerala) being the two most notable works in this regard. The story thus got wide currency not only as one which passes from mouth to mouth but also as one which has the authority of the written word.

This mythological story of the origin of Kerala was later taken over by British historians, and Indian historians under British influence, in a modified form. This modified version naturally rejected the obviously absurd part of the story—the part relating to Parasurama personally having created land out of the ocean. It however said that behind the mythological story of Parasurama having created the land of Kerala lies the truth that Kerala is that part of the land which had once been submerged in the ocean and which later was thrown up by geological processes. It also said that behind the mythological story of Parasurama having given the land as a gift to Brahmins and made them the lords of the land lies the truth that Brahmins came to Kerala and settled themselves as lords of the land.

This “scientific” interpretation of the mythological story of the origin of Kerala has till very recently been accepted as “authentic history”. While it helped the spokesmen of the landlords to assert their claim to be masters of the land, it served the purpose of the new rulers of Kerala—the British—to show that all Kerala minus the pro-British landlord class is uncivilised, barbarian. The class interests of the oppressors of the people—landlords and the British—have thus in the main managed to hide the facts of history behind the obviously untenable story of the origin of Kerala.

Recently, however, a change has taken place in this: the growth of a bourgeois class, first in Tamilnad and then in Kerala, has given rise to the development of “Dravidian history”. A host of researchers have unearthed facts to show that the Dravidians of South India had, long before the Aryans of North India, developed their own civilisation, built up their own Dravidian empires, developed their own Dravidian lan-

guage and literature—all independent of and distinct from the Aryan variety. This discovery of a glorious pre-Aryan civilisation of South India has finally exploded the theory of Kerala having been inhabited by uncivilised tribes who were brought into the fold of civilised society by the Aryans, since it has been conclusively shown that pre-Aryan Kerala was so civilised as to have regular trade connections with foreign countries.

Thus has arisen the new theory of Kerala—the theory of Dravidian superiority over the Aryan. It says that the people of pre-Aryan Kerala were far more civilised than the Aryans who had nothing to contribute to the indigenous civilisation of Kerala. It however does not explain why, if pre-Aryan Kerala had such a glorious civilisation, the Brahmins could so easily and successfully dominate over the land and people of Kerala.

As a matter of fact, this new theory of Dravidian superiority is as unscientific as the theory of Aryan superiority. For, it goes against all the accepted conclusions of historical research which have conclusively proved the indivisible links between social and family institutions on the one hand and the stage of civilisation on the other.

For example, the well-known American anthropologist, Lewis Henry Morgan, has conclusively shown that the matriarchal family is of a lower order than the patriarchal family. So have the Marxist historians of recent years (beginning with Engels himself) shown that the changeover from matriarchy to patriarchy takes place at a time when the hoe is replaced by the plough as the instrument of production in agriculture.

Now, it is an undisputed fact that pre-Brahmin Kerala had a predominantly matriarchal system of family relationships; nay more, that system continues to this day over the larger part of Kerala. No history of Kerala can be considered scientific unless it gives a rational explanation for this phenomenon, unless it unravels the interconnection between the matriarchal family and the state of social, political, economic and cultural life of ancient Kerala. Far from doing this, the new bourgeois theory of Dravidian superiority seeks to attribute all the characteristics of modern civilised society to a people whose family life was dominated by matriarchal relationships.

All the three classes that have so far attempted to write the history of ancient Kerala—the landlords, the British im-

perialists and the indigenous bourgeoisie—have thus failed to write real scientific history. While the former two classes have totally denied the role of the indigenous people in the pre-Brahmin Kerala, ignoring them as the active force in the development of Kerala, the latter class (bourgeoisie) denies the active role played by the Brahmins in the further development of Kerala. While the bourgeois historians have unearthed very valuable data to explode the pseudo-scientific “history” of the landlords and the British, they themselves could not help being pseudo-scientific in their historical researches. The theory of Dravidian superiority has led them to the theory of “Brahmin domination just an accident”, a theory which denies the very scientific character of history.

It is the working class, and working class alone, that can develop history as a science, since it is the only class that is not interested in hiding historical facts in order that its own class interests are preserved and advanced. The working class alone can look objectively at facts, interpret their meaning without prejudices, unravel the complicated connection between several outwardly-unrelated facts and thus establish the laws of social development in history.

Unfortunately, however, the working class in Kerala is as yet so weakly developed that it has not been able to apply historical materialism to the problems of the history of ancient Kerala. What is attempted in the following pages is to pose certain problems rather than to answer them, to suggest certain hypotheses rather than to draw conclusions. It is hoped that this will stimulate discussion and that others will take up the study of these problems, so that a real and scientific history of ancient Kerala may be produced in course of time.

(2)

Engels in his celebrated work *Origin of Family* referred to the system of group marriages that prevailed “among the Nayars in India”. He said: “The men, in groups of three, four or more, have, to be sure, one wife in common; but each of them can simultaneously have a second wife in common with three or more other men, and in the same way, a third wife, a fourth and so on. This, however, is by no means real polygamy; on the contrary, it is a specialised form of group marriage, the men living in polygamy, the women in polyandry”.

He added that “the certainly not uninteresting origin of this form of group marriage requires closer investigation.”

Engels is inexact and inadequately informed as to the details, though entirely correct as to the main point, regarding group marriage in this part of India. For, as a matter of fact:

1) It is not among the Nayars but among some of the more backward castes that the type of group marriages which he describes prevailed in his day and prevails, to some extent, even today. (The present writer has himself come across cases of three or four brothers having one wife in common but not among the Nayars, among whom the custom has become extinct for several generations.)

2) Nayars do not have polyandrous marriages but polygamy and very easy divorces. It is only in the nineteen-twenties that polygamy has been prohibited by law and that divorce has been controlled among Nayars. Even today, however, either the man or the wife can get a divorce if he or she wants it, though it involves procedures more complicated than before.

3) This system of free marriages and divorces prevailed however not only among the Nayars but among most other Hindu castes in Kerala, the only notable exception among the Hindus to this rule being the Namboodiris who have no right of divorce.

4) Even among the Namboodiris there is a peculiar type of marital relation that cannot be rationally explained in any other way than that it is a transitional form from group marriage to the patriarchal family. The system is as follows: Only the eldest son of a Namboodiri family marries a Namboodiri girl but he takes more wives than one (three is the usual number); the younger brothers take wives from some other castes including the Nayars. Now, there is a particular stanza in *Sankara Smriti* (the authority quoted in support of all customs prevalent among the Namboodiris) which says that the birth of a son to the eldest brother will relieve the younger brothers of the sin of sonlessness, the elder brother's sons being as good as the sons of all the brothers. It is only if the eldest brother has no sons even after taking two or three wives, that the younger brother takes a wife from the caste and that in order to beget a son and relieve the family of the sin of sonlessness.

Add to these the fact that impartible joint family is the normal practice in all Hindu castes. The only difference is that while some castes have the family arranged on the basis of patriarchy, some others have it on the basis of matriarchy. Thus, while the Namboodiri has his joint family property passed on from father to son, the Nayar has it from mother to daughter. As a matter of fact, a comparison between a Namboodiri and a Nayar joint family will show that, if only a decision was made, as Engels remarked when dealing with the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal family, "that in future the descendants of the male members should remain in the gens but that those of the females were to be excluded from the gens and transferred to that of their father", the Nayar joint family becomes the Namboodiri (leaving aside, of course, the additional difference that, while all the children of the sisters in the Nayar family are members of the family, the children of only the eldest son of the Namboodiri family belong to it).

Looking at these various mystifying types of marriage and family relations from the Marxian point of view of development from group marriage to monogamy, the whole thing becomes quite clear: the polyandrous family whose traces are still to be found in certain backward castes is the more or less pure form of group marriage akin to what Engels calls the Punaluan Family; the type of marriage with polygamy and easy divorce, which is dying but not yet completely dead, among the Nayars and several other castes, is one form of transition from group to pairing marriage; while the type of marriage in which only the eldest brother marries within the caste (and he marries several wives) is another form of transition from group to pairing marriage. While the first shows as Engels says, "a certain pairing for longer or shorter periods taking place already under group marriage", and gradually "being supplanted by the pairing family", the second shows a gradual exclusion of the younger brothers from the marital rights that they had enjoyed under group marriage. It thus becomes clear that what seem to an outside observer the strange and mysterious ways of the Malayalees are nothing but the various stages of development of the earlier system of group marriage of which Engels had wisely suggested that "the certainly not uninteresting origin . . . required investigation."

This explanation of the marriage and family system of Kerala down to modern times does of course require further in-

vestigation. For the moment, it is suggested as nothing else than a hypothesis to work upon. But, even as a hypothesis, it cannot be accepted unless we take up for discussion some basic ideas universally accepted by all acknowledged authorities on the history of Kerala. We will therefore now turn to these ideas and see how far they are correct and how they conform to the above explanation of the marriage and family system of Kerala.

(3)

It is accepted by all the acknowledged authorities on the history of Kerala that the Malayalees of all castes except the scheduled castes are immigrants: the highest caste, the Namboodiri, is supposed to have come and colonised Kerala some time between the second century B. C. and the eighth century A.D.; the Nayar is supposed to have come earlier than the Namboodiri though in his case there are some historians who argue that they are not immigrants at all; the Ezhava is also supposed to have come some time just before or just after the beginning of the Christian Era; the Jew, the Christian, the Muslim, etc., are all of course supposed to be either immigrants themselves or converts.

These basic assumptions of the history of Kerala are so universally accepted that it is considered to be fantastic to challenge them, to suggest that these people may also have been the descendants of the earliest people of Kerala. Even the author of the latest edition of the *Travancore State Manual* who complains that "the notion of the migration of peoples has gained such great currency among ethnologists and historians that, in writing the history of a country, they proceed from a fundamental assumption that the earliest people inhabiting any part of the civilised world must have come from some other part" (Vol. II, History, p. 11), agrees that at least the Namboodiris and Ezhavas are immigrants, the former from the North and the latter from Ceylon.

These basic assumptions however cannot stand the severe test of criticism from the point of view of similarity and dissimilarity in social life. For, the organisation of "family, property and the State" of the Namboodiri in Kerala is so similar to that of the Nayar and so different from that of the North Indian Brahmin that it is difficult to accept the theory

of the Namboodiri being an immigrant. As a matter of fact, if one were to examine the problem from the point of view of the organisation of social life, one would be forced to come to the conclusion that the Nayar and the Namboodiri belong to the same racial stock, accept the same form of social organisation, the only difference being that the Namboodiri has adopted the social and cultural make-up of the Vedic age to a slightly greater degree than the Nayar.

We have already seen that the mystifying complexities of marriage and family in Kerala cannot be explained except on the assumption that there have occurred a series of transformations in the original family, leading up to the large number of forms of transition from group marriage to the patriarchal family. There are therefore very strong reasons to believe that all the castes that are today considered Caste Hindu (of which the highest is the Namboodiri and the lowest the Nayar) were once of the same caste, that there was free intermarriage among them; that they were all following a type of group marriage (nearer to what Engels calls the Punaluan Family than to any other); that certain of these castes began to impose restrictions on the freedom of marriage and to make the transition from mother-right to father-right; that the caste which imposed the maximum amount of restriction on the freedom of marriage and the sharpest break from mother-right to father-right (the Namboodiri) became the highest caste while that which retained the maximum amount of freedom in marriage and divorce and preserved mother-right intact became the lowest of the Caste Hindus or Savarna (Nayar).

The difference between the North Indian or even the Tamilian Brahmin on the one hand and the Namboodiri of Kerala on the other is so manifest that the very tradition, accepted as basically correct by historians, says that the Nayar resisted the Namboodiri so much that the latter thought it wise to adopt some of the former's customs. It is however highly improbable for a Vedic Brahmin, taught for generations to observe the strict injunctions of caste rule when getting married, to make the taking of non-caste wives as a regular practice in the case of all but the eldest son. This cannot be explained on the theory of the Namboodiri conciliating the Nayar who was resisting; nobody would demand the introduction of such queer forms of marriage as the price of peace. This can be explained only on the basis that the

previous system of Namboodiri and Nayar boys and girls marrying one another freely was changed to the system under which Nayar girls are being married to a boy belonging to any of the higher castes but not *vice versa*.

The question arises: if that is the case, how is one to explain the universally-held belief that the Namboodiri is an immigrant, coupled with the fact that he is the only man who represents, though inadequately, the culture of the Vedic Brahmin? The explanation is simple: it need not at all be disputed that small groups of Brahmins came from the North and settled themselves in Kerala; nor need it be disputed that it was they who brought the culture of the Vedic Brahmin to the people here. What is disputed and should be disputed is that the majority of, or even all, the Namboodiris are the descendants of these Brahmins from the North. The most probable development of the original Nayar (we will use this term for that caste which comprised all the castes that are today included in the Caste Hindu—Savarnas) to the present-day Namboodiri and Nayar is as follows:

- 1) The original Nayar was following the system of group marriage and matriarchal family. Since however the forces of production were going through such transformations as to lead to the development of trade, the family also must have been subjected to transformations though we know little about their character. It was in the midst of these transformations that Vedic culture was brought from the North.

- 2) The influence of the Vedic culture brought by the Brahmins from the North influenced certain sections of these original Nayars. Some of these gave up the system of group marriage, introduced strict monogamy for the woman, but continued to allow loose marriage and concubinage in the case of men who were allowed to participate in the system of group marriage where that was retained. These sections also changed over from mother-right to father-right. Furthermore, they began to study the Vedas, perform religious duties as enjoined upon in the Vedas, etc., but still retained some of their earlier practices like post-puberty marriage, keeping the tuft of hair not in the rear of the head but in front, etc. These sections of the original Nayars plus those of the North Indians who came here became the Namboodiris.

3) Certain other sections of the original Nayars were also influenced by Vedic culture but not to the same degree nor in the same manner. Some of these restricted the freedom of marriage to this extent that their girls were not allowed to marry except within the caste or a Namboodiri; they however retained mother-right. Some others went a step further and changed over from mother-right to father-right but did not take to the study of the Vedas. All these castes, numbering over a dozen, are together called Antharala Jatis, i.e., castes that stand in between the Namboodiri and the Nayar. Each of these castes does, of course, stand in a particular order in the caste hierarchy.

4) The present-day Nayar is that section of the original Nayars which made the least change in his ancient organisation of family and social life, the section which adopted Vedic culture to the least degree. But even he accepted it to the extent that he began to consider the section which made bigger changes than he did to be superior to himself.

It may be mentioned in this connection that what actually happened subsequently in the case of Christians and Muslims makes the above process look the most probable and the most logical.

For, what happened in the case of Christians was that small groups, beginning most probably with St. Thomas himself, came to Kerala, propagated their cult, converted the local people beginning with the high-caste people. In this process of conversion, however, they made such adjustments in the social life of the new converts that the Syrian Christian of Kerala is as different from his brothers of other countries as the Namboodiri Brahmin of Kerala is from his brother Brahmins of other parts of India. The Syrian Christian of Kerala is so proud of his independence from the Christians from outside that the Portuguese who tried to dominate over him in the 16th century had to face stiff resistance, as was witnessed in the memorable incident known as Koonan Kurisu Satyam (Pledge taken with the Cross of Koonan Hill). Nobody suggests that anything more than a microscopic minority of the present-day Christians are the descendants of those who came from outside.

This is the case also of the Muslims; only a very insignificant number of families came from Arabia.

If this is how Christianity and Islam penetrated our country, why should it be assumed that Brahminism could have come only along with hundreds of Brahmin families who have continued to remain the sole inheritors of Brahminism?

Equally unhistorical is the theory that Ezhavas are immigrants from Ceylon. For, it is most improbable that a section of the people numbering about 30 lakhs (the Ezhavas including their variant, Thiyyas, form nearly 25 per cent of the Malayalee Hindu population) came from outside during the last 2,000 years without leaving behind them any trace of their having come and settled here. (Ezhavas are supposed to have brought Buddhism from Ceylon. Hence they could not have come here before the beginning of the Christian Era.) And yet historians accept the theory with no other evidence than the extremely far-fetched interpretation of certain words like Ilava and Thenkai.

Here again, it need not be disputed that some people came from Ceylon and that they had very much to do with the propagation of Buddhism. What is disputed and should be disputed is that the majority of, or even all, the Ezhavas are the descendants of Buddhist immigrants from Ceylon. The manner in which the Ezhavas of today evolved themselves was very probably that, while Brahminism brought from the North by small groups was influencing certain sections of the people of Kerala, Buddhism brought from Ceylon by some other small groups was doing the same thing in the case of other sections; and that, while the sections influenced by Brahminism, became Namboodiris, Antharala Jatis and Nayars, the sections influenced by Buddhism became Ezhavas.

We therefore come to the conclusion that the so-called colonisation by Namboodiris and Ezhavas is nothing more than a figurative expression for the penetration of the Brahmin and Buddhist cultures brought by small groups of Brahmins and Buddhists and the consequent transformation of the social organisation of Kerala. But the penetration of Brahminism and Buddhism has taken place not only in Kerala but in other places also. And yet we find that while Brahminism and Buddhism dealt a crushing blow to the ancient form of social organisation in other parts of India, it is only in Kerala that remnants of the earliest form of social organi-

sation—group marriage, mother-right, etc.—continued more or less unimpaired even under Brahminism and Buddhism. It is therefore quite clear that there is something distinctive in the material conditions of Kerala which it is necessary for us to study, and without studying which we cannot come to a correct understanding of the history and social organisation of Kerala. It is precisely because bourgeois historians do not care to study these material conditions that they make such facile assumptions as explained above and raise them to the level of historical truths.

(4)

We have referred in an earlier section of this chapter to the clash of two schools of historians—those who hold the theory of Aryan superiority and those who sing the songs of Dravidian superiority. Both have naturally applied their respective theories to Kerala which is geographically a part of South India and therefore of the Dravidian world and where Brahminism established its ascendancy for over 2,000 years.

While the clash of these two schools of historians has helped in exposing the inadequacies and fallacies of both—each pointing out the crude mistakes committed by the other—both have committed the common mistake of not taking the specific features of Kerala's material conditions as their starting-point in studying its history. If only they had done that, the school of Aryan superiority could have easily seen that the Brahmin civilisation of Kerala cannot be of the same type as that of North India; the school of Dravidian superiority would, on the other hand, have seen that the Dravidian civilisation in Kerala cannot remain the same as in other parts of South India.

The material condition of Kerala is different from that of other parts of India—North and South—in one fundamental respect: field cultivation here does not, in a normal year, require artificial irrigation by canals and other forms of public works. The two monsoons—Southwest, extending from June to September and Northeast, in October-November—together give a total rainfall of about 100 inches per year; two main crops (roughly corresponding to the Kharif

and Rabi of North India) are raised on the basis of water supplied during these two monsoons.

This distinctive feature of Kerala's material condition should be the starting point of any scientific study of Kerala's history because it forced the ancient and mediaeval inhabitant of Kerala to arrange his life in a way different from that of his brother in other parts of India—North and South. For, as Marx has remarked in his penetrating analysis of Indian and Asiatic society, "artificial irrigation by canals and public works constitutes the basis of Oriental agriculture." Nay more, it is the material basis of the very village system of Asia, a system which is so significant that Marx puts the social formation known as "Asiatic Society" side by side with the Slave, Feudal and Capitalist systems. For, says Marx,

"This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated in the Orient where civilisation was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralising-power of the Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments, the function of providing public works. This artificial fertilisation of the soil, dependent on a Central Government and immediately decaying with the neglect of irrigation and drainage, explains the otherwise strange fact that we now find whole territories barren and desert that were once brilliantly cultivated.... In Asiatic empires, we are quite accustomed to see agriculture deteriorating under one Government and reviving again under some other Government. There the harvests correspond to good or bad government, as they change in Europe with good or bad seasons."

It is this circumstance, adds Marx, of "the Hindoo, leaving like all Oriental peoples, to the central Government the care of the great public works, the prime condition of his agriculture and commerce", together with what he calls "the domestic union of agricultural and manufacturing pursuits", that "had brought about, since the remotest times, a social system of particular features—the so-called *village system*, which gave to each of the

small unions their independent organisation and distinct life."

The exact manner in which the ancient tribal society of India—North and South—developed itself into this type of Asiatic society is yet to be investigated. There is, however, no doubt that the Vedas, the Upanishads, Mahabharatha, Ramayana, etc., are the literary expressions of this Asiatic society at the various phases of its evolution. What is popularly known as the Brahmin civilisation is nothing but the superstructure built on the basis of this Asiatic mode of production.

Similarly, what is called the Dravidian civilisation is the mode of living and thinking of the people of South India who were developing themselves from tribal to Asiatic Society, independent of their counterparts in North India. While the development of field cultivation on the basis of irrigation from the Ganges and the Jumna gave birth to Brahmin civilisation, the same development on the basis of irrigation from the Kaveri and the Godavari gave birth to Dravidian civilisation.

The development of society in Kerala cannot obviously take place on these lines, since the fundamental basis of either the Brahmin or the Dravidian civilisation is absent here. Centralised (imperial) government cannot develop here since it has no role to play in production. As a matter of fact, two efforts made to bring Kerala under such central (imperial) administration failed.

The Chera Empire flourished for some time in Kerala along with other parts of South India; it is probably under the Cheras that extensive commercial contacts developed between Kerala and the outside world; the very name Kerala may be a derivation from Chera. It is, however, a fact that the imperial administration of the Cheras did not leave any lasting impression on the social organisation of Kerala. It did not, for example, transform the family organisation from one that was based on mother-right to one that is based on father-right. Nor did it succeed in making the cultural tradition of the Sangom period a part of the cultural make-up of the people of Kerala, as it did succeed in making it the starting point of a glorious culture of the people of Tamilnad. The very works (in poetry) of some of the Chera rulers who had their capital in Kerala, not to speak of the works on

them by other poets, are today a part of Tamil and not Malayalam literature.

This failure of the Chera Empire to influence the course of the historical development of Kerala cannot be explained except on the basis that that empire was an artificial superstructure on the material conditions of Kerala. It was the advanced mode of production based on artificial irrigation from the Kaveri and other rivers that helped the growth of *Senthamil* and the development of Sangom literature; it was the increase in the wealth produced under this mode of production that dealt in Tamilnad the most crushing blow to family life based on mother-right; it was again the necessity for the organisation of such a mode of production that compelled the Tamils to develop their Chera, Chola and Pandya Empires. That material basis present in Tamilnad was absent in Kerala. The Chera Empire therefore could not last long in Kerala; it did not last long.

The second attempt made to form a centralised imperial state was *the Empire of the Perumals*, the last of whom probably reigned in the eighth century A.D. The disruption of this Empire and its division into a number of petty principalities (about 2 dozens) is the source of the great lamentation of present-day bourgeois advocates of United Kerala who claim that, down to the disruption of the Empire of the Perumals, Kerala was a united country with a united people and that it was an unfortunate accident of history that that Empire got disrupted. This theory however cannot stand the test of scientific criticism. For, eminent historians like Logan and Padmanabha Menon have shown that the Empire of the Perumals was not co-extensive with present-day Kerala but was confined at best to a territory stretching from Calicut in the North to Quilon in the South. Furthermore, the Empire itself was nothing more than a very loose combination of several petty principalities, each of whose rulers owed formal allegiance (nothing more) to the Perumal. It was precisely because there was no socio-economic basis for such an Empire to develop in the specific material conditions of Kerala, that that Empire had no alternative but total disappearance from the political scene of Kerala.

It is however true that both the Chera Empire as well as the Empire of the Perumals did indirectly play their roles in transforming the ancient tribal society into the mediaeval society of Kerala. For, the attempt to form these Empires in-

involved clashes and conflicts between the representatives and advocates of these imperial states on the one hand and the champions of the ancient tribal society on the other. Moreover, the very existence of centralised (imperial) administrations, however weak their links with the people and however short their duration, could not but have helped the development of intercourse (commercially and otherwise) between the people of Kerala and those of the outside world; this in its turn could not but have altered the very mode of production and consequently brought about big changes in the social, political and cultural life of the people of Kerala.

We have, however to take particular care when studying these changes to note that the material conditions being different, the development of production, distribution and exchange in Kerala would not lead to the same type of Asiatic Society as in other parts of India. We shall see in the next chapter that mediaeval Kerala actually developed a pattern of society which partakes of the character of both Asiatic Society as described by Marx as well as of feudal society on the model of mediaeval Europe. Before taking that up, however, we should try to get as complete a description of ancient (pre-Chera Empire) Kerala as can be unearthed, so that we can see exactly where the Chera Empire, the Empire of the Perumals, the Brahmin and Buddhist civilisations succeeded and where they failed in smashing the ancient tribal society and in constructing a new society. This alone will enable us to see what elements of ancient society still remain to be smashed in order that we may be able to build a new People's Democratic Kerala.

(5)

The traditional explanation given for the national festival of Kerala, the Onam, throws light on the pattern of social life in pre-historic Kerala. It is as follows:

“Once upon a time, the whole earth was being ruled by Emperor Mahabali. He was a good, benign emperor, extremely solicitous for the welfare of his subjects. Peace and prosperity reigned in the land. There were no quarrels among people; nor was there any inequality between one man and another. Everybody had as much

of food, clothes, houses and all other good things in life, as he or she desired.

“It was to such a good land and to its good emperor that God Vishnu came in the guise of a dwarf (Vamana). As in the case of every visitor, the Emperor asked the dwarf what he wanted. The dwarf asked for that much of land as can be measured by his three steps and it was readily granted. The dwarf however turned himself into such a huge giant that the whole earth had already been covered by the first two steps that he took. There being no other place to put his third step, the dwarf put it on the head of the emperor and sent him down to the netherworld.

“Now that it had become clear that the dwarf was not an ordinary dwarf but God Vishnu himself, the Emperor in his turn bowed low and asked for a boon which was readily granted—that he should be allowed once a year to come up to the earth and satisfy himself that his former subjects are still happy and prosperous. It was fixed that the Emperor would come on the Thiruvonam day of the Chingam month (a day that falls some time between August 15 and September 15).

“The people of the earth thereafter decided that, ten days before the Thiruvonam of Chingom, they will start making preparations to receive their beloved Emperor. On the day of the Emperor's visit and for three days thereafter, they will once again live as they had lived during the Emperor's rule. They eat the best food, put on the best clothes, entertain themselves with the most enjoyable dances, songs and games. Every member of the family who is away comes home for the annual family reunion. Nobody works on that day, even domestic servants being allowed to go home and enjoy themselves.”

All this is of course nothing but a poetic way of explaining the annual harvest festival: it is exactly when the crops have already come in that the old Emperor, the origin and source of all prosperity, comes back for his annual visit. It is however significant that the few days of post-harvest prosperity at once reminds the Malayalee of the days when he had full prosperity for the whole year round—the days which have been cut short by the will of the Almighty.

It is of course difficult to find out whether there was a historical figure by the name of Mahabali. Possibly there was; for there are some places whose names are still connected with his. More probably still, this is a poetic combination of the Mahabharata story of Vamana (the fifth incarnation of Lord Vishnu) with the actual story of what happened to some tribal chieftain who was reigning at the time of the establishment of Chera sovereignty. It is to be noted in this connection that though the traditional story speaks of Emperor Mahabali, the actual celebration of the festival is connected with the deity of a temple at Trikkakkara, a few miles from Muziris or present-day Cranganore, the seat of the Chera Emperor.

But, even supposing that such a historical figure actually existed, his dethroning could not have acquired the character of such a national festival, were it not made use of to commemorate the big change in the life of the entire people—the change from primitive communal society in which the tribal chieftain has already developed into a semi-ruler of the tribe, but in which classes have not developed to any marked degree, to a society in which the rigours and sufferings of class division have already become apparent. The time and manner of this change cannot of course be ascertained on the basis of historical facts so far known, but there are facts to show that the tribal society so painstakingly investigated by Morgan and explained in its proper setting by Marx and Engels did actually exist in Kerala in pre-historic times.

There is the family of Mannanar in Chirakkal Taluk with the remains of a fort used by it. (Mannan is the Malayalam for King.) This is a family which has had some attributes of authority till a couple of generations ago but is now extinct. The present writer has not been able to collect and evaluate all the facts regarding this family but the stories told about it show unmistakably that Mannanar is one of the last remnants of the old tribal society which continued to exercise some of its old functions till 2 or 3 generations ago. It is also said that the last remains of a Pulaya Kotta (the fort of the Pulaya ruler) are still to be found in South Travancore; if this is true (the present writer has unfortunately been unable to find it out), it is another indication of the persistence of some aspects of tribal society even in the mediaeval and modern Kerala.

Far clearer, far more indisputable, is the evidence of temples and deities in all parts of Kerala. It is remarkable how, in spite of the centuries of Brahmin domination, non-Brahminical deities continue to be worshipped in the plains and coastal areas, not to speak of the same being done in the highlands. Many of these have of course been taken over by Brahmins, the deities themselves being converted to Brahminism. There are, however, many more that are still under non-Brahmin domination, being non-Brahminical in name, mode of worship, etc. Far many more are such that, though taken over by Brahmins, still show traces of their non-Brahmin origin.

Looking at these non-Brahmin temples and deities, we find that: (1) unlike in the Brahmin temples, there is very little of caste differences or none at all; (2) the temples are maintained by the daily or periodical offerings of devotees, the temples having no landed or other properties—a common attribute of Brahmin temples; (3) the offerings given to the deities are goat, fowl, toddy, etc., and not sweets and vegetable preparations as in Brahmin temples; (4) the process of worshipping the deities is far more of a collective affair of the whole body of the worshippers than in Brahmin temples where the practice is for the priest (necessarily a Brahmin) to stand between the deity and the worshippers; (5) many deities (like the Muthappan of Parassini the Ayyappan of Sabarimala, etc.) are of such a character that their origins can be traced back to some tribal chieftain who ruled in the interior or even in the forests.

The continuation of these non-Brahmin temples even to this day, the fact that some of these attract tens of thousands of pilgrims every season, shows unmistakably that the type of society whose disappearance is mourned in the traditional story of Mahabali had really existed at one time in real life and that it still continues in the people's imagination. When we add to this the fact that remnants of the marriage and family system of such a primitive communal tribal society are still observable, it becomes clear that prehistoric Kerala was a country of primitive communism.

This would immediately raise the question: How can this be squared with the theory that Kerala was a civilised land even in prehistoric times? Does this not show that, at least upto the time of the Cheras, Kerala was not civilised?

Now, the historical facts that can be said to be scientific show only two things: One, that there was regular trade between Kerala on the one hand and Babylonia, Phoenicia, etc., on the other over 2,000 years before Christ; two, that urban life and other attributes of a civilised society had developed in Kerala before the Brahmins began to dominate our social life. It does not necessarily follow from these that the people of prehistoric Kerala were so civilised as to keep regular commercial relations with the outside world or that they were leading the lives of urban citizens. It is just possible that the trade with Babylonia, Phoenicia, etc., was a one-way traffic, that it was the Babylonians, Phoenicians, etc. who came here, took those products of Kerala like teak and ivory (which have been found in Babylon) and sold them in their country. If, on the other hand, the people of Kerala had themselves done this, it would most probably have left its traces in the social life of Kerala. Actually, however, we find that, in the scheme of caste evolved in Kerala under Brahmin domination, there is no caste whose profession as a caste is trade. (The merchants in pre-British Kerala are either Chettiers from Tamilnad or Jews, Christians and Muslims.) It is therefore unscientific to conclude from this evidence of ancient Kerala having had trade with the outside world, that traders should necessarily have been Malayalees.

Similarly, the fact that the Chera Emperors had their seat of power in Kerala does not necessarily show that the people of Kerala had themselves so advanced socially as to raise an empire of their own. It is just possible that the Chera Empire which grew up on the basis of the Kaveri Civilisation came and conquered Kerala, set up its capital on the West Coast (Cranganore) and carried on trade with the western world (Babylonia, Phoenicia, etc.). It would then have been an empire which has the characteristic features of what Comrade Stalin calls "the empires of the slave and mediaeval periods", i.e., empires "which had no economic basis of their own and were transient and unstable military and administrative associations. Not only did these empires not have, they could not have, a single language common to the whole empire and understood by all the members of the empire. They were conglomerations of tribes and nationalities, each of which lived its own life and had its own language." (*Marxism And Linguistics*)

We have already seen that the cultural world of the Cheras

(Tamil of the brilliant Sangom Epoch) has actually left no indelible direct impression on the culture of the Malayalees and that the Malayalam language had had to make a sharp break with Tamil before it could become an independent language. It can therefore be clearly seen that the Chera Empire and corresponding to it, the Tamil language, were not the natural product of the various tribes that inhabited Kerala but an imposition on them of a product that was natural on the banks of the Kaveri. It was most probable that, while what Comrade Stalin calls "the development from clan languages to tribal languages and from tribal languages to the language of nationalities" was taking place in Tamilnad, Kerala was undergoing nothing higher than "development from clan languages to tribal languages."

All the evidence that is available at present therefore indicates that Kerala in prehistoric times was inhabited by many tribes whose common characteristic feature is a pattern of relations of production based on primitive communism. It is of course natural for each of these tribes to have attained a particular degree of development—some of them being on the threshold of breaking away from primitive communism, some still in the lowest phase of this social formation and most of them in the various phases intermediate to these two types. But, more probably than not, none of them had already broken away from primitive communism. There is, in any case, no evidence to show that any of them had done so. It was the transformation of these various tribes into an empire of the Asiatic type that the Chera rulers attempted but failed to achieve. But the very attempt and its failure set about a chain of reactions which affected the development of social relations in Kerala, as we will see in the next chapter.