

Chapter III
RISE OF FEUDALISM

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The champions of the theory of Dravidian superiority claim that the Chera, Chola and Pandya Empires have a peculiar Dravidian character of their own, that they are fundamentally different from the empires of the North.

It is unnecessary for us here to try to find out if this is true in the sense that the founders of the Dravidian Empires are fundamentally different from their North-Indian counterparts from the ethnological point of view. For, the question of the racial origin of the founders of the two types of empires—the Indo-Aryan in the North, the Turanian in the South—is irrelevant in a study of the respective roles they played in the development of human society in India. Nor is it relevant here to go into the question of the antiquity of the Southern Empires, the question as to whether and by how much the Southern Empires preceded their northern counterparts. The relevant point is the sociological significance of the two types of empires, the exact role they played in transforming the ancient (tribal) society into the Asiatic Society which continued to flourish in both Northern and Southern India down to the days of British rule.

This would naturally involve a comparative study of the classical works of Sanskrit and Tamil literature—*Ramayana*, *Mahabharatha*, etc. on the one hand and *Silappadikaram*, *Mani Mekhalai*, etc., on the other—a study of the influence exercised by each on the other. This has, unfortunately, not been done so far by anybody on a scientific basis, the tendency being either to ignore the Tamil classics altogether (the tendency of scholars of Sanskrit literature) or to so exaggerate the role of Tamil classics as to deny the role played by the Indo-Aryan civilisation of the North in the mode of development of the Dravidian civilisation (the tendency of scholars of the Dravidian classics).

One thing however stands out very clearly: the net result of the foundation and development of the Chera, Chola and Pandya Empires in the South was the same as that of the Indo-Aryan empires in the North. We come across in the Sangam works the stories of the exploits of Dravidian emperors and heroes told in approximately the same way as in the classical works of Sanskrit literature. As matter of fact, even the most fanatical champions of the theory of Dravidian superiority do not claim that the Dravidian empires were of a fundamentally different *social* character; their claim is only this that these empires were built up independently of the Northern empires and that some of these Dravidian emperors were so powerful that they even conquered parts of North India.

Nor is this claim unfounded or unreasonable. For, just as the development of cultivation, the increase in the productivity of labour, the accumulation of wealth, etc., on the Gangetic plains led to the development of the tribal chieftains into military leaders and to the waging of wars in the North; just as this development in the North led these military leaders of the North to go as conquerors to South India and Ceylon (as is described in the *Ramayana*); the same development of the forces of production in the South led to the same development in the socio-political order. The process of changing the ancient (tribal) society into the new (Asiatic) society was thus more or less the same in the South as in the North.

Wars between tribes being the main instrument of breaking the old (tribal) society and building the new (Asiatic) society, it is quite natural that wars between the Northern and Southern emperors were a two-way traffic, that several emperors of the South were able, not only to beat back wars of conquest waged by their rivals from the North, but themselves to wage wars of conquest against the North.

It was through a series of such wars of conquest, defence and counter-attacks that both the Northern and Southern empires were built up; it was through them that the early Vedic civilisation became the later Brahminical and Buddhist civilisations; and it was through them that the whole Indian sub-continent and the neighbouring island of Ceylon came to have a certain amount of cultural affinity. This being so, the very Brahminical and Buddhist civilisations were the common products of the Indo-Aryans in the North and the Turanians in the South and Ceylon, though of course they had their origin

in the Gangetic plain and, parallel with it, on the Kaveri delta.

If this assessment of the respective roles of the two types of empires is correct (the very limited knowledge that the present writer possesses of the material pertaining to the question does not entitle him to state anything more than that this is a very good hypothesis to work upon and that it explains several problems of South Indian history hitherto unexplained), then we are led to the very interesting conclusion that the Dravidian empires of the South were not (as is generally supposed) bastions against Brahminism which were ultimately broken down, but the agency through which Brahminism was reared on Dravidian soil, as the Indo-Aryan empires were in North India. The great warriors and emperors, the songs of whose exploits are sung in the works of Sangom literature were, far from being defenders of the Dravidian way of life against the Aryan, the soldiers of the Aryan way of life. The dogmas of Brahminism, their practice in the daily life of its followers, were as natural to the Southern emperors of the Sangom period and to their subjects as they were to the heroes of the Ramayana, the Mahabharatha, etc. The Chera, Chola and Pandya emperors were the best representatives of the ruling class in the Brahminical world of that historical epoch.

This, however, was all right only so long as the Chera Empire was confined to that part of South India which lies to the east of the Western Ghats. As soon as it went down west of the Ghats into the plains of Malabar (present-day Kerala and South Kanara), the Empire encountered unexpected difficulties. For, the very condition precedent for the development of such an empire—development of productivity in cultivation based on artificial irrigation constructed on a big scale—was absent here. However powerful the rulers sitting in their capitals, however extensive the commercial contacts that they had with the outside world (Babylonia, Phoenicia, etc.), however glorious the arts and literature produced under their patronage, they could not penetrate beyond the outer surface of social life in Kerala. Hence, while the Dravidian people beyond the Ghats adapted themselves to—nay, even helped in the creation of—the Brahminical way of life in all its essentials, their brethren to this side of the Ghats continued to live their old life in several essentials (as we have already seen in the previous chapter).

It is however wrong to think that the laws of social development operating outside Kerala had no validity here. As a matter of fact, field cultivation had already developed in Kerala by the time of the Mahabharatha, as is clear from the statement that the belligerents in the battle of Kurukshetra were being supplied, among others, with rice by the King of Kerala. Such a development of the productive forces necessarily led to accumulation of wealth, division of labour, division of society into classes, etc. It paved the way for the break-up of the family system based on mother-right in the case of those classes and tribes which had already started on the path of accumulation of wealth, division of labour, division of society into classes, etc. It moreover led these advanced classes and tribes into contact with the advanced mode of production and living which had already developed outside Kerala. It was through these developments that the soil of Kerala was prepared for the sowing of the seed of Brahminism and its development into the mediaeval social order. But, as the essential material prerequisite for the Brahminical system of society—artificial irrigation organised by a centralised state—was absent here, that mediaeval social order had to take a path different from that of the Gangetic plain as well as of the Kaveri delta.

This explains the peculiar fact that, while Kerala has adopted the Brahminical scheme of division of labour—the system of division of society into high and low castes—and developed it into the worst form of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability, she has at the same time clung to a most un-Brahminical form of social life in several respects. Division of society into castes is as natural a development for Kerala as for Tamilnad and North India, since that is the mechanism through which accumulation of wealth could advance further than it did in the first stages. The particular use made of this division of society into castes, its development into a centralised State, was however inapplicable in Kerala. The break-up of the old (tribal) society had therefore to take a path different from the one taken by the tribes and nationalities outside Kerala.

The exact manner in which she traversed this path will be described in the succeeding pages but let us state very clearly, here and now, that the essence of this path of Kerala is the existence of landed property of feudalism, the absence of which has been noted by Marxists as the principal feature

of Oriental Society. ("How comes it that the *Orientalists did not reach to landed property or feudalism?* I think the reason lies principally in the climate, combined with the conditions of the soil, especially the great desert stretches which reach from the Sahara right through Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary to the highest Asiatic uplands. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of cultivation, and this is the concern either of the communes, the provinces or the central governments." Engels, Letter to Marx, June 6, 1853. Emphasis mine.) In other words, while it was the task of the British in India as a whole to establish "private property in land—the great desideratum of Asiatic Society", this "great desideratum" had actually developed in Kerala in mediaeval days.

Though the basis of society in Kerala was thus more akin to that of Europe where feudalism developed in the mediaeval age, the superstructure built on that basis was Brahminical, i.e. Asiatic. This contradiction between the basis and the superstructure explains why Kerala could not develop either the feudalism of the European type or the Asiatic Society on the lines of that of the Gangetic plain or of the Kaveri; why she could neither preserve the old primitive communal society intact nor adopt the Brahminical social order in all its main essentials; why the present-day socio-economic order of Kerala offers rich material for the study of almost every pattern of society from primitive communal to capitalist.

Only an understanding of this contradiction between the basis and the superstructure—an understanding of the fact that while the basis (i. e., "the economic structure of society at the given stage of its development"—Stalin) was taking the path of its development towards feudalism, the superstructure (i. e., "the political, legal, religious, artistic, philosophical views of society and the political, legal and other institutions corresponding to them".—Stalin) was taking the path of development towards Asiatic society—will enable us adequately and systematically to explain the various phases in the development of society in Kerala. For, as Stalin says, "the superstructure is a product of the basis, but this does not mean that it merely reflects the basis, that it is passive, neutral, indifferent to the fate of its basis, to the fate of the classes, to the character of the system. On the contrary, having come into being, it becomes an exceedingly active force, actively assisting its basis to take shape and consolidate itself, and doing every-

thing it can to help new system finish off and eliminate the old basis and the old classes." (*On Linguistics*)

That the champions of the two theories of South Indian history, especially those of Kerala history, have no such understanding of the relation between the basis and the superstructure is at the root of their failure to explain the main facts of history. They do not understand that, so far as the basis is concerned, South India is not a homogeneous entity but is split up into two—one part having the same basis as in North India while the other has a different basis. Nor do they understand that, having the same basis, one part of South India (Tamilnad and Andhra) built up its superstructure on the same lines as, though independently of, that of North India. Still less do they understand that that part of South India which has a different basis (Kerala) built up its own superstructure different from that of the rest of India. Finally, they do not understand that it was the vain attempt of the ruling classes of Kerala to artificially build up a superstructure on a basis that cannot naturally give birth to it that has created a superstructure that looks absurd to a superficial observer but which served the purpose of the further development of productive forces—a superstructure which is partly primitive communist, partly Asiatic, partly feudal, but which at the same time so developed the productive forces that the rising bourgeoisie of Europe started its career of trading with and conquering India on the coasts of Kerala.

(2)

When the British administrators took upon themselves the task of land settlement, they found that the prevailing system of land-ownership in Kerala was different from that of the major part of India. As against the system of the Government getting, as the supreme owner of all lands in the country, a more or less well defined fraction of the value of agricultural produce as in other parts of India, the Government in Kerala had no right of any kind on the land, not even the right to receive annual land revenue. It was during the administration of the Nawabs of Mysore (Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan) that land revenue was first levied in Malabar. Even in Travancore and Cochin where, by the time the British became the overlords of the State, the Government had become

the owner of large tracts of land (the process of their acquiring these ownership rights will be described in a subsequent chapter), there were other large tracts of land which were owned by private jenmis (landlords) who were free from the obligation to pay any land revenue to the State. This fact and several others made the British rulers see that the ownership rights of the Government were the least, while those of private jenmis were the most, in Kerala.

They however did not go beyond noting this fact. The explanation for it they more or less took over from the traditional account of the origin of Kerala, though after rejecting the crudest part of it. That traditional account, as we have seen earlier, is that the mythological hero, Parasurama, created Kerala out of the ocean and then made a free gift of it to the Brahmins (Namboodiris). Being the representatives of the modern bourgeois class, the British administrators could not of course accept this version in its mythological form. They, however, accepted it in all essentials, i.e., that the system of land relations in Kerala which has the maximum degree of proprietary rights in land was the creation of a small minority of immigrants; that these immigrants were themselves in their original homelands following a system of land relations in which communal ownership was dominant; that, just by saying "let there be proprietary rights on land", they created proprietary rights which were, without resistance, accepted by the indigenous people. They did not stop to consider how it was possible for a whole system of class relations to be established by a small minority of immigrants unless the local soil had already been prepared for it.

As far as we are concerned, we have already questioned the very basic assumption that the Namboodiris of Kerala are immigrants from outside. We have offered the hypothesis that, barring a small minority of settlers, the majority of the Namboodiris and other castes are people who were the original inhabitants of Kerala and that the difference between one caste and another is a difference in the stage reached by them in the evolution of society. But even supposing that that hypothesis is disproved, it does not follow that the theory of the Namboodiris being the first proprietors of land is correct.

There is, on the other hand, very strong reason to believe that land had already gone very far towards being turned into private property before the Namboodiris had come and settled

themselves in Kerala. For, it is an undisputed fact that the system of landownership in the regions from which Namboodiris are supposed to have come to Kerala is communal ownership by the village communities. It is therefore natural that they should try to introduce not the system of private proprietorship but the system of communal proprietorship of land. Actually, however, the system that was created after they came and settled themselves in Kerala is the furthest removed from communal ownership.

This riddle cannot be unravelled except on the assumption that private proprietorship had already developed here by the time the Namboodiris started immigrating and that what they did was just to transfer the rights of ownership from the original inhabitants to themselves. This assumption is also highly untenable because, if the rights of ownership had developed to such a high degree among the original inhabitants, the transfer of ownership from them to the immigrants would have caused bloody conflicts; the immigrants should have been the possessors of such overwhelming amount of physical force as to crush all resistance. As a matter of fact, all available evidence shows that it was the original inhabitants (the Nayars) who were far more powerful from the point of view of physical force than the immigrants. There is no reason why a people who had independently developed a higher form of property relations—private property as opposed to communal—and who, besides, possessed greater physical force should submit themselves socially (consider themselves an inferior caste) and economically (transfer their rights of proprietorship) to a people who were on a lower level of economic development and who were physically weaker than themselves.

The only rational explanation of the development of property is therefore the same as we made in the case of the development of the family: that it was the operation of internal forces within Kerala and not any intervention from outside, that led to the development of a system that is unique in a country that is developing along the lines of an Asiatic Society. Since, moreover, we have already laid our finger on the basic ingredient of the internal forces within Kerala—the absence of the system of artificial irrigation and therefore of centralised administration—it is easy for us to trace in broad outline how these internal forces worked and ultimately created the system of private property.

1) At the time of or even before the Chera Empire, field cultivation had developed to such an extent that the destruction of the equality that is characteristic of primitive communal society and which is commemorated in the traditional account of Emperor Mahabali had begun; class division had started making its appearance.

2) Class division however took the form of caste division: those who were in a position to accumulate the greatest amount of wealth came to occupy the position of being the highest caste; the next in point of the accumulation of wealth became the next highest caste, and so on, till we reach the class that is in a position to accumulate no wealth at all which became the lowest caste.

3) This process of the division of society into castes was facilitated or even stimulated by the Chera Empire and other contacts with the rest of India. Whether these contacts did also include the physical immigration of a whole caste (Namboodiris) or whether only a few immigrants came is still an open question, though, as we have noted earlier, it is most likely that only a few came, mixed themselves with those indigenous people who had accumulated the greatest amount of wealth and, together with them, formed the highest caste, the Namboodiris.

4) This division of society into castes disrupted the old tribal society. Not only did it lead to inequality in social relations, but it also broke up the old tribal assemblies. In place of an assembly for each tribe came an assembly for each caste. Thus developed the Gramams of the Namboodiri, the Tharakoottams of the Nayar and other caste assemblies—each caste having its own, more or less democratically functioning assembly.

5) The further development of cultivation, as well as trade in certain commodities (particularly forest produce), led to still greater accumulation of wealth which, in its turn, led to a slow but sure process by which the powers of these caste assemblies themselves got restricted. It was through this process that the military-feudal regime of mediaeval Kerala was evolved, as we will see in the following pages.

6) The economic consequence of this break-up of the ancient tribal assemblies was that the wealth that was accumulated also underwent this transformation. Each caste assembly (Gramam, Tharakoottam, etc.) had its own temple, the deity of which constituted the reflection and representa-

tive of the collective body of the entire caste. And it was in the name of the temple and its deity that the wealth accumulated through generations was held. Gradually, however, the control of the temple and therefore of its property narrowed down, first from the entire caste assembly to the collective body of the heads of families, then from the heads of all families to those of a few families and, in the end, to the head of one family. When it had reached this stage, it remained only to transform the right of ownership, from that of the head of that family as trustee of the temple and through it of the entire caste, to that of the head of that family in its own right. Any number of such transformations have taken place in living memory (many of them to the personal knowledge of the present writer himself)—transformation of public *Devaswam* (literally, the property of God) to private *Devaswam* and of *Devaswam* to *Brahmaswam* (literally, the property of the Brahmin). Furthermore, a very large extent of land remains, to this day, after so many centuries in which temple properties were subjected to such transformations, the property of the temples.

7) While the above was the basic form in which the ancient communal property was destroyed and private property established, the process of the establishment of the militarist-feudal regime of mediaeval Kerala led to other forms—invasion and conquest by one chieftain of another's land leading to the confiscation of the latter's private property by the former; the presentation of gifts by chieftains to their dependants; the offering of property to Brahmins by devout non-Brahmins, etc. The development of money, the exchange of commodities, etc., also led to the mortgaging and sale of land. (The collection of documents made by Mr. Logan, the most authoritative British historian of Kerala, contains several documents showing that purchase and sale of land was very common in mediaeval Kerala, long before the British came and settled themselves here.) It was through a combination of all these forms that the system of private property in land developed in Kerala. None of these forms however could have made its appearance unless the collective property of ancient tribal society had already been destroyed in the manner described above.

It can therefore be stated that the traditional account of the origin of the system of land relations in Kerala—that land was given as a free gift to the Namboodiris—is correct only to

this extent that the evolution of the caste system (in which, of course, the Namboodiri occupies the highest position) is intimately connected with the evolution of private property in land. As a matter of fact, it is this adaptation of the Brahminical caste system of the Gangetic plain to the soil of Kerala, in order to evolve a system of land relations akin to those of mediaeval Europe, that lies at the root of all those peculiarities of the social order in Kerala which are bewildering to a visitor from outside. The examination of the question of how this adaptation took place leads us direct to the question of the evolution of the State in Kerala—the break-up of the ancient tribal assemblies, the attempts at setting up a centralised State of the type found in Asiatic Society, the failure of these attempts, leading ultimately to the formation of the militaristic-feudal State apparatus but with no centralised empire, etc.—which we will now take up.

(3)

The Zamorin of Calicut and the Raja of Cochin, in their long-drawn-out wars to decide the issue as to which one of them was to become the Emperor of Kerala, both claimed descent from Cheraman, the last of the Perumals, and as such, the throne of the Emperor of Kerala.

The ruling dynasty of Travancore for its part claimed direct descent from the Cheras who ruled Kerala as its emperors long before the Perumals established themselves in Kerala. This dynasty further claims that it was not subjected to the overlordship of the Perumals but was an independent ruling dynasty equal to the Perumals. It claimed therefore that it had a title to the emperorship of Kerala far more ancient and continuous than that of any descendant of the Perumals.

These claims and counterclaims of the various ruling dynasties have become so great a part of the consciousness of the historians that most of them take it for granted that Kerala had been a centralised imperial state down to the 9th century A.D. when the Empire of the Perumals got broken up into more than a dozen petty kingdoms. This common consciousness of the historians has been taken by the bourgeois champions of the Aikya Kerala (United Kerala) movement as their ideological basis; they mourn the "fact" that the once united and glorious Kerala fell into evil days in which each

ruling dynasty quarrelled with the other and brought ruin and slavery on the people.

This view of Kerala having had in the past a united centralised imperial State is of course wrong. We have seen that what made centralisation possible and necessary in other parts of India — the need to organise artificial irrigation — was absent in Kerala and that it was the absence of this factor that led to the downfall of both the Chera Empire and the Empire of the Perumals. It is therefore most unscientific on anybody's part to accept uncritically the so-called "historical fact" that Kerala had once been a centralised imperial State.

It would however be wrong to dismiss the Chera Empire and the Empire of the Perumals as two phenomena which have had no influence on the course of the development of society. Close examination of the available evidence shows, on the other hand, that the social order underwent basic changes during the two imperial regimes, so that, even though the empire was a "transient and unstable military and administrative association", as Comrade Stalin describes all the empires of the slave and mediaeval age, society did not remain, after its dissolution, in the same stage as it had been before its formation.

There is of course no reliable evidence to show what type of society existed before the formation of the Chera Empire. We can only presume that more or less the same order that is described in the traditional epoch of Mahabali prevailed at the time — a social order in which classes have not developed, tribal equality continued to prevail, but tribal chieftains had started assuming far greater authority than they did in the earlier phases of Primitive Communism. It may be further assumed that the Cheras were a people who had already developed class society (of the Asiatic type) and that it was under their imperial rule that Brahminism became a vital social force in Kerala. For, as we have already seen, the Chera and other South Indian empires were of the same socio-economic character as the North Indian empires and hence took to the Brahminical ideology very easily and as a natural course. In any case we know that, by the time the Namboodiris established their social ascendancy — it is irrelevant here whether they were in their entirety an immigrant people or whether the majority of them were thrown up from the indigenous people — society had already developed on the lines of a caste oligarchy which is described in tradition as follows :

"The land of Parasurama was very early divided into four districts, namely the Tulu Khandam from Gokarnam to Perumpula River, the Kupa Khandam from the Perumpula to the Kotta River, the Kerala Khandam from Puthupattanam to Kannetti including the southern half of the Kurumbranad Taluq of Malabar, Cochin and North Travancore, and the Mushika Khandam extending from Kannetti to Cape Comorin.

"The country was parcelled out into 64 villages — 32 in Tulu Khandam and the other 32 south of it—and granted to the Brahman colonists with 'flower and water' to be enjoyed as a freehold for ever. A hundred and eight *Kalaries* were established to train the men in arms. Images of *Durga* and *Sasta* were installed in different places, the former on the sea coast and the latter on the hills. Rules were laid down to regulate the religious ceremonies. The ordinances of Parasurama were obeyed by all, and even the wind and the weather and the other forces of nature respected his commands and performed their allotted functions to ensure the prosperity of Kerala and the welfare of its inhabitants. The Namboodiris thus became the lords of the land in virtue of Parasurama's grant.

"The form of government prescribed by Parasurama was a sort of oligarchy in which all the 64 *gramams* were represented. For some time, the system appears to have worked well enough. On the failure of the *gramakkar* to meet together and conduct the affairs of the country satisfactorily as ordained by the Rishi, representative authority was conferred on 4 villages, Payyannur, Perumchellur, Parappur and Chengannur, to act on behalf of the whole community. While the Brahmins were ruling the land, disputes arose which marred the happiness of the people. Rakshapurushas or Protectors were therefore appointed and commissioned to hold office for 3 years. 4 *Kalakams* or advisory bodies were established, each under an official called *Thaliyathiri*, to assist the Rakshapurushas in administering the affairs. Four caste assemblies, *Varna Kalakams*, were formed to protect the different interests. It was also resolved that each of the *Kalakams* should have a house at Thiruvanchikkulam which was the seat of government so that the representatives should be able to guide and control the administration. Some of the Brah-

min families were initiated in arms to ensure efficient fighting and good leadership." (*Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II, pp. 4-5)

The *gramams* mentioned in this traditional account continue to this day as relics of this social organisation. They of course do not perform any social function today. But most families are even today known as belonging to this or that *gramam* and some of them have a say in the management of the affairs of the *Gramakshetram* (the common temple of the *gramam*). It can therefore be safely concluded that the traditional account given above is correct to this extent that the Namboodiris were organised into 64 *gramams*.

It however does not appear to be correct in so far as it says that these *gramams* of the Namboodiris had political and administrative authority over the entire people of a particular territory, over people of all castes. For, side by side with these *gramams* of Namboodiris, there continued to flourish also the Tharakkootams of the Nayar and the associations of the other castes.

It would therefore be better and more correct to assume, as we did earlier, that the socio-political organisation described in the traditional account given above shows that the ancient tribal society had broken up to give rise to the caste society, that the primitive communal tribal republic had given place to a series of caste republics, that these caste republics in their turn had started developing towards the autocratic authority of the caste leaders.

Herein is to be found the germ of the State, the mechanism that is yet to be developed and perfected as an organ of crushing the resistance of the lower classes (castes) to the authority of the upper classes (castes). It is not yet an organ standing above society since it is yet a part of the social organisation of each caste; but the process has already started since (i) each caste assembly has started to surrender part of its authority to caste leaders and (ii) the caste assemblies of the higher castes had started to encroach on the authority of the assemblies of the lower castes.

It was to facilitate this process and to bring it to its culmination in the establishment of a regular State machine that the Empire of the Perumals came to be established. The above-mentioned traditional account goes on to say :

"This system (the rule by the *gramams* of the Namboodiris) having failed of its purpose, the Brahmins, in a meeting assembled at Thirunavai, resolved to bring down a king to govern the country. The choice fell on Keya Perumal of Keyapuram in the country beyond the Ghats. The Kali year of his installation, 3317, is expressed in the chronogram *Bhiman Thupoyam prapya*, corresponding to A.D. 216. The newly-appointed Perumal was put on terms. He had to enter into a covenant with the people that he would respect the ancient customs and usages and permit them to conduct the administration themselves. Ordinarily twelve years was to be the period of the rule of each Perumal. On its termination he was to retire from public life. The most approved mode of doing this, it is said, consisted in the Perumal cutting his own throat, on the termination of a grand feat, in the presence of the assembled guests. These Governors were bound to observe certain Brahminical regulations. In matters of doubt the decisions of the Brahmins was to be final. There were 25 Perumals in all who ruled the country from A. D. 216 to A. D. 428. The field of selection was wide and the Perumals are said to have represented that dynasty in South India which was most powerful for the time being, for we hear of Chera Perumals, Chola Perumals, and Pandya Perumals. The last Perumal was permitted to govern for 36 years at the end of which he is said to have embraced Islam and embarked for Mecca after partitioning his territories among his numerous kinsmen who thus became the rulers of the land." (*Travancore State Manual*, Vol. II, pp. 5-6)

This traditional account of the Perumals is wrong in several respects: it is not true, for example, that the last of the Perumals embraced Islam and went to Mecca. The late Padmanabha Menon whose monumental work, *The History Of Kerala*, is the best-known authoritative work on the subject, says that this story is the result of the mixing up of two historical facts — the conversion to Buddhism of one of the earlier Perumals and the conversion of one of the subsequent Zamorins to Islam — and that the last of the Perumals was converted to neither but died a natural death as a devout Hindu.

Equally wrong is the assumption, underlying the tradi-

tional account, that the Perumals were the sovereign rulers of the whole of Kerala. For, after making a thorough study of three copper-plate grants made by some of these Perumals, the late Padmanabha Menon comes to the conclusion that during the period ranging from the end of the seventh to the beginning of the ninth century A. D., the boundary of Kerala stretched only from Calicut to Quilon and not to the whole Malayalam-speaking area of today. He also points out that though the Perumals were accepted as emperors, some very powerful rulers were already reigning in this period, some of whom have signed as witnesses to the grants made in the copper-plate documents.

A third interesting conclusion emerges out of the study of the above-mentioned copper-plate grants — that the Perumals were not the heads of a State based on the Brahminical caste organisation but rulers of a territorial administrative machinery covering all castes and religions. For, the three copper-plate documents are those which confer certain privileges and lands on some non-Hindu (Jewish and Christian) communities. Attested as these grants are by some of the best-known rulers of Kerala in that period, including the emperors themselves, they make it perfectly clear that the transition from caste oligarchy to the territorial administrative machine had already taken place before the last of the Perumals passed away.

As a matter of fact, it would appear, it was this very thing that the Perumals were expected to do: class differentiation had grown to such an extent that it was time for the caste assemblies, including the *gramams* of the highest caste, to be deprived of their administrative functions. These latter had to be entrusted to a special mechanism which should, of course, be linked up socially with the caste hierarchy but should be politically independent of it. It was in search of such a mechanism that the Namboodiris assembled at Thirunavai went to the land beyond the Ghats — the nearest land where such a mechanism had functioned for centuries. That mechanism failed in the form in which it functioned in its original home — in the form of a centralised imperial State — since the economic basis of that form, Asiatic Society, was not and could not be laid in Kerala.

But, in the process of laying the foundations for such a centralised imperial state, the ruling class that was emerging in Kerala found the State form that was particularly suited to

the soil of Kerala — a militarist-feudal State, rooted in private property in land, closely linked with the caste system of Hinduism (complemented of course with elements of the Jewish, the Christian and the Muslim religions) and extending to such narrow boundaries as are capable of being administered under conditions of ill-developed communications. It was the necessity for such a conglomeration of petty principalities, the unsuitability of the centralised imperial type of State in the material conditions of Kerala, that led to the break-up of the Empire of the Perumals.

The State form that emerged out of these transformations is described as follows by the author of the *Cochin State Manual* :

“The government was based more or less on principles resembling those of the feudal system of Europe in the middle ages. The king was the supreme ruler of the country, but local administration was in the hands of hereditary chiefs subordinate to him. The kingdom was divided into a number of *nads* or districts of varying extent, each presided over by a hereditary chief called *Naduvazhi*, and each *nad* was for military and other purposes divided into *desams*, some of which were presided over by hereditary *Desavazhis*, while the others, being the private property of the *Naduvazhi* or the king, were administered by the latter directly or by officers appointed by them. The *desam* was further subdivided not into territorial units but into caste or tribal groups such as the *gramam* of the Namboodiris, the *tara* of the Nayars, the *cheri* of the low castes, the territorial limits of which, though more or less well defined, overlapped each other. The *nad* and *desam* of this coast differed from analogous territorial divisions elsewhere in that they consisted not of so many towns and villages, but of so many Nayars, such as the “Five Hundred” of Kodakaranad, the “Four Hundred” of Annamanad and the “Three Hundred” of Chengazhinad. The affairs of the caste or tribal groups were under the management of headmen or elders, Graminis, Karanavans, Tandans, etc., as the case might be. The Karanavans looked after the local affairs of the *tara*, superintended the cultivation of the desmenes of their chief, who might be a king, a *Naduvazhi*, a *Desavazhi* or a mere *janmi*, received a share of the produce for their maintenance, and render-

ed military services to him, whenever called upon to do so. The *Desavazhis*, where they existed, had the direction of all the affairs of the *desam*, and saw to the execution of all the orders sent to them by the king or the *Naduvazhi*. They were also military leaders, subject to the authority of the *Naduvazhis* and marched at the head of their quotas when ordered to the field. The *Naduvazhis* had authority in their respective *nads* in all civil and military matters, but the extent of that authority and the degree of their subordination to the king depended upon their political status. All of them however were bound to maintain a number of men at arms, fixed according to their position and wealth, and to attend the king in his wars.

“*The Naduvazhis*

“The *Naduvazhi* chiefs, by whatever designation they were styled, whether Raja or Acchan or Kaimal or merely Nayar, belonged to one of the three classes, viz., *Svarupi*, *Prabhu* and *Madambi*. All who had the power of life and death were *Svarupis*. A *Svarupi* might therefore be an independent king like that of Cochin or Calicut, or he might be a tributary Raja like that of Porakad or Alangad, the only restriction on whose power was that they could not make war or coin money without the sanction of their suzerain, or he might be a subordinate chief like the Kaimal of Koratti or the Nambiar of Muriyanad, governing a district under the orders of the king. The *Prabhu* differed from the third class of *Svarupis* only in that he had no power of life and death. He might be wealthier and more powerful than a *Svarupi*, but he could not exercise the power of life and death unless he was raised to the rank of a *Svarupi*. The *Madambis* were petty chiefs with very limited powers, who had only very small bodies of armed retainers under them, seldom exceeding a hundred in number. All had to pay the king a succession fee or *purushandaram*, varying from two to 1,200 fanams, a small annual tribute called *andukazhcha*, and an annual contribution for special protection variously called *rakshabhogam*, *changatam*, *palam*, etc. The *Madambis* had to pay, besides these, the assessment called *Kettutengu*, which was a cess levied only on three per cent of the coconut trees in a garden. No regular land tax was levied from the *Svarupis* and *Prabhus*, but they were called upon for special contributions on extraordinary occasions. The

merits and defects of government through the agency of hereditary nobles who were also commanders of armies are self-evident. The conflicting interests of the chiefs and their mutual jealousies and misunderstandings led to endless quarrels and faction fights, and the country was generally in a state of political effervescence. The same circumstances also made it the interest of the chiefs to protect their people and promote their prosperity, and that prosperity was not seriously interfered with by the wars and fights of those days, as the latter were governed by certain humanitarian rules and regulations which were scrupulously observed by all parties." (pp. 48-49)

"The Power of the King"

"Though the king exercised great authority over his subjects and chiefs, his power was not unlimited. In the first place, the personal equation was an important factor in the politics of old Cochin. If the king happened to be a weak man, his authority was hardly more than nominal, especially in the territories directly under the control of his chiefs. If he was a strong man and a capable ruler, he managed to exercise great power, but even the power of such a king was not absolute. The kuttam of the nad, or the national assembly, effectively curbed the power of the king and would not tolerate any violation by him of the laws and usages of the country. 'When a new king is crowned' says Duarte Barbosa, 'all the grandees and former governors make him swear to maintain all the laws of the late king, and to pay the debts which he owed, and to labour to recover that which other former kings had lost. And he takes this oath, holding a drawn sword in his left hand, and his right hand placed upon a chain lit up with many oil wicks, in the midst of which is a gold ring, which he touches with his fingers and then he swears to maintain everything with that sword. When he has taken the oath, they sprinkle rice over his head, with many ceremonies of prayer and adoration to the sun, and immediately after, certain counts, whom they call Caymal, along with all the others of the royal lineage, and the grandees, swear to him in the same manner to serve him, and to be loyal and true to him'. The chiefs and the people thus obeyed the king ungrudgingly so long as he remained within the limits of the law. Even if a king or

chief were to worry some individuals, the whole community would not rise against him, but if any orders issued were prejudicial to the interests of the community, the people would not submit to them. Hendrik Adrian Van Rheede, the Dutch Governor of Cochin from 1673 to 1677 and the celebrated author of *Hortus Malabaricus* says: 'Subjects are not bound to observe any orders, commands or whims and council decisions of the king which are at variance with their laws, prosperity or privileges, and which they have approved of in their own territories and accepted at their political meetings. No king of Malabar has the power to make contracts which are prejudicial to the interests of landlords, noblemen, or Nayars; such a king would run the risk of being expelled or rejected by his subjects....' The English East India Company's Linguist at Calicut, reporting on certain commotions there, said: 'These Nayars being heads of Calicut people, resemble the Parliament, and do not obey the king's dictates in all things, but chastise his ministers when they do unwarrantable acts.' According to Keralolpatti, Parasurama separated the Nayars into taras and assigned to them the functions of 'the eye', 'the hand' and 'the order' (the power to supervise, to execute and to give orders), 'with a view to prevent the rights (of all classes) from being curtailed or suffered to fall into disuse.' (pp. 50-51)

The foregoing pages make it clear that the development of the basis (an economic order based on private property in land) as well as the political superstructure (the militarist-feudal state machine) were the natural development of ancient tribal society in Kerala and that the historical role played by the ruling classes of Kerala lay precisely in laying this economic basis and building this political superstructure.

The same however cannot be said of the ideology that came to dominate the ruling classes and through them society as a whole. For, Kerala being only a small part of India and its mode of production being of such a type as to lead to less productivity of labour, the ruling classes, even when they evolved out of the soil of Kerala, could not develop an ideology of their own; what they did was to take over other ideologies and make them their own. When it was a question of laying the economic basis and building the political superstructure, even such of the ruling classes as came from outside (Namboodiris

or Perumals for example) could not help departing from what they had learned in their original homelands and creating something new; on the other hand, when it was a question of building the ideological superstructure — religion, literature, arts, etc. — even such of the ruling classes as grew on local soil had perforce to take over something that had already been created outside.

This conflict between the basis and political superstructure on the one hand and the ideological superstructure on the other should have led to conflicts between the various sections of the ruling classes; it also led to conflicts between the rulers and the ruled as a whole. There is very little historical evidence indicating how these class conflicts took place. There is however no doubt that such conflicts have taken place, as is indicated by the traditional account of the colonisation of Kerala by the Namboodiris—that, when they came here, they had to meet the furious resistance on the part of the Nagas (Nayars) and that it was only when the Namboodiris agreed to follow the customs and manners of Kerala, including serpent-worship, that the Nagas (Nayars) were pacified.

The rapidity and ease with which successive religions established their firm grip over the masses—first Brahminism, then Buddhism, also Judaism, later Christianity and later still Islam; the obstinacy with which the indigenous religious beliefs and practices continued among the masses after centuries of these various religions; the pressure felt by each of these religious communities to depart from what they had adhered to in their original homelands and to adapt themselves to the conditions of their new land—all these show two things:

One, the great social transformation accomplished in the course of the centuries from the beginning of the Chera Empire to the end of the Empire of the Perumals was so great that the ideology of ancient tribal society was totally inadequate. The ground was thus prepared for any and all sorts of new ideologies that were going about anywhere in the world; any new religion (which, after all, was in that age the central element of the ideological system) would immediately grip the mass mind; it would grip the minds of even sections of the ruling classes as is manifest in the conversion of one of the Perumals to Buddhism, the conversion of a large num-

ber of Namboodiris to Christianity by St. Thomas himself and the conversion of some upper class Hindu families to Islam.

Two, every one of these ideological systems was so alien to the soil of Kerala that the masses were not prepared to accept it in its entirety or in its original form; the leaders of each of these religions were forced to make several departures from their original beliefs and practices. There is something particularly Malayali about the beliefs and practices of the Namboodiri, the Syrian Christian and the Moplah, though they claim to be true followers of Brahminism, Christianity and Islam respectively.

It would be wrong to consider these changes in the religious system as having been brought about smoothly; big clashes and conflicts must have taken place though we know very little about them. It is only in respect of one of these conflicts, that between Brahminism and Buddhism that there is some, though meagre, evidence. It was this conflict that threw up Sankara, the philosopher, who dealt the final blow to Buddhism on the soil of Kerala. Nor was it a mere ideological conflict confining itself to abstruse questions of the soul; it was a bitter, practical, daily struggle between two camps in which, as in all wars, everything that leads to victory was considered fair and just. The result was that Buddhism ceased to exist in Kerala, though at one time it was a very powerful force.

Since the ruling classes had to fight these battles of ideas, they had perforce to develop a distinct category of ideologues who made it their whole-time occupation to study one or another department of ideology, sharpen their own understanding of the subject, carry on polemics against opponents, etc. It was thus that a great volume of literary works—artistic, philosophical, scientific—was created. Sankara and his philosophical works are of course the best-known of these literary productions of the ideological representatives of the ruling classes of Kerala; but there are many more that are less well-known outside but show the high degree of the cultural level of our ideologues. They include original, creative artistic works (kavyas) as well as scientific works in the various fields of knowledge.

But all this cultural work, an attempt to build an ideological superstructure in Kerala of a type natural to the Gangetic Plain and the Kaveri Delta, was artificial to its soil. It was the social order based on hundreds of village communi-

ties ruled by a powerful centralised imperial State that gave birth to the ideology which the rulers of Kerala attempted to transplant to the soil of Kerala; while the social order of Kerala was one in which the ancient tribal republics were being replaced not by the village communities and the centralised imperial State but first by the caste assemblies and then by the system of militarist-feudal petty principalities.

This contradiction between the social order that was developing as a natural course and the ideological system that was being artificially attempted to be planted here lay at the root of the extreme isolation of the arts, literature, sciences, philosophy, etc. from the common people. It is this artificiality that explains the fact that, while the ruling classes have developed some of the fine arts to a high degree of perfection, the enjoyment of these highly perfected forms of art are confined to narrow circles of upper class connoisseurs; this in its turn leading to greater and greater isolation of these art forms from the people and even to deterioration of its technique. (An example of this is the Kathakali which is a combination of the arts of singing, dancing and acting, each of which has been developed to a high degree, but their combination has led to highly artificial productions—appreciated only by narrow circles.)

It is this artificiality again that led to a situation in which, despite the tremendously great number of authors thrown up by the ruling classes, Malayalam as a language did not develop till very late. Most of the earlier works are written either in Tamil or in Sanskrit, the first really Malayalam literary production being as recent as the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

The consequence of all this artificiality was that the great efflorescence of culture among the ruling classes did not affect the masses of the people who continued to maintain their old forms of singing, dancing, etc. The philosopher Sankara could annihilate Buddhism but his class could not annihilate the folk culture of the overwhelming majority of the people. The Christian and the Muslim got thousands of converts from among the indigenous people but they too could not destroy the various forms of the folk culture of those whom they converted.

It is not in the field of culture alone that this artificiality expressed itself. It is the same in the family system which seems so strange to an outsider.

The system of impartible joint families, in its twin forms of patriarchy and matriarchy, is admirably suited to the development of private property since it prevents the division of the wealth accumulated by the family into small bits of property each owned by a particular branch of the family. (Kerala is one of the few places where the Mitakshara Hindu Law does not apply. It has a local law which prohibits the division of family property unless each and every single member of the family agrees to the division.)

Now, the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, from group marriages of various kinds to the system of the monogamous family, takes place at a time when it is necessary to facilitate the passing of property from generation to generation. The conditions of social development in Kerala did not require such a transition since the joint family in its twin forms of patriarchy and matriarchy served the same purpose, with the additional advantage, as explained above, that it prevented the dissolution of the family into numerous branches and the consequent division of family property. This latter precaution was not necessary outside Kerala where the main form of property, land, was in any case communal and did not stand any risk of being divided. It is only in Kerala that land had ceased to be the property of the village communes and that, if the accumulated wealth was to be preserved intact, division of the family had to be prohibited.

Once this particular form of the family was founded there was no need to further advance towards monogamy. All the forms and types of marriages that had already been evolved needed only to be brought within the framework of this system of impartible joint families. Thus was established the patriarchal joint family of the Namboodiri with strict rules of fidelity for the woman and polygamy, concubinage, etc., for the man. The matriarchal joint family of the Nayar with free marriages and easy divorces was also thus established. This matriarchal family had no strict rules of marital fidelity of the woman who was quite free in sexual relationships. The establishment of these two main types of families by the upper castes helped all the lower castes to preserve the type of family and marriage that they had already evolved and did not impose on them the type of family and marriage adopted by their brethren outside Kerala. It is thus that the process of transition from group marriages and matriarchy to

the monogamous patriarchal family was arrested and a peculiar form of family and marriage evolved in Kerala.

It is only when these artificial elements of the superstructure are destroyed, only when a superstructure that is completely in accordance with the basis is built up, that this artificiality of the ideological, family and social system can be ended. This is a task which remains to be done to this day because the further development of the social system—from the downfall of the Empire of the Perumals to the beginning of British domination, from the beginning of British domination to the formal transfer of power from British to Indian hands, and from the formal transfer of power to this day—has not done away with the domination of an ideological system alien to the soil of Kerala; nay more, even those elements of the basis and the political superstructure that were natural to the soil at the time of the Perumals were destroyed in the course of the centuries since the downfall of their Empire, particularly since the western imperialist rulers established their suzerainty in Kerala.

This does not of course mean that the alien ideological system that made our social and cultural life artificial has remained in the same form to this day. Later developments in the economic and political fields have certainly influenced our social and cultural life. The fact however remains that, in spite of all these developments, the isolation of the ruling classes from the common people, the consequent divorce between the ideology created by the ruling classes and the social and cultural life of the people, has not diminished; it has, if anything, increased. That is why, as we shall see later on, the modern national-democratic movement has unleashed a powerful movement for destroying the system of the old religious, philosophical, legal, family and other beliefs and practices and the institutions corresponding to them. The working class as the leader of this national-democratic movement cannot close its eyes to this task; it alone can build a superstructure that is in keeping with the basis, in keeping with the needs of social development.