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Non-Brahmanical Landlords in the Midlands: Of Land and Caste, Part 2

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Summary: The second part of the series on Land and Caste explains how land tenures, land reform, law, and caste position worked in the midlands of Kerala through the experience of two families belonging to the Kaimal and Syrian Catholic community settled in Purapuzha, Idukki.

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Ethnicity refers to the division of society into segmented communal groups, whose members have a common descent belief, a sense of distinct identity from the rest of society, and institutionalised boundary-marking mechanisms that maintain and emphasise their social separation.¹ These groups share attributes such as a common origin, ancestry, traditions, language, history, society, religion, or social treatment. Ethnicity is a significant frame to understand how certain mid-level castes and communities locate themselves in the socio-economic and caste-based society of Kerala.



Figure 1. Location of Purapuzha in Kerala. Image: Wikipedia, 2024.

In the second part of the series on Land and Caste, we look at two communities—the Kaimals and Syrian Catholics—to understand how land tenures, land reform, law, and caste position worked in the

¹ For more information on ethnicity, see: Kurien, Prema. 'Colonialism and Ethnogenesis: A Study of Kerala, India'. *Theory and Society* 23, no. 3 (January 1994): 385–417.

midlands of Kerala as experienced by two families belonging to these communities settled in Purapuzha, Idukki.

Genesis: Syrian Catholic Community

The Vyattattil family, belonging to the Syrian Catholic Community, is a mid-level landlord settled in Purapuzha, near Thodupuzha in Kerala. The Syrian Christian community is among one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Oral tradition places the origin of the community in 52 A.D., when St. Thomas reached the Malabar shores and converted upper-caste families to Christianity. In the fourth century A.D., a group of Christians from Canan of Jerusalem immigrated to Kodungalloor and settled in the south of the Periyar delta.² They did not mix with the 'Nasranis' (followers of Jesus of Nazareth).

The native Christians (descendants of the original St. Thomas converts) hailed the foreigners as patrons and placed themselves under their bishop who had come with them. They adopted the religious practices of the immigrants including the Syriac language of worship. Hence the native Christians came to be known as Syrian Christians... In 1595, at the time of Alexis de Menezes, Archbishop of Goa, the local leader of the native Christians accepted the Roman faith for the first time and promised not to receive a bishop who was not sent by the Pope. In the famous 'Coonan Cross Oath' of 1653 at Mattancherry in Cochin the majority of the Christians in Kerala renounced the Roman faith and returned to the earlier faith... The former party formed the Catholic Church and the latter the Orthodox or Jacobite Church. (pp. 340–1)³

This is a short account of the Syrian Catholic community to which the Vayattattil family

² Mathew K. Jacob, and Leela Dube. "Kerala Christians." *Man* 12, no. 2 (1977): 340–42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2800805>

³ Mathew and Dube, 1977.

belongs. Not much is known about the history of the family before their forefather came to Purapuzha from Mulanthuruthy, Ernakulam.

His descendant, Babu John, a retired headmaster, said that though the forefather had belonged to a family of *nattuvaidyas*, he did not practice medicine:⁴

He was travelling around and reached here. Purapuzha was ruled by the *edaprabhu* (chieftain)—the Kaimals—then. One of the women in the family had a chronic disease. When he heard about her disease, he said that he would treat her; and he cured her. In return, he asked for a house and land, possibly paddy fields, to settle on. They gave him land close to their household—land that was used for *payattu* (martial arts training) and called *payattu kad*.



Figure 2. This palm leaf manuscript with indigenous medical prescriptions is believed to have been handed down from the forefather of the Vayattattil family. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

The term *payattu kad* is supposed to have contracted to Vayattattil. As the Kaimals wanted the Vayattattil family to be at hand if they needed them, the latter were settled on a nearby plot of land quite close to the

Kaimal tharavad. Even today, the descendants of the families stay close to each other at Purapuzha.



Figure 3. The door leading to an *ara*, the store room, where produce, seeds, and preserves were stored in the past. This *ara*, part of the original Vayattattil homestead, was built in the plot given by the Kaimals. It was retained when the house was demolished and rebuilt in the mid-20th century. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

That a Christian family was allowed to stay quite close to an upper-caste or middle-caste family⁵ in pre-colonial times is surprising. Historian Susan Bayly mentions that Syrian Christians were accorded an important position in the southern princely states of Travancore and Cochin until the nineteenth century.⁶ In the martial culture of southern Kerala, their skills were as crucial to the rulers as those of the Nair elite warriors. The Syrian Christians were rewarded for their military service with royal grants and privileges. Traditional accounts of the founding of their most important churches emphasise the role of Hindu rulers as patrons and benefactors of these shrines. These privileges were often documented on edicts and copper plates, known as *Cheppedes*. Many of them worked as pepper brokers and port revenue officers, and specialised in maritime and hinterland trade. The Nairs and Syrian Christians intermarried until the late 16th century, suggests Susan Bayly.

⁴ Interview with Babu John at Purapuzha on 17 January 2024.

⁵ The four varna system manifested differently in Kerala, with several rungs between the kings and Brahmins at the top and the outlier castes at the bottom. Syrian Christians and Mappila Muslim

⁶ Bayly, Susan. "Hindu Kingship and the Origin of Community: Religion, State and Society in Kerala, 1750-1850." *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (1984): 177-213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312432>.

M.D. Kaimal, president of the NSS Karayogam in Purapuzha and vice president of the Thodupuzha Taluk Union, is a descendant of the Kaimal family, who was the original landlord in Purapuzha. He mentioned the special place Syrian Christians had in former times:⁷

The Vayattattil family came here probably 600 years ago. They came when the caste system was very strong.

“Thailadhi vasthukkal ashudhmaayal, Nasraani thottal athu shudhamaakum.”
(Liquids that have become impure will become pure when a Nasrani touches them.)

This has been written in some book somewhere. That was one reason for the Christian settlements—they were brought in to remove the impurity (caste-related) of the coconut oil needed for the use of temples and landlords.

Oil extracted by a caste called Chakkalathu Nair had to be ritually purified for use in pujas. The special position of the Syrian community, however, was not the reason this family rose to prominence in the village. In the 18th century, an extensive land survey was done during the reign of Marthanda Varma of Travancore to increase revenue.⁸ Later, the East India Company–Travancore Subsidiary Alliance Treaty of 1795 established a subsidiary alliance according to which the Company was to maintain a military force in or near Travancore to aid the kingdom. The costs of this force were to be paid by the government of Travancore. The government initiated assessments of individual land holdings, fixing taxation based on the capital held by landowners and annual profits, to raise this money. Additionally, new wastelands were cultivated to generate revenue.⁹ Babu John explained:

The rest of the land was *pathupichu eduthathu*—a land deed written over in the name of the family with taxes paid directly to the king. In the 18th or 19th century, when the land survey happened for the first time in Travancore, surveyors came to Purapuzha. They stayed at a house in Chethikottu that belonged to one of my ancestors. They needed a house with land and toilet facilities, and this two-storey house may have had that, which is why they stayed there. This ancestor influenced the officer, possibly a Britisher, and got possession of the land. This entire area belonged to us—around 400 acres. Before that, we did have some land—Valluvanparambu, Kollikalam, the land with the current Pallathinal house, and so on. After the Kaimal had given them land, smaller plots were bought because, in those days, land was not expensive. It was after the survey that the family came into possession of the bulk of the land in this village.



Figure 4. One of the houses at Purapuzha belonging to the Vayattattil family branch that moved away from the original homestead 4–5 generations ago. Though close to 100 years old, the house is called Puthenpurayail, meaning ‘new house’. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Around the nineteenth century, the Syrian Christians began to lose their high status within the caste system. Susan Bayly connects it to how the British and the

⁷ Interview with M.D. Kaimal at Purapuzha on 17 January 2024.

⁸ Pillai, T.K. Velu. *The Travancore State Manual*. Vol. IV. Trivandrum: The Government of Travancore, 1940.

⁹ Aiya, V. Nagam. *The Travancore State Manual*. Vol. III. Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906.

missionaries viewed the community, sectarian divisions within the community, fall of the martial system in Kerala, and changes in access to cultivable land to communities as a result of various policies.¹⁰ The community began to align its aspirations towards a Brahminical lifestyle, which she says was happening all over India among many other martial communities including the Marathas.

Origins: Kaimal Community



Figure 5. The original tharavad of the Mazhuvanchery Kaimal family in Purapuzha. No one stays in this house at present. Image: Sudheesh Kaimal, 2024.

Like the Vayattattil family, the Kaimals in Purapuzha arrived from elsewhere.¹¹

Our family came here from Madurai in Tamilnadu. Our ancestors were members of the Madurai Raja's family. When Tirumala Nayakan attacked, many people fled the area—the Poonjattil Thamburakanmar, Pandalam Rajas, Meenachil Karthas, and the Kaimal family in Thodupuzha. Our family reached Neriyanagalam one night and settled down near the river. There were women, children, and soldiers; it was a huge group that had fled through

forests at night. A few of the family members came to Kodikulam, Thodupuzha, and are called Madapally Kaimal. The branch that is settled here in Purapuzha is called Mazhuvanchery Kaimal.

The Bhagavathi Myth and Early Settlements

Like in the case of the Namboothiri families mentioned in the first article of this series, the Kaimal family has a story connected to transporting their *paradevatha* (family deity) to a new location:

Our *paradevatha*, or *dharmadaivam*, is Madurai Meenakshi. The idol of the Devi would not come loose from the soil the next day when they tried to migrate further from Neriyanagalam. The Bhagavati commanded that they should settle there. Even now, our *moolakshetram*, or *moolakudumbam*, is the Madurai Meenakshy temple across the river in Neriyanagalam, in a place called Kanjiraveli.¹²

The immobility of the idol gives the Kaimals the right to settle down in the new place, like in the case of the Parur Raja and the Mattappally Mana.¹³ At present, the family members go to the family deity at least once a year to do pujas.

Vasudevan Namboothiri, a descendant of Mattappally Mana, recounted that an older temple, the Shasthavu temple, already existed when the ancestors relocated to Puliyanam:

The Shasthavu or Ayyappa temple is very old; the idol is slightly eroded. We are not very sure how old the Bhagavati temple is or where it was brought from.¹⁴ Mattapally may have been the

¹⁰ Bayly, 1984.

¹¹ M.D. Kaimal, 2024.

¹² M.D. Kaimal, 2024.

¹³ For more information read “When Rajas and Landlords Speak.” Both these Namboothiris recounted stories of Bhagavathi travelling with an ancestor and

later being permanently placed in the current location when the idol or umbrell

¹⁴ The Bhagavati that came to the location on an umbrella.

original seat of the temple. Of the Shiva temple, I only know that it was brought from outside. I don't know if there was property or wealth connected to this temple—if the property we accumulated was through this temple.¹⁵



Figure 6. The Shiva Temple within the Bhadrakali Mattappally Mana in Puliyanam. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

M.D. Kaimal mentioned that, in the past, families would settle in a place that had both a temple and a water source:

The Namboothiris, Karthas, and Kaimals were the old landlords. When the Kaimals came here more than 1000 years ago (we believe), this place was a jungle with wild animals roaming free. Families would settle at first near temples and jungles.

Where there are no temples, one is built, often over years or centuries:

Earlier, the pujas were done under some trees on land belonging to us. Later, the *tharas*¹⁶ were removed, and temples were built in their stead. The idol is placed, the temple is built, and accompanying repairs are done periodically. There would be a *srikovil* and a *thadapally*¹⁷—nothing elaborate.

Temples are built based on the financial status of the landlord. In the past,

before the idol was placed, beneath it, gold was set down. Idols could be either metal or stone. A door frame is made, under which gold or *panchaloha* (5-metal alloy) is placed.¹⁸

Temples, Livelihoods, and Kaimals

The temple is central to the livelihoods of various castes, including the Kaimals, the Namboothiris, and the Ambalavasis (castes entrusted with jobs other than puja within a temple). Temples are recognised and understood as income-generating enterprises by the descendants of the Kaimals and the Mattapally Mana (as the earlier quote from Vasudevan Namboothiri shows). Owning a temple or more is a matter of pride. M.D. Kaimal said:

Our paradevatha here is Puthuchirakavu Devi Temple. Nearby, there is Moovalloor Shiva Temple; one kilometre from here is Edakkal Shasthavu Temple, our family temple. There are two temples in Karinkunnam panchayat—a Sashata Temple and a Bhagavathy Temple. The family owned five temples and 250 acres of land. Moovelil is one of the oldest temples here, and Muchrakavu temple is also old. Both of these temples belong to us but have been handed over to the NSS for their running.

The Kaimals were in charge of governing the temples under their control. They were also a powerful community with access to the local kings.

If you take any of the major temples in Kerala, the main advisor of the king would be a kaimal connected to that temple. Thachudaya Kaimal is the family connected to the Irinjalakuda temple; Vaakayil Kaimal is the owner of the Kodugalloor Bhagavathy Temple. They are called *sthanikals*. Though the temples are now under the government

¹⁵ Interview with Vasudevan Namboothiri at Puliyanam on 16 November 2023.

¹⁶ These are built-structures usually waist high or lower.

¹⁷ The sanctum sanctorum and where the puja related preparations are done.

¹⁸ M.D. Kaimal, 2024.

and Devaswom board, whichever family is the *sthani* of the temple will have a prominent place in the daily rituals and other decisions.

The Kaimals in Purapuzha were entrusted with collecting the tax for the king. The money they collected was given to the Alluvancherry Thambran (a Namboothiri family and position) in Thrissur, who had temples in Kollai, Vazhithala, and Amarankalli. The Namboothiris that lived in Purapuzha and surrounding villages were not powerful families. Kaimal explained why:

It is said that there were six Namboothiri families in Purapuzha a long time ago. When Tippu Sultan and Hyder Ali attacked Malabar in the past, they destroyed around 3000 temples, did forced conversions, apprehended landholdings, and caused Namboothiri families to flee. The Namboothiris settled in various places that they deemed safe, including here. There was a family here, Kandamarukku Illam, that came from Kannur. When these families fled, they would take their family deity, gold, and whatever currency was in use with them.

Being the tax collectors for the king, Kaimals had people in the family trained in Kalari and able to handle weapons.

Chances are that the Kaimal family had a say in the maintenance of law and order in the area. If there was a murder or other dispute, they might have given judgment. People would not have gone all the way to Thiruvananthapuram.

However, M.D. Kaimal clarified that it was the Kartha community that were the warriors. The Meenachil Kartha, an old family from Meenachil, Idukki that originally migrated from Madurai, were in charge of the Vadakumkooor Raja's army. This was one of the smaller kingdoms (based in Kottayam and Ettumanu) that emerged following the

fall of the Chera dynasty.¹⁹ The kingdom was annexed to Travancore during the reign of Marthanda Varma. The Kaimals worked under the Vadakumkooor Raja in the past and later under Travancore.

Land and Cultivation

A major source of income for these mid-level landlords, other than temples, was produce from the garden lands and paddy fields.



Figure 7. On this land that belongs to the Vayattattil family, the paddy field is bordered by garden land. Tapioca, coconut trees, and a few areca nut trees are grown on the garden land. All these plants and trees were important in pre-colonial and colonial times as cash crops. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Babu John described:

The major cultivation on our land was paddy. There was coconut and areca palm. The areca nut was mainly cultivated for *murukkan* (pan/psychoactive use). It was exported and used for medicine. The areca nut was dried in a specific building where a fire is lit at the bottom and the nuts are dried on top, on a shelf called an *atti*. This processing was done in the nearby village of Karinkunnam. Merchants would measure it in *rathal* (a local measure); it would be cut, dried, and sent for exporting.

This village was a centre for the cultivation of lemongrass. It was

¹⁹ Malekandathil, Pius. 'Dynamics of Trade, Faith and the Politics of Cultural Enterprise in Early Modern

Kerala'. In *Clio and Her Descendants: Essays in Honour of Kesavan Veluthat*, 157–98. New Delhi: Primus Books, 2018.

processed here in a *vaattupura* (distillation room). The process is the same as that for making arrack. That is probably how illegal arrack also happened to be processed, in the sense that because the equipment was there, people took to processing arrack. There was a *vaattupura* near the house of Sudheesh (M.D. Kaimal's son), as did other houses. The hill behind this house had lemongrass. It used to smell good. Lemongrass would grow on its own after the initial batch was sown. The plants were beautiful to look at and had a sharp edge. Lemongrass cultivation was stopped once it became unprofitable.

The family also cultivated pepper.

In his early 20s, my father left the village to start cinema production. He asked for his portion of the money from the sale of pepper and areca nuts. Imagine the amount of product they would have had for him to ask for this!

Pepper is grown in between the coconut palms and areca nuts. Other crops were also cultivated—tapioca, yams, colocasia, and so on—for home consumption. Earlier, they were also sold because, by then, there was a marketing process in place.

Rubber cultivation started late in Purapuzha. Babu John remembered:

Rubber cultivation started in the village only in the 1940s. We started cultivation because relatives in neighbouring areas were doing it. Rubber cultivation initially started on land that was fallow or not being cultivated.

After my father's interest in film production waned, we lived in a rented house in Kottayam. He started one of the first rubber industries in Kerala. It was called Vajjo Industries and later New Bharat Industries. This was before Indian Independence. We procured rubber from Kanjirapally and Pala, and it was brought in trailers. The factory was in Nagambadam; the building was pulled down only recently. They used to

export shoe soles to London. It was highly profitable, but due to mismanagement of the business, there was loss. And so, we returned.



Figure 8. Rubber milk spread out on a footpath for drying in one of the houses at Purapuzha. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.



Figure 9. A lone cocoa tree in Babu John's garden in Purapuzha. Cocoa was cultivated by many of the farmers here because Cadbury had a collection centre in the nearby Thodupuzha town. Once the collection centre closed and prices came down, cocoa cultivation was abandoned. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

The Vayattattil family, though a landlord family, seems to have moved with the times, changing the products they cultivate as and when the market shifts.

M.D. Kaimal added another industry to the above-mentioned ones, toddy tapping:

Toddy tapping was done here on the palmyra tree, not the coconut tree. The toddy was sold in shops. The landlords

were given a share of the toddy. It is only in the recent past that the government took over the toddy shops and their licencing, probably around 1950. Arrack was also distilled here illegally.

He said that opium was in use until it was banned in the 20th century. Initially, the Dutch had the monopoly to import it.²⁰ Opium, tobacco, salt, and spirits were the main revenue-generating goods for the local kings, and duty had to be paid to transport them from one kingdom to another, even from Cochin to Travancore.

Historian Raghava Varier mentions that in medieval Kerala paddy was the most widespread cultivation. The chief cash crops were pepper, sugar cane, and coconut.²¹ Other spices like ginger, cloves, cinnamon and so on were also grown and traded in the village markets. Jackfruit, mango, tamarind, elephant yam, brinjal, and varieties of bananas were grown. Throughout Kerala, the kind of cultivation did not vary much according to him.

Water for Agriculture

Purapuzha is situated near Thodupuzha in the midlands of Kerala, and the paddy fields are all situated near waterbodies. Farmers have access to water throughout the year. Hence, irrigation does not require much power consumption, unlike other agricultural lands.

Here, we do not have to water our crops using electricity. There are *varalli* (small canal systems) that divert water from bigger canals. Equipment to transport water was very rare because of the height difference between the fields and the rest of the land. Occasionally, there would be fields on higher land. In such fields, the water was diverted from ponds using mechanical and later electric equipment. Teak from the

²⁰ Pillai, T.K. Velu. *The Travancore State Manual*. Vol. II. Trivandrum: The Government of Travancore, 1940.

forests was brought in and used to make planks. The planks are used to dam the water and divert it to the *varalli*. Palm tree wood was used to line the sides of the canal in the past.²²



Figure 10. Opening to a *varalli* from a bigger canal. The opening is closed with a tile at present. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.



Figure 11. The main canal has slots between the pillars to place planks. The planks would act as a check dam when water has to be diverted to the paddy fields towards the side. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Land Tenures and Leases

The terms of the tenure and the terminology were different in different parts of Kerala in the past. Giving land on various types of leases or tenures was quite common in Kerala. M.D. Kaimal explained:

The Kaimals used to behave like landlords—they would take a bath and go to the temple in the morning. The land was supervised only occasionally

²¹ Varier, M.R. Raghava. *Madhyakalakeralam: Swaroopaneethiyute Charithrapatangal*. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, 2014.

²² Babu John, 2024.

since they had managers, mostly Nairs, to oversee the land. Our land was farmed by Nairs; in neighbouring areas, it was done by Christians.

Pattom, vaaram, otti, nadapupanayam and so on were the different kinds of tenancies. Say, one or two acres were given on *pattom* for cultivation. They give the landlord 25 *para* (1 *para* is approximately 10 kg) of paddy, or a predetermined amount. If there was more produce, the tenant kept it; if there wasn't enough, he would have to make up the difference from somewhere. For *vaaram*, whatever was being cultivated, say yams or tapioca, the tenant had to give one-sixth or one-fourth of the produce to the landlord.

Paddy fields are cultivated 1–3 times a year. In most cases, the land was given for *otti* in places where there was water scarcity and only one set of paddy cultivation could be done. The landlord didn't cultivate the land but entrusted it to someone. If the tenant did well, the land would be given on lease for a long period of time.

The Syrian Catholic family had tenant farmers similar to the Namboothiri and Kaimal families. Most of their tenants belonged to Nair and other Christian communities. Certain fields and gardens were cultivated by the Vyattattil family using lower-caste labourers.

Babu John mentioned another kind of lease:

Some families did partnership (*pankinnu*) farming, and members of the same family would work as labourers. The farmer would get one part of the harvest, and we would get two-thirds of the harvest. Later, it became 50:50. We had to provide the seed and fertilisers. Rice kept aside from the harvest was given as seed. When the harvest was done, there was a compartment in the *ara* specially built for storing the seed. The rice was preserved there.



Figure 12. Retired Headmaster Babu John explaining about land holdings and land use at Purapuzha. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

The fertiliser used then was dung and dried leaves. Every household would have a cowshed and cows, and the dung would come from there. The farmers or someone else would take care of the cattle; normally, people lower in the socio-economic rung, not necessarily Pulaya caste. People in the household would also take care of the cattle if necessary.

At present, Babu John has leased his land to cultivate pineapple.

There was some fallow land, and clearing the land would have required money. My sons are not interested in cultivation, and I do not have the physical strength to cultivate this land myself. So, I leased out four acres for cultivating pineapple. Pineapple has been cultivated in the area for at least 20 years. Vazhakulam, the centre of pineapple cultivation, is quite close, which is how pineapple cultivation started here.



Figure 13. The various-sized openings on the surfaces in this wooden storage room, or *ara*, at one of the Vayattattil houses are where seeds or other precious goods were stored in the past. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

Compensation or Wage

And in Purapuzha, like elsewhere, the labourers were given paddy instead of money as compensation. M.D. Kaimal said:

The agricultural workers were given paddy instead of money. The currency came later. We did have the Travancore *chakram* and the British rupee; they had different values. The workers were paid once a week. The *palla* (the part adjoining the trunk of palm leaves) and coconut, or palm, leaves are spread out on the ground. The paddy was measured onto it using indigenous measures. The worker would take the paddy home and boil, dry, and husk it. They may be given a small quantity of the tubers grown.

During special occasions and festivals, all the tenants brought coconuts, plantains, banana bunches, and

sometimes rice, whatever was being cultivated, to the house of the landlord. It was called *kazhchavakkukka*. In return, they were given clothes—*mundum neriyathum* (two long pieces of cloth, one thinner than the other and used to cover the upper part of the body) and *thorthu* (thin bath towel made of cotton). The clothes were probably woven—they would not be from mills—bought in large quantities and stored at the household for this.



Figure 14. Banana trees at the Bhadrakali Mattapally Mana, Puliyanam, Ernakulam. Bananas were one of the items given and taken as part of tenancy agreements in the past. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Most of the produce would be consumed in a few weeks. Some would be given to people who came to clean the yard and wash the plates. These would be Nairs from financially backward families.

Further, all the workers and neighbours were invited to a feast on Onam:

There would be at least 10 people invited to the feast, including people from the Christian community. People from other communities would be very few. That is because they also celebrated Onam.

This reveals that Onam may not have been as widely celebrated in the past or by all communities.

Caste Relations in the Past

Festivals of the temple and church brought in traders and wares needed for the household:

Knives, spades, carving knives, axes, *cheenachatty* (wok), earthenware, and so on for the household were bought during festivals from people who sold these wares. In those days, there were no steel or aluminium vessels, but only earthenware. Curries were made in *currychatty* made of mud or *kalchatty* made of stone.

A few Jacobites from Puthenkurish would bring woven utensils as headload. These were needed for paddy cultivation—mats, baskets, and so on. They would stay at one of the houses. The people in the house would provide them with food, and allot them space on the veranda for the night. The traders exchanged goods with the householders and then moved on to trade with other families in the village. Even they were given paddy as payment; later, they were given money.²³



Figure 15. M.D. Kaimmal with his wife outside their house in Purapuzha. Image: JANAL Archive, 2024.

²³ M.D. Kaimal, 2024.

²⁴ As in the case of the Namboothiri households, the Syrian Christian family was reluctant to discuss past

practices that are now identified as inhuman and choose to remain anonymous while narrating these. Unlike Namboothiri households, these families were more open about allowing people from other communities entering the household compound; caste pollution rules were not as strict for them. The Kaimal women depended on Nair women as housemaids and nannies.

Nevertheless, in Kaimal and Syrian Catholic households, other castes were not allowed in the kitchen. Though they were the ones that processed paddy into rice and worked in the kitchen gardens, people belonging to the lower, polluting castes were not allowed to touch the plates and other utensils used for cooking. At Vayattattil tharavad, it was the Ezhava women who helped with the grinding, sorting, and so on. But it was only in the 1960s that they were allowed to help with the actual cooking.

Before that, women from financially backward Syrian Christian families were allowed in the kitchen to help with the cooking. Food had to be made for the family members and the labourers in landlord families. There would be a separate cook belonging to the same caste and/or community as the landlord family to do this.

Many mid-level landlords had access to modern education much before the Brahmins. Hence, their awareness of social and caste injustices developed early. That did not mean they could always act against what they perceived as injustice. A Vayattattil descendant mentioned that converted Christians (from the Pulaya caste) were not allowed to help in the kitchen because of the objections of the Ezhava housemaids.²⁴ Pulaya or converted Pulaya labourers began to be admitted to the physical space of the kitchen merely 20–30 years ago.

In colonial times, for *chaathams* (annual death rites), lower castes and other outliers called *puravar* would come en masse to the feast arranged by landlord families. Pits

practices that are now identified as inhuman and choose to remain anonymous while narrating these.

would be dug in the ground and lined with leaves. The entire feast would be served in the pit, one pit for each family. Poverty was rampant, and these feasts were open not just to the agrestic slave castes but also to the homeless and beggars, mentioned another descendant of the Vayattattil family. The outlier families could and would carry home whatever was left of the food served to them.

The tenant farmers belonging to Nair castes were also invited to feasts at the Syrian Catholic household. In Purapuzha, they would partake of snacks like unniyappam, but would not stay for a full meal that included rice. The current family members were not sure why it was so in the past.

Drinking Water and Caste

Even in the 1970s, lower castes were not allowed to draw water from the well belonging to the landlord families. Someone from the family or equivalent to the Nair caste would draw the water needed for the lower caste labourers. However, all these changed by the early 1980s. In 1983, Purapuzha experienced an extreme drought, and all the wells and streams around the original homestead of the Vayattattil family dried up, except the main well near the tharavad. The well was opened to the entire village, irrespective of caste. People were queuing up day and night to bathe and wash. The head of the family dug another well in their field to meet the water demand. Though still open to the public, since every household has access to a government water connection, this well is in disuse at present.

Out Migration

Since Purapuzha is primarily an agricultural village, there are not many jobs available for the educated youth. Moreover, the land reform laws took away large tracts of cultivable land from these landlords and converted them into small holdings. The

Kaimal family land became fragmented even earlier.

Our family holdings became fragmented with the partition and changes to matrilineal laws. There is a partition deed belonging to the family that is 100 years old, which says that 250 acres of land were divided into 28. Each branch would have received about 10 acres or less. If you examine the old *aadharams* (title deed) of the land around here, it would have belonged to the Kaimals. Now, many family members have migrated. Only 4–5 families remain in the village.

A large group migrated to Wayanad because it was possible to buy more land over there by selling the smaller holdings here. Some stay in Vaikkom, Thalayolaparamb, Koothattukulam, etc. for jobs. Many got married to people from those places and settled there.

Additionally, land was not taken care of adequately, and some of the land was taken by the villagers. Now, there are no rich landlords in the family. Everyone just about manages to make a living.²⁵

Both the Kaimals and the Vayattattils have members of the younger generation staying with them, but like most small towns and villages in Kerala, the majority of the extended family is studying or working in the big cities.



Figure 16. This two-storey house built for another ancestor of the Vyattattil family has only migratory workers from other states of India

²⁵ M.D. Kaimal, 2024.

staying there. The original owner died without issue a century ago. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Conclusion

Land reforms, matrilineal laws, division of ancestral property, and modern education abolished the *jati-janmi-naduvazhi* (caste-landlord-chieftain) system to a great extent in Kerala. Mid-level landlords, who held considerable land, were affected by the abolition of their statutory landlord status. This meant they could no longer exert the same level of control over land and tenants. They lost their privileged position and had to adapt to the changing landscape of land ownership. The ones that could adapt and innovate maintained their financial status to some extent.

Labour and migration are issues for mid-level landlords since the younger generation is not interested in agriculture, which was the main source of income in the past. These families depended on labourers who had been working in their fields for generations. Now, most of the labourers are migrant workers. The high labour charges have made cultivation of labour-intensive crops like paddy untenable, and many fields lie fallow in Purapuzha and the larger state of Kerala. In fact, Raghava Varier mentions in his study that paddy fields in Kerala lay between hills and forests. The mix of sandy

soil in cultivable land adversely affects water retention. Additionally, agriculture in Kerala is dependent upon the monsoon. These factors have worked against large-scale paddy cultivation from medieval times.²⁶

Rising input costs, fragmented land holdings, and increasing labour expenses contribute to high production costs for the former landlords in Purapuzha. The lack of decentralised storage and processing facilities further complicates matters, as it did for cocoa farming. Subdivision and fragmentation of land holdings waste time and labour in moving seeds, manure, and implements across plots. Moreover, irrigation becomes challenging in fragmented fields.

Mid-level landlords no longer exist in Kerala; they have moved on to become professionals, medium landholders, or business families.

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²⁶ Varier, 2014

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