



Of Land and Castes Part 1: When Rajas and Landlords Speak

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Summary: *Narratives of upper-caste landowners on land and caste transactions among Malayalis in the past.*

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The high human development indices connected to the state of Kerala have been directly and indirectly connected to the reformation of land tenure rules brought about by the various local rajas and the British. Land tenures are rules about who can use land, for how long, and in what ways. It depends on the agreements people enter into with the government or the local landlord. Land tenure is essential because it helps people feel safe about their land, use it well, and avoid conflicts.

This article explains how land ownership worked differently for different castes through oral narratives of people living in various locations in Kerala—Moozhikulam, Puliyanam, Parakkadavu, Kangarappady (Ernakulam), and Purapuzha (Idukki). Part 1 of the article focuses on the narratives of upper-caste landowners to see how land transactions and caste worked among Malayalis in the past.



Figure 1. The main Poojari of the Parur Raja family, the oldest living male in the family, walking through their grounds. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

Land Tenures

In pre-independent Kerala, land tenure was not the same as in other parts of India. The landlord and the tenant had a complex relationship. According to historians, the landlords owned the land only partially. They entrusted the land to some communities and classes for farming. The

cultivator and the intermediaries at different levels shared the crop. British rule changed traditional relations dramatically.

Even earlier, in medieval Kerala, there were four main kinds of land ownership:¹

Janmam: This was a lifetime right held by Rajas, Namboothiris, temples, and *naduvazhis*. Naduvazhis had armies that they lent to the king in times of war and they did not have to pay taxes to the king in return.

Kanam: This was a proprietorship tenure and was held by Nairs and sub-groups.

Verumpattom: These were temporary tenants with simple lease agreements and were given to Nairs, Ezhavas, Muslims, and Syrian Christians.

Agrarian Slaves: People belonging to Pulaya, Paraya, Cheruma, and other lower castes did the tilling, weeding, etc. They were tied to the land and could in certain instances be bought and sold.²

Table 1. Different kinds of land tenures in medieval Kerala

The janmis owned the land and had two choices: they could cultivate it using their agrarian slaves or lease it to the kanakkar (kanam holders) and verumpattakar (verumpattom holders). The kanakkar were not farmers, but intermediaries who rented the land from the janmis and sub-rented it to the verumpattakar. The verumpattakar were the actual farmers, who had to give a portion of their harvest to the kanakkar. The kanakkar then kept some of the harvest for themselves and gave the rest to the janmis. This portion of the harvest was called *pattom*. The verumpattakar did not do the physical work but hired workers

¹ Based on Prakash, B.A. 'Changes in Agrarian Structure and Land Tenures in Kerala: A Historical Review'. Thiruvananthapuram Economic Studies Society, August 2017. <http://keralaeconomy.com/admin/pdfs/A%20Historical%20Review.pdf>.

² Paul, Vinil. *Adimakeralathinte Adrishyacharithram*. Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2023.

from the lower castes or the agrarian slave communities to do it for them.

The land tenure in Kerala varied based on geography and the ruling authority. In the following section, we look at the origin story of the Namboothiri community, the apex landowning group in Kerala until the last century.

The Arrival of the Namboothiris

The story of Parasurama throwing the axe from Gokarna to Kanyakumari, causing the sea to recede and bringing forth the land of Kerala, is a story every Keralite child hears. It is believed that he brought 64 Brahmins with him and settled them in 64 villages in Kerala. Historians estimate that there were more villages and of the original 64, 32 may have been in Tulunad.³

However, M.D. Kaimal from Purapuzha had a slightly different version of this story to narrate.⁴

The story goes that most priestly clans, warriors, and landlords were killed during the Mahabharata War. The land became like a jungle, with no one to conduct poojas. It was then that Parashuraman brought Brahmins to settle on the land. The native Brahmins in Kerala are those who migrated from Andhra Pradesh. Among them, the Ashtagrahathil were eight families that were elevated to Namboothiripads. The rest were sala Namboothiris. Namboothiris have subsects—Namboothiris, Namboothiripad, Elayathu, Bhattathiri, Potti, etc. The Sabarimala poojaris were brought by Parashuraman—Tazhman Thantris and Tharananelloor Thantris. Among the subsects within the Namboothiris, some marry amongst

themselves; others marry from other sects.

Historian Rajan Gurukkal, however, says that the establishment of Brahman settlements in various regions was influenced by several factors.⁵ Contrary to the legend of Parasurama, which suggests royal initiative, these settlements were primarily the result of organised migration by select Brahman families from previous settlements. The fertile river valleys provided an ideal environment for these settlements. The landscape in these regions was often waterlogged and marshy. The land required extensive labour to be converted into agrarian fields. Agro-pastoral clan families staying along the hilly fringes of the marshy wetlands became their primary workforce. These families engaged in cultivating millet and highland paddy. Additionally, groups specialising in arts and crafts were attached to Brahman lands on a permanent basis through bonded labor arrangements. The high ritual status, scholarship, and charisma of the Brahmins facilitated this.⁶ As a result of these developments, social stratification began to emerge in the region.



Figure 2. The Moozhikulam Temple. An ancient vedic learning centre called Moozhikulam Shala existed near this temple. Social scientists mention that Moozhikulam was one of the original Brahmin settlements in Kerala. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

³ For more information see, Gurukkal, Rajan, and Raghava Varier. *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2020.

⁴ Interview with M.D. Kaimal on 17 January 2023.

⁵ Gurukkal, Rajan. 'The Making and Proliferation of Jati: A Historical Inquiry'. *Studies in History* 31, no. 1 (2015): 30–50.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0257643014558461>.

⁶ Gurukkal and Varier, 2020.

Edgar Thurston, in his *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, mentions about different sub-castes of Brahmins settled in Kerala in the early twentieth century: Embrantiri (Tulu Brahmins/Malabar), Elayad or Ilayatu, Jain Vaisya (Travancore & Cochin), Namboothiri (Malabar), Papini, and Pattar.⁷

The Brahmin settlements in Kerala were temple-centred. The temple committee was synonymous with the village assembly and looked after the property belonging to Brahmins and the temple. The land held by the temple was called Devaswom and those held directly by Brahmins was called Brahmaswom. A code of conduct, Moozhikulam Kacham, followed universally, is believed to have been formulated near the Brahmin settlement of Moozhikulam in medieval times during the rule of the Cheras.⁸

Namboothiris were not just poojaris but trained in the use of arms. Historian Kesavan Veluthat mentions that “it was not only by the ‘art of peace’ but also by ‘force of arms’ that they expanded to this part of the country” (p. 5).⁹ Vasudevan Namboothiri, a retired teacher and Assistant Education Officer, from Puliyanam, said:

Some temples also had a Brahmin army. For example, places called *shala*, like Moozhikulam Shala and Thiruvalla Shala, were places where, together with the shastras, the use of weaponry was also taught. Among the Namboothiris, there was a group that was trained in weaponry called Shastra Namboothiri. When a decision was being taken in the temple, they would

stand outside with their weapons. There would be no opposing voices there. In the early periods, the guarding duty was done by the Namboothiris themselves; the Nair brigade and all came later. First, one had to scare the Nairs into submission before making them into soldiers. The weapons would be varied, like swords, spears, and *gadha*. We did not have any weapon-bearing members, but we do have weapons here (speaking of his mana or extended household).¹⁰

The Brahmin settlements grew and began to amass wealth, influence, tenants, and servants over the centuries. Vasudevan Namboothiri said, “It is said that the Edappally Raja was a *Shanthi mootthu rajavayathu* (The shanti of the temple ascending to the position of raja).”

Academic Pius Malekandathil mentions that from the initial low-lying paddy cultivating zones, due to political developments, the Brahmins moved to the mid-upland terrains of Kerala.¹¹ Thus, Brahmin settlements are currently found in many places, far from the original settlements.



⁷ Edgar, Thurston. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*. Vols 1-7. Madras: Government Press, 1909.

⁸ Veluthat, Kesavan. *Brahman Settlements in Kerala: Historical Studies*. Calicut: Sandhya Publications, 1978. https://www.tamildigitallibrary.in/admin/assets/book/VA_BOK_0008908_Brahman_Settlements_in_Kerala.pdf

⁹ Veluthat 1978.

¹⁰ Interview with Vasudevan Namboothiri at Puliyanam on 16 November 2023.

¹¹ 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.

Figure 3. Paddy fields adjoining the Mattappally Mana in Puliyanam, a low-lying paddy cultivation zone. The fields do not belong to the Namboothiri family at present. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Origin myths of Namboothiri families

Vasudevan Namboothiri belongs to the Bhadrakali Mattappally Mana in Puliyanam, near Moozhikulam. He recounted the origins of the family as told by his ancestors:

It was called Bhadrakali Mattappally because Bhadrakali was pleased or captivated and brought along by an ancestor. Bhadrakali was brought on a palm leaf umbrella. The ancestor said, "I cannot come and see you there, so come with me." And she was brought here. The umbrella carrying the goddess was placed on the ground, and it couldn't be lifted again. And then Bhagavati's presence was felt. This history is similar to that of other places. This same story is said of most places (with Bhagavathi).



Figure 4. The entrance to the Bhadrakali Mattappally Mana at Puliyanam, near Moozhikulam. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Ravi Sarma Raja, a descendant of the Parur Raja, who lives in Parakkadavu at Vadakkepattu Madam on the other side of

Moozhikulam, had a more grounded origin story for their family, connected to the Parur Raja's abdication of the throne.¹²

The entire Parur (now known as North Paravur) taluk belonged to the Parur Raja, who abdicated around 250 years ago. He heard from spies that the Travancore Maharaja was about to attack Parur. If Travancore were to attack us, we would have nothing. The legitimation of kingship was the sacred sword (*udawal*). This sword was taken to the Sri Padmanabha Swamy temple in Travancore and presented to the deity (*thripadiyinmel vachu*). This was equivalent to abdicating one's power, authority, and wealth. As soon as he heard it, the Travancore Raja came there. The Travancore Raja asked him why he did this. The Parur Raja said he did not have the power or capability to protect his kingdom if the Travancore Raja attacked: "If there is a war, people will suffer losses, and there will be damages. Now, there will be no damage or loss. Since I gave everything to God, the people have been saved.

We believe this area must have been under the Parur Raja because we were allotted land here free of tax in those times. A house was built here by the Travancore king himself for our use. It was a thatched building. It does not exist anymore.



¹² Interview with Ravi Sarma Raja at Parakkadavu on 12 February 2024.

Figure 5. The Badrakali Temple, owned by the Parur Raja family at Parakkadavu, was in the process of being rebuilt in 2024. When the original *ettukettu* house was built, the temple was part of the building. It was re-built in the exact location when the original house was dismantled in the past. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

There was a place called Kottapurayidam in North Paravur, where the Parur Raja's palace used to be. This is where the current transport bus stand is located. When the Parur Raja and family relocated to Parakkadavu, another Namboothiri family was already there. Thettadimekkadu illam, as it was called, had previously quarreled with Raja's family and left the place to settle in Chalakudy. Ravi Sarma Raja's current house borders their temple, which is under the ownership of the Devaswom Board.



Figure 6. View of the temple that belonged to Thettadimekkadu Illam from the gates of Ravi Sarma Raja's house. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Landholdings and Expenditures

Surprisingly, Ravi Sarma Raja's family did not inherit or retain ancestral land. Since they had opted for rice and money as pension, the family depended on that for their daily needs until 2–3 generations ago. They had to resort to legal battles post-Indian Independence to continue getting the pension. The quantity of paddy was converted into the current price of rice, and the amount of money (₹91) has been maintained in the payment. After

litigation, it was decided that the eldest living male of the family would receive the entire amount, which he would distribute evenly among the remaining male members. However, since 2010, though the court had ordered that the money be paid, the government has not paid it. The female members of the family are not entitled to the pension since the Namboothiris follow patriliney.

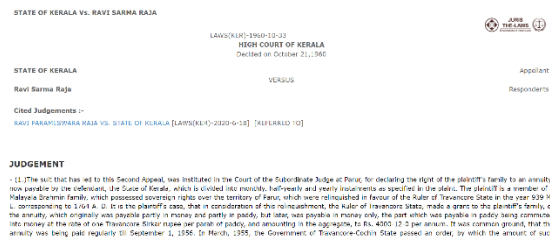


Figure 7. Screenshot of the judgement in the State of Kerala vs. Ravi Sarma Raja. Image: www.the-laws.com

The Parur Raja's family did own land bought from the pension they received over the past century.

Our primary source of income up to 2 to 3 generations ago was the pension. Later, my grandfather bought land with the money the family could save from the pension. He also ran a chitty and used the initial payment of every chitty to buy some more land. The buying began around 150 years ago. In those days, he bought land in other people's names because they felt entitled to receive only a pension. There was faith that the people in whose name the land was bought would not take it for their own use. In the past, when you entrusted someone with something, they would not cheat because it would affect their standing and good name. Later, these lands were taken back; they were made over in our names. The land would have been both garden land and paddy fields. The garden land was

also given on pattom or lease. We gave the paddy fields on lease to other people. We did not cultivate them on our own. They would bring a portion of the crop, usually paddy, to the tharavad. Then, they also bring plantains (*kazhchakola*).

There was a document called a *pattasheet*, which carried the terms and conditions of the lease—the quantity of rice or money, and for Onam, this number of plantain bunches and so on—to be given to us. It is based on the size of the land given on lease. There would be an understanding between the landlord and the tenant, the *pattasheet* would not be registered, and written on stamp paper or plain white paper. If the lease amount was not paid, that same document was used as evidence in court to file a complaint. If the tenant had not been paying the lease for, say, 2 to 3 years, then we would go to court to settle the dues.



Figure 8. The Chalakudy river borders the property where Ravi Sarma Raja lives. The river was earlier used as a means of transport and is important in their rituals. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024

We sold the paddy we received as pattom. People would come here to buy the paddy via the river, and most of them were regular buyers, coming from places as far as Varappuzha. Only the rice needed at home was

processed here. There used to be some 8–10 labourers to do these kinds of work during my childhood. The work was done by those from the Nair caste and not Christians because they had to enter the house.

Ravi Raja said of the paddy field he owned, “I used to give it on pattom and get a share of the crop. I have not cultivated any land myself.” Further:

Some of these lands used to be given on *pakuthivaaram*. *Vaaram* means the land would be cultivated and the expenses borne by the tenant. The harvest would be brought to us here. Half the paddy and the hay would be taken by us, and the other half was taken by the tenant. This is called *pakuthivaaram*. Later, as a kind of compromise, half the land was given to them, and we retained the other half. The actual transaction happened after the government rule was brought into effect, though there was a mutual understanding even prior that this would happen. Only paddy fields were given.

The land around the house had cash crops like nutmeg, mango, and a few other crops. But Ravi Raja said they did not sell the produce; it was mostly used for their own consumption. However, coconut and areca nuts were sold. He introduced his profession as agriculture, but he did not see himself as a farmer because he did not do the actual manual labour.



Figure 9. Nutmegs in a row, lining the path between Raja's house and the family temple. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

The Mattappally family at Puliyanam used to own around 25 acres of land at the time of Vasudevan Namboothiri's grandfather. Sometime in 1400 A.D., "Ten families named Mattappally merged into one. There is a possibility that they accumulated land following this merger." The family previously held land in places like Angamaly, Aluva, and Karukutty. He added:

We don't know the correct extent of the land given for lease, but we've heard it said that 35,000 *para* of rice (1 *para*, approx. 10 kg) used to be received. The land was approximately 25 acres, including the hills, and the compound of the tharavad is 12 acres.

His family, especially his grandfather, had donated and sold land for building a school and hospital in the village.

There was a Christian management school quite close by. Someone said that they would not give admissions to anyone other than Catholics. Someone raised the need for a school for the children in the community so the family gave an empty plot to start classes. A building was constructed, and the

school was started as an LP school in 1947.



Figure 10. Government Higher Secondary School, Puliyanam. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

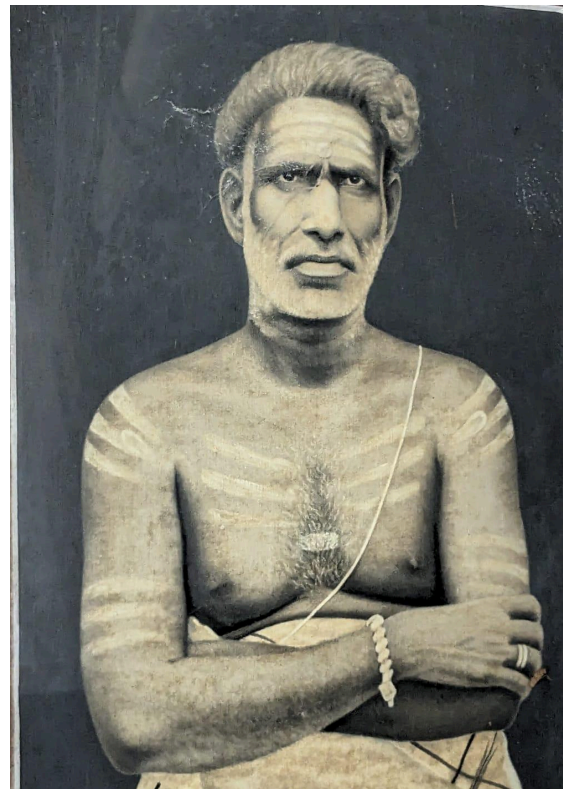


Figure 11. Vasudevan Namboothiri's grandfather donated the land for the Puliyanam government school. Image: Vasudevan Namboothiri, 2023.



Figure 12. The land for the Parakkadavu Family Health Centre was donated by the Bhadrakali Mattappally Mana. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

During the land reforms in the 1970s, he further added:

Not much of the family's land was lost or sold—maybe two or three acres. We sold the paddy fields; the lands we had in places like Angamaly, Aluva, and Karukutty were sold much earlier. The land where the Aluva private bus stand is situated used to be ours.

Since both these Namboothiri families did not cultivate the land themselves, they did not know about aspects of paddy cultivation other than what they had read and heard over the years. Both families faced shortages of funds in the last 100–150 years and had to venture into other fields to generate income. Vasudevan Namboothiri mentioned:

During my father's time, we did not lose any land as such, but we sold some paddy fields. There were many reasons for this. My father had started a few business ventures and incurred losses. It may have been because there was not enough

income from land. He had a tile factory in Angamaly. Then, he sold that and started a company in Ollur in 1962. That year, the State faced a severe power shortage.

Moreover, we didn't have the required business acumen. The business declined, and by 1970, it was a complete loss. Then, whatever income was generated was not enough to cover all the business expenses, including recurring expenses like rent. Large Namboothiri households had other expenses. Land was sold to meet these expenses.

Expanding on the management of finances, Vasudevan Namboothiri said:

When money was needed, it was borrowed from people or institutions. When it couldn't be repaid in money, land was sold. One reason money would have been needed was to pay for wedding expenses. In those days, medical costs were not much. Only the rich spent money on treatment. The rest of the people used local ingredients—oil and *kuzhambu* (ointment)—to treat diseases.

Marriage was one of the most expensive affairs in that period. Among the Namboothiris, there were more women's marriages (because only the oldest male in the family was allowed to marry from within the community until 100 years ago). In the case of men's marriages, bringing the girl here was very important. Women's weddings did not entail that many extravagant functions. On the day before the

wedding, there is a ritual called *ayniunnu*, equivalent to the current Mehndi-Haldi. We don't have any songs, but the mehndi is applied, and a silver ring is placed on the feet of the bride. Then, there is a special lamp called *aayiramthiri* (1000 lamps). In some families, the bride and groom are *uzhiyikkukka* (a blessing done by circling the lamp before a person); some only do it for the bride. The bride and her friends make this lamp the day before the wedding.

Chorrunu, Upanayanam, Samavarthanam, Vivaaham, Pindam (the first ritual done after death), then *Aandumasam*, held one year after death—these six ceremonies held for a man. They are called *aaradiyanthirangal* (six ceremonies). They are held with a fair amount of ceremony. Until my Samavarthanam, everything was celebrated fairly well. At the time of my wedding, we did not have the means to hold these. These are all held in the presence of relatives. Usually, only one child's ceremonies are held unless there is more than one child of the same age in the family. Although one couldn't call these events extravagant, about 200 or 300 people would attend them.



Figure 13. The house belonging to Vasudevan Namboothiri within the larger compound of the Mattappally Mana. The house was built in

1957–58 on land that was exchanged for another land under lease. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

The running of the temples was another massive expenditure on the families. They would need to pay for the workers' salaries, maintenance of the buildings, the rice and other perishable goods used in the poojas, not to mention the various festivals that the community compulsorily celebrates, both now and in the past.

Land Reforms

After independence, the various land reform acts passed in Kerala adversely affected Namboothiri households. Vasudevan Namboothiri's wife, Geetha Namboothiri, mentioned times when specific households, including theirs, did not have enough food to eat because they had to give away all their cultivated land to the tenants.

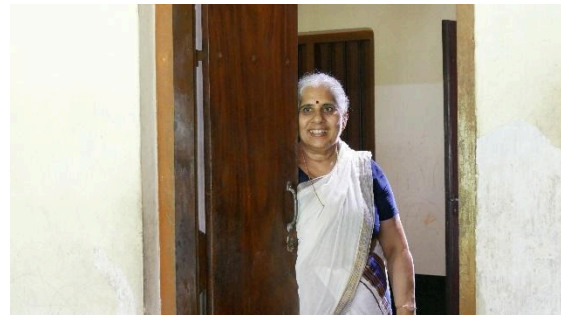


Figure 14. Geetha Namboothiri at their illam in Puliyanam. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

The main features of the Land Reforms Acts that were enacted in Kerala after Independence are

1. limit on the amount of land that one could own,
2. redistribution of excess land to those who had none, and
3. reforms that gave tenant farmers more rights and security.

These acts reduced the size of large estates and gave landless farmers a share of the land. They also gave tenant farmers the right to own the land they worked on and protected them from eviction.

Speaking about the legal aspect of the land reform laws as it affected their household, Vasudevan Namboothiri said:

When the Land Rights Law was passed, the household managers, the Nairs, took care of the legalities. There is still a case going on under the Land Tribunal. When the law was passed, the government took all the land. The idea was that we would receive 12 times the pattom amount in return for the land. The tenant was supposed to buy the land from us. I still receive papers from the tribunal to appear for some hearings, but I usually do not bother to go. The papers come in the name of Vasudevan Namboothiri, which could be either me, my grandfather, or my uncle because we share the same name.



Figure 15. The tharavad building within the Mattappally Mana. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Relationships with Other Castes

Namboothiri households depended on several other castes for their functioning.

Vasudevan Namboothiri hesitated to discuss the Namboothiri household's relationships with people from different castes because he believed many of these relationships were unjust:

Several kinds of workers were at home—household cleaners, those who cleaned the grounds, and those who cared for the children. Belonging to the Nair caste, they had certain rights, and were called *adiyan* in the past. It is a continuation of the old slavery system. Some of these families had numerous members, and the work was divided among them; some would only work for five days, and so on. I should not say this in public—they were given food on leftover leaves. This was the system that was followed at least 60 years ago, and I have seen it. It's possible it was because there was much poverty in those times.

In Raja's household, which was an *ettukettu* (a house with two inner courtyards), Nair women in charge of taking care of the children were allowed to stay in one of the rooms. They had more than enough room to spare.

These women were in charge of processing the milk from the cows owned by the household. Namboothiri households engaged in paddy cultivation kept bulls and buffaloes but avoided keeping goats because they did not consume goat milk. On rare occasions when they needed goat's milk to prepare ayurvedic medicines, they procured it from somewhere else. The Nair

women did not do the cooking, but the Namboothiri women did.



Figure 16. Across the river from Ravi Varma Raja's house, the chapel (*kappela*) of the Moozhikulam St. Mary's Forane Church that faces the river can be seen. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

In Parakkadavu, at Raja's house, Christians were among the field labourers. Moozhikulam (the neighbouring village) had a church that is believed to have been established 1400 years ago. There are Christian families in and around the village. They were not allowed to enter the house, but they could enter its compound.



Figure 17. A migrant labourer sprays the field belonging to Mattapally Mana. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

People belonging to the Pulaya caste worked in the fields as agrestic slaves in Puliyanam. Because of the prevailing practice of *ashudi* (untouchability and pollution related to caste), they were not allowed to enter the household compound. Cooked rice was poured into a hole dug

into the ground and covered with leaves, outside in the fields, for them to eat. "*Thambran ennu villipikkum, pallyill kanji kudipikkum*" was a saying of the Pulayas (You make us call you Tambran, and you give rice to us in palm leaves). The time was such. There's no doubt that they were also killed," said Namboothiri.

He added:

A huge man, probably Nair, was engaged to cut the wood. Wood cutting was a necessity in all the houses at that time. My great-grandfather would walk around the compound early in the morning, collect all the smaller branches and wet wood, and bring it to the kitchen. There was a rule that only these should be used in the kitchen, even though the attic was full of dry wood. It could be miserliness or management of resources.

Palm leaf was used to make different kinds of umbrellas to protect one from the sun and the rain. The Parayas used to bring these umbrellas. The man supplying the umbrella would come to the south side of the property and call us. When he called, someone would take food to him there. Objects supplied by the lower caste had to be purified. Some of them could be purified with the application of sacred water. I do not remember the umbrella being purified.

During Onam, rice, banana, oil, and pappad were given to the tenants. The Pandaran caste, of whom there were many in the village, made the pappad and brought it every day. They would have been given money and rice. We used to buy large amounts of coconut, sesame,

groundnut oils from outside, especially for temple-related rituals. And ghee.

Ravi Raja explained:

In the past, clothes were brought by travelling salesmen like Chettiar. In my childhood, we used to go to places like Aluva and Parur and buy clothes from there. We travelled to Parur either by *vanchi* or boat. Most of the things were available here. Items like knives were brought by the Kollan (smith) and woven baskets by other castes during Onam. Their tribute (*kazhcha*) would be these items. In return, they were given land to hold.

Namboothiri Temples and People

Kings and landlords coveted a position in the temple, mentioned Vasudevan Nampoothiri. It was one way to accumulate wealth.



Figure 18. The sarpakavu at Mattappally Mana. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Mattappally Mana had three temples and a sarpakavu (snake abode), while the Parur Rajas had one temple belonging to the family, two other temples belonging to the Devaswom, and a sarpakavu on their grounds. The family members had been doing the pooja in the Bhagavathi temples,

which belonged to the families as far as they could remember. Other people were in charge of the poojas in the different temples, peppering their compounds.

The Parur Raja's owned two other temples in Parur.

We built Dakshina Mookambika Temple, a Saraswathi temple in North Paravur. One of our ancestors visited the original Mookambika temple once a month or a year. He became too old to go there regularly; he was praying at the temple entrance when, in a dream, the goddess appeared to him and told him that she would go with him. "You will have to build me a temple that follows all the rituals followed here," she said. "My place will be wherever you put down the umbrella you're carrying right now." When he reached Kottapurayidam (the Parur Raja's palace), he thought, "OK, I've reached home." And he put the umbrella down. As he couldn't lift the umbrella from its position, that is where the idol was placed. The original Mookambika Temple has a sanctum sanctorum in the middle and a temple pond around it. Like the Mookambika temple, it also has a sreekovil in the middle and a lotus pond surrounding it. The Peruvaram Temple is located southeast of this temple. The Peruvaram temple had belonged to the family even earlier.

Even now, family members must compulsorily be at the Peruvaram Temple for all ten days of the festival. The festival will not take place if we are not there. We give the *koora* (dress worn) and *pavitram* (a ring made of

a *darbha* or halfa grass) worn by the thantri for the pooja. The ceremonies are done only after the pavitra is worn on the right-hand ring finger. We are considered the temple owners; the thantri only officiates. Giving the koora and pavitram symbolises our empowerment of the thantri to do the ceremonies in our stead. More than one person can go. The Devaswom board is in charge of the board and food for all that attend from our family. Now the amount has been reduced to ₹101 for all 10 days. We do not stay when we go there, but go in the evening during the flag hoisting on the first day and then on subsequent days.

Nivedyam, Ganapathi homam, and a few other poojas are held in Namboothiri households daily. If none of the family members are present to do these for whatever reasons, the temples owned by the households are closed for the duration.

In Namboothiri's house, a structure was built in the past, when his parents were alive, within their courtyard that had the idol of Bhagavathi. This structure was built specially for his mother, so she could do the morning prayers and poojas without stepping out of the house. It is called a *kappela* or *roopakoodu* (identical terms are used for chapels and framed idols within Christian houses or churches). Once Namboothiri's mother passed away, the deity was moved to their tharavad because there was no one left at their home to do the prayers in the morning. However, there is no one staying at the tharavad at present. To continue the rituals, someone from his house would have to go there and do them.



Figure 19. The *roopakoodu* for the deity built within the inner courtyard. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

The Mattappally Mana has seen an outmigration of the younger generation. Most houses have only 2–3 older residents, as the younger ones have left for the bigger cities and towns for jobs. However, at Vadakkepattu Madam, the situation is slightly different since the current generation (except Raja's younger brother, a practising lawyer at the Ernakulam High Court) has taken up modern jobs that allow them to commute from home. Therefore, the place felt lively, with people coming and going for various reasons. Moreover, the Parur Raja family's grounds were not as extensive as that of Mattappally Mana. Though Raja's eldest brother's nephews are responsible for continuing the poojas at the family temple, every male is taught the prayers compulsorily.



Figure 20. One of the many paths within the Mattappally Mana. Due to outmigration, the only people around were migrant labourers during the day time. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Namboothiri's married son is working in a bank and stays with him. However, he plans to take up their traditional thantri job, and Namboothiri expresses his dismay, "He's decided to drop the bank job and become a thantri. I cannot say why he chose that. You can probably call it bad luck." Namboothiri and his wife were both teachers. So, he cannot comprehend why his son would want to take up a traditional job that few in their family want to continue. Contrarily, Raja's son, who runs a business (he has a Pepsi dealership) has taken up Kathakali as a hobby and has his father's approval. He performs nearly 2–3 times a week in various temples north of Kottayam up to Kannur. Pradeep Raja, the son, told us, "In fact, my father used to take me to these performances and developed my interest in the art form. I have a B.Com degree. I studied Kathakali under an *asan* (teacher). My father supports my passion."¹³

Earlier, some of the temple-related jobs were done by people from other castes. Namboothiri explained:

The family took care of all the expenses of the temple. For the *nivedhyam*, rice was needed—taken care of by a Nambisan who used to stay in the eastern part of the land. Nambisan would be given paddy. He would do the processing and give the rice to the temple. Paddy was also Nambisan's salary. In those days, for work related to the temple, compensation was given in the form of cooked rice. The *nivedhyam* was given as compensation to the people who worked there. Especially during festivals, people who came to play the *chenda* were given the *utsava balli*, rice that had been sprinkled with ritualistic

materials, to take home. The household servants were given paddy.



Figure 21. The land surrounding the temple closest to Vasudevan Namboothiri's house was being cleared of weeds after the monsoon in November 2023. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023

Raja added:

Two families belong to the Ambalavasi caste here. Earlier, they used to do jobs connected to the temple. Now, all of them are employed outside. They made the garlands and cleaned the temple premises. The *poojari* himself used to clean up the space inside the *sreekovil* (sanctum sanctorum). The Ambalavasi castes cleaned the area outside.

Edgar Thurston mentions at least fourteen castes that belong to the broad group of Ambalavasi:¹⁴

- Ari (Travancore)
- Bhramani
- Chakkiyars (Recites Puranic scripts/Malabar & Travancore)
- Gurukkal (Priestly caste/Travancore & Malabar)
- Kallattakurup
- Karo Panikkar (Temple servants/Malabar)
- Kshetravasinah Maran or Marayan (Temple servants or drummers/Malabar)
- Nambiyassan (Travancore)

¹³ In conversation with Pradeep Raja on 12 February 2024.

¹⁴ Thurston, 1909.

- Parasaivan (Priest or Ambalavasi)
- Pidarani
- Pisharodi
- Poduval (Cochin & Travancore)
- Tiyadi
- Variyar

It would appear that not all of these castes were found in all the temples, especially those owned by Namboothiri households.

Ponds and Running Water

Running water, like a river or a pond (with its renewable underground source), is usually found near Namboothiri households. Running water was believed to purify the body of all impurities—physical and caste-based (in the past). The women and men in the households take a dip in the pond or river before important rituals. Water from a well is not used for rituals since it is not considered running water, and as Raja playfully said, “One cannot jump into the well to immerse oneself.” Total immersion of the body is necessary to attain ritual purity. The Parur Rajas did not have a pond within the compound due to their proximity to the river, while the Mattappally Mana had three ponds. The household members used the one closest to the house, and the one close to the temple was used for the temple activities.



Figure 22. One of the three ponds in use at Mattappally Mana. A tortoise can be seen basking in the sun on the half-wall leading to the water. Image: JANAL Archives, 2023.

Households with cultivation used a pump to direct water from the nearest pond, canal, or waterbody into smaller man-made channels to water the crops. In fact, the Vadakkepattu Madam (Raja’s household) was the first to get electricity:

We had electricity here in the late 1950s or early ‘60s—the first household to get electricity in the village. The rest of the village did not have electricity at that point. The line was drawn over the river from Moozhikulam and connected to a motor in a shed. Electricity was given here for agriculture, not for lights. Many years later, the house had an electricity connection; when the streetlights and the main connections were given, the first electrical line was finally cut.



Figure 23. Water being pumped into the channels leading to the crops at Parakkadavu. Image: JANAL Archives, 2024.

Conclusion

Modern education played an important part in changing the social relationships and landholding patterns of Namboothiris. Ravi Sarma Raja, a descendant of the Parur Raja, succinctly stated, “We learnt to see humans as humans because of modern education.”

The various land reform laws have caused drastic changes in their social hierarchy positions. But there did not seem to be a harping back to a golden past. Instead,

both Vasudevan Namboothiri and Ravi Sarma Raja explicitly acknowledged that many of the customs followed in the name of caste purity or pollution (*ayitham*) in the past were inhumane and illogical. Both were apologetic about the social differentiation observed by their families in the past. Vasudevan Namboothiri appears to have dealt with this past by distancing himself from it and stopping his inquiry into customs and traditions from the past that he found painful. This stands out starkly because he is a well-read and technologically aware person who keeps up with current information, especially new discoveries in history, through books, newspapers, and YouTube. Ravi Sarma Raja has not made such a drastic cut in the past, possibly because the family has *poojaris*, and the temple has a crucial position in their lives and livelihood.

Since supervisors and other castes did the cultivation of their lands, the current descendants did not have extensive knowledge of farming practices and related details. Though descendants of families with fairly large landholdings, they live in moderate-sized houses. And while they did not express nostalgia for lost power and land, they were all quietly proud and aware of their entitlements. The Parur Raja family, for instance, did not question why they should still receive a pension from the government for a deal that was made at least 250 years ago in a social and political climate that was very different from the current times.

That said, these descendants of rajas and landlords were quite different from what one assumes landlords would be because of their education, semi-urban location, and the socialist ideology that permeated Kerala in the mid-twentieth century, during their formative years.

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