

BOOK REVIEW

Kerala Samskaram Akavum Puravum

by

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A RICHLY RESEARCHED BOOK OF GREAT ORIGINALITY

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By 'culture' people usually mean colourful festivals and fairs. Objective historians have compiled books on Kerala's culture, neatly dividing festivals into Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain etc. Dr. N.M. Nambudhiri's *Kerala Samskaram Akavum Puravum* comes as a whiff of fresh air into this assortment. In a richly researched book running into seven hundred and odd pages and divided into fifteen chapters, Dr. Nambudhiri subjects several issues into critical analysis and interpretation. Displaying great familiarity with a variety of primary and secondary sources, Dr. Nambudhiri makes several observations which are refreshingly original. Written in a unique style of his own, Dr. Nambudhiri's book is an essential read for all those who are interested in Kerala's history and culture.

What is noteworthy in Dr. Nambudhiri's work is that he takes a trans cultural perspective. This enables him to handle religious practices, political authority and the working of marketing networks syncretically. Thus culture is not defined as a fixed entity but as a socially active process. Abandoning a strictly chronological approach, the author adopts a thematic sequence to his study, putting ordinary human beings in the centre stage. Calling for a 'non traditionalist' approach, Dr. Nambudhiri emphasises the need to use hitherto little used sources. Among these he gives priority to village settlement accounts and place names. Such sources would give evidences of a once flourishing market, a settlement site of an occupancy group, a river which has changed its course or has been 'lost', an ecosystem, a centre of cottage industries and such other things. A nontraditional approach would focus on micro studies, on local ('urukal') history and would be based on a chronology of four phases: land, its types, its resources, its settlements and growth of urbanisation. A place name like Puthiyangadi (literally New Market) would lead us to several other questions like: Did an old market exist? If so why and how did it decline? How did a new market arise? Place names 'Kari' give evidences of 'groups' settlements, their density and structure. Dr. Nambudhiri notes that references in the 10th Century A.D. to place names ending in 'Kari' and 'Kadu' declines in the 12 Century while place names ending in 'Nadu' and 'Kottam' increases. This shows that the process of clearing forests and bringing more land under cultivation was strong during this period. At the same time pursuing micro studies has some pit falls one of which is the tendency to exaggerate local issues and miss the larger ones. Thus Dr. Nambudhiri gleans out the decline of the Roman trade from numerous sources but makes no mention of the decline of the Roman empire itself. There are also instances of Dr.

Nambudhiri's intense study acting as a necessary corrective. His criticism of

historians who have described what actually were elitist opposition to colonial powers as 'popular uprisings' (Pages 579 and 591) is one such. There was nothing 'popular' about these uprisings which were led by landlords and people of authority who had lost their powers and privileges.

In abandoning a strictly chronological approach and adopting a thematic one, Dr. Nambudhiri sometimes misses the historical context in which an event has taken place or a social custom has come into practice. His efforts to link 'Vadakkirickal' with political power is one such. 'Pattini' (p. xiii) was a feudal practice. 'Nilavili' (nizhalvili) could be compared to 'hue' and cry' which was prevalent in Europe.

Dr. Nambudhiri's emphasis on trade is manifested throughout the study. Of particular interest is his observation that 'Mamankam' was actually a big fair which was intended to mobilise the internal market. This is in sharp contrast to the romanticised popular versions of 'Mamankam' as a feud between chivalrous nobles locked in mortal combat. At the same time, Dr. Nambudhiri misses the ideological function the festival as a whole performed.

Another instance of the primacy given to trade is his explanation of the rise of Calicut port. The Samuthiri was able to stabilise his rule only by promoting trading communities and through it, trade itself (p. 274). But the author is aware of the importance of rice cultivation areas to the overall economy. Thus he traces parallels between the Samuthiri's eagerness to retain the 'rice bowl Valluvanad' and Marthanda Varma's control of the rice bowl Nanjinad "which supplied the food for the protection of Kollam port" (p. 324).

Emphasis on trade comes out also through the numerous references to fortified enclosures, small and big towns and cities (Nagaram), the ports, the power structure in city complexes (Nagara misram) etc. Important too is the difference the author strives to highlight between areas of rice cultivation and areas of cash crop cultivation. It is reasonable to assume that cash crops like pepper and cardamom were grown as garden crops and were not wild growths, resulting from monsoonal rains and forest cover. The resources were the products of human labour and not the gifts of nature and these facilitated the growth of a well developed market system. That people were aware of the changes in the structures of cultivation according to the pattern of the soil is clear from the place names and from the numerous references to such variegated regions in inscriptions and literary works. Dr. Nambudhiri brings these out with great clarity.

Though very much aware of change, Dr. Nambudhiri fails to give a rounded picture of change or transition. This is primarily due to an unwillingness to conceptualise change. Boggled down by his own empiricism, the author seldom goes beyond the description, sometimes elaborate, of change. Thus he notes that growth occurred centring round city (Nagaram), market, port and temple and that such a growth was a means of structuring Swarupam rule (p. 317). Such a growth also brought with it, changes in administration. But the explanations stop here and are not carried beyond

this point. Sometimes the author falls back on 'impact-response' explanations. Thus the Mysorean invasions have been credited with bringing out fundamental changes in the polity and society of Kerala (ps. ixxxii, cxi). Even if this undue emphasis on the Mysorean invasion as the 'cause' for disruption of traditional social and economic structure is accepted, it would be wrong to extend it to Cochin and Travancore areas. On another occasion too the author exaggerates the impact of the Chola-Cheta wars (ps. 247, 308). This is surprising as the author gives evidence of internal crisis and causes for the decline of 'central authority.' (pp. 256-7) prior to and during the wars .

Unlike Mysorean conquerors, colonial powers are not credited with having brought about fundamental changes in the society. While there are not indicators of colonialism having effected a break, there are pointers to continuities between the pre-colonial and colonial periods. Though mildly critical of modern economic historians' treatment of colonialism, Dr, Nambudhiri fails to note the States' transition to a colonial economy (p. 650) when Kerala (Malabar directly and Travancore and Cochin indirectly) became a typical colony, of course with regional differences. The author resorts to a 'split personality-duality of thinking' explanation of the social concerns of late 19 century and early 20 century Kerala. These could also be seen. as cultural expressions of emerging nationalism (p. 687). That Moidu Moulavi, a nationalist Muslim, conducted marriage ceremonies in Malayalam was no 'deviation'; it was an expression of cultural nationalism. And speaking of nationalism, it would be wrong to club 'Mitavadi' Krishnan, who was an ardent British loyalist and Sahodaran Ayyappan together and credit them with having raised a unifying and not a divisive voice (p. 700). In North Malabar, more than anybody else, it was Vagbhatananda who prepared the intellectual ground for the later transition to socialism.

Dr. Nambudhiri uses the term 'feudalism' many times in his study but is reluctant to elaborate it as a concept. As a consequence he fails to explain the strength and weakness of medieval rajas. The growth of new landlords in the pre-colonial period is noted (pp.335-45) but its effect in weakening 'central authority' is not. Evidences of weak base for 'feudalism' and of an emerging 'crisis' are aplenty, though Dr. Nambudhiri refuses (p. 656) to see them as feudal crisis. Thus there are many descriptions of barter type exchange, of chieftains reducing prices of commodities to undercut competition (ps. 500-1, 563-4) and of indigenous articles - some of them artisanal products - fetching low prices from foreign merchants. There are also references to kings taking loans from their own Karyasthans (Managers) and from foreign firms and not being able to repay them (ps. 482-563). It is not enough to describe these as instances of the weakening of the authority of the rajas. The author should have gone deeper into the situation to see whether these were the responses of a society which was no longer dynamic; whether cultural and social reasons prevented chieftains from generating more resources. Instead, the author simply condemns the efforts of the chieftains as 'suicidal' (p. 563). More than anything else a weak resource base made it impossible for the chieftains either to raise an efficient navy, buy better artillery or modernise the army. The chieftains simply lacked the

resources for such an effort. It would be wrong to locate the absence of a strong centralised army in the disbursed settlement pattern of Kerala. The situation was indeed complex, difficult to understand and easier to caricature, Kunjan Nambiar style. However Dr. Nambudhiri's ability to place literary works in the social context of their origin has to be appreciated.

Some minor **points:** In such a thorough study one is surprised to note seemingly casual comments on matters relating to religion. For example, it would be wrong to describe Marthanda Varma's *Trippadidanam* as marking the 'birth of a Hindu Raj' (p. 606). *Trzppadidanam* was an important means of gaining legitimacy as Marthanda Varma did not have an uncontested claim to the throne. Another was the relation between colonialism and Christianity. Colonialism promoted Christianity for its own benefits and missionaries often acted as agents of colonialism. In Malabar, riots were not 'caused' by religion. A section of the Muslims, many of whom were adversely affected by British rule, rose in revolt. But rising in revolt was just one of the responses to a changing / changed situation over which they had no control.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the book remains fascinating, one of the best among a number of studies on Kerala history and culture in recent times. The documentation is rich and Dr. Nambudhiri's study marks a departure from established historical traditions'. The book is enriched by several charts and maps. The complexity of the task undertaken by Dr. Nambudhiri and his special style which reflects the variegated sources consulted make the book not an easy one to read. However it is a book of great originality and scholarship, full of insights and suggestions for detailed enquiry ('Aattu' and Sapindi. - p. L' { - for example) and unhesitatingly recommended.

The Calicut University Central Co-operative Stores have done a wonderful job in bringing out the book without much printing mistakes and keeping the price at Rs. 200/- for a book of seven hundred and odd pages.