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The Functions of Hindu Social Reformers—With Special Reference to Kerala

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1. The All-India Setting

Modern India's most profound revolution has been directed by its social reformers, a loose fraternity of philosophers and organizers with origins in the early nineteenth century and branches in all parts of the land. Initially by self-recruitment, and then by community sponsorship, the social reform movements spread from such centres of religious and educational activity as Bombay and Calcutta, Nagercoil and Trivandrum. The India-wide fraternal bond among reformers was their commitment to individual and collective freedom of opportunity, sometimes defined as personal fulfilment (e.g., female education), often as upward caste mobility (e.g., Ilava advancement in Kerala), and also as national progress (which would include, e.g., ending untouchability). Social changes had to precede the attainment of any of these ends, and when those changes turned on altered personal laws or customs or transformed relations among castes or communities they were called social reforms. Welfare programmes, labour legislation, and other causes which did not affect traditional or religion-enforced usages and which might be called social reforms in other countries fall outside of that category in India.

The earliest social reform movements of the modern variety stemmed out of religious reform bodies, such as the Brahmo, Prarthana, and Arya Samajs—but, functionally, we should include missionary bodies as well, which in Kerala were the first agencies of modern social reform. As religious movements they could appeal, theoretically, to anybody, and some of them did—the Arya Samaj in the northern plains is the best known case, and Narayana Guru's movement is a less known example in Kerala.

Since Rammohan Roy's time some reformers were convinced that religious spirit had to accompany thorough transformations in belief and behaviour. In the twentieth century Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghose, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, and their many followers held up spiritual revitalization as the root of India's needs. From the brief survey that follows, such a view seems hard to sustain as a general rule. The Ilavas, indeed, were inspired by Sri Narayana Guru's religious leadership, and he in turn was spiritually

nourished by Chattampi Swamikal; all untouchables gained strength from Gandhi's religion-based morality. But Ilavas and other low and outcastes were discontented and on the way up before those esteemed guides took up their causes. And the Nayars and hundreds of other castes and communities organized themselves under non-religious leadership and gained their ends through legal means and careful secular organizations alone.

In any case, religions follow closely the social order in India, and religious reform naturally draws together people of common caste and region. A continent-wide organized transformation of Hinduism or Islam would be as miraculous as agreement on a single spoken language for the entire country.

Non-religious social reform movements were well underway among English-educated urban men and some women by the mid-nineteenth century in Bengal and Bombay Presidencies. The changes that they advocated were based on utilitarian grounds or on "moral laws" such as the idea of "natural justice" as understood in the West. Members of voluntary social reform bodies in all parts of the country moved naturally towards political reformist activities, and social reformers were among the founders of the Indian National Congress in 1885. Two years later the National Social Conference was organized under the leadership of Mahadev Govind Ranade, Raghunatha Rao, and others who believed that social reform must precede or at least accompany political reform.[1] Public organizations proliferated during the latter part of the nineteenth and into the present century along with the spreading interest in social betterment, and it is not unusual to come across records of literary societies, alumni associations and political groups which urged social changes.

But by the 1890s the all-India social reform movement, reflected in the proceedings of the National Social Conference, had lost most of its drive for centrally-ordained amendments in Hindu personal law, which had been the sweeping and hence largely ineffective approach of the major reformers. Of the nationally recognized reformers of the latter half of the century—such as Karsondas Mulji, Jotiba Phule, Kashinath Telang, Behramji Malabari, Viresalingam Pantulu, Mahadev Ranade—some had died and the others realized that the era of social advancement through legislation affecting all Hindu communities had reached an end. The last great piece of social legislation of the reform era, the Age of Consent Act of 1891, exposed the unpopularity of using alien laws to try to transform the whole Hindu society and at the same time raised the prestige of those actively opposing social reform through Central legislation. Not until the Sarda Act was passed in 1929 raising the marriage ages to fourteen and eighteen was government-sponsored reform at the Centre a popular cause, by which time Indians were rapidly replacing the

[1]For details of the national social reform movement see Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton University Press, 1964, and Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1965.

British in enacting and enforcing the laws.

Since the turn of the century caste associations have superceded general religious and social reform movements and the great national personal law reform crusades and have carried the main weight of the Hindu social reform movement. Created to enhance the social prestige and economic welfare of certain castes all caste associations of which I am aware instructed their members in reforms of personal behaviour, marriage practices, religious or secular rituals, and urged and actively arranged educational opportunities for the community. However varied were the bundles of reforms prescribed for different groups they could stand very well alongside any general social reform association's programme. Indeed, although the National Social Conference, in its clearinghouse capacity, deplored the restrictiveness of reforms under caste auspices the Conference President, Ranade, observed in 1897 that caste conferences were carrying on most of the work of the national body.[2] Caste reformers might have taken Ranade's mixed compliment as condescending, because the National Social Conference by then was floating on the tide of the practical transformations in caste practices all across India, not creating any new waves on its own. The *Indian Social Reformer* poked fun at the national body in 1899: "The [National Social] Conference has noted with pleasure many little things that were done during the year. Changes for the better are taking place, and they will take place whether the Conference notes them with pleasure or no."[3]

Because of the urgency of the caste associations to improve the immediate condition of their communities by any means available, caste reformers rarely paid attention to the debates at the all-India level over means and ends. Such controversies as whether social reform should or should not precede political reform, whether or not reformers should enlist the administrative support of the government, whether modifications in ritual behaviour could or could not find some Shastric sanction appeared too esoteric to interfere with the overcoming of caste bans on foreign travel, adopting new laws for marriage and divorce, fighting a census commissioner's varna designation, or breaking the barrier to low caste admission to temples. If new laws might serve caste needs, it would seem irrelevant that the legislature and courts bore British seals of authority. If political campaigning could move caste representatives closer to the levels of power, then the budget and personnel of a caste association would be shifted from social to political work. The examination of caste-sponsored social reforms thus produces a refreshing sense of immediacy, of grass-roots action. One is tempted to conclude that modern India's social changes have been largely group efforts—communities, not individuals, adapting *en masse* to changed economic and administrative conditions; furthermore,

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 281.
[3] *Indian Social Reformer*, 5 February 1899, p. 176.

that caste reform, in Kerala and elsewhere, whether or not accompanied by religious reform, did not proceed according to a single formula. A typology of objectives of caste associations may be supportable, but not a typology of means.

2. KERALA'S UNIQUENESS AND THE EARLIEST REFORM

Unlike social reform in the British Indian provinces the movement began in nineteenth century Kerala among the low castes. The leaders of the society—Nambudiri Brahmins, ruling Kshatriyas, Nayars—failed to see Kerala as a "land of depravity" (Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's description of mid-nineteenth century Bengal) or themselves as "deformed . . . bent in a hundred places" (Mahadev Govind Ranade's charge against all Indians in 1897),[4] moral stances that incited the social reform movement elsewhere. Among the educated leaders of southern Kerala there was not the helplessness and guilt which comes from witnessing great calamities like famine, war, and social disruption which one notices in the writings of other Indian reformers. Kerala was a secure land for the most part, and a sense of stability, even timelessness, militated against the anxieties that in other parts of India resulted in destructive rebellion—and also creative analysis of social and religious institutions. The absence in nineteenth century Kerala of strong commentary from Brahmins, the most intellectually advanced communities in British India, was another uniqueness. The Nambudiris held back from modern education and followed their orthodox style of life cut off in their great estates.

At the early stages of the all-Indian social reform movements the "evils" of society, mostly inflicted upon women—sati, the non-remarriage of young widows, purdah, early marriage, and lack of education—engaged the reformers' attention, and crusades for laws to protect (mostly high caste) women and the founding of institutions to support and educate them defined the practical reform programmes.[5] In Kerala those women's causes never caught on, for the obvious reason that society there had been impregnated with mother-right cultural norms and thus women—except in Brahmanic Nambudiri and some Muslim households—were already liberated.[6]

[4]Vidyasagar, *Marriage of Hindu Widows*, Calcutta, 1856, p. 94; Ranade, *Miscellaneous Writings*, Bombay, 1915, p. 196.

[5]The Indian, especially Bengali, reformers' preoccupation with women reflected the central position of the female, as human being, goddess, and philosophical principle, in Indian culture See Ashis Nandy, "Woman Versus Womanliness in India," *The Psychoanalytical Review*, Vol. 63, No. 2, 1976, pp. 310-12; Charles H. Heimsath, "Shakti, The Female Component in Indian Culture," *Illustrated Weekly of India*, June-July 1972.

[6]The literature on the mother-right tradition in Kerala and elsewhere in India is vast. One citation might stimulate someone's quest: Umar Rolf von Ehrenfels, *Mother Right in India*, Hyderabad, Oxford University Press, 1941. von Ehrenfels and others have described the dominance of women in domestic life in matrilineal societies such as Kerala's.

They were dominant figures in some castes and in all castes were given respect, if only for their economic value. Education and literacy among high caste women and Christians was not a rarity.[7] Seven per cent of Nayar females was recorded as literate in 1891,[8] though a missionary believed that most of them could read and write.[9] The matrilineal Nayars, the dominant caste, often educated their girls, if only to give them skills to help manage family holdings.[10] Sati, female infanticide, and the disfigurement of widows were never mentioned in foreign and local accounts of Kerala, and one may assume that these customs, which so enraged Indian social reformers, failed to emerge from the mother-right culture of Kerala. Widow remarriage, a highly charged issue throughout India, caused no ripples either, because most low caste and Nayar widows freely remarried, as did high castes such as Ambalavasis.[11] Nambudiris did not, but because they tended to be mature

[7]V. Nagam Aiya, *Report on the Census of Travancore*, 1891, Trivandrum, 1892, p. 485; see also *Report on the Census of Travancore*, 1875, p. 248.

[8]Without indicating what age group was measured; Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.*, p. 508. Because Kerala literacy rates are the highest in India for men and women an observer is curious to know when this trend began. A literacy census was taken in 1901, but because children in school were counted as literates, whereas many of them would forget their skills later, more accurate standards were applied by the Census Commissioner, K. Kunjan Pillai, in 1931. The results: 408 males and 168 females per 1,000 people over seven years old, or 289 persons per 1,000, were recorded as literate. Pillai, *Census of India, 1931: Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1932, p. 283.

[9]Rev. Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and Its People*, London, 1871, p. 38, describing the matrilineal customs of Nayars concluded: "These peculiar usages of the Nairs naturally give to their females considerable liberty of choice and action."

[10]The earliest Travancore census estimated that 80 per cent of educated women were native Christians and Nayars, the latter having the largest number. *Report on the Census of Travancore, 1875*, p. 248. When occupational statistics were collected in the 20th century there was confirmation of the importance of Keralan women as job holders. Of a total female population in Travancore of 2,530,900 in 1931, almost one-half (1,128,770) was returned as wage-earners or working dependents, of whom 7,265 had jobs in "public administration and liberal arts." *Census of India, 1931: Travancore*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. I, p. 170.

[11]*Report on the Census of Travancore 1891*, p. 748. Later figures bear this out: *The Census of India, 1921: Travancore*, Pt. I, Trivandrum, 1922, reported widows under age 15 in Travancore: 1 in 1,000; in all India: 13 in 1,000 (p. 70). *The Census of India, 1931: Travancore*, Pt. I, provided these figures (p. 174) for:

	widowers	*widows* (per 1000)
all India 1921	64	175
Travancore 1931	29	119
England/Wales	35	82
U.S.A.	33	76

The Commissioner noted (p. 185) that widow remarriage was not prohibited among Nayars, Ilavas, and large sections of Vallals who were mother-right – these castes being the bulk of Hindus.

when married widowhood could not claim major attention among their reformers. Infant marriages among all communities were rare, perhaps for two reasons: (1) the relatively high status of a female eliminated much of the competitive pressure to have girls married as early as possible; (2) the loose marital tie and occasional polygamy and polyandry in matrilineal households lessened if not eliminated the value of female virginity, one of the main reasons for pre-puberty marriages in India.[12]

Kerala's social "evil" was caste. Its social reform movements skipped the stage of individualistic and usually female-oriented reform and early in the nineteenth century confronted inequities among Hindu castes, which as everyone knows were more egregious in Kerala than anywhere else in India. The central personages of the movement were not high caste intellectuals inspired by the European Enlightenment but low caste Shenars (or Nadars), Ilavas, and later Pulayas and Pariyas and members of some smaller caste groups. Through the middle of the century their identity remains unrecorded; their sponsors were European missionaries.

The well-known breast-scarf controversy,[13] which resulted in government protection to Shenar women wishing to wear a garment similar to that of upper caste women, initiated the social reform movement in Kerala, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Missionaries encouraged, if they did not incite, the controversy, and their influence on the government was crucial to its outcome. In Travancore the scarf episode pointed in the direction that social reform proceeded in the remainder of the century and into the next. Reforms of caste practices or relations among castes (usually sponsored by caste associations rather than by missionaries) would be aimed at governmental sanction of enforcement of innovations as well as voluntary compliance. Even when reformers argued their causes on moral or religious grounds they looked to the *sircar* for ultimate enforcement of major reforms. The fact that in Travancore the ruler was the authentic guardian of the laws and customs of the people and symbolically led religious ceremonies of the majority (Hindu) community assured minimal chance that the state's backing of reforms would give much offence. A nice conjunction of a socially liberalizing ruler, an ambitious community (Christians) backed by powerful outsiders, and an administrative-legal system not dedicated entirely to preserving the *status quo* described the outward circumstances when social reforms prospered in Travancore. The ruler's attitude usually was crucial.

[12]In all India about 400 out of every 1,000 females aged 10-15 were married in 1921. In Travancore the number was 80. *Census of India, 1931, op. cit.*, p. 187.

[13]Two recent excellent accounts of this controversy permit omission of the details here: Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., "The Breast-Cloth Controversy: Caste Consciousness and Social Change in Southern Travancore," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. V, 2, June 1968; Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance*, N.Y., Holmes and Meier, 1976, pp. 57-61, 85-86.

3. The Inspirations for Social Reform

The inner or psychological environment for successful reform is much more difficult to identify. On that was based the voluntary compliance with reform ideas without which no movement prospered. Many Keralans with whom I discussed social reform attribute its force in their lives to the teachings of Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928). His name enters conversations with the frequency one encounters in Bengal of allusions to Swami Vivekananda. The brilliant interpreter of social change, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, considers "the saintly leader of the Ezhavas [as] . . . the first inspirer and organizer of the mass democratic movement of the cultivating and landless peasant masses of Kerala." Namboodiripad takes social reform as an early stage of the national political movement and identifies the followers of Narayana Guru as "founders of the nationalist movement in Kerala."[14] Of course the Guru's appeal was religious, while many of Kerala's reform movements lacked formal religious premises. But the moral and intellectual receptivity of people to the reformers' messages increased with their exposure to the *darshan* and to the writings and simply to the accounts and legends of the great Kerala Guru.

Like Swami Dayananda Saraswati in north India at approximately the same time, Narayana Guru scourged the temples of the low castes calling them places of filth and superstition. (Low castes could not enter the temples managed by Brahmins.) He urged temple priests to abjure their folk practices and adopt "purified," by which he meant Brahmanic, rituals. Outraged by any cruelty he persuaded them to ban animal sacrifices; he crusaded against liquor consumption, also associated with religious rites. As Narayana Guru toured about the country visiting shrines and learning from pundits and *sanyasins*, in the ancient manner, he was a social reformer in the same sense that other spiritual seekers in India have often rejected the busy worldly round of meaningless activity and have drawn people toward a simpler statement of their needs and of their relations with others. He went further than most reformers by totally rejecting caste and varna: all men, he said, are of the same caste (from his *Jati Mimamsa*, 1914).

Social reform for the masses in Kerala, and in India, could not banish caste, any more than religious reform could produce a nation of *sanyasins*. Improvements in the wretched position of low castes, thus, meant *elevation* within the system, not elimination of all caste distinctions or an opting out of the system. (Christians observed caste, too.) Altered personal laws or customs prepared a community for its rise in social rank. In attempting such an elevation in their status the leadership of the Ilava community found in Narayana Guru the inspiration that was necessary to give the caste cohesion

[14]Namboodiripad, *Kerala: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Calcutta, National Book Agency, 2nd edn., 1968, p. 120, and an interview in Trivandrum on April 1968.

and boldness. The Guru, in turn, relinquished his itinerant habits and his personal style of preaching and comforting people, and quite literally in the late 1880s became institutionalized.

Shortly thereafter his strong worldly message appealed to a young Ilava writer, Kumaran Asan (1873-1924) who joined the Guru in 1892 and became his indispensable friend and agent. Kumaran Asan had an extraordinary talent for poetry and is today regarded as a founder of Malayalam literature.[15] His biting social commentaries have never been surpassed in Malayalam, according to the critics, and helped present the social reform movement as a force in human affairs that could not be turned aside. Other powerful writers, most of them of high caste backgrounds, helped produce the effect of an inevitable breach in the accustomed ways of life, an opening out of opportunities for the oppressed majority of the population.[16] The literary plots and images were searing reminders of the ugliness and torment produced by Kerala's caste system: "And how many of the finest men are aborted from thy womb, my Mother Kerala, because of caste's bloodthirsty ways !"[17] The inspiring literary propaganda for the new age was overwhelming.

In comparison to the degraded position of the *avarna* communities the Nayars had reasons to be satisfied with their position in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. They had traditionally dominated public life in Kerala and continued to occupy a majority of government jobs. But, as Jeffrey has shown, the "decline of Nayar dominance" was already in evidence by the 1880s. The educated Nayars' distress about their family system equalled their anxiety about losing their dominance in public affairs. The new economic environment had made obsolete many features of the *tarwad* (the extended family and its often vast living establishment), notably its claims to the earning of all of its members, and the new Victorian moral standards learned in modern schools and colleges challenged the very basis of a matrilineal family structure. Publicizing the out-of-date features of the *tarwad* system and inspiring its participants to rebel against them was the novelist, Oyyarath Chandu Menon (1847-1899), whose effect on his community resembled Kumaran Asan's on the Ilavas.

Menon's first novel, *Indulekha* (1889), held up in public the life of a Nayar *tarwad.* In Menon's portrayal it was a family structure based on inequalities —Nambudiris' rights over the Nayar women, elders' rights over younger people, men over women, and in special highlight the power of the *karnavn*

[15]See Krishna Chaitanya, *A History of Malayalam Literature,* New Delhi, Orient Longmans, pp. 212-28, for a critical survey of Asan's work.

[16]See Verghese Ittiavira, *Social Novels in Malayalam,* Bangalore, Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1968.

[17]Freely t anslated from Asan's *Duravastha* (1923); see another translation in P.K. Parameswaran Nair, *History of Malayalam Literature,* p. 192.

(eldest male member of a *tarwad*) over everyone.[18] *Indulekha* reached its audience at a timely period in Nayar social history, when the matrilineal family was under attack both in public utterances and in private revolts of *tarwad* members. Nayars who had received modern education began to view their matrilineal households as outsiders saw them, that is, as a system based on loose sexual relations of the women of the family with Nambudiri or Nayar visiting consorts—Nayar men lived in their sisters' *tarwads*, not in their wives', and Nambudiris of course did not join Nayar *tarwads* but took Nayar women somewhat as concubines.

Chandu Menon himself wanted no wholesale wrecking of his community's marriage customs. *Indulekha* and Menon's second novel, *Sarada* (1892), however, were inspirations for reforms which until their publication had been matters mostly of discussion among community leaders or unsympathetic probings by outsiders.

4. Identifying the Issues and Organizing for Nayar Reforms

Social reformers and their literary allies guided a community's general dissatisfaction with its customs towards specific alterations in them which seemed feasible at a given time. The Nayar community's vexation over the *tarwad* system had not jelled into specific proposals to reform it—much disagreement surrounded any analysis that was put forth—until the early 1890s, when a few English educated Nayars in Madras drew attention to the looseness of the marital bond in their families. They agreed that the *sambandham* ("connection" or "union" which formally linked Nayar women with their consorts) should approximate the marital union in patrilineal societies, in particular Western secular marriages (as opposed to the sacramental marriages of Brahmins in Kerala). Such a reform would not have severely shaken the *tarwads*, but reformers thought that it could be a first step in the direction of encouraging nuclear family units among Nayars, which were regarded as more economically efficient than the *tarwads* and also morally superior to a matrilineal family structure.

In close touch with the intellectual life of Madras, Nayar social reformers found their inspiration in the India-wide endeavours to transform Hindu personal laws through legislation. G.P. Pillai (1861-1903), a Nayar, concentrated his forceful writing on the ills of the Ilavas and Pariyas of Travancore and was instrumental in having Ilavas' grievances added to those of Nayars in the Malayali Memorial of 1891. Pillai was a founding member of

[18] A good study of *Indulekha* appears in T.C. Sankara Menon's short biography, *Chandu Menon*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1974. The novel's English translation by W. Dumerque appeared first in Madras in 1890; a new edition, Calcutta, Mathrubhumi, 1965. The Malayalam version was reprinted 60 times.

the Madras Social Conference (1892) and represented Madras at the National Social Conference in 1895, where he spoke on the mistreatment of Ilavas. A prominent member of the National Congress, he edited the *Madras Standard*, which became a strong proponent of social reform.[19]

C. Sankaran Nair, a leading Madras lawyer, Congressman, High Court Judge, and member of the Madras Legislative Council, was also active in the National Social Conference, assumed its presidency in 1908, and believed unconditionally in the superiority of European to Indian society. His articles on social reform place him squarely in the all-India social reform tradition, turn-of-the-century vintage. In 1890 he inroduced a bill in the Madras Legislature to legalize Nayar marriage practices by registering *sambandhams* with the government, thus resolving the moral issue of the supposedly unregulated Nayar sexual unions and at the same time opening the way for legal enforcement of a father's desire to pass on his self-acquired property to his wife and children. The Madras Government sympathetically set up a Commission to investigate the merits of the bill, with Sankaran Nair and O. Chandu Menon among others as members. After collecting evidence in Kerala the Commission issued a report in 1891 (O. Chandu Menon abstained from signing) the reading of which today reveals the classic nineteenth century social reformist views on Indian society—partly primitive, partly degenerate—and the preferred methods of changing it—partly moral courage by Indians and partly British legal sanctions.

The Report's constant references to the "unchastity" of Nayar women predictably caused sullen offence among many Nayars and could not but increase their humiliation at being out of step with the prevailing moral ideology.[20] The resulting Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, which permitted registration of *sambandhams* thereby giving them the full status of marriage under British-Indian law, was a resounding failure. Only 74 marriages had been registered under it by 1900, by which time everyone simply ignored the reform legislation.[21]

In Travancore Nayar leaders benefited from Sankaran Nair's mistake in Madras of undertaking massive social engineering by legislative fiat. They moved more slowly.[22] Finally in 1912 the Travancore Legislative Council passed Regulation I of 1088 (Malabar Era), the first great social reform measure in a series that continued to contemporary times. The new law recognized the traditional Nayar *sambandham* as a "legal" marriage, Nayar-Nam-

[19]See G.P. Sekhar, ed., *Select Writings and Speeches of G.P. Pillai*, Trivandrum, 1964.

[20]*Report of the Malabar Marriage Commission*, Madras, 1891, p. 93.

[21]"Report of the Registrar-General of the Working of the Act," *Census of India, 1901: Cochin*, Pt. I, Ernakulam, 1903, p. 161.

[22]Still the *Report of the Marumakkathayam Committee, Travancore Government Gazette*, 4 February 1908, resembled the Malabar Marriage Commission's findings in its slashing attacks on the moral standards and economic practices of the *tarwads*.

budiri unions henceforth had legal, hence permanent, status. Polyandrous unions were declared illegal—the *Marumakkathayam* Committee's Report on which the law was based held up monogamy as an "ideal as it is best calculated to foster a healthy family life, the foundation of civic life and the evolution of society."[23] Half of a man's inheritance, the new law required, went to his natural offspring, leaving only half to his *tarwad.* Otherwise the position of the Nayar *tarwad* was not shaken in 1912.

In 1925, after the Legislature had been expanded, a new bill was passed, Regulation II of 1100 M.E. It not only provided for partition of *tarwads* but also for divorce and obligatory financial support by husbands of their wives and children. "The Regulation," wrote N. Kunjan Pillai overdramatically, "has sounded the death-bell of matriarchy and ushered in the dawn of patriarchy."[24] But he was right: 32,900 *tarwads* partitioned their properties within five years of the bill's passage.[25]

As critics of partitioning had warned, Nayars lost control of their lands with increasing rapidity once the *tarwads* were broken up. Christians appeared to be the major gainers, and Ilavas benefited too. Given this predictable result it seems fair to say that the economic motive was not the chief reason why Nayars went through with the reform. Probably for most of them the greater freedom of choice made available by leaving the *tarwads* compensated for the loss of security and even wealth. Such a motive was the cause of most social reforms in India.

The two Nayar regulations, probably the most sweeping social reform legislation affecting a single community ever passed in India, set off a chain of emulatory reactions all over Kerala. Cochin Nayars, just a step behind those to the south, carried through almost identical reformist strategies to those in Travancore, which resulted in the Cochin Nayar Regulation of 1920, amended in 1938, to end *Marumakkathayam* law by providing for partition of *tarwads* by individuals. Madras took up the issue in 1913, and eventually, in 1933, the *Marumakkathayam* Act, which permitted *tarwad* partition and legalized inhe-

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 22. The majority of men interviewed by the Committee, 592 of 1045, favoured sanctioning polygamy because (1) it already existed on a large scale and (2) it was recognized by Hindu law. But the Committee held up monogamy as a "nobler" rather than a "baser" course to be recommended.

[24] *Census of India, 1931: Travancore,* Pt. I, Trivandrum, 1932, p. 169. Matriliny and patriliny are the correct terms.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 168. But partitioning matrilineal extended families did not introduce patriliny *ipso facto*; it only set up the economic basis for it. Joan P. Mencher's illuminating study of the effects of *tarwad* partition in south Malabar reveals that some small family units which split from a *tarwad* are nuclear while others are small *tavaris*; that is mother-centred families in which the husband "visits" but also looks after his sister's domestic interests. Mencher, "Changing Familial Roles Among South Malabar Nayars," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Autum 1962, pp. 240-43. See confirmation in Adrian C. Mayer, *Land and Society in Malabar*, Bombay, Oxford, 1952, pp. 99-102.

ritance from father to son, was enacted.

In Travancore the lobbying for official regulating of Nayar personal laws had been carried on by several caste organizations all of whose aims were broader than reform. One of them, the Nayar Service Society, founded in 1914, eventually became the major vehicle for protection and advancement of that caste's interests in Kerala. Its founder, Mannath Padmanabhan Pillai (1878-1970), worked for individual partition of *tarwads*, an end to mother-right customs,[26] and the unifying of the Nayars into a single community. In addition to its social reformist functions he conceived of the N.S.S. as a social service body along the lines of Gopal Krishna Gokhale's Servants of India Society. The vision of Nayar revival propounded by Mannath Padmanabhan, who continued to lead the N.S.S. for over half a century, though essentially a competitive program, eschewed putting other castes down as the Nayars tried to rise up. In particular Mannath supported some of the Ilava crusades such as temple entry—Nayars and Ilavas, he said, were the pillars of Kerala society.

The genius of Mannath Padmanabhan, shared by a substantial group of Nayar leaders active since the 1890s, lay organizationally in bonding together a diverse "tribe" for powerful corporate action and intellectually in identifying the community's needs for legislated social reform. In retrospect it may appear to have been easy to overthrow the psychological grip of mother-right institutions and set the roots of Nayar patriliny. Census reporters, novelists, literary club debaters, judges all knew that only by changes in *Marumakkathayam* law could the Nayars revive their greatness. But with what parts of that law to begin, how to win over Nayar and Brahmin conservatives who ran the state, and how to gain public acceptance so that reforms would not be met with the apathy of the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896? Answering those questions convincingly and then following through with effective action were the functions of the Nayar social reformers.

5. Social Reform Organizations and Crusades of Ilavas and Other Castes

The examples of organizational success that the Nayars and other castes followed included missionary bodies and the Servants of India Society, but above all the great Ilava association, Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana (S.N.D.P.) Yogam. The idea for establishing the Yogam itself came from outside of Kerala.

[26]The specific *Marumakkathayam* customs opposed by Nayar reformers and Mannath Padmanabhan are dealt with in his autobiography, *Ente Jeevitha Smarankal*, 2nd printing, Nayar Service Society Press, Trivandrum, 1964, pp. 41-42 (on *talikkettu* and *therandukuli*), 75 and 87 (on *pulakuli*), 39 (on the Nambudiris' lack of care for their Nayar children), 38 (on the *karnavans'* diversions to *tarwad* properties to their own children).

In 1892 Swami Vivekananda visited Travancore on his pilgrimage to Kanya Kumari. In a much quoted comment the outspoken swami called Kerala an "insane asylum" of caste. He may have learned about the disabilities suffered by Ilavas and the castes below them from conversations with Dr P. Palpu (1863-1950), by then an important Ilava leader, who in turn found Vivekananda an inspiration to him in organizing the Ilava community for action. The fact that Narayana Guru had been educated in three languages and that P. Palpu's father had applied to sit for a pleader's examination in 1865 and he himself ranked second in the entrance examinations for the medical school in Trivandrum—he was refused admission as an Ilava—suggests the accomplishments that some Ilavas had attained in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Dr Palpu wanted to spread such opportunities to a wider section of Ilavas and saw in Narayana Guru's religious following a natural base for a successful reform movement. He became active in the S.N.D.P. Yogam in 1904. Meanwhile the poet, Kumaran Asan, after several years' experience outside of Travancore, had rejoined his guru at Aruvipuram, where he edited an Ilava journal, raised funds, and became Secretary-Treasurer of the Yogam.

The triumvirate of Ilava leaders, Narayana Guru, Palpu, and Asan, provided their following with a corporate guidance unsurpassed by any caste association in India. Like the Nayars and other such far-flung communities the Ilavas' primary objective was unity. Through newspapers and journals, local discussion groups, offices with permanent staffs, recruitment campaigns, annual conferences, schools and literary programmes, legal cases, industrial exhibits, crusades for caste inter-dining and inter-marriage, the S.N.D.P. Yogam welded together a modern interest group capable of powerful action. Each of its strategies labels it as a typical caste reform movement. In mundane contexts associations similar to the Yogam supported the advancement of castes throughout India—Nadars of Tamil Nadu, the Kayasthas of the Ganges Valley, Rajputs, Jains, Khatris, Kunbis, Prabhus, Oswals, Vaishyas, Jats, and hundreds more.[27] I have found little evidence of direct communications between the Yogam and other caste bodies outside Kerala. Only occasionally did the National Social Conference and its organ, *The Indian Social Reformer*, report the work going on in Travancore. Parallels in caste reform and in methods for social and economic advancement resulted not from copying or coordination but from the similarities in external circumstances throughout the country.

The unification of the Ilava caste proceeded apace with that of the Nayars. Travancore Ilavas recorded themselves as a single caste for the 1931 census as against 22 sub-divisions in 1891.[28] Because many Ilavas followed *Maru-*

[27]See Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., *The Nadars of Tamilnad*, Berkeley, University of Califonia, 1969, Chapter V; Heimsath, *op. cit.*, Chapters X, XI.

[28]Cited in *Census of India, 1941: Travancore*, Pt. 1, Trivandrum, 1942, p. 131.

makkathayam law, reforms strikingly similar to those of the Nayars were embraced by the S.N.D.P. Yogam. Following closely the Nayar reform strategy Ilavas petitioned for communal legislation, and in 1916 an Exhava (Ilava) Law Committee was set up to gather evidence and recommend a bill. The Committee's report,[29] and then a second Committee in 1918 and a new Report resulted in a revised bill which was passed as the Ilava Regulation of 12 February 1925.

Having achieved the passage of a personal law comparable to that of the Nayars the S.N.D.P. Yogam could turn full attention to its crusade against public discriminations based on caste. One of the most blatant manifestations of the inequality among castes resulted from the "pollution" that low castes, including Ilavas, created when approaching high castes and their shrines. So-called "distance pollution" must have struck Vivekananda as one of Kerala's "insanities" and the S.N.D.P. Yogam was determined to bring it to an end. Reforms of personal laws should lead to greater opportunities for those adopting them; the physical barrier between castes in Kerala had to be broken before those reforms could do their full work.

On the overarching issue of "distance pollution" Nayarana Guru's enlightenment affected the thinking of all Kerala castes, low and high, and cleared the path of acceptance for specific reforms. But the public crusade chosen first to embody that enlightenment in concrete behaviour apparently did not attract the Guru. He had begun his public career by founding temples at Trichur, Cannanore, Tellicherry, Calicut, Mangalore, Sarada, and elsewhere for low castes to use with as much satisfaction as could be derived from worshipping in the established Hindu temples of Kerala. With this parallel network of major shrines under his leadership the Guru seemed less enthusiastic than some S.N.D.P. organizers in pressing the authorities of the old temples to permit low castes to enter. Ilava leaders, some of them associated with the National Congress, on the other hand, felt that they had the power, in the 1920s, to agitate for that objective. In early 1924 Ilava and Nayar leaders, reinforced by Congress volunteers from outside, tried to open the roads approaching the Vaikom temple, traditionally off-bounds to low castes. A *satyagraha* camp on the ground controlled by Narayana Guru served as a staging centre; so the Guru apparently tolerated the *satyagraha*, but he did not participate in the campaign.[30] It lasted 16 months and ended with one of Gandhi's famous compromises, which satisfied no one.[31] Most, but not

[29] *Report of the Exhava Law Committee with Draft Bill and Appendices*, Government of Travancore, 1919.

[30] The factual narratives on temple entry which follow are based on Mahadev Desai, *Epic of Travancore*, Ahmedabad, 1937; A.K. Gopalan, *Kerala Past and Present*, London, 1959; Regional Records Survey Committee for Kerala, P.K. Karunakara Menon, Convener, *The History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala*, Vol. II (1885-1938), typescript.

[31] On the occasion of Gandhi's visit to Vaikom he and Narayana Guru compared their

all of the roads surrounding the temple were opened to everyone. The temple remained closed to low castes.

A few years later, 1931-32, the campaign for civil rights shifted to the Guruvayoor temple in Malabar and aimed at low caste access to the temple, not merely to the roads near it. As at Vaikom Gandhi and the Congress assumed an overall direction; Gandhi began to include Kerala in his Harijan tours in the late 1920s, and his great prestige mingled with the local pressures for non-discrimination in public places. (A technical issue turned on whether temples were in fact public or private places.)

Local Congress supporters, most of them Nayars, and national figures such as C. Rajagopalachari and Srimati Rameshwari Nehru helped provide a climate of opinion that anticipated a liberal declaration from the Maharaja. Over 50,000 caste Hindus petitioned the ruler to open the temples of his state. A Temple Entry Enquiry Committee, heavily Nayar and Madras-Brahmin, produced a report in 1934, judicious but favouring unrestricted entry.[32] Finally on 12 November 1936 the Maharaja issued his famous Proclamation abolishing all restrictions on Hindus wishing to enter even the most sacred areas of temples. As before in Kerala, the state's sanction for social reform was essential to the success of a grand crusade.

Voluntary adherence to the S.N.D.P. Yogam's reformist creed, however, though less well publicized undoubtedly surpassed the acceptance of changes dictated by authority. An outside observer of the private and public lives of villagers in central Kerala described how reform doctrines were translated into behaviour:

> For the past ten years, Palakkara [a pseudonym] Ilavas had belonged to the Sri Narayana Guru Movememnt (SNDP), a famous caste association, based on the creed, "One God, one caste, one religion." The SNDP required monogamy of Ilavas, Sanskritization of their religious rites, repudiation of caste inequalities, a kind of Protestant (and indeed capitalist) ethic of thrift and independent enterprise. Under SNDP influence the Ilavas paid monthly dues to their statewide association, attended its temple in a nearby village, and employed its Ilava priest to perform Sanskrit life-crisis rites. They had ceased to take part in animal sacrifice or other 'low caste' ceremonies at the village temple festival. The Ilavas had, in fact, abstracted themselves

philosophies and methods. In theory they seemed far apart, but on human problems they agreed. See Nataraja Guru, *Word of the Guru*, Ernakulam, Paico Publishing House, 2nd edn., 1968, pp. 40-41. John Bondurant regarded this campaign a success, but reports of it from Kerala observers were more sceptical, and some judged the effort as a failure because the basic issue of "distance pollution" was unsolved. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence*, rev. edn., Berkeley, University of California, 1965, pp. 46-52.

[31] *Report of the Temple Entry Enquiry Committee*, Trivandrum, 1934.

from Palakkara's traditional caste system—both economically through wage work, and also morally through the SNDP.[33]

On a broader level of analysis E.M.S. Namboodiripad summed up the effects on Ilavas of Sri Narayana Guru's movement as "the establishment of the bourgeois family."[34]

The Ilava reform movement is a prime example of the thrust of Indian social reform movements in the twentieth century, toward fundamental transformations of the caste system, in contrast to the emphasis on reform for individuals and small dissident communities that characterized nineteenth century social reform in other parts of India.[35] In fact, Kerala's social reform movements from the beginning had stressed inter-caste relations. The Ilava movement also reveals the ways in which social reformers inspired and guided their followers in taking advantage of the new environment so that changes would not leave them behind but rather ahead in the quest for that elusive goal called modernization.

Other communities in Kerala moved along almost as rapidly, and under guidance similar to the great Ilava or Nayar reform associations. Pulayas organized in 1907 under the leadership of Ayyankali (1866-1941), who founded the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Yogam in 1907 after the model of the S.N.D.P. Yogam. Other Pulaya associations, some under the name Cheramar which was considered more prestigious, spread across Travancore similarly to the spread of the Ilava's Yogam. Christian missionaries encouraged the advances of Pulayas, whether they were converted or not, as they did also the Pariya associations, such as the South Travancore Sambavar Mahajana Sangham. The Census of 1931 reported that most low castes appeared to have formed organizations of some kind and mentioned, in addition to Pulayas and Pariyas, the Anjanavars, Chackaravars, Kuravas, Vetas, Arayas, Voanavas, Pantarams, Panars, as well as Muslims.[36]

In support of low caste social reforms and social services, in addition to the missionaries and such Christian groups as the Salvation Army, the Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and Ramakrishna Mission contributed their moral pressure and sometimes their physical help (as the Arya Samaj did during the temple entry campaigns). As influences from outside these all-India religious bodies never gained significant followings in Kerala. The Ramakrishna Mission claimed no special reform purposes and concentrated on religious instruction and social service. The Arya Samaj joined Kerala crusades mainly to encou-

[33]Kathleen Gough, "Village Politics in Kerala—I," *Economic Weekly*, 20 February 1965. See also A. Aiyappan, *Social Revolution in a Kerala Village*, Bombay, Asia, 1965, Chapter X.

[34]Namboodiripad, *Kerala: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Calcutta, National Book Agency, 2nd edn., 1968, p. 125.

[35]See Heimsath, *op. cit.*, Epilogue.

[36]*Census of India, 1931: Travancore*, Pt. I, Trivandrum, 1932, p. 439.

rage low castes to maintain their Hindu identity.

Slower to move than some other communities in Kerala were the so-called Malayala Brahmins, the Nambudiris, whose aloofness from modern education kept the caste from participating in the modern life of Kerala until well into the twentieth century. A vigorous thrust of the Nayar reform movement was aimed at ending or at least placing under legal restraints the sexual ties of Nayar women and younger sons of Nambudiri families. Nambudiris felt the moral disapprobation emanating from that movement and, after the Nayar Regulation, the force of law required that they support their Nayar wives and children. In 1908 a Nambudiri social reform association, the Yogakshema Sabha, was founded by a few of the caste's younger men with modern education to try to protect their community's interests against the threats to its economic and moral position by the Nayars, Christians, and even the Ilavas.[37] The Yogakshema stressed the advantages of English education and through its weekly journal propagated ideas of marriage reform—Nambudiri men should marry their own women, thus among other advantages improving the chances for Nambudiri women to avoid spinsterhood. Radical reformers among Nambudiris spoke through their journal, *Unni Namboodiri*, in an ideological tone against all instruments of social and political repression. The novels and plays produced by this group on the plight of Nambudiri spinsters, on the customs of purdah and polygamy, and on the educational backwardness of the caste raised as much furore as the similar artistic social awakening among Nayars and Ilavas. Nambudiri support for the admission of low castes to Hindu temples, which so struck Mahatma Gandhi, came from this radical segment of the caste reform movement. Both segments were troubled by the economic plight of Nambudiri *illoms* (estates comparable to Nayar *tarwads*). Mismanagement of properties and the feudalistic family structure resulted in the by then accepted reform strategy: a committee investigation and then the Travancore Malayala Brahmin Regulation, passed in 1930. Among its purposes was the removal of "the impediments on the growth of family life experienced by the younger members of the *tarwad*," but not the partition of *tarwads*, or *illoms*. Polygamy and the ties with Nayar women came to an abrupt end, as did most of the Nambudiris' sources of tangible power in Kerala. Their religious and intellectual prestige, however, carried on to some extent.

The 1920s and 1930s were decades of reform legislation by castes in Kerala, signifying accelerated social changes and sharpened competitiveness among communities. The proliferation of disparate personal laws cluttering up the code books on the surface reinforced the inviolability of caste. But because the in-

[37]For insights into the Yogakshema Sabha I am indebted to E.M.S. Namboodiripad. *The History of the Freedom Movement in Kerala*, Vol. II, carries information on Nambudiri reform. See also *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, Vol. I, No. 3, July 1966, p. 190f.

tents of all the regulations were similar the overall effect created a more nearly homogeneous Hindu society. The same point can be made about social reform movements throughout India: while influencing small segments of the population at a time, they moved the entire body in more or less the same direction, culminating for Hindus in the national legislation revising the Hindu Code after independence.

6. To Summarize the Social Reformers' Functions

The origins of social changes in modern India have been the new economic environment including the technology of railways, ships, telegraphs as well as the growth of industry and markets; ideas about the worth of the individual and the evolution of societies propounded in missionary and government schools and universities; the privileges and opportunities newly afforded by the courts, legislatures and public administration. The functions performed by the social reformers were to direct these social transformations having revolutionary force on individual lives and on the social status of groups. They screened and interpreted for people at large the powerful innovations introduced over the past two centuries and charted a course for a transformed Indian society that would accommodate them. The reformers felt the jostling of environmental pressures and realized that they would lose control of their own lives (to foreigners or to competing domestic communities) and that the local or national society would be unpredictably or chaotically shaken up unless they offered new guidance.

Thus social change in India has not been an accidental or an automatic process. For the most part, Indians have been told where they were going and how they might get there. The social reformers instructed them: intellect could precede action. In keeping with the pragmatic purpose of most Hindu speculative thought the teachings of the social reformers form a comprehensive philosophical discussion on social modernization. Responsive to the needs of various regions and communities the reformers exposed the conflicts between ancestral patterns of behaviour and the modern economic and administrative environment, championed the revolt against "inefficient" or "evil" customs, and then created an intellectual synthesis of the traditionally sanctioned ways and the novel adjustments that they invented or accepted as inevitable. Reformers prepared the mixed concoctions of the old and the new, and their successes showed in the readiness of their multitudes of followers to imbibe the stimulating brew. In some cases it was intoxicating—Brahmoism in Bengal, the Arya Samaj in the north, and the movement of Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala. In other cases reformers took the "lines of least resistance" and upset only slightly the expected rules of behaviour.

Whether through drastic or subtle prescriptions for change social reformers in all regions of India and among many caste groups rationalized the inevit-

able adjustments that Indians had to make to the modern environment. The movements they sponsored were the bridges between the realities of a new age and the peoples' clinging (for security) to the past. Thus modern India's social philosophy of non-violent, gradual change was constructed in the literature and preaching of social reform; then it was placed on permanent display in legislation and legal case histories. The remarkable stability of India in the face of changes that disabled other societies results not from mere neutral administrative capability. Those who governed—politicians, judges, administrators—have exhibited consistent philosophies of national life which were best reflected in, if not directly learned from the teachings of the social reformers.

While rejecting the apparent uniformity of an authoritarian system India's diversified group of leaders has subscribed with few exceptions to reformist doctrines of moral purpose and public order that are mutually compatible if not identical. Modern India's social transformation lies in largely uncoordinated reforms of its diverse communities, not in centralized social engineering. Each unit makes its own adjustment; the total effect appears to be a common movement. A Kerala judge and a Punjab district officer, members of the S.N.D.P. Yogam and the Arya Samaj, respectively, are likely to exhibit the same views on marriage age, family structure, education of low castes, the position of women, uninhibited entry to Hindu temples, inter-marriages and inter-dining—learned separately from local sources but identically supporting personal and group freedom of opportunity, which is the essence of social reform.

Hence contemporary India is unified by a common philosophy of how the society should be organized. This intellectual bond, the heritage of the social reform movements, along with its strong democratic political traditions, provides the cohesion of the nation.

The social reformers' functions have often been overlooked by those fascinated by the physical and behavioural changes going on in India, whose rapidity, power and variety seem to place them out of intelligent control. But the processes going on have been understood and in the more important ways prescribed, if not by the notable figures dealt with in this essay then by unknown caste leaders, school teachers, village council members, newspaper writers. All these people are modern India's social reformers. They are its social philosophers, the guides and organizers of the present and the future.