Narratives of Hegemony and Marginalization: Deconstructing the History Legends of India

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Abstract

Myths and legends as local sources of history reveal their implicit assumptions and demonstrate the way in which events are filtered through the interpretations of their authors. By examining a variety of these interpretations, we might piece together a refracted image of the past which will ultimately present a history of "what actually happened". There is also an attempt to create a single narrative supported by various sources that claim to reveal the truth in political and social terms about what may have happened there. I have substantiated my arguments by drawing examples from the compilation of legends, Aithihyamala (Garland of Legends), *a pioneering and exhaustive collection of 126 legends of Kerala (India), compiled and published between 1909 and 1934 by the Sanskrit-Malayalam scholar Kottarathil Sankunni. My contention in this paper is that there is a politics behind the subversion of "other histories" (local or subaltern) to establish a hegemonic history. One finds a "politics" behind the legend-making, a deliberate attempt at compiling an elitist record of legends and through it the homogenizing of the cultural past of a region.*

Keywords: *historiography, subaltern history, rewriting history, politicizing culture, rereading legends*

> *Even in a democracy, history always involves power and exclusion,*
> *for any history is someone's history,*
> *told by that someone from a partial point of view.*
> (Appleby et al. 1994: 217)

If we consider history a form of shifting discourse constructed by historiographers, it is entirely possible that we need to also consider reading several accounts of the same past. This leads us to the conclusion that there can never be what may be thought of as a single, absolute and authentic account of the past. The historian at best represents the past which is a recovered past that is incomplete, fragmented and subverted. According to Keith Jenkins "the past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart" (1997: 5).

   A new reading is likely to appear whenever there is a change of 'gaze' or shift in perspective. As Jenkins observes, the past and history are not

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stitched into each other so that only one reading of the same past is absolutely necessary (qtd. in Appleby et al. 1994: 25*)*. While writing history, the historiographer tends to move beyond the world of facts and gives an interpretation of the past in accordance with his/her perspective. Moreover, the historian is looking at the past from the present and is, therefore, likely to be biased by the contemporary. As Jacques Le Goff writes, "all history is contemporary in so far as the past is grasped in the present and responds to the latter's interests" (1992: 130).

History today is regarded as a narrative about the past, not the past itself. The deconstructionist theorists have argued that what the historian does while narrativizing is to impose a textualized shape on the past. Poststructuralists talk about the elusive and obscure nature of the texts. A text, it has been observed, is full of gaps, uncertainties of meanings and silence. Our language is incapable of comprehending the reality and is too poor to express what we perceive. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the word and the world. There is no fixedness of meaning either.

The postmodern predicament of history, to borrow Roland Barthes' words (1975), is that the historian's description of the past reality represents a number of concepts about the past, not the past itself. It is inevitable, therefore, that while narrativizing the past, the historian ensures "the past obeys my interpretation" (Jenkins 1997: 12). By imposing plots on the past, the historian indulges in omission and exclusion and, in the process, marginalizes people, events, movements and regions from mainstream history. However, this fragmented and unequal universe of the historian has opened up the unlimited possibilities of history. It has given birth to new histories like the Feminist, the Black, the Subaltern and a host of other histories which are bold expressions of all those who have been excluded from mainstream history. History has thus given way to alternative histories making the "chorus of voices" (12) audible to the world.

Postmodern historians have realized that grand narratives can provide only an aerial view, often missing all the important details. The mainstream histories with the nation as the central unit are guilty of marginalizing and subverting regions, localities and communities. In the emerging "other" (local or subaltern) histories, the communities and the regions have become the focus of analysis. In these subaltern histories, the voices of all the dalits, the women, the peasants and other silent sections who have previously been absent in history, can be clearly heard.

It is in this context of subversion and marginalization that local histories rise into prominence. They are histories of marginalized localities, people, movements, struggles and sacrifices. By history, I mean local myths

and legends—written or oral—about the past. While some of these "histories" are formal, others are informal but they are all narrated in one form or another. Through this narrativization, we witness the process in which narrators and historiographers in the past and present have used myths and legends as political actions to create a "history" to suit their vested interests. It is the study of these histories that will help us in rereading mainstream history and looking for gaps and exclusions which will expose the politics behind this subversion.

Myths and legends or local narratives, many of which were oral, led to political responses by influencing how events were ultimately reported, recorded and translated into sources for written histories. Also, the language used in these narratives revealed some of the forces that produced them, and certainly the audience for whom they were intended. It is significant to note that these extrapolations in recorded history resulted in the marginalization of communities and their histories.

As local sources of history, myths and legends reveal their implicit assumptions and demonstrate the way in which events are filtered through the interpretations of their authors. By examining a variety of these interpretations, we might piece together a refracted image of the past which will ultimately present a history of "what actually happened". This approach is common in cultural studies, in which historians read against the mainstream texts to reveal the histories of the marginalized. Equally critical are the history of interpretations themselves, i.e., the processes through which myths and legends of the past were constructed. One comes across various issues while examining this politics of subversion. There is an attempt to create a single narrative supported by various sources that claim to reveal the truth in political and social terms about what may have happened there. There is also the problem that stems from confining oral sources that are, by nature, transient and dynamic to a more restrictive medium like the written one. Equally prominent is the difficulty of translating back and forth from several cultures and finding words that make useful associations from one language to another. There is also the necessity of interpreting events from accounts produced at different times.

It is the process of myth/legend-making that sustains the continuity of human existence and helps in transferring knowledge from one generation and one culture to another. The way sources narrate an event (in a myth or legend) brings to light the intellectual modes of understanding that have shaped different versions of history. When we identify what history makers and the compilers of legends chose and choose to tell, it

becomes clear that they provide lasting lessons of the past and the politics that influence historical memory.

According to Foucault, we need to know who produced them to evaluate the products of history. His contention is that texts immortalize their authors and connect our belief in the unchanging truth of the past to our belief in the authors who wrote about it (1980: 210). By emphasizing this unreliability of authors and the constraints of contemporary discourse on the production of knowledge, Foucault used a humbling weapon against the powers of hegemony and influenced current scholarship.

By focussing on the construction of history through local narratives or legends, I have attempted to look into these questions:

> How do narratives and legends located in sources of the past, portray the politics behind legend-making?
> Whose interests do they serve? How do legends influence historiography?
> What information do they hold other than an account of past events?
> How can they be interpreted/narrated in a postmodern literary scenario?

The answers to such questions, which are integral to what is now called postmodern scholarship, will help refigure historiography and bring out the politics behind "history-making". These questions lie at the basis of most historical narratives and shed light on the effort made to find out what happened. In a sense that is "the postmodern conundrum" as Singer puts it: "Is there any point to our intellectual endeavour if we are all trapped as Michael Foucault would claim, in the prisons of language and discourse?" (1997: 12)

My argument is that there is a politics behind the subversion of "other histories" (local or subaltern) to establish the hegemonic history through a romantic and conformist compilation and reading of myths and legends. My claims are supported by examples drawn from the historic legends of Kerala (in the southern state of India) in the compilation of legends, Aithihyamala (Garland of Legends). It is difficult to ascertain historical truths in legends the interpretation of which is decided by the language or politics of the compilers. This is true even in the case of Kottarathil Sankunni's Aithihyamala (Garland of Legends), a pioneering and exhaustive collection of the legends of Kerala, (India) compiled and published between 1909 and 1934. Sankunni is not a historian or a social

critic. However, his Aithihyamala is widely read as a social and historical document of the period.

Folklore in Kerala (India): placing *Aithihyamala* in Kerala (India) folklore
Folklore study in Kerala (India) was inaugurated in the year 1791. By that time, the Europeans had already made significant contributions to the advancement of the subject. The first work was published by Fr. Polinose in 1791 under the title *Adagiya Malabarica* which was a collection of proverbs. For half a century until the 1840s, no serious work was done in the field. In this decade, several foreigners contributed a great deal to this subject. Native scholars followed it and the emphasis was more on anthologizing and publishing rather than on any original work.

It is interesting to find out what prevented the native scholars from pursuing folklore studies before the work of Fr. Polinose. Two reasons could be traced out. Primarily, Kerala was not in the least urbanized or industrialized as it happened in the West. However, changes were brought to the social fabric of Kerala on a smaller scale through foreign contact, trade and religious conversions. Secondly, the educated people and the scholars were guided by the thought that the anthological works of folk songs and riddles deserved no serious study. Also, there was the caste and class hegemony which demarcated culture into 'higher' and 'little' traditions. As Payyanad (1999: 80) says, "We [in Kerala] too had the concept of 'higher tradition' and "little tradition" in our culture. The compartmentalization of folk arts and classical arts into 'little tradition' and 'higher tradition' respectively was prevalent at that time. The 'higher tradition' which dominated the intellectual and cultural spheres of our life never allowed the 'little tradition' to emerge from the shadows".

Perhaps it would be interesting to examine the factors that prompted foreigners to pursue folklore studies when native scholars ignored them. Firstly, they were not merely interested in popular culture or its studies but in the nature of their work. As missionaries, they wanted to be acquainted with the cultural artifacts of the peoples they worked with. As early as the 19th century, they established seminaries in Kerala and started imparting theological lessons in the vernacular. It was both a necessity and an intelligent move that resulted in learning the native language. Their devotion to their work resulted in the anthologies of proverbs, the publishing of *Keralolpathi* (Origin of Kerala) and dictionaries in the vernacular. At the same time, they did not have much regard for the folklife in Kerala and their cultural products, which the missionaries considered inferior to those of the Westerners. Their professional aim in pursuing folk

studies, therefore, was to "refine" and perfect the cultural artifacts as they considered them deficient and imperfect. Such prejudices did stand as obstacles in the path of folklore studies in Kerala.

A group of foreigners such as Edgar Thurston, William Logan and Percy Mac Queen were colonial administrators, fascinated not by India's rustic life or her village culture but rather by the stakes of the imperialists. They were part of the imperialist force that looted the country keeping it as their perpetual colony and, as it is to be expected, the ideology represented by their country was upheld by them. For instance, this is particularly evident in the maps of the Malabar Manual by Logan, the Malabar collector who displayed the important crops of Kerala, the seasons favorable for them and the exact locations where they were cultivated. The preface presents his faulty information and biased views of the people of Kerala. He says "The Malayali race has produced no historians simply because there was little or no history in one sense to record" (qtd. in Payyanad 1999: 82). In short, their colonial interests largely dictated this first phase of folklore studies started by the foreigners. It was either for religious conversion or exploitation that they were interested in learning and understanding more about the natives and their popular culture.

The first notable work by a Keralite came out in the year 1881 entitled *Bhashacharithram* (History of Malayalam Language) by P. Govinda Pillai, who studied the folksongs of Kerala. The news magazines like *Vidyavinodini* and *Viodyavilasini* gave the much-needed impetus to folklore studies. They published folksongs and descriptions of the tradition of folk arts. Then came the epoch-making compilation of legends called *Aithihyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni, a collection of 126 stories in eight volumes, the first one published in 1909 and the last one in 1934.

From the 1930s for almost three decades, there was a great increase in the number of such anthologies along with their studies. The works of Dr. Chelanatt Achuthamenon, Dr. S. K. Nair and M. D. Raghavan are notable. The scholars concentrated on anthologizing folksongs and folk arts. Attempts were made to study folk texts through the study of various titles of folklore. Some scholars also tried to incorporate ideas from similar studies conducted outside the country and thereby bring up folklore as a separate branch of study.

By the end of the 1950s, the experts in the field started concentrating on description too, rather than confining themselves to anthologizing. By the end of the 1970s, certain descriptive studies on folksongs and folk arts also came out, written by people like Kilimanoor Vishwambharan, C. R. Kerala Varma, S. Guptan Nair, Kanhiramkulam K. Kochukrishnan Nadar, M. C.

Appunni Nambiar, Chirackal T. Balakrishnan Nair, G. Sankara Pillai, T. H. Kunhiraman Nambiar and C. M. S. Chandera. The support extended by National Book Stall, Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham and government-controlled academies and institutes were of much importance. The broad outlook that pervaded all fields of knowledge influenced folklore studies in Kerala too.

The seventies brought the decline of the joint family system and the feudal structure of the society and, in turn, brought down the joint family system based on agriculture. Even when people started dreaming of a healthier way of life, they indulged in nostalgic thoughts of the past, which incidentally triggered off an added popularity and recognition to the anthologies and descriptive studies of folklore. In the first few decades of the present century, social reformers such as Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and in the forties and fifties communists and agriculturist movements worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden. It was only by the end of the 1970s that the present folklore studies evolved, although many changes had been happening until then, both in attitude to the discipline and in the discipline itself. Such awareness was late to come.

In the eighties, folklorists became aware that they should pose a strong resistance to certain challenges and create awareness in the society about this. The advent of alien cultural concepts like consumerism and globalization, which interrupted the quiet life of the folks in Kerala, made folklore study all the more significant. The challenges brought by the new culture of globalization and its ideological basis posed serious problems to folklife in Kerala. A group of important personalities emerged in this discipline, as is the case of Chummar Choondal, G. Bharghavan Pillai, M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri, A. K. Nambiar and Raghavan Payyanad. Additionally, folklore academies caught up with the changes in the present age.

Folklore as an academic discipline is no longer viewed as inferior to other branches of knowledge, and yet, it has not gained the importance it deserves. The range and scope of this field of knowledge have not attained enough popularity among the public. Folklore activists themselves have not been able to comprehend the developments in the field beyond the fifties and sixties. The studies are mostly descriptive in nature and superficial which merely evokes nostalgia. The new awareness attained by certain scholars on a theoretical level and to a certain degree in practical studies has not been imbibed by the rest. The reason lies in the lack of interest or application.

However, while folklorists have reasons to counter these accusations, universities have almost sidelined, if not ignored this subject. In Kerala,

students of folklore do not pursue it at a higher level. In the West, folklore organizations coordinate folklore studies and chalk out strategies for the growth of the subject. In Kerala, however, these organizations seem to lack initiative and objectives. In addition, there is an absence of journals to publish the serious work done. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of every folklorist to face the challenges posed by the subject and the age in which they live, by making the subject contemporary and popular.

We are passing through a highly complex, conflict-ridden era of liberalization and open market policy. The imperialist forces, which control the world market and invisibly direct the whole world, attempt to control even the life and individuality of the folks in such a way that they enhance their own policies and interests. However, as a reaction to this, a mode of restoration is gaining prominence over the world. This is reflected in the domains of knowledge in the entire world. Truth and knowledge which had been marginalized in the premodern and modern era have come into prominence because of this. This is evident from the fact that local history and narratives have become significant in historical studies, local culture in cultural studies and marginalized literature in literary studies. A study of the politics and power, which dominate and control history and legend-making, becomes significant in this context.

Reading through the gaps in the legends of Kerala (India) – text, context and (re)interpretation

Though some regard them as a figment of the imagination or blatant lies, legends have always had a place in the socio-political life of people. Legends are part of the oral tradition transferred from generation to generation. Their making has always been a part of cultures across the world. Legends have played no mean role in creating the "history" of a region. By drawing examples from actual places, the creators have succeeded in skillfully convincing the reader of the existence of an "imagined community". Kottarathil Sankunni is no different. It is through his compilation of legends, *Aithihyamala,* that the people of Kerala seem to have become aware of the history of temples, the regions and the life histories of rulers and the ruling class. "It is left to us", says Ambalapuzha Ramavarma "to sift and sieve the legends to look for the truth through logic and research. However, it is commendable, that *Aithihyamala* has been able to give us a memorable history although shrouded in untruth and vagueness" (Sankunni 1909, *Prologue*).

Sankunni portrayed people from all walks of life: kings, lords, priests, physicians, poets, brigands and sorcerers. Yet, we cannot say that he

gave a secularised image of Kerala life and society. It is true that there are legends about people from marginalized communities and Sankunni also attempted a rereading/rewriting of some of the legends from the oral tradition. For instance, the legend of a Muslim brigand like *Kayamkulam Kochunni* (Sakunni 1909: 176-201), a Kerala version of Robin Hood, seen by many to be a heartless dacoit, is described by Sankunni as actually honest and compassionate. *Arakkal Beevi* (845-849) is presented as a Hindu princess who embraced Islam to respect tradition and started a new dynasty in order to resolve a crisis with justice, courage and tolerance. The story of the Christian priest of *Kadamattam* (428-441) speaks of a destitute lad becoming a priest who heals and has power over evil spirits. Sankunni also has questions which he sometimes poses at the end of his legends. However, he leaves these questions open-ended and, in his own words, "to be solved by the scholarly who can examine these questions logically, the result of which will be a boon to all". Sankunni is passionate in his narration. It is as if he wanted us to believe what he believes in and, therefore, one finds a fanatic adherence to the subjects he handled. His ignoring the contradictions in his writing has led his stories to be appropriated by the upper caste Hindus as a treatise on temple history and history of the elite and upper-caste families. Others who fail to read through the gaps in Sankunni's *Aithihyamala* regard it as children's literature.

There has been an attempt to compile the "popular legends" in order to establish a hegemonic history and in the process, what happens is a deliberate marginalization of communities and denigration of their "histories". One can also find an overdose of Sanskrit slokas in almost all the stories, which is yet another example of elitist documentation of the life and society of Kerala. So the *namboothiri* (upper caste) history becomes a homogenized cultural past of Kerala. Sankunni does not touch upon the social inequalities of the period, considering that most of his stories belonged to the feudal period (16th-17th centuries) and the British colonial period (18th-19th centuries). For instance, in Sankunni's *Kadamattathu Kathanar*, there is just a passing mention of a visitor from the European church who did not approve of Kathanar's magic and healing. Sankunni fails to read in this legend an attempt of the European Catholic Church to hegemonise its faith over the marginalized cultures in the colonised lands. *Arakkal Beevi*'s story is a conformist narrative where she decides to uphold tradition and sanctity by moving out of her home and finally marrying the Muslim young man with the permission of the custodians of the Hindu religion, namely the priestly brahmin class. Munroe, the British resident and Dewan who has faith in Lord Padmanabha and wants to protect the Hindu king (Sankunni 1909: 241)

is again a conformist reading of Sankunni about the British colonial magnanimity with the divine validation of a Hindu god. There are passing references to *Tipu's (King of Mysore) Malabar attack* (461, 825) but nothing into the actual historical anecdotes of atrocities. Also, one does not find any legends about the resistance to colonialism, feudal struggle or the movements against the hegemony of upper caste and class.

Numerous myths, especially creation myths, have gained the stature of legends with some historical facts, dates, events and even places or regions attributed to them. This is true even among Indian legends. Importantly, almost all such legends were created to the best interest of religions, castes, communities or ideologies. Many legends find their place even in school textbooks as though they were history. According to this legend, the land of Kerala was a gift from the Arabian Sea to Parasurama, one of the ten avatars or incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The legend has it that Parasurama threw his *parasu* (axe) across the sea from Gokarnam to Kanyakumari (or from Kanyakumari to Gokarnam as per another version), and the water receded up to the spot where it fell. The tract of territory so thrown up is said to have constituted the land of Kerala, otherwise called Bhargavakshetram or Parasuramakshetram. A mythological hero himself, there is very little historical or factual basis for the Parasurama tradition. According to the legend, the Lord bequeathed this precious land to 64 families. Under its shade, the incoming Vedic Brahmins claimed that Kerala was their inheritance by divine dispensation (Menon 1979: 9). With their cleverness and means at their disposal, the Malayalee Brahmins convinced the locals that they alone possessed genuine knowledge as different from that of the Buddhist *theros* (priests) and as such they were Nampoothiris or *nampu* (reliable) theros. By tradition and habit, the locals were tolerant, understanding, and prone to be fascinated by novelty. They welcomed the new sect and lent their ears to their philosophy. With ploy and subtle manipulation, they took over the places of worship and abodes of knowledge, along with the extensive freeholds they had. Naturally, the Aryan intruders became the *janmis* (landlords). They annexed a small segment of the Dravidian population as their allies and henchmen and labelled them *savarnas* (upper caste). A warrior group was organized as their military sentries. The existent priestly sector was transformed into various temple functionaries and some of the local chieftains who wielded considerable clout were acknowledged as *kshatriyas* (royal class). Thus, the four-fold Hindu caste syndrome came into being. The rest of the people from the vast majority were denigrated as *avarna* (low caste) with the stigma of

untouchability upon them. Thus, was introduced the nefarious caste divide into the egalitarian society of ancient Kerala.

The politics of legend-making: rereading a popular legend
The intricacies of the complex social order in Kerala can be traced to the legend from popular folklore entitled '*Parayi Pettu Panthirukulam*' (twelve kulams/clans born of a paraya woman belonging to a marginalized class), the fascinating story of Vararuchi, a renowned brahmin scholar and subject at the court of King Vikramaadithya (believed to have lived around 300 A.D.). Highly learned in all the *saasthras* (sciences), he is said to have discovered the inter-relationship between numbers and the letters of the alphabet. The legend compiled and narrated in the Kottarathil Sankunni's *Aithihyamala* (Garland of Legends) is as follows:

> One day, King Vikramadithya, prompted by those jealous of the King's admiration for Vararuchi, asked him to recite the most important verse, (and in it, the most important phrase) from the epic Ramayana. Vararuchi could not immediately come up with a proper answer and the King gave him 41 days to find out. Vararuchi approached many scholars but still could not arrive at the right answer. Dejected, he left for the forest and on the night of the 40th day, as he was resting under a banyan tree, Vararuchi finally got the answer from the conversation of two spirits who were seated on the branches of the tree in the form of kalaneemi birds. The most important verse in Ramayana was the advice given by Sumithra to her son Lakshman before he embarked on a 14-year life in exile with his elder brother and hero of the epic, Sri Ram and his wife Sita. "Ramam Dasaratham vidhhi, maam vidhhi Janakaatmajam Ayodhya mataveem vidhhi, gaccha thaatha yattha sukham" (consider Rama as your father Dasaratha, Sita as your mother and the forest as Ayodhya; may the journey be a blessed one).
>
> And the most important phrase in it was "Maam vidhi Janakaatmajam" (consider Sita as your mother). Vararuchi got his answer. But he also gathered from the conversation of the birds that he was destined to marry a girl born that day in a nearby lower caste paraya family. He returned to the court and the King was much pleased at Vararuchi's answer. The brahmin scholar then willfully used this opportunity to avoid the prospect of marrying a paraya woman and convinced the King to order the killing of the girl child born on that day in a paraya family which Vararuchi said was necessary for the wellbeing of the country. The girl child instead of being killed was abandoned on a small raft in the flowing river with a lighted torch stuck on her head.
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> Several years later, Vararuchi, during one of his travels, went into a poor brahmin's house for food. Vararuchi set some preconditions (in riddles) for taking food there. He said that he needed "a fine silk cloth to wear after my bath, a hundred people must be fed before I eat, a hundred items must be served for my meal. When I finish, I need to eat three people. And four people must support me afterwards".

However, he was assured by a girl from inside that all the conditions will be met. She knew that the fine silk cloth means a konakam (inner wear) of fine material. Giving a hundred people food means performing the vaishya ritual, which is equivalent to making a hundred gods happy. A puli inji curry (ginger-curd curry/ginger pickle) is equal to a hundred items, and that is all he needs for his meal. The three people he wants to eat are betel leaves, areca nut and lime-paste. And the four people he needs to support him are the four legs of the cot on which he wishes to lie down after his meal is over

Impressed by the intelligence of the girl who could understand even the complicated conditions he had put forth and the perfect arrangements she made for him, Vararuchi married her. He later realized that the girl he married was the same girl who was sent afloat on the river. The great scholar could not escape his destiny. The brahmin family where he spent the night had found the girl floating in the river and had brought her up. Vararuchi then set on a pilgrimage with his wife. The pilgrimage seemed never ending, and the woman gave birth to twelve children during this journey, while traveling along the banks of river Nila. Vararuchi asked his wife after each delivery, whether the newborn had a mouth or not. On getting an answer in the affirmative, Vararuchi mercilessly asked his wife to leave the child on the wayside and proceed. His justification was that if the child had a mouth, then God would feed him.

Grief-stricken by her husband's actions, when the 12th child was born, she lied and said the baby did not have a mouth, upon which he permitted her to take the child along. But when she was about to breastfeed it, the mouth was actually not there, proving that the words of great personalities do indeed become real. Vararuchi then deified the child on a hill, which is called Vaayillaakkunnilappan (Hill Lord without mouth), near Kadampazhipuram (in the present Palakkad district).

Translated from Aithihyamala (Sankunni 1909: 44)

It is said that families belonging to different communities of Kerala, from brahmins to parayas, brought each abandoned child up. All the children became famous and were revered by the people because of their knowledge and spiritual abilities. They also recognized each other as they grew up. It is said that they used to get together at the illam (residence) of the eldest son, Mezhathol Agnihothri, on their father Vararuchi's Sraadham (death anniversary). These twelve children are believed to be: Mezhathol Agnihothri (brahmin), Paakkanaar (paraya, a low caste), Rajakan (washer man), Naaraanathu Bhraanthan (elayathu, a brahmin of lower strata), Kaarakkal Maatha (a woman of high caste nair), Akavoor Chaathan (vysya/farmer), Vaduthala Nair (nair/soldier), Vallon (pulaya/lower caste), Uppukottan (Muslim), Paananaar (paanan, low caste of nomadic country musicians), Perumthachan (carpenter) and Vaayillaakkunnilappan (deity). The descendants of these famous children consider themselves relatives, despite the vast social and economic gap between them. The

veracity of this legend may be difficult to judge. The legend attempts to endorse the belief that the descendants of these clans are amicable just as the twelve children mentioned in the legend who used to meet up every year to honour their parents. This narrative not only makes the legend unique but far-fetched in the false egalitarian perspective it seems to perpetuate, far removed from the actual social ills of the times which had a regressive caste and social hierarchy.

Until the coming of the Aryans, who established their cultural supremacy in India, there had been no caste system (Edamarukku 1995: 456). Distinctions were based on traditional jobs. The ones who cultivated the *pulam* (fields) were *pulayas*, and the ones who grazed the sheep were shepherds and so on. Then came the Jains and the Buddhists. The patrons of the caste system could not keep up with these faiths. During the time of feud/clashes between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, the caste system was not strong. It was when they got into a compromise that the caste system became deep-rooted. It was considered the duty of the brahmins to salute the Kshatriyas as the class destined to rule the land and they, in turn, would be regarded as those who would ensure salvation for them. So, with the help of the kings, they could eliminate the Buddhist faith and popularize the caste system. The brahmin invaders considered the feudal lords as belonging to one class. The merchants were below them and all the others were even lower in the social hierarchy. This is how the caste system became entrenched in Kerala although it was not as distinct in terms of the structured caste hierarchy as in North India.

Over time, mass awakening and the consequent attitudinal change that has crystallized among a large section of Kerala's population on different issues have opened up diverse themes and new avenues in historiography. Sumit Sarkar (1983: 52) also talks about a quick transition from social reform, initially sought through caste associations, to thoroughgoing radicalism with the swing towards communism as a recurrent feature of Kerala life. The awakening of the subaltern class, ezhavas under the social reformer Sri Narayana Guru was a major anti-brahmin movement and a step towards social awakening. Sri Ayyankali, the foremost dalit activist and social reformer in colonial Kerala challenged the upper caste restrictions on the marginalized communities in education, public space and social interactions. This has given rise to a subaltern approach towards Kerala history like P. K. Balakrishnan's *Jathivyavysthayaum Kerala Charithravum* (Caste Structure and Kerala History) and Edamarukku *T. C. Joseph's Kerala Samskaram* (Culture of Kerala). It was realized that what was hawked as Kerala history until recently was a mixture

of myths and legends, which were fabricated by the dominant forces of the feudal period to give legitimacy to the casteist order that was established possibly a thousand years ago.

Conclusion

In his book, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson says that the nation [here, a region] is imagined as a community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation prevalent in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (1991: 6). In the legend-making process, Sankunni created an "imagined community", to borrow the term from Benedict Anderson, where he tried to give an account of the history of the period in a homogenized framework, regardless of the actual hegemony and inequality that existed then. Therefore, the Kerala legends can be read in this light where a conscious attempt can be traced out in constructing an "imagined history" of the dominant classes/castes (even resorting to a divine validation as in the mythological references) to subvert the local history/legends of the other communities.

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