

Case Study

# Historicizing the Non-Brahmin Identity and Cultural Syncretism of Kerala: A Case of Thiruvalla

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## ABSTRACT

Syncretism is a combination of two separate ideas that combined together as a unique discourse. Cultural syncretism can be described as a kind of cultural amalgamation of two or more different cultural structures that create a new tradition, design, practice, or philosophy. An analytical approach persuaded by modern anthropologists and which has been found to be extremely widespread in the study of traditions, is to classify them into two broad categories—the Little Tradition and the Great Tradition. Little Tradition is close to primitive and will be marked by its continuity. The basic feature of Little Tradition is “nature-oriented”. The Great Tradition is more powerful intellectually and hence dominant. Great Tradition in its turn, proceeds by absorbing the good qualities of Little Tradition and places its permanent stamp of authority on the latter. [1] In other words, the Little Tradition is compelled to accept supremacy of Great Tradition. Consequently the Little Tradition slowly gets relegated, sidelined or even erased in this process. Robert Redfield as a discernible phenomenon in each society has conceived this. [2] Some of the vital factors that make up the identity of a social group are its distinctive lifestyle, cultural practices and observances. As a direct consequence of the interaction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition, mixed traditions also take shape. However it will still be possible for the anthropologist and the historian to discern the remnants or elements of the various cultural practices and observances of the ‘originary’, wired and primitive Little Traditions in the mixed tradition but tactfully subordinated by the Great Tradition. [3] The Brahmin settlement in Thiruvalla had attracted the interest of many scholars and historians. It is possible to contextualize the religious and cultural legacy of Thiruvalla to the theoretical framework of a cultural syncretism.

**Keywords:** Syncretism, Mixed Tradition, Non-Brahmin, Primitivism, Parochialization, Universalization

## INTRODUCTION

The Spiritual and Customary Practices of Kerala culture in particular the cultural belts of Central Travancore shows the symptoms of a Mixed Tradition. [4] The epigraphic and textual evidences suggest that Brahmanism was prevalent in Kerala at least from 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. [5] The aspects such as Albinism and Derma-pigmentation separated the Brahmin community from the rest and hence it becomes an intellectually dominant group in the power structure and

this resulted in a process of Brahmanisation in Kerala [6]

*Granthavaries* are authoritative texts, functioned as early temple and *illams* [7] records on daily affairs found in several parts of Kerala mentioned the existence of certain Non-Brahmanic communities and its customary practices. The Sanskrit text *Kularnavatantra* speaks a few re-oriented Non-Brahmanic terms i.e. *Vamamarga*, *Panchamakara* or sometimes *Kaulachara* to signify a Non-Brahmanic mode of worship. *Panchamakara* or *Vamamarga* can be

spotted as a combination of five fundamental elements i.e. *Madya* (liquor), *Mamsa* (meat), *Mathsya* (fish), *Mudra* (black magic) and *Mantra* (hymns). Self-dedication, total surrender, extreme faith and sacrifice are the philosophical components of *Kaulachara* system. [8] The intellectual dominance and proficiency of Brahmanic systems provided a space for the conversion of Non-Brahmanic groups in to Brahmanism. [9] The above mentioned sources are satisfactory at least in tracing an interaction among the two Traditions.

An elementary fieldwork over this region suggest the presence of 'Living Non-Brahmanic communities' exist in the worshipping centers such as *Kavus* and Hilly Tribal centers. The Geo specialties and the absence of appropriate modes of communication prevented the scope of an interaction here. The Colonial modernity and attempts of Modernization opened the scope of proper communication and interaction. [10] This naturally resulted in creating certain exceptions in this context. The interaction and assimilation resulted in occurring both 'Universalization' and 'Parochialization' in Kerala's Hindu Spiritual domain and a 'Mixed Tradition' attained in its space over here.

Culture can be defined as a complex whole which includes the entire experiences of humanity. [10] The historical enquiry of culture separates each and all elements from its complexity and tracing the roots of each factors of culture. Here the study opted a vision of viewing the things from 'Present to past' and primarily objected in rooting the early traits of Non-Brahmanic cultures of Kerala. It is also important in this context to state that this is not a study of a particular community or any social groups. This is simply an attempt to analyze historically the process of cultural interaction and the evolution of cultures. Here the area of my topic is local but the process is universal.

The absence of quality secondary materials is a major obstacle in studying the topic especially in the area of Non-Brahmanic cultures. *The authors of Cultural*

*Anthropology and Sociology contributed largely in explaining ideas of Cultural assimilation and Formation of Traditions. Among them Robert Redfield's The Little Community* needs primary mentioning. Mckim Marriott's *Village study in Indian community* opened the scope for placing the theme in Kerala context. Keshavan Veluthat's study of Brahmin Settlements presents how the Brahmins were able to shift the semi tribal and primitive social structure in to a temple centered, semi autonomous, and society. [11] The works of P. Unnikrishnan Nair on Thiruvalla village such as *Thiruvallakshetramahathmyam, Upasanamurthikal* are useful works in generating a primary level of Understanding on the topic.

Since the study requires an interdisciplinary approach, I would like to incorporate ethnographical and anthropological methods for this research. This will be also supplemented by an extensive field work in the proposed area. I would also like to use the ethno-archaeological approach in this visit and see how it is useful in constructing a social history of the evolution of a mixed tradition.

The aborigine tradition in this area is Non Brahmanic system. The traditional worshipping tribes like *Malaarayyas* and *Velas* lost their priesthood in many centers. Naturally it effected in the customs and practices of primitive system. The *Koulachara* system is replaced and the Vedic worshipping system has occupied its position. This movement Brahmanised deities were placed with primitive gods and changed originality. This process of cultural capture commenced from the entry of Brahmanism and still it is continuing. This movement also creates traditional and historical loses. For example, a *devaprashnam* was held in 1980's and the basic structure and tradition of this deity center was converted in to Brahmanic. Now the chief priest (*tanthri*) is from *Paramboor illam*, a Brahman family. As per the recommendation of *Devaprasnam* the primitive idles were dropped in river

*Manimala* and this incident interpreted as *jalasamadhi*. At the same way the history of the Non Brahmanic period of this area also immersed as *Jalasadhi*.

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2. Robert Redfield, *Folk Cultures of the Yucatan*, pp.13-27
3. *Ibid.*
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5. Keshavan Veluthat, *The Nambudiri Community*, p.18.
6. M.G.S Narayanan, *Aspects of Aryanisation in Kerala*, pp.55-70.
7. *Illams*-The Brahmanic residence.
8. Medavarapu Sampath Kumar, *Koulachara tantra*,(Telungu),p.12.
9. Kuzhikkattu Granthavari, at present documented in the Kerala University Manuscript Library(Palm leaf -no-2642,2655) refers the conversion of 22 Non-Brahmanic centers.
10. M. A. Oommen, *Rethinking development: Kerala's development experience*, pp.122-127.
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