

Introduction

Long may they [i.e. the Nampūtiris] be what they are,
the only undisturbed vestiges of Vedic Brahmanism¹
(Fawcett 1900: 85).

1. AIMS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The south Indian state of Kerala is well known to Indologists for its conservatism. The caste system is said to have achieved here its greatest rigidity. The men of the highest caste, the Kerala Brahmins called Nampūtiris, have preserved religious customs and practices from a very ancient past. Their archaic ritual songs and recitations have attracted the attention of a number of scholars since the 1930s (Bake 1935; Staal 1961; Howard 1977), and their solemn *śrauta* rituals have been thoroughly documented and studied (Staal 1983).

Kerala is not only known as the state where many Vedic traditions have been preserved longer than in most other parts of India. Kerala is also known as an exceptionally advanced and modern state, often referred to as the 'success story of India' thanks to its socio-economic achievements (cf., e.g., Weisman 1988). Kerala as a whole, and especially its non-Brahmin castes, have been the focus of studies on social reform in India (cf., e.g., Fuller 1976).

There is more than one paradox in Kerala, a place which has been held as an example, not only to inspire, but also to warn. Old Kerala has been called the 'lunatic asylum of India' or 'a madhouse of caste' with its problems of untouchability. Travancore state, again, was seen by the British as a model Native State in the 1860s, because the local Mahārāja had opened his country to missionaries and to plantation agriculture, and established a British-style administration there. By the 1950s Kerala had become the problem state, 'the Yenan of India', where communism had found a base from which it could spread, only to emerge as a model of successful social reform by the 1970s. To complete the paradox, it was announced in the 1990s that there is no Kerala model after all. The statistics that have intrigued

¹ Brahmanism: 'A term commonly used to denote a system of religious institutions originated and elaborated by the *Brāhmins*, the sacerdotal and, from an early period, the dominant caste of the Hindū community' (*The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (1910-11), IV: 381).

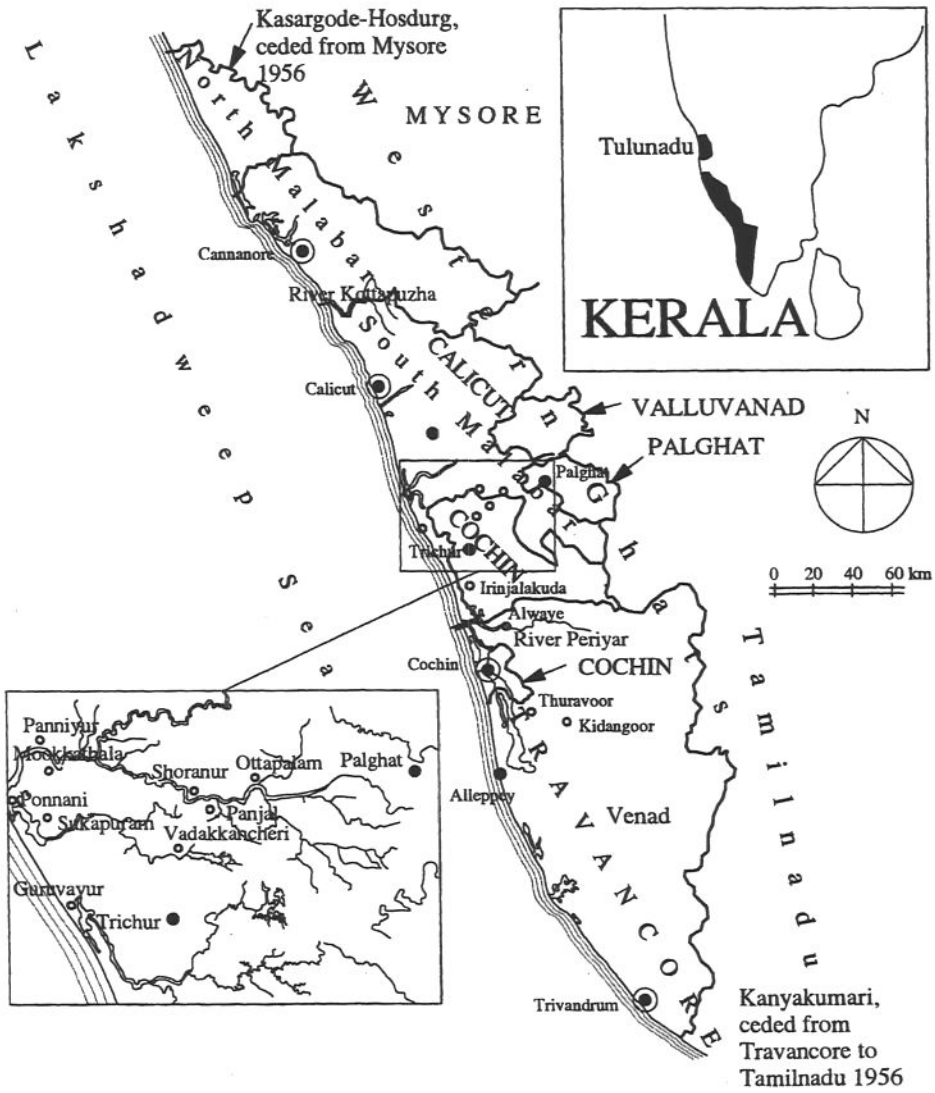


Fig. 1. Map of Kerala (drawn by Henri Schildt).

scholars only stemmed from the way in which public politics and the role of women took shape between the 1920s and 1950s, but, later, hope and prospects have been centred elsewhere. (Cf., e.g., Franke & Chasin 1989: 75; Jeffrey 1992: 4, 217; Damodaran & Visvanathan 1995: 12.)

When my husband Asko Parpola (henceforth AP) went for the third time to Panjal village in Kerala to study Vedic ritual as performed by Kerala Brahmins, I accompanied him. I worked for the research project 'Domestic rituals of the Jaiminiya Sāmaveda' (cf. A. Parpola 1984; 1985) in 1983 and 1985, photographing domestic rituals, and collected data and artifacts illustrating the theme.² I had for some time been working on the symbolism of dress and personal appearance in Indian domestic rituals, basing my study on translations into English of ancient Indian texts (cf. M. Parpola 1986). Having in mind Victor Turner's (1967: 45, 50-51) different levels or fields of meaning of a symbol and etic and emic information, I thought that I could continue this study by observing and interviewing specialists and laymen.

When preparing for my field trip to Kerala I became interested in new aspects of Indian society and culture. The Kerala Nampūtiri Brahmins as a special group and their culture, not only the Brahmin culture in general, started to occupy my mind. I came across a set of very concrete and detailed ancient rules, the so-called 'irregular customs of Kerala', which first and foremost apply to the Nampūtiris. It struck me immediately on the first day that I spent in Panjal village in Kerala that some details of personal appearance of the Nampūtiris tallied with the instructions given in these exceptional rules. I subsequently developed such an interest for observing what was going on among the Nampūtiris and comparing historical sources and actual life around me that I changed my study plan. This study has grown into the present work.

AP worked especially closely with an elderly Nampūtiri, and we, as a couple, lived in the home of this learned Vedic ritualist. I came to know the members of his family very well, and I am writing about the Nampūtiri Brahmin culture from my intimate experience living and corresponding with them. I do not concentrate on analysing rituals, Vedic or others, as such, but they are always there in the background. The Nampūtiris were earlier obliged to perform daily religious exercises, the objective of which was to make their entire daily lives a religious experience (cf., e.g., Lemercinier 1984: 173).

Rapid social change can be expected to have consequences for and put special pressure on the life of the Nampūtiris, the traditional elite that has been in control of the religious sphere and politico-economic power in Kerala for many centuries. The aim of this book is to be an ethnography of a group of Nampūtiris with the general

² I collected more than 600 items of artifacts, illustrating the everyday and ritual life of Nampūtiris, for the collection of the National Museum of Finland (cf. M. Parpola 1995).

purpose of examining whether Vedic Brahmanism still thrives in Kerala and how the Nampūtiris have coped with the initially outward pressure for change, and with the special purpose of studying what the Nampūtiris' relationship to some ancient Kerala customs or rules is nowadays. Knowing that in Tamil Nadu, the neighbouring Dravidian-speaking state, the Brahmin dominance has virtually disappeared, the Dravidianist ideology identifying the Brahmins as Aryan 'others', it is all the more interesting to study the situation in Kerala.

My orientation is thus toward seeking for cultural persistence from the past. The special rules contain an impressive amount of detail concerning many aspects of personal life. Today, many middle-aged and younger Nampūtiris refer to their old customs and written rules of conduct as being something that only belongs to the past. At the same time, they admit that they still have some familiarity with these texts. Whenever there is enough evidence of ideals actually being followed in an earlier phase, I will try to find out about cultural persistence and change. I intend to study in which areas of life and in what order change is taking place among this group of people, and, if old customs prevail, what seems to keep them alive.

Further, it is my aim to study whether modernization also means Westernization. While examining the changes in Kerala society from this perspective I will take into consideration first of all the nationalist movement of India. This movement openly stated what kind of influences were to be adopted from the West and what kind of indigenous features were to be preserved. Secondly, I will bear in mind the current discussion about the role of the globalization process, and try to observe whether multinational/transnational corporations have been able to expand their activities into the lives of the people among whom I study (cf., e.g., Chakravarthi 1996: 7-16).

I do not approach my subject with the help of one single theory or idea. On the contrary, I try to find answers to my questions in several ways. I will, for instance, consider the material in the light of theories which are concerned with the relationship between status and politico-economic power in India. Hierarchy, purity and pollution and their relationship to power are very important for understanding the functioning of the Indian society, and I aim to take this topic, which was of great interest some 20-35 years ago, up again. In India the universe is often thought to be dichotomized into the categories of pure and impure, and the status ranking in the caste system is said to be based on this notion. Pollution rules will be referred to throughout this work as people's attitude and relation to them can be seen as indicators of conservatism or change.

The Nampūtiri women have not received much attention in ritual studies, as their part in the Vedic rituals is very marginal. They have not been in the focus of social studies either, which is partly explained by the fact that they were long kept almost in seclusion and out of reach of outsiders. The women of another caste, the

matrilineal Nāyars, traditionally the soldier caste, have caught the attention of foreign observers centuries before the birth of modern anthropology on account of their polyandrous marriage system. The 'women problem' in studies which concern Indian social reforms in general is much discussed, but not in studies which concern caste movements, although the line drawn between these is rather arbitrary. (Cf., e.g., Gough 1955; 1959; Fuller 1976: 1ff.; Moore 1988: 254; Awaya 1995.)³

I will not pay particular attention to feminist theories, as my wider interests in Kerala prevent me from concentrating on the position of women to the extent done in many recent studies (cf., e.g., Kumar 1994). The Vedic texts and the special rules emphasize the world of men and their rituals. The marginal and hidden inside role of the women is part and parcel of their ideology. But even if my informants represent Brahmin male views in the first place, this is not to say that female voices will not also be heard. The informants' autobiographies also deal extensively with Nampūtiri women. Although my sources do not pay much attention to women's rituals, I aim to illustrate the parallel ritual life of Nampūtiri women, not visible in Vedic texts, with the help of examples. Everyday family life will be in the foreground. My initial observations and studies used as sources widen the perspective to other castes as well.

I hope to be able to understand and interpret both public and private meanings and explore the dialectic between culture and the individual's agency (cf. Geertz 1973: 3-30; Bourdieu 1977; Høiris 1993: 43-46; Silverman 1990: 124). Since I am myself taking an active part in the process of field-work, a dialogue between my informants and myself (cf., e.g., Marcus & Fischer 1986), I will come forward and try to explain my role. As my special purpose is to compare ancient rules for Brahmin conduct, rules that they are or were still recently familiar with, actual written texts, with their observed and reported behaviour, I also aim to make a serious effort to compare some different written versions of Kerala rules and find out the correct intended meaning.

As this study is written not only for those who are acquainted with India, I have included some background information that at least Indologists will find superfluous.

³ Nampūtiri women have described their own lot since the 1920s in their belletristic writings, the most often mentioned example being the novel *Agnisakshi* by Lalithambika Antharjanam (Damodaran & Visvanathan 1995: 6).

