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Preserving Malayali Identities: Local Cultural Pollution in Colonial Travancore

Owing mainly to different factors –such as its multicultural bisection, its size, its economic blossoming or even The Partition’s subsuming repercussions – Kerala has been, in humanistic and academic terms, usually eclipsed by other Indian regions that might seem to be more galvanising. The former kingdom of Travancore, Kerala after the post-independent annexation, worked as a social laboratory for the westernisation of the colonies. Needless to say, Travancore was no exception for the empire’s autocratic ruling. This region nevertheless offered a unique mosaic of challenging obstacles for the installation of the imperial biopsy: an aristocratic matriarchal apparatus, a different caste system never documented before or a syncretistic amalgam of tribal paganism and Hindu doctrines. These singularities made of Travancore an immune kingdom to the English colonising agenda. The empire thus decided to implant a system that, far from being culturally bellicose, it will gradually reshape Kerala’s harmony. This scheme finally succeeded. The British, with the un-/intentional help of the local government and royal family, tried to distort these native singularities to a point where these were neither completely European nor Indian anymore, but, on the contrary, these will eventually conform a homogenous community. These new resulting perverted identities were, no doubt, more flexible and mouldable to the needs of the English.

It is neither my intention nor I am qualified to fill such monumental chapter as Kerala’s colonial history. Much on the contrary, this paper attempts to shed as much light as possible on the Anglo-Indian interactions between English colonisers and regional aristocrats as well as high-casted locals. To that end, I have consulted Rev. Samuel Mateer’s *The Land of Charity* (1871) and *Native Life in Travancore* (1883), these two historical records offer a provocative picture that, although ideologically biased, is meticulously elaborated. Although Mateer’s work explores topics as diverse as agriculture, caste and pollution or serpent worship, among others, this paper rather

focuses on these cultural vehicles that have been deliberately reshaped for the benefit of the European acclimatisation. These range from legislative dispositions such as revising the local academic curricula while, incidentally, introducing English educational modules, or, for example, to delimit the role and traditions of the different Travancorean royal families to a more mundane way of indoctrination as in rituals, fashion or even architecture.

My findings ultimately suggest that these contaminating relations between local royal families and British oligarchs have altered the meaning of what is native in terms of history, culture and even politics. Unlike other Indian states where this process of acculturation turned more aggressive – then making it more evident – in Travancore this agenda took more subtle nuances thus problematizing the meaning of imperialist inheritance. This colonial hangover is thus still echoing in present-day Kerala, this is why the Department of Cultural Affairs has established – with the aid of academics, historians or linguists, among others – a series of cultural institutions which are responsible for the rescuing and restructuration of those local traditions that have either been forgotten or rewritten.

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