

## **THE TRUTH ABOUT FISHING: IL (LEGALITY) OF WORK IN PRINCELY TRAVANCORE**

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**Abstract:** As a livelihood activity, fishing and the related activities of the subsistent economy was of least interest to the policy makers of both British and Princely Travancore. But over the years, under colonial supervisors, Travancore state went on to modernize, reform and change its society and economy. Social reformers took the responsibility of changing social morals and values. Whereas, economic reforms were largely under the purview of state officials. The state encountered a problem with fishing community, as their activities were deemed as non-productive, and therefore valueless labour. Valueless labour has to be value added the colonial officials insisted. Therefore fishing and related practices became on the verge of becoming illegal, because the community was neither a worker nor a peasant that contributed to the state revenue. My paper will look into the ambiguities of respectable and legal aspects of the definition of work in these policy debates.

**Keywords:** *British, Fishermen, Legal, Princely, Travancore*

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Travancore Princely state situated in the south western peninsular India was one of the rich states of British Princely India. Under the resident system of rule, and with a choice of Dewans recognized by the colonial administrators, these Princely states had semi-autonomous status of rule that allowed them to develop unique styles of modernity and regional identity. In a recent work of importance on Princely rule in India namely Mysore, Janaki Nair recounts, 'how the

instrumentalities of state power refracted through the trappings of monarchy<sup>1</sup>. The importance of becoming ‘modern’ like western and yet to remain ‘traditional’ in their own ways was in the knowledge of some Princely states<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, very early under the circumstances of colonial rule of British Paramountcy, Travancore state too devised its ‘secret path’ towards ‘Modernity’ and that was its unique ways of handling ‘political economy’ with human development<sup>3</sup>. Wealth creation had to go by removing superstitions that blocked the development activities and also by promoting entrepreneurship amongst the educated youngsters, who, in the words of Prince Ramaverma, were only looking for mere Government jobs with the hope to draw salaries as their only achievement<sup>4</sup>.

It is with the hope of embracing ‘Modernity’ and to achieve a future ‘Nation’s’ status, the Travancore state followed a series of economic reforms that changed its economic and land relations of many years<sup>5</sup>. The pace of changes happening in economic sphere were not followed adequately in the social sphere<sup>6</sup> and that resulted with social movements of various hues from missionaries to low caste Dalit groups challenging caste orthodoxy and temple controls over property and labour<sup>7</sup>. These movements for equality and dignity had its inspiring origins from the many Protestant missions run educational institutions that accommodated many low caste students who were denied admission by the high caste authorities of the state run schools. Therefore, the struggle for equality started with access to public spaces and dignity for everyone irrespective of their caste belonging. And it had to be waged as ‘labour strike’ by Ayyankali, a noted Pulaya caste leader of Dalit groups in Venganoor of Thiruvananthapuram District of Travancore state<sup>8</sup>. Ayyankali’s strike was a success and slowly the authorities had to take steps to accommodate lower castes in public places like schools, hospitals and other Government establishments. These changes in relaxation of caste rules by upper castes and accepting low caste as students in state run schools as a token measure in recognizing the spirit of the social movements, the low caste groups could find the weaker spot in the high caste controlled state administrative apparatus. And that was to bring to halt production activities like road building,

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<sup>1</sup> For details on the debates of modernity in Mysore and also its historiographical importance to the study of Princely rule elsewhere, see Janaki Nair, *Mysore Modern: Rethinking the region under the Princely Rule*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi: 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Hollow Crown: Ethno history of an Indian Kingdom*. Cambridge University Press, 1988

<sup>3</sup> For more details on Travancore political economy and human development issues involving low caste social movements against untouchability and for entry in public places, see K. T. Rammohan, *Material Processes and Developmentalism: Interpreting Economic Change in Colonial Tiruvitamkur 1800-1945*. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the University of Kerala, 1996. Also P K Michael Tharakan, ‘History as Development Experience: Desegregated and Deconstructed Analysis of Kerala’. Mahatma Gandhi University, 2004

<sup>4</sup> Address of Prince Vishakhom Thirunal Ramaverma, ‘Our Industrial Status’, Travancore Debating Society, 1892.

<sup>5</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1976, Pp1-7

<sup>6</sup> Robin Jeffrey, *the Decline...* P. 6

<sup>7</sup> T C Varghese, *Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences: Land Tenures in Kerala 1850-1960*, Bombay, Allied Publishers, 1970

<sup>8</sup> C. Abhimanyu, Ayyankali, *Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications*, Government of Kerala, 1989.

irrigation activities, farm laboring, artisanal labour etc. by calling mass strikes and boycotting all economic activities of the state and upper castes.

### **To be Modern, You have to speed up...**

In the beginning of 20th century, the state, the upper caste officials and other experts brought from the Madras Presidency showed impatience with the pace of economic activities happening in Travancore, as if time was running out for them<sup>9</sup>. As per the deliberations and discussions with the British officials, the state went for reorganization by introducing various branches of Departments, manuals and rules of administration. Followed by the British planter's success in the hills with coffee, tea, pepper and cardamom plantations Travancore state also encouraged commercialization in paddy cultivations in the lowland areas of Kollam, Alappuzha and Kottayam. Like the planter Raj in the hills by white westerners, the Travancore state wanted a bourgeois class of its own amongst the natives who can replicate financial success in its agrarian and manufacturing sectors by investing and innovating in its agrarian and industrial belt. The state wanted a caste Raj over the natives rather than a planter Raj that would always be loyal to the British and it feared may provoke rebellion amongst the natives by converting them to Christianity or by inspiring the young low castes to rebel for social change. This was done by asking many of elite natives to take shares in its officially promoted banking systems or by forming cooperative societies amongst them by releasing soft loans for enterprisers in cashew, coir and lime shell sectors. The state economic activities were according to the standards set by the liberal economic persuasions by following the 'invisible hands of market'<sup>10</sup> in every possible way. This was also devised as a means to avoid social and political tensions emerging in the context of various caste based social movements demanding equality and also by the native liberal and Indian nationalist movement leader's calling for the abolition of monarchy in Travancore. So, in short, whenever social tensions and conflict situations emerged for legitimate reasons, state found an opportunity to deny it by saying that, it would affect work and eventually the economy of the state. Agitating leaders and movement participants were always warned that their actions would cause 'great harm' to the economy and therefore their own livelihood, and not the state which was just supervising everything on behalf of all Travancoreans!

The material changes, brought by colonialism changed Travancore not just in political terms but too in social terms. The caste based social structure underwent major changes in Travancore with missionaries introducing western education and apart from that the economy also prospered with new players amongst the natives. The middle caste groups like Syrian Christians, Muslims and

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<sup>9</sup> Many discussions about the wasteful expenses, idling, and laziness among the natives in Travancore were the routine subject matters of early discussions with the British officials by Travancore Princely State officials. For more on the subject see, V. Nagam Aiya, the Travancore State Manual 3 Vols. Trivandrum: Govt. Press, 1906, p 14-16.

<sup>10</sup> It should be mentioned here that Travancore is one amongst the Princely states to follow liberal economy according to Adam Smith's famous, Wealth of Nations, for its policy framework very early in 19<sup>th</sup> century itself. Prince Ramaverma of Trivendrum debating society was using Adam Smith's insights to analyze Travancore's political economy in his lectures to educated natives. For more details see, Vishakhom Thirunal Ramaverma, 'Our Industrial Status', 1892.

Ezhavas too witnessed radical changes in their economic status as many of them were drawn into the commodity rules of world market. Market relations started dominating many sectors that were gradually opened by the state in consultations with colonial bureaucracy. The sectors that witnessed radical changes were both agriculture and manufacturing.

Travancore's low lying areas which are supposed to be undersea water level in central and north Travancore had many waterbodies like lagoons, backwaters and estuaries that had many low caste agrarian and fisher groups residing in the adjacent lands owned by the jannies (landlords). Lot many of these landlords had absolute control over these low castes and their laboring activity. Traditionally, the customer rights of Travancore and the local temple, shrine and church rules provided the necessary checks on the absolute status of the landlords. Many villages in south and central Travancore had moral and customary rituals, rules and practices that provided low castes access to resources, food crops and articles of importance like salt. But the land reforms initiated as early as in 1865, changed all these by giving more propertied individual rights to landlords who could evict a tenant or dependent labourers without any reason<sup>11</sup>. The reforming state did not want the momentum of economic and ecological changes to stop by responding to the agitating caste groups. Rather it squarely blamed them for not improving themselves economically. But the assertive groups like Ezhavas, Nairs and Syrian Christian middle strata groups organized socially as community organizations and later politically bargained with the state. The opening of the legislative assemblies and various offices of the many departments of government were made open to Nairs, Christians and Muslims by deviating from the early practice of employing only Tamil Brahmins. Ezhavas and other low castes were left out from employment in state services.

It was in this context of demand for employment opportunities and economic benefits state promoted few enterprisers to start reclamation policy in central and north Travancore areas. The reclamation activity was carried out by using the labour powers of backward and Dalit castes. It was both capitals intensive as well as labour intensive. And the labourers were put in the service for reclaiming thousands of acres of wetland from the shallow waters of Vembanadu lake, Kayamkulam Lake and Ashtamudi lake in Kollam. The land was embanked by removing water manually through pedal pumps and mud banks were constructed to keep the water away. This was a herculean task, according to some surveyors visiting Travancore in 1916<sup>12</sup>. The caste groups who could be absorbed as labourers were naturally the traditional middle level agrarian and labour caste groups like the Ezhavas, Syrian Christians, Roman Catholics, Latin Catholics (of Kottayam, Kollam, Alappuzha and Alappuzha Diocese) and the Dalit agrarian groups like the Pulayas and Parayas. The Agriculture department, state Public works Department and

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<sup>11</sup> T C Varghese, *Agrarian Change and Economic Consequence*, pp 105-07

<sup>12</sup> Visit of Madras Presidency officials. In 1914, a group of British officials working under Frederic Nicholson of the Fisheries department and in charge of Cooperative societies visited Travancore upon the invitation of Narayana Aiyer. The team toured in the first year of their visit to study the scope for improving agriculture and industry. In the next year they suggested to travel in the interiors of Travancore by boat to study the water reclamation possibilities and also to find water transport system to connect efficiently with the Cochin port linking the many interior markets. File no. 1972- Year 1911 onwards to 1921 of Department of Development, Travancore, 1921, p114.

Revenue Department did the ‘overseeing’ work respectively and the big capitalists were accorded royal titles and recognition by the state for making Travancore a rice exporter rather than a rice importer<sup>13</sup>.

### **The Change and the Victim**

The only social groups who suffered considerably in this material processes of ecological and economic changes were the fisher caste groups of central and north Travancore like, the Dheevaras, Mukkuvas, Arayas, Latin catholic fisher castes, Muslim fisher castes and the Padannans of the Alappuzha district. Most of these groups were involved in fishing and other related occupations in the waterbodies like fishing, clam collections, oyster catch, salt mining, irrigation channeling, water transport of both people and goods, flood water management in the interiors of Travancore. When Travancore state actively pursued land based productions like agriculture and industry its water based productions suffered a major setback. The wetlands that were reclaimed had also the customary and traditional involvement of many fishing families for clearing water from the fields before farming starts. They also had the responsibility of channeling water in the interiors by pedaling water from one block of the field to the next. Not to mention it was also expected of them to control and maintain the water levels of many paddy fields of the landlords. As a concessionary gesture from the landlord, they were allowed to keep fixed gear and traps for fish catching. But some others were allowed to use fixed Chinese nets on river fronts, waterbodies and lands with backwater boundaries. These catches were their personal right and they could use it to exchange basket full of fish for rice. Reclamation activities in the lakes affected many of them badly. Large numbers of them were replaced by mechanical pump operators who had the skills to operate pumps. In many places, pump house damages, mud bank destructions and boundary walls collapses were reported. The blames went on and large number of the fisher castes were arrested, brutally punished or shot by police. Large number of them got added as ‘criminal castes’ by the state<sup>14</sup>. Around this time, a new Superintendent of Forest and Miscellaneous department was appointed by the Resident commissioner in charge of Travancore and Cochin upon the recommendations of the surveyors of Travancore. One of the surveyors recommended for the establishment a separate Department for Fisheries. And his recommending letter cited that Travancore’s territory comprised of waterbodies that is close to 40% of its land area. He also emphasized for its maximum utilization by the Government. His recommendations went to Dewan’s office.

### **Inventing the ‘fisher Man’....**

Dewan’s recommendations went to the circle office of Karunagappally near Kollam District and special meetings of the stake holders were called and Narayana Aiyer came as the nominee of The Travancore Govt., Frederic Barker, specially invited by the Industries Department, Director

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<sup>13</sup> For more details on the reclamation activities in Travancore and the laboring activities involved in the material processes of development, see K T Rammohan, *Tales of Rice : Kuttanad, South west India*. Thiruvananthapuram: Centre for Development Studies, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> File no. 1972 / 1915, Development Department, Travancore Government for the year 1916.

of Department of Agriculture Vasudeva Pillai and few members of the Janmi representatives of all districts too attended. The deliberations recommended for the creation of a separate Fisheries Department under Agriculture Department separating it from the Forest and Miscellaneous Department with a Superintendent in charge of it reporting their day to day matters to The Director, Department of Agriculture. A separate wing was created in Trivandrum itself with 12 officers, 5 inspectors, 8 sepoys and a police Inspector with 2 head constables and 24 constables,<sup>15</sup> to meet the immediate task of disciplining the fisher castes.

The immediate task of the Department was to discipline the fisher castes and thereafter to find the scope for value additions in Fisheries sector so that more people could be accommodated in Fisheries. Traditionally both Agriculture and small scale industries were the primary employers of most Travancoreans. But the recent changes brought in by commercialization brought many people as unemployed and there was rush towards Agriculture, where large number of them could not be employed. The critical changes brought by land reclamation activities left many members in the waterbodies jobless and the traditional customary practices were not followed by the land lords who wanted commercial exploitation of paddy fields.

In 1917, a delegation of Fisher caste community members under their community organization leader's met the 'in charge' of Department of Fisheries who could listen to their grievances. They submitted a memorandum demanding that the fishing communities to be involved in the Department affairs<sup>16</sup>. But the files moved across various departments and offices adding many submissions and comments. One such comment was that, the fishing community lacked discipline like the peasant communities. And the commend goes

To say that fisherfolks lack discipline. They don't work throughout .Like agriculturists and labourers throughout the day. Large numbers of them work in the night. They look for tides so that shoals of fish come in the night and they can trap it. And then they sleep throughout the day. It seems women of the houses look after them and also provide care, food and other requirements. Their children are care less. The men drink a lot and are incapable to work in a day long work in the coco nut, paddy and banana fields. He cannot even hold farm instruments for that matter. How can he be responsible? His work routine is like that. It's better to leave him like that. Give him minimum rice for his survival that is enough<sup>17</sup>.

In an added comment to the same file another note appears to say that agriculturists have fixed tenure and they produce paddy out of their best efforts<sup>18</sup>. Their time schedule seemed to be according to the order of nature following the sun, moon and the calendar. Whereas, the fisherman was lost his time, with days, nights and calendar largely because he seemed to be at loss with the order of nature. It was better for him, if he remained fixed with agriculture or small scale industry where disciplined work according to sun light, seasonal rains etc. mattered the work schedule, rather than a day's catch in fishing. The concluding section even went on to say

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<sup>15</sup> File no .1974/ 1915, Development Department, Travancore Government for the year 1916.m

<sup>16</sup> It is not known who all visited the Superintendent of Fisheries section.

<sup>17</sup> File No. 114 -1918 for the Department of Agriculture, Travancore Govt.

<sup>18</sup> File no 117- 1918, Department of Agriculture.

that state govt.'s intention might be good but it was going to create losses for the state and it would be better if Department of Fisheries got closed for creating further scopes in Agriculture and industries Department<sup>19</sup>. File notes from Resident Commissioner's office from Madras Presidency dated March 12 1918 was detailed about the fate of fishermen but not of fisheries. The note suggested that Fisheries elsewhere got wider recognitions owing to the involvement of general public other than the traditionally involved fishermen<sup>20</sup>. Countries like Norway, Denmark and the States of America advanced in fisheries because the fishing communities welcomed the technological changes and the general public interest by keeping the working conditions attractive throughout. But in Travancore this community was the least respectable as they were the 'thieves and marauders of the sea. That perception was justified by quoting Duarte Barbosa verbatim:

They are great thieves and shameless: they marry and their children inherit, and their wives sleep with whom they like without thinking ill of it.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, Duarte Barbosa had also commented that they were the first communities any foreigner encountered on the coasts of Malabar. In one of his observations he found that:

These people for the most part get their living at sea, they are fishermen. Their nephews are their heirs, and not their sons, because they not marry. These people live in separate villages: their women are very pretty and whiter than others of their country because they are for the most part daughters of foreigners who are white!<sup>22</sup>

No wonder, for the policy makers in Madras, the fishing community was unsuitable for development. Because, according to the moral standards set by the Victorian ethos of the colonial administrators and native elites, the fishing community required better 'disciplining' for themselves than a separate department of Fisheries for them.

But on the other hand, in the coastal areas of Coromandel and South Canara areas of Mysore, Frederic Nicholson along with his efficient team members were bringing changes in the lives of fishing communities. He founded the cooperative schemes and thrift banking for the community members and encouraged the educated leaders to go for social reform movements. Gradually the changes were more visible and the condition of the sea fishermen improved better than their freshwater river fishermen. They were able to better their catch, improve their timings of fishing and encouraged to fish in the early mornings than the night trawls which they were used to. All

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<sup>19</sup> Now it is evident that there might have been few inter departmental rivalries and tasks in the concluding comments. The senior officials were not in favour of new independent department that was functioning autonomously under the Director's office in the same office without the mandatory official hierarchies of postings. The file notes between two senior officers became an issue for considerations in 1916 and the circle office meetings were called separately by the Dewan's Officer on special duty to deliberate upon it. File notes 118-26 pp of Department of Agriculture.

<sup>20</sup> File Notes pp-134-35.

<sup>21</sup> File Notes p137.

<sup>22</sup> Duarte Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.* 1866. Reprint Edition 1970, Johnson Reprint Corporation.p234

in all, the community members became receptive to changes<sup>23</sup>. In Calicut and neighboring areas they were able to establish good fish curing yards where hygienically cured dried and sun dried fishes of export European quality could be sent to Malaysia, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Nicholson became perhaps the most revered British officer in Malabar and Madras due to his success with the fishermen of Madras Presidency. The news of Nicholson's efforts in cooperative societies and his value addition attempts in Fisheries sector reached Cochin Princely State where, the social reform leader of the fisher caste groups, the Dheeveras, Pandit Karuppan took it upon himself to go with Fisheries improvement<sup>24</sup> in Kochi. Upon his advice, few leaders from Travancore took the initiative for having Fisheries sector there.

The leaders submitted another round of memorandum submissions to convince Travancore authorities for Fisheries department. Their submissions had been approved by the new Superintendent of the Fisheries, who wanted timely actions towards Fisheries department and social improvements at the ground level. The new appointee, Mr. Banerjee deputed from Madras, also took it as an opportunity to conduct Fisheries activities as well as community improvement. It was also visible from different corners in other departments that they would not remain cooperative with Mr. Banerjee, perceived to be an outsider, by many. His enthusiasm for scientific culturing of fishes and taxonomic identifications for documenting fish stock in Travancore was well received. He requested a social and economic survey of Travancore fishing community but it was rejected due to manpower shortage and account objections. He himself conducted the 'feasibility study'<sup>25</sup> in the lines of Rao Bahadur V Govindan's study on Malabar fisheries<sup>26</sup>.

The team deputed to study under Narayana Aiyer submitted a report with British scientists from the Zoological Department of Madras University. They clearly followed the Taxonomic collections, species identifications and commercial possibility of Travancore fishes, especially the freshwater ones<sup>27</sup>. Apart from this, one of the officers separately commented that 'the fishing communities share a lifestyle similar to peasants and artisans'; therefore they could not be considered 'really as productive' for the rural economy of Travancore. They were incapable of producing profit out of work and could not meet the challenges of wealth production demands of the market. Therefore, one must stick to the rules of market where 'the survival of the fittest' happens. In this way speaking, the investment and effort from the state officials for the uplifting

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<sup>23</sup> For more details on the fisheries sector innovations and skill development in Madras Presidency see Madras Fisheries Bureau papers from 1899, Vol 1 –Bulletin No -1, Madras Superintendent, Govt. Press, 1915, Pp. 6-7

<sup>24</sup> Pandit Karuppan Souvenir, Smaranika by Edakkochi Jnanodaya Sabha 1989

<sup>25</sup> Study report for Fisheries Department, Bureau team for Department of Agriculture, 1919

<sup>26</sup> V. Govindan, Madras Fisheries Bureau, Bulletin 1909.

<sup>27</sup> It was assumed that the magnum opus work of Francis Day's, *Fishes of Malabar*, 1868, could not be replicated as it widely covered the identifications of most coastally available fishes in Malabar sea coast. So, no wonder, the Departmental survey for Fisheries in Travancore, could remain focused on the inland varieties as it was in these localities majority of the fishing communities were found to inhabit. The Agriculture Department Official's report was acknowledging the scholarly attributes of Francis Day for Malabar Coast in its reports. For more details, see A Narayana Aiyer, File Nos.119-124, Department of Agriculture, Govt. of Travancore, 1919



of the fishing community would end up as failure and might encourage corruption among the newly appointed officials.

However discouraging these file notes may be, the Travancore officials including the Dewan, went ahead with the proposal for Fisheries department in Travancore. No doubt, the debates about the ontological status of the fishing community in terms of their productive capability in the emerging economy shaped the later discourses about the value of labour in a liberal economy that was evolving in British India and elsewhere.

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