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THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF A CASTE ASSOCIATION, 1875-1905: THE FOUNDING OF THE S.N.D.P. YOGAM

ROBIN JEFFREY

In January 1905 C. Kesavan, an Irava boy of thirteen, attended an exhibition and series of meetings held in Quilon in the princely state of Travancore on the southwestern coast of India. Nearly fifty years later, after a stormy career in politics during which he briefly became chief minister of Travancore-Cochin state, Kesavan wrote a vivid four-page description of the 1905 meeting in his autobiography.1 He recalled the dress of the leading men, all of whom were Iravas: their dark suits, long coats and turbans. It was rare at that time, he wrote, for Iravas even to wear shirts; the honourable dress was a cloth around the shoulders and another around the waist.2 He remembered also the typewriter which he saw for the first time, the skilful exhibits of Irava craftsmen and agriculturalists and the resentment of savarna, or high-caste, Hindus at these pretensions of the lowly, avarna Iravas. As a result of the meeting and exhibition, he wrote of an “awakening” in the “Irava community”.3 What he did not mention was that within ten days of the exhibition there was bitter fighting among conservative Nayars and aspiring Iravas in a number of towns and villages in Quilon District.

The exhibition was organized by the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana (S.N.D.P.) Yogam (the organization for the propagation of the teaching of Sri Narayana) to coincide with its second annual general meeting. The S.N.D.P. Yogam was to become one of India’s best-known caste organizations.4 The Yogam originated, and had its main strength, in princely Travancore, which roughly corresponds to the southern half of Kerala, the Malayalam-speaking state of today’s Indian Union. Travancore was theocratic and staunchly Hindu; caste distinctions were enforced by the government. Iravas throughout the state thus had a common identity imposed on them, and the grievances against the discrimination of the government helped to overcome subcaste differences among them. The Yogam was a response to the

2 Ibid., pp. 409-10. “Irava” is transliterated in various ways—Ezhava, Elava, Ilava. In north Travancore and Cochin, Iravas were also known as Chogans or Chevans. In British Malabar, they were known as Tiyyans (Tyias or Tiyias). These differences in name, often accompanied by differences in customs, emphasize the internal divisions among Iravas/Tiyyans in the nineteenth century.
3 Ibid., p. 407.
aspirations of many Iravas who had made economic and educational advances in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Their social goals came to be embodied in the Yogam and its president, Sri Narayana Guru. Iravas wanted an end to the disabilities enforced against them by government and savarna Hindus, and an acknowledgement of their position as respectable members of Hindu society. The Yogam's original sanskritizing and religious aims, and the fame and sanctity of Sri Narayana, gave it an appeal to Iravas of widely varying degrees of wealth and education. The Yogam's establishment was closely related to the social conditions faced by many thousands of Iravas at the turn of the century. In this, it may not have been typical of other caste associations in India.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the condition of Iravas in Travancore in the late nineteenth century and the circumstances which led to the formation of the Yogam.

Iravas in Travancore Society

The census of 1875 enumerated Iravas at 16 per cent of Travancore's population of 2.31 million, but dismissed them with the remark that they were "not distinguished by any peculiarities worth mention". Such curt treatment, after high-caste Hindus had been discussed over many pages, exemplified the position of Iravas in the state. Their traditional occupation as tappers and tenders of the coconut palm and distillers of liquor was regarded as debasing. In a society which had refined caste to a unique complexity, they were said to pollute Nayars from a distance of twelve paces and Nambudiri Brahmans from thirty-six paces. Their place as avarna Hindus circumscribed their mobility, and roughly coincided with their economic power. They were generally poor and landless, and though of higher status and greater wealth than the wretched Pulaya, Pariah and Kurava ex-slaves, were nonetheless "despised by the higher castes, such as the Nairs and Brahmans". Caste restrictions prohibited them "from keeping milch cows; from using oil mills, metal vessels and umbrellas; and from wearing shoes and any but coarse cloths and ornaments". They were forbidden—men and women—to cover their bodies above the waist, and were expected to use a particular style of self-degrading language when speaking to the high castes. By 1870 such restrictions were no longer enforced by the Travancore government, but the high castes still successfully preserved them; as a Resident wrote, "the spirit . . . is still alive and active in many parts of the

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5 M. N. Srinivas, Caste in Modern India (Bombay, Asia, 1962), pp. 42-62, discusses his concept of "sanskritization".
6 See David Washbrook's very critical review of Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., The Nairs of Travancore (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969), in Modern Asian Studies, V, No. 3 (1971), pp. 278-83. Washbrook argues that most caste associations were largely unconnected with any kind of social reality and were "perhaps, merely another way of building up a constituency in order to raise their [the organizers'] bargaining power both with other politicians and with the government" (p. 282).
7 Travancore Census Report, 1875, p. 281.
8 The appropriate distances vary slightly in different accounts: see A. H[awksworth], Day Dawn in Travancore (Kottayam, CMS Press, 1860), pp. 9-10. J. H. Hutton, Caste in India (Bombay, OUP, 1969), pp. 79-81, gives a digest of the various accounts.
11 G. A. Ballard, Resident, to the Chief Secretary to the Madras Government [hereafter Ch. Sec.], 9 March 1870; National Archives of India, Madras Residency Records [hereafter MRR], Madras Political Proceedings [hereafter MPP], 13 April 1870, G.O. No. 143.
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Showing British administrative Districts and the Princely States of Travancore and Cochin
Moreover, the government still prevented Iravas from using many roads, schools and public buildings.\textsuperscript{12} Nayars, and their allied caste superiors, were the dominant group in Travancore society. Traditionally, Nayar subcastes had provided the landholders and soldiers of Kerala. “When they walk along a street or road,” wrote Duarte Barbosa in the sixteenth century, “they shout to the low caste folk to get out of their way; this they do, and if one will not, the Nayre may kill him without punishment.”\textsuperscript{14} Nayars lived in large matrilineal, matrilocal joint-families; they were hypergamous, their women having liaisons with Nambudiri Brahmins, Malayali Kshatriyas, immigrant Tamil Brahmins or Nayars of the same or higher subcastes. The census of 1875 returned Nayars as 19 per cent of the population; their allied caste superiors amounted to a little less than two per cent.\textsuperscript{15} Nayars were the most numerous landholders, though in Travancore individual holdings were not as large as in Cochin or British Malabar.\textsuperscript{16} Nayars also held more than 60 per cent of the jobs in the Travancore government service, from which Christians, who made up about 20 per cent of the population, and avarna Hindus were virtually excluded.\textsuperscript{17}

The only group which approached Nayars in status, numbers and economic power were Syrian Christians (about 12 per cent of the population) who were concentrated in central and northern Travancore. They were traders and landholders, and traced their origins in Kerala to the time of Thomas the Apostle. Savarna Hindus accorded them “clean” caste status, and Syrians for their part were punctilious about keeping avarna Hindus in their place. An incident from the journal of a Syrian Christian pastor affiliated with the Church Missionary Society helps to illustrate the relations between these three broad groups in the 1850s:

One of the [Irava] converts said that a Syrian a few days ago pointed out to a Nair who passed by him, calling out to the Nair, “You are defiled, the man whom you passed by is a convert from Chegons [Iravas].” The Nair got very angry and used abusive language to him for not giving notice to the Nair that he was a Chegon and for not getting out of the road as Chegons do when they see a Nair. The Syrian was the cause of the disturbance: he acted as if he was in duty bound to see that the higher castes be not defiled by the approach of the lower castes.\textsuperscript{18}

In the traditional economy cash was little used. Iravas tended to be the subtenants of Nambudiri, Nayar or Syrian landholders or to be labourers who were paid in grain. Until 1855 slavery was legal, and slave castes, comprising perhaps 15 per cent of the Travancore population,\textsuperscript{19} performed the most arduous tasks of cultivation for high-caste masters. The export trade in cash crops like pepper was a government monopoly; internal trade was limited to basic items like cloth and iron, and was in the hands of Syrian Christians, Muslims and Tamils.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Iravas were kept off roads near temples or public buildings which might be polluted by their proximity. Their presence in government schools would have driven away high-caste pupils.
\textsuperscript{15} Census, 1875, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{16} T. C. Varghese, \textit{Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences} (Bombay, Allied Publishers, 1970), p. 217. The princely states of Travancore and Cochin plus the British Indian district of Malabar made up the Malayalam-speaking region called Kerala.
\textsuperscript{17} Census, 1875, p. 255.
\textsuperscript{19} Census, 1875, pp. 188-9.
In this traditional society which survived largely intact until about 1860, most resources lay with savarna Hindus, Nayars, and their caste superiors, were the largest single social category; they controlled most of the land and the government service; they had the power to enforce the subservience which they demanded from low castes. It is safe to say that no Irava in 1860 would have dared to appear in Quilon town dressed like C. Kesavan’s notables of 1905.

Economic Changes after 1860

From 1860, with the coming of a new British Resident and the accession of a well-educated Maharaja in Travancore, the brilliant young Dewan, T. Madhava Rao, embarked on a programme of vigorous administrative reform and expansion. A system of government schools was established; the policy of commercial monopolies abolished; European planters encouraged; a public works department created; and land reform accomplished. Such changes fostered the growth of a cash economy and devalued the ritual sanctity which underwrote the traditional social system.20

In the 1840s Travancore was said to have been an exporter of rice, but by the 1880s it was importing rice to the value of Rs 14.5 lakhs annually.21 There had been an increase in population,22 but there had also been a “general improvement of the circumstances of the lower castes, who can now afford to eat more rice”.23 That improvement had come about largely through the increased demand for labour and the increase in, and spread of, wages. In the 1850s cooly labour was worth one anna a day if it was worth a cash wage at all. By the 1870s it was worth four annas a day, and skilled workmen could make up to a rupee a day by the 1890s.24

To be sure, the cost of living also rose. A survey taken in Cochin in 1891—conditions in much of Travancore would have been similar—concluded that the cost of living had increased by 103 per cent between 1850 and 1890. But the wages of non-agricultural labourers—for example, those employed by planters, by the public works department or in the coir industry—had risen by 167 per cent and those of artisans by 140 per cent. Moreover, many more people were earning wages by 1890. The survey calculated the cost of living of a man at Rs 42 a year, and the average cost of living, including women and children, at Rs 29.5 a year.25 It concluded that large landholders who were not numerous in Travancore, had “no doubt enormously benefitted during the last 40 years by . . . the marked increase in the price of food grains”. At the same time, the standard of living of many of the low castes had improved. It was the small landholding family which may have found itself in difficulty,26 especially if it had clear notions about what constituted “respectable” employment. On the latter score, Iravas had few illusions; necessity forced them to tackle most jobs. Nayars, however, were traditionally more privileged and thus less able to cope with the new conditions.

20 The Travancore Administration Reports [hereafter TAR] for the 1860s, corroborated by Residents’ reports, make clear the extent of Madhava Rao’s activities and reforms.
21 Madras Mail, 23 July 1890, p. 5; a lakh is 100,000.
22 The haphazard censuses of 1836 and 1851 put the population of Travancore at 1.28 million and 1.26 million respectively, thus recording a drop in population. See W. H. Horsley, Memoir of Travancore (Trivandrum, Sirkar Press, 1863), pp. 54-5 and 60-1. The well-organized census of 1875 put the population at 2.31 millions.
25 Cochin Census Report, 1891, I, 144.
26 Ibid., p. 157.
Iravas were involved in the care of the coconut palm and the exploitation of its products. Between 1870 and 1890 the value of exports of coconut products from Travancore more than doubled.\textsuperscript{27} Exports of coir, the rot-resistant fibre of the coconut husk used for making ropes and mats, rose in value from Rs 9.27 lakhs in 1871 to Rs 26.22 lakhs in 1891. Exports of copra, the dried kernel of the coconut, appreciated from Rs 21.06 lakhs to Rs 42.37 lakhs in the same period.\textsuperscript{28}

It would be foolish to suggest that all the proceeds of this trade, amounting by 1900 to Rs 90 lakhs annually, were finding their way to the Irava men and women who collected the raw materials. Merchants from Europe, America and other parts of India conducted the exporting in Alleppey and Cochin, while Nayar, Syrian Christian or Nambudiri landlords generally owned the trees. Yet the trade could not be conducted without Iravas. Their expertise was essential; in caring for the coconut palm they enjoyed a closed shop. The production of coir was an unpleasant, semi-skilled, labour-intensive task. The husk had to be soaked in the backwaters, then the fibre separated from the rotted pulp and finally spun into yarn. Between 1881 and 1890 the value of coir exports increased from Rs 12.55 lakhs to Rs 24.55 lakhs as a result of “the increasing demand for this article in America”.\textsuperscript{29} With an expanding market for coir, Iravas, women as well as men, would at least have found full employment, while the traditional aim of the poor Irava—to own or rent a few palm trees—had the advantage of increasing not only his status but also his wealth. By 1900 a few Iravas owned coir factories. Irava women who collected and sold coconut shells for fuel were said to earn more than enough to feed their families.\textsuperscript{30} Iravas’ traditional occupation was an economic asset. This was different from the cases of other low castes, such as potters or blacksmiths, who were harmed by the greater availability of manufactured goods in the late nineteenth century.

Another traditional vocation of Iravas was embarrassing yet profitable. This was the toddy and arrack trade, the value of which doubled between 1860 and 1880.\textsuperscript{31} The sircar regularly auctioned licences to sell intoxicants, and these were usually bought by rich Tinnevelly Shanars, Syrian Christians, Eurasians and occasionally Europeans.\textsuperscript{32} But the actual vendors were mainly Iravas,\textsuperscript{33} and the men who tapped the palm and made the toddy in the area from Trivandrum northward were exclusively Iravas. When the London Missionary Society made an Irava convert in 1874, the missionary praised the man’s devotion, for he had given up “the profitable employment which specially belongs to his caste, viz. the distillation and sale of ardent spirits”.\textsuperscript{34} To the despair of the local \textit{abkari} contractors, Iravas were able to run illicit and remunerative businesses. In 1889 a Trivandrum contractor complained, probably extravagantly, that he had lost Rs 1.5 lakhs in two years because the large Elava population that live solely upon liquor trade contrives various means of carrying on the trade without the contractor’s knowledge. They distil at

\textsuperscript{27} TARs, 1870-1 to 1891-2.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{29} TAR, 1882-3, pp. 67-8.
\textsuperscript{31} Mateer, \textit{Native Life}, p. 281.
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Travancore Times}, 1 July 1885, reported that the wealthy Thavasimuttu Na- dar bought the \textit{abkari} rights for three-quarters of the taluks in Travancore. For the range of his interests, see his obituary in the \textit{Hindu}, 7 March 1888, p. 4. See also TGER, Cover No. 10271.
\textsuperscript{33} J. C. Hannyngton, Resident, to V. Ramiengar, Dewan, 16 Dec. 1886: TGER, Cover No. 10312.
\textsuperscript{34} London Missionary Society, Travancore District Committee [hereafter LMS, TDC], \textit{Report}, 1874, pp. 16-17.
night and deposit underground or transmit to their customers . . . . Even though great efforts are put forth only one fourth of the liquor that is now consumed belongs to the contractor.\textsuperscript{35}

Occasionally illegal toddy vendors were caught, but generally Iravas seem to have pursued the profitable, shady business with only minor interruptions.\textsuperscript{36}

Iravas also worked as carpenters, masons, coolies and agricultural labourers. They had a tradition as weavers, and some Iravas opened small handloom factories towards the end of the century. As ayurvedic doctors they enjoyed a high reputation throughout Travancore. Such occupations put money into Irava hands, and money brought education and social ambitions.

Growing Aspirations and Flirtation with the Missionaries

As early as 1884 British governments were receiving petitions from Travancore Iravas which complained at the disabilities enforced upon them:

The Chogans [Iravas] and other low caste people are not allowed to come near any public office whether it be of the 1st Class District Magistrate or (the lowest) of the tax collectors. They are put to the greatest inconvenience whenever they use any of the public roads inasmuch as they have to move a considerable distance away from high caste men whom they meet on the roads. They have, in speaking to people of higher castes, to use certain technical expressions, which if they do not, they are taken to task for it. There are many Chogans in the state but not a single one of them has ever had a situation under Government.\textsuperscript{37}

Iravas were increasingly resentful of such discrimination and increasingly able to challenge it.

In 1865 P. T. Palpu, an Irava of Trivandrum, applied to write the first pleaders' examination organized by the reforming Travancore government. His application fee was accepted, but when it was noted that he was an Irava, he was refused permission to appear for the examination. His fee was never refunded.\textsuperscript{38} Palpu had acquired a general knowledge of English from Christian converts and European missionaries who had visited his house, and, indeed, one branch of the family was converted to Christianity.\textsuperscript{39} The difficulties which two of Palpu's sons, P. Velayudhan and P. Palpu, encountered in trying to get an education illustrate the conflict between Irava ambition and the values of traditional Travancore society.

\textsuperscript{35} Petition of Kumaraswamy Nadar, 11 July 1889: TGER, Cover No. 10312.

\textsuperscript{36} See the \textit{Madras Standard}, 5 Feb. 1886, p. 2, for the arrest of two Iravas who were smuggling toddy from the British enclave of Anjengo into Travancore. The position of Iravas seems similar to that of the distiller castes of Bisipara. “But the biggest gains [from the new economic opportunities available after 1855] went to the DISTILLER caste-groups, who profited from a monopoly arising out of caste-beliefs and Government support.” F. G. Bailey, \textit{Caste and the Economic Frontier} (Manchester, University Press, 1975), p. 173.

\textsuperscript{37} Petition of Kurikkacheril Mathavan, Kunku Raman and others of Shertallai to the Madras Government, 6 April 1884: MRR, MPP, 9 May 1889, G.O. No. 321. A member of the Madras Council noted: “A curious paper. We can do nothing, but such documents should be kept with care”. Why the petition took five years to come before the Council is unexplained. It was postmarked Alleppey, 6 April 1884.

\textsuperscript{38} “A Travancore Tiya” [P. Palpu], letter to the editor, \textit{Madras Mail}, 19 Feb. 1891, p. 6. Of the thirty-six successful candidates in the examination, twenty-three were non-Malayali Brahmins, seven Nayars, four Vellalas, one Chetti and one Eurasian. \textit{Travancore Government Gazette} [hereafter TGG], III, No. 8, 9 May 1865.

Although the government was conducting an expanding education programme, its schools in 1870 remained firmly closed to the state's 383,000 Iravas. The Resident wrote that "a boy professing Christianity would probably be admitted" to the High School in Trivandrum, that a Shanar from the Madras Presidency "would pass if at all discreet as a 'Pandy'," but that "an Elavan or Chogan would hardly effect an entrance, and if he did so would probably find the position too uncomfortable to maintain for long". In the outlying towns an Irava could not "even theoretically" be admitted to government schools, but if converted to Christianity, "with ordinary discretion on the part of the converts the point would not generally be raised against them".

P. Velayudhan, the eldest of P. T. Palpu's sons, became the first Irava admitted to the Maharaja's College and High School in Trivandrum about 1874. His enrolment was an act of some daring, both on the part of Velayudhan and of John Ross, the Scottish principal. The younger Palpu, having studied under the local asan or teacher, began at the age of twelve to take English tuition from a Eurasian. Eventually he was able to attend the Maharaja's High School; he matriculated in 1883. In the previous year Velayudhan had graduated from the College and applied for government employment. His application was rejected, and he entered the British service in the Madras Presidency where he rose to be a deputy collector and received the title Rao Bahadur.

P. Palpu wrote the entrance examination for the Travancore medical class, passed second and was refused admission because he was an Irava. In 1885 he went to Madras and "having managed partly by borrowing and partly by subscription to make up a sum of Rs. 140," enrolled in the Madras Medical College. He was awarded an honour certificate for the first year's work, but in 1885, heavily in debt, he petitioned the former Travancore Dewan, Sir T. Madhava Rao, for help:

Your Honour need not be told that the "Ilavers" of Travancore are considered so low a caste of people that they are not allowed at all to hold any post in that Government and the incentive to education being thus denied them, they are a very backward class. The Petr., however, without remaining in the state in which his caste-men are, made up his mind to study the English language . . . .

Madhava Rao, living in comfortable and adulated retirement in Mylapore in Madras, sent a cheque for Rs 50 and arranged for Palpu's petition to be sent to V. Ramiengar, the Travancore Dewan, who was Madhava Rao's old friend and schoolfellow. The Travancore government, however, had to be careful: a scholarship would have led Palpu to expect a government post after completing his course, and the sircar had no intention of making such an offer. Instead, the Maharaja sent a donation for Rs 50 which was repeated after Palpu twice petitioned for it the following year. He was awarded the Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (L.M&S) degree in 1889, applied and was rejected for a post in the Travancore Medical Department, worked for a time in Madras, and in 1891 entered the service of another princely state, Mysore. He was to promote Irava causes for the next thirty years from outside Travancore.

40 Ballard to the Ch. Sec., 9 March 1876: loc. cit.
41 Panikkassery, palpu, pp. 18-19.
43 P. Palpu to T. Madhava Rao, 2 Oct. 1886: TGER, Cover No. 841.
44 TGER, Cover No. 841.
The association with the missionaries, which the case of Palpu’s family illustrates, seems to have been fairly typical among ambitious Iravas. In 1872 the Rev. Samuel Mateer of the London Missionary Society opened a school near Anjengo, between Trivandrum and Quilon, for fifty “highly respectable” Irava boys who “were refused admission to the Sircar School”.\textsuperscript{45} Mateer received more requests for mission schools than he was able to meet, and noted with regret that “the very interesting Ilavar people” north of Trivandrum “who were willing to receive instruction, have not been sufficiently impressed to join us outright”.\textsuperscript{46} The story in the areas of north Travancore where the Church Missionary Society worked was similar. Iravas met the missionaries or their evangelists, accepted Bibles and asked for schoolmasters.\textsuperscript{47} But there was one major difference from the situation in the area south of Quilon. In north Travancore, the Syrian Christians who were associated with the Church Missionary Society kept the low castes at a distance and were reluctant to associate with Irava converts. Iravas, on the other hand, would not attend C.M.S. schools maintained for slave-caste converts. This led Iravas to ask missionaries to provide masters for separate Irava schools. Although such requests held out the prospect of conversions, the missionaries were generally short of teachers and were increasingly aware of Iravas’ reluctance to become Christians.

Yet why were Iravas reluctant, when Shanars, whose position in south Travancore appeared comparable, were converted in large numbers?\textsuperscript{48} Throughout the 1870s and 1880s Irava pretensions, assertiveness and frustration were growing; missionaries offered education and in some cases protection. Converts “have their Missionary to press their claim on Government and get them some consideration”, a letter writer to the Madras Mail pointed out; Iravas had no one.\textsuperscript{49} By 1890, however, Mateer could write that “Iravars . . . do not largely join us now”, and that the Iravas near Anjengo, for whom he had opened the school in 1872, “hate Christian teaching.”\textsuperscript{50}

The matrilineal system partially followed by Iravas had much to do with the paucity of converts. In the area of Travancore north of Quilon, Iravas followed pure marumakkattayam, or matrilineal, law; in the south, half a man’s property went to his children and half to his sisters’ sons. If an Irava were converted to Christianity, he took with him only what he could prove were his self-acquired property and possessions; all else belonged to his family. Even if the senior male of an Irava family in north Travancore were converted, the position was the same. Although he was the manager of the family property, he did not own it. At the same time, the matrilineal system provided a loose, flexible marriage tie, or, as the missionaries thought, no marriage at all. “Hence we require,” wrote Mateer, “Iravas who embrace Christianity to marry in due form the women with whom they are...
living”.

On the question of inheritance, they pressed the sircar for an act entitling marumakkattayam converts to a share of their family property. A court decision of 1885 had ruled that converts had no inheritance rights at all, and various appeals by the missionaries brought no change in the law. While this difficulty of property and inheritance deterred prosperous Iravas from conversion, the rigorous missionary view of marriage discouraged the poor and self-seeking. Moreover, as many Iravas prospered, they were able cautiously to imitate the manners of Nayars. A respected place in Hindu society was a more desirable goal than a doubtful Christian role between contemptuous Syrians and polluting Pulaya converts. As the Rev. Jacob Chandy lamented in the 1850s, Iravas “could not see any spiritual motive for embracing Christianity; rising in caste and freedom from opposition of the high castes were all that [they] cared for.” What did Iravas ask of Christianity? Chandy replied: to “be raised to the position of Syrians in the country,” and that was something few Syrians would tolerate.

Irava aspirations within Hindu society, and the help derived from the missionaries, were neatly illustrated in an incident recorded by a missionary near Kottayam in 1882. He met a fine looking man. Even those with me mistook him for a Nair at first. He turned out to be a wealthy Chogan [Irava] who had learnt as a boy in our mission school, hence his superior ways. He . . . has no real love for Christ or desire to serve Him.

The growing aim of many Iravas, unstated, but perceptible from the 1880s, was to achieve the status of Nayars, many of whose customs also came to be Irava customs. Nayars, for example, generally cremated their dead. Iravas, largely because of the cost, cremated only the eldest member of a family and buried others. After government-enforced caste restrictions were removed in the 1860s, Irava women began to discard their own distinctive jewellery and to wear that of Nayars. Wealthy Iravas built their houses in the same style as Nayars.

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The growing aim of many Iravas, unstated, but perceptible from the 1880s, was to achieve the status of Nayars, many of whose customs also came to be Irava customs. Nayars, for example, generally cremated their dead. Iravas, largely because of the cost, cremated only the eldest member of a family and buried others. After government-enforced caste restrictions were removed in the 1860s, Irava women began to discard their own distinctive jewellery and to wear that of Nayars. Wealthy Iravas built their houses in the same style as Nayars.

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Between the censuses of 1875 and 1891, literacy among Irava men increased from 3.15 per cent to 12.10 per cent, although the number of Iravas in government schools remained small. Their association with the missionaries and their improving economic position allowed increasing numbers of Irava children to get a basic education. The outcome was fairly predictable. In 1891 Palpu and Velayudhan, Travancore’s only Irava graduates, associated themselves with the Malayali Memorial, which was organized by young official Nayars to protest against the dominance of non-Malayali Brahmins in the best jobs in the government service. A paragraph on the disabilities of Iravas was written into the Memorial. No action resulted, but the Memorial suggested to Palpu a method for future campaigns.

Palpu proved a doughty fighter. In 1895 he submitted a long petition in English to the Dewan, S. Shungarasoobyer, which outlined the disabilities suffered by Iravas. He emphasized that under existing government policies, Iravas had only one course open to them if they wished to educate their children or enter sircar service: conversion. “This induced conversion is prejudicial to the interests of all the religions concerned.” After eight months and a number of reminders, Palpu had had no reply from the Dewan. He went to Trivandrum from Bangalore in February 1896 and received an assurance from Shungarasoobyer that qualified Iravas would receive consideration on their merits for all departments except Revenue; as many government schools as possible would be opened to them. But when a few Irava graduates immediately applied for jobs, they were told there were no vacancies.

Again taking leave from his job in Mysore, Palpu returned to Travancore and attempted to organize an Irava Sabha. The Sabha seems to have been a failure, but he circulated a mass memorial, similar to that of 1891, which was signed only by Iravas. Within a few months, more than 13,000 Iravas, nearly half of them payers of land tax, had signed the petition, which was submitted to the Maharaja and released to the Madras newspapers in September 1896. Claiming that Iravas paid more taxes than any other community, the petition lamented the fact that government schools were virtually closed to them and that they were denied the incentive to education which employment in the sircar service provided. The 1891 census showed at least 25,000 “educated” Iravas, all of whom were working loyally in such pursuits as ayurvedic medicine, weaving, shopkeeping, the abkari trade and astrology. Those few with English education had left the country in search of employment. It was a source of regret, the petition continued, that although Tiyyans in Malabar District and Christian converts in Travancore were entertained in the government service, Iravas in Travancore were excluded. The memorial asked for entry to government schools and employment under the sircar.

Shungarasoobyer’s reply offered little comfort. Iravas themselves, he wrote, were great sticklers for caste customs and in a state like Travancore, government had to feel their way and preserve caution lest any violence should be done to social...

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59 Census, 1875, pp. 245-6; 1891, I, 498.
60 See the Memorial in the Madras Times, 8 July 1891, pp. 5-6.
61 P. Palpu to S. Shungarasoobyer, Dewan, 13 May 1895: TGER, Cover No. 3234. Shungarasoobyer’s reply, if there was a written one, has not been preserved here.
62 Panikkassery, palpu, pp. 76-7. For the letters of the Irava applicants, see pp. 114-16. One of the latter was M. Govinda who became the first Irava munsiff in 1908. See also the letter from “A Travancorean”, Madras Mail, 15 Oct. 1896, p. 5, also Madras Mail, 13 Dec. 1895, p. 4.
63 Panikkassery, palpu, pp. 77-8.
64 Madras Mail, 6 Oct. 1896, p. 3, printed the Memorial in full. The copy in TGER, Cover No. 1231, is in Malayalam. Regarding Tiyyans, see n. 2 above and n. 90 below.
order and harmony”. Most of the higher schools in the state were open to Iravas, but to open the lower schools would be to drive out the high castes. Special Irava schools would be started instead; some were already operating. “Thus for all practical purposes the Memorialists are at no real disadvantage.” In the public service, he now agreed that Iravas would be eligible for some departments, and this, government hoped, would “meet the aspirations of the community having regard to their present educational conditions”. Iravas might have been forgiven for not dancing in the streets.

Within two weeks of the Dewan’s endorsement, a letter from “A Travancorean,” almost certainly Palpu, appeared in the Madras Mail. It pointed out that only a few months before, Iravas had been rejected for posts in the very departments to which the Dewan now recommended they should apply. (The Forest and Cardamom Department, whose officers worked amidst the malaria of the Western Ghats, was one). The superintendent of police, the letter claimed, was willing to employ Iravas, but the Dewan would not consent; there were no Iravas in the police except for a few who had converted to Christianity. “A Travancorean” returned to the attack six weeks later when he reported that an Irava graduate whom the Dewan had told to apply to the Public Works Department had been rejected; a Brahmin undergraduate had been hired. There were, moreover, only five special schools in the state for a population of nearly five lakhs. And an Irava-run school attended by four Nayar pupils had been told by the Nayar school inspector to drop the Nayar pupils from its rolls. Thus caste distinctions, concluded the writer, were intentionally fostered.

By the mid-1890s missionaries could detect a distinct change in Irava attitudes. There was, one wrote, “an awakening among the Elavars. . . . They are beginning to assert themselves and to claim attention from the Government. The movement has in it a very strong religious element also”. When Palpu’s attempts to move the Travancore government brought few results, the direction of educated Iravas’ activity changed and moved towards the “religious element”. Shortly after Palpu took up service in Mysore, Vivekananda visited the state. Palpu appears to have got to know him well, and many of Vivekananda’s teachings were to find their way into Irava enterprises as they developed at the turn of the century. Palpu became receptive to the idea of Hindu revivalism and reformation. But a Western-educated, Western-dressed doctor in government service in a distant state could exert little appeal to the emotional cravings of his castemen. In Sri Narayana Guru, one of the most famous Indian ascetics of the last hundred years, he found an ideal complement.

Born about 1855 near Trivandrum, Narayana was the son of an Irava asan who also cultivated a little land. The chronology of his early life is difficult to piece together, but he was certainly educated in Malayalam, Tamil and Sanskrit. It appears that as a youth he helped his father in the fields and was remarkably devout. The latter may explain why he was allowed about 1877 to join a Sanskrit school run by a wealthy Irava family in Karunagapalli taluk near Quilon town. He remained there four years. When he returned to his home, he began small vernacular

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65 Endorsement, 3 Oct. 1896: TGER, Cover No. 1231; Madras Mail, 5 Nov. 1896, p. 5.
67 Madras Mail, 4 Dec. 1896, p. 5.
68 LMS, TDC, Report, 1897, pp. 8-9, quoting Rev. W. D. Osbourne.
69 Panikkassery, palpu, p. 93.
schools and acquired the name “Nanu Asan”. He was married against his will about 1882; it is uncertain whether the marriage was consummated, though he appears to have lived with his wife for a time. After his parents died, he left home to wander as a sanyasi. In 1887 he founded a small Siva temple at Aruvipuram about twenty miles south of Trivandrum. He seems to have used this as his base while he continued his wanderings in central and south Travancore, Tinnevelly District and Madura District; in these areas he was acquiring the reputation of a distinguished holy man. By about 1890 his remote hermitage and temple were attracting so many pilgrims that he had to establish a kitchen to feed them. In 1893 a sanyasi from south Travancore offered to make over his encumbered property if Narayana would clear the debt. Two of Narayana’s followers collected subscriptions, the debt was paid, the property registered, and P. Parameswaran, another of Palpu’s brothers, became manager of the temple properties. It was probably through Parameswaran that Palpu and Narayana met. By 1896 Narayana’s fame was widespread, and the annual Sivaratri festival drew 10,000 people, mostly Iravas, to Aruvipuram. A London Missionary Society evangelist wrote:

At the close of January we went to a festival, known as the Sivarathri, held at Aruvipuram. It is ... famous for its shrine. It is situated near a waterfall, and dedicated to Siva by one Sanyasi (an Ascetic) named Nanen Asan, an Eleven by birth, greatly respected for his good behaviour and profound study of Hindu Vedas. He is called Swami and is very attractive in personal appearance.

In the course of his wanderings Narayana met an Irava trader “of moderate means” who had a studious, intelligent son. The son was N. Kumaran Asan who was to become the first secretary of the S.N.D.P. Yogam and perhaps the greatest modern Malayalam poet. Asan learned Sanskrit and Malayalam as a child, worked briefly as a merchant’s accountant and left an advanced Sanskrit school after an argument with the master over the meaning of a sloka. At fourteen he first met Narayana, and four or five years later, about 1892, he joined Narayana at Aruvipuram and studied yoga under him for two years. In 1894 Narayana visited Palpu in Bangalore, and arrangements were made for Asan to join the Sanskrit college there. With financial help from Palpu he studied Sanskrit and picked up English in Bangalore, Madras and Calcutta between 1895 and 1899. In the latter year he returned to Aruvipuram.

Having acquired more funds and property, the Aruvipuram ashram was reorganized in 1899 as the Aruvipuram Temple Yogam; Asan was elected secretary-treasurer. He and Narayana toured as far as Malabar District to raise money, and another temple was started in Travancore. Finally, in December 1902, ten share-
holders, paying Rs 100 each for a life membership, met at Aruvipuram to found the S.N.D.P. Yogam. It was registered as a limited company in March 1903.

Palpu did not attend this inaugural meeting, nor was he one of the ten original shareholders. His absence underlined the fact that the Yogam had more resources than his to rely upon and that it was Narayana’s spiritual message, rather than Palpu’s more overtly political one, to which Iravas responded. Of the ten shareholders, six were from the area within twenty miles of Trivandrum, and the other four were from central Travancore around Quilon. Although the Yogam was organized around an ashram, its by-laws were businesslike and detailed. Its “main object” was “to promote and encourage religious and secular education and industrious habits among the Elava community”. This included strict monogamy and the abolition of the tali-tying ceremony and other expensive but unbrahminical customs.

By January 1904 when the Yogam met again in Trivandrum—this time Palpu attended—Asan had put out most of the society’s capital on loan to Iravas and Eurasians; the interest was paying the salary of a Sanskrit master employed to teach Irava boys. About sixty people attended this meeting, including sixteen ayurvedists who were said to be quite wealthy. The wealthiest Irava landlord in Travancore sent a telegram of support. By 1904 the Yogam was attracting attention even in Madras, and under Palpu’s guidance it began to organize the industrial exhibition which so impressed C. Kesavan in 1905.

Palpu, Narayana and Asan were the right combination to tap the great reservoir of Irava yearning and discontent. But they did not create it. The improvement in the economic position of many Iravas was accompanied by social ambitions. Western education and, indeed, even the Travancore government, laid stress on qualifications rather than birth. An Irava graduate, therefore, should be preferred to a Nayar matriculate; a movement from ascribed to achieved status had begun. Conservative Nayar families, whose ritual status was high, tended to resist the movement. Iravas, who had much to gain, welcomed it.

Yet it would be wrong to think of Iravas before the twentieth century as a “community,” unless one wished to use the word in a loose sense. As a low caste, the mobility of Iravas had been even more circumscribed than that of Nayars. Iravas, too, were divided into subcastes or clans. Kesavan wrote that in the area south of Quilon where he was born there were four endogamous Irava clans which were in turn divided into exogamous groups. As Mannath Padmanabha Pillai was to write of Nayars, it was doubtful whether they ever thought of themselves in terms of a broad community; as a result of subcaste and geographical differences, they lived without mutual connections.

75 P. Parameswaran to K. Krishnaswami Rao, Dewan, 8 Jan. 1903: TGER, Cover No. 8338. The by-laws are in the same file.
76 Pre-pubescent Nayar and Irava girls underwent the costly tali-kettukalyanam (literally, tali-tying marriage) ceremony. The tali or pendant was tied round the girl’s neck by a man with whom she would probably not cohabit. Both Nayar and Irava reformers sought to abolish the tali-kettukalyanam. The tali is now tied at the same time as the presentation of the cloth (sam-bandham) in Nayar marriages. In Irava marriages for the tali-tying ceremony the bride wears the sari presented earlier by the groom’s party.
77 Fivehodayam, I, No. 1 (1904), 3.
78 Miller, “Caste and Territory”, p. 416.
79 Kesavan, jivitasmaranakal, p. 38.
80 Mannath Padmanabhan [Pillai], ente jivitasmaranakal (Trivandrum, Nayar Service Press, n.d. [about 1957]), p. 37.
On the other hand, however, in traditional society Iravas, like Nayars, had certain common denominators. There was, first, the name. Iravas were called "Irava" or "Chogan" by other castes, regardless of Iravas' internal segmentation. Iravas were forced to dress alike and to suffer approximately the same disabilities throughout Travancore. Their customs, occupations and economic power were generally similar. As communications improved and caste restrictions on Irava mobility were removed, those Iravas who were mobile and educated experienced a growing sense, as David Pocock has written of the Patidars of Gujarat, "of being more like each other than anyone else". For men like Palpu, the task was to transform the common denominators into a sense of "community," for a community could lobby government over caste disabilities, build schools and generally support its members. Moreover, men like Palpu had watched the missionaries create a community among their converts, some of whom indeed were related to Hindu Iravas. The advantages and methods had been made clear.

As early as 1892, a London Missionary Society agent wrote that an Irava organization in Quilon District was holding regular monthly meetings to promote local education and was pressing him to start an English school. By 1896 there were 16,000 Iravas in schools inspected by the Travancore government, and in 1900 a correspondent of the Madras Mail superciliously reported "a rather remarkable religious mania" among Iravas. The Irava youth, he continued, "aspires to be a religious teacher, gets off by rote tags of Sanskrit verse and takes to discipleship and begging". The writer blamed the phenomenon on "the throwing open the doors of the educational institutions of the Province to the backward classes". In 1900 the London Missionary Society station at Attingal between Trivandrum and Quilon had not received a single Irava convert for a number of years, although most of its adherents were Irava converts of twenty years' standing. The missionary in charge attributed the decline of interest in Christianity to "an increased activity on the part of the Elavar caste everywhere to secure social and political recognition. . . . To this end they have established associations of their own, have promoted education amongst themselves, and have increasingly fitted themselves to take a part in the larger life and growth of the state." The experience of the Church Missionary Society was similar: "it is as easy to make a convert from the Brahmins as from the Chogans". Although conversion to Christianity was to remain a useful threat for Iravas to use against caste Hindus, a junior partnership among Christians ceased to be an attractive alternative when respectability among Hindus became a possibility.

The Quilon Exhibition and the Nayar-Irava Disturbances

By mid-1904 the S.N.D.P. Yogam was receiving notice in the Madras press, operating a few schools and temples and publishing a monthly magazine, Vivekodayam (sunrise of knowledge), edited by Kumaran Asan and showing in its content its debt to Vivekananda and Samuel Smiles. Across its masthead was the

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82 LMS, TDC, Report, 1892, p. 8, quoting a catechist, V. Charles Victor.
83 TAR, 1895-6, p. 143.
84 Madras Mail, 24 April 1900, p. 3.
86 Rev. John Caley to the Secretary, CMS 29 May 1900: CMS Archives, No. 69 of 1900.
87 Iravas threatened mass conversion to Christianity in the early 1930s before the Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 in Travancore ended the issue for good.
English slogan, “God helps those who help themselves”. In November 1904 the Yogam announced that its second annual general meeting would be held in conjunction with an industrial and agricultural exhibition in Quilon. Only Iravas were permitted to enter exhibits. There was to be a special competition for knowledge of Sanskrit.

The success of the exhibition probably surprised even Palpu. Dozens of exhibits of coconut and other agricultural produce were submitted, as well as examples of weaving, carving and handicrafts. Three thousand Iravas, a few from as far north as Cannanore in Malabar District, attended. Palpu, moreover, was able to attract support from many quarters. The Maharaja sent a contribution of Rs 300, and the Dewan, V. P. Madhava Rao, whom Palpu knew from the Mysore government, sent Rs 50. The Dewan, indeed, had agreed to open the exhibition, but later withdrew. A total of Rs 3,000 was raised to defray costs. The twenty-six Sanskrit entrants were judged by Kerala Varma, a Kshatriya and the husband of the late Senior Maharani, and A. Govinda Pillai, a Nayar judge of the High Court. When the Dewan was unable to attend, Palpu got T. F. Bourdillon, Travancore’s Conservator of Forests and brother of a former Resident in Mysore, to perform the opening ceremonies.

Bourdillon, an old Travancore hand, was probably more perceptive in his encouragement than the Dewan would have been. “You [Iravas],” he told the gathering, “have a great advantage in being accustomed to manual labour and trained in special industries. . . . You have. . . the entire control of the coconut-fibre industry in your hands, at all events in its early preparation.” Before the ceremonies began, Sri Narayana was met at the Quilon landing jetty and taken in procession through the streets to the shamiana, which was decorated with pictures of himself, the King-Emperor and Queen-Empress, the Maharaja and the Dewan. Palpu proudly told the meeting that the Yogam had 600 paid-up members.

Malayala Manorama, the Kottayam newspaper owned by Jacobite Syrian Christians, wrote of the “interest and admiration” which “the very successful exhibition” excited.

As C. Kesavan’s recollections, with which this paper began, indicated, the exhibition gave many Iravas a sense of pride and wider community which had hitherto been lacking. It was proof that Iravas could organize and create—and that they could wear long black coats and trousers, like other educated Indians and Englishmen, in the 60ish heat of a Kerala January. Moreover, the respect accorded to Sri Narayana as a genuine holy man, even by men of higher castes, was proof of the Iravas’ place within Hindu society and perhaps of the possibility of improving that place. For conservatives among higher castes, however, the exhibition and the new self-confidence of Iravas were signs of an assertiveness which cried out to be resisted and destroyed.

On 22 January 1905, about ten days after the end of the exhibition in Quilon town, fighting broke out between Nayars and Iravas at a temple festival at a village

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88 Madras Mail, 4 June 1904, p. 5; Vivekodayam, II (1905), see Nos 1, 2, 4 and 6 for Vivekananda’s speeches and writings translated into Malayalam. The slogan “One caste, one religion, one God”, now generally associated with Sri Narayana and the Yogam, did not come into prominence until fifteen or twenty years later. It would probably not have been appreciated by caste Hindus in the orthodox Travancore of 1900.

89 Madras Mail, 21 Nov. 1904, p. 5.

90 In northern Kerala those who tended the coconut palm were called Tiyyans. Tiyyans generally claimed to be of higher status than Iravas. See Thurston, Castes, III, 38-40. In traditional times it seems likely that they rarely met.

91 Madras Times, 11 Jan. 1905, p. 3; Madras Mail, 11 and 13 Jan. 1905, both p. 5.

92 Malayala Manorama, 21 Jan. 1905.
in the northern part of Quilon District. Following the exhibition, Iravas were said
to have put on airs, and when the temple procession took place, they dressed their
women in imitation of Nayars and pressed closer to the idol than custom allowed.
Nayars retaliated by beating the pushful Iravas and sometimes stripping their women
to the waist. At about the same time in Haripad, the nearest small town, Nayars
beat Irava schoolboys who had refused to move off the public road to allow Nayars
to pass unpolluted. At Haripad the real sore point was the local government
school to which Iravas had been admitted over Nayar opposition in 1903. Some
Nayars had withdrawn their children while others had continued to grumble at the
innovation.

Iravas in the area, who had a local organization affiliated to the S.N.D.P. Yogam,
were quick to respond to these incidents with telegrams and petitions and also, even
at this early stage, it appears, with despatches to the Madras press. The European
superintendent of police travelled north to investigate and posted a Christian inspec-
tor, a London Missionary Society adherent, to replace the Nayar officer who had
been in charge. All the officials in the area were Nayars.

Although there were reports of scattered clashes and of intimidation of Iravas
on their way to the district headquarters in Quilon, the trouble seemed to subside.
The Maharaja and the Dewan went on tour to Madras as scheduled, and a district
officer, V. Nagam Aiya, was left in charge of the Dewan's duties. He viewed the
situation more seriously. On 9 February he wrote to the district officer of Quilon,
V. I. Keshava Pillai, a Nayar, to warn him of "serious breaches of the public peace"
similar to those between Shanars and Maravars in Tinnevelly District in 1899. He
instructed Keshava Pillai to "take immediate steps to prevent the quarrels deve'op-
ing into serious faction fights in which the whole population may take sides".

Whatever measures Keshava Pillai took, they were ineffective, and, Iravas later
charged, provocative. On 20 February there were further disturbances ending in
bloodshed in three taluks of Quilon District, and Keshava Pillai telegraphed to
Trivandrum for extra police and troops. He got little sympathy from V. P. Madhava
Rao who by now had returned from Madras. Scribbling a marginal note about officers "keeping too much at headquarters and . . . to desk work," Madhava
Rao repeated that "the whole thing will subside if you visited [sic] the scene of the
so-called riots and brought your personal influence to bear. . . . The calling out of
troops will invest the whole affair with greater importance than it deserves." None
of "the extraordinary measures" which Keshava Pillai called for was to be imple-
mented.

94 Madras Mail, 8 Feb. 1905, p. 3. reported
that the schoolboys had been bloodily beaten.
The police in Trivandrum received similar
reports from Iravas, but the superintendent
who saw the boys wrote that their injuries
had been grossly exaggerated. R. H. Bensley,
Superintendent of Police, to the Ch. Sec.,
Travancore Government, 28 Jan. 1905: TGER, TJD 115. Government received the
first protest from Iravas in a petition from
Komatha Kunju Panikkan, the secretary of
the Karligapalli Irava association, received
25 Jan. 1905 in Trivandrum. A telegram,
complaining of the assault on the boys, was
received the same day.

95 Nagam Aiya to Keshava Pillai, 9 Feb.
1905: TGER, TJD 115.
96 Madhava Rao to Keshava Pillai, 28
Feb. 1905 and Keshava Pillai to Madhava
If Iravas were getting the worst of these clashes in Quilon District, they were getting the best of them in the Madras press. On 21 February the Madras Mail reported the persecution of Iravas in Quilon taluk and a week later the Madras Times wrote that worried Irava leaders had telegraphed for Palpu to come from Mysore. Some newspapers in the Kerala region put the Nayar case, but on the propaganda front Iravas were generally better organized. When the disturbances intensified in March, Iravas in Quilon District wired a petition to the sircar in Trivandrum—and to the Madras Times.

The S.N.D.P. Yogam held an emergency meeting at Aruvipuram on 4 March, and Kumaran Asan forwarded to government its resolution appealing for support. He pointed out that he had received letters and petitions from Yogam members in Quilon District and that intimidation had prevented some from attending the the emergency meeting.

Iravas maintained a solidarity which gave them an advantage in putting their case. Educated men like Kumaran Asan and his associates in the Yogam advised those who collided with Nayars, and organized the petitions and telegrams. Educated Nayars, however, were on the defensive. They may have had some sympathy with their conservative castemen, and Nayar officials probably did show partiality, as Iravas charged. However, the causes of the disturbances—enforcement of distance pollution and exclusive schools—were not ones with which educated Nayars wanted to be publicly associated, regardless of their private feelings. For Iravas, the problem was more simple. Very much the challengers for a respected place in Malayali society, they had far fewer educated, influential men. There was a consequent feeling that all must hang together to avoid hanging separately.

The disturbances continued into March. Irava homes were entered, men beaten and women “compelled to remove their upper cloth.” Sujanandhini, an Irava newspaper published at Paravur south of Quilon, called on the Resident to intervene and wrote that Iravas planned to ask the British government and the rulers of Cochin and Mysore for grants of land where Iravas might settle. “Many,” it continued, “are contemplating a change of religion. It is under discussion whether Christianity or Mohammedanism will afford the necessary relief.”

Shortly after publication of this editorial, the office of Sujanandhini was burned down—by Nayars, the editor claimed. No one was ever prosecuted for the fire. The incident resulted in Madhava Rao himself going on tour in Quilon District: he met the editor of Sujanandhini and a number of Irava delegations, and guaranteed them protection if they went to Quilon to file formal complaints.

Madhava Rao appears to have encouraged a public meeting of reconciliation which was held on 19 March in Quilon. It was chaired by a leading Nayar landlord and retired vakil. It heard fifteen speakers and passed five resolutions; about a thousand people were said to have attended. At least six of the speakers were Iravas, and two of the resolutions represented clear advances for them. One resolution...
tion urged members of both sides to seek education by taking advantage of the government's order of 1904 which opened most government schools to Iravas. (In theory, most of the schools had long been open, but Madhava Rao was attempting to make admission of Iravas practicable.) The other thanked the sircar for its attempts to select government employees from all castes and religions. With the meeting the disturbances ended; only the recriminations remained. These included an unsuccessful Nayar attempt to trump up a bribery charge against the Christian police inspector and allegations that Nayars were firing the houses of non-Malayali Brahmins as part of a plot directed against all their caste rivals.

A few Iravas emerged bruised from the disturbances, but no one on either side was killed. The crisis helped to enhance the reputation and confidence of the Yogam, which had called Palpu down from Mysore at the height of the trouble to lend moral support. At the end of April the Yogam was back on the offensive when it petitioned the sircar either to allow Irava children into a school at Changancherry or to help Iravas build a school of their own. The petition, neatly written in English, bore the marks of twenty-eight illiterate residents and not a single signature in Malayalam or English. This was the work of Kumaran Asan and Palpu, the Malabar Herald concluded. At about the same time, Iravas boycotted a temple festival at Cranganore in Cochin in which they had traditionally taken part, though always from a deferential distance. Their “spiritual head,” it was reported, was arranging to build another temple in the area. In 1907 the Yogam was permitted to nominate a member to the annual meeting of the consultative assembly held in Trivandrum. Kumaran Asan was its first representative. In 1908 M. Govindan, a graduate and a member of the Yogam, became the first Irava munsiff in Travancore and the first Irava to rise to a moderately important position in the government service.

Conclusion

The formation of the S.N.D.P. Yogam was a response to the increasing prosperity and education of many Iravas in Travancore. It was an attempt to win social respectability: to be allowed to use roads, attend schools, visit government offices, hold government jobs and enter government-administered temples. In Travancore, such prohibitions worked against all Iravas. By propagating the dharma of Sri Narayana, a wider sense of community could be created among Iravas, and a large, united “community” might be expected to wield some influence with governments. But this was not a one-way process. It was not solely—or even chiefly—a question of Palpu and a handful of educated Iravas wishing to enhance their own importance

106 Madras Mail, 21 March 1905, p. 5. The other resolutions proclaimed that “reports of inter-racial animosity are quite unfounded”, that the two communities could improve themselves without harming each other, and that pending cases should be settled out of court. See also the Malabar Herald, 25 March 1905.

107 Bensley to Madhava Rao, 3 April 1905: TGER, TJD 115.

108 Madras Times, 21 March 1905, p. 3. The cry of anti-Brahmin arson had gone up, along with a number of Brahmin houses, in most hot weathers since the Malayali Memorial of 1891. See for example the Madras Mail, 19 March 1892, p. 5 and 23 April 1897, p. 5. The houses were thatched and cooking was done over open fires.

109 Madras Mail, 20 March 1905, p. 5.

110 Petition, received 29 April 1905: TGER, Travancore Educational Department, File No. 255 of 1907; Malabar Herald, 22 July 1905. In August Iravas were admitted to the school in Changancherry; G.O., 21 Aug. 1905: TGER, Educational Department, File No. 255 of 1907.

111 Madras Mail, 8 April 1905, p. 5.

112 Kesavan, Asan, p. 331; Regional Records, Freedom Movement, II, 462n.

113 Madras Mail, 14 March 1908, p. 5.
and wringing recognition and patronage from government. There had been local movements for self-improvement among Iravas since at least the 1890s. The approaches of Iravas to the missionaries indicate fairly clearly that these local organizations were searching for outside help and a wider sense of identification. In many ways the combination of Palpu, Narayana and Kumaran Asan ideally answered these cravings. Dr Palpu, with his medical degree, turban and long black coat, exemplified “achieved” status. Narayana, respected even by savarna Hindus, was in a tradition of Kerala ascetics which went back to Sankaracharya. Kumaran Asan, the efficient organizer, was growing in fame as a Malayalam poet and a builder of the modern Malayalam language. Narayana and Kumaran Asan were virtually full-time workers for the Yogam.

By 1909 when the Yogam held its annual meeting in Ernakulam, it had more than 900 paid-up members, who subscribed one rupee initially and contracted to pay Rs 25 in instalments. Its total capital was more than Rs 60,000. It had twenty-five local branches in Travancore, five in Cochin and three in British Malabar; it had seventeen temples in Travancore and two each in Cochin and Malabar. The aspect of religious reform was foremost. Palpu told the meeting:

As all successful movements of any importance in India have for the past several centuries been connected with religious revival of some sort or other, special efforts were made in this direction. The personality of the President of the Yogam [Sri Narayana] who is the recognized religious leader of the community has been the main guiding force in this direction.

It was not until 1917 that the Yogam changed its emphasis from temple-building to school-building. The Rs 25 pledge which was required for Yogam membership meant that such membership was not going to be large. But a man did not have to belong to the Yogam, in the sense of being a paid-up member, to accept the teaching of Sri Narayana or to take advantage of Yogam schools and temples. In accepting Sri Narayana’s teaching, Iravas from every part of Travancore were accepting membership in a wider community which was united at least in its reverence for an Irava guru. Because the appeal was essentially religious and vernacular, it reached Iravas of all economic levels. The poor man climbing the coconut palm was as receptive to Sri Narayana as the Irava graduate may have been to Dr Palpu.

From religion other movements might grow. For a time in the 1920s and 1930s, the Yogam was an important political force. No Irava who had any public ambitions could avoid taking part in its affairs. C. Kesavan, who was general secretary of the Yogam at the height of its militancy and power in the 1930s, wrote that he was not eager to become a Yogam leader. "But just like saying the leopard cannot change his spots, it was easy to understand that I was not able to forsake my Irava-ness. The relationship between me and the Yogam then was like the drop of water in the lotus."

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114 See e.g. Malabar Herald, 24 March 1906, 16 March 1907 and 27 March 1909.
116 Dr K. M. George, Trivandrum, "Asan", unpublished manuscript, quoting a statement of Sri Narayana in 1917.
117 “The SNDP Yogam”, the Travancore police’s Weekly Secret Bulletin, II, No. 43 (26 Oct. 1935), recorded, “appears to be a strong anti-Government organization”. Orders were given “to carefully watch the activities of the various Branches”. Trivandrum, Kerala State Archives.
The Temple Entry Proclamation of November 1936 in Travancore did much to take the militancy out of the Yogam's activities. The proclamation affirmed Iravas' respectable status in Hindu society. Coupled with the skilful political juggling of the new Dewan, Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, it ultimately put the administration of the Yogam into the hands of moderate middle-class Iravas who were prepared to cooperate with the government. Kesavan joined the Travancore State Congress, while the poor Irava labourers of towns like Quilon and Alleppey fell increasingly under the influence of dedicated Communist organizers. By the 1950s Iravas were seen as the backbone of the Communist Party in Kerala state, and the Yogam, according to one interpretation, was split on class lines between its middle-class executive and its Communist-oriented membership. By the late 1960s, such conflicts had virtually paralysed the organization.

The Yogam, perhaps more than other caste associations in India, grew out of the peculiar nature of local society and took strength from the repressive nature of the local administration. By enforcing similar disabilities against Iravas throughout the state, the Travancore government created grievances in which all Iravas—from a toddy tapper in Alleppey to a graduate in Trivandrum—had a share. In the early years, moreover, the Yogam's strength among a wide range of Iravas lay in the fact that Sri Narayana was not an anglicized notable and that his emphasis was on religious reform rather than institutional politics. Asan, as general secretary, might use the Yogam as a lever to pry the occasional job out of government, but any Irava could make an offering at a Yogam temple or take pleasure and pride in getting the darshan of Sri Narayana. The widespread support which the latter won for the Yogam made it an important force later when new leaders like T. K. Madhavan and C. Kesavan turned it towards politics.

Sri Narayana, Kumaran Asan and Palpu were not waving a magic wand over localized subcastes to create the handsome prince of "the Irava community". Economic and educational developments in Travancore in the late nineteenth century increased Irava power and encouraged Irava aspirations. Their matrilineal or semi-matrilineal system, coupled with Syrian Christian control of the proselytizing Anglican church, discouraged conversion to Christianity. The Yogam, with its revered guru, successful doctor and promising poet and administrator, provided a focus for the widespread, but hitherto unconnected, ambitions of many Iravas.

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121 See the Hindu (Kerala edition), 1 Oct. 1971, which carried a report that the Yogam had at last elected office bearers after five years "in the doldrums".
122 T. K. Madhavan (1885-1930) was the leading figure in the Yogam at the time of the Vaikam satyagraha in 1924: see Regional Records, Freedom Movement, 11, 462-3n.