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Ways of Knowing: Asaris, Nampoothiris and Colonialists
in Twentieth Century Malabar, India

By
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Doctor of Philosophy

History

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M. A., Emory University, 2011
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An abstract of
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Abstract

Ways of Knowing: Asaris, Nampoothiris and Colonialists
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This dissertation explores the historical trajectories of the different forms of knowledge production in the colonial context analyzing the community reform movements of two caste communities in twentieth century Malabar in India. Through a comparative historical study, the work investigates how Asaris (the carpenter caste) and Brahmins (the priestly caste) of Malabar, in their attempt to reform the community, differently negotiated with the colonial practices of production of knowledge. In this analysis, I mark the activities in the dominant field of knowledge both in the colonies and in post-colonies as *production of knowledge* and the embodied actions of knowing outside the dominant field as *practices of knowing*. The major objective of the study is to trace the tension between production of knowledge and practices of knowing by analyzing their interface both in the colonial and post-colonial situations.

Asaris in the first half of the twentieth century assimilated the new materials and the new social relations emerged through colonialism into the fold of Asari world without entering into the order of knowledge. They avoided colonial interventions in their practices by keeping asarippani (carpentry) a practice of knowing. By the last decades of the twentieth century, general socio-economical changes in the region and technological changes in the construction field forced Asaris to incorporate elements of 'modern knowledge' which transformed asarippani into a new form. By the end of the twentieth century asarippani moved into an overlapping field of production of knowledge and practice of knowing. Nampoothiris, through the reform movement during the second quarter of the twentieth century, attempted to establish a continuity between the 'traditional' Brahmanical knowledge and 'modern' scientific knowledge. The dissertation shows that the specific way in which colonialists conceptualized knowledge, enabled Nampoothiris to enter into the order of knowledge maintaining the dominance in the society. The comparative analysis of production of knowledge and practice of knowing contributes to a politics which challenge the homogenizing tendencies in the contemporary institutional practices of knowledge. The dissertation also demonstrates and underscores the possibilities of different ways of knowing and being in this world.

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As my journey with this dissertation concludes, it is time to look back, remember and forget. Acknowledging everyone and everything that made this journey possible is an impossible task, nevertheless I shall attempt. I will begin with the obvious. This dissertation in its current form is a result of my advisor Dr. Clifton Crais' patient and persistent criticisms, advices, suggestions and warnings. It was in a difficult and struggling phase that Dr. Crais joined in this journey as my advisor. I express my sincere gratitude to him for helping me at a critical juncture and for his directions and efforts in bringing this to a logical conclusion. I thank Dr. Jeffrey Lesser and Dr. Pamela Scully, first for accepting my request to join the committee and for their efforts in improving the content and form of this work.

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Whatever contribution this dissertation makes towards the scholarship on Asari practices, is a result of my conversations with Asaris in various part of Keralam. I express my sincere gratitude to the activists and leaders of the Kerala Viswakarma Sabha and other Asaris who shared their knowledge and information with me. It is sad that I cannot mention names here for reasons of privacy; still, I would like to put it on record that, it is their thoughtful and ingenious comments that helped me create the arguments in this dissertation.

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and many other friends helped me clarify my own theoretical and political positions I have taken in this dissertation. My nieces and nephews have always brightened my life in ways only children can. I warmly remember Deepak, Sreekutty, Manikuitty, Devu and Adityan for all the joyous moments.

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Content

Introduction

Through a comparative historical study, this work investigates how *Asaris* (the carpenter caste) and *Nampoothiris* (the priestly caste of Brahmins) of twentieth century Malabar in India negotiated the colonial categorization of knowledge and ignorance, theory and practice, and traditional and scientific knowledge. This work analyzes the different ways of knowing in the context of hierarchical caste practices and the transformations of these practices in the wake of colonial intervention. In this analysis, to mark the activities in the dominant field of knowledge both in the colonies and in post-colonies, I employ a category *production of knowledge.* For mapping the embodied actions of knowing outside the dominant field I use another category *practice of knowing*. The major objective of my study is to trace the tension between production of knowledge and practices of knowing by analyzing their interaction, confrontation and intersection in both colonial and post-colonial situations. I do not use the analytical categories of production of knowledge and practices of knowing as two new binaries to replace other dichotomous categories such as theory and practice or modern and traditional knowledge. The categories I employ underscore difference rather than dichotomy and difference-making rather than opposition.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the British colonial government in India had established a wide network of educational institutions which included schools, colleges, universities and professional training institutions.[1] The colonial practices

[1] For a general history of educational institution in Colonial India see, Syed Nurulla and J.P. Naik, *History of Education in India During the British Period* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1951); S. N. Mukherjee, *History of Education in India: Modern Period* (New Delhi: Acharya Book Depot, 1966); N. Jayapalan,

related to these institutions produced a specific discourse of knowledge which served to order native populations hierarchically according to their assumed relation with knowledge. By the beginning of the twentieth century, this colonial discourse became dominant but was not hegemonic. The different caste communities in India responded in different ways – such as negotiation, adaptation, resistance, distancing, neglecting – to the colonial domination and this transformed their existing practices of knowing.

This project draws inspiration from James Scott's most recent work on hill people in Southeast Asia in which he demonstrated how certain groups established self-governed zones outside the purview of nation-states. Scott argued that "everything about these people's livelihood, social organization and ideologies and (more controversially) even their largely oral cultures, can be read as strategic positioning designed to keep the state at arm's length."[2] Scott explained that the history of state-making could not be understood without including "the history of deliberate reactive statelessness."[3] Following this scholarship I attempt to understand resistance in varied forms such as distancing, avoiding, neglecting and ignoring.

The resistance in the form of avoiding/neglecting existed only through the practices in the everyday life. Henri Lefebvre argued that as the "public (political) life has penetrated private life and vice versa," everyday life practices have political

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History of Education in India (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2000). For a critical analysis of colonial education see, Krishnakumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991); Clive Whitehead, *The Colonial Educators: The British Indian and Colonial Education Service 1858 – 1953* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Sanjay Seth, *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[2] James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchic History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), x.

[3] Ibid.

consequences.[4] In his work, *The Practices of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau demonstrated how people resisted the disciplining technologies of dominant cultures through different actions in the everyday which he called "practices of everyday creativity."[5] He argued that everyday actions are not just mundane and insignificant but are very much part of both disciplinary and anti-disciplinary politics. Furthering this concept of the everyday, I explain the negotiations of Asaris and Nampoothiris with colonial practices of knowledge through the exploration of everyday life practices and their transformations.

By exploring the worlds of Asaris and Nampoothiris of Malabar in the twentieth century, I further reexamine certain aspects of the politics of knowledge. I use the Asari community to analyze how, in the first half of the twentieth century, practices of knowing that were located in everyday life became a domain in which Asaris resisted colonial intervention in their practices. I demonstrate that the mode of Asari resistance to the practices of production of knowledge was not that of opposition but that of difference-making through everyday practices. The Asari practices of knowing were *different* from colonial practices of knowledge production, but the former was not always *oppositional* to the latter. Asaris did not organize or participate in any political actions that overtly challenged the colonial practices. Instead, they avoided / neglected colonial institutions and distanced themselves from the new material production practices associated with the colonial forms of knowledge. I also illustrate how in the late twentieth century Asaris incorporated the features of the

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[4] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* (London; New York: Verso, 1991).

[5] Michel de Certeau, *The Practices of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xiv.

production of knowledge into *asarippani* (carpentry) as a result of a new socio-economic and political environment. In this process of incorporation, Asaris positioned themselves in the overlapping fields of the production of knowledge and practices of knowing.

I use the example of Nampoothiris to show how colonial practices enabled different caste communities to position themselves within the hierarchical series of knowledge production. I compare the Brahmanical intervention in the production of knowledge with that of Asari interactions in order to underscore the importance of caste in the historical trajectories of the production of knowledge and practices of knowing. I show that knowledge was not a necessary part in all forms of power or domination such as, for example, in the Nampoothiri domination in Malabar in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Knowledge became intrinsic to the application of certain forms of power in a specific historical moment. By exploring the Nampoothiri world in the first half of the twentieth century, I argue that the Nampoothiri interactions with the institution of the production of knowledge through reform in the 1920s and 1930s resulted in re-evaluations of values and norms of daily life practice based on the colonial discourse of knowledge. However, if colonial discourse assumed an opposition between objectivity and religious beliefs, Nampoothiri intervention created a possibility of making belief itself objective. In other words, the Brahmanical interaction with colonial knowledge transformed the fundamental characteristics of knowledge production in India.

Knowing practices had existed and continue to exist in all societies in different forms. My attempt here is not to construct a trans-historical or universal theory of

knowing practice which could explain the process for all times and spaces. The objective here is a limited one: to explain specific forms of practices of knowing in the context of its interaction with production of knowledge in the colonial and post-colonial period. Most human actions involve some kind of knowing, and it would be difficult to draw fundamental differences between actions of knowing and other actions. For analytical purposes, I mark certain actions as practices of knowing which, in the colonial context, were juxtaposed, compared or contrasted against the category of knowledge. Artisans in the nineteenth century neither considered their production practices as knowing practice nor did they differentiate it as an expert activity in contrast to daily life practices. From the vantage point of the present, I describe certain artisanal activities as practices of knowing because at a certain period of colonialism both artisans and colonizers began to position these activities against the colonial practices of knowledge. It is in this context of its juxtaposition with the production of knowledge that this dissertation marks artisanal activities as practices of knowing.

Scholars in the colonial period studied practices of knowing under the sign of traditional knowledge, practical knowledge, or artisanal practice. Colonial officers who inaugurated anthropological surveys constructed the category of "traditional practice" in opposition to modern Western knowledge, which became and continues to be the fundamental operating binary in the discipline of anthropology. The colonial ethnographers contrasted traditional practices, which were in the form of embodied practices and experiences, with modern knowledge which was supposed to be

disembodied and objective.[6] Thus tradition and traditional practice were, from the very beginning, colonial categories. Talal Asad noted that, though the contribution of anthropology towards imperialism and colonialism might be an exaggerated one, "[t]he process of European global power has been central to the anthropological task of recording and analyzing the ways of life of subject population." The role of colonial power was not limited in facilitating the anthropological field work; rather, "it is that the fact of European power, as discourse and practice, was always part of the reality the anthropologist sought to understand, and the way they thought to understand it."[7] Working within this reality, tradition was constructed as static, religious and as a relic of human history.

There was no consensus among British colonizers in India regarding the value of native production practices. Historians generally mark the varied opinions of colonizers under the opposing schools of Orientalists and Utilitarians. The Utilitarians, with a notion of a historical teleology, believed in progress and change. For example, Alfred Chatterton, a civil engineer who later served as the director of the Industries Department of Madras Government, championed for the progress,

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[6] For example, Francis Buchanan who conducted a detailed survey of southern India in the early nineteenth century underscored the difference between the traditional practices of natives which he connected to ignorance and superstition and the modern anthropological knowledge practiced by himself and other colonialists. It is important to note that Buchanan found the 'tradition' not in the past or in history of the native communities but in their present. See, Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1807). For another example of similar colonial depictions of tradition by colonial historians see, James Mill, *The History of British India* (London: James Madden and Co., 1840). In the early twentieth century, colonial ethnographers using modern ethnographic tools reinforced the dichotomy of subjective practices of the natives and modern objective practices of the colonizers. For example see, Edgar Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India* (Madras: Govt. Press, 1906).

[7] Talal Asad, "From the History of Colonial Anthropology to the Anthropology of Western Hegemony," in George. W. Stocking, *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 315.

modernization and improvement of native production systems in India. He observed that "social customs and caste restrictions militate against progress" of industries in India and hence the artisanal practices in which "religious prejudices have greater control" were in the state of decay. Chatterton mentioned that as part of modernizing the artisanal practices,

> labor must be trained to work more efficiently – there must be less of brutal force and more of rational actions; the primitive tools of artisan must be superseded by better implements; subdivisions of labour must be introduced and from the crude simplicity of each family as a unit of productive effort strong combinations must be evolved, either by co-operative working or by concentration of manufacture in small factories.[8]

In Chatterton's view, the basic elements of the traditional system of production were religious prejudices, primitive tools and crude division of labor. As a hardcore believer of progress and modernization, Chatterton advocated the gradual transformation of the family-based native production into a system of factory production.

The Orientalists, on the other hand opposed industrialization based on the destructive consequences of factory mode of production in Britain. George Birdwood, a colonial officer who conducted a systematic survey of artisanal practices in India in the 1870s explained the nature of Indian arts and craft as follows:

> The arts of India are the illustration of the religious life of the Hindus, as that life was already organised in full perfection under the code of Manu BC 900 – 300…. So securely was the sacerdotal state system of the Brahmanical Hindus fixed by the Code of Manu that even the foreign invasions and conquests to which they have been constantly subjected to from the seventh century B.C. have

[8] Alfred Chatterton, *Industrial Evolution in India* (Madras: The Hindu Office, 1912), 15.

> left the life and arts of India essentially the same as we find them in Ramayana and Mahabharata[9].

Birdwood had great admiration for Indian art and craft like many other British Orientalists at that period and he was a strong critic of the rapid industrialization taking place in Britain. His analysis was premised on an incommensurable and dichotomous relation between Indian craft production and industrial production in Britain. Still, his assumptions regarding traditional and modern knowledge were not different from that of Utilitarians like Chatterton. Both the Orientalists and the Utilitarians assumed that traditional practices were bodily skills based on experience whereas modern knowledge was a representation of a rational, logical, thought process. They differed in their opinion regarding the value and importance of tradition but agreed on the elements that constituted traditional practices. It is less important for our purpose to analyze which position was more accurate than noting the fact that it was in this debate that colonizers invented the notion of tradition by marking certain practices as traditional in opposition to modern knowledge.[10] In short, we may conclude that the "traditional" and "modern" emerged together in a particular colonial condition and they mutually constituted each other in their process of evolution.

From the early twentieth century onwards anthropologists have challenged the colonial concepts of tradition from various stand points. From a structural-functional position, Malinowski attempted to rationalize primitive cultures and their practices.

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[9] George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London: Chapman and Hall Ltd., 1884), 1.

[10] Comaroff and Comaroff demonstrated how in the colonial South Africa, the encounter between the missionaries and native people created "the stark dualism – white/black, Christian/heathen, European ways/Tswana ways" and how the same practices "undermined those very dualisms, dichotomies and distinctions." See, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 7.

He observed that "tradition is a fabric in which all the strands are so clearly woven that the destruction of one unmakes the whole."[11] In his analysis on South African native communities, Malinowski criticized the colonial attempt to modernize "the tradition of people living in the simple tribal conditions of Africa" through "schooling of unblushingly European type."[12]

While Malinowski and several other anthropologists in this period critiqued colonial claims of superiority, these criticisms still privileged the binary of modernity and tradition, but now from a cultural relativist stand point. This dissertation attempts to situate artisanal practice outside this binary of tradition and modernity. It also distances itself from the periodization based on colonial-modern concepts of the linear time of progress. Periodization such as traditional and modern or even colonial and post-colonial are not relevant in understanding the genealogy of artisanal practices analyzed in this work. Instead, I mark periods based on the significant and visible shifts in the everyday practice of artisans in negotiation with multiple social forces that were active in their world.

If anthropological works located artisans in tradition and culture, historical studies mapped artisans in the domain of politics and economics. These studies explained artisanal production as an economic activity which faced serious challenges due to colonial intervention and its exploitative economic policies. Scholars from India, both Marxist and nationalists, marked the transformation of artisanal practices

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[11] Cited in George W Stocking, "Maclay, Kubary, Malinowski: Archetypes from the Dreamtime of Anthropology," in Stockings, ed., *Colonial Situations Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 51.

[12] Ibid, 58.

and the question of industrialization in relation to the introduction of capitalist industries during the colonial period.[13] In this scholarship, the transformation is a movement of artisans from one kind of economic activity to another according to the historical transformation of the mode of production. Most of the studies on artisans based on an economic deterministic approach assumed that this transformation was historically necessary as part of the expansion and progress of the economy. If some sectors were not industrialized or were "left behind," it was because the colonialists were not "sincere" in their attempt of modernizing the colonies.[14] It is true that in some sectors like textile production, colonial intervention brought substantial changes which destroyed the market for artisanal products. Still, even in situations where they faced severe poverty and famine, artisans did not "naturally" move into factories, abandoning their traditional practices.[15] Most of these works discussed the question of

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[13] For a Marxist debate on the transformations of production practices in the colonial period see, Paresh Chattopadhyay, "On the Question of Mode of Production in Indian Agriculture," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 7, 13 (May 25, 1972): A41- 46; Ashok Rudra, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism in India* (New York: Vanguard Books, 1978); Utsa Patnaik, *The Long Transition: Essays on Political Economy* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1999); Anjan Chakrabarty, Stephen Cullenberg, *Transition and Development in India* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[14] Historians with a nationalist perspective considered the transformation from feudalism to industrial society a necessary process of progress which could be attained only through independent nation-states. Their critique of colonial state on the destruction of the artisanal practices was limited within the teleology of progress and development through industrialization. Gandhi was an exception and his views on industrial society never gained dominance within the nationalist discourse. For nationalist perspectives of industrialization see R.C. Dutt, *The Economic History of India under early British Rule* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1908); Rajani Palm Dutt, *India To-day* (Bombay: Peoples Publishing House, 1949); M.K.Chaudhuri, *Trends in Socio Economic Changes in India 1871 – 1961* (New Delhi: Prem Printing Press, 1969). For Gandhi's criticism of industrialization see M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (New Delhi: Navajivan Publication House, 1982).

[15] For example Tirthankar Roy criticizing the nationalist perspective argued that colonial economic policy was less destructive of artisanal production practices than it was described by the nationalist historians. Though Roy's appreciation of colonialism is problematic his analysis of artisanal production helps us to understand the artisanal reactions to the colonial intervention in a different perspective. Tirthankar Roy, *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

artisanal production in the space of the nation and nationalism. For them, artisanal practices were important only as a "national issue."

Even the recent historical work which critically scrutinizes the colonial and nationalist discourse on artisanal practices follows this trend of situating craft in the national context. In a recent study of craft production in colonial India, Abigail McGowan explores "how knowledge was created about craft during British rule and how this knowledge helped shape development efforts at that time."[16] While this work is an excellent study of colonial –nationalist discourse on craft, the craftsmen's perspective is almost absent in this analysis. It is one thing to acknowledge that craft was a central theme of the colonial and nationalist discourse, but it is another thing entirely to recognize the artisanal life world outside the domains of colonial and national appropriations of art and craft. It is not an accident that these historians develop their arguments on artisans depending solely on colonial archival sources. As a result, even while criticizing colonial ideologies and policies, they reproduce and sometime reinforce the colonial categories such as "artisan" or "handicraft." This dissertation recognizes the importance of the negotiations of artisanal world with dominant forces, but it attempts to place on center stage the imaginaries of artisans through their own categories such as *desham*, *kalam* and *asarippani*, about which the later part of this introduction will explain in detail. The use of so-called vernacular categories as heuristic device enables us to shift the narration from the institutional and state authorized language to a language of everyday practice.[17]

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[16] Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4.

[17] Nandita Sahai's work on artisans of early modern Rajasthan is a good example of situating artisanal perspectives and the perspective about artisans in the same analytical domain. . Still, for Sahai, the

The 1980s and 90s witnessed a worldwide surge of new social movements which gathered protest against the alarming rate of destruction of the environment, against the destruction of the livelihoods of indigenous communities in the name of development, and against the economic exploitations through globalization. This had its own reflection in the academic scholarship on traditional knowledge now understood as indigenous knowledge. Scholars began to study indigenous practices not merely as traditions but as alternative to the violent practices of modern knowledge.[18] This scholarship privileged and even valorized the experiential elements of indigenous practices against the objectified forms of scientific knowledge. Studies in the anthropology of the senses underscored the importance of taste, touch smell and aural senses in the epistemology of indigenous societies.[19] This work draws inspiration from the above politics and scholarship and at the same time maps its limitations in understanding the methodological features of artisanal practices.

The above scholarship maintains the difference between discursive and non-discursive practices by emphasizing the importance of the latter in indigenous practices. In this work I attempt to show that the separation of discursive from no-

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relation to the state is the major determining factor of the social world of artisans rather than their laboring practices in the daily life. Hence law, institutional state practices and artisanal engagements with these institutions over-determine Sahai's narratives. See, Nandita Sahai, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in the Early Modern Rajasthan* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006)

[18] For a comparative analysis of scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge see, Ladislaus Semali and Joe Kincheloe, eds. *What is indigenous Knowledge: Voices From the Academy* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 1999); Suman Sahai et. al., *Indigenous Knowledge: Issues for Developing Countries* (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 2005); Darrell Poesy and Kristina Plenderleith, *Indigenous Knowledge and Ethics: A Darrell Poesy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

[19] For the critique of Western understanding of senses see, Constant Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993); David Howes., ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991); Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. T'irner, eds., *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1991).

discursive elements is not relevant in understanding artisanal practices. In Asari representations of asarippani (carpentry) we will see mentions of "mind acting" and "hand thinking" which makes the above separation meaningless. For example, a *moothasari* (the chief carpenter) may recite a verse during asarippani, which are part of the practice. The purpose of this reciting was not the transmission of meaning through words. The recital was part of producing certain forces which can create effects on objects and on other Asaris who are hearing the recital. Hence, it is less useful in separating the discursive and non-discursive elements than understanding the productive effects of various forces active in asarippani.

Scholars who study experiential knowledge from a phenomenological perspective have questioned the notion that the anthropologists' sensitivity could translate the non-discursive practices based on sensual experience into objectified knowledge by experiencing herself/himself through the body and then writing about that experience. They relocate knowledge to the realm of unconscious, impulsive and implicit thinking. For example, Peter Storkerson explains experiential knowledge as "things recalled from experiences, things tacitly or implicitly learned or acquired." According to him, "the various kind of experiential knowledge and knowing have in common the use of what is termed unconscious, non-conscious or implicit thinking, which does not involve explicit, expressible, analyzable theoretical system of knowledge."[20]

[20] Peter Storkerson, "Experiential Knowledge, Knowing and Thinking," *Experiential Knowledge Special Interest Group 2009*, accessed February 18, 2012, http://web.me.com/niedderer/EKSIG/proceedings_speakers_files/Storkerson.pdf . For a debate on experiential knowledge see Jerry Fodor, *Modularity of Mind* (Scranton: Crowell, 1983); Arthur S Reber, *Implicit Learning and Tacit Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); George Lakoff and Mark Jobnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*

Laura Marks observed that "[t]here is a current popular tendency to embrace feeling over thinking," which according to her "descends from feminist and other critique of mind-body dualism and instrumental rationality."[21] She also noted that "the turn towards visual culture has left in place the sensory hierarchy that subtends Western philosophy in which only the distant senses are the vehicles of knowledge."[22] In the process of challenging this Western philosophy, the arguments in favor of feeling ignored the importance of proximate senses (senses of touch, taste and smell) in the production of knowledge, and "plays back into the commercial capture of sense experience: the senses are being sold back to us as means not of knowledge but of pleasure."[23] While Laura Marks' criticism of privileging feeling over thinking is important in understanding artisanal practices, it is necessary to mark that both sides of this debate stem from the history of Western philosophy where the divide between knowledge and experience is a 'historical fact.' Marks' criticism indirectly emphasizes knowledge as a central category of human existence.

This work distances itself from marking artisanal practices as traditional knowledge, indigenous knowledge or even as artisanal epistemology – all of which emphasize the knowledge (as a noun form) part of these practices. It also distances from making the above practices just a non-discursive field of experience, feeling or sensing in opposition to knowledge and thinking. By using the category *practices of knowing* to explain artisanal production this work underscores the importance of

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(New York: Basic Books, 1999); Timothy D Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Massachusetts: Belknap, 2002).

[21] Laura U. Marks, "Thinking Multisensory Culture," *Paragraph*, 31, 2 (July 2008): 130.

[22] Ibid., 123.

[23] Ibid., 130.

knowing and *practice*. Knowing (as a verb form) explicates that artisanal practices were neither just experiencing nor feeling and practice points out that knowing was inseparable from human action. Modifying knowledge with adjectives like "indigenous" or "traditional" suggests that artisanal knowledge, for example, is a type of knowledge of which, the rational, Western kind is the highest form. The task of this project is to show however, that artisanal knowledge is not simply a type of knowledge, but rather modifies and helps understand the limits of this category of knowledge itself. While it is strategically important to challenge the colonizers' association of indigenous practices with ignorance, it is problematic to equate these practices with the production of knowledge. Asaris neither produced knowledge as an object nor did they exchange an objectified knowledge, both activities which are fundamental to the production of knowledge.

"Production of knowledge" denotes specific practices that emerged at a certain period of colonial rule and which continue to exist today through institutional practices (such as practices in universities, research institutes etc) in the post-colonial period. The important concepts in the production of knowledge include a notion of objectification and an idea of exchangeability of knowledge without the presence of a human subject. The location of the production of knowledge is the Nation, though the knowledge produced is assumed to be universal. Knowing practice, on the other hand, is located in the everyday life, the boundary of which is the limit of experience of the individual body.[24]

[24] I underscore the importance of bodily experience in the knowing practices of Asaris; at the same time I do not follow here the phenomenological notions of experience as explained in Martin Heidegger or Edmund Husserl in which experience is abstract and a-historical. See, Martin Heidegger, *Question*

By the 1950s, scholars from various academic disciplines began challenging the self-claims of modern knowledge as objective, value-neutral, and factual. In this endeavor, anthropologists, historians and philosophers of science and historians of colonialism contributed significantly by establishing a connection between knowledge and power from various disciplinary and subject positions. Bernard Cohn, in a series of anthropological studies published in the 1950s and 60s, traced the genealogy of categories like, 'caste' and 'village,' in British India and signaled a connection between the construction of these categories and colonial governing practices. In these works, Cohn examined how colonial legal-juridical practices constructed a "Hindu law" based on "Hindu scriptures," how the categories of traditional and modern were deployed in the colonial understanding of "Indian village" and how the Brahmanical ideology was generalized as Hindu religion in colonial perspectives on caste.[25]

If Cohn's earlier works inaugurated the process of historicizing colonial categories, statements and texts, without naming them as discourses, Michael Foucault developed the concept of *discourse* as the central category for understanding production of knowledge. For Foucault, discourse is set of statements, texts and utterances which act together; it produces and governs the objects of knowledge. In

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Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970). For a criticism of the phenomenological understanding of experience see Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Lincoln, N.E: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

[25] Bernard S Cohn, "The Changing Tradition of a Low Caste," *The Journal of American Folklore*, 71, 281 (July – September, 1959): 413 – 421; "The Initial British Impact on India: A case study of Benares Region," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 19, 4 (August 1960): 418 – 431; "The Past of an Indian Village," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 3, 3 (April 1961): 241 – 249; "Anthropological Notes on Dispute and Law in India," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 67. 6 (December, 1965): 82 – 122.

The Archeology of Knowledge, Foucault explained the relation between discursive practices and knowledge as follows:

> Knowledge is that of which one can speak in a discursive practice, and which is specified by that fact: the domain constituted by the different objects that will or will not acquire a scientific status; knowledge is defined by the possibilities of use and appropriation offered by discourse. There are bodies of knowledge that are independent of the sciences (which are neither their historical prototypes, nor their practical by-products), but there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may he defined by the knowledge that it forms.[26]

Foucault explored the relation of power and knowledge through the analysis of techniques and apparatuses of discipline and explicated how different techniques of power constituted different *epistemes* which were historically specific and culturally contextual. This approach, as Stuart Hall explained it, "took as one of its key subjects of investigation the relation between knowledge, power and the body in modern society. It saw knowledge as always inextricably enmeshed in relations of power because it was always being applied to the regulation of social conduct in practice."[27]

Edward Said's, *Orientalism,* first published in 1978, became one of the most influential Foucault-inspired works for scholars of colonial knowledge practices. Said defined the concept of Orientalism as

> the corporate institution for dealing with the orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling

[26] Michael Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 201.

[27] Stuart Hall, "The Work of Representation," in Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1989), 47.

> it, ruling over it: in short Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.[28]

Analyzing Said's work, Gyan Prakash observed that "[u]nsettling received oppositions between the Orient and the Occident… it forced open the authoritative modes of knowing the Other." According to Prakash, *Orientalism* brought down the authority of Western knowledge "from Olympian heights to expose its involvement in Western power."[29] If Foucault's theorization of power-knowledge located its genealogy in the knowledge of Self in the history of the West, Said mined this very same history of the West in order to chart its knowledge of the Other..

A major criticism of Foucault and Said was their exclusion of the role of colonized people in the practices of production of knowledge in the West / Occident. Ann Stoler raised the questions: "Why, for Foucault, [do] colonial bodies never figure as a possible site of the articulation of the nineteenth century European sexuality? And given this omission, what are the consequences for his treatment of racism in the making of European bourgeoisie?"[30] Answering these questions, Stoler explained how the so-called modern forms of knowledge (the self-knowledge of the West) were enmeshed in colonial relations of power.

Following Foucault's conceptualization of power and knowledge, Bernard Cohn, in the 1980s, explained the modalities of colonial knowledge production but shifting the location into colonized spaces and through detailed ethnographies of colonial state practices. The essays, later collected and published as *Colonialism and*

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[28] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

[29] Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory*, 34, 3 (October 1995): 199-212.

[30] Ann Stoler, *Race and The Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), vii.

Its Forms of Knowledge, detailed six investigative modalities of colonial governing processes: the historiographic, the observational/travel, the survey, the enumerative, the museological, and surveillant. According to Cohn,

> [a]n investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias.[31]

Cohn explained that governing and knowledge production are not different processes but two aspects of colonial governmentality. Colonial investigations simultaneously produced scientific knowledge about the population and ordered and controlled the population. Cohn, unlike Foucault or Said, emphasized the importance of the practices of the colonized in the study of colonial knowledge.

In the 1980s and 90s, scholars developing Said and Cohn's insights on the forms and practices of colonial knowledge moved the location of analysis to colonies where the colonized interrupted the colonial discourse. Homi Bhaba and Gyan Prakash, among others, contributed to the debate on colonial knowledge by underscoring the native interruption of colonial discourse and the corresponding transformation of knowledge practices. Bhabha identified mimicry as "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial knowledge and power."[32] According to Bhabha, the process of production of knowledge about the Other, which was an integral part of colonial practice, was neither as complete nor as "successful" as Said

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[31] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5.

[32] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *October*, 28 (Spring 1984), 125.

thought. "The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace."[33] In other words, colonial knowledge is "ambivalent" and always under threat by the reversed gaze of the colonized which was authorized in the first instance by the very colonial discourse of the difference of the Other.

This dissertation draws its energy from the above debate on the power – knowledge relation both in the West and in colonies but attempts to re-examine it by further pushing the limits of the debate. It considers production of knowledge in the colonial form as dominant, but at the same time traces the dominated practices of knowing not just in their partial presence in the moments of domination but in their own independent trajectories.. In Said, and in Bhabha's criticism of Said, the colonized appeared only in the context of the colonizers' discourse of the Other, as interrupters of the very discourse that enabled their action. Bhabha's own description allowed the colonial subject only a "partial presence" which is "both incomplete and virtual."[34] The gaze of the native in this description is a "reverse gaze" which in the first place was authorized by colonial surveillance. This dissertation underscores the natives' capacity, even under domination, to "gaze" both independent of and in relation to colonial discourse. In interaction with the colonial discourse of knowledge, the native practices of knowing created its own categories, rules and regulations, or in other words, a semi-autonomous field of practices.

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[33] Ibid., 127.

[34] Ibid.

The shift that this dissertation makes from colonial discourse to everyday practice is also a shift from the domain of power-knowledge to a domain of actor-knowing, where knowing is always entwined with the body and action. Since Foucault, power has become a central theme in the scholarly understanding of the production of knowledge. Foucault located the dominant forms of knowledge in "the institutionalization of scientific discourse," which "is embodied in a university, or more generally, in an educational apparatus, in a theoretical –commercial institution such as psychoanalysis, or within the framework of reference that is provided by a political system such as Marxism."[35] Most Foucault-inspired scholars focused their study of production of knowledge in the above locations: the locations of the dominant/dominating forms of knowledge. Foucault himself was more interested in "local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges" which struggled against "the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its object."[36]

My analysis of subjugated knowledges moves in a different direction in two ways. In Foucault, these knowledges appear always as an opposition to the dominant forms of knowledge. For Foucault, it is their invalidation by the dominant knowledge that created the potentials and possibilities of subjugated knowledge. I attempt to locate artisanal knowing practices not just in the place of their subjugation to dominant forms, but also in the moments of their independence and in the spaces of their

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[35] Michael Foucault, "Two Lectures," in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power /Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings, 1972 – 1977* ((New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 84.

[36] Ibid., 83.

autonomy. The colonial invalidation did not solely determine the trajectories of changes that took place in artisanal practices. The changes in these practices during the twentieth century should be analyzed on their own terms and contexts. Hence this work shifts the field of analysis from colonial discourse to artisanal practice which is understood as "knowing practice." In this debate, production of knowledge is important so far as it is a comparative category through which we can analyze the specificities and differences of practices of knowing. The analysis neither conceptualizes the artisanal world as autonomous nor does it collapse this world into the world of colonial discourse.

In a second sense, this work differs, not necessarily with Foucault's own theorization, but from the scholarship which emphasizes institutional deployment of power within a Foucauldian paradigm by highlighting the presence of the actor rather than analyzing the apparatuses of power that produces the subject position of that actor. Here, the body is not only an object on which power acts, but it is also a source which can produce forces. If, according to the notion of power-knowledge, power acts from the outside on the body, according to the concept of actor-knowing, forces are always embodied. By substituting power by force, I attempt to underscore the absence of knowledge outside the moment of action – knowledge exists only as knowing – which in a sense follows Foucault's suggestion that power exists only at its point of application.

Comparative historical analysis is the primary method used in this dissertation. It compares modalities, rules and forces that constituted and transformed Asari practices with that of Brahmanical and colonial practices in twentieth century

Malabar. This comparison allows me to map not only the different genealogies of Asari, Nampoothiri and Colonial practices, but also their intersections and overlaps.

This dissertation explores Asari activities in twentieth-century Malabar as an example of artisanal practices. In Malabar, Asari is a word in Malayalam used to denote the caste of carpenters; the term also connotes as "male carpenter." In the dominant versions of history, Asaris are part of the five artisanal Jatis (castes) earlier known as *Aynkammalar,* which means five groups of handicraftsmen. The category of Aynkammalar entered into History through colonial ethnography, which was mediated through Brahmin interlocutors. Colin Mackenzie, who served in the British East India Company army and who conducted a survey of south India in the early nineteenth century, mentioned about five groups of artisans comprising goldsmith, blacksmith, carpenter, sculptor, and leather-smith as part of Aynkammalar.[37] Francis Buchanan, who traveled through Malabar in the first decade of the nineteenth century, included Asaris in the category of Aynkammalar along with goldsmith, blacksmith, mason and coppersmith.[38] The author of *Malabar Manual*, William Logan, quoting the 1881 census report, included Asaris in the category *Kammalar* (handicraftsmen) which was again a group of five castes of Carpenters, Braziers, Stone-Masons, Goldsmith and Blacksmith.[39] It is important to note that all these colonial ethnographers always collected information with the help of Brahmin interlocutors.

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[37] *The Mackenzie Collection: A Descriptive Catalogue of the Oriental Manuscript*, India Office Library, London, B 21: 12, 1(828), 28.

[38] Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1807), 231.

[39] William Logan, *Malabar Manual,* vol. 1 (Madras: Govt. Press, 1887), 115

It is difficult to know whether or not, in the nineteenth century, Asaris considered themselves as part of Aynkammalar. From the evidence in the available written and oral sources, one may observe that in the first half of the twentieth century, Asaris never mentioned being part of this group or establishing social or familial relations with any of these caste groups. Asari, in sociological terms, was an endogamous caste group with kinship rules based on a patrilineal lineage system. Asaris considered themselves superior not only to many of lower castes[40] like *Ezhavas*, *Pulayars* and *Parayars,* but also to the other four castes of Aynkammalar. They did not eat food cooked or enter in marital relations with any of the other castes.[41]

Another category to which Asaris were connected and to which a section of Asaris began identifying with in the last decades of twentieth century is *Viswakarma*. Viswakarma is one of the gods, and the name in Sanskrit means the architect of the universe. The five Viswakarma castes trace their lineage to the five sages emerged from Viswakarma who created the universe. Historians have noted that, in many parts of India in the pre-colonial period, people from artisanal castes had worshipped Viswakarma. There are temples specifically designated to Viswakarma where artisans conduct rituals and prayers.[42] Still, in the Malayalam-speaking region of Keralam,

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[40] I certainly do not agree with the concept that certain castes are lower and certain castes are higher; however, throughout this dissertation I use the terms lower caste and upper caste without quotation marks in order to indicate the materiality of hierarchical caste practices.

[41] See P. Bhaskaranunni, *Keralam Irupatham Noottantinte Arambhathil* (Keralam in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2005), 164.

[42] For example in 1879 John Dowson studied various Viswakarma worshipping practices in different regions of British India. He mentioned that in several regions in south India, such as Mysore, Canara and Madurai artisans worshiped the God Viswakarma. John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature* (London: Trubner & Co., 1879), 311.

Viswakarma worship was unknown until recently when Viswakarma became an icon for the reform organizations of artisanal castes.

I have already used the category artisan to represent Asaris. For many reasons, in the remaining part of this dissertation I use the Malayalam word "Asari" to represent the Jati and a male individual from this Jati. The most obvious reason for this is the fact that Asaris have used, and are still using, this term to represent themselves. I employ the term 'Viswakarma' in occasions when this term is invoked in reform writings and speeches to represent castes including Asaris. As the term artisan carries the burden of its origins in the colonial regime of order, I limit the use of the term for analyzing only the colonial representations of artisans. More importantly, this politics of representation itself is a subject connected to the tension between production of knowledge and practices of knowing which is the central theme of this work.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the governing activities of colonizers started penetrating into the Asari world through different channels. Even though the colonizers had initiated different activities from the 1850s onwards, especially in the field of education to improve artisanal practices, they had little effect in the world of Asaris in Malabar. In the early decades of the twentieth century, as the momentum of colonial appropriations accelerated though large-scale constructions of railways, roads and buildings, *asarippani* (carpentry) became the organizing point of resistance to these colonial interventions. Asaris created a new space where they could distance themselves from colonial forces, bringing asarippani to the centre stage of everyday practice. Difference-making was the modality through which Asaris in

this period created the distance between asarippani and the outside world. In this process, asarippani transformed from the status of a hereditary trade to that of a central organizing category of Jati Asari.

The question of hereditary occupation is central to the debate on caste practices in India. Colonial anthropologists and later nationalist upper caste historians and anthropologists attempted to rationalize the origin of caste based on the theory of division of labor. In the 1871 census report, Surgeon - General Cornish observed that "the present Hindu castes must all have branched out from a few parent stems; that from the first there must have been a primitive division of labor, and hence of caste, corresponding to the great division of labour now existing, i.e., Professional, Personal Service, Commercial, Agricultural, Industrial and Nonproductive."[43] Opposing Cornish's idea of caste, William Logan argued that caste was an Aryan invention of civil administration organized "on the model of [the] well regulated house hold." Still, for Logan too, the division of labor was the criterion of stratification. Logan explained this model based on duties: "The cook must attend to kitchen, the lady's maid to her mistress' attire; the sweeper must not interfere with the food, nor the water-man with the lady's muslin."[44] As part of the project of writing the history of the nation as a unified entity, upper-caste nationalists, in the early twentieth century wrote the colonial interpretation of caste into that history. The idea that caste in its origin was the division of labor provided the nationalists a reason to support their claim as representative of the whole nation, and to ignore the contemporary hierarchical practices through caste.

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[43] Quoted in William Logan, *Malabar Manual*, vol. 1 (Madras: Govt. Press, 1887), 109.

[44] Ibid, 112.

Prathama Banerjee, in an analysis of the relation between caste and history as a discipline, argued that, "caste in history writing was relegated to being a 'social' category different in conceptual status from self-evidently political categories like the nation."[45] Therefore, Banerjee noted that, in the post-independent nation, "it was sociology that would become the natural home for the study of caste."[46] One implication of situating caste studies in sociology was that in these studies the question of occupation mattered only as an empirical question where as the focus was on making a general theory of caste. Until the 1990s, these sociological scholarship interpreted caste practice providing varied general theories of caste. If hierarchy and difference was the key explanatory device in the classical work of *Homo Hierarchicus* by Luis Dumont, in other works it varied from purity and pollution to ideology.[47] Irrespective of these differences, sociologists of caste made it a national phenomenon, something peculiar to Indian culture, civilization and history, even while marking the utter impossibility of generalizing the caste practices at the level of the nation.

By the 1990s, historians, especially from south India, began questioning the nationalistic theories of caste by center-staging region as the location of caste.[48] Prathama Banerjee observed that "such histories have served to irreversibly

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[45] Prathama Banerjee, "Caste and the Writing of History," in Imtias Ahmad, Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, eds. *Dalit Assertion in Society, History and Literature* (New Delhi: Deshkal Publications, 2007), 220.

[46] Ibid, 221.

[47] Luis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980).

[48] For analyses of caste from various regions of India see, E. Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essay on Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992); Shekhar Bandopadhyay*, Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997); G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matryliny in Kerala, Malabar, c-1850 1940* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003); Dilp Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India: Malabar 1900 – 1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of Tamil Political Present* (New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2007).

disaggregate the dominant national story."[49] Following this criticism of the nationalist theory of caste, this dissertation argues that caste was imagined, inherited, and lived in different ways by different castes and any general theory of caste will fail to recognize the specific modes of these lived experiences. While the question of hereditary occupations cannot be disconnected from the question of caste, it is necessary to reframe the question differently from its colonial and nationalist versions, in order understand the ways in which caste was practiced in the daily life.

I argue that different Jatis understood, imagined and practiced caste in their own ways, each of which changed through time and space. Asaris in the early twentieth century understood caste as an effect to be produced by engaging in asarippani on an everyday basis. In other words, Jati was not a pre-given set of rules regarding customs and rituals, but was an active principle produced through engaging in asarippani. This does not mean that, at this period, Asaris imagined Jati as a passive phenomenon or as an object which does not have any implication in their daily life. Contrarily, Jati as the effect of asarippani certainly produced its own effect in the everyday life of Asaris. The important point is that the capacity of Jati to produce this effect was a function of the practice of asarippani and the ways in which Asaris practiced asarippani contextually. By privileging asarippani over *a priori* caste rules in understanding the modalities of knowing practices, this work attempts to underscore everyday practice as the central organizing feature of Jati Asari.

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[49] Prathama Banerjee, "Caste and the Writing of History" in Imtias Ahmad, Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, eds., *Dalit Assertion in Society, History and Literature* (New Delhi: Deshkal Publications, 2007), 223.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Asari understanding of Jati as a function of asarippani underwent a significant transformation as they incorporated elements of knowledge production into asarippani. The socio-economic changes and the reform organizations Asaris formed in this period for negotiating with the state created new ways of understanding Jati and asarippani. Reform associations encouraged the community members to learn and write history, which was one of the languages through which they could communicate with the state. Knowledge in the written form was a necessary condition for these negotiations, the fact which compelled them to transform asarippani into production of knowledge from its earlier form as a practice of knowing. In this process, asarippani became an occupation and the work of the caste 'Asari.' In other words, by the end of the twentieth century, asarippani was no longer a determining factor of caste which was now understood in terms of kinship, lineages and blood relations. It became possible that, even if one did not actually participate in asarippani, one could still be an Asari which was not the case in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Asaris utilized the specific modalities of asarippani for resisting the intrusion of colonial knowledge production into their world. In this period, they invoked specific notions of space and time in connection to the concept of asarippani. Colonizers, while being aware of the regional differences, always desired to make production of knowledge a national activity, more of which we will discuss in the latter part of this introduction. It is enough to say now that national level policies and training programs of the colonial government created concepts of common units of measurement, methods of work and common principles

of artisanal practices at a national level. Asaris distanced themselves from this colonial attempt by maintaining a specific unit of space, *desham*, as the boundary condition of asarippani.

Desham was a geographical unit, the meaning of which changed over time, space, individuals and communities. Brahmins in the pre-colonial period made it an administrative unit. Colonizers continued this Brahmanical tradition. From the very beginning of the British colonial rule in Malabar, desham was the smallest unit of administration which was invoked mainly for the purpose of land revenue. In the first half of the twentieth century, Asaris imagined desham in a different way and invoked it for a different purpose. In order to resist colonial attempts of bringing them to cities and small towns, Asaris defined desham as a limit, only within which one could conduct asarippani. This definition was also connected to the idea that an Asari could learn and practice asarippani only through experiencing the specificities of the locality for a long duration. Asaris called upon this concept of asarippani, i.e., asarippani as embodied knowing, in their attempt of avoiding the colonial offers and temptations extended to them. From the colonial and vernacular sources, we could observe an increasing tendency among Asaris of limiting their movements within desham throughout the first half of the twentieth century. According to the above notions of desham, Asaris believed that the modalities of asarippani varied according to the specificities of each desham and if one had to move into a different desham, one had to learn asarippani again from the first principles.

Since the community defined desham as the location of asarippani, it became impossible for an individual from the community to join the colonial institutions that

were emerging in cities or small towns without being an outcast. This did not prevent a small number of individuals leaving their deshams and joining workshops, industrial training centers and the public works department of the colonial government, but they ceased to be the members of the caste and in many cases were not able to return to their deshams.

If Asaris, in the first half of twentieth century, deployed desham as a tactic in their difference-making, they also utilized a particular notion of time as part of avoiding colonial impositions on their practices. Against the colonial notion of homogenous empty time and its linearity, Asaris underscored the heterogeneity of time, not only regarding its form of progress (as linear, circular or spiral) but also on its qualities and constitutive factors and its appearances.[50] For the colonizers, work was directly linked to time in the sense that the latter was an intrinsic factor of the former. Asaris employed time as a factor which can influence work but only from the outside. More importantly, for Asaris, time was not a unified entity; like multiple individuals or objects, it had different forms, characters, effects and durations. According to Asari notions, time could be bad, good, aggressive, helpful, destructive, or productive. On the one hand, one could position oneself inside a specific form of time or try to distance oneself from it. On the other hand, time could possess individuals or manipulate their internal characteristics and their actions.

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[50] Benedict Anderson argued that the emergence of modern conception of time and simultaneity is connected to the development of "secular sciences." Using Walter Benjamin's ideas, Anderson explained that the members of national communities imagine a "simultaneous" existence with the other members of the community in homogenous empty time. The imagined communities understood the passage of time based on shared clock and calendar times. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). For a criticism of Anderson's notion of time see articles in Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Question of Modernity* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Contemporary academic scholarship has criticized the notions of time in the colonial-modern discourse; this scholarship, however, maintains the modalities of colonial knowledge production and assumes time as a fundamental factor of all phenomena, even in the non-modern world.[51] I argue that the question of time should be revisited not to understand a different concept of the progress of time other than linear time but rather it should be investigated in order to understand different ways of practicing time in different worlds. It is not enough to say that in the non-modern world, time progresses non-linearly; the question is not just about the passage of time but is about the very meaning of time. This work shows that Asaris in the first half of the twentieth century considered time similar to a material object or a human individual. By the end of the century this notion underwent partial transformations as Asaris incorporated methods of production of knowledge into their practices of knowing.

Through the analysis of Asari negotiations with production of knowledge in the twentieth century, I attempt to show the heterogeneity of ways of knowing and how knowledge attained its present status as an intertwined element of power. While the Asari stories explain struggles against the intrusion of disembodied objective knowledge, they also tell us how in by the end of the twentieth century, practices of knowledge production made its entry into the world of asarippani. If Asari objections to production of knowledge stemmed from the fundamental contradiction between

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[51] For a critical analysis of colonial concepts of time see, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Prathama Banerjee, *Politics of Time: "Primitives" and History Writing in a Colonial Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006). These historians explained time in a colonized world as heterogeneous, hybrid or multi-directional; still they did not analyze the quality and nature of time or the relevance /irrelevance of time for different communities in a colonial situation.

embodied and objective knowledges, the genealogy of Nampoothiri interaction with production of knowledge in the twentieth century traced a different vector of negotiations and transformations.

Nampoothiris of Malabar began their interaction with the colonial institutions in a later stage compared to many other Brahmin communities of different places in India. It is not part of the objective of this work to investigate the history of colonial knowledge production in any comprehensive manner. Still, it is important to know the specific features of colonial practices with which Nampoothiris began interacting in the early decades of the twentieth century. By that time, the process of colonial knowledge production had already undergone several mutations and transformations. Hence, at this point, I take a small detour to briefly describe the routes through which colonial practices arrived in its specific forms in the early twentieth century as this is important in understanding the genealogy of the category of knowledge production as it is used in this work.

Historians of science have pointed out that, from the sixteenth century onwards, the "discoveries of new worlds" produced a need for new understandings of the world and a need for a cosmology which could incorporate the newly discovered spaces, beings and things.[52] Missionaries, colonial officers, merchants and travelers collected, explored, mapped and invaded the new world which later resulted in the emergence of various disciplines of modern knowledge. The radical developments in natural philosophy, astronomy, geography and map making, geology, navigational

[52] See Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization and colonial rule in India* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Joyce E. Chaplin, *Anxious Pursuits: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in Lower South, 1730 – 1815* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

sciences, medicinal practices, history and anthropology were a direct result and part of the colonization project. In general, these historians tried to develop a continuous narrative of colonialism along with the development of modern sciences from the sixteenth century to twentieth century. For example, Claude Alvaris argued that the fundamental philosophy of modern science remains the same throughout its history from Galileo's theory of motions to the theory of space shuttles. According to him, the scientific worldview which emerged in Europe became a global perspective through colonialism and imperialism.[53] Alvaris and several other critics of science viewed science as a Western colonial project which expanded from the center to the peripheries through European colonial invasions.[54]

Recently, scholars have criticized this perspective by underscoring the contribution of colonized people in the production of modern knowledge. Analyzing the development of botanical and cartographic knowledges in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kapil Raj demonstrated that science developed through intellectual interaction and encounters in which both the West and the non-West contributed significantly.[55] While Raj relocates the development of modern science from its Western location to a global space of circulation and encounters, he did not focus on the transformation of the idea of science itself in this circulation. According

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[53] Claude Alvaris, "Science, Colonialism and Violence: A Luddite View," in Ashis Nandy, ed. *Science, Hegemony and Violence: A Requiem for Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[54] For explanation of science as Western and European project, see, Richard Olson, *Science Deified and Science Defied: The Historical Significance of Science in Western Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious and Institutional Context, Pre-history to A.D. 1450* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[55] Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650 – 1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

to Raj, throughout this expansion or circulation, the fundamental principles of the scientific practice remained the same: claims of objectivity, rationality and empiricism.

Exploring the specific forms of scientific practices in Colonial India, Gyan Prakash argued that in the colonial condition, science had already "gone native." Analyzing the spaces of museums and exhibitions, he demonstrated that "neither the status of science as Western nor its separation from the Indian could be maintained – European knowledge and institutions emerged pursued by the shadow of its colonial birth."[56] Prakash used the metaphors of ambivalence, shadow and hybrid to describe the colonial practices of science. This perspective enables us to understand the contradictions of the colonial claims of universality of science and the racial politics of difference between the colonizer and the colonized. At the same time, this view imagined that colonial practice began with the deployment of dichotomous oppositions and ambivalence and hybrids were the result of the contradictions arising from the interaction between these two oppositions. Instead of making this model applicable to the whole history of colonial knowledge practices, I argue that the above view is relevant only for the early phase of colonialism, where 'rule by force' was the model of colonial administration. In order to understand colonial knowledge practices from the second half of the nineteenth century, we have to extend and reexamine the above perspective.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, as colonial governing practices underwent transformation, colonial knowledge production also changed

[56] Gyan Prakash, "Science "Gone Native" in Colonial India," *Representations*, 40 (Autumn 1992): 154.

correspondingly. David Scott, analyzing the British colonial power in Sri Lanka, underscored a crucial shift in the point of application of colonial power during the nineteenth century. He marked this as a shift from sovereignty to colonial governmentality. Scott explained this as a new rationality in which the point of application of power had been shifted from "subject" towards "population."[57] While Scott's work is seminal in understanding this new form of colonial power, what is not analyzed is the transformation of the process of production of knowledge, which was integral to the transformation of the practice of power.

For seventeenth and eighteenth century colonialists, the difference between the Europeans and the colonized, or between "us" and "them," was irreducible and natural. The dichotomous difference was applicable not only to human culture but also to nature itself. The colonialists at this period considered the weather, the flora and fauna and the diseases of the colonies as directly opposite to that of Europe. This led to a whole set of inventions of tropical weather, tropical forests and tropical diseases.[58] The knowledge produced from these explanations constituted a separate register different from the one in which they marked European weather or diseases. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, objectivity was not a central characteristic of colonial knowledge. The eighteenth-century investigators considered

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[57] David Scott, "Colonial Governmentality," *Social Text,* 43 (Autumn 1995): 191-220.

[58] For an analysis of the colonial invention of tropical diseases, see, Helen Tilley, "Ecologies of Complexity: Tropical Environments, African Trypanosomiasis, and the Science of Disease Control in British Colonial Africa, 1900 – 1940," *Osiris*, 19 (2004): 21-38.

the belief pattern of the scholar and his proximity to the object of inquiry as important factors in producing facts and truthful knowledge about the material world.[59]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the process of production of knowledge transformed significantly in its formative elements, methods, and in its self- description. Instead of dichotomies, *series* became the form in which objects were arranged. Objectivity became a measure in the production of knowledge and subjectivity was no more considered as a preferable element in this process.[60] Once the subjective elements were removed from the concept of knowledge, it could be produced "from distance." All "proximate" senses were excluded from the process in which visuality was considered as the most authentic sensation.[61] Knowledge became an exchangeable object and writing became the ultimate form of knowledge.[62] Among

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[59] In the descriptions of Duarte Barbosa, Ludovico Di Varthema, and Francis Buchanan, all who traveled through Malabar at various times between the early decades of the sixteenth century and the early nineteenth century, we can see the subjective elements of production of knowledge becoming more and more unspeakable and unscientific. See, Ludvico Di Varthema, *The Travels of Ludvico Di Varthema* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1863); Duarte Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar*, (London: Hakluyt Society, 1866); Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1807).

[60] Lorraine Daston argued that, though different notions of objectivity were part of the discourse on production of knowledge, it attained the specific meaning which it has in the present parlor only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Daston observed that the idea of objectivity as disinterestedness, as the distancing of the observer from the phenomenon observed or as the value-neutral approach of the scientist was result of internationalization of science in the mid nineteenth century. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

[61] Laura Marks argued that while the visual and cultural turns in the scholarship on knowledge and aesthetics have contributed towards the criticism of positivism, "the turn has left in place the sensory hierarchy that subtends Western philosophy, in which only the distant senses are vehicles of knowledge." Even in the West it was not the visual that was always privileged; this privilege has undergone numerous changes from the time of Plato to the early modern times. It was the post-enlightenment society that started privileging visual and aural senses by removing touch, smell and taste from the process of production of knowledge. Laura Mraks, "Thinking Multi-sensory Culture," *Paragraph*, 31, 2 (July 2008): 123-127.

[62] In his study of Nambkwara society in Brazil, Levi Strauss observed how the introduction of writing among this indigenous group created new forms of power relations and new forms of inter-subjective violence. Criticizing Levi Strauss for his attempt to "safeguard the exteriority of writing to speech," Derrida asked: "Is there a knowledge, and above all, a language, scientific or not, that one can call alien at once to writing and to violence?" Derrida's attempt to question the Western metaphysical tradition of

these features of production of knowledge the most important one in the colonial encounter was the concept of series which replaced the concept of an irreducible dichotomy.

The project of governing the population in colonies was not possible by a clear demarcation between "us" and "them." While this difference was still important, for all practical purposes of governing it was necessary to create a series of objects that would connect the colonizer to the colonized. The colonial investigators defined, described and ordered objects in different hierarchical series, the two endpoints of which were the earlier binaries or dichotomies. For example, the human became a hierarchical series with European white man on the top and the aboriginal tribal man at the bottom.[63] Knowledge itself became a series with Knowledge and Ignorance serving at the top and bottom levels and different kinds of knowledges were arranged in between according to their universality and objectivity. The construction of series as part of creating an order of knowledge was not just a discursive activity. The material practices of governing followed the same process of creating hierarchical series. A new order of institutions, actions and people was formed by creating a time - space between the 'government' and 'people' and simultaneously connecting them

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privileging speech over writing is important, but it fails to consider the specific historical situations where the colonialists privileged writing over speech, the act which had severe violent consequences in the colonial world. Levi Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York, Penguin, 1975); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), 127.

[63] Kay Anderson has argued that humanism based on the nineteenth century scientific theories of human species did not assume homogeneity or equality among all human beings; instead these theories essentialized the racial differences based on biology and justified hierarchical stratifications based on race. "The colonial difference" practiced by the colonial governments in colonies was not an aberration, as Partha Chatterjee put it, of the universal theories practiced in Metropole. From the very beginning, universalism was a practice of the hierarchical ordering of objects and human beings. Kay Anderson, *Race and the Crisis of Humanism* (London: Routledge, 2007); Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

through middle objects. Educational institutions, Public Exhibitions, and Museums were some of the important sites which were part of this process.

The British orientalist scholarship, which was, as Said noted, an integral part of colonial governing practices, incorporated the existing caste hierarchy in India into series of knowledge. On the one hand, colonial scholars launched strong criticisms of caste practices, describing it as the tyranny of Brahmins, Eastern despotism and an archaic uncivilized tradition. On the other hand, as more and more European scholars started studying the so called "Hindu texts," they found a new ally in their project of producing knowledge about the colony.[64] This partnership – though it was never an equal partnership – constructed a relation between traditional knowledge and the Brahmin caste. The colonial concept of knowledge as text was crucial in inventing the traditional wisdom of the East. The colonizers considered writing as one of the most important measures of knowledge, and they arranged oral and other bodily practices of knowing at the lower level of the knowledge series. In India, in the process of creating the middle objects of the series, colonialists regarded Brahmins as the authority on traditional knowledge as they were the authors of written Sanskrit texts.

Within the colonialist imagination, caste was the essential stratification criteria of Indian society, and hence colonial activities in the domain of knowledge were reflected through the prism of caste. There was not much confusion regarding the

[64] For example, James Mill, in his six volume work on British India, depicted the Brahmins as despotic and uncivilized. H.H. Wilson, on the other hand, objected to the general view among the colonial officers that Brahmins were "crafty and cunning." Wilson argued that Brahmins and their Sanskritic tradition were part of a great civilization upon which the whole history of India was built. James Mill, *The History of British India* (London: James Madden and Co., 1840); H.H. Wilson, *Essays: Analytical, Critical and Philological on Subject Connected with Sanskrit Language* (London: Trubner and Co., 1865).

nature of institution that would be appropriate for the upper caste elites among the natives. According to the colonialists, the upper castes, especially the Brahmins, were the group who were capable of attaining higher learning in literature, natural philosophy and mathematics.[65] In all the three universities that were established in India in the middle of the century, there was no restriction, technically, for individuals from any caste group joining the institution. But the upper caste dominated these institutions and continues to do so even in the twenty-first century.[66]

Colonial education policy, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, mapped the hierarchical caste system into a series of hierarchical educational institutions. The new universities were the place of upper caste, whereas the industrial training centers were the proper place of artisanal castes.[67] In short, what we see as colonial knowledge by the end of the nineteenth century was already a colonial – Brahmanical knowledge in content and in its form.

Although in this period the upper castes in general and the Brahmins in particular dominated among the natives in the field of colonial knowledge practice, the majority of the community did not engage either in traditional or modern forms of

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[65] Both the Orientalists like William Johnson, who favored the promotion of Sanskrit-based education, and the Utilitarians like John Stuart Mill, who was strong proponent of English education, considered Brahmins and other upper castes as the proper native group who could be "educated" and enlightened through the colonial educational institutions. For an analysis of the colonial education policy and the privileges and preferences of the Utilitarians and the Orientalists, see Bart Schultz and Georgios Varouxaki, eds., *Utilitarianism and Empire* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005).

[66] For an analysis of the role of caste in the history of education see, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed., *Education and the Disprivileged: Nineteenth and Twentieth Century India* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2002).

[67] Alfred Chatterton's study of Industrial education is an example of how the colonialists mapped the caste hierarchy onto a hierarchical system of education and training. He attempted to assign each caste group a specific form of education depending on their traditional occupation and a supposed historical relation with knowledge. Alfred Chatterton, *Industrial Education* (Madras: Govt. Press, 1901). See also George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1884).

production of knowledge. Different lower caste groups engaged in knowing practices in the field of agriculture, architecture and handicrafts, as a community. Historically, Brahmins as a community were never part of any field of knowledge, but individuals from their caste have been engaging in fields like medicine, astrology and literature. It was the colonial –Brahmanical discourse on traditional knowledge that authorized the community as the sole carriers of traditional knowledge.

Recent scholarship, inspired by the Dalit criticism of Brahmanism, incorporated the above notion of traditional knowledge, of course in this case as an example of caste discrimination and oppression. In this narration, Brahmins using their political and social power, deliberately excluded lower castes from attaining textual knowledge.[68] I argue that textual knowledge became part of Brahmanical oppression only in the colonial period, and hence the desire for gaining that form of knowledge among communities also should be understood historically. By analyzing the everyday practices of Nampoothiris (the Brahmins in the Malayalam speaking region), this dissertation reexamines the relation between Brahmins and knowledge production.

By the early twentieth century, various new social forces which were part of the process of colonial knowledge production began challenging the domination of Nampoothiris in the social life of Malabar. The new economic opportunities were directly connected to colonial education which came along with new social imaginaries and new moralities. The Nampoothiri interaction with colonial

[68] For example see, Sukhdeo Thorat, *The Dalits in India: Search for a Common Destiny* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009); Kancha Ilayya, *Post-Hindu India A Discourse on Dalit –Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

knowledge culminated in the reform movement in the 1920s and 1930s. This work, focusing on pre-reform and post- reform periods, explores the tension between the existing order of *acharam* and the emerging order of knowledge in the Nampoothiri world in the first half of the twentieth century. Acharam is simultaneously custom and ritual, i.e., the daily life activities, and the rules of performance of these activities. For Nampoothiris in the first two decades of the twentieth century, acharam was the reference point for value and moral judgments, and a guide for everyday life.

Historians and anthropologists have generally connected Nampoothiri acharams directly to the Vedic textual rules and assumed that the Vedic text is the reference point for acharam.[69] I argue that even though one could see resemblances between the prescriptions in the Vedic text and the everyday practice of acharam, the former was not a reference point for the latter. By this I mean that when the question of values or morals was under dispute, they referred not to the texts but to precedents and authority based on experience. Hence, acharam in this work is not a reflection of the Vedic Brahmanical ideology, but a performance which produced an effect of order in the society. This order, which was produced through the rituals of everyday life, was the reference point for moral evaluations and judgments.

By the early twentieth century, the order of acharam confronted much opposition, especially from the young generation of Nampoothiris who were educated in colonial institutions. Still, the majority of the community challenged the idea of the young generation that knowledge could be the basis of the well-being of a society by

[69] For example, Marjatta Parpola, in her ethnographic work on Nampoothiris, explains Vedic texts as imagined and actual reference point for the rituals in the daily practices of Nampoothiris. Marjatta Parpola, *Kerala Brahmins in Transition: A Study of a Nampoothiri Family* (Helsinki: The Finnish Oriental Society, 2000).

pointing out the inseparable connection between the superiority of Nampoothiris and their daily performance of acharam. These ideas were dominant in the first two decades of the century and the community leaders were skeptical about the liberatory potential of knowledge and they postponed the question of education and reforms. As the reform movement gained momentum by the third decade, it became impossible for the community to defer the question of knowledge anymore which inaugurated not the destruction of the order of acharam but its reinterpretation and realignment.

Scholars of reform movements of various caste communities have noted the importance of the question of education for the reform movements. They considered reform a process of modernization or enlightenment through education.[70] Feminist scholars have questioned the conventional understanding of caste reforms as a transformation from tradition to modernity or as an element of the modernization process. Emphasizing the importance of understanding reform as a process of "en-gendering," J. Devika noted that "such an approach would be distinct from not only the liberal histories that celebrate women's liberation as part of modernisation, but also the critical efforts that seek to reverse the binaries of tradition/ modernity or passive/ active."[71] Devika situated the question concerning gender as the central domain of reform debate. My attempt in this dissertation is to broaden the above criticism to the general question of knowledge production in this period which will enable us to understand both the continuities and discontinuities of social formations, including that of gender.

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[70] See, Ashok Swain, *Struggle Against the State: Social Network and Protest Mobilization in India* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1988).

[71] J. Devika, *En-Gendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 17.

By the 1930s, Nampoothiris began reinterpreting acharam based on meaning, scientific fact and history all of which were categories adopted from the colonial discourse on the production of knowledge. They attempted to prove that the acharams were scientifically correct and could be justified through historical reasons. The oral tradition, which was an integral part of Nampoothiri acharams, lost its relative importance in comparison to the written text. The learning of Vedas, which was part of the childhood rituals of every Nampoothiri boy, did not comprise learning of the Sanskrit language or the meaning of the words. The basic objective of Veda learning was to memorize as many verses as possible and to learn its recital in proper tones and intonations. Even the well-known teachers never attempted to interpret the text as they were not aware of the meaning of the words or the grammar of the language. Once writing became the form of representation of knowledge, the centers where the Veda learning was conducted lost importance in the daily life of Nampoothiris, though they continued to exist with a smaller degree of relevance.

Many scholars of religion who study Brahmanical oral traditions have explained it as form of transfer of canonical knowledge in the Hindu tradition.[72] I argue that the colonial intervention not only transformed the mode of transfer of knowledge but also made Vedic texts the source of traditional knowledge. It is important to note that scholarly debates were very much part of Brahmanical traditions, but these debates were not the reference point for everyday life. What happened through the colonial discourse on knowledge was that knowledge became a

[72] For a debate of canonical knowledge and status of Vedas in Hindu tradition see the essays in Laurie Patton, ed. *Authority, Anxiety, and Canon: Essays in Vedic Interpretations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

measure of everyday activities of individuals and groups. Hence, the focus here is on the changing status of knowledge in the everyday life of Nampoothiris.

The Asari and Nampoothiri stories from twentieth century Malabar, as analyzed in this dissertation, enable us to trace the genealogies of production of knowledge and practices of knowing, and the interaction between these two historical processes. By marking modern knowledge as colonial knowledge, this work participates in a politics which exposes the violent and oppressive nature of knowledge production which dominates contemporary societies all over the world. At the same time, by mapping the trajectories of practices of knowing, this work underscores the possibility of other ways of understanding the world and being in it. The concluding part of this Introduction explains how these arguments are arranged in different chapters.

The first chapter explores the difference between production of knowledge and practices of knowing by analyzing the Asari world in Malabar in the first half of the twentieth century. It argues that asarippani, in the form of knowledge-as-action, was the central activity that defined the Asari caste during this period. The chapter shows that the specific ways in which the Asari world was constituted through asarippani enabled Asaris to actively ignore the colonial interventions in the field. Asaris at this period assimilated the new materials and the new social relations that emerged through colonialism into the fold of Asari world without entering into the order of knowledge.

Analyzing the practices of Nampoothiris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second chapter shows how they dominated over other Jatis without participating in any kind of knowing practices. Nampoothiris as a Jati were

dependent on other caste groups for knowledge at this period. Still, they maintained their dominance in the social and economic domain, though various new social forces had already started challenging this dominance. The chapter introduces the concept of order of acharam through which Nampoothiris established their dominance over other Jatis. The chapter underscores the argument that power was not always entwined with knowledge and that it was in the specific historical context of colonialism that this interconnection was established.

The third chapter analyzes the reform literature and scholarly debate on the Nampoothiri reform movement of the 1920s and 30s, and argues that the reform constituted a new order (which I call the 'order of knowledge') which incorporated the prominent elements of acharam. The chapter details the process of confrontation and mutual incorporation of the order of knowledge and the order of acharam. By the 1920s the Nampoothiri world of acharam, as described in the third chapter, faced serious challenges from the inside and outside. The order based on acharam became incapable of incorporating new and emerging social relations and concepts based on the colonial forms of knowledge. The chapter shows that the specific way in which colonialists conceptualized knowledge enabled Nampoothiris to enter into the order of knowledge while maintaining the dominance in the society.

The fourth chapter investigates the interactions of the Asari community with the order of knowledge in the last three decades of the twentieth century. The chapter explores how reform organizations attempted to negotiate with the colonial categories of 'traditional knowledge' and 'practical knowledge' in a post-colonial condition. The chapter establishes a connection between the changes in the Asari practices of

knowing and the social and material changes in the field of house construction. It further shows that History, as a colonial form of knowledge, was crucial in this reorganization of the community.

The thesis concludes with an exploration of contemporary politics related to the production of knowledge in India and analyzes the role caste plays in this politics. By establishing the colonial nature of the contemporary knowledge and the casteist characteristics involved in its practice, the thesis challenges the egalitarian claims of knowledge and the high moral value assigned to knowledge in contemporary society.

Chapter 1
An Asari World of Knowing

By the end of the nineteenth century various caste groups in the Malayalam-speaking region of Keralam began actively participating in the colonial institutions of production of knowledge. Historians of the region have mapped various caste communities' interactions with colonial knowledge under the category of community reform. Academic histories and school text-books marked the early twentieth century as a period of caste community reform.[1] The assumption behind this generalization was that, given an opportunity, every community and individual will seek knowledge, as knowledge is intrinsically connected to the natural desire of human beings for welfare and progress. However, a close observation of the Asari world in the first half of the twentieth century tells us a different story. In this period, by actively ignoring / avoiding the opportunities provided by the colonizers, Asaris resisted the temptations extended through various colonial institutions. Asaris neglected or avoided colonial intervention by maintaining carpentry as a *practice of knowing,* rather than transforming it as a process of *production of knowledge*. Here, practice of knowing emphasizes the importance of action and experience, while production of knowledge underscores the importance of knowledge in the objectified form of writing: a product separated from the process of production.

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[1] For example, see, A. Sridhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1967); Govindan Parayil, ed. *Kerala: The Development Experience, Reflections on Sustainability and Replicability* (London: Zed Books, 2000); S.N. Sadasivan, *A Social History of Kerala* (New Delhi: S.B. Nangia, 2000).

Asaris used different strategies to uphold asarippani as a practice of knowing. First, they created a spatio-temporal location called *desham* within the boundary of which they limited their practices. Asaris imagined desham as the limit of action and experience, which were the two major elements of asarippani. This imagination was a part of Asaris' resistance against colonial attempts to bring them into cities/ towns. This does not mean, however, that the Asaris resisted all kinds of changes. Desham was in one sense a newly imagined locality. Asaris incorporated the changes happening in the field of building construction into the space of desham without transforming the basic organizing principle of their caste. Second, Asaris refused to participate in colonial educational institutions or to assimilate the methodologies used in these institutions into their practices. In this period, the attempt of colonizers to standardize measures, instruments and products was a failure at least in the case of Asaris in Malabar. Asaris did not incorporate into asarippani the objectification process – such as the use of drawings or modeling – which was fundamental to the production of colonial knowledge. At the same time they reformed their tools, included new production materials and implemented their own new methods within the practice of knowing.

The Asari process of negotiation with colonial institutions of knowledge differed fundamentally from the reform process initiated by other lower-caste communities in the Malayalam-speaking region around the same period. During the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the *Pulaya* (the former agricultural slave caste) and *Ezhava* (another lower-caste community) reformers strongly urged their members to participate in colonial educational institutions. These leaders

attempted to use colonial education as a means in the struggle against Brahmanical oppression. The reform leaders urged the community to relinquish the hereditary occupation and to seek jobs in government service, a move which they thought would bring respectability and progress to the community.[2] The Asari community in this period, however, considered modern education a strategy of *sayip* (white man) designed to intervene in their autonomy and freedom of practice. It is difficult to pinpoint a reason for the difference in responses of Asari and other lower-caste communities towards the emerging colonial institutions. These lower-caste communities, like Asaris, engaged in practices of knowing such as agriculture or toddy tapping.[3] Still, we can map some of the contextual factors which enabled Asaris to avoid the colonial intervention.

Brahmins considered agricultural work and toddy-tapping, which were the traditional occupations of the Pulaya and Ezahva castes respectively, mere physical work and impure practices. The Christian missionaries and the colonialists, influenced by the Brahmanical discourse, espoused these derogatory notions regarding occupations in their understanding of various caste practices. In their evangelical

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[2] Both Ayyankali, the Pulaya reform leader, and Sri Narayana Guru the Ezhava reform leader underscored the importance of (colonial) education in their writings and speeches. *The Ezhava memorial* a memorandum submitted to the Travancore government in 1890 pleaded with the Raja (King) to reserve a certain percentage of government jobs for educated Ezhavas. Several articles in *Mithavadi,* the mouthpiece of Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham (SNDP) – the reform organization of Ezhavas – urged the members of the community to completely distance themselves from toddy tapping and to seek government jobs. Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham, the reform organization under the leadership of Ayyankali, initiated steps to start schools for the children from the Pulaya community. For Ayyankali's contribution towards education, see, M. Nisar and Meena Kandaswamy, *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007). For Sri Narayana Guru's deliberations on knowledge and education see Sri Narayana Guru, *Srin Narayana Guruvinte Sampoorna Krithikal* (The Collected Works of Sri Narayana Guru), (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2005).

[3] Toddy is a juice extracted from coconut tree which has high alcoholic content. Tapping toddy from the coconut tree is a highly skilled job and it was considered the traditional occupation of Ezhava men.

mission in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the missionaries in Malabar preferred artisanal practices rather than agricultural work or toddy-tapping as occupations in which the newly converted natives could be trained to develop their moral and material skills.[4] V. Nagel, the German missionary of Basel Evangelical Mission who was in charge of the educational and industrial activities of the mission in Kannoor in the first decade of the twentieth century, observed that the mission should "encourage the downtrodden to join the industrial centres" because "the traditional occupations, they are currently involved in, are driving them towards slavery and disrespect."[5] In short, carpentry, unlike agricultural work or toddy-tapping, was not an impure or disrespectable occupation within the colonial and Brahmanical discourses of the early twentieth century. Hence, at this point of time, there was neither an incentive nor a pressure on Asaris to renounce their occupation or to join in colonial institutions like other lower-caste communities.

The economic changes in the first half of the twentieth century also helped Asaris to remain in asarippani rather than shifting into a different occupation. In Malabar, the Nampoothiri and Nair landlords were the main employers of Asaris. In

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[4] The main missionary organization in Malabar was of the German protestant missionaries of the Basel Evangelical Mission. Unlike the British protestant group such as Church Mission Society and London Missionary Society, which were active in the neighboring Malayalam-speaking areas of Kochi and Travancore, BEM did not believe in mass conversion. According the manual of BEM, each individual had to go through a certain period of probation before they were able to convert. But both CMS and BEM considered education an important step in approaching God. They urged the lower-caste people to join in mission schools and escape the tyranny of Brahmins through knowledge. The missionaries recruited mainly Pulaya and Paraya community members; their attempt to convert people from artisanal castes was generally a failure. For the contributions of LMS and CMS, see, PKM Tharakan, "Socio-Economic Factors in Educational Development: Case of Nineteenth Century Travancore," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19, 45 (November 10, 1984): 1930-1928. For the work of BEM on education of lower-castes in Malabar see, J. Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara (1834-1914) : A Study of its Social and Economic Impact* (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1990).

[5] *Basel Evangelical Mission Records*, Vol. 15 (1899) 112, Mission Archives, Mangalore.

the nineteenth century, Nairs and Nampoothiris resided as large joint families, and the family property was undividable. The *karanavar* (the eldest male in the family) controlled the income and expenditure of the family, the main source of which was agriculture. It was impossible in this circumstance for an individual member of the family to build a new house for lack of resources and for the fear of the displeasure of the karanvar.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, several members of the Nair community, who were educated in colonial educational institutions, joined in the government service at the middle level and started earning private incomes. The new occupations also created in this generation of Nairs an urge for independence from the karanavars and to build their own households outside the joint family. In 1923, the Madras legislative assembly passed *Madras Marumakathayam (Matriliny) Act* which endorsed individual rights on the joint family property of Nair households and which "guaranteed the legitimate partition of joint property and provided for individual inheritance."[6] The legal and social intervention under the leadership of the educated young generation of the Nair community catalyzed the shift from matrilineal joint family households to patrilineal nuclear families. Corresponding to this shift, the requirement of new houses and demand for Asaris increased throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The census report of 1931 noted an increase of 56% in the number of clay-tiled houses in ten years in the Malabar district.[7]

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[6] For a detailed analysis of the changes in the Nair Joint family in the nineteenth ad twentieth centuries see G. Arunima, "Multiple Meanings: Changing Concepts of Matrilineal Kinship in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Malabar," *Indian Economic & Social History Review*, 33: 283 (September 1, 1996): 283-307.

[7] *Census Report of India 1931*, Vol. 12, Part 1 (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1923), 235.

Analyzing the reports of the industrial survey conducted by the Madras Government in 1926, F. Fawcett noted that "the carpenters and masons are the two groups relatively less affected by the flooding of domestic and imported industrial products in the market, compared to weavers, black smiths and potters." The survey evidenced that the carpenters in the Malabar district have significantly improved their "economic and social status, compared to the other artisanal communities."[8] V. N. Kurup observed in 1934 that "the trend and fashion of the time compel every married person to move into a new house. The time only will tell whether this is a healthy tendency or not, but for the carpenters and mason, this has provided an ample opportunity to remain in their hereditary trade."[9] V. Keshavan Achari remembers that his grandfather was the first Asari in his and neighboring deshams to work simultaneously on more than one house. "Nairs and Nampoothiris started dividing their property and moving into new houses. This was a good opportunity for Asaris, as we got for the first time a sufficient income to survive."[10] The status of asarippani as a respectable profession and the prospering economic opportunities served as the two most important factors which enabled the Asari avoidance of the colonial intervention. Asaris utilized the economic opportunities that emerged in desham; at the same time they rejected another set of opportunities colonizers extended to them as part of the governing process of the colonial state. The genealogy of this colonial

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[8] *The Report of the Industrial Survey of 1926, Madras Presidency* (Madras: Government Press, 1928), 132.

[9] V. N. Kurup, "Marunna Kudumba Kramangal (Changing Family Practices)," *Kerala Chandrika*, 11 (1934): 35.

[10] Interview with Keshavan Achari, October 06, 2009.

intervention in artisanal practices extended back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the British colonial government in India established new governing practices which differed significantly from the earlier forms of colonial administration. David Scott, using the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, describes this as a transformation from the "rule of force" to the "rule of law". In this new form, population became the basic unit of the governing process and self-governance the ultimate form of governmental control.[11] Though the military and the police still had important roles in controlling the population, education became one of the major activities of governing. This transformation was part of a wider colonialist recognition of knowledge as the organizing category of governance and for arranging individual and groups in a hierarchical order both in the metropole and colony. A new political rationality and a new order of knowledge co-emerged and mutually constituted each other. This order assigned a specific position for each section of the population in a hierarchical series according to their assumed historical relation with knowledge.

It was in the colonial attempt of ordering the population in the hierarchical series of knowledge that artisans became the target of governing processes. In this attempt of governing, we can mark two important tactics developed by the colonialists. Firstly, the colonial government encouraged the artisans to migrate from their supposedly natural locations in the villages to the institutional spaces in the cities and towns. Through this process of institutionalization, the government hoped to

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[11] David Scott, "Colonial Governmentality," *Social Text* (Autumn 1995): 191-220.

bring artisanal practices under the visibility of the state and to transform it into a formal and regulated process. Secondly, the government initiated different programs to standardize artisanal practices all over the country by implementing uniform methods and measures in artisanal production.

The colonial government assigned Asaris an important role in their project of development based on towns and cities. In 1883, analyzing the prospect of industrial development in the Madras state, E. B. Havel argued that the native handicraft industry, rather than large factories, should be the central feature of the development of cities and towns. He observed that there were very few workshops and training centers in urban localities and the government should focus on providing economic support for carpenters and smiths to migrate into Madras and other small towns.[12] The committee that conducted a nationwide survey as part of the industrial conferences in the first decade of the twentieth century concluded that, though large scale industries should be part of the long term plan, developing handicraft production based small workshops and trading shops in towns was the best option in the contemporary socio-economic situation in India

Public works initiated by the government was another site of state intervention in artisanal practices. In 1875, the Madras government formed a new department for conducting and supervising public works. The Public Works Department (PWD) initiated construction of roads, railways, bridges and buildings for which the colonial officers in charge attempted to recruit traditional artisans and to train them in using modern tools and methods. The government established a series of technical

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[12] E.B. Havel, *Report on The Native Industries in Madras Province* (Madras: Government Press, 1883).

education institutions which would accommodate different sections of the population. While the colonialists considered general education a suitable domain for the upper-castes, they imagined technical training as the proper and pertinent method of governing artisans. The Madras government attempted to recruit Asaris from Malabar for the carpentry works related to railway, bridge and building construction under the PWD. The Education Department established various institutions such as schools of arts, industrial training centers, and technical schools for training carpenters in modern methods of carpentry. All of these institutions and work sites were located in towns and cities.

From different colonial documents we can see that both the above attempts– relocating artisans to the workshops in cities and recruiting artisans to PWD-related institutions – did not succeed in general. Alfred Chatterton, who was the superintendent of Industrial Development in Madras government in the early years of the twentieth century, explained the reluctance of artisans in joining factory production:

> We have found that the hand weavers of Salem like the hand-weavers of Madras object to working in a factory, and although their wages were good their attendance is unsatisfactory. This is mainly because the weavers prefer to work in their own home, assisted by their women and children and dislike being subjected to the discipline and regular hours of working which must necessarily prevail in the factory.[13]

Many colonial officers made similar remarks in the context of recruiting artisans in to the colonial institutions. E. B. Havel, the superintendent of the Madras School of Arts, saw a connection between the failure of the various departments in the

[13] Alfred Chatterton, *Industrial Education of India*, (Madras: The Hindu Office Publication, 1912), 81.

school in imparting quality training and the "shortage of apt students from the traditional castes for appropriate trades."[14] In 1910, the director of the public instruction department of the Madras Government reported that the technical training schools, especially those in small towns, "serve no purpose because they completely failed in enlisting the children of traditional craftsmen such as carpenters, smiths and potters."[15]

The colonial documents of this period underlined Asari adherence to their desham as one of the major reasons for the above failure. In Malabar, like many other places in the colony, the colonizers "targeted" artisans and initiated different plans to relocate the artisans to new institutional locations. For example, the colonial officers in Malabar planned different strategies to recruit Asaris for PWD work and technical training in the early decades of the twentieth century. The District Collector of Malabar, in 1907, recommended that the government should use the traditional authority of the educated landlords / upper-castes to "convince the artisans of the advantages of joining in government works."[16] He sent a detailed note to the subordinate officers explaining the importance of improving traditional artisanal practices. After one year, he reported to the government that he "is still waiting for definite results of the new initiatives." A number of village level officers reported that the Asaris were not ready to leave their village because by doing so "they fear that they will become outcastes and will not be able to go back to their deshams."[17] The

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[14] E. B. Havel, *A Report on Madras School of Arts*, (Madras: Government Press, 1902).

[15] *Annual Report 1910, Department of Public Instruction,* Tamil Nadu State Archives, No B 112 – 2, 13.

[16] *Proceedings of the Home Department 1909*, Tamil Nadu State Archives, NO N – 12, 21.

[17] Ibid., 25.

collector assured the lower-level native administrative officers under his authority that the artisans who were ready to work in the PWD would be able to perform "the daily rituals they have to conduct according to their caste rules," unless it violates "the rule of law and existing norms of work."[18] This clarification did not help much in convincing the artisans.

Six months later, the same Collector reported to the government that he was now in contact with the Christian missionaries who had established workshops in Calicut and Cannanore where they imparted technical training to the non-artisanal lower-caste converts. The protestant Christian missionaries who were active in Malabar were already using technical training as a method to teach the pagan natives the importance of hard work and punctuality and the troubles of laziness. For the missionaries, physical industriousness was the first proof a native had to show in order to be accepted into the mission and into Christianity. The Basel Mission Church of Calicut established a number of carpentry, weaving and pottery workshops, the training in which was compulsory as probation for the new aspirants for conversion into Christianity.[19]

Colonial officers were reluctant to accept the newly trained and baptized workmen from the missionary workshops for the works of the PWD. The Malabar Collector mentioned that he "is worried about the quality of these workers because

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[18] Ibid., 34.

[19] For an analysis of the Basel Evangelical Missions practices of conversion in Malabar see J. Raghaviah, *Basel Mission Industries in Malabar and South Canara (1834-1914) : A Study of its Social and Economic Impact* (Delhi: Gian Publishing House, 1990).

they are not from the traditional craftsmen castes."[20] Here, it is clear that the colonialists attempted not simply to create a labor force suitable for their economic policies. On the one hand, in India, the so called modernization projects were already cast through the prism of caste. Caste was an important parameter in the economic policies of the colonial government. On the other hand, colonialists initiated these projects not simply as economic activity but as a process of governing in which no sections of population could be left out.

Many Asaris do remember that their grandfathers were invited to work in towns for the government and they had refused it for the fear of losing the caste. Velayudhan, an eighty year old chief carpenter from Calicut, remembered his grandfather's advice that he should never leave the desham, which was told to him in a proverbial form: "the moment you leave the desham, the *charatu* (the measuring string Asaris use) will break."[21] According to Krishnan, a chief carpenter, his grandfather considered "sayip (the white man) as evil" and that "they reside in towns." [22] Several Asaris I interviewed remember similar stories from their childhood told by their grandparents. The moral of these stories was the necessity of rejecting the temptation of town, or the importance of locating oneself at a place to which one belongs: the desham.[23]

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[20] *Proceedings of the Home Department 1909*, Tamil Nadu State Archives, NO N – 12, 23.

[21] Interview with Velayudhan, Koyilandi, June 6, 2009.

[22] Interview with Krishnan, Beypore, June 27, 2009.

[23] A number of people whom I interviewed repeated similar stories regarding cities or towns. Even in the contemporary situation, where a significant number of Asaris are working in the furniture manufacturing workshops in towns and cities, they consider city not a place of belonging but a temporary location. Almost all the Asaris from the old generation whom I interviewed had a story about city and how their grandparents did not want to leave the desham.

Desham as such did not emerge as a new space in the early twentieth century. Even in the pre-colonial period it was the lowest administrative region and a familiar location for different sections of the society. The landlords and the agricultural labour castes 'located' in desham for the obvious reason of settled agriculture. However, Asaris until the early twentieth century shifted their location from one desham to another for various reasons. William Logan, while challenging the traditional wisdom that Indian villages were always self-sufficient in material production, noted the mobility of artisanal practitioners. He observed that, the mere fact that the different sections of the population speak in different accents – and sometimes in totally different languages – underscored the mobility of population. Logan specifically mentioned that "in many occasions, the artisans and the lower-caste people shifted their locations mostly for the reasons of survival."[24]

While describing the procedures of a temple construction he witnessed in Malabar in 1897, W. Arbuthnot observed that "the architect, a carpenter, who is originally from a neighboring village, has settled with his family near the temple for the purpose of the construction." Arbuthnot noted that once the construction was over, "he may make this village as his permanent location or may move into a different place" depending on the demand for his expertise.[25] Innes and Evans also observed that, though large-scale migration of labour was an unknown phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, workers, "especially carpenters and smiths, were not hesitant to shift into a new village according to the opportunities available to them at different

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[24] *Proceeding of the Home Department*, Government of Madras, CRI, No 12 – 32B, 1887.

[25] W. Arbuthnot, *A Journey through Malabar Coast* (London: Trubner & Co., 1901).

periods."[26] These observations show that on the one hand, jobs that were within a desham were not sufficient to survive and hence Asaris had to move from one place to another looking for opportunities. On the other hand, it also shows that Asaris, at this period, did not consider moving out of desham a violation of customs or caste rules.

By the turn of the century, we start observing Asari articulations in which desham becomes the only genuine space of asarippani. In a reply to the Collector of Malabar mentioned earlier, the village officer of Purathur, wrote about the difficulty of recruiting Asaris for the PWD works. He explained:

> One of the major objections they (Asaris) raised was based on their affinity to their desham. In one case, I pointed out to a chief carpenter that it was only thirty or forty years ago, that his grandfather and his maternal uncle had moved from neighboring village to the present one. His reply, which was not convincing for me, was that they took long time to settle in the new locality. Now it is difficult for him to start again in another place because to work efficiently he has to know the peculiarities of that desham.[27]

The village officer in the above case, who mainly wanted to justify his failure before higher authorities, depicted the Asari arguments as historically incorrect. In a report in 1915, S.W. Johns observed that, though "the spirit of progress we brought into this country has reached even in the remotest villages… the parochial nature of the caste artisans has been increasing year by year."[28] The colonizers noted that the Asari claims regarding their affinity to desham was a new phenomenon, but they

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[26] C. A. Innes and F. B. Evans, *Malabar and Anjengu* (Madras: Addison & Co, 1905).

[27] *Proceedings of the Home Department 1909*, Tamil Nadu State Archives, NO N – 12, 41 (original letter in Malayalam; my translation).

[28] *Report of the Malabar Tenancy Committee*, 1915 (Madras: Government Press 1917), 154.

considered this a mark of the backwardness and inherent parochial nature of the community.

Asaris cared less about the historical correctness of their argument than about a strategy that would help them preserve their authority and independence over their practice. Asaris based their reluctance to move into towns by emphasizing the importance of desham as the location of asarippani. Desham in this concept was not only a geographical space but also an imagined social space. Asaris in this period thought of asarippani as a *located* practice, bounded by the space of desham, crossing which would disable their knowing/ practicing capacities. By locating asarippani in desham, Asaris connected knowing and space, which was incommensurable to the colonial idea of universal knowledge.

Two written Asari sources from the first half of the twentieth century shed some light on the relation between desham and asarippani. *Asari Vrithantham* (The News of Asaris) is an unpublished palm leaf manuscript written by Neelakantan Achari.[29] Neelakantan Achari learned Sanskrit and Malayalam from an upper-caste teacher named Govinda Variyar. He finished the writing of this particular work in 1932.[30] It is important to note that, even though paper and printing were popular by this time, Achari wrote in palm leaves in a traditional style. In the pre-colonial period, scholars and experts wrote the Sanskrit texts, horoscopes, and almanacs in palm leaves. When paper and printing became the dominant mode of writing, people started

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[29] This palm leaf manuscript is now with V. Sreedharan, the grandson of Neelakantan Achari. Sridharan helped me to read and calculate the time period of the work, consulting with his grandfather's elder brother. There was no practice of numbering the pages of the palm leaves in this form.

[30] In the Sanskrit tradition the last line of the verse indicates the year in which the work is finished. Neelakandan Achari uses the similar method, but according to the Malayalam Calendar year. Neelakantan Achari, *Asari Vrithantham*, unpublished manuscript, (1936).

associating palm leaf manuscripts to sacred, traditional or ritual knowledge. Invoking a traditional method and form of writing, Achari might have been attempting to make his work authentic and look like a traditional text. At the same time, the work itself did not follow any traditional narrative practices. It is in the form of a dialogue between a father and son described both in prose and *slokas* (verses). The content itself was not mythical or ritualistic but about the contemporary social situation.

Koman, the son in the story is planning to migrate to Kozhikkode town where he can find a job in the railway workshop. Kandan, the father, in attempting to discourage his son's wish to relocate, highlights the importance of secluding themselves in desham:

> An Asari out of his own desham
> Is like a fish out of water.
> He knows only about his desham
> And only that desham knows him.
> Outside desham
> He doesn't know East or West
> He doesn't know the wind or water
> Doesn't know the tree or measure.[31]

Kandan connected Asari and desham through knowledge. According to him, the Asari knowing practice was limited within the geographical space of desham. Unlike colonial knowledge, which once produced can be exported to any place, knowing requires continuous experiencing and hence the knower should be located in a space for long periods. By creating a relation between space, experience and

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[31] Ibid.

knowing, Neelakantan Achari indirectly made a distinction between asarippani and the colonial modes of production of knowledge.

The second source is a "travelogue" written by Govindan Asari in the second or third decades of the twentieth century, which expresses a similar kind of connection between Asaris and desham.[32] Asari left his home near Thalasseri in North Malabar in the early years of 1910s and traveled through the Southern part of the Malabar district and also through the neighboring princely state of Kochi. He retuned home after three years and started writing this travelogue most probably in the last years of the 1910s and finished it in 1921.

The travelogue begins with the description of his re-entry into his desham. The moment he crossed the bridge at the boundary of his desham, he transformed into his earlier identity as Asari. "During the travel I was mere Govindan and at this moment I became Govindan Asari again." Even though he enjoyed his travel, he was "naturally happy" only in his desham because "it is only here, I can do my own work which is the responsibility rested on me by the directions of my forefathers."[33] He also explained how in different deshams, Asaris exercised very different procedures and methods. According to him this was another reason for an Asari to remain in one's own desham. For Govindan Asari, his own desham was always the reference point for comparing the peculiarities of other deshams. The desham in his description was not a space which was always already existing there for him. It was his travel that made

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[32] Govindan Asari wrote these notes in a note book, which is currently with his nephew K. Manikantan. Though Manikantan made some effort to publish this work it still remains unpublished. The time of the work is calculated from the memories of Manikantan's grandmother Kunja and her brother Gopalan

[33] Ibid, 21-26.

him aware of the connection between Asari and desham and this awareness was considered important by him in the new circumstance of sayip's intervention. He wrote this travelogue mainly to explain this new situation where Asaris had to understand the importance of desham.

Asaris imagined desham through the axes of asarippani. Desham was the boundary of their experiencing and hence the limit of their practices. The relation between desham and asarippani was not exhaustive in the sense that asarippani could not be explained completely by the parameters of desham or vice versa. Still, this relation played an important role in the Asari articulation of difference in the first half of the twentieth century. The Asari imagination of desham was different, say, for example, from that of Brahmins in the same period. For Brahmins, desham was an administrative region or mark of certain controls and powers.[34] As we observed above, Asaris started invoking desham in the early decades of the twentieth century mostly by connecting it with asarippani. We may then assume that it was at this time that Asaris situated themselves in desham, and it was then that the desham became a space of belonging and a space of difference-making.

Desham as articulated by Asaris was not the same as *gramam* (village) which was one of the central themes of the nationalist discourse, especially in Gandhi's imagination of the Nation. In the nationalist narrative, village and artisans were inseparably connected. By the beginning of the twentieth century, artisans became an important figure in the national movement dominated by the Hindu upper-castes. The

[34] Each Nampoothiri family especially in South Malabar was associated to specific deshams. They considered families in certain desham having relatively law status compared to certain other deshams. For the relation of Nampoothiris with desham see Kanippayyoor, Sankaran Nampoothirippad, *Ente Smaranakal* (My Memories) (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Pusthaasala, 1964).

Indian National Congress, which was the major organization in the nationalist movement, championed the revival of handicrafts of India which was being made extinct by the colonial policy of importing industrial products from England. Gandhi's campaign for self-reliance imagined artisans as the central figure of material production. Analyzing the central-staging of craft in the nationalist movement, Abigail McGowan pointed out that in the early twentieth century "crafts stood in for India as a whole economy, society, culture and politics." She explained that this was "the result of struggles between Indian elites and British officials to establish authority over the lower classes as well as the state itself."[35]

Both the colonialists and the nationalists imagined gramam as the natural location of artisanal production in opposition to the city which was the site of industrial production. Gandhi's idealization of India as a federation of self-reliant villages incorporated the British Orientalists' romanticized views on the structure and functions of Indian villages.[36] Asaris, who refused to relocate into the cities, did not accept the romantic space of gramam as their location; it was desham that they considered the place of belonging.

The descriptions of Kuttippurathu Kesavan Nair about his village in the second decade of twentieth century indirectly explained how the nationalist imagination of gramam and Asari imagination of desham were different. Nair, an upper-caste poet, was famous for his verses which romanticized the natural beauty of gramam in

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[35] Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 3.

[36] For example Gandhi's description of Indian villages and George Birdwood's analysis of Indian villages share many aspects, especially regarding the roll of the artisans. For Gandhi's ideas about gramam, see, M. K. Gandhi, *Mahatma Gandhi: Selected Political Writings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996).

opposition to treacherous and pretentious cities. In an article in 1921, Nair explained that "if there is anything valuable about city, it is the fact that its emergence helped everyone to recognize the beauty of the village."[37] This beauty was also part of the recognition that his village "is not an isolated and remote place, but part of a nation, the culture of which is formed in thousands of similar villages." It was only when this connection (the connection through the idea of nation) was established that the beauty itself would be revealed. He contrasted this with the imaginations of "innocent and poor villagers who have never traveled outside their village. They are unfortunately unable to see their village as beautiful."[38] For example the carpenters see the village as their place of work. Appunni, an elderly carpenter in Nair's village told him that "one should work only where one can learn through walking and one should walk only where one can learn by walking."[39] According to Nair, "the river at the boundary of his desham was the limit of Appuni's walking. For him that world was "a place for working and remaking, not an object for the eyes for which it gives immeasurable pleasure."[40] Nair's descriptions showed that for Asaris desham was the world of work, whereas for the upper-caste nationalist, gramam was a world of beauty and innocence.

If space was one of the important parameters though which Asaris avoided the colonial invitations, time was equally an important factor in this avoidance. Asaris in the early decades of the twentieth century recognized the presence of a new time

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[37] Kuttppurathu Kesavan Nair, "Nattuvazhiyiloote (Through the Village Road)", *Kerala Nandini*, 8, 2 (March 1925): 36.

[38] Ibid., 37.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., 38.

which was different in form and behavior from other times in the past. To understand how Asaris interacted with this new time, we have to first explore the Asari ways of engaging with time in general. *Kalam* was the general name that was used to represent different forms of times at different periods. The prayer quoted below, which is known to many Asaris even now, illustrates certain generalized notions of Kalam as Asaris understood it.

> Oh Kalabhairava
> Didn't you see that
> A kalam with all its vicious intentions
> Has captured me and leads me
> Through paths which are not mine
> Use your powers and help me
> For escaping from its tightening embrace
> I don't know where it came from
> I don't know whether I deserve it
> If I do, I don't know
> How many days it will continue
> Please show mercy on me and
> Send this vicious time
> Far away from me.[41]

Asaris especially recited this prayer in a ritual attempting to exorcise bad omens. Unlike the colonial notion of time, Kalam was not an omnipresent phenomenon in which everything else was located. Nor did it progress in a linear path from the past through the present to the future. Kalam, while being a measure of duration, was also an object or a person-like entity which had its own behavioral

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[41] This song was sung to me by Shanmughan Achari of Mundur, who is a chief carpenter and scholar. According to him, "time is a powerful force like the flow of wind. If it is slow and cool we call it breeze which is pleasurable. But if it is strong, we call it a storm which is destructive." Interview with Shanmughan Achari, May 13, 2010.

patterns and effects on other objects and individuals. Since it was an object-like entity, humans could interact with it, be located inside it, resist it or just distance themselves from it. Since it was also a human-like entity, a powerful person could change the characteristics of a particular time for good or bad ends.

It was within this general notion of temporality that Asaris invoked the presence of a new time in the early decades of the twentieth century. Kunjan, a carpenter in his eighties from Keralasseri in the southern part of Malabar, described the time of his childhood during the 1930s in a similar manner to several other old Asaris.[42] According to Kunjan, "time is like an intelligent person who behaves in different manners with different people." His childhood was such a period when time was angry with all Asaris. "Evil forces were active everywhere. In that situation one had to act carefully and cautiously." To my question of the form in which the evil forces manifested in that period, Kunjan answered that the evil forces acted mainly in the form of temptation to violate caste rules. As Kunjan's grandfather knew the strategies to overcome the evil forces of time they did not face any major catastrophe. According to Kunjan's grandfather, the most important rule was that one should not travel to any unfamiliar places, especially out of desham, during *kashtakalam* (bad time).

Kunjan's story is an example which shows how Asaris understood the period when the colonial intervention shook the fundamental structures of caste and asarippani. In *Asari Vrithantham*, Neelakantan Achari explained the characteristic of the new time through the dialogue between Kandan the father and Koman the son. In

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[42] Interview with Kunjan, Keralasseri, January 26, 2009.

their discussion about the desirability of travel, the son argued that travel was not against caste rules by pointing out the example of the great grandfather who had moved from another desham to the present one. To this argument of his son, Kandan replied:

> One has to decide when and whether one should travel according to his time. The present is obviously a difficult time for Asaris. Who will protect asarippani other than Asaris? During the bad time we have to stick into desham and pani (work) like a scared baby who sticks to the chest of its mother. That should be the *new* prayer of Asaris to Chathan (one of the gods). If we travel out of the desham during an evil time, we will not come back[43]

In this narration we can glimpse a shadow of fear of the imminent threat to asarippani from some undisclosed sources. In this new circumstance of bad time, Kandan saw a necessity of a new prayer for holding on to one's own desham and work. Asaris in my interviews only indirectly explained the colonial intervention as a reason for the bad time in their childhood, but Neelakantan Achari's work quoted above has directly mentioned the nexus between the new and old *thamburakkanmar* (lords) as the evil force in the form of bad time. The Brahmins were the old lords and the white men were the new lords in this description. Achari, through his character Kandan, described the relation between the new and the old lords as intimidating and uncontrollable.

> Earlier too, under the old thamburans (that is the earlier generations of the landlords), we had had many instances of bad time. But our forefathers knew how to overcome those unkind forces which were mostly otherworldly forces. When the old thamburan (naïve land lord) in desham met the new thamburan (the white man) from the town, the latter tempted the former with earthly pleasures

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[43] Neelakantan Achari, *Asari Vrithantham.*

> and he has succumbed to this temptation. They together changed the world around us and now we Asaris have ended up in the clutches of an evil time.[44]

Neelakantan Achari's analysis of the contemporary forces of domination noted not just another period of bad time but a new variety of bad time which was result of the alliance between the colonialists and the Brahmins. In other words, time, like an individual, could behave in totally unprecedented ways and one has to be creative in deciding strategies to overcome bad time. As we saw earlier, the first rule Kandan prescribed to his son was that of locating oneself in desham when one was under the influence of bad time. The second rule, which was equally important, was that one should slow down every activity including asarippani.

> You can see there is an urge in everyone and everywhere to rush towards fulfilling our desires. Asari, in order not to fall down in this rush, has to bring time under his control. When there is doubt, he has to slow down, even though others may not appreciate it. If earlier, one has to touch the wood once to sense it, now he has to do twice to make it sure; he should see twice and smell twice.[45]

Achari here prescribed a slowing down of work which was clearly a strategy to oppose the colonial / missionary conception of work and industriousness. The Asaris' 'slowness' was a very popular concept, especially among the upper-castes for whom Asaris built houses or temples. There are many proverbs from the early decades of twentieth century which criticized Asaris for their lazy attitudes during the work. One proverb says that "if Asari is in, the *Adharam* (document of the property) is out." The proverb means that if an Asari is working in a house, his work never ends until one has to pledge the document of the property to pay the expenses. Mention of the

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

property document shows that the proverb emerged in the colonial period where a property's ownership was established by a document called Adharam.[46] The proverb "It is like when you call the Asari for the lunch" is premised on an opinion that, generally, Asaris worked very slowly and when they were called for lunch they pretended that they were busy in their work. It is important to note that this concept of slowness of asarippani was a relatively new notion that emerged in the context of Asaris' conflict with colonial notions of work and time.

In one of his early travel reports in 1889, Edgar Thurston described how he was surprised "by the coordination and swiftness" of Asaris who worked "without drawings or plans." In Ponnani, he witnessed the construction of the roof of a house "which was completed in a day's time by a group of proficient carpenters in an orderly manner."[47] E. B. Havel considered carpenters "efficient and hardworking." According to him the way Asaris executed their work was "commendable for its precision, promptness and finish."[48] We should remember that the colonialists generally considered natives lazy people who did not know the value of time. Even in that context Thurston and Havel described Asaris as prompt and hardworking. We may conclude that the so-called slowness / laziness of Asaris was not an ahistorical and essential characteristic of asarippani but a strategy in a particular context and period. The Asari concept of desham and (bad) time were part of the strategies through which

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[46] Documentation of landed property was not unknown in the pre-colonial period. This was mostly in the form of King's order written in palm leaves. The specific word Adharam (literally means reference) became the name of titles of land in the colonial period. See, K. N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprising in Malabar 1836 – 1921* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989)

[47] Edgar Thurston, *Ethnographic Notes in Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1906), 358.

[48] *Proceedings of the Department Of Industries and Commerce*, Industries, March 1901, No. 1-21, National Archives of India (NAI).

Asaris avoided the colonial attempt of relocation and assimilation. In other words, space and time were two of the important domains in which Asaris resisted the colonial intervention in their practices of knowing.

Other than space and time the method of work and training was a major area of contestation between Asaris and the colonialists. The report of the industrial education conferences held in various provinces in India during 1901 – 02 revealed the objectives and the anxieties of colonial administrators in transforming the methods and training process of artisanal practices.[49] The education department of the Government of India distributed a questionnaire to government officials, industrial school administrators and private business men as a preparation for the industrial education conferences. Through this questionnaire, the government sought to collect information regarding the native methods of training and the possibility of the reform of the native system. The questionnaire asked the informants to provide their opinion regarding the advantages or disadvantages of the native systems of the training of artisans over the British system of industrial training schools, regarding the possibility of improving the native system and about the desirability of including native methods in industrial training schools. Another question was whether the native system could be "influenced by outside expert suggestions, advice, or interference, and how best?"[50]

These questions, on the one hand, expressed the intentions of the colonial state to translate and bring artisanal production activities into the field of the "mapped" and controlled territory of colonial governing practices. On the other hand, the questions

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[49] *Report on Industrial Education* – Part II, Education Department, (Calcutta: Government Press, 1906). (hereafter The Report).

[50] *The Report*, 3.

also showed that the government did not desire to transform the artisanal production into the factory production system; rather the colonialists wanted to transform artisanal practices into a (modernized) traditional knowledge practice. The colonial officers in the field made these intentions clear through the answers to the questionnaire. The superintendent of the Madras School of Arts, Alfred Chatterton submitted a detailed reply to the questionnaire.[51] In this reply he opined that the native system as such cannot survive without modernization of tools and methods especially in competition with the factory production system. He mentioned that "artisans are cut off from the rest of the industrial world and continue to pursue the most antiquated methods of working not withstanding the fact that they have long been superseded everywhere else."[52] According to Chatterton, the best procedure to reform artisanal practice was the method followed by the Madras School of Arts. The school, as a first step, provided to new apprentices of all trades training in drawing. Drawing is the "most important step in learning how to produce standard patterns," a method about which the "native artisans are completely ignorant."[53] Chatterton underscored the learning of basic arithmetic and the English language as well because this will help Asaris in converting their trade into a business.

The Principal of the Madras Engineering College, H.D. Love, rejected the general idea that the artisans should gradually be transformed to factory workers. Even though he supported the reformation of artisanal practices, he insisted that it should

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[51] *The Report*, 143-171.

[52] *The Report*, 162.

[53] *The Report*, 164.

not be at the cost of the skills "that produced wonderful artifacts of the yesteryears."[54] He differentiated between the practices of trained artisans and engineers, which he thought should co-exist in the contemporary industrial scenario in India. Artisans "pick up knowledge of their father's craft" at an early childhood "in the same way as they learn their mother tongue." Engineers learn the trade "as one studies a foreign language through the mother tongue." [55] The advantage of the latter was that an engineer attains "not only the capability to talk (that is to actually execute the work) but also an expertise in the grammar of the language (that is the knowledge of what he executes)."[56] In other words, according to Love, the reformation of artisanal practice should focus on increasing the skill of the artisans, not on imparting knowledge about their practice.

The report contained several other colonial administrators' suggestions regarding the reformation of artisanal practice. Most of them reflected the views of Chatterton and Love. These suggestions can be summarized as a proposal for the institutionalization, standardization and modernization of artisanal practices. It was exactly these attempts that Asaris tried to both oppose and ignore in reforming their trade according to contemporary requirements.

We already saw that technical education institutions generally failed to attract students from the traditional artisanal castes. This was not a general result of the ignorance of artisans about these institutions. At least in the case of Asaris, there were several instances where they actively tried to discourage the members of the caste

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[54] The Report, 159.

[55] *The Report*, 161.

[56] *The Report*, 162.

from joining in these institutions. Murukan Achari's story[57] is the best source for understanding the ways in which Asaris as a Jati attempted to resist the colonial interventions in their practice.

Murukan Achari, as a child, left his home in Malabar in 1901 with a Christian missionary to Salem where he joined a missionary school. As he was from the Asari caste, the principal of the school enrolled him in the industrial training classes. After graduation he joined as an instructor in the industrial training centre at Salem and later joined at the Madras School of Art. He came back to his desham in 1919 to visit his parents and he had also plans for getting married to an Asari woman. He wrote that "even though I had expected some kind of antagonism at home and in my village, I did not think that it would be to this intense degree." [58] He tried to convince them that he has neither converted to Christianity nor moved to any trade other than carpentry. Even his father did not agree with him. They thought that he could not learn carpentry without training under a moothasari (chief carpenter). He might be "working on wood, but it could be named only as *companyppani* (factory work). No Asari family was ready to enter into a marital relation with a person "who is practically not an Asari." [59] Within two weeks he retuned to Madras.

Asaris at this point socially boycotted those who left desham to join a colonial institution. Arumughan Achari, in an article, described a similar experience of his

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[57] This story is reconstructed from the letters Murukan Achary sent to his mentor J. F. Heyer, who was the principal of the missionary high school at Salem. This letters are included in the private collections of Heyer. J. F. Heyer, *Private Collection*, India Office Library, London

[58] Ibid., 24.

[59] Ibid., 26.

brother who joined the railway workshop at Perambur in the early 1920s.[60] Even though this brother used to visit the house once in a year, he was excluded from all the important family functions. After many failed attempts of finding a woman from the Asari caste, he married from outside the caste which completed his expulsion from the community. It was mainly through the strategy of social exclusion that Asaris resisted the institutionalization process. The above mentioned were the instances where individuals left desham and where in turn the community used expulsion from the caste as an effective tactic.

By the 1950s, as the result of political independence, colonial educational institutions came under the control of nationalist elites. Education became one of the major agendas of the national government and following this national agenda, the state governments attempted to widen the network of educational institutions. By the late 1950s, almost all villages in Malabar had at least a primary school which enrolled students from all caste groups.[61] As education was now a national issue, the compulsion to join these institutions was far greater than in the early part of the twentieth century. For Asaris, it became difficult to completely ignore the social pressure of enrolling their children in schools.

The majority of Asaris I interviewed, who are between the ages of fifty and sixty, have studied at least up to fourth standard. However, only a few had passed the tenth standard, which was the qualification required for many government jobs in the

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[60] Arumughan Achari, "Asarimarum Acharangalum (Asaris and Customs)," Vidyaposhini, 2, 6 (July 10, 1943): 22-27.

[61] For a history of the educational institutions in Malabar see S. Subba Raman*, History of Progress of Education in Madras State. 1875- 1960* (Madras: Sakthi Publishers, 1979).

1950s. Gopalan studied till the ninth standard, by which time his father withdrew him from the school. He explained that those who passed the tenth standard never came back to asarippani. Sreedharan, who is now a school teacher, remembers that his father was totally disappointed when he decided to complete the tenth standard. As predicted by his father, he did not return to asarippani, but joined a teachers training course and later became a history teacher. The census report of 1951 mentioned about the Malabar district that, "though there is substantial improvement in the enrollments in the primary schools, the number of 'drop outs' is increasing at an alarming rate." The report pointed out that one of the reasons for the increasing drop out was the concern among parents regarding their children "moving out from the hereditary occupations based on castes."[62]

Cherukad, who was famous for his progressive novels and short stories, discussed the issue of drop-outs from his experience as a teacher in the 1950s. He connected this issue with "caste prejudices" and observed that "the members of the lowest castes are comparatively more interested in education than the castes like Asari or Karivan (carpenter and smith, both artisanal castes)."[63] According to Cherukad, one could not blame the parents from these castes because they were then able to provide their children with a solid training in a job which provides a stable income, whereas the school education did not provide any such training for any kind of job.

A sample survey conducted by K. Ravindran in the Kozhkkode district (which was part of earlier Malabar district) in the late 1960s shows that only two percent of

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[62] Census Commissioner India, *Census of India 1951*, Vol. 11 Part II, (Delhi: Government Press, 1952), 126-27.

[63] S. Cherukad, *Vidylaya Chinthakal* (Thoughts on School) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi, 1952).

the Asaris between the ages of 16 and 50 had a matriculation degree (tenth standard) at that period.[64] Ravindran observed that usually students drop out from school when they continuously fail in a class three or four times. Many of the Asari students, however, dropped out because "their parents required more hands to finish the works they undertook."[65]

From the above discussion it is clear that Asari students were dropping out from schools not necessarily because of their disinterest in studies. It was the silent understanding among the community elders that the educational institutions could not protect the interest of the community that compelled them to withdraw their children from the schools. In short, we can observe that from the early twentieth century to the late 1960s, Asaris resisted the attempts of institutionalization by the colonial and the post- colonial governments which tried in similar ways to 'governmentalize' the population through educational institutions.

If the resistance against institutionalization was a major part of the struggle against the sayip's interventions in asarippani, the realignment of methods and measures within the practice of carpentry was another strategy in the struggle Asaris undertook at this period. The director of the Public Works Department of Madras government issued a directive in 1910 that the engineers should exactly follow the drawings and plans for all the buildings constructed by the department in various

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[64] K. Ravindran, *A study of Technical Education in Kerlam*, Industries Department, Government of Kerala, (Thiruvanathapuram: Government Press, 1964).

[65] Ibid., 23.

towns.[66] Preparation of drawings was already an existing practice among civil engineers, but in many cases for practical reasons the actual construction did not follow the plans or drawings. As a result, there was always an escalation in the estimated cost of construction. It was in this context that the director issued the above directive. In a reply to this, Assistant Engineer of PWD at Calicut M. J. Reed submitted that he needed more time to implement this directive.[67] According to Reed, the masons or carpenters were incapable of working according to a drawing or plan. It would take time to train them in reading drawings and to teach them to work according to the plans. Reed observed that "the carpenters still measure using their own measuring scales which are marked in units of fingers and feet." There were standard conversion tables converting fingers and feet into inches, but Asaris did not follow these tables. Reed stated that "the carpenters here are reluctant to abandon their traditional measuring practices" because "they consider these practices as part of their religious belief."[68] It is obvious that what Reed named a "religious belief of Asaris" was actually the belief in caste practices.

The issue of the use of drawings was not just a question of whether Asaris could learn to read the drawings or not; it was a question of difference between two kinds of practices altogether. In the colonial form, knowledge *represents* something outside itself and it is always a knowledge *of* something. This conception separates the object of knowledge from the knowledge about the object. The use of models and

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[66] *Proceedings of the Public Works Department*, Government of Madras, 1910 (Madras: Government Press, 1911), 23-25.

[67] Ibid., 31.

[68] Ibid., 32.

drawings are knowledge in the form of representation. Within colonial practice, it was difficult even to begin a work without this knowledge. In an article in the 15th issue of the *Journal of Indian Art*, B.C. Temple, a colonial officer, expressed his surprise over the native system of building construction which never used drawings or models. He wondered "like many another Englishmen, what manner of men, they were who raised grand buildings, the remains of which we see in India."[69] He observed a temple construction at Karli and reported the conversation he had with the overseer of the construction about the chief mason:

> "How long had he (the mason) been at it?" "Oh a long while – many months." "How much longer would he be?" "He could not say, there is no need for hurry." Had he any plans?" "Yes." "On Paper?" "No, why should he have on paper?" "But how do you know what will it look like?" "The master mason knew, he just gives directions to others. I will know when it finishes."[70]

For Temple, it was seemingly impossible to begin construction work without drawings. Even after witnessing the native method of construction, he was not convinced that the native masons or carpenters were reliable for anything other than simple works:

> They may be safely trusted to make good metalled roads, to bridge a small stream, or road on special circumstances with reasonable intelligence; but, unless directed, they will not make plan or estimate. There are some *mistiris (contractors)* who understand plans, but many, and by no means the most incompetent in the practice, when asked to explain details, gaze at them

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[69] R. C. Temple, "A Study of Modern Indian Architecture As Displayed in a British Cantonment," *Journal of Indian Art*, 15, (March 1890), 57-61.

[70] Ibid., 59.

helplessly for a while and then look up wishfully saying "*Garib Parivar* (poor family)!!"[71].

In the hierarchical series of knowledge, colonialists positioned practices significantly below theoretical/ written knowledge. They believed that theoretical knowledge can always represent practice. Drawings and plans were such knowledges which represented the construction practices. For colonizers this knowledge was important to control, order, or, in short, to govern the practices of the natives. The Asaris clearly attempted to escape from these governing practices to keep their authority over asarippani. P. C. Kuttikrishna Menon, who was Sanskrit scholar and a *vydya* (native medical practitioner), noted in his autobiography that Asaris (in the 1930s and 40s) consciously decided "what kinds of reforms should be accepted and what should be rejected."[72] While constructing a new house, Menon sought the help of an engineer from Kochi for designs and drawings. Menon gave the design supplied by the engineer to the chief carpenter who in turn asked Menon to explain the drawings. After Menon's explanation, the moothasari asked Menon: "You know what type of house you want, and I know how to construct it. Then what is the purpose of these drawings?" Menon stated that "no one referred to those drawings after these conversations, but they still lie in the attic of the old house covered with dust and smoke."[73]

Menon mentioned that "the chief carpenter was not ready to compromise on the relative proportions of the rooms, but he easily accommodated modern facilities in

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[71] Ibid., 61.

[72] P.C. Kuttikrishna Menon, *Pinnitta Pathakal* (The Treaded Paths) (Thrissur: Vidya Vijayam Publishers, 1957), 76.

[73] Ibid., 82.

kitchen and front room according to my demands."[74] The moothasari (the chief carpenter) in his construction was using many objects which were relatively 'modern' such as iron nails for joints and clay tiles for roofs. At the same time, he was resistant in modeling his practice according to drawings and plans prepared by an engineer.

The accommodation of new objects into existing methods of asarippani requires creativity, flexibility and openness toward changes. The introduction of the two objects mentioned above – the iron nail and clay tiles – demonstrates these features of asarippani during the first half of the twentieth century. Till the end of the nineteenth century, Asaris designed the wooden frames for the roof in such way that pegs or nails had very limited application. Even for complex assemblies, they used lap joint, box joint or dovetail joint techniques which limited the use of fasteners and pegs.[75] The British engineers introduced iron nails to Asaris in Malabar in the 1840s during the construction of a government guest house at Calicut. However, even in the beginning of the twentieth century, as there was a very limited availability of iron nails, Asaris continued their earlier methods for making joints and couplings.[76] By the 1920s, the availability of iron increased, especially in the form of scrap from the railway workshops, and many small industrial units began manufacturing iron nails along with many other fabrication materials like bolts, nuts and screws.[77] The

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[74] Ibid., 78.

[75] For a detail description and drawings of the joints Asaris uses in the construction of roof frames refer Keshavan Achari, *Prayogika Vastu Vidya* (Practical Architectural Knowledge) (Kodungalloor: Jyothi Books, 1993), 34-56.

[76] Keshavan Achari claims that, according to his knowledge, one Appu Achari of Kunippara invented in the 1930s new forms of joints which assimilated the use of iron nails and clay tiles into the proper measures of asarippani. Ibid., 34.

[77] See, K. Ramakrishnan, *Theevanti Malabaril: Oru Charithranweshanam* (Railway in Malabar: A Historical Inquiry) (Shornoor: Kripa Publishers, 1987).

Assistant Engineer in the PWD at Calicut, E. W. Thomason, wrote in 1923 that the carpenters in Malabar have started using iron nails, "but only as an additional reinforcement for joints." He added that the carpenters, as they were still an "uneducated and ignorant class", could not fully accept "the significance of modern construction materials and reform their practices accordingly." [78]

If this was the colonial interpretation of selective adoption and adaptation of changes, Asaris viewed themselves as flexible but cautious regarding the changes in that period. In a conversation with Karuppan in 1928, a chief carpenter, P. Govinda Variyar described the attitude of Asaris towards the changes in the construction filed.[79] Karuppan considered himself as a person who was ready to experiment. According to him, Asaris always observed external conditions including weather and time and hence they easily sensed the pulse of the moment. Karuppan further explained how, disregarding his father's concerns, he has started using a new form of joint using iron nails. Even his father started using it after he found it simple and convenient. For Karuppan, the criterion for accepting a new practice was that it should "allow the combination of proper measure and beauty." If the measure was not proper, "he (an Asari) will be nailing not the wood piece, but the body of his forefather. Asaris can do only asarippani. One can do a new thing, if and only if it is asarippani." [80] Karuppan here assumed that all Asaris knew what asarippani was. According to him, the reference point for evaluating the propriety of a new material or method was the caste

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[78] *Proceedings of the Public Works Department*, Madras Government, 1923, Tamil Nadu State Archives, V – 34, No 29 – 31.

[79] P. Govinda Variyar, "Marunna Nattinpuram (Changing Rural Area)," *Keralapathrika*, 2, 4 (May 1928): 38-45.

[80] Ibid., 40.

rules which defined asarippani. The assimilation of clay tiles for roofs is another example in which Asaris incorporated the changes within the norms of asarippani.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Basal Evangelical Mission established various industrial units all over Malabar. The mission opened three tile factories in the Malabar district at Palakkad, Calicut and Kannoor. Even though tiles were available from the early decades of the century until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, only a few houses, such as those of the local rulers, had tiled roofs. Actually, the custom prevented even the smaller landlords having tile-roofed houses.[81] By the end of the century, however, we can observe that the custom was relaxed and many rich landlords started roofing their houses with clay tiles. According to the 1901 census, the number of tile-roofed houses in Malabar increased to 132 from 43 in 1891.[82]

Clay tiles brought two important changes in the methods of roof construction. A new kind of frame was required to hold the tiles properly. Asaris invented a new model of frame which was a long, square wooden pole which replaced the old round-shaped bamboo poles. The older bamboo poles were usually tied to the main frame of the roof. In the case of new poles, Asaris started using iron nails to fix them to the frame.

The clay tiles and iron nails were factory products and their sizes were measured in inches. Asaris had to adapt to the new material and also to a new

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[81] Until the last decades of the nineteenth century caste and power status determined nature of the house one can build. See P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathompatham Noottantile Keralam* (The Nineteenth Century Keralam) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 1988).

[82] *Census Report of India 1891*, Vol. 18, Part I (Delhi: Government Press, 1892), 241.

measuring system. Even though the colonial and Asari systems of measuring had feet as a standardized measure for length, the actual length of a foot was different in these two systems. The colonialists attempted to standardize all the units of measure and make it uniform all over India. The Government of India in 1905 appointed a committee to reform the Weight and Measures and to suggest standardized measures. Earlier in 1865, W.H. Bayley had submitted a report with suggestions to improve the measuring systems then in practice. Bayley's system, according to the Director of the Department of Weights and Measures, "though may not be scientifically the most perfect, is practically best in the present circumstances."[83] The Director suggested that "the time has come to create a system which is both scientifically and practically the best."[84] The members of the committee were not in unison in their opinions regarding the reforms, but suggested that "the government can implement the English system causing least inconvenience to people."[85]

While generally agreeing with the committee, W. T. Denison, an officer with Madras government, observed that the system proposed by the committee will be the "simplest mode of getting over a difficulty without running too much counter to native ideas, fancies and prejudices." According to him the general principle should be that the "name shall be general and that the measures will be easily assimilated to the English standards."[86] Denison, on the one hand, thought that the native systems of measures should be homogenized and made comparable with the English systems. On

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[83] *Report of the Committee on Weight and Measures*, Proceedings of the Home Department, October 1907, No. 61-63, NAI

[84] Ibid., 21.

[85] Ibid., 22.

[86] Ibid., 26.

the other hand, he also believed that this should be executed in a manner that would be acceptable to the natives as well. This colonialist attempt was part of the general effort to make native practices visible, knowable and controllable.

The problem of conflict between English and native systems occurred mainly in transactions between the natives and the Government such as in tax payments and government purchases or in commerce between the natives and the Europeans. Asaris generally did not engage in any transactions commercial or otherwise with the Government or with the European traders until the second decade of the twentieth century. After the introduction of new construction materials like iron nails or clay tiles, Asaris began using measures like inches in their practice. Even then, as we saw earlier, Asaris incorporated the new measures by translating them into unit of fingers.

Achu Asari, a chief carpenter from Palakkad, remembered how his grandfather used to engage in arguments with his grandfather's elder brother (most probably in 1930s) regarding the translation of inch into fingers.[87] The grandfather used clay tiles from the Basel Mission Tile factory at Olavakkod as a standard for inch (a tile was fourteen inches in length) and he converted 3 inches equal to 5 fingers. His brother thought that it was more accurate to equate 6 inches with 10 and 1/2 fingers in which case an inch would be slightly longer than in the former case. Even though they differed in opinion regarding the length of an inch, this difference did not create any problem for them to work together. Achu Asari's point was that it was not pre-calculated conversion method that determined the practice. Both his grandfather and

[87] Interview with Achu Asari, August 14, 2008.

his brother determined the width between two wooden frames which supported the tile using the tile itself as a measure.

Using the tile itself as a measure is a perfect example for understanding the difference between Asari ways of knowing and the colonial methods of knowledge production. In the Asari practice, knowing and using that knowledge was a single activity. The process of measuring and understanding the unit of measure were simultaneous processes. Hence the separation of representation from practice, which was one of the fundamental characteristics of colonial knowledge, was not relevant for Asari practices. In other words, by keeping the above colonial separation in abeyance, Asaris avoided the intrusion of colonial knowledge into their practice. It is important to note that Asaris were not incapable of generalization or abstraction. The *muzhakkol* (the wooden measuring scale Asaris used) itself was an object of abstracted measure. In the colonial form, the production of knowledge started from the particulars and ended in general (which is the only form of knowledge) through abstraction. In Asari practice, the movement between particular and general was a reversible action. On the one hand, an abstract measure was present in the form of muzhakkol, but an Asari learned or understood the measure through the action of measuring. The continuous movement between generalization and particularization constituted the practice of asarippani. In other words, Asaris avoided the colonial intervention not by abstaining from the process of abstraction as such but by negating the separation of abstraction from the process of particularization.

The protection of asarippani as a practice of knowing, in the process of avoiding the invasion of colonial knowledge, created multiple effects on the daily life

of Asaris and their imagination about caste and gender. In nineteenth-century Malabar, like most other places in the colony, caste and gender forces operated as a single force in an entwined manner.[88] At this period, the gender identification was directly predicated on the caste identification of an individual. For example, the cloth or ornament an individual wore in late nineteenth century Malabar clearly indicated both their gender and caste identities.[89] In other words, the identification process as an Asari and as a woman / man was a unified practice determined by the reproduction of these identities in the daily life. The dress codes, the manner of speech, the diet and eating restrictions and the restrictions of movement and touch in daily life simultaneously reproduced gender and caste identities.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the gender identification process began separating from the process of caste identification. The question of the status of women was the central question of the reform movements in India in general the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From the very beginning, the colonial and upper-caste reformers deployed the female body as an object of reform discourse. In Malabar, both the Nampoothiri and Nair reform movements focused on the status of women in their reform efforts. Scholars have already shown that the community reformers never imagined a complete equality between men and women. The attempt was to transform women into a respectable position in the private space of household

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[88] For analyses of entwinement of caste and gender see Anupama Rao, *Gender and Caste* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 2005); Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, (New Delhi: Zuban, 2006); *Caste and Gender: Violence Against Women in India* (Florence: European University Institute, 1996).

[89] For the description of the dressing codes in the nineteenth century based on caste and gender see P. Bhaskanunny, *Pathompatham Noottantile Keralam* (The Nineteenth Century Keralam) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 1988).

who will mange the modern household and serve the educated modernized husband in civilized ways.[90]

The fundamental principal of gender relations in the reform narratives was bio-logic, which was premised on an essential biological difference between the identities of men and women. According to this imagination, the whole future of a body is biologically determined and a civilized society has to design practices that will reproduce, maintain and naturalize the difference between the identities of man and woman. In other words, colonialists and the reform leaders justified the social practices that created the difference between the men and women based on the logic of the law of nature and also based on a concept of essentialized bodies.

Bio-logic was not just a concept of differentiation of bodies based on biology. It was a process of the social construction of the very biological difference and the naturalization of that difference.[91] Hence, by bio-logic we are not just mentioning the process of gender identification at birth; rather it points towards the justification of gender difference based on biological difference. Asaris in the first half of the twentieth century refused to accept this bio-logic by center-staging asarippani as the gender differentiating category. This refusal was very subtle and complex, and could

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[90] J. Devika discusses the reformation of patriarchy in the context of reform movements. Exploring the upper-caste reform literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century she shows that the reform movement separated the public from private and positioned women in the private space of family. The reform discourse articulated family women as virtuous and 'public women' as morally corrupt. J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Reforming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007).

[91] For a critical analysis of understandings of gender difference based on biology, see, Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

be sensed only if we pay great attention to the nuances of the Asari gender identification processes in this period.

Asaris, like any other community, identified a child as boy or girl at its birth. The different sets of male and female names are indications of this identification. One could consider this as differentiation based on biology. The difference between the Asari identification of gender and the colonial bio-logic was that in the former case, gender difference was not reproduced or explained based on bio-logic but based on asarippani. The song which was popular among Asaris in the first half of the twentieth century explains the relation between the gender differentiation process and asarippani:

> Protect me Kaliyamme (The goddess Kali)
> Protect my pani (the work: asarippani)
> If I lose my capacity to work
> I will be considered neither man nor woman
> Oh Kali protect my pani
> If my hand cannot hold chisel
> I will be among the womenfolk
> Oh Kali protect my pani
> If I cannot measure with muzhakkol
> I will have to work in kitchen
> Oh Kali protect my pani.[92]

The song defined the manliness of an individual based on his capacity to engage in asarippani. It articulated the difference between the genders in the form of an affiliation to work: men engaging in asarippani and women working in the kitchen.

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[92] The song is included in C. K. Venugopal, ed., *Natan Pattukalum Nattarivum* (Folk Songs and Folk Knowledge) (Thrisur, Mudra Publishers, 1997), 34-35. According to Venugopal, this song was part of the rituals for pleasing the goddess Kali which also describe various Asari tools and instruments.

If a specific dress code was one of the important markers of gender for most of the communities, it was the *kolum charatum* (the scale and the string which Asari men were supposed to carry everywhere) that was the mark of the Asari man. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Asari man and woman wore the same kind of attire: a simple white plain cloth which covered the lower part of the body. Even the hairstyle of men and women was similar. Both tied their hair upwards and both wore similar brass earrings.[93] If the above song represented the internal conceptualization of Asaris regarding gender, Asaris gave a similar impression about them for outside observers too. W. Travers, a British colonial officer in Malabar, observed that "among the five traditional artisanal castes, carpenters attract separate attention for their customs and practices. They are the only group in which women are not part of the hereditary occupation; for the other four artisanal castes, women are important part of their trade."[94] Travers also mentioned that some of the natives informed him that earlier Asari women used to engage in producing kitchen utensils and small tools at home. When he asked about this to a chief carpenter he completely denied any such knowledge. Travers concluded that irrespective of the stories about the past, in the present "carpentry is a vocation of men" and for an external observer, "outside the workplace, it would be difficult to identify their women from the men from their appearance."[95]

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[93] P. Bhaskanunny, *Keralam Irupatham Noottantinte Arambhathil* (Keralam in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2005), 57.

[94] W. Travers, *A Journey Through Malabar and Mysore* (Madras: HigginBothom and Co, 1918), 29.

[95] Ibid., 34.

This was true not only for a foreign observer but also for a native person outside the Asari caste. K.V. Moosathu, an upper-caste reform writer who was a strong supporter of the reforms and modernization in the 1920s wrote:

> After ten or fifteen years if we tell our children about the dresses men and women were wearing in the Malayalam speaking region in the wake of this century, they will consider it as ridiculous and some may think it as pure fiction…… Consider the example of Asaris. Even now both Asari men and women wear a mundu (a plain cloth) around their waist which reaches little over the knees. Both wears earrings and put the hair in the same fashion. I am wondering how we will distinguish the men from women if the men stop asarippani and no longer carry the measuring scale and the thread![96]

In the above description it is clear that Moosathu observed asarippani as the major measure of gender difference for Asaris. It should be noted that Moosathu, who was trained in a colonial system of education, believed in the bio-logic of gender difference and in later in this article he directly expressed his belief. He observed that the educated classes "are now aware of the basic difference between man and woman through scientific education." These educated individuals expressed this understanding through their dress: "men wear mundu (a plain cloth) and shirt and women wear mundu and blouse." Moosathu reasoned that Asari men and women were similar in their appearance because "they have not attained the scientific awareness of the difference between the bodies of man and woman."[97]

Questioning Moosathu's argument in the next issue of the same journal, another upper-caste orthodox writer, Vasudeva Menon, observed that Asaris were not

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[96] K. V. Moosathu, "Acharavishengal (The Peculiarities of Customs)," *Vidyavinodin*i, (December, 1929): 34-38.

[97] Ibid., 36.

unaware of the bodily difference between man and woman. The difference between Asaris and the young reformed generation was that "Asaris have not yet started indulging in bodily pleasures like the contemporary educated young people." According to Menon, Asaris still considered their body as a "god-given instrument for divine work; through their work they show that they are strong men."[98] Menon connected the manliness of Asaris directly to the work. In a satiric article in 1932, the unknown reporter for the Mathrubhumi daily mentioned that "for the educated new generation it would be difficult to distinguish between men and women of the lower-caste." This was because most of the lower-caste men and woman wore the same kind of attire and engaged in similar work. "Asaris and Mannans (mason caste) are exceptions; at least their men and women engage in different kinds of works."[99]

The above discussion shows that in the first half of the twentieth century, Asaris deliberately projected asarippani as the organizing category of gender. This was not possible in the nineteenth century because Asari women were also part of asarippani, though they worked only from home and their role was subordinated to that of men. Even in the last decade of nineteenth century, we can see references to the work of Asari women in the colonial records. In a report in 1889, William Logan observed that "Asari women in Malabar are experts in making carved handles for knives and wooden utensils."[100] We have already seen that when Travers reported on the carpenters thirty years after Logan, he mentioned that "they are the only one

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[98] M. Vasudeva Menon, "Visheshamaya Acharangal (Peculiar Customs)," *Vidyavinodin*i, (January, 1930): 45.

[99] Ibid., 37.

[100] *Proceedings of the Home Department*, Government of Madras, 1889, Tamil Nadu State Archives, B – 156, No 32 - 34

artisanal group in which women are not part of the hereditary occupation."[101] Until the 1911 census, like other artisanal groups, Asaris were generally counted in families. This was because the colonialists considered carpentry, like other artisanal practices, as family work in which the whole family members participates. From the 1911 census onwards, the government started using an individual occupational status for Asaris for all comparative purposes.

In an article in 1932, C. Raman Menon made a similar comment regarding the participation of women in asarippani. His grandmother told him that in her childhood, an Asari women near her house used to make toys for her and this women was an expert in making kitchen utensils. When Menon inquired about this to a carpenter near his house, he was told that "there are stories like that, but Asari women were never allowed to touch a chisel."[102] Despite this contradictory account, we can conclude that Asari men at this period purposely took efforts to convince themselves and others that asarippani was always a male profession.

The Asari ways of constructing gender difference through asarippani, in one sense, resisted the bio-logic of colonial knowledge. At the same time it was not completely antithetical to this logic. For the upper-caste educated classes, the Asari interpretation was not surprising or unacceptable. Even when the colonial knowledge based its justification of gender difference in biology, the division of occupation based on gender was part of its practice of gender differentiation. The colonialists and the native reformers considered tailoring, nursing and house management suitable

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[101] W. Travers, *A Journey Through Malabar and Mysore* (Madras: HigginBothom and Co, 1918), 47.

[102] C. Raman Menon "Chila Nyayangal (Some Justifications)," *Kerala Chandrilka*, 32, 6 (June, 1932): 43-49.

occupations for respectable women. The criteria for this was the bio-logic which reasoned that women's bodies can sustain only lighter jobs and also that by nature women are not capable of highly intellectual deliberations.[103] In this circumstance, it was not difficult for the colonialists and the upper-castes to understand the Asari interpretation of asarippani as a male profession. The difference was that Asaris did not use any bio-logic to justify the exclusion of women from the profession. For them, the gendered nature of the profession was not connected to the nature of the body that executes the work, rather it was the reverse. In this logic, asarippani, by nature, was a male profession, engaging in which a child becomes a man. It was not the human being who was 'necessarily gendered'; rather it was the work which was already gendered and which enabled the human being to achieve one's gender. It is necessary to underscore here that the point is not that Asaris did not assign an a prori any gender to the body. The difference between the colonial and Asari practices of gender differentiation was, rather, in the justificatory logic of the respective arguments.

As a central organizing category, asarippani was not only the ordering logic of gendering process, but also became the defining factor of caste itself. Again, as in the case of gender differentiation, the difference from the earlier period was subtle and complex. Earlier in this chapter we saw that Asaris used the threat of exclusion from the caste as a strategy against those who cooperated with colonial institutions. It was in this process that asarippani began determining the definitions of the Asari caste.

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[103] For a discussion on how the reform discourse categorized different new occupation based on gender, see, J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Reforming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007).

This argument should not be confused with the Orientalist and the Hindu revivalist argument that caste in its origin was a system of division of labor.[104] The functionalist argument in the latter case attempts to justify the caste system in its origin by considering the Brahmanical domination as a later aberration. Our point here is that asarippani became the defining category of caste only in a historical juncture where Asaris projected asarippani as something more than mere occupation in their resistance against the intervention of colonial knowledge.

We have already seen two cases where Asaris excluded men who joined the colonial institutions from their family and the caste. This indicates a tendency where Asaris started increasingly defining caste based on asarippani. In other words, the caste identification process, which had multiple dimensions, gradually narrowed down to a process based on asarippani. Francis Buchanan, a Scottish physician who surveyed South India in the first decade of the nineteenth century, noted the complexity of the process through which natives identified their caste. A child slowly recognized what his caste means through food habits, dress codes and specific ways of conversation with older and younger people within and outside the community. Buchanan observed that "it is hard for a foreigner to recognize all the factors of caste rules", considering the fact that "even the natives here do not know how the people outside their caste conduct their daily life."[105] Buchanan's description shows that

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[104] B. R. Ambedkar, who was the champion of the downtrodden and former untouchable castes, through his writings exposed as fallacious the Brahmanical justification of caste as originally a division of labor. To the contrary, Ambedkar argued, from the very beginning caste was a hierarchical argument of power and Brahmanical strategy of domination. See B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* (Delhi: Sidhartha Books, 2008).

[105] W. Hunter, ed., *Journal of Francis Buchanan, Mysore and Malabar 1821 – 22* (Madras: Government Press, 1907).

caste identification through daily life practices was a complex and multi-dimensional process.

By the 1930s, we could observe asarippani increasingly becoming a crucial condition for Asari men to be part of the community. In *Asari Vrithantham*, Kandan the father explained to his son that asarippani was not something that was limited to "working on wood with chisel and hammer." Asarippani was a dialogue "with other worlds: the world of trees, the world of five elements (earth, water, fire, air and sky) and the world of forefathers." It was through engaging with these five elements that one becomes Asari. According to Kandan, the white man could understand only one part of the dialogue that of Asaris; "they could never hear what we (Asaris) hear from the trees, waters, fires or forefathers. In the white man's working place even we will not be able to hear these voices." This was the reason that one cannot be an Asari "in white men's location."[106]

Neelakantan Acahri's philosophical deliberations on what it meant to be an Asari in the first half of the nineteenth century clearly defined caste based on work. In Achari's story, the son who provoked his father with questions was a character who symbolized the temptations of the new world. The son asked his father that "if Asaris are only those individuals who are engaged in asarippani, how a woman born in Asari caste is still an Asari?" The father replied that "men and women become Asari by performing their duty. An Asari woman's duty is to be in relation with an Asari man

[106] Neelakantan Achari, *Asari Vrithantham*.

(to be in kinship relations in the terms of sociology) and serve the Asari men in her family. If she fails to do that she is no more an Asari."[107]

The above explanation established the Asari-ness of women through their connection to Asari men, and men could be Asari only if they are engaged in Asarippani. Hence, if an Asari was not submitting himself to his duties he was risking not only his existence within the caste but also that of his immediate woman relative. In short, asarippani was the defining category of caste directly for men and indirectly for women.

The stories of the Asari world in the first half of the twentieth century show the importance of different forms of knowing practices in understanding the social forces of caste and gender. By the beginning of the century, for each caste community the relation to knowledge became an important parameter in their changing understandings of caste and gender relations. In other words, knowledge became the reference field from where communities could evaluate their present and chart out their future. However, these evaluations and future programs were already constrained by their corresponding position in the hierarchical series of knowledge created through the dominant colonial discourse on knowledge. The varied interaction of communities with the production of knowledge produced varied understandings of caste and gender within each community.

Until the 1970s, Asaris successfully avoided / actively ignored the colonial forms of knowledge through various strategies and tactics. The Asari interaction shows how difference-making, instead of dichotomous opposition could be a way of

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[107] Ibid.

creating distance from the intervention of the dominant forces. It also provides examples of alternative possibilities of organizing the world other than through the measure of knowledge.

In the early twentieth century, asarippani as knowing practice played a crucial role in the Asari engagement with dominant colonial practices. What were the Brahmanical practices related to knowledge and caste in this period? How did the Nampoothiris – the Kerala Brahmins – negotiate with emerging colonial institutions? What was the role of knowledge in the Nampoothiri reform discourse of the 1920s and 1930s? The next two chapters explore these questions by comparing Nampoothiri practices with Asari negotiations in the same period analyzed in this chapter.

Chapter 2
A Nampoothiri World of Acharam

In nineteenth century Malabar, Nampoothiris as a Jati dominated other Jatis in different domains of social life. They controlled the majority of the land which was the biggest source of revenue at that period.[1] If economic power was one of the important factors that enabled them to dominate over other caste groups, the claim of authority over ritual power was equally important in this process of domination.[2] During this period, Nampoothiris maintained their authority through the daily practice of *acharam*, which included all the daily life activities and the directive principles of how to conduct these activities.

Acharam was not just the repetition of ritual practices as many scholars of religion have explained it.[3] It was simultaneously action and a normative principle which determined individual actions in all spheres of economic, religious, social and political life. In other words, acharam determined the daily life of Nampoothiris in the

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[1] In Malabar, especially in south Malabar, Nampoothiris were the major Janmis in the pre-colonial and colonial period. According to one estimate in 1895, they owned seventy percentage of the agricultural land and fifty five percentage of the non-agricultural land in the Malabar district. See, W. B. Stuart, "The Report on Land and Revenue of the Malabar District," *Proceeding of the Revenue Department for the year 189*, Government of Madras, Regional Archives Kozhikkode, D – 27, 112, 17 – 19.

[2] For a colonial description of the rituals of Nampoothiris in Malabar, see, Edgar Thurston, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909). For an 'inside' view of rituals of Nampoothiris practiced in th early twentieth century see Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, *Ente Smaranakal* (Memoires) (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Publishers, 1964). For analysis of Nampoothiris' ritual power as an aspect of social domination see P. K. Balakrisnan, *Jati Vyavastayum Kerala Charithravum* (The Caste System and Kerala History) (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1983).

[3] Scholars, especially from the West, studied Nampoothiri ritual practices based on the Euro-centric idea of religion. They considered acharam as a spiritual activity practiced with an objective of attaining salvation and a better afterlife. For studies based on these notions see, Genevieve Lemercinier, *Religion and Ideology in Kerala* (New Delhi: D.K. Agencies, 1984); Bardwell L Smith, ed. *Religion and Social Conflict in South Asia* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1976); Marjatta Parpola, *Kerala Brahmins in Transition: A Study of a Namputiri Family* (Helsinki: The Finnish Oriental Society, 2000); Daniel Lak, *Mantras of Change: Reporting India in a Time of Flux* (New York: Viking, 2005).

nineteenth century and enabled them to maintain their claims of superior power by dominating other caste groups. I call this situation of domination attained through the forces of acharam as *order of acharam*.

By the end of the century, new social forces emerged in the context of accelerated interactions of the upper-castes in the region, with the colonial institutions of production of knowledge. This interaction engendered many forms of challenges to the order of acharam. This chapter explores the tensions between the dominating order of acharam and an emerging order of knowledge, and Nampoothiri attempts at maintaining the order of acharam against these new challenges in the early decades of the twentieth century. By focusing on acharam as a source of domination, the chapter interrupts the supposedly long historical role of knowledge in Brahmanical power, and situates the knowledge-power relation in specific historical contexts. By analyzing the daily life practice of Nampoothiris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the chapter traces how Nampoothiris redefined acharam in the context of increasing intervention of knowledge in the daily life. It also maps the effects of this redefinition of acharam on Jati and gender practices in this period.

The last decades of nineteenth century witnessed dramatic changes in the caste practices of Jatis like Nair, Ezhava, and Pulaya in the Malayalam speaking region Keralam, which comprised the princely states of Thiruvithamkoor and Kochi and the British ruled district of Malabar. In Malabar, it was Nairs who began challenging the order of acharam based on their newly acquired status within the colonial administrative apparatuses. By the end of the nineteenth century, a number of individuals from Nair Jati, who were trained in various colonial educational

institutions, attained positions of power such as revenue administrators, magistrates and police officers. Their participation in the colonial practices produced new ideas of individuality and new concept of norms and values regarding social life.[4] These ideas, which were predominantly influenced by colonial discourses, were not commensurable with the existing order of acharam imposed by Nampoothiris. The interaction of Nairs with colonial discourses produced new notions of family and morality based on the bio-logic of colonial knowledge. Nairs, under the leadership of educated individuals, started revaluating and questioning the existing norms and values, especially regarding the special conjugal practices Nair women had with Nampoothiri men.

In the period of interest, in a Nampoothiri *illam* (Nampoothiris called their family house as *illam*), only the elder son married from within the caste. The younger brothers practiced a particular kind of conjugal relation – which was known as *sambandham* – with women from the upper-castes, including Nairs. Children born in these relations did not belong to the Nampoothiri caste but to that of their mothers.[5]

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[4] Robin Jeffry studied the transformation of Nair social power and the changes in the caste practices in the context of colonial interventions and modernization in Thiruvithjamkoor. See Robin Jeffry, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847 - 1908* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994). G. Arunima's study on the matrilineal practice of Nairs of Malabar may be the first systematic scholarly work on the transitions of Nair social life in Malabar in the colonial period. She analyzed the interaction of different values and social norms in the context of colonialism and how Nair reform leaders influenced by colonial discourse began considering matriliny as an immoral practice. See, G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar, c. 1850 – 1940* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003).

[5] There is difference of opinion among historians regarding the emergence of sambandham relations. Some consider this as a compromise arrived between Nairs and Nampoothiris in order to keep the family property undivided and thus benefiting both communities. But for others, the system began when Nampoothiris who were immigrants from the North inserted themselves into the age old matrilineal system of Nairs some what forcefully after attaining dominance in the social order. For the first view, see, E.M.S. Nampoothirippad, *Keralam Malayalikalute Mathrubhumi* (Keralam: the Motherland of Malayalees), (1944: reprint, Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1984). For the latter view see Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *Kerala Charithram* (The History of Keralam), (Kottayam:

The women or children in the sambandham relation did not have any right to the property of their 'husband' or father. Nairs followed a matrilineal system and property was transferred through the lineage of women. Nair women generally practiced serial monogamous relations with upper-caste men including Nampoothiris. Theoretically, a Nair woman could suspend one such relation and begin a new one on her own. Typically, however, the suspension of a conjugal relation was more complicated. But the idea of chastity was not a factor in this system.

The colonizers and missionaries considered this matrilineal system unhealthy, uncivilized and immoral.[6] English-educated Nair men in the late nineteenth century attempted to reform this lineage system through various channels including legal enactment. They demanded that Nair women should "properly" marry from within the caste and follow patrilineal monogamous conjugal relations. They influenced the British administration successfully to pass an act in the Madras legislative assembly, which was named as the Malabar Nair Marriage Reform Bill of 1898.[7] The bill envisaged to make sambandham a legal marriage so that the wife and children in the

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NBS, 1961). Whichever may be the case, this system as it was practiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Keralam was unique. The couples who entered into a sambandham relation did not live in the same house. The Nampoothiris who had sambandham relation with Nair women would arrive at the Nair house in the evening and leave the house in the morning. They would not eat at their wives' houses. Their children were not allowed to touch their fathers because they belonged to the mothers' castes. For a detailed analysis of Nair Matrilineal system, see G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar, 1850 – 1940*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003).

[6] G. Arunima, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and the Transformation of Matriliny in Kerala, Malabar, 1850 – 1940*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003).

[7] The Malabar Nair Marriage Bill of 1896 was result of the recommendations of the Malabar Marriage Commission set up by the Madras Government in 1891. Chandu Menon, one of the members of the commission strongly condemned Nampoothiris for their exploitation of Nair women through sambandham and underscored the right of Nairs' to institutional legal marriage. See *the Report of Malabar Marriage Commission*, Madras Legislative Records, 1891, 26. The actual act that was passed in 1896 did not include all the recommendations of the commission but legalized sambandham as marriage. For a detailed discussion of the act, see, C.J. Fuller, *Nairs Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

marriage would have the right to the property of the husband. Nampoothiris considered this as a challenge and threat to their economic power and to acharam. Nampoothiri community leaders started propaganda against this act through articles and memorandums in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The second challenge to the order of acharam originated from the British government's attempts to reform the land revenue system in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. From its inception in Malabar in the late eighteenth century, British rule granted full ownership of the land to *Janmis* (landlords). Their objective was to create manageable and defined land authorities from which they can collect tax, which was the major portion of their revenue. This destroyed the age-old arrangement between the Janmis and the *Kutiyans* (tenants).[8] Now the Janmis were able to evict a tenant more easily and to pressurize kutiyans to pay ever increasing rents. The tenants, especially the Muslim tenants protested against this in different ways from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Low level officers of the British government warned that this might lead to serious riots and rebellion. Once the situation became alarming, in 1887, the government appointed a commission headed by William Logan. Logan in his report suggested important reforms including the prohibition of large scale evictions of the tenants by the Janmis. Though the government did not implement his suggestions; in 1897, a more diluted bill was introduced in the Madras assembly.

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[8] Most historians assume that the system of land tax was first introduced in Keralam by Tipu Sultan. The British followed his taxation system but installed the Nampoothiri and Nair Janmis as the sole proprietors of the land. Earlier, for all practical purpose tenants had the right over the land, though technically the Janmis were the owners of the land. For an analysis of the changes in the land ownership system during the British rule see K. N. Panikkar, "Land Control, Ideology and Reform: A Study of the Changes in the Family Organization and Marriage Systems in Kerala," *The Indian Historical Review*, 1 (July 1977): 30-46.

The Malabar Janmi – Kutiyan Bill of 1897, aimed to rationalize the renting of land.[9] It suggested certain restriction in the rights of Janmis to transfer tenancy from one tenant to another. The bill did not intend anyway to change the absolute right of Janmis or their right to choose the tenant; its only objective was to rationalize the process. Still, Nampoothiri Janmis considered even these minor changes in the land tenancy system a major threat to their rights over the land.

The debate around the above mentioned bills in the assembly and the propaganda for and against the bills outside created anxiety and tension among the Nampoothiri Janmis. They reasoned that English education and the *parishkaram* (reforms) that accompanied it were the roots of the problem. A few Nampoothiris who were closely following the debate of various reforms in the first decade of the twentieth century occasionally wrote articles in contemporary Malayalam journals and newspapers. In an article in 1903, Narayanan Nampoothiri reminded the Nairs and the British government that "there are certain things that are more valuable than knowledge and parishkaram for a society."[10] He claimed that it was traditional values that protected the culture of the country from time immemorial. According to him knowledge of the universe was a result of "good practices", not the cause or basis for a good life.[11] P. K. Nampoothiri argued that both the bills in the legislative assembly reflected the "new ideas of the educated class and their total disrespect to the age old customs." He warned that, the bills if enacted would create "social disorder and

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[9] For a detailed discussion of tenancy acts in Malabar, see, V.V. Kunhikrishnan, *The Tenancy Legislation in Malabar, 1870 – 1970: A Historical Analysis* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1993).

[10] Narayanan Nampoothiri, "Acharavum Parishkaravum (Acharam and Reform)," *Yuvadeepthi*, 2 (March 1903): 34.

[11] Ibid, 35.

chaos" among the upper-castes.[12] Despite the protest of Nampoothiris, the Madras Legislative Assembly passed the Janmi Kutiyan Bill in 1906.

The passage of the Janmi-Kutiyan bill gave a clear message to Nampoothiris that occasional articles in journals or a few meetings of interested parties were not enough to overcome the challenges they were facing at the period. It was in this context that Nampoothiris formed a community organization, the Yoga Kshema Sabha (YKS) in 1908. Later this organization would be a platform for radical demands of reform within the community. At its formative period, however, the major objective of the organization was the protection of the order of acharam and the maintenance of dominance in the social world.

In its initial years, conservative Janmis in the community controlled the YKS. In this period the objective of the YKS was not widen the base or to mobilize each community members. Rather, the Sabha was body of a few elites who imagined their interests as the interest of the community.[13] The resolution passed in the first meeting of the YKS stated that "no member of the Sabha should utilize the platform of the same to speak, decide or act against acharam and customary traditions of Nampoothiris."[14] M. R. Bhattathirippad remembered that until the seventh annual

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[12] P. K. Nampoothiri, "Janmi –Kutiyan Billum Achara Vyvasthakalum (The Janmi – Kutiyan Bill and the Order of Acharam)," *Malayala Manorama*, October 12, 1904.

[13] The discussions of the initial meetings of the YKS were centered on the question of tenancy act and its possible implications for the Janmis. For the details of the Activities of the YKS in its initial years see I.V. Babu, *Keraleeya Navothanavum Nampoothirimarum* (The Enlightenment of Kerala and Nampoothiris) (Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, 2001).

[14] Quoted in M. R. Bhattathiripad, "Kal Noottantinullil (In a Quarter Century)," *Mathrubhumi Special Issue* (1936): 51

conference in 1915, Sabha did not take any positive action regarding English education, women's education, sambandham, or dress reform.[15]

Even though the main objective of the YKS was to protect the community from the invasion of colonial knowledge, colonial governing practices directly inspired the modalities of the activities of the organization. They adopted techniques like writing articles, submitting memorandums to the government and finally constituting a formal organization, all of which were forms of colonial governance. At the same time, the adoption of these techniques did not prevent them from opposing colonial intervention through knowledge. As we saw above in the article of Narayanan Nampoothiri, the main target of YKS was English education and *parishkaram* (reform) which would destroy traditional values and morals.

In community reform attempts among Nairs, Ezhavas and Pulayas, education was one of the central objectives of the reform. The reformers from these caste groups considered knowledge as the light that would remove the darkness of ignorance in which the community was supposedly immersed. Knowledge became the measure of welfare within the community. The reform leaders in these communities regarded education as the sole means through which one can attain knowledge. The YKS considered knowledge as a threat to the more important aspects of human life such as values and morals based on acharam.

The first and the prime objective of YKS was to overcome the threats to acharams from various social forces. In the first decade of the twentieth century Nampoothiris recognized that without certain changes in the Jati practices it would be

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[15] Ibid.

difficult to maintain the dominance in the society. The YKS at this period attempted to incorporate the new social situation into the order of acharam with minor changes and adjustments. In this attempt, for the first time, Nampoothiris had to define acharam and then try to widen its scope and range of application, both in opposite to and in relation to colonial practices of knowledge.

In the nineteenth century practice of acharam, representation was not a technique that was separate from the daily practice of acharam. As we saw in the case of Asaris, it was impossible in this practice to separate the discursive elements as representations from non-discursive elements. In order to communicate with a new audience – colonizers and English educated natives – it was necessary to use representative strategies based on writing, and hence, to separate the elements of representation from daily life practices. In this situation, Nampoothiri authors started defining acharam according to contemporary needs and requirements. The majority of these authors followed a strategy of defining Nampoothiri acharam as a practice that protected and protects the life-world of not only Nampoothiris but also that of all other caste groups who were part of the network of caste hierarchy. They argued that Nampoothiris through their daily life rituals protected the whole society from sins and evils. Hence, according to them, it was important to not change these daily life activities in the name of education or employment.

According to Nagam Ayya, a non-Malayalee Brahmin officer from Thiruvithamkoor who wrote the first manual of the princely state, the Nampoothiri community gravitated towards acharam through strictly-followed daily rituals. Every action was a ritual and it was the proper performance of these ritualistic actions that

constituted the Jati. The moment one broke a rule, it affected not only the person or Nampoothiri Jati but the whole order of things in the Jati world.[16] Several of the Nampoothiri authors echoed Nagam Ayya's opinion and defined acharam as a force that extended beyond the Nampoothiri world. For example, Krishnan Nampoothiri claimed that different Jatis have different kinds of responsibilities towards society. The responsibility of the Nampoothiri Jati was "the performance of rituals and the maintenance of acharam that are necessary to keep the whole human world happy and peaceful."[17] Even a single person's activity that violates the code of acharam could invite a number of sins and create different kinds of difficulties in daily life. According to the author, Nampoothiris responsibly performed the rituals in proper ways without hesitating to expel even powerful persons from the community who deviated from the rules of acharam. "The superiority of the Nampoothiri Jati was commonly approved for the above reason."[18]

The above claim was important especially considering the fact that, in the nineteenth century, Nampoothiris neither had direct control over the daily life of other Jatis nor did they desire to intervene in it in any substantive manner. For example, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan observed that each caste was "a world of its own," and the internal rules "were different for each caste."[19] In 1890, Edgar Thurston noted that, as far as the daily practices of other castes were

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[16] Nagam Ayya, *The Travancore State manual* (Thiruvananthapuram: Government Press, 1874).

[17] Krishnan Nampoothiri, "Nampoothirimarum Jati Dharmavum (Nampoothiris and Jati Responsibilities)," *Kerala Pathrika*, 3, 12 (December 1905): 3.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Francis Buchanan, *A Report on the Native Customs of South India* (London: Abe Scot Publishing Company, 1812), 86.

concerned, "the power of Brahmins is limited."[20] This did not mean that the Brahmanical domination was less violent or exploitative at this period; it meant only that the strategy of domination in the nineteenth century was different from that of the early twentieth century. In the former period, Brahmanical domination acted as an external force, which of course, restricted and bounded the daily life of other castes; but within the boundary these caste groups conducted their daily life with different internal rules and customs.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, in the context of their attempt to protect the order of acharam, Nampoothiris began claiming that acharam was a matter of all castes and it was Nampoothiris duty to protect acharam for the well of being of all castes. They also maintained that acharam could be protected only through the proper performance of rituals by Nampoothiris in their daily life. In order to understand this claim we have to explore how Nampoothiris at this time represented the relation between acharam and their activities of daily life. In the introduction of his autobiography, Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad wrote:

> It is very easy to write my biography. I took a bathe in the morning and had a coffee; had lunch and another coffee in the evening; had supper and slept. I did all these according to acharam. Thus one day's history is complete. Now if I change the date and write 'ditto', it is the next day's history. I am sixty eight now. If I write all the dates in this period and write 'ditto', my biography is complete.[21]

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[20] Edgar Thurston, "Notes on the Hindus of Madras," *Journal of Madras Museum*, 2, 13 (1890): 23.

[21] Kanippayyoor gave lot of insights in the daily practice of Nampoothiris in his three volume memoir. In the introduction he makes interesting connections between memory and history. He claims that he is writing these memoirs in order to record certain practices which no longer exist and which would be soon erased even from memory. For him history writing is struggle against forgetting, because through writing memory become immortal. See the preface, Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, *Ente Smaranakal* (My memoirs) (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Publishers, 1964), Vol. 1.

Nampoothirippad's description underscored the aspect of repetition of the performance of acharam, which was the most important characteristic of Nampoothiri daily life. Even though the author himself was not completely against colonial education, he believed that the performance of acharam in daily life was "the basis of all good values such as simplicity, peace and bodily health of Nampoothiri men," which was incommensurable with the "modern practices."[22] A champion of reform and an activist of Indian National Congress, Mozhikunnath Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad has noted that in the beginning of the twentieth century "conservatism appeared with a new vigor which was the final leap of the fire before it was put down." According to him, at this period, Nampoothiris began "performing acharam more rigorously than before to protect themselves from the storm of reform which had already started showing its strength."[23] Nagam Ayya noted that every action of a Nampoothiri man was a ritual whether it was eating, sleeping or taking bathe. [24]

In its initial years, the leaders of YKS argued that colonial education and reforms accompanying it were totally antithetical to the rules of acharam. The first and foremost point of their objection was regarding the rule of untouchability. The conservative leaders defined acharam based on the notions of purity and pollution. According to this concept each object, human beings and actions were either pure or polluted. Nampoothiris could not touch anyone outside the caste without being

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[22] Ibid., 78.

[23] Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad, *Khilafat Samaranakal* (Memories of Khilafat) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2006), 141-43.

[24] Nagam Ayya, *The Travancore State manual*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Govt. Press, 1874).

polluted. The degree of impurity depended on the caste of the individual: the lower the position of the caste, the higher was the impurity. Hence it was impossible for Nampoothiris to attend a school without violating the rules of acharam, where all the objects (like pen, paper etc) and other human beings (other lower-caste people) were polluted. The conservative section of Nampoothiris argued at this period that threat of being polluted was one of their reasons for not participating in colonial educational institutions.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, a new group of individuals from within the community began questioning the conservative leaders of the community. These individual did not challenge the order of acharam as such. Their attempt was to incorporate education within the order of acharam. They argued that Nampoothiris could and should redesign the daily life of a Nampoothiri boy so that he could attend school and keep himself pure. V. Keshavan Bhattathirippad suggested that "by not eating at school and taking a bathe after school before entering into illam" was sufficient to keep a Nampoothiri boy unpolluted.[25] At this period this was a minority voice which did no have much influence among community members.

The conservative authors in this period argued that colonial education would not only interrupt daily life during the educational years but would introduce changes in future daily life as well. In an article describing the objective of Nampoothiri life, Parameswaran Nampoothiri argued that "if a Nampoothiri boy learns modern knowledge instead of Veda recital, he might get a job in government. And if everyone

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[25] V. Keshavan Bhattathirippad, "Vidyabhyasavum Achara Samrakshanavum," *Kerala Patrika* (May 1909), 22.

in the community follows this, Nampoothiris might gain some wealth in the form of money, but they will be equal to the caste of untouchables in their culture."[26] An educated Nampoothiri would naturally seek employment in government, which would further change his daily life for ever. According to the author, the status of a Nampoothiri who was not performing the ritual was equal to a lower-caste person.

Several other articles in various journals criticized English education for the values and norms that this education imposed on individuals. In an article in 1912, K. Neelakantan Moosathu explained English education a "training which compels students to think only about the material success in this world, not about the importance of the otherworldly life." According to the author, not only the institution of modern knowledge, but the content of that knowledge too was polluted. "The modern knowledge promoted the value of money but not the value of culture."[27]

The meetings of the Yogakshema Sabha regularly passed resolutions which juxtaposed acharam and English education as antithetical and incommensurable. A resolution passed by a subunit of YKS in 1915 stated that the major three challenges the community faced were (1) the increasing ignorance of traditional spiritual practices (2) the economical dependency due to the reforms modeled on the West and based on English education and (3) the changes in the objectives in life due to the imitation of unadvisable Western models. The resolution stated:

> In the present time, gaining English education has become a fashion which encourages individuals to breach acharam in all possible ways. But

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[26] Parameshwaran Nampoothiri, "Vinasha Kale," *Prabhatham*, March 23, 1911.

[27] K. Neelakantan Moosathu, "English Vidyabhyasa Bhramam (The Desire for English Education)," *Kerala Pathrika*, 5, 8 (March 1912): 21.

> Nampoothiris should be very careful in their method of attaining education. If we want to protect the well being of Nampoothiris, we should protect our acharams and traditions.[28]

The resolution did not completely reject the idea of education but warned that Nampoothiris should give preference for maintaining acharam over gaining education. The juxtaposing of education in opposition to acharam made acharam more than a daily practice of rituals; it attained a new role as the protector of the well being of Nampoothiri Jati.

The new status of acharam had certain connections with the colonial discourse of traditional knowledge. As we discussed in the Introduction, within the colonial hierarchical series of knowledge, traditional knowledge had a lower status than modern knowledge. At the same time within traditional knowledge, the Brahmanical tradition was superior to the traditions of practical knowledge, such as artisanal practices. The Orientalists depicted the textual tradition of Brahmins as a prequel to the modern forms of knowledge.[29] Nampoothiris utilized this depiction of tradition to underscore the importance of acharam in protecting the values that lead the whole society into well being. While Nampoothiris utilized the higher status attributed in the

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[28] The memorandum submitted to the YKS by the Kottakkal unit, (Kottakkal, 1917).

[29] Edgar Thurston, who was a colonial officer and anthropologist in his analysis of castes considered Brahmins as a ritual community who possessed the knowledge of Vedas from time immemorial. See, Edgar Thurston, *Caste and Tribes of Southern India*, Vol. 1(Madras, 1909). A continuation of this thought can be seen in the nationalist and communist historians. For a nationalist version of this argument, see, L. A. Anantha Krishnan Iyer, *Castes of Cochin* (Kochi: Govt. Press, 1934); for a Marxist interpretation of the same argument see E.M.S. Nampoothirippad, *Keralam Malayalikalute Mathrubhumi* (Keralam the Motherland of Malayalikal), (1946: reprint, Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publishers, 1984). Scholars who have raised strong criticisms against Brahmanical ideology have also ironically assumed that in the pre-colonial period, Brahmins controlled all forms of theoretical knowledge. See P. K. Balakrishnan, *Jativyvasthayum Keralacharithram* (The Caste System and Kerala History), (Kottayam, 2003).

colonial discourse to their tradition, at this period, they did not necessarily connected acharam with knowledge as they would in the period of reform in the 1930s.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Nampoothiris articulated acharam more as tradition than as traditional knowledge. This was because, within the dominant discourse, knowledge, modern or traditional, was already connected to writing on the one hand and to institutional education on the other. Acharam as understood by Nampoothiris in this period was neither related to writing nor to institutional learning; it was learned and practiced through the daily life activities. In other words, the colonial depictions of Brahmanical tradition and Nampoothiri interpretations of this colonial representation were not the same.

One author claimed that "the Western scholars themselves have proved that the Brahmanical traditions kept our society intact and efficient." According to this author those who ignore this scholarly understanding were "imitating the white men like monkeys, without knowing the meanings or values of our own tradition." He further argued that Nampoothiris should teach the young generation how to practically perform acharam more rigorously and effectively. If they knew the importance of acharam, "they will not chase the vulgar fashions of Western tradition."[30] Even while quoting the point of view of Western scholars, the author did not argue for an education based on Sanskrit texts. Learning the performance of acharam was more important than learning the language and texts. Another author of this period reminded the importance of the practice of acharam by comparing it with swimming. He wrote:

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[30] P. Anujan Bhattathirippad, *Puthiya Noottandu* (The New Century) (Kozhikkode: Kalpadruma Publishers, 1913), 22-23.

> When one is in water, there is no use of knowledge of swimming taught by an elder or an expert, unless he himself cannot swim. If every Nampoothiri boy studies Sanskrit and Vedas, he would not get time to conduct family life and rituals of daily life. We should leave that (the learning of texts) to a few who are really dedicated to that purpose.[31]

From the statistics in this period we can deduce that the conservative section of Nampoothiris was generally successful in preventing the community from attending the colonial educational institutions. According to the census report of 1911, thirty three percent of Nampoothiris were literate but not even one percent attained literacy through the "modern institutions." The report mentioned that "majority of the Nampoothiris in the Malabar district, follow the traditional methods of learning."[32] The conservatives prevented the members of the community from joining educational institutions in the name of protecting acharam. It was, however, more difficult for them to insulate themselves from some of the other 'polluted' objects and practices that emerged through increasing colonial governmental activities in the region. In such a situation they evaluated each object or event based on notions of purity and impurity and incorporated or excluded them according to the new interpretation of acharam.[33]

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[31] K.V. Nampoothiri, "Nampoothirimarum Vidyabhyasavum (Nampoothiris and Education)," *Sahithya Chandrika*, 1, 4 (April 1914): 32.

[32] *Census of India, 1911*, Vol. XII, Madras, Part 2 (Madras: Government Press, 1912), 177.

[33] Most of the literature on caste practices generalized this Brahmanical principle of pollution and purity as an organizing principle for the caste system. See, G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India* (London: Routledge, 1932); Luis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1980; M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1996); Dipankar Gupta, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000). I argue that the principle of purity and pollution as defining

According to N. P. Nampoothiri, Nampoothiris "were never afraid of changes, but they were cautious on deciding what elements they should accept and what they should reject."[34] For example, paper in itself was considered a polluted object, but printed books were partially pure. N. P. Nampoothiri further explained that

> [i]f paper was considered polluted earlier, now everyone reads *Ramayanam* or *Mahabharatham* in the printed form and doesn't have to take a bathe after touching a book. But still nobody takes the books inside the shrines or near the deities. Factory tiles when they first appeared were considered polluted, but now they are widely used even in some temples.[35]

We can observe here that whenever a new material emerged, Nampoothiris determined its status according to acharam. Although the author attributed certain permanence to acharams, it is obvious that acharams were also changing in this process. However, the fundamental objective of the community leaders at this period was not to change but to maintain the acharam unlike in the reform actions in the 1920s.

The example of restaurants that emerged at this period will further show this point. In the late nineteenth century when it was in the emerging stage, Nampoothiri elders strongly prohibited their family members from eating in these restaurants. As the transportation facilities increased with the introduction of buses and trains, long distance travel became more frequent and the prohibitions on eating created lot of difficulties in these travels. Slowly, many Nampoothiris started to eat at restaurants

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category of caste practices was applicable only to the Brahmin castes and that each caste had its own specific organizing principle.

[34] N.P. Nampoothiri, "Nampoothiri Acharangalute Innathe Avastha (The Present Condition of Nampoothiri Acharams)," *Bhasha Poshini*, 9, 8 (September, 1919), 27.

[35] Ibid., 30.

but only at "Brahmanal hotels."[36] Tamil Brahmins ran these hotels where they made special arrangements for Nampoothiris. The restaurant owners arranged special spaces for Brahmins where non-Brahmins were not admitted. These restaurants offered food cooked and served by Brahmins, accompanied with the rituals as in a Nampoothiri home. Most of these hotels carried a sign 'pure Brahmanal hotel' in the name board. The menu was also different from the hotels run by non-Brahmins. Nampoothiri elders justified this new practice with the logic that a Nampoothiri would be already polluted on the journey and he should have to take bathe before entering the illam. Hence, eating the food prepared by a Brahmin at the hotel would not further pollute the person.[37]

The bus journey was another event that Nampoothiris had to negotiate at this period. Outside their illam, Nampoothiri women were not allowed to show any part of their body in public and they always carried a cadjan umbrella when they went out of the house to cover themselves. This umbrella was not foldable and had long handle. It was very difficult to take this inside the bus. To solve this problem the bus operators provided seats with curtains inside the bus. When Nampoothiri women entered the bus, they would first cover their face with the mundu which they used to cover whole the body. Once they are seated they would hold the umbrella given from the outside of the bus, the upper part of which would be outside the windows of the

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[36] Tamil Brahmins who ran restaurants invented the term 'Brahmanal Hotel' to attract the upper-caste population in general and Brahmins in particular. Many such restaurants have now become chain restaurants with branches in various metro cities of the world. For a description of such restaurant in the early twentieth century, see Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, *Ente Smaranakal* (My Memoirs) (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Publishers, 1964), Vol. 1I, 71.

[37] Ibid.

bus. This would cover the view from outside and the curtains would block the view from inside[38].

Nampoothiris attempted to order the newly emerging public spaces according to the Jati rules based on acharam. For this purpose, in the early decades of the twentieth century, Nampoothiris often interpreted acharam in new ways to include the emerging objects and practices. At this period, while attempting to incorporate new objects and events, they preserved majority of their practices from the earlier century. It is important to explain how, even in the early twentieth century, acharam continued to order the daily life of Nampoothiris according to the principles of purity and pollution.

As mentioned earlier, acharam derived its rules from the notion of purity and pollution which could be essential or relative. In the nineteenth-century practice of acharam, Nampoothiris treated some objects and people as they were essentially polluted. For example, they considered certain trees, some animals and all lower-caste people always polluted and untouchable. Any pure material could become polluted through the association of polluted objects or according to their spatial positions. Flowers or sandal paste used for different *puja* (ritual worship) were pure before the use but they were impure when they were lying down near the deity after the use. If a Nampoothiri touched any of these he had to wash his hands; otherwise he himself and whatever objects he had touched before washing the hand would become polluted. Rice in its uncooked form, even though touched by many lower-caste people in the

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[38] For a description of buses and bus journeys in Malabar in the first quarter of the twentieth century, see V. K Menon, *Smaranakal* (Memoirs) (Ottappalam: Sudarshanam Publications, 1954), 67 – 72.

process of its preparation, was not polluted. Once the Nair maid-servant washes it and hands over to the Nampoothiri woman for cooking, it should not be touched again by a non-Nampoothiri person. But then, the cooked rice also had certain impurity. Every time one touched the vessel which contains the cooked rice one had to wash the hand. If they gave a portion of the rice from the vessel to anyone outside the Jati, the remaining portion had automatically become impure and could not be used by Nampoothiris.[39]

Nampoothiris preserved the above rules of acharam from the nineteenth century even in the early decades of the twentieth century including the rules regarding the social obligation of other Jatis towards them. The practices based on the rules of social obligation of other Jatis provided the required material and ritualistic resources for a Nampoothiri household. Veluthedath Nairs (the washer caste) washed clothes in boiled water in which a very small amount of ash was dissolved to make the cloth pure. These cloths were necessary for Nampoothiris in occasions when they observed pollution like death, birth, and menstruation. In these occasions, after the purification ritual, they had to take a bath and wear the pure cloth supplied by the above lower-caste people. Usually if a non-Nampoothiri person had touched a cloth it would become polluted. But the cloth supplied by the Veluthedathu Nair would not become polluted even if other lower-caste people touched it before the use.[40]

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[39] For a description of the acharams of Nampoothiris connected to cooking and dining see P. Bhaskaranunni, *Keralam Irupatham Noottantinte Arambhathil* (Keralam in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Thrissur, Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2005), 172-73.

[40] Ibid, 129

This shows that, in the order of acharam, the objects' internal qualities were not a concern. Its position in the space and its association with other objects including human beings determined the 'temporary essence' of the object. The question what constituted an object was not enunciable in this order. Even the locus of the travel of an object was less important than its position at a particular time. Through acharam, Nampoothiris controlled the circulation and exchange of material objects and this helped them in exploiting the labor and material resources of other caste groups for their benefit.

As in the nineteenth century, the rules of purity and pollution controlled even the use of the language in the daily life in the early years of the twentieth century. Nampoothiris used a very different vocabulary from other castes to articulate objects and actions. A person carried the mark of his / her Jati in the language he/ she spoke. Kanippayyoor provided a table of words used by Nampoothiris along with its 'translation' in the language used by lower-caste people. For example, the lower-caste should add a prefix *pazham* (which comes from the word *pazhaya* which means old / rotten/ polluted etc.) to mention all of his /her possessions including body parts. He / she would say *pazha-manas* to mention about *manas* (mind), *pazham-kanji* for *kanji* (rice porridge) and so on.[41] On the other hand, the objects when possessed by Nampoothiris carried a prefix of *thiru* or *palli,* both of which denoted their pure, blessed or superior status. While the manas (mind) was pazha-manas in the case of lower-castes, it was *thiru-manas* in the case of Nampoothiris.

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[41] Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, *Ente Smaranakal* (My memoirs) (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Publishers, 1964), Vol. 1II, 252 - 57.

Through the ritualistic practice of language, acharam determined the qualities of an object according to its possessors. The moment it was transferred from a lower-caste person to Nampoothiris or vice versa, an object was transformed not only in name but in its quality as well. This shows that, in this period, within the Nampoothiri world (and the world they come in contact with), it was acharam that determined the very ontological status of objects. In other words, Nampoothiris understood the world through the performance of acharam and this performance constituted their knowledge of objects and actions.

Understanding acharam as an action leads us to an important conclusion regarding the relation between Nampoothiris and knowledge practices. The scholarship on caste and Brahmanical ideology in India, understood acharam as a practice based on the prescriptions of Vedas and other Sanskrit texts.[42] This interpretation was clearly a continuation of colonial understanding of written text as the only valid form of knowledge. The major difference of the above scholarship from the colonial version was that, now the scholars include oral traditions as well in the field of knowledge. In both cases, the Sanskritic textual tradition was understood as the base of the Brahmanical world. I argue that it was the practice of acharam not knowledge in Vedic texts that constituted the Nampoothiri understanding of the world. The discursive practices that Nampoothiris engaged in this period had no association with knowledge as it was conceptualized in colonial discourses. These practices were part of the practices of acharam and were not related to the production of knowledge.

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[42] See *footnote 3*.

In order to demonstrate this argument, we have to explore how Nampoothiris used Vedas in their daily life in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The learning of Veda recital was an in important part of the life of Nampoothiri men; women did not learn Vedas. In the pre-colonial period there were two major centers of Veda learning in Keralam; one in Thrissur which was sponsored by the Raja of Kochi and the one in Thirunavaya sponsored by the Samoothiri Raja of Kozhikkode. After the British took over of the administration of Malabar, the Thirunavaya centre declined because of the lack of sponsorship. The Thrissur center which was known as *Brahmaswam Matam*, continued to prosper under the Kochi Rajas and at the time of our interest it provided residential learning facilities for all Nampoothiris who wished to learn the Veda.

Nampoothiri boys began Veda learning after the sacred thread ceremony, which was a ritual that would start the process of transformation of a boy into a Nampoothiri. This was usually conducted between the ages of ten and twelve. The one who taught the Veda recital was *othikkan*. In the early twentieth century, to learn Vedic recital, Nampoothiri boys from Malabar, either joined the Brahmaswam Matham at Thrissur or they stayed at othikkans' house for the whole period of learning. Memorizing the verses in a totally unfamiliar language was not an easy task. The recital of these verses with the proper movement of head and hand added to the difficulty and many Nampoothiris remembered this period as the worst period in their life. As most of the boys struggled to learn the recital properly, the teachers used

severe punishment tactics such as slapping and even hitting the boys' heads on the wall. [43]

In most of the cases, the *othikkans* who taught the Vedas were illiterate and they themselves had no knowledge of the meaning of these verses. The most important part of learning was to memorize hundreds of verses and the corresponding body gestures which accompanied the recitation of these verses. The boys learned how to *perform* the recital not the *knowledge* that Vedas supposedly carried. For example, the prescriptions of Vedas on Brahmanical duties were never a subject matter of study in the above process of learning. Even though recital of some of these verses were part of the daily rituals in later life, the boys soon forgot a major part of what they learned during the study as it was never used in their daily life.

In a parallel history, by the end of the nineteenth century, Vedas attained a new status through colonial orientalist scholarship. This scholarship considered Vedas as the only authentic texts which provided the principles of the Brahmanical practices in India.[44] Emerging disciplines like history reinforced the status of Vedas as the source of traditional knowledge in India. There were two assumptions behind this conclusion. The first was that all the human practices could be divided into discursive and non-discursive practices; and the second was that discursive practices constituted

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[43] Mozhikunnam Brhamdathan Nampoothirippad remembered that his othikkan was very short-tempered and he once pushed Nampoothirippad down some steps and he fell down to the ground floor. Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad, *Khilafat Samaranakal* (Memories of Khilafat) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2006), 73.

[44] William Jones, the founder of the Asiatic Society, the German orientalist scholar Max Muller, Colonial officers like George Birdwood and E. B. Havel etc., were some of the pioneers of orientalist scholarship in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following the western conceptualization of Latin as the scholarly language, this scholarship put Sanskrit as the language of knowledge in India. For an analysis of the changing status of Sanskrit, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the world of Men* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

knowledge. In other words, for the colonialists, knowledge existed only in the form of language. In this conceptualization language, and knowledge too, was always a representation of outside reality.

In the period we are discussing, Nampoothiris' relation with language did not match with the above assumptions. Most Nampoothiri boys and girls were initiated in language learning at the age of four or five which was another ritual. Many of them learned how to write and read Malayalam and to do basic arithmetic. Teachers used *puranic* texts and prayers during this process. By this time, several publishers had started publishing printed texts of puranas and ithihasas and they sold these books through salesmen who traveled from house to house.[45] The reading of these books became another ritual of the daily life of Nampoothiris, especially of women in the early twentieth century. Again, most readers were unaware about the meaning of the verses and even when they understood the meaning, their focus was on the recital itself. The objective of the reading was to attain *punyam* / *sukritham* (blessings / welfare of the family) by the recital of the stories of gods. The girls had to discontinue their study once they attained puberty or even before that. The boys also had to stop the initial stage of learning once they became Nampoothiris though the sacred thread ceremony after which they would start learning Vedas either at the above mentioned

[45] In the early years of book industry in Malayalam, the most popular subject was upper-caste mythological stories based on Ramayana or Mahabharata. For a history of printing in Keralam see, K.M. Govi, *Adimudranam: Bharathathilum Malayalathilum* (The First Printing: In Bharatham and Malayalam) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 1998).

centers or under individual instructors. They never used their writing skills again in their life.[46]

Here the use of language was a performance, an embodied action similar to many other actions such as prostrating before the deity or offering flowers to the deities. Even the correct pronunciation was not a major concern and this would become a contentious subject later in the debate within the reform movement when meaning became an important issue. At this period the function of reading texts was purely ritualistic. In short, even within the colonial definitions of knowledge, the discursive practices of Nampoothiris in the early twentieth century did not produce knowledge: traditional or otherwise. Nampoothiris themselves did not consider their discursive activity a practice of knowledge. Rather these activities were part of ritual performances which helped maintaining the order of acharam.

The attempt of Nampoothiris to keep acharam as a performance is interesting especially in comparison with the other upper-caste group's reaction to the changing understanding of texts and traditional knowledge in the same period. It is important to note that, in the early twentieth century Malabar, most of the experts of traditional knowledge such as astrology or *vydyam* (medicinal practice) were from *Ampalavasi* (literally means that one who resides near temple) Jatis, non-Nampoothiri upper-castes who were not socially powerful as Nampoothiris or even Nairs.[47] These experts taught their disciples Sanskrit, astrology and medicine in a system known as *Gurukula*

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[46] V. T. Bhattathirippad, *Veetiyute Sampoorna Krithikal* (Complete Works of V. T.) (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1997), 159-68.

[47] For a detailed description of Ambalavasi life in Malabar in the first half of the twentieth century see K.V. Moosathu, *Kazhinja Kalangal* (The Bygone Days) (Thrissur: Vidyavijayam Printers, 1963).

Sampradayam. In this tradition, students resided at their Guru's house and learned language, astrology or medicine, all of which were interconnected. In this traditional system, a Guru transferred knowledge to disciples not through texts but through practices. For example, in the case of vydyam, there were standard Sanskrit texts that students had to learn. They used these texts mainly to memorize certain methods or some properties of medicinal plants and the human body. The major focus was on the practical activities like preparing medicine, determining the condition of the patient from bodily symptoms and applying the medicine in proper ways. Along with this practical work, the Guru would teach the corresponding verses in the text mostly for memorizing the method. By the end of the nineteenth century, as discussed before, texts in general and Sanskrit texts in particular attained a special status in relation to traditional knowledge. Unlike Nampoothiris, the non-Nampoothiri experts were not reluctant to utilize the new status of texts in their practice.

The story of the learning centre at Pattambi run by Punnassery Nampy in the early years of the twentieth century is a good example for how some communities incorporated colonial concepts into their traditional practices. Punnassery Nampy was an expert in Sanskrit language, astrology and medicine who learned his profession from various teachers in a traditional manner. Nampy was from an *Ampalavasi* caste, whose traditional occupation was to prepare the materials for daily worship in temples. In his memoir, one of Nampy's famous disciples K. V Moosathu described Nampy as

the first "modern traditional vydya, who had deep knowledge in traditional methods but who was eager to modernize the tradition."[48]

Nampy in his teaching underscored the importance of Sanskrit texts and the possible new interpretation of the verses in the texts of medicine according to new situations. Moosathu remembered that "unlike other scholars, Nampy began his teaching of vydyam from texts."[49] Nampy installed a printing press at his home and published numerous translations of Sanskrit texts to "propagate the valuable knowledge among common people."[50] The influence of the colonial concept, that texts in the form of printed books could carry knowledge and hence could be used for the transfer of knowledge, was evident in Nampy's reform attempts.

The example of P.S. Variyar shows another instance of appropriation of colonial knowledge into traditional practices. P. S. Variyar was an expert of *Ayurveda* which was traditional medicinal practice followed mainly by the upper-castes. Variyar developed a pedagogy for teaching ayurveda completely based on Sanskrit texts. In later years he established an institute modeled on colonial educational institutions where texts became the central source of teaching. In this institute, in the first two years students just learned Sanskrit and texts on ayurveda. Only after the second year were they allowed to practice vydyam.[51]

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[48] Ibid, 78.

[49] Ibid, 80.

[50] Ibid.

[51] K.N. Panikkar argued that the process of Sanskritization of indigenous medicinal practices was part of the elitist nationalist attempt of maintaining their hegemony during the freedom movement in India. See K. N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (London: Anthem Press, 1995), 153-58.

Nampoothiris, unlike the Ampalavasi castes, were not eager to engage either in the new colonial educational institutions or in the learning centers like those mentioned above, at this period. Most of the students in the above centers were from the Ampalavasi or Nair castes; a very few Nampoothiri students joined in these centers of learning. The community leaders in this period were skeptical about reforms based on colonial methodologies of production of knowledge. They justified this by juxtaposing knowledge opposite to acharam and by making acharam the defining activity of Jati.

Making acharam central to the definition of Jati in the early twentieth century was a reaction to the challenges Nampoothiris faced from both outside and inside the Jati. In the previous chapter we saw that Asaris, in reaction to colonial intervention, centre-staged asarippani as the organizing category of their Jati. It would be worthwhile to compare the Asari and Nampoothiri reactions in this period, to understand the similarities and differences in the performance of acharam and asarippani and their position in relation to the colonial production of knowledge.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, both the Asaris and the Nampoothiris of Malabar saw colonial practices as a threat to the customs and traditions of their respective Jatis. Both of them refused to be part of the hierarchical series constructed in the colonial production of knowledge. Nampoothiris, however, had the advantage of already being the dominant caste and being positioned at the top among natives in this series of knowledge.[52] They still believed that, it was a more strategic to protect the order of acharam than participating in the production of

[52] For the explanation of the concept of hierarchical series of knowledge see Introduction.

knowledge, in order to maintain their dominance in the society. This was because acharam was not just an internal matter of Nampoothiris, but a process of bringing other Jatis into the order as well. Asarippani, on the other hand, as a trade and as a discursive category acted strictly within the Jati Asari. It was the bounded nature of asarippani within desham and Jati that Asaris underscored in their attempt to avoid colonial intrusions into their practice. Unlike asarippani, acharam externally determined the principles of hierarchy of the Jatis, and hence, it was active not only within the Jati but also in the social spaces outside the Jati. Acharam worked as an external force on the other Jatis especially in the moments of inter-Jati communications.

Each Jati had special obligations to a specific Nampoothiri families in their desham. The men and women from other castes conducted a number of physical jobs for Nampoothiri illam in satisfying all the material needs of the household. They served Nampoothiris in different capacities on the occasions of birth, death, birthdays, puberty, monthly menstruation, auspicious days, and so on. Veluthedathu Nairs provided the pure cloths for all these occasions. Vilakathila Nair did the job of the hair dresser. Asaris did the maintenance of the houses. People from the Cheruma / Pulaya and Nair caste did all the agriculture work in the field and *karyasthans* (Managers) from the Nayar caste supervised the agriculture production. The people from the lower-castes brought all agriculture products to the house of the Nampoothiri Janmi. Paddy was de-husked and made rice by Nayar women. The men and women

from the *Ampalavasi* castes (temple servant castes) prepared materials for rituals.[53] Nampoothiris appropriated these obligations, which were economic and ritualistic, through acharam. Hence, when they projected acharam as the central factor of their Jati practice, they were attempting to maintain the hierarchical caste order which provided them the economic and social resource for domination.

This re-definition of acharam produced corresponding effects on Nampoothiri practices of gender; acharam became a central category in this process of gender differentiation. Even in the nineteenth century acharam was part of the patriarchal practices of Nampoothiris. These patriarchal customs institutionalized gender difference through the practice of acharam. For example in the seventh month of pregnancy, Nampoothiri couples performed a particular ritual called *pumsavanam*, so that the baby would be a boy. If it was a girl they repeated this ritual until a boy was born. There were elaborate rituals after the birth of a baby boy, especially for the first boy who later becomes the Moos (the head of the family). Most of these rituals could not be performed for a girl child. Boys wore golden ornaments but girls were allowed only copper or bronze.

Just before puberty, girls started wearing a mundu (a white plain cloth) in a special way as the elders wear. From then onwards her life was strictly dedicated to the ritualistic performance and household labor. She had to learn *nedikkal* (the ritualistic offerings to gods, done by women inside the house on a daily basis) and she was introduced to cooking at a very early age.

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[53] P. Bhaskaranunni, *Keralam Irupatham Noottantinte Arambhathil* (Keralam in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Thrissur, Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2005), 178.

For a Nampoothiri girl and woman the day started before sunrise. She had to take a bath before the sunrise, which itself was an elaborate ritual, and do prayers and pujas for *netumangalyam* (long married life) which would take more than two hours. After that, she had to cook food with other women in the house which should be ready by ten in the morning. She could eat only after the men and children finish their meals. Between this meal and the preparation for the evening puja, they read Bhagavatha or some other puranic texts or prepared materials for the evening puja. By around five, she would begin the evening prayers and immediately after that the preparation of evening food. Men usually ate about eight in the evening followed by the women. After the meal she had to clean the kitchen, and the place where the deity was placed, where the Nair servants were not allowed to enter. Before sleeping she had to recite some prayers for keeping evils and bad dreams away.

In Nampoothiri illam, women lived in the inner part of the house and hence they were known as *antharjanm* which literally means that a person of inside or an inner person. Acharam did not allow them to appear before any male person other than their father, husband or son.[54] When they went out of the house they had to wear purdah (a white plain cloth which covers from neck to toe) and also carry a cadjan umbrella to cover the face. Kanippayyoor has observed that these rituals not only discriminated against women, but created a sense of inferiority from the time of childhood so that it was naturalized.[55]

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[54] Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, *Ente Smaranakal* (My memoirs) (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Publishers, 1964), Vol. 1I, 134 - 37.

[55] Ibid., 91.

Scholars have already shown the nature of discrimination and exploitation of the women in a Nampoothiri illam. Our purpose is not to re-establish that the Nampoothiri Jati in the early twentieth century practiced patriarchy. The focus here is on the increased importance of acharam in Nampoothiri self-understanding of gender differentiation in the early twentieth century. If in the nineteenth century, customs and rituals were a 'natural' part of the Nampoothiri life world, by the beginning of the new century, the community elders believed that in order to protect acharam, they would have to forcefully impose acharam on every individual of the community. They started over-emphasizing the practices of control through traditional methods like s*marthavicharam* and *bharshtu* (ritualistic exclusion from the Jati).

Smarthavicharam was a complex ritual of legal intervention to investigate the allegation of sexual infidelity among Nampoothiri women. If there was a 'convincing' case, the elder of the desham would decide to hold a smarthavicharam. The Raja would appoint a Smarthan who was the inquisitor and the judge of the whole process. They kept the accused woman in a secluded room outside the main structure of the illam, where she could contact only a servant woman. From then onwards she was addressed as *Sathanam* (a thing in a derogatory sense). After gathering evidence from the accused and from servants, if Smarthan confirmed that the woman had sinned, he would declare Brashtu for the accused along with the man or men she named as her partners in the sin.[56]

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[56] For a detailed description of Smarthavicharam, see A. M. N. Chakyar, *Avasanathe Smarthavicharam* (The Last Smarthavicharam), trans. K.K. Sankaran Nampoothiri (Thiruvananthapuram: Cultural Publication Division, Kerala Government, 2001).

In the nineteenth century, Nampoothiris invoked this form of punishment in exceptional situations. In the first decades of twentieth century, however, as community leaders resumed stringent policing of sexuality based on acharam, they started using smarthavicharam on a regular basis. According to Mozhikunnam Brahmadathan Nampoothiri, more number of smarthavicharam and bhrashtu happened in the first two decades of the twentieth century than might have happened in the whole nineteenth century.[57]

In the process of gender differentiation based on acharam, notions of masculinity and femininity had very little relevance. Within the household, Moos (the eldest son) was the controlling authority who was in charge of the economical and ritual activities. As mentioned earlier, only the eldest son was allowed to marry within the Jati. He was called Moos by other Nampoothiris. Ideally he took over the charge of the family after his father and would become the head of the family. So his authority was based on his gender and age. But this authority did not give him any additional manliness or reversely masculinity was not a necessary quality of an efficient Moos. For example, Nampoothiris did not consider an individually weak Moos less manly or more womanly. However, if he was not following the acharams correctly they would consider him a lesser Nampoothiri. This was true not only in the case of Moos, but for all the male members of the community.

K.P.K. Nampoothiri's story is revealing in this sense. He was one of the few persons from the community who gained higher education in the second decade of the

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[57] Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad, *Khilafat Samaranakal* (Memories of Khilafat) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2006), 73.

twentieth century. When he joined the Madras University, it was a totally new world for him. The difference he felt was not just about city life, the weather or the food. Whenever he began a conversation with other students or when he was just walking towards them, he saw a veiled laugh in their face. Later it was his friend, Bhaskaran Nair who was one year senior to him who saved him from this agony. He told Nampoothiri that his classmates were thinking that he did not have enough manliness in his manners. He was confused what this manliness meant. Nobody in the illam had told him this before. There the focus was on whether one was doing the ritual performances properly or not. He started physical exercises with Bhaskaran Nair who was also a football player. He changed his 'manners' in a year and did not face any further difficulties in this regard. The most interesting part of the story is that, when he came back to illam, he was afraid or shy about his new manners. But nobody at the illam even noticed this; the elders in the house were more worried about the degree of pollution he carried because of his non-Nampoothiri life during his study at Madras.[58]

Bodily behavior was not a measure to evaluate the manliness of a Nampoothiri man. N.P. Nampoothiri wrote in 1919 that "in public spaces, Nampoothiri men invite attention for their dress and appearance. Most of the people consider their appearance comic or some times pathetic. They, however, never care about their appearance or what others say about that. In a public space, they will be focusing more on keeping the prescribed distance from people from other lower-caste communities."[59] N.P. Nampoothiri justified this Nampoothiri behavior because he thought that "the quality

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[58] K.P.K. Nampoothiri, *Madrasile Jeevitham* (Life in Madras), (Calicut: Mathrubhumi Publishers, 1972).

[59] N.P. Nampoothiri, 'Nampoothiri Acharangalute Innathe Avastha' (The Present Condition of Nampoothiri Acharams), *Bhasha Poshini*, 9, 8 (September 1919): 34.

of a Brahman is not in his appearance but in properness of his action in protecting *Brahmanyam* (Brahman-ness)."[60]

Once the reform movement in the 1920s and 30s started re-ordering the community based on self-knowledge, the process of gender identification also transformed accordingly. The performance of gendered roles became directly linked to education and self-knowledge. J. Devika argued that in the reform period "[s]elf knowledge was to specify the ground of the reformist activity, identify its key players, target and goals."[61] In the pre-reform period, however, it was more important to perform gendered rituals in order to be a Nampoothiri man or woman. In this performance, the idea of masculinity or femininity was not a factor because there was no concept of inherent qualities of being a man or a woman. The body, especially the woman's body, was marked at different occasions like birth, puberty, pregnancy etc., but was not at the centre of the gender differentiation process. As Devika explained "even bedecking was more a ritual process."[62]

In the early twentieth century, asarippani and acharam constituted Asari and Nampoothiri Jati rules respectively through embodied action. While Nampoothiris practiced acharam in order to extend their control over other Jatis, Asaris used asarippani as a technique to seclude themselves inside their Jati and to prevent intrusion from colonial practices. Both Nampoothiris and Asaris juxtaposed the corresponding central organizing categories of Jati (that is acharam and asarippani)

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[60] Ibid.

[61] J. Devika, *En-gendering Individual: The Language of Reforming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 131.

[62] Ibid., 122.

against the colonial category of knowledge. By the 1920s, equipped with the colonial concepts of knowledge, the young generation of Nampoothiris began challenging the order of acharam from within. It became impossible for the conservative section of the community leadership to protect acharam from various internal and external social forces. The next chapter analyzes this process of transformation or translation of the order of acharam into an order of knowledge, the process which is generally understood in the scholarship as the Nampoothiri reform movement.

Chapter 3
Nampoothiris and the Order of Knowledge

By the 1920s the Nampoothiri world of acharam as described in the previous chapter faced serious challenges from both the inside and the outside. The order based on acharam became incapable of incorporating new and emerging social relations and concepts based on colonial forms of knowledge. This resulted in organized attempts in the leadership of the Yoga Kshema Sabha (YKS) to reform and to reconstitute the community based on new principles. Analyzing the reform literature and scholarly debate on the Nampoothiri reform movement of the 1920s and 30s, this chapter argues that Nampoothiris entered into the order of knowledge through the reform movement which incorporated prominent elements of acharam. The chapter details the process of confrontation and mutual incorporation of these two orders and explains the elements of Nampoothiri life in the order of knowledge.

The concept of the order of knowledge explains less an ordered structure than the process where objects, human beings and their actions were evaluated, indexed, transformed or excluded with reference to their relation to knowledge. Knowledge attained such an importance in the Nampoothiri life that even the conservatives in the community began justifying the importance of acharam based on its relation to knowledge. The order of knowledge also denotes a condition of domination in which various social forces created hierarchical series by assigning indices to objects and actions with reference to knowledge. The order of knowledge incorporated acharam into its fold by reinterpreting the ritualistic practices of Nampoothiris. Contemporary

debates within the reform writers actively produced what they considered a scientific interpretation of acharam. This interpretation made some of the old practices superstition or inhuman. The acharams in the daily life of Nampoothiris did not transform radically in this period, but acharam was no longer the reference point for these actions.

Reformers attempted to reorganize the Jati (caste), where acharam was the central organizing force, into *samudayam* (community) in which knowledge was the pivotal point around which new social relations were imagined. These attempts introduced a process of engendering individuals in which each man and woman required knowledge to be a member of the reformed community.[1] This knowledge included self-knowledge, a new bio-logic of gender, history (of the community, religion and nation) and a new cosmology based on scientific explanation.

This new knowledge introduced a new process of gender differentiation based on the biology of the body, which may be called bio-logic. In this bio-logic, the earlier entwinement of gender and caste was untwined and gender became a part of nature and caste a part of culture. Concept of purity and impurity continued to inform the process of understanding the nature of objects in circulation, but many objects that were considered impure earlier now became pure. This chapter traces the changing relation of Nampoothiris to the social world as they entered into the order of knowledge.

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[1] For an analysis of the issues of gender and subject formation in the context of upper-caste reform in Keralam, see J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007).

By the second decade of the twentieth century, new social forces especially the reform movements among other lower-castes ignited panic, discontent and, moreover, a desire for change among the young members of the Nampoothiri community. The active involvement of young members in the YKS turned the organization in new directions. The reformists and the conservatives attempted to influence the community through public meetings, journal articles and face to face conversation. In 1916 the YKS initiated the publishing of a daily *Yogakshemam*. Initially, *Yogakshemam* was under the control of the conservatives and they used this as a platform to raise their criticism against the reformists. The influence of the reformists within the organization, however, gradually increased in the period between 1915 and 1920.

In the eighth annual conference of the YKS held at Vellinezhi in the April of 1916, the major debate was around English education. In the conference, one of the young members introduced a resolution which strongly called for members to join educational institutions and learn English, which was "the language of new civilization, knowledge and progress."[2] The conservatives argued that "English is a language of people who indulge in material pleasures and of those who totally disregard the spiritual aspects of human life."[3] The conference passed the resolution only with a thin majority, but the debate gave a clear sign that the subject of knowledge and education would be the major field of contestation in the future activities of the YKS. Even though the conference disapproved their position, the

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[2] K. P. Nampoothiri, "The Report of the Annual Conference," *Mangalodayam*, 22, 11 (November 1916): 19-22.

[3] Ibid, 20.

conservatives continued their propaganda against English education among the community members. They formed another group "Nivarini" (the remedy) to create awareness about the importance of acharams for the well being of the community. They organized meetings of the community members and published some articles in journals. These efforts did not last long and within two years the group became defunct.[4]

By this period, the young generation who entered into colonial educational institutions started interacting with the colonial idea of knowledge. This interaction created a new imagination of the status of the Nampoothiri community in relation to knowledge. This imagination depicted the community as one engulfed by the darkness of ignorance and the community members as individuals facing severe internal crisis. The young leaders of the reform movement considered education as the first and the most important step in overcoming this crisis.

The entry of Nampoothiris into education was a slow, gradual and contested process. In the beginning, even those who argued for English education did not consider it proper for a Nampoothiri boy or girl to sit along with the students from other Jatis. In other words, the reformists at this period did not outright reject the relevance of the practices of acharam. Their attempt was to make acharam and knowledge commensurable and co-inhabitable. Kuroor Unni Nampoothirippad, who was one of the most respected leaders of the reformists group, reminded young and

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[4] For the explanations of the conservative position and for a description of the group Nivarini, see, E.T. Divakaran Moos, "Achara Vicharam." *Malayala Manorama*, June 19, 1917.

enthusiastic members that while criticizing the conservative position they should not disrespect elders or the acharams in general. In 1916, he wrote:

> Our criticism is against certain acharams, which are standing in the way of the progress of the community, especially those which are preventing Nampoothiris from attaining modern education. This should not lead us to abandon all other acharams without which we will not be Nampoothiris.[5]

Nampoothirippad explained that modern education in Britain had not prevented the British from following Christianity. Rather, modern knowledge helped them in propagating their religion. Similarly, educated young Nampoothiris would provide the community a better image and status in front of outsiders.[6]

The major question for the reformist in this period was how to implement their plan for education without completely abandoning acharams, especially that of untouchability. In public schools, Nampoothiri boys would have to sit with other lower-caste people which would make them polluted. If they were polluted especially by certain lower-caste students, they would have to undergo different rituals which may have extended for more than a day. Even though a few individuals from the reformists section argued that the community should privilege education even at the cost of acharam, for the majority of reformists in this period that was not an acceptable solution.

This debate brought out the idea of Nampoothiri *Vidyalayam* (special school for Nampoothiris) where Nampoothiris could attain modern education and at the same time keep their acharams, especially the acharam of untouchability, intact. The first

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[5] Kuroor Unni Nampoothirippad, "Nampoothiri Yuvajanangalude Katama (The Duty of Nampoothiri Youth)," *Mangalodayam*, 22, 9 (September 1916): 30-34.

[6] Ibid.

Nampoothiri Vidyalayam was established in 1918 in Edakkuni, which was later moved to Thrissur, under the management of the Raja of Kochi. Within two years, the community established four more Vidyalayams in various places in Kochi Rajyam (nation) with the help of the Raja.[7]

In Nampoothiri Vidyalayams, all the teachers were from the upper-caste but were not necessarily Nampoothiris. Hence, coming back from the school, students had to bathe before entering their home or hostel where they resided. The subjects taught in these schools included Malayalam, Sanskrit, History, Science and Mathematics. The management provided residential facilities for students who came from distant places. Even though the Raja was the patron of these schools the Nampoothiris in the locality had to raise funds for the daily expenses of the schools and hostels.

From the beginning, the Nampoothiri Vidyalayams faced a number of difficulties including severe financial problems and low attendance. At this period the rich among the community did not feel any need to financially support these schools. Most of the community members were also not eager to send their children to any kind of school.[8] Still, the few who studied in these schools later became the leaders of the YKS. The schools continued to exist at least in a nominal way, until they were taken over by the government in the 1950s or were closed in the same period.

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[7] Sri Rama Varma, The Raja of Kochi(1901 – 17) was considered a progressive person who implemented a number of administrative and legal reforms during his rule. He supported the idea of special educational institutions for Nampoothiris, suggested by the leaders of the YKS. The financial help he offered, however, was nominal and the rich among Nampoothiris were not interested in education at this period. Sri, Kurur Raman Nampoothiri in his presidential address in the 6th annual conference of the YKS explained the various reasons for the failure of Nampoothiri Vidyalayams. See, "The Presidential Address," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 2, 7 (March 1917): 3-9.

[8] Ibid.

The activities of the reformists made knowledge a debatable category within the community. Acharam still dominated the organization of Nampoothiri daily life, but at least one section of the community established communication and connection with the order of knowledge. The reformist criticism shook the unquestionable status of acharam and created a possibility that certain acharams could be changed or even excluded from daily life. The passing of a resolution by the YKS in 1917 condemning the *Vadhyar* of Thrissur Brahmaswam Matham was such an instance where acharam was questioned by community members.

Vadhyar was the manager of the matham and a figure of authority regarding acharam as well. His words were final in cases of disputes and confusion regarding ritualistic practices. Technically the Thrissur Yogam, which was a committee of important Nampoothiri families in the locality, owned the matham, but for all practical purposes Vadhuyar was the actual authority. In 1916 the residents of the matham complained to the Yogam and Raja of Kochi that the current Vadhyar was very authoritarian and corrupt. The Yogam conducted an inquiry and found that the allegations were correct and eventually Vadhyar resigned from the position.

In 1917, Vadhyar unilaterally took over the administration of matham and re-established his position. Kuroor Unni Nampoothirippad took the initiative of the campaign against the Vadhyar and presented the case in front of the Raja of Kochi. The Raja did not take any steps against the Vadhyar as he considered it was the responsibility of the Thrissur Yogam to act on the matter. The annual conference of the YKS in 1917 condemned the Vadhyar and appealed to the Thrissur Yogam to take immediate action against him. The Yogam, pointing out the unanimous resolution in

the YKS conference, removed Vadhyar from the position and took over the administration of the matham. M. R. Bhattathirippad remembered this as the first instance where the community members successfully challenged one of the sacred authorities of acharam, whose position was so far unquestionable. Bhattathirippad concluded that, this was made possible mainly because of the awareness of the educated young Nampoothiris "who, depended on their own knowledge and wisdom instead of following the elders without any question or doubt."[9] The campaigns of the reformists and the debates within the community in the years between 1915 and 1920 brought the order acharam and the order of knowledge in contesting positions in different arenas of daily life of the community.

In 1920, in a meeting conducted at Thripoonithara, the young members of the community formed an association, the Nampoothiri Yuvajana Sangham (The Nampoothiri youth wing, NYS). The stated objective of the NYS was to propagate the ideals of the Yoga Kshema Sabha and create awareness among members regarding the importance of education. The clear reason for forming such an organization was to challenge the conservative leaders of the YKS partially from within and using an independent platform as well.[10] The NYS took initiative to publish a new journal *Unni Nampoothiri* (the young Nampoothiri), which became an important medium in the reformists' struggle against the conservatives. The formation of the NYS

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[9] M.R. Bhattathirippad, Kal Noottandinullil (In a Quarter Century),", *Mathrubhumi Special issue*, (1936): 51.

[10] For the details of the objective of the NYS see K. Krishnan Nampoothiri, "Nampoothiri Yuvajan Sanghathinte Prvarthanodyesangal (The Objectives of the Nampoothiri Youth Wing)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 10, 11 (November 1924): 26-31.

inaugurated a new face of reform where the inclination towards knowledge became clearer and stronger.

By the third decade of the century, the discourse of knowledge / ignorance significantly influenced the process of imagining the community. The NYS gradually moved into a more radical position regarding the question of education and acharam. They now strongly urged community members to join public schools even though that may be a violation of acharam. They described the community as one immersed in darkness and pointed out that only education could bring light into the community. The reform leaders urged the members of the community to be equipped for new occupations, new family practices and in general for a new way of life. They emphasized that education was the first and foremost step for the beginning of this new life. This was the second stage where the order of acharam began losing its tight control over members and the order of knowledge appeared in the horizon of the self-imagination of the community.

The debate around the Nampoothiri Family Regulation Committee formed by the Kochi government demonstrated the increasing influence of knowledge over acharam. In 1923, the Kochi government formed a committee to study the possibility of introducing new family laws for Nampoothiris. During this period all the three legislative assemblies in the Malayalam speaking region were considering Nampoothiri family regulation bills for legalization. The committee report clearly suggested that the community could progress only based on knowledge. The report pointed out that "the true and permanent well being of the community does not depend upon the promulgation of royal legislation." According to the members of the

community, "it is education and knowledge of the individual that creates the strong base of any community." The report concluded that "the community will be truly blessed only when such knowledgeable and open minded individuals become numerous."[11]

The report showed that knowledge had become the measure of evaluating the existing condition and imagined future of the community. The community began evaluating each action and value based on their respective relation and position in the future order of knowledge. At the same time, in particular instances, there was no consensus even among the reformists regarding what they understood as knowledge; it had multiple connotations and different hierarchical levels.

At the basic level knowledge meant the capacity to write and read Malayalam. This was the necessary condition for any individual to be a member of the (imagined) reformed community.[12] In other words, the formation of this new community was dependent on the degree of the dissemination of literacy among Nampoothiris. Krishan Bhattathirippad wrote in 1925:

> In those days, the majority of Nampoothiris considered only the members of their family and their relatives as 'our people'. Even after the formation of the Yoga Kshema Sabha, only the active leaders believed that all Nampoothiris are 'our people'. Nampoothiris became familiar with the idea of *samudayam* (community) and the idea that all Nampoothiris are 'our people', only after they

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[11] *The Nampoothiri Family Regulation Committee Report and Draft Regulation* (Thrissur: Mangalodayam, 1925), 92-94

[12] The discussion of community as an imagined group by Benedict Anderson inaugurated a wide range of debates around different forms of community formation. The discussion here follows Anderson's idea of community as a group of individuals connected only as readers of the same text. See, Benedict Anderson, *The Imagined Communities* (London: Verso 2006). For a criticism of Anderson, see, Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

started reading about the common problems of Nampoothiris in *Yogakshemam, Magalodayam and Unni Nampoothiri*.[13]

Kanippayyoor mentioned that, while the famous *smarthavicharam* of Kuriyedathu Thathri in 1903 invoked serious discussion among other upper-caste communities, Nampoothiris did not take it as an issue that would affect them in any manner.[14] According to Kanippayyor, this was because they did not read any newspapers or magazines and hence they were not aware of these issues.[15] Kanippayyoor's point was that Nampoothiris were not a samudayam at that point because they were not a reading community. It was the knowledge of reading /writing that predicated the formation of samudayam.

Knowledge at the next level was related to occupation. The colonial governing practices mapped the hierarchy of occupation in the colonial bureaucracy to a hierarchy of knowledge; each occupation required a certain degree of knowledge attained through institutional learning. The reform discourse of Nampoothiris, in interaction with this colonial idea, produced a certain kind of relation between knowledge and occupation; or

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[13] Krishnan Bhattathirippad, "Nampoothiri Samudayam" (Nampoothiri Community), *Unni Nampoothiri*, 10, 5 (May 1925): 21- 23.

[14] Kuriyedathu Thathri was accused infidelity and the Kochi Raja ordered a smarthavicharam in 1903. During the inquisition, Thathri began giving evidences regarding the individuals who had sexual intercourse with her. As the inquisition progressed she revealed names of many prominent and powerful individuals in the society and she gave evidences about 64 men which included Nampoothiris, Nairs and other upper-caste men and most importantly her own father. It was said that the Raja ordered to stop the inquiry when she was about to reveal evidence against the brother of the Raja. Thathri and all the 64 men were expelled from their respective Jatis. The incident has become plot for several stories novels and a movie. For a novel based on the incident, see Madampu Kunjikuttan, *Bhrashtu* (The Expulsion) (Kottayam: SPSS, 1991).

[15] Kanippayyor, *Ente Smaranakal* (Kunnamkulam: Panchangam Publishers, 1964), Vol. II, 56.

more precisely, the idea that occupations are someway related to knowledge itself emerged in this interaction.[16]

Until the third decade of the twentieth century, the majority of Nampoothiris engaged in only two 'occupations'. Usually in each family one (male) person engaged in the management of the landed properties and issues related to rent and other returns. If the family was poor, men worked as priests in temples. In both cases, authority or efficiency in these jobs was not in anyway related to the possession of institutional knowledge. By the 1920s Nampoothiris started recognizing that the other upper-caste people, especially Nairs, who started entering into the new occupations colonialism produced, had managed to improve their status individually and as a community. In a meeting of Janmis (landlords), in 1926, M.V. Nampoothiri warned the Nampoothiri Janmis that they have to seriously asses the status of Nampoothiris in society. Explaining the history of the Janmi Kutiyan Bill in the Madras and Kochi assemblies he argued that "it was not just a defeat of our demands. It was defeat of ignorance in the hand of knowledge." The members of those castes "which promoted English education from the very early days have now reached at critical decision making posts in administration and have gained respect among the common people." He reminded that the passing of the bill showed how other communities moved upwards in their status.[17] On the one hand, the community recognized that for the progress and well being of the community in the

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[16] The Orientalists who wrote about the caste system in India, assigned an occupation for Brahmins: that of priests. In Keralam, only the poor among the Nampoothiris engaged in the 'occupation' of priests. And it is clear that different kinds of caste based occupations carried different levels of power and authority, depending on the position those castes in the hierarchy. The hierarchical levels of the new occupations produced by colonialism were directly linked to different levels of knowledge and educational qualification.

[17] M.V. Nampoothiri, "Janmithavum Vidyabhyasavum," *Yogkshemam*, March 23, 1926, 3.

future, it was necessary to join in the new occupations in colonial institutions. On the other hand, as M.V. Nampoothiri argued above, it was clear that even to protect the existing occupation the presence of knowledgeable individuals was a necessary factor. It was evident that Janmitham (landlordism) alone could not protect the economic or social status of the community any longer. This was the background in which the discussion about entering into new occupations began within the community. This debate attempted to historicize the relation between occupation and knowledge.

The conservative section of the community attempted to create a historical relation between the traditional occupation of Nampoothiris and knowledge. Vadakkumkoor Rajaraja Varma rejected the argument that the occupations in which Nampoothiris were involved had no relation to any kind of knowledge.[18] He argued that the only occupation Nampoothiris (he was talking only about Nampoothiri men) engaged was related to learning or teaching of Vedas which was the ultimate form of knowledge. All the Nampoothiris should learn Veda, teach Veda and practice the acharams according to the Vedas. The present crisis, according to Raja, was that nobody actually learned Veda even though everybody could recite it from memory. Varma claimed that Veda teaching was the traditional occupation of Nampoothiris and it was very much connected to knowledge.

The young leaders of the reform movement who argued for English education challenged the above argument and observed that Nampoothiris were not engaged in any occupation. K. M. Anujan wrote that "the only occupations Nampoothiris engaged were

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[18] V. Raja Raja Varma, "Nampoothirimarum Vedabhyasavum (The Nampoothiris and Veda Learning)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 7, 11(November 1922): 7.

eating and procreation." According to him, the crisis the Nampoothiri community faced was "a welcome sign, so that the community will try to over come the crisis by marching towards the daylight of knowledge at least because of the selfish need for survival."[19] It was through the connection between occupation and knowledge or ignorance that these authors explained the conditions of the community in the present and in the future.

Knowledge at its highest level was expert knowledge. There was no consensus on what exactly expert knowledge was. One section argued that the practice of astrology, Vydya (medicine), and debates of grammar and logic based on Sanskrit texts were forms of expert knowledge similar to the modern disciplines in science. The related claim was that the Nampoothiris as a community had been the possessors of this knowledge from time immemorial. They agreed that science was a form of expert knowledge, but as a morally corrupt enterprise it was totally unsuitable to Indian culture.

T. N. Thirumulppad argued that scientists are experts in finding solutions to the material world, but Vedas provide knowledge for success in the material and spiritual life not only in this world but also in other worlds. According to him, Western societies were clear examples of immoral civilization where the desire for material gain has overpowered the respect for human values. Thirumulppad argued that it would be disastrous for the community to renounce the great tradition of Sanskrit knowledge and to embrace an alien culture in the name of science.[20]

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[19] K.M. Anujan, *Ormakalilute Oru Yathra* (A Journey through Memories), (Kozhikkode: Jnyanavardhini, 1953), 58.

[20] T.N. Thirumulppad, "Mathangalum Vijnyanavum (Religions and Knowledge)," *Mathrubhumi*, September 23, 1929, 4.

Another section approved the importance of science but considered traditional knowledge important as well. They argued that science was the basis of expert knowledge but traditional Sanskrit knowledge also was scientific. Numerous articles in *Mangalodayam* and *Unni Nampoothiri*, raised this claim explaining various developments in the emerging disciplines such as physics, economics and history, according to the principles of Hindu *sastras* (sciences). M.R.K.C.'s article on wireless technology concluded as follows:

> We, Hindus, have a lot to learn from this technology of the Westerners. It is through the medium called ether that we bring gods to earth or send our request to them. Since we have separate manthras (verses) for each God, each of them must be receiving without failure, the 'telephonies' sent to them by the Hindus. This is the same principle based on which the Vedanthies (the experts of Vedas) form the concept of Nada Brahma (the universe of sound) and the Yoga experts conduct yoga practice controlling the five senses.[21]

M.R.K.C's comparison underscored two important points. According to the author, the basic principles of Hindu Knowledge and modern science were the same and the new technologies were just an application of these principles in new ways. The second point was that the Hindus were equal, if not superior, to the Westerners in expert knowledge. The only difference was on emphasis: the Hindus focused on using expert knowledge in the field of spirituality and the Westerners used it for material success. M.R.K.C believed that the development in science was not antagonistic to the Hindu *sastras*; rather scientific principles proved the facticity of traditional knowledge. Hence, according to him, Nampoothiris should learn science and use it to revive the traditional knowledge to its earlier superior status.

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[21] M.R.K.C, "Wireless Technology." *Unni Nampoothiri*, 11, 10 (October 1924): 134.

A third section believed that traditional practices were superstitions and only scientific practices could produce knowledge. They demanded total abandonment of acharam and imagined a new daily life based on scientific principles. P. K. Raman Nampoothiri described contemporary Nampoothiri life "unhealthy, immoral and uncivilized." He ridiculed the claim that acharam was scientific or rational. "If Nampoothiris take bath twice a day, it is not because of concerns for hygiene, but just the fear of being out-casted otherwise." According to him, the Vedas were suitable as guiding principles at a certain point in human history, but in the contemporary world only science could provide these guidelines.[22]

Through the discourses on knowledge and ignorance, Nampoothiri community entered into the order of knowledge, which became discernible as a network that connects community members, as a force that produces new hierarchical stratifications and as an explanatory system which gave new meanings to the elements of the everyday practices of the community. The community was imagined as network of 'knowledgeable' individuals in which the status of the individual was related to his knowledge. Acharam was still a central part of the daily life, but knowledge mediated the meaning and methods of understanding acharam. In other words, the community recognized that even to protect their acharam, knowledge attained through modern education was necessary and important.

K. N., one of the important leaders of the YKS, argued that between the two objectives of the YKS, which are promoting education and the formalization of acharam,

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[22] P. K. Raman Nampoothiri, "Pazhamakkarum Sastravum (The Old and the Science)," *Vidya Vinodini*, 3, 2 (March 1924): 23.

education was a fundamental requirement and the latter would follow naturally if the community achieved the former. He introduced plans of formalizing acharam through writing a dictionary and coding the rituals in a uniform manner. He reminded that in order to achieve this, the community needed members who were educated and who were *aware* of the Nampoothiri acharams.[23] K.N. considered the reform of acharam a derivative of the education of members of the community.

K. N. further observed that even the issue of Kutumba regulation (family regulation) depended on the issue of education. As mentioned earlier, the younger brothers in a family were not allowed to marry within the community. The leaders of NYS considered this as one of the major moral and cultural issues that made the Nampoothiri a comical figure in front of other communities. They strongly demanded that all Nampoothiri men should marry within the community. K. N. argued that this could be achieved only if each individual has their own occupation and income. For obtaining the newly emerged occupations, an educational qualification was necessary. Hence, he concluded, the process of reforming acharam was completely dependent on the issue of education.[24]

P. K. Bhattathiri concocted another relation between education and the progress of the community. If K. N considered Sanskrit education as a thing in the past and

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[23] The shift from the performance of acharam to the awareness of acharam shows a shift towards the order of knowledge. This was also a move where meaning became an important measure in legitimizing or delegitimizing an action. K. N., "Nampoothirimarute Naveena Vidybhyasa Reethi (The Method of Modern Education of Nampoothiris)," *Unni Nampoothiri,* 9, 12 (December 1922): 194-204.

[24] Ibid.

It should be noted that the initial agenda of the YKS was to protect Janmitham (Landlordism) and Nampoothiri domination in the society. Here K.N. is not completely opposed to these agendas but in the changing world he saw that, in order to achieve these objectives, education should be put as the first and primary agenda of the organization.

unsuitable for the present times, Bhattathiri argued that both Sanskrit and English education are necessary for the welfare of the community. He advised the young generation not to neglect the acharams while participating in colonial educational institutions. If they completely exclude acharams from their daily life, Nampoothiris would no longer be Nampoothiris. At the same time, Bhattathiri reminded that, education should be considered "not as a practice opposed to acharams but as a way to reform and preserve acharams."[25]

The speech by A.K.T.K.M. Valiya Narayanan Nampoothirippad at the 15th annual conference of the YKS in 1925 at Vykom, reflected the anxieties of the community regarding the proper method of education at that period. He criticized the old generation for their attitude of neglect in the matter of education. According to him, "those who are interested in protecting acharam should look into the present status of acharam among other communities." He observed that "the educated public thinks that acharam is a superstition because in the present situation it has become a comical act losing all its intended meaning, deviating from the original objectives." He reminded that it was the duty of Nampoothiris to prove that acharam was a scientific practice which allows an individual to lead a simple, nature friendly and hygienic life. In order to prove this, all individuals of the community should be empowered with scientific knowledge through education. An educated individual would continue to perform acharam but in a scientific manner. [26]

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[25] P. K. Bhattahiri, "Nampoothirimarute Pouranikavum Naveenavumaya Vidyabhyasam (The Old and New Educational System of Nampoothiris)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 9, 3 (March 1923): 310-314.

[26] A.K.T.K.M. Valiya Narayanan Nampoothirippad, "The Presidential Address," *Unni Nampoothiri,* 11, 12 (December 1925): 445-454.

Rajaraja Varma's article is an example of another position different from both of the above arguments, but again one which considered education as the measure of the welfare of the community. Varma argued that it was impossible to bring the East and the West together as they are fundamentally different in all aspects. He observed that the origin of the present crisis of the community was the disjuncture between the Nampoothiri daily life and Vedic principles. According to Varma "if Nampoothiris start learning Veda again in a proper way, they will become respected individuals in the society. If they were to learn English, they will end up in government jobs like sweepers and lower grade clerks in the government offices."[27]

Bhattathiri, Varma and K.N. took very different positions regarding the method of education that was proper for the community. All of them, however, underlined that education was a crucial factor in the future well being of the community. They all considered ignorance as a major reason for contemporary problems faced by the community. This position was very different from earlier debates on education. The discussion of the community reform in the first two decades of the twentieth century considered education only as an additive factor for the progress of the community. The idea that the community was immersed in ignorance did not appear in the discussion at this period. In its initial years, the YKS considered protecting janmitham (landlordism) and acharam through social and political interventions as its major objective. Once the notion of knowledge / ignorance gained prominence in the reform discourse, education became a measure of the status of the individual and the community.

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[27] V. Raja Raja Varma, "Nampoothirimarum Vedabhyasavum" (The Nampoothiris and Veda Learning), *Unni Nampoothiri*, 7, 11 (November 1922): 6-10.

By the 1930s the meaning of education narrowed down to the practice of education in colonial institutions. All other forms of education became a deviation from this normal and normalized form, which could be expressed only with adjectives such as traditional, practical etc. As in colonial conceptualizations, the difference between discursive and non-discursive activities became crucial in the practices that emerged through the reform movement. In this conceptualization, the production of knowledge was a discursive activity and the resulting knowledge could exist only in a written form. The higher status given to discursive activities helped Nampoothiris to justify their domination with a new claim that historically they were the 'Jati of knowledge'. This also compelled them to enter into colonial educational institutions in order to maintain their higher status in the order of knowledge, because it was the only accepted way of attaining knowledge.

The entry into the order of knowledge transformed Nampoothiri understanding of Jati, gender and acharam. The immediate signs of this transformation were the use of universal categories such a Hindu religion, History, Nation etc. in the debate around reformation. In the world of acharam, the conceptual categories were inseparably connected to the practices of daily life world. We saw in the previous chapter that Nampoothiris at that period understood Jati and gender in the localized space of their specific acharams. By the 1930s, Nampoothiris began locating themselves in the space of Hindu religion, nation and history.

The writings on or by Nampoothiris in the first two decades of the twentieth century, in various Malayalam magazines, newspapers and journals hardly mentioned Hindus or even religion. The articles that appeared in the context of Malabar rebellion in

1921 where some of Nampoothiri Janmis (landlords) were killed in the hands of Muslim rebels, discussed the event either as an altercation between Muslims and Nampoothiris or as struggle between Janmis and Kutiyans (between serfs and landlords). It was rarely mentioned as a Hindu – Muslim issue even though Islam was already considered a religion with essential characteristics.[28] P.N. Bhattathirippad described the rebellion as an act of "ignorant and arrogant Muslim kutiyaans against Nampoothiri Janmis who were affectionate and benevolent."[29] P. Narayana Menon, a leader of Indian National Congress in Malabar saw the riots as "a rebellion against imperialism which later became a riot against Nampoothiri Janmis."[30] Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad who was arrested by the British police for his alleged support for the Muslim rebels, later in his memoirs described the rebellion as one "which began with respectable intentions but which was later turned against Nampoothiris misguided by the fanatical Muslim leaders."[31] Even when attributing a religious nature to Muslims, Nampoothirippad did not align it against Hindus but Nampoothiris.

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[28] During the second half of the nineteenth century there were a number of uprisings of Muslim tenants in Malabar against Janmis and the ruling British Government. Colonial reports described these rebellions as riots by illiterate Muslim fanatics. The 1921 rebellion was the most widespread armed struggle in this series which was brutally suppressed by the British army. As Nampoothiris constituted the majority of the Janmis in the localities where the struggle was intense, they were the main target of the attack by rebels. Both contemporary writings and later academic writings have discussed whether the rebellion was Janmi tenant issue or a religiously inspired struggle. But only in the later works were these rebellions described as a Hindu – Muslim communal riot. For a contemporary report on the Malabar rebellion in 1921 which describes it as a Muslim – Nampoothiri issue, see K. Madhavan Nair, "Malabar Lahalakku Sesham" (After the Malabar Riots), *Mathrubhumi*, October 7, 1922. For a Marxist analysis of the rebellion see K.N. Panikkar, *Against Lord and State: Religion and Peasant Uprisings in Malabar, 1836-1921*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[29] P.N. Bhattathirippad, *Ormakurippukal* (Kozhikkode: P.K.Trust, 1923), 34.

[30] P. Narayana Menon, "Khilafathum Congressum (The Khilafat and the Congress)," *Mathrubhumi*, June 21, 1922, 5.

[31] Mozhikunnathu Brahmadathan Nampoothirippad, *Khilafat Smaranakal* (The Memories of Khilafat) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi Books, 2006), 27.

In the early writings of reform leaders of Pulaya, Ezhava and Nair castes, the issue of Jati was rarely conflated with the issue of Hindu religion. This was not because the category Hindu was not known to the authors of these articles. By the second half of the nineteenth century the English educated native historians have started using the term Hindu religion. Padmanabha Menon's *Travancore Manual* published in 1864 had mentioned the Thiruvithamkoor Rajyam as a Hindu Rajyam.[32] Still, this idea was rarely circulated among the general population especially among the illiterate Nampoothiri community. By the early twentieth century, colonially educated upper-caste individuals started 'recognizing' themselves not just as Ezhavas, Nayars or Nampoothiris but as Hindus too. Even then, for the majority of the members of these communities, though Hindu may be a familiar category, it was not a group that they belonged to. They primarily identified with Jati, and the inter-Jati relation was never an in-group relation.[33]

The reform journals introduced the categories of Hindu and religion among Nampoothiris, in the context of creating a history of individual Jatis. Historians widely used orientalist texts which mentioned Hindus as a religion and Sanskrit as its language. For example, the article by K. V. Mossathu cited orientalist scholars Max Muller and William Jones, to argue that 'among *Hindus*, Nampoothiri men were assigned the responsibility of keeping the Vedic knowledge alive through generations.'[34] V. R. Nampoothiri used the words Hindu and Brahmin as interchangeable and his *History of*

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[32] Padmanabha Menon, *The Travancore Manual* (Thiruvananthapuram: Government Press, 1864).

[33] For a genealogy of the word Hindu see Aravind Sharma, "On Hindu, Hindustan, Hinduism and Hindutva." *Numan,* 49, 1(2002): 1-36.

[34] K.V. Moosathu, "Hindukkalute Pracheena Vignyanam" (The Ancient Knowledge of the Hindus), *Arunodayam*, 32, 5 (May 1931): 17-22.

the Hindu Religion is a justification of Brahmanical domination over other Jatis.[35] Similarly K. Raman Ilayathu, who considered the contemporary practices of Nampoothiris archaic and immoral, situated these customs as part of the Hindu religion and its Varna principles.[36] In other words both the orthodox and radical positions started using the categories of "Hindu" and "religion" as historical facts.

The reform discourse familiarized the notions of Hindu and religion among the educated members of the Nampoothiris community and disseminated further among other members through speeches, plays and songs. In 1930, for the first time in the history of the YKS, in the annual conference of YKS, the presidential address portrayed the issues of Nampoothiris as the issues of Hindus.[37] The reformers, using the colonial oriental scholarship, created a historical essence for the category Hindu and the meaning of this category became increasingly stabilized within the community.

Colonial and the missionary discourse depicted Christianity as the only rational religion and all other religions as irrational and uncivilized.[38] The reform historians had to challenge this concept in order to establish the historical existence of a religion for Hindus based on rational principles. K.V. Raghavan Nair's article "Scientificity of

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[35] V. R. Nampoothiri, *Hindu Mathathinte Charithram* (The History of the Hindu Religion), (Thrissur: Vidyodayam Publications, 1937).

[36] K. Raman Ilayathu, "Hindu Mathathinte Naveekaranavum Nampoothirimarum" (The Reformation of the Hindu Religion and the Nampoothiris), *Kerala Pathrika* (May 1931): 34- 39.

[37] Kaplingad Narayanan Nampoothiri, "Adhyksha Prasangam" (The Presidential Address), *Bhasha Poshini* 20, 11 (November 1930): 27-33.

[38] For missionary views on Christianity and Hinduism from the Malayalam speaking region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century see, Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and Its People* (1870: reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991); C.M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore* (1903: reprint, New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1990). For a scholarly analysis of the missionary narratives of Christianity and Hinduism, see, Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The London Missionary Society in South Travancore in the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989).

religion" is an interesting example in this regard which attempted to prove the scientificity of the Vedic tradition of the Hindu religion. The author was not a Nampoothiri, but the magazine *Unni Nampoothiri* gave a prominent space to this article because it established a connection between scientific knowledge and the tradition of Veda which was considered a Brahmanical tradition. Nair began his article by stating that "the present time in which we live is known as *vijnyana yugam* (the millennium of knowledge)." The West has connected knowledge with progress and it has changed the life of human beings in the whole world. Scientists could not only explain the laws of nature and society but have developed scientific method of practicing art, dressing, cooking and eating as well. The secret behind the success of science was that it has produced one single general law to explain all the phenomena in the universe.

He further analyzed the basic principles of different religions such as Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism and argued that since all these religions propagated dualism of good and bad, they could not explain the world by one general principle and hence these religions were not scientific religions. But the Hindu religious principle which was based on non-dualism of Vedanta philosophy explained the world with one general law and hence it was the only scientific religion.

Nair provided a historical reason for the Hindu religion being the one and only scientific religion. All other religions were established by prophets who had magical or extra-human power. But the Aryans formed the Hindu religion through experiments in real life as is done in scientific practice. Before the West invented modern scientific

principles, the Hindus had the knowledge of evolution, a theory of the atom, and they were familiar with many other scientific laws.[39]

Nair's argument expressed the general view of the educated upper-castes at the time. Several articles in *Unni Nampoothiri*, *Mangalodayam* and *Vidya Vinodini* shared similar views regarding the Hindu religion.[40] It was in this comparison between modern science and the upper-caste practices a concept of Hindu religion emerged for the first time among the upper-castes in Keralam. The words Hindu and religion were not expressed for the first time in this period, but these debates reinforced a concept of identity based on religion and also filled that identity with a historical essence. The primary identification of individual was still with the Jati turned samudayam but the samudayam itself was now part of the larger entity called religion.

The process of assimilation of Jatis into the fold of Hindu religion was a contested process. In the order of acharam, Nampoothiris never had to verbally and rationally justify their dominance. The various Jati practices in the daily life naturalized and reproduced the dominance of Nampoothiris. The other Jatis experienced the domination of Nampoothiris as an external force which restricted and bounded them within the limits of their own Jatis. The Brahmanical ideology in general, did not determine the internal configuration of non-Brahmanical Jatis especially the belief systems and ritualistic practices. But as Jatis started to transform into communities and as rituals and other

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[39] K.V. Raghavan Nair, "Mathathinte Sastreeyathvam (The Scientificity of Religion)," *Unni Nampoothiri,* 10, 11 (November 1922): 69-79.

[40] See, Parasurama Iyer, "Hindu Viswasangalum Sasthravum" (The Hindu Beliefs and Science), *Mangalodayam*, 6 (May 1926): 81-90; N. K. Pisharody, "Hindukkalaya Nammute Innathe Katama" (The Responsibility of We Hindus Today), *Vidya Vinodini*, 9, 3 (October 1927): 41-47; M.R.K.C, "Hindu Mathavum Veda Jnyanavum (The Hindu Religion and Vedic Knowledge)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 14, 5 (May 1927): 211-18.

practices were explained based on scientific principles, the newly emerged Brahmanical notions of acharams and the daily practice of rituals became the reference point for other Jatis as well.

Hindu religion and samudayam were imagined communities where individual members shared a common imagination through reading and writing. In other words unlike in the earlier Jati order, where Brahmins dominated other Jatis through localized daily practice, in the new situation, knowledge became an essential factor for the imagination and reproduction of community identities. Scholars recognized the importance of education and knowledge in the reform process and community formation but most of them imagined an already existing community that was the target of reform.[41] I argue that the community itself was a result of the development of a reading / writing group through the reform movements. It is also important to emphasize the difference between Jati hierarchy based on acharam and the new hierarchies based on knowledge.

This will be clearer when we look closely into the ways in which Nampoothiris attempted to position themselves in the emerging Hindu religion. It was already evident that Jati based acharam was incommensurable with the emerging notion of the Hindu religion where different Jatis share a common past. The lower-caste reform movement had already challenged the concepts of untouchability and caste based labor exploitation.

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[41] For example, T.H.P. Chentharasseri's various writings on reform leaders like Ayyankali, Sri Kumara Guru Devan uses the category samudayam (community) to refer to both the pre-reform Jati and the reforming community. T.H.P. Chentharaseeri, *Ayyankali Nadathiya Swathanthrya Samarangal* (The Struggles for Independence lead by Ayyankali) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi, 1991); *Poykayil Sri Kumara Guru Devan* (Thiruvananthapuram: Navaodayam Publishers, 1981). Even the scholars who studied 'community formation' did not sufficiently demarcate between Jati and samudayam in their analysis of the transformation of community identity. See, G.A. Oddie, *Social Protest in India: British Protestant Missionaries and Social Reforms* (Delhi: Manohar, 1979); K. Saradamony, *Emergence of a Slave Caste Pulayas of Kerala* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1980); Genevieve Lemercinier, *Religion and ideology in Kerala* (Delhi: D.K. Agencies, 1984).

Only by making these caste practices an exception in the notion of Hindu religion, the reformers could justify a shared common past. The demand for dismantling the hierarchical relations of Jatis by establishing horizontal relationships was already prominent in the political arena. Hence, the imagination of communities as a part of a religion required reorganization of the existing Jati hierarchy. This resulted in two simultaneous processes: first was the emergence of an idea of *Savarna* (with color) Jatis, which comprised the Jatis from Nampoothiris to Nair in the Jati hierarchy, as a group distinct from the *Avarna* (without color) Jatis which included Ezhava to further lower-castes. The second process was the transformation of Jatis based on separate internal principles into samudayams (communities) based on a common principle of knowledge.

The concept of savarna and avarna emerged in the context of textual interpretation of history and religion. Educated individuals from the upper-caste started writing the history of Jatis based on a notion of a Hindu religion and *chathurvarnya* (four colors) principles as laid out in the Vedas. These histories introduced the distinction between Savarna and Avarna Jatis based on scientific explanations of practices of different Jatis.[42] According to these histories, at the origin, chathurvarnya was division of labor and all Varnas had equal status. In a later period when Brahmins started dominating the social and political domains, they interpreted the chathurvarnya principle as a hierarchy of Jatis in which Brahmins were on the top. These histories described the hierarchical ordering of Jati as an aberration in the historical process which could be and should be rectified in

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[42] See for example, K. V. Sharma, *Varna Vyvasthayum Sastravum* (The Varna System and Science) (Cochin: Pingala Printers, 1929); O.M. Vasudevan Nampoothirippad, "Chathurvarnyam: Chila Charithra Vasthuthakal (The Four Varna System: Some Historical Facts)," *Unni Nampoothiri,* 17, 11 (November 1933): 26-34.

the present. For upper-caste Jati historians the concept of Savarna and Avarna became the principle of reorganization of Jatis.[43]

Academic historians of caste, while keeping their differences regarding the basic principle of the caste system, agree that Varna principles were not followed in the actual practice of caste anywhere in India.[44] In the case of Keralam, the actual regrouping of castes as Savarna and Avarna did not follow the chathurvarnya distinction. But the point is that the production of historical knowledge referring to chathurvarnya created an impression of the historical existence of Hindu religion in which all Jatis shared a common past. This history was necessary for upper-caste historians to project a common present and future for Savarna Jatis based on a shared common past.

The grouping of upper-caste Jatis as savarna reduced the degree of hierarchy in the relations within these caste communities, though the differences between them were not totally obliterated. The claim of association of communities with knowledge –either in the past as in the case of Nampoothiris or in the present as in the case of Nairs – helped savarna communities to claim superiority over the avarna communities which were portrayed as ignorant groups. In other words, the order of knowledge challenged the hierarchical order of Jatis but did not produce horizontal relations or equality between all samudayams. The dominance of Savarna Jatis over Avarna Jatis continued in this order but with the justification based not on acharams but on knowledge.

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[43] M. Raman Nampoothirippad, *Jatikalude Utbhavavam Charithravum* (The Origin and the History of Castes), (Thalasseri: Kalpadrumam Publications, 1938); K. N. Nampeeshan, "Ahararеethiyum Jathiyum (The Eating Habits and Jati)," *Arunodayam*, 12, 2 (May 1930): 28 - 34; P.N. Nair, "Varnabhedavum Jathikalum" (The Difference of Varna and Jatis), *Mathrubhumi*, June 21, 1932.

[44] M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1995); Dipankar Gupta, *Social Stratification*, (Delhi: OUP, 1992); Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India, from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

By the 1930s, Nampoothiris, especially educated young men, started co-dining with other upper-caste men, an act which would have resulted in expulsion from the Jati in the previous decade. They also began to ignore the acharam of untouchability among savarna Jatis. The scientific explanations of hygiene justified these new customs. V. K. Raja explained the new formations based on the "new knowledge of universal laws of nature which states that every action has its own reactions."[45] For Raja this meant that the future of a person was not determined by birth but by his actions; the actions in this world should be the basis in which people form groups.

> Nampoothiris, Rajas, the Ambalavasis (the temple castes), and Nairs now dine together because they are all vegetarians. They are educated and hence share common views about this world and society. The new grouping of savarna Jatis is based on a new awareness about healthy ways of living. The Jatis which are yet to reach this awareness are naturally excluded from this grouping.[46]

It is not surprising that Raja did not make any reference to the fact that traditionally Nairs were not vegetarians. The idea of vegetarianism was spreading among some sections of Nairs and it was strictly followed in situations of co-dining. The savarna castes developed certain shared spaces through measures like hygiene or education adopted from colonial discourse and excluded avarna castes from these spaces. The more important point is that this exclusion was justified not on the basis of customs, but on scientific principles. Of course, avarnas challenged this kind of exclusion, especially in

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[45] V.K. Raja, "Acharangalum Sastravum (The Acharams and Science)," *Mangalodayam*, 11, 6 (June 1927): 36.

[46] Ibid., 39.

public spaces, but they also used the rationale of hygiene and knowledge to establish their claim.[47]

Jati continued its presence in the order of knowledge but in new forms and modes. As explained above, Jati in its earlier form was incommensurable with the emerging order of knowledge. The reform leaders of different Jatis imagined samudayam as the future form of identification and association. Education was a common constitutive factor for all samudayams because samudayam in the first instance was imagined as a network of knowledgeable individuals. In this sense samudayam was constituted very differently from the constitution of Jati. In the latter case each Jati had its own constitutive factors: for Asaris it was asarippani and for Nampoothiris it was acharam and so on, as we saw in the previous chapters.

It is important to note that upper-caste reform leaders did not consider education as a project to transcend the difference between Jatis; rather they imagined education as a process through which the internal elements of Jati could be reconstituted so that Jati will be transformed into samudayam. The reform leaders attributed for each Jati a historical relation with knowledge and constructed a hierarchical order of samudayams in the present based on this relation in the past. The reform movement of Nampoothiris attempted to put the community in the top of the hierarchical series of knowledge through a claim of their assumed relation with knowledge in the past.

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[47] Sri Narayana Guru considered hygiene and education as the two major objectives of reform and he articulated them as connected issues. He used contemporary Christian missionary notions of hygiene and knowledge as the two necessary conditions in each individual's journey to God. See, *Narayana Guruvinte Sampoorna Krithikal* (The Complete Works of Sri Narayana Guru) (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 2005).

This may seem a difficult task considering the contemporary colonial claim of knowledge as universal and independent of human subjectivities. As we saw in the Introduction, in actual practice the universals in colonial discourse were arrangements of elements with incremental differences in series and these series were hierarchical with dichotomous elements at each end of a series. For example, knowledge was considered a universal category but all types of knowledges were not equal. In the hierarchical series of knowledge, Western scientific knowledge was on the top and practical knowledge of the artisans of the East was at the bottom which was almost equal to ignorance. The Nampoothiri reform leaders focused on inserting themselves in the series of knowledge through actively producing a history of the community and its relation to knowledge. In other words, in the reconstitution of Jati based on acharam into samudayam based on knowledge, history was one of the most important elements that determined the processes of this redefinition.

Historical knowledge was critical in the formation of samudayams as samudayam was imagined as both historical and as continuation of Jati. Influenced by colonial ideas of caste, the early reformers described Jati as natural, and unchanging. By the third decade of the twentieth century, the radical reform narratives began emphasizing change rather than continuation in the history of Jati practice. These inquiries resulted in the exploration into the origin of Jati, and a variety of 'originary stories' started appearing in magazines and newspapers. Among the originary stories of Nampoothiri samudayam, two specific stories became dominant.

The first one was the myth of Parasurama who was a *Rishi* (Saint) and who had thrown an axe from the mountains of the Western Ghats to the Arabian Sea to recover the

land from the sea which became known as Keralam. He invited sixty four Brahmin families from the northern part of India to settle in this newly recovered land and gave each one a village and the full authority to administer the land. This story attributed a historical justification for Janmitham (landlordism), through a description of an originary moment in the history when Nampoothiris became the landlords. It should be noted that this story was always quoted as a myth but as one which had a certain connection with the actual history of the region; in other words, as a glorified version of an actual event in the past.

For example, M.N. Nampoothiri explained that the Parasurama story might not be factual but it was created based on actual events. According to him, in the ancient period one of the ruling Rajas invited Nampoothiris to Keralam because they were experts of astrology which was a science necessary for the development of agriculture. The King gave them the full authority to administrate the land which later transformed into full fledged Janmitham.[48] For Ramanatha Iyer, the Parasurama story was a proof that Nampoothiris were the community which developed agriculture by recovering land from water. According to him, for lack of evidence, one cannot say whether the rulers invited Nampoothiris to Keralam or they came on their own. But it was evident from the Parasurama story that "their authority over the land had centuries long history and they were known for their knowledge even in distant lands."[49]

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[48] M.N. Nampoothiri, "Keralavum Nampoothirimarum (Keralam and the Nampoothiris)," *Arunodayam,* 10, 6 (June 1928): 76.

[49] Ramanatha Iyer, *Keralathinte Adicharithram* (The Ancient History of Kerala) (Thrissur: Mangalodayam Publications, 1935).

The second story was about Sankaracharyar, a philosopher sage who established the *advita* (non-dual) philosophy. He was born in a Nampoothiri family, and even as a child he showed his aptitude towards Vedas and other Sanskrit texts. He accepted sainthood in his teenage. Sankaracharyar developed a particular school of philosophy called Advaitha (non-dual) which challenged the Buddhist philosophy that was dominant in that period. He travelled widely and established four maths (a kind of monastery) at four different places to teach and propagate his philosophy. *Sankara Smriti* a Sanskrit work, which coded the sixty four acharams of Nampoothiris, was supposedly written by Sankaracharyar.[50]

These two stories became a mandatory element in most of the histories of Keralam written in the first half of the twentieth century.[51] The adaptation of these stories into the history of Keralam indicates the way in which the upper-castes selectively constructed a past as the pre-history of samudayam. One of the main objectives of this history writing was to connect the Nampoothiri Jati with knowledge. In all these histories, which claimed about a golden past of Nampoothiris, Sankaracharyar was a prominent figure as a scholar-philosopher. The reference to Sankaracharyar created an

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[50] For a detailed description of Sankaracharyar's life, see Ullor S. Parameshwara Ayyar, *Adi Sankaran* (Kottayam: National Book Trust, 1981).

[51] It is interesting to note that almost all the colonial and upper-caste historians, including the Marxists, had included Parasurama myth as an introductory story, when they wrote about the ancient history of Keralam. We can see this story in the colonial writings of Francis Buchanan and William Logan, in the twentieth century histories written by Malayalee historians like Elamkulam, E.M.S and A Sridhara Menon and in the academic histories written in the late twentieth century like that of Robin Jeffrery, Maria Parpola etc. In short, we can conclude that it was history writing that converted a Nampoothiri myth into an originary story of Kerala history. See, Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras Through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1807); William Logan, *Malabar Manual,* vol. 1 (Madras: Govt. Press, 1887); Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *Kerala Charithram.* (Kottayam: National Book Stal, 1961); E.M.S., *Keralam Malayalikalute Mathrubhumi* (Keralam: the Motherland of Malayalees), (Thrissur: Chintha Publishers, 1984); A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History* (Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham, 1967).

impressionistic connection of Nampoothiris with knowledge. By this time colonial oriental scholarship has already established Sanskrit texts as the source of the great traditional knowledge of India. Now in making a connection with this traditional knowledge helped Nampoothiris to claim an admirable position in the hierarchical series of knowledge. For example, in the article mentioned earlier, K. N. coined a phrase English-Saraswathi (Saraswathi is the goddess of learning), in order to position English education in a continuum with the history of learning of Nampoothiris. He wrote that the golden heritage of the past was "only the first chapter of the world history." It was true that "in the present, English is the goddess of education, but she is daughter or granddaughter of the Sanskrit Saraswathi."[52]

If Nampoothiri as a Jati was already associated with knowledge from ancient time onwards, what was the necessity of the reform of Jati into samudayam? The reform leaders justified this necessity with a reason associated with another attribute of knowledge which is *meaning*.[53] The (lack of) connection between the use of language and its meaning became a subject of historical inquiry for reformers. This was in context of the colonial depiction of language as a medium of representation which supposedly had a one-to-one connection through meaning with the external world that it represented. The Nampoothiri reformers constructed a history in which the present disjuncture between the use of a language and the knowledge of that language was articulated as a problem. According to this history, once Brahmins became dominant in the society of

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[52] K. N, "Nampoothirimarute Naveena Vidybhyasa Reethi (The Method of Modern Education of Nampoothiris)," *Unni Nampoothiri,* 10, 12 (December 1922): 201.

[53] The debate around the relation between word and meaning has dominated the whole discipline of linguistics. Our interest here is only to understand the way the idea of meaning was debated in non-scholarly circles and how it became important in the Nampoothiri reform discourse.

the ancient period, they started mechanically repeating the acharams without learning and teaching the meanings of these acharams. Hence, in the present world of Nampoothiris, the individual who performed acharams did not know the actual objectives and purposes behind the acharams. The loss of the meaning of acharams was the crucial point of departure from the great tradition of knowledge. N. P. Bhattathirippad explained:

> The famous Sanskrit verse says that "word and meaning are inseparable like Parvathy and Parameswara". But Nampoothiris who chant Vedas without learning the meaning have separated Parvathy from Parameswara. Without Parameswara, Parvathi is just another woman. Only when words are combined with respective meanings knowledge is produced. Parrots can speak, but can never have knowledge, because they don't know the meaning of the words they speak.[54]

The question of meaning was a major debating point in the community reform process. While differing on the method of explanation, both the orthodox and radical positions in the reform movement accepted that the reformed samudayam could accept to in fold only those acharams, which have some or other meaning and which could be proved through scientific explanations. This resulted in increased attempts in interpreting the meaning of acharams based on scientific principles. Many authors interpreted the acharams related to bathing based on scientific principles of hygiene, those related to eating and cooking with the scientific explanations of the body and health and so on.[55]

As we saw above, the transformation of Jatis into samudayams and the process of the reinforcement of the order of knowledge were intermingled processes. The reform

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[54] N. P. Bhattathirippad, *Matangi Varatha Kalam* (The Time Which Will Never Return), (Thrissur: Bharathi Printers, 1940).

[55] See, V.K. Raja, "Acharangalum Sastravum (The Acharams and Science)," *Mangalodayam*, 6 (June 1927): 35-41; K. N. Nampeeshan, "Aharareethiyum Jathiyum (The Eating Habits and Jati)," *Arunodayam* (May 1930): 28-34.

literature that we analyzed, however, gives us only ideal forms of expectations, objectives and visions of future. They were not directly reflected in practice. Still, there were real effects and changes in practice which were of course different from the ideal forms.

The Nampoothiri daily life underwent through significant changes in the process of transformation of Jati into samudayam. Many community members now considered the practice of eating in a restaurant run by the upper-caste people or eating with the members of other savarna Jatis in their home acceptable. The practice of untouchability also transformed in new ways as more and more members enrolled in schools and joined in occupations in government or private offices. K.P. Rama Variyar in his memoirs described these changes through a description of daily of life of one Narayanan Nampoothiri who was working as a teacher in a government school. In a normal day, Narayanan Nampoothiri, like his conservative father, would wake up early morning and would take a bath with all rituals and did puja according to the acharams. His father usually finished these pujas in four or five hours where as Narayan Nampoothiri took only an hour; but no important parts of the ritual was excluded. He would eat breakfast and then would go to the school which was half an hour walk away. Two decades earlier, one could recognize a Nampoothiri from the dress code; but now, Narayanan Nampoothiri wore a mundu (a white plain cloth which covers from waist to ankle) and a shirt like all other teachers in his school. His hair style was also not different from the others.

At school most of the teachers were upper-caste except one Ezhava and one Muslim teacher. According to Variyar, Narayanan Nampoothiri had friendly relations with these two teachers but never ate with them or went into their house, not because of

their Jati or religion but because they were non-vegetarians. He would come back from the school and directly go to the pond to take a bath. He would enter the house only after a bath. In the evening he did all the acharams as his father, but ate dinner a little later than his father. In short, at home he still continued his daily rituals as the earlier generation did, where as outside the home he was now less a Nampoothiri than a savarna.[56]

The above description of Narayanan Nampoothiri's daily life in the 1940s, by Variyar, demonstrated that the major transformation that took place was in the practice of Jati in public spaces; in the private Nampoothiris maintained Jati acharams as before, though in an abridged version. We should note that the divide between the public and private might not have been as sharp as Variyar depicted it; but the concept of this division was already evident in social life of Nampoothiris. In private, the concept of Jati based acharams still loomed over daily life, though these acharams were interpreted in new ways based on scientific knowledge. In public, the distinction between savarna and avarna samudayams became more important than the difference between Jatis. In short, the order of knowledge emerged not by completely displacing the order of acharam but by reconstituting some of the elements of acharam.

The practice of purity and pollution continued to determine the status of materials inside the illam. For example, women started wearing blouses, but they removed it when they were doing the nedikkal (a ritual worship) because it was considered impure for such an occasion. The cloths become polluted once they were worn while traveling outside

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[56] K. P. Rama Variyar, *Pinnitta Vazhikaliloote* (Through the Treaded Paths) (Kottakkal: Keraleeyam Press, 1963), 73-88.

the house. The women continued to strictly follow the pollution rituals related menstruation and child birth. But a majority of them stopped wearing khosha (a cloth that covers from head to toe) or taking cadjan umbrellas when they traveled outside. Nampoothiri women still continued to follow the rules of purity related to cooking, eating and serving with minor modifications.[57] Reform in the domain of acharams was more a discursive activity – of explaining the acharams on scientific basis – than changing the performance of acharam altogether in daily life. In other words, the transformation process mainly involved giving new meaning to existing action so that people experienced the same actions in new ways.

As Jati became an "inappropriate" element in the order of knowledge, the forces of gender that were entwined with Jati forces, began enforcing their own separate axis in new ways and forms. We have already seen that the colonial production of knowledge was inherently a gendered process based on the bio-logic of bodies. Interaction of Nampoothiri reform with this bio-logic produced a new kind of engendering process of individuals. If the space one resided and the rituals one performed constructed man and woman in the order of acharam, bio-logic determined this construction in the order of knowledge. The reform discourse attributed natural, essential and mutually exclusive characteristics to these bio-logically constructed bodies, i.e. to man and woman. In this order it was necessary to train each individual in developing inherent natural characteristics and to suppress any other unnatural traits one may attain from outside. As gender became a central issue of reformation, antharjanam (Nampoothiri woman) became a central figure in the initiatives of the YKS in the 1930s.

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[57] N. Madhavi Amma, "Navothanathinu Sesham (After the Enlightenment)," *Mathrubhumi*, October 20, 1949.

The process of transformation from Jati to samudayam passed through the prism of gender and each element in the emerging samudayam carried a mark of gender as a sign of identification. Some early works on gender have mapped this process as a spatial division into public and private which corresponds to the sexual division of male and female.[58] All the actions in the public were designated to men and private was the realm of women. Lately, scholars have pointed out the problem of a neat division between public and private spaces.[59] Taking the case of Nampoothiris as an example we can see that the process of gender differentiation was not just a process of objectification of women into the private spaces. The reform discourse assigned each object, action and concept, both in the public and private, a natural correspondence with either one of the sexes. The gendering process in the public could be best explained in the case of education.

The Nampoothiri reform discourse took education as one of the important domains of reform. Each element in the series called education could be mapped onto a corresponding element in the series of gender. The early debates on education, where general education was the subject, focused only on the education of Nampoothiri men. N. Damodaran Nampoothiri wrote in 1920 that "the time has not yet arrived when one can think about Nampoothiri girls attending schools." He argued that "this is not because Nampoothiris as a samudayam has not progressed as Nairs, whose girls are attending

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[58] See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Woman in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Cambridge (UK): Polity Press, 1988); C. Katz and J. Monk, *Full Circles: Geographies of Women over the Life Course* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

[59] See Susan B. Boyd, *Challenging the Public/Private Divide: Feminism, Law, and Public Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Leela Fernandes, "Beyond Public Spaces and Private Spheres: Gender, Family and Working-Class Politics in India," *Feminist Theory,* 23,3 (Autumn 1997): 525-547; Asma Afsaruddin, ed., *Hermeneutics and Honor: Negotiating Female "Public" Space in Islamic/ate Societies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

schools in large numbers." The reason he gave for this was that Nampoothiris were still "considering only two type of education: one for the sake of knowledge and the other for new occupations." According to Damodaran Nampoothiri both these types of education corresponded to men.[60]

Even in the late 1920s when women's education became one of the major agendas of the YKS, it was clear that women's education should be "special education." A commission was set up in 1926 to chart out the program of educating women. The report of this commission suggested that the Nampoothiri girls from the age of 6 to 12 should be educated, but it is not proper to send them into public schools. If in a certain region there were several illams, one illam should be selected as the center for the education. A teacher should be invited to this illam. Otherwise girls should be taught at their own illams.[61] The commission recommended that a special curriculum should be developed which should focus on training girls in "womanly duties." The subjects mentioned in the report included music and arts, embroidery and stitching, scientific ways of child rearing and healthy ways of preparing food.[62]

The radical group in the YKS argued that the commission failed to understand the aspirations of the oppressed Nampoothiri women and it was time to bring women along men in all spheres of life. Criticizing the report, Narayanan Bhattathirippad pointed out that the commission was still trying to seclude women in special education centers and this was totally against the emerging spirit of freedom in the society. According to him

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[60] N. Damodaran Nampoothiri, "Vidyabhyasam: Ventathum Ventathathum (The Education: Desirable and Undesirable)," *Mangalodayam* 24, 6 (June 1920): 88-93.

[61] Narayanan Bhattathirippad, "Stree Vidybhyasa Commissionte Report (The Report of the Women Education Commission)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 12, 4 (April 1928): 407-410.

[62] Ibid.

Nampoothiri girls should be allowed to participate in public life by joining *suitable* jobs.[63]

Bhattathirippad's argument sounded like a call for total equality for men and women in all domains of life. As we continue to read Bhattathirippad's criticism, we come to know that the new space he suggested for women was an already gendered space. He mentioned that "the scientific understanding, regarding jobs in which women can be occupied without hindering their biological nature and womanly instincts", helped to chart out a program to "liberate the Nampoothiri women from their centuries long sufferings."[64] In short, Nampoothiri women should seek jobs, but only those jobs which were womanly occupations.

The debate over newly emerged occupations attempted to mark each occupation on basis of gender. Nursing and teaching corresponded to the motherly nature of women. Dancing, music and paintings were also proper for women because "they corresponded to the light and emotive nature of their heart."[65] The jobs that involved authority were 'naturally' not suitable for women. Even Nampoothiri men, who were supposedly not manly enough compared to Nairs, "need proper training to bring out the *veeram* (valor) sleeping inside every man, in order to appear as a person who can assert the authority."[66]

M. R.K. C invoked the case of the West, where some reformed women had taken manly jobs, as an example of moral degradation where the laws of nature have been

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid., 409.

[65] Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, "Stree Samajam (Women's Association)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 10, 2 (January 1926): 279-289.

[66] Ibid., 285.

violated. Quoting the article by Eleanor Glin in the magazine *Pear Science*, M. R. K. C explained the possibility of dividing acts, spaces, and values on a sexual basis.[67] Similarly, Kanippayyoor attempted to mark the gender of each ritual Nampoothiris performed and to explain the reasons why women were not allowed to perform most of the rituals.

In 1929, V.T. Bhattathirippad published *Rajani Rangam* (The Stage of Night) a collection of four short stories, which first time in Malayalam literature brought into light the dark inside world of antharjanams into public view. M. R. Bhattathirippad pointed out that the book came in a period where "writers were not allowed to see Nampoothiri women even in their imagination." *Rajani Rangam* was just the beginning of the career of V.T. Bhattathirippad who continued to write plays, novels and articles focusing on the issues of antharjanams.

The annual conference of the YKS in 1930, witnessed dramatic scenes of radical reforms which challenged the precedents and customs based on acharam. In this conference, Missis Manazhy, a woman leader of the YKS came out of the veil in public, first time in the history of Nampoothiri women. The young members staged a satirical play *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* (From the Kitchen to the Center-stage) written by V.T. Bhattathirippad. In the beginning of the play female audience was seated separately with curtains separating them from the male audience. When the play was over, the young members in the audience removed the curtain and the female audience, though

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[67] M.R.K.C, "Prakrithi Virodham (Against the Nature)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 12, 2 (February 1927): 124-128.

covered by veil, shared the space with the male audience.[68] Within the next two years several antharjanams came open out of the veil in public and several Nampoothiri girls joined Nampoothiri Vidyalayams and a few even joined public schools.[69] In 1932, Parvathy Nenminimangalam became the first female member of a legislative assembly from the Nampoothiri community. Her speech in the Kochi assembly helped to present before the legislators, the pathetic conditions of antharjanams on the basis of first hand experience. Her contribution was crucial in the passage of the Nampoothiri family reform bill.[70]

It is important to note that the radicalism regarding the YKS and NYS was conditional and limited in many domains. Scholars have explained the gendering aspects of the reform movement which transformed an earlier form of patriarchy associated with Jati into a new patriarchy based on engendered individuals and the heterosexual nuclear family. J. Devika argued that it is not enough to understand the 'problems' of women under patriarchy because this presupposes that the category woman was always available as a subject of inquiry. She highlighted "the discursive conditions and practices under which it became possible to speak of such categories as 'Men' and 'Women'." [71]

We saw in the second chapter that, in the pre-reform period the gender differentiation was performed through gendered actions. As the idea of nature with definite fixed rules was not part of this process, these gendered actions were not

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[68] M.R. Bhattathirippad, "Kal Noottandinullil (In a Quarter Century)," *Mathrubhumi special issue*, (1936), 51.

[69] Ibid., 53.

[70] For the full text of Parvathi Nenminimangalam's speech in the Kochi Assembly see "Nampoothiri Billum Parvathi Nenminimangalavum," *Manorama*, March 10, 1932, 4.

[71] J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient and Longman, 2007), 18.

considered 'natural' or 'unnatural'. Through the interaction with colonial knowledge the concept of nature became a key element in all forms of knowledge.[72] In this conceptualization the difference between man and women was natural and biological. The 'naturalization' of gender as man and women produced a new kind of enunciability. Now for the reform leaders, women became an independent subject matter of inquiry. It was now possible to ask questions like 'what was the status of women in the ancient Hindu period?', or 'what is the condition of women inside an illam?' and so on. Women were now supposed to have a biology and a history. In the earlier gender differentiation process, sexual identification was just the preliminary step of gender differentiation; the actions that individuals performed in the daily life assigned the gender for individuals. Now gender was someway reduced to sex and the life of the individual could be defined based on the sex. In other words, earlier actions were the criteria for gender identification, and hence, those who perform manly or womanly actions were males and females respectively. In the transformed samudayam, sex determined the gender of all actions. This meant that manly or womanly acts were those actions that were proper to male sex or female sex respectively, rather than the reverse.

In his discussion about proper female behavior, Elavoor Krishnan Nampoothiri explained the fundamental nature of sexual difference. According to him modern science and traditional Indian knowledge agreed that for all living beings the difference between male and female were natural and fundamental. "God gave human beings special wisdom to maintain the laws of this nature in their culture." At a certain period in history, men stopped asking the question what actions were proper for a man and for a

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[72] For an analysis of the ways in which nature is conceptualized within modernity, see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1993).

woman which would enhance the inherent properties of each sex. Nampoothiri men started treating women not as the other sex but as another species. According to him, "it is the duty of the reformers to educate each sex in actions proper to their biology."[73]

If Krishnan Nampoothiri used the biological explanation of gender difference to emphasize the importance of women's education, Kanippayyoor used the same bio-logic in his argument against *stree samajams* (women associations). He argued that "women's biological properties do not allow them to be equal to men and hence men and women can never mutually exchange the actions they are supposed to perform." While the actions performed by women should be equally respected, "a samajam which demands equality of men and women are acting against the fundamental laws of nature." According to Kanippayoor, only male members should form association and they were the ones who have to lead the women out of their oppression and miseries.[74]

The process of gender differentiation based on sex produced its own effects on other hierarchical orders in the Nampoothiri world. Like any other difference articulated in colonial discourse, man and woman were not just different, they were unequally positioned too in different series. For example, the Nampoothiri reformers put men along with the expert knowledge which was at the top of the series of knowledge. Reform itself was considered a domain of men where women could participate at non-decision making levels. In short man was the general, the universal or the highest element in any series of the universal and woman the particular instance of this universal.

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[73] Elavoor Krishnan Nampoothiri, "Antharjanangalum Parishkaravum (The Antharjanams and Fashion)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 11, 7 (July 1927): 89-96.

[74] Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, "Stree Samajam (The Women's Associations)," *Unni Nampoothiri*, 10, 2 (January 1926): 279-289.

The general history of Hindu religion was the history of acts of male saints, kings and male philosophers. The Vedas which were considered the ultimate base of knowledge was also a domain of men. The reformers who championed women's education and respectability did not invoke female saints and philosophers like Gargi, Mythreyi or Lopamudra in the general history; rather they argued that the male saints *allowed these* women scholars to acquire knowledge.[75]

Once woman became a biological category, it was possible to trace a continuum of biological women independent of Jati in the form of history. This does not mean that the reform discourse placed the category woman totally outside the domain of Jati. Rather, it produced new alignments such as savarna women who could have common characteristics and a shared past. J. Devika explained that by the 1930s, in the writings of female authors, "'women' often appear as a distinct collectivity that is supposed to have interests and problems, sometime opinions, specific to them, beyond consideration of caste and class."[76] Still, the common interests and opinions these authors described as "women's issues," were almost always the issues of upper-caste women. Though there were exceptions, the majority of women, who took initiative to form women's associations and who wrote articles, stories and poems were from upper-caste communities such as Nairs or Nampoothiris. Hence, it would be more correct to say that the aspect of gender became an independent category of analysis but included in it savarna and avarna hierarchical differentiation.

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[75] See, M.C.N. Nampoothiri, "Rishimarum Vijnyanavum (The Sages and Knowledge)," *Yogkshemam*, May 13, 1932, 2.

[76] J. Devika, *Engendering Individuals: The Language of Re-forming in Early Twentieth Century Keralam* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2007), 175.

There are many elements that were crucial in the formation of the order of knowledge. If "education" was the crucial constitutive force in the emergence of the order of knowledge, sex and 'samudayam (community)' were the axes through which this order was deployed. Many elements of the earlier order continued their presence in this new order. In other words, the order of knowledge challenged the hierarchical Jati system only to create a different form of hierarchy based on savarna, avarna difference.

The order based on knowledge that emerged in the colonial period continued its dominance in the post-colonial period in India. The upper-caste elites who became the rulers of the nation incorporated several elements of colonial governing practices into the practices of the newly formed nation-state. Among these practices, the production of knowledge was the most important activity that was adopted from the colonialists with least changes in method, form and content. This continuity was vivid in the practices of the institutions of knowledge production such as colleges and universities which continued with minor organizational restructuring. The major difference in the postcolonial period was that, the nationalists baptized the same colonial knowledge as modern knowledge.

In the 1950s and 60s in Keralam, the associations which were formed as part of the reform movements of various caste communities in the early decades of the century, became part of the governmental political process in the state. These associations diverted their focus from internal life in the private, which was the major domain of reform activity to the public, where a proper share in education and government jobs were the central agendas. Compared to the other community organizations like the SNDP of Ezhavas, or the Nair Service Society of Nairs, the YKS was not very active or

effective in the post independent Keralam. This meant neither that the post independent governments marginalized Nampoothiris nor that their domination as savarnas became less influential. With a new authenticity and power, savarna ideology became an integral part of the nationalist identity and culture.

In the domain of knowledge production, especially in the discipline of history, savarna nationalist ideology dominated by assimilating the differences within the nation into its fold and by erasing other practices and ideas. The next chapter analyzes, how in such a context of savarna domination in the field of production of knowledge, Asaris initiated reforms, and how in this process they incorporated the elements of the order of knowledge into their practices of knowing.

Chapter 4
Asaris and the Order of Knowledge

By the second half of the twentieth century, Asaris started interacting with the order of knowledge and this interaction transformed Asari practices. In the first chapter, we saw that throughout the first half of the twentieth century Asaris avoided entering into the order of knowledge by maintaining asarippani as a practice of knowing. In the context of India's formal independence from colonial domination in 1947 and the subsequent nationalist take-over of the institutions of production of knowledge, Asaris faced new forms of intervention in their world of knowing. Analyzing the changing relation between Jati and asarippani in the second half of the twentieth century, this chapter demonstrates that Asaris in this period entered into an overlapping world of production of knowledge and practices of knowing. If in the period between1950 and 1970 the processes of transformation in the Asari world were slow and indistinct, in the last two decades of the century by contrast they gained momentum and attained concrete forms. The chapter analyzes the new social forces that produced the transformation in the Asari world in the second half of the twentieth century and the important elements of the transformed Asari world.

Soon after the formal declaration of the independent Indian Republic in 1950, the Government of India began reorganizing regional states based on language. Keralam was formed on November 1st, 1957 by merging the Malayalam speaking

regions of Malabar, Kochi and Thiruvithamkoor.[1] From the very beginning, caste organizations had central role in the democratic politics of the state. Even in the early twentieth century, caste reform organizations had declared sharing and redistribution of resources as one of their main demands.[2] Still, the reform leaders in that period equally focused on the internal reform of daily life practices and on the introduction of new forms of marriage and family. After independence, these organizations became involved n electoral political process and became mediators between the caste community and the government. The postcolonial governments, in the process of planning and executing development projects, considered these organizations the representative of their respective caste communities and incorporated them into the governing process. In the 1950s and 60s, the organizations of Nayar and Ezhava communities were the strongest community groups in terms of mobilization and influence, but other caste groups and even sub-castes also began forming their own organizations, demanding a share in government and politics.

It was in this context that the first Viswakarma association was formed in 1961. The Kerala Viswakarma Association was an initiative of a group of educated individuals from the five artisanal castes, including Asari, Thattan (goldsmith), Kollan (blacksmith), Moosari (coppersmith) and Kallasari (sculpture). We will discuss the

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[1] The state of Keralam formally came into existence on the 1st of November, 1957. After the formation of the state, even though regional differences were still significant, the social, economic and political context of Asaris in the earlier district of Malabar became comparable with the Asaris in the other regions. Hence, the location of analysis of this chapter moves from Malabar to Keralam and considers the Asari activity within different regions in the sate as a single process.

[2] For example, the first formal activity of the Ezhava reform was *the Ezhava Memorial*, a memorandum submitted to the King of Thiruvithamkoor, demanding deserved share in government jobs and education. For an analysis of the early twentieth century political formations and the role of communities in this process, see, K.N. Yesudas, *The People's Revolt in Travancore: A Backward Caste Movement for Social Freedom* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Historical Society, 1975).

details of the use of Viswakarma as an identity in the later part of this chapter. Here we note that the leaders of this association adopted this name from a similar association in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu. According to the leaders, they used the name 'Viswakarma' for the Association for two reasons.

> Even though the concept of Viswakarma is not very familiar among our community members in the Malayalam speaking region, by using this name we are attempting to connect with similar groups in other states and underscore our presence throughout the nation. We also use this name to demonstrate the rich heritage of our traditions in the ancient period and its origin from the god Viswakarma.[3]

This shows that the questions of tradition and national identity were already part of the concern of the association from the very beginning. At this stage, however, the major focus was on how to negotiate with contemporary regional politics and claim a share in the process of governance.

The state government in this period took initiatives to expand the network of educational institutions and every village had at least one lower primary school. Various caste organizations, especially Nair Service Society (NSS) and Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), opened schools as part of their attempt to strengthen their respective communities' influence in the public domain.[4] The

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[3] The Resolution passed in the first conference of the Kerala Viswakarma Association, *The Collection of Minutes of the Conference* (September 21st 1961), 1, 22, Kerala Viswakarma Sabaha Library, Changanasseri.

[4] In the 1960 and 70s, the NSS and the SNDP widened their network of schools and became leading groups in corporate management of the schools in the private sector. They significantly influenced the education policy of the government in this period and the various political parties in the state including the communist party, attempted to create cordial relations with these community organizations for electoral gains. For a critical analysis of the role of community organizations in the education sector of Keralam, see, Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).

government and community organizations depicted illiteracy as a disease which had to be eradicated from the society.

The Kerala Viswakarma Association, similar to other caste organizations in that period, underscored the importance of education for the well-being of the community. The Association's declared objective was to "to attain a deserved share for Viswakarmas in education and government jobs by including Viswakarma Jatis in the category of 'other backward castes' (OBC)."[5] For the first time in the history of the community, the Association considered entry into educational institutions as an option for improving the socio-economic status of the community. One resolution passed in the first meeting of the Association urged the community members to enroll their children in schools because "the future is owned by those who can read and write and those who have the wealth of knowledge."[6]

The leaders and main activists of the Kerala Viswakarma Association were from the southern part of Keralam and the association had little influence among the Asaris in Malabar. Even in the south, the association had influence mainly among the goldsmiths and its activities were limited to holding committee meetings and submitting memorandums to the government. Even five years after the formation, the membership of the Association was less than five hundred and the association did not

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[5] The Indian Constitution identified three different groups of castes which required the benefits of positive discriminatory actions by the central and the state governments. The tribal groups were included as 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST), the lowest castes were included as 'Scheduled Castes' (SC) and the other castes which were just above the SC were grouped as 'Other Backward Castes.' The central government, according to the recommendations, of the state governments decided which specific caste belongs to which group.

[6] *The Collection of Minutes of the Conference* (September 21st 1961), 1, 32, Kerala Viswakarma Sabaha Library, Changanasseri.

succeed in achieving any of its decaled objectives.[7] The members of the Viswakarma castes were still hesitant in participating in the institutions of production of knowledge. The census report in the 1971 mentioned that "the members of artisanal castes are still reluctant to send their children into schools because they want to train them in the hereditary occupation from a very early age."[8]

However, the physical presence of schools and the dominant discourse around the importance of education combined to force parents to enroll their children in schools even in the rural areas. Asaris were unable to completely resist this new social pressure. Many of the parents from the community enrolled their children in primary schools; however, they withdrew their children before they reach the tenth standard, which was the qualification for several lower-level government positions.[9] The Viswakarma Association neither had the wealth to initiate their own educational institutions nor had the influence to compel the community members to train their children for government jobs. By the 1970s, the Kerala Viswakarma Association practically became non-existent and for a decade there were no other formal initiatives from the Viswakarma castes in the direction of community reform or political activity.

There were many reasons for Asaris not actively associating with the first Viswakarma organization. Sridharan, who was an active member of the Viswakarma Association, reasoned that "in the 1960s and 70s, Asaris, though considered as a lower

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[7] See, *The Report Presented at the Fifth Conference of KVA* (Kottayam: Ebenezer Printers, 1965). For more general analysis of the activities of the Kerala Viswakarma Association see, K. Shivanandan, *The Early Days of Viswakarma Sabha* (Thrissur, Vidyavijayam, 1997).

[8] *Census of India, 1971: Series 9: Kerala, Part 5* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1972), 211.

[9] A survey conducted by the Department of Small Industries in 1974 noted that between the period of 1960 and 1970, out of the total members of the artisanal castes under the age of twenty, less than one percent appeared for the public exam at the tenth standard. See, *Report of the Sample Survey on Artisanal Industries in Ten Districts of Kerala* (Thiruvananthapuram: Govt. Press, 1975), 31-32.

caste, could still hold considerable respect in villages and had minimum job security."[10] They did not seek any kind of major changes in their occupation or caste practices. According to Ramachandran Achari, in the period between 1960 and 1980 less than one percent of the Asaris in Malabar completed a High School education and below ten percent completed primary school education. He explained this as the "continuing influence of traditional values and the socio economic systems in the villages which help sustain the traditional values."[11]

The contemporary technology of house construction was also a major reason for Asaris' reluctance to participate in the process of production of knowledge. Until the 1980s, most of the houses built had tiled roofs which required elaborate wooden roof frames. The carpenter's role was critical in the construction of these kinds of houses. More importantly, the chief carpenter designed the whole house and he conducted the rituals of the construction as well. Ramachandran Achari noted that "if we compare the 1920s and 1960s for the ways of constructing a house and the role assigned to Asaris as the designers of the houses, we would not see any significant difference in these periods."[12] In 1972, V.N. Menon observed that in most of the places in the Calicut district it was very difficult "to get hold of Asaris for minor works because they had sufficient major contracts within their villages."[13] In short,

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[10] Interview with Sridharan, May 12, 2009.

[11] Ramachandran Achari, "Caste and Social Change in Keralam: A Study of Lower Castes in Malabar, 1947 – 1970," PhD diss., Calicut University, 1976, 43.

[12] Ibid., 56

[13] V. N. Menon, *Marunna Nadum Nagaravum* (Changing Village and City) (Kozhikkode: Mathrubhumi, 1982), 49.

until the 1980s asarippani was a localized practice and Asaris enjoyed certain respect within their desham as the authorities of architectural practices.

The oil boom in the early years of the 1970s intensified the industrialization process in West Asian countries which created a large scale demand for skilled and unskilled laborers. Indian laborers started migrating to Arabian Gulf in the late 1970s and by end of the century, about three million Indian workers were laboring in various countries in this region. Nearly half of the Indian migrants were from Keralam (around one and half million) and, according to one approximation, they brought 550 million rupees per annum to Keralam.[14] Migration and remittance transformed the socio-economic scenario of Keralam; these changes consequently produced reverberations in the Asari world as well. Migrants spent a large percentage of their income from the Gulf for housing and by the late 1980s, building construction became one of the important domains of economic activity in Keralam.[15] For the Gulf migrants, the size and design of the new houses they constructed in their home village were directly a demonstration of their newly acquired social and economic status. They wanted to design their houses in 'modern' ways, the demand for which transformed the basic methods of house construction in Keralam. This transformation brought a corresponding change in the role of Asaris in construction work.

Most of the new houses built after the 1980s in Keralam used the technology of reinforced concrete (RC) for building the roof, instead of the old method of wooden

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[14] See B.A. Prakash, "Gulf Migration and Its Economic Impact: The Kerala Experience," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33, 50 (December 12 – 18, 1998): 3209.

[15] Department of Economics and Statistics, *Report of the Survey on Utilisation of Gulf Remittance in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Govt. Press, 1994), 13.

frame and tiles. Concrete is a mixture of cement, sand and crushed stone which was introduced in India during the British period. Until the 1970s, the use of RC– the technology of using the concrete with steel bars – was generally limited to public and commercial buildings.[16] As we saw earlier, by the middle of the twentieth century, the use of cement in construction works had transformed the method of building of walls and floors. These changes, however, did not produce much impact in the methods of asarippani. On the other hand, the introduction of reinforced concrete roofs affected Asari practices in many ways. The change was not limited to the method of constructing the roof. The RC roofed houses required different kinds of wall structures and basements from those of the tailed roof houses. The RC technology also opened the possibility of totally changing the shape and measurement of the rooms and proportions of spaces for kitchens, bathrooms and toilets. In Keralam in 1971, only 10% of houses had a modern kind of roofing; it had increased to 60% in 1991.[17] As the majority of new houses constructed used new designs, the engineers took over the role of planners and designers from the carpenters.

The new Municipal and Local Bodies Act of 1970 required that a plan approved by a civil engineer be submitted to get permission for the construction of each building.[18] This rule did not completely take over the authority of Asaris as the

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[16] According to the survey conducted by the Department of Economics and Statistics in 1980, only 6 percentage of the total houses in Keralam used RC technology for roof. *Survey on Housing and Employment* (Trivandrum: Govt. Press, 1980), 68.

[17] *Census of India 1991, Series 9 Kerala, Part 4* (New Delhi, Govt. Press, 1992), 147.

[18] The Kerala Municipal Corporations (Amendment) Act 1970 passed by the Kerala Legislature transferred a wide range of powers from the state government to the elected Municipal administrative bodies. It also enhanced the scope of government control over construction works. Before the act, one has to file an application before the Local authorities to get permission for constructing a house. The 1970 amendment required that from then onwards, this application should be accompanied with

designers of houses. Until the 1990s, the chief carpenter designed and executed the construction; but, on paper, the owner had to get the plan, drawings and estimates worked out and approved by a civil engineer for submission to the local authorities. In other words, in the 1970s and 80s, the engineer's and carpenter's role in designing overlapped and the carpenters still controlled the actual execution of the construction. It is only in the 1990s, through technological intervention, that engineers established the overall control of the processes of planning and the construction of houses.

The above changes not only reduced the authority of carpenters over knowing practices in the field of house construction, but also changed the very idea of knowledge within the community. Within the schema of the new order of knowledge, the expert was the one who produced objectified models and representations. Those who actually executed the work were practitioners whose capability was not knowledge but skills and techniques. The new reinforced concrete technology removed Asaris as a caste from their role as designers into that of workers, or from the role of experts to that of practitioners. The engineers trained in the new technology became the authority of architectural knowledge.

Moothasari (the chief carpenter) now became a shadow of his earlier figure without having any significant authority over the practices in his field. He still maintained his authority in the field of ritual practices that were connected with the construction of houses. In this new avatar, he was as an expert in *Thachu Sastram* (the traditional science of architecture) or an authority of *traditional knowledge*, a category

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drawings and estimates prepared by an approved civil engineer. This was one of the important moments when the engineers as the authorities of architectural knowledge received a chance to directly enter into the domain of house construction.

which was modern and colonial. Scholars have noted that the practice of inventing traditions was important for the self definitions of modernity in general and that of the nation-state in particular. Hobsbawm observed that the invention of tradition was a response to "novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish(es) their past by quasi-obligatory repetitions." It is a result of "the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it unchanging and invariant."[19]

In the case of Asaris, until the 1980s they were experts in the contemporary practices of house construction and by the 1990s they became the authorities of "traditional knowledge." In this new role, the moothasari had to prove his knowledge in Sanskrit texts on Thachu Sastram and also his ability to understand and negotiate with the forces of the nonhuman world. In the role of ritual practitioner, the moothasari still finalized the exact location of the house and the water-well in a plot, the direction of the front door, the area of the front yard and so on, all according to Thachu Sastram. Numerous publishers initiated publication of old Sanskrit texts with introductions and interpretations by famous moothasaris.[20] In these introductions, they interpreted these texts as the base of asarippani, though we have seen that in the

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[19] Eric Hobsbawm, "Inventing Tradition," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

[20] Most of these texts were already in circulation but only in very limited circles. In the 1990s, a number of local publishers started reprinting these works in Malayalam and most of them included introductions and interpretations by famous moothasaris. *Manushylaya Chandrika*, a Sanskrit text supposed to be written by a Malayali Brahmin in the 15th or 16th century, was reprinted at least in five version with five different interpretations during 1994 – 2002. See, B. Raghavanachari, ed., *Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Kodungalloor: Devi Books, 1994); K. V. Achuthan Achari, ed., *Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1998); K. Neelakantanasari, ed., *Maha Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Kodungalloor: Devi Books, 2000); Kanippayyoor Sankaran Nampoothirippad, ed., *Manushyalaya Chandrika*, 12th edition (Kunnamkulam: Panjangam Book Stall, 2004).

earlier period, Asaris never used these texts as a reference for their actual practice. Knowledge in these Sanskrit verses became *the knowledge* of Asarippani and the capacity to execute practical work was measured in terms of skill and experience.

The invasion of new technology and concepts associated with it into the field of construction reduced the status of Asaris in two ways. The notion of a divide between theory and practice was one of the basic concepts in the order of knowledge.[21] This concept divided carpentry into a knowledge part and practical part. The former included the capacity to create, learn or reproduce textual knowledge or knowledge as an object. The latter was part of the bodily work which required experience and skill. Both of these parts had a lower status compared to the technical knowledge of engineers. The dominant discourse depicted the knowledge part of the carpentry as traditional knowledge which had a lower position in the hierarchical series of knowledge compared to modern engineering knowledge. The second part, the practical work, had a lower status than *any* form of knowledge, including traditional knowledge. This gave the moothasari in his new role a higher status than an expert carpenter, but even his status was never equal to that of the engineers.

It is important to note that the role of the moothasari as a ritual practitioner was not just a continuation of his earlier role in ritual activities. This "traditional role" was very much a modern construct and only within that conceptual framework did this new role have any relevance. Earlier, it was not possible to separate the elements of work and rituals in asarippani, or in other words, rituals were an integral part of asarippani as a practice of knowing. Now, the rituals became a negotiation with nonhuman

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[21] See Introduction.

forces which may affect the residents of the houses if the houses were not properly built. The rituals became a separate activity and were not part of the actual construction of houses. The moothasari's present role was to give advice and suggestions to satisfy the nonhuman forces related to construction work according to Vasthu Sasthram.

If the moothasari became more or less a ritual figure, the status of other Asaris also changed in these circumstances. Before the phenomena of Gulf migration, Asaris worked at the construction site as daily wage laborers. A large number of Asari men migrated to the Gulf countries in the 70s and 80s and many of them returned by the 1990s.[22] The Gulf migration created scarcity in the workforce in two ways. First, there was a reduction in the actual numbers of available working men. Second, although by the 1990s many of these Asaris working in the Gulf returned, they did not join the workforce of wage laborers.[23] Though there is no caste based census on gulf migration, various sample studies showed that most of the artisanal workers like Asaris and smiths who returned from the Gulf countries preferred to start their own small work shop units instead of working as daily wage laborers.[24]

Working at construction sites always proceeded through trial and error methods and each project was tailor-made according to the requirements of the

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[22] For an analysis of the pattern of Gulf migration from Keralam, see K.C. Zacharia, E.T. Mathew and S. Irudaya Rajan, *Dynamics of Migration in Kerala: Dimensions, Differentials and Consequences* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2003).

[23] K.N. Harilal, "Deskilling and Wage Differential in Construction Industry," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24, 24 (June 17, 1989): 1347-1352.

[24] For example, the survey conducted by R. Ramachandran in Palakkad district on the small manufacturing unit shows that by 1990s, the number of carpentry workshop units in the rural areas increased 23% from that of the 1980s. He noted that almost 80% of these were owned by gulf returned Asaris. R. Ramachandran, *The Report of Survey on Small Manufacturing Units in Palakkad District* (Shornur: Govt. Press, 1999), 27-29.

customer. In the 1990s, as Asaris started working from shops which manufactured standardized products such as doors and windows, asarippani transformed into a different form of practice. In most of these shops, Asaris used new kinds of tools and machinery and this in turn demanded different kinds of skill sets and capabilities.

The changing status of tools was an important factor in the changes of Asari knowing practices. Scholars have noted that one of the important reasons for the loss of independence of artisans in the wake of industrialist production was the loss of control over the means of production.[25] In the case of Asaris, even though they were in control of their means of production, they were not able to maintain their authority over the knowledge practices related to construction work. Within the earlier form of asarippani, tools carried clear Jati markers and were agents which could exert their own forces in asarippani. Tools were not instrumental objects which could act only as directed by human beings. Various Asari stories, proverbs and myths enriched the content of the tool. A popular proverb said that "if you are experienced enough to use *Vadakkan Uli* (a special kind of chisel) then you can go the way the Uli leads you." In another Asari story, *muzhakkol*, a wooden measuring scale which was a trade-mark of Asari Jati, tricked a greedy customer by changing its unit of measure in order to save the chief carpenter from embarrassment.[26] Each story or proverb established

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[25] For a Marxist analysis of the effects of transformation of means of production in the artisanal practices in the early industrial societies, see, Ronald Aminzade, *Class Politics and Early Industrial Capitalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); for an anthropological study of means of production and its transformation in the industrial age see Michael Brian Schiffer, ed., *Anthropological Perspectives on Technology* (Arizona: The Amerind Foundation Inc., 2001).

[26] V. M. Shivan, "Asarimarumayi Bandhappetta Pazhamchollukal (Proverbs Related to Asaris)," *Karmabhumi,* May 1992, 3.

mutual respect, dependence and agency for both the worker and his tools. In short, the tools, like human beings, had caste identity, agency and moral consciousness.

In the workshops, the tools, especially the new ones like the lathe, were not specifically designed for carpentry. Unlike the old tools, the contents of which were enriched with stories and proverbs related to Asari Jati, the new tools were commodities purchased from tool makers. They were not caste- specific and hence the use of these tools moved carpentry practices beyond the rules of Jati.

This was true for the measuring instruments as well. The intrusion of new technical knowledge in the construction field brought along with it new methods of measuring and calculation. The standardized measures like meter and degrees partially replaced the subjective measures like finger, measure of eye and feet etc. Colonialists had introduced these measures in the region as early as the second half of the nineteenth century, but until the 1980s, Asaris did not incorporate these units into their practice.[27] In the new situation, where they had to work alongside engineers who were equipped with the colonial forms of knowledge and who had more authority in the field, Asaris began translating their calculations into these objectified measures. Measuring tapes in meters or feet replaced the *muzhakkol* (wooden scale with measures in fingers) and the *chartau* (measuring string), both of which had multiple symbolic dimensions in the Asari practices.[28] As in the case of tools, the measuring

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[27] In 1992 *Karmabhumi* published a table for conversion from the old system to the new system of measure which showed that by then Asaris had began using the new units and tools of measurement along with the old ones. See, "Kai kanakku Pattika," *Karmabhumi*, May, 1992, 12. The interviews I conducted with Asaris revealed that even now, the older generation of Asaris is reluctant to use measuring tapes with the measure of centimeter and inch. Even when Asaris use it, they translate them into the older measures in order to calculate the measures and designs.

[28] See Chapter Two.

instruments also lost their caste identity and pushed the Asari practices beyond the Jati order.

Similar to tools and measuring instruments, the work on wood, on which Asaris had the monopoly, was no longer a Jati activity. By the 1980s, sawmills started taking over many activities on wood and Asaris depended on these mills for the initial processing of the wood. The sawmills took over the preliminary processes of cutting and planing the wood according to the requirements of Asaris. In this case, on the one hand, Asaris had to understand the techniques of operation in the sawmills so that they could give correct directions to the mill operator. On the other hand, as Asaris were neither an experts nor practitioners of these techniques, they were not able to adapt this activity into the caste practices. The dependability of the mill owner and the personal relationship that Asaris had with him were crucial factors in getting quality wood pieces. If earlier the network of Asari practices mainly included the objects and the individuals and their mutual relations within the Jati community, in the present, the network moved beyond the Jati community by including many other objects, individuals and relations. Asarippani, which was a process negotiated within the community, transformed into a network of activity which crossed the boundary of Jati and in this process the community lost its exclusive monopoly in the practice of carpentry.

Another important factor that has changed within the Asari practice was the spatial dimension of asarippani. Desham, which was the boundary condition of asarippani, lost its importance as the network of carpentry practices extended beyond desham. In the new form, space was no more a dimension of asarippani. We saw

earlier that the particular weather, flora and fauna or geography of a location were important factors in the Asari ways of knowing. The location of the plot of land, the geological properties of the specific location and the weather of a particular location were intrinsic elements in the Asari practices. In the case of RC roofed houses, Asaris mainly produced windows, doors and furniture which they manufactured independent of the factors of space mentioned above. In the actual construction sites where carpentry works were executed earlier, weather was an important factor and the asarippani was a seasonal work. As Asaris started working inside the shops, seasons did not have a significant effect on their work. The increased transportation facilities further reduced dependency on the locally available varieties of trees for wood. The increased mobility of carpenters gave them access to localities outside their desham.

Once Asaris shifted their location of work from the construction site to workshops, general carpentry work and artistic production became two separate activities. In the first chapter we saw that the colonial practice attempted to separate art from science, fact from fiction, and rational from irrational. It was in the circumstances of these separations that the term artisan came into usage in colonial discourse. The term was supposed to point towards the overlapping spaces of art and science in the artisanal process. The supposed factual and fictional elements in their practice required a new category to denote them other than simply as artist and worker or as artist and scientist. In the colonial period Asaris were not 'bothered' about or affected by the category artisan. It was not possible, and there was no need, to separate art and work in asarippani. In the late twentieth-century transformations of asarippani, art work and general work became separate elements in asarippani.

For the new-model houses, the carpentry work was limited to products like windows, doors and furniture which were generally made in a standardized format. Still, there was a demand for "art-worked" windows, doors or furniture as special features of a house. The customers in this case, however, considered art work as a separate activity depending upon the creativity of the individual carpenter, and not based on the "traditional" inheritance of the community. Asaris used new patterns and designs for these art works which were very different from the traditional patterns used in the earlier constructions. Like any other art, the individual Asari became the author of his art work whereas earlier the community was assigned the authorship.

The movement of asarippani outside the Jati practices, however, does not indicate secularization or rationalization of Asari work, as some scholars had argued about the changes in the artisanal practices in the context of industrial development in the West.[29] Lately, historians have challenged the notion that the mechanization of production has totally disenchanted the world of work or someway has secularized it. For example, analyzing the case of Malaysian female factory workers, Aihwa Ong argued that the so-called scientific management principles deployed by the corporate factory owners incorporated the cultural aspects – including religion – as important

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[29] The early sociological scholarship beginning from Max Weber understood the process of industrialization as a rationalization process where the world is further and further disenchanted and made human-centered. Following this scholarship, anthropologists and historians of technology mapped the disenchanting processes in the artisanal practices in the wake of mechanization and industrialization. For Weber's view on rationalization see, Stanislav Andreski, *Max Weber on Capitalism, Bureaucracy and Religion* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2008). For a historical analyses of rationalization of artisanal production see, Steven M. Zdatny*, The Politics of Survival: Artisans in the Twentieth Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert Tarule, *The Artisans of Ipswich: Craftsmanship in Colonial New England* (Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). For a critique of rationalization approach from anthropological perspective, see Deepak Mehta*, Work, Ritual, Biography: A Muslim Community in North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

factors in increasing the efficiency of the employees.[30] Susan George argued that technology was always a spiritual endeavor and religion and technology in the capitalist world are mutually constitutive.[31] Following this scholarship, we can observe that the new relation between Asaris and the tools did not make Asari practice either secular or rational practice. The new tools were soon incorporated into the symbolic dimensions not governed by the Jati rules but by a new spiritual dimension of religion. For example, in most of the workshops, the Hindu workers, irrespective of their Jati, put sandal paste brought from the temples on the lathe before they started working. Some of the workers put calendars, photos or pictures of goddesses and gods on the tools. Unlike in the earlier caste-based production systems, the practices of spiritualizing the tools were not Jati-specific, but rather according to religious beliefs.

Similarly, the new tools had not rationalized the methods of production as some scholars have argued.[32] Even in the new ways of production it was difficult to separate logical and rational actions from intuitive and automatic bodily actions. For example, working on a lathe required certain kinds of hand skills, which were attained through experience. Similar to the earlier methods used in carpentry, hands have to

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[30] Aihwa Ong, *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

[31] Susan George, *Religion and Technology in the 21st Century* (London: Information Science Publishing, 2006).

[32] For example, Susan Hirsch in an early work gives an impression that craftsmen, when moved from the artisanal production practice to factory system, in some way underwent a process of rationalization in their new workplace. The latest anthropological scholarship on factory practices notes that while the new tools and manufacturing systems had mechanized the human interaction with the tools, it would be wrong to consider this mechanization as a process of increased rationality. See Susan F Hirsch, *Roots of the American Working Class: The Industrialization of Craft in Newark* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978). For an anthropological criticism of the view of rationalization, see Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago 2004).

'think on their own' when one works on a lathe. The Asari practice, while incorporating the colonial/ Brahmanical notion of religion into their practice, did not follow the logic of the division of practices into secular and spiritual domains.

Until the 1980s, an Asari's work began by selecting the appropriate tree for each purpose. For determining the quality of the wood, Asaris applied different senses including taste, touch and smell. In the new format, Asaris purchased wood pieces which were already cut and roughly shaped at mechanized sawmills. Here, Asaris could recognize the quality of the wood only during their work. The use of senses like taste and smell started disappearing from Asari practices. The new generation of Asaris in the 1990s, who got their training in these workshops, mainly exerted the visual sense and the sense of touch to a certain degree. The visual sense was important not just because the appearance of the product now had a greater value in the market. The quality of wood which was purchased from sawmills had to be determined by the process of observation. Earlier, Asaris used the taste and smell of the tree leaves or trunk in order to determine the hardness/softness of the wood. Now, they had to completely depend on their visual sense to decide the quality of the wood they purchased. As a result, certain kind of knowing methods disappeared from the Asari practices.

Anthropologists who studied the sensual processes in non-western cultures have argued that, in these cultures, proximate senses were very much part of the production of knowledge. A number of ethnographies have described how people

used smell, taste and touch for sensing and ordering the world around them.[33] Judith Okely noted that, without the dining experiences she had in certain villages in France, she could not have understood the relevance of certain memories of old people from the village.[34] Okely argued that the tasting experience was critical not only for the knowledge of the people she studied but also for her own anthropological inquiry of their knowledge. Okely's attempt was to critique the scholars who wanted to limit embodied knowledge to non-Western societies and written knowledge for the Western scholarship.

While the anthropological scholarship mentioned above questioned the importance given to the visual and aural senses in Western scholarship, they did not challenge the Western notions of senses and sensory experience. Our objective here is not simply to understand the change or comparative differences in the ways in which different cultures privileged different senses at different times. More important is the change colonial knowledge introduced in the conceptualization of the process of sensing itself. Within the colonial concepts of knowledge, sensing as a subjective practice was not an element of objective knowledge. The sensing processes could, at most, be a part of the production process of knowledge, but not an element in the finished product. This did not mean that in the actual practice of science, subjective elements were not important. Historians and sociologists of science have observed

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[33] C. Nadia Seremetakis, ed., *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik, ed., *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1994); Paul Stoller, *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: Senses in Anthropology* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

[34] Judith Okely, "Vicarious and Sensory Knowledge of Chronology and Change: Ageing in Rural France," in Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Hervik, eds., *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1994).

that it is in the discourse on science – both by scientists themselves and by commentators of science – that objectivity became an intrinsic factor of scientific knowledge; in the actual production of knowledge, subjective elements still had a critical role.[35] These scholars identified contradictions of discourse and practice as a central feature of modern institutions of production of knowledge.

The contradiction of discourse and practice was visible in the Asari practices too, as Asaris incorporated the elements of production of knowledge into asarippani. The introduction of new production practices in asarippani in 1990s changed the sensing practices of Asaris; the proximate senses of smelling and tasting were no longer part of asarippani. This does not mean that, in this transformation, Asari practices became an objectified rational process. In all practical situations, asarippani remained an embodied practice because the processes of sensing and knowing were still inseparable. At the same time, in describing asarippani, Asaris began using the dichotomous categories of theory and practice, body and mind or thinking and doing all adopted from the colonial concept of knowledge.

Ravindran, a middle aged Asari who runs his own shop equated the new situation with that of "talking in multiple languages."[36] He uses the new measuring instruments for work, but uses the earlier proportions, measures and calculations in practice. Ravindran explained:

> When I discuss the work with the engineer I use the new terms and measures. When I supervise my young nephew, I use both the old and new terms. When I

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[35] See, Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 1988); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[36] Interview with Ravindran, November 16, 2009.

> am working, my mind thinks in the same terms of calculations as my father taught me years before.[37]

Ravindran's example shows how Asaris utilized different registers of 'traditional' and 'modern' vocabulary in the context of asarippani from workshops. Asaris utilized scientific knowledge but by translating it into their language and method. For example, it was the engineers, using the new botanical knowledge, who selected specific wood for particular frames, but this knowledge did not directly control the understanding of the Asaris' regarding the way in which a wood piece might behave during the process of sawing. This does not mean that Asaris completely ignored the information supplied by the engineer regarding the quality of the wood. They assimilated both experiences into his practice and created new ways of knowing the qualities of wood.

Rajan, another Asari in his forties, showed me several engineering design manuals and vernacular books on Thachu Sastram, which he kept in the shop. He explained that he kept these books as a strategy to satisfy customers. According to him, the customers measured his capacity not just based on the quality of his product, but also by his displayed understanding of modern scientific knowledge. Only by establishing a certain authority over both modern and traditional knowledge he could gain the respect of the customers. He mentioned that "they (the customers) want to check what I *know* as well as what I *do*. Nowadays, in many instances, the former is more important than the latter."[38]

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[37] Interview with Ravindran, November 16, 2009.

[38] Interview with Rajan, January 23, 2010.

Asaris, in order to satisfy the customer of the present day, had to incorporate the idea of knowledge as a written object and of written texts as the base of practical work. At the same time, the distinctive domains of discursive and non-discursive practices historically created by the colonial order of knowledge overlapped in asarippani. On the one hand, Rajan believed that in actual situations, asarippani was a practice beyond the definitions of knowledge as written object. On the other hand, he accepted the dominant view that knowledge has a higher status than practical work. Rajan incorporated these two contradictory views in his understanding of asarippani.

The 1980s and 1990s were socially and economically a challenging time for Asaris. As we observed, the new technology removed Asaris from their central role as the chief architects of house construction. The middle-aged and old Asari men, who were not ready to adapt to the new technologies in the field, became partially or totally unemployed. Only a few – like Ravindran and Rajan in the examples before – were successful in running carpentry workshops within their own village. The moothasaris still enjoyed some respect as ritual practitioners, but this status did not provide them with enough economic gains to prosper or even survive.

One immediate response to the economic crisis was migration to towns and cities both within India and outside which was mainly to the Gulf countries. In the 1980s, several Asaris moved into workshops and furniture production units in or near towns and cities. It was, however, not easy even for the younger generation to adapt to the new working conditions in these units and generally to the life in the cities. These units mostly paid Asaris based on piece-rate, which was barely sufficient to

survive in the cities.[39] Like in any other piece-rate system, in these units, the speed in which one could finish the work was the most important factor of economic success which was completely antithetical to the earlier notion of asarippani. In this system, Asari work was disconnected from the earlier Jati network and Asaris found themselves disconnected from familiar spatial and temporal locations. In the manufacturing units and workshops, the social status of Asaris was similar to that of other workers like plumbers, electricians or drivers.

The dilemma Asaris faced in the new mechanized production system was not one of deskilling as some scholars have suggested of artisanal practices in the context of mechanization. Historians of technology depicted the deskilling process as an outcome of modernization and industrialization. Most of these discussions focused on a teleological historical perspective based on modernist narratives of the transformation from artisanal production to industrial production.[40] These scholars considered skill an ahistorical category which could be attributed to certain human capabilities across time and space. According to these scholars, only the degree of specific skill sets changes through time, not the definition of skill. This conception enables them to debate on deskilling and enskilling with the concept of skill remaining the same before and after deskilling/enskillng. In the case of Asaris and many other

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[39] See, K.N. Harilal, "Deskilling and Wage Differential in Construction Industry," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24, 24 (June 17, 1989): 1347-1352.

[40] For analyses of transformation of artisanal practices based on the concept of deskilling/enskilling see, Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Paul Thompson, *An Introduction to Debates on Labour Process* (London: Macmillan, 1989); K.N. Harilal, "Deskilling and Wage Differential in Construction Industry," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 24, 24 (June 17, 1989): 1347-1352.

artisanal castes, it is problematic to understand the changes in terms of deskilling or enskilling without re-evaluating the very category of 'skill'

We saw in Chapter one that the concept of skill itself emerged along with the notion of knowledge-as-object in the colonial condition. In the pre-colonial situation, as the bodily work was not considered separate from the act of mind, the term skill in its colonial sense was not relevant and so was not used to understand asarippani or any other artisanal practice. In other words, what industrialization triggered was not a process of deskilling, but the introduction of a new discourse of skill itself and a new way of understanding artisanal practices. It is only in the terms of this colonial history that we can discuss the question of deskilling.

There are two important difficulties in understanding the change of asarippani in the 1990s in terms of de-skilling. First, even if we assume that Asaris were now executing the work designed by engineers, mere skill was not enough to turn a design into a product. For example, an engineer, using botanical knowledge, might suggest which specific tree should be used and in what dimensions it should be cut for a specific product. In a practical situation, however, an Asari used his own method of calculation, testing and reasoning, which too requires discursive, rational and formal ways of thinking. In other words, the problem Asaris faced in the manufacturing units was not that they lost their traditional skill; rather it was a predicament of disconnecting asarippani from the earlier network of Jati and connecting it to a new network as practical work. In an article in 1992, V. Shanmukhan Achari noted that

> it is not correct to say that the young Asaris who migrated to the cities are less capable than the old generation. They are using their capabilities and skills in a

> different manner. The dilemma they face is whether they want to continue asarippani and perish or to engage in other works and give up their respectable position in the society.[41]

In interviews I conducted, most of the young Asaris raised the same concern regarding the disconnect between asarippani and the network based on Jati. Divakaran, who is now in his late twenties and who is working in a distant city, explained that his present job in the furniture shop required "high bodily skill and capacity to adapt to machines. I am comfortable with the work as such. Still, there is no life in this; it is just a job."[42] Asaris identified this crisis not as problem of deskilling but a question of self-identification in the new networks in which they found themselves. In its new format, asarippani was no longer the central organizing category of Jati Asari. The disjuncture between Jati and asarippani produced a vacuum in the practice of Jati and self-identification practices.

The crises Asaris faced in the 1980s were multi-dimensional. The Asari self-understanding described the new situation as loss of identity or their lack of commitment to their own Jati. It was in the context of the above problematic that the community initiated various forms of reform activities through a new community organization in the 1980s. In 1981, Asaris, along with the other four Viswakarma Jatis, formed an association named the Kerala Viswakarma Sabha (KVS). The Sabha incorporated the main objectives of the Kerala Viswakarma Association which was active in the 1960s. Like the Kerala Viswakarma Association, negotiation with the state government in obtaining adequate shares in the governing process was still the

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[41] V. Shanmukhan Achari, "Yanthrayugavum Viswakarmajarum (Machine Age and the Viswakarmas)," *Karmabhumi*, November, 1992, 11.

[42] Interview with Divakaran, March 3, 2010.

main objective of the Sabha. The Sabha, however, took cultural reform as an equally important agenda, which was a response to the crisis in the practices of self-identification. Asaris were one of the five Jatis included in the Viswakarma tradition and individuals from the Asari community took major roles in the formation of this organization.

The KVS successfully organized members of the five Jatis and many agitations demanding reservation[43] in government jobs and in other politically-appointed positions. In 1985, the state government conceding to the demands of the Sabha included the Viswakarma Jatis in the schedule of "Other Backward Castes." By the 1990s, the Sabha's membership reached around twenty-seven thousand. In 1983, Sabha initiated a publication named *Karmabhumi* (the land of work) which soon gained wide subscription among the community members. Started as a monthly, *Karmabhumi* soon became a bi-monthly in 1989 and a weekly in 1993. In 2000, the state government nominated the Sabha's state secretary as a member of the Public Service Commission, which was the body responsible for all government recruitments.[44] In short, within ten years, the Sabha made its presence visible in the domain of politics and successfully negotiated with the government on behalf of the Viswakarma community.

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[43] 'Reservation' is the term used in post-colonial India to refer to positive discriminatory actions of the government towards various sections of the population.

[44] Each new state government, after being elected, appointed their own nominees to various public sector corporations and boards. In nominating these positions, the ruling political parties attempted to satisfy all the community organizations that supposedly helped them in the election. The Public Service Commission is an independent body appointed by the state government which conducted all the selection processes of state government employees. The position in the commission is a prestigious post and the nomination of its member to this position shows the importance of the KVS in the political domain.

Other than the activities in the realm of politics, the Sabha made significant attempts to improve the status of the community in a society where Brahmanical values and concepts had already gained domination in social and cultural practices. The first step in this regard was to make the Viswakarma identity part of the history of the nation, erasing the individual Jati identity. In the case of Asaris, the crisis in the asarippani had already weakened their identification to Jati and identifying with Viswakarma was a timely opportunity to regain their lost respectability.

It was in the shift from Asari to Viswakarma, that History as form of knowledge of the past intervened in the self-understanding of the community members. We already observed that, by the early twentieth century, through the processes of negotiations between Jati communities and the colonial order of knowledge, history writing had become the dominant method of understanding the past. In all community reform movements which intended to enter the order of knowledge, history writing became an unavoidable agenda for establishing and naturalizing the identity of the community. Individual and organized attempts to create a suitable past were always part of the activities of the community reform movements.

The reform movements of the upper caste Jatis such as Nairs and Nampoothiris in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used history writing as one of the major activities of reform. The histories written as part of the reform activity created a Hindu past as the history of the Nation, which justified the Brahmanical traditions in

the name of knowledge and superiority of values.[45] The leaders of the lower caste movements such as Ezhava and Pulaya reform movements challenged this past with their own histories in which the story of nation was told as the story of invasion and domination of Brahmins over other cultures through a hierarchical Jati system.[46]

The upper caste and lower caste histories opposed and challenged each other regarding the content, but both justified the importance of History as the knowledge of the past. The Brahmins justified this colonial form of understanding the past because it gave them the authority over traditional knowledge – the knowledges of the past – through which they justified their claims of superiority in the present.[47] The Ezhava and Pulaya reform leaders invested their hope in the self-description of colonial knowledge as modern defined in opposition to traditional. They imagined that entry into modern knowledge would help them challenge traditional Brahmanical hierarchies. At the same time, all these histories following the colonial protocols of History considered the Nation as the natural boundary of a particular culture, written text as the most convincing form of evidence, Sanskrit as the language of traditional knowledge, and science as a valid form of knowledge to which all other practices should refer.

Asaris, before the interaction with the practices of production of knowledge, invoked the past through their carpentry work and through story-telling and songs. These invocations of the past differed from *history* in its method, form and content.

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[45] S. Madhava Menon, *The Vedic Tradition of India* (Madras: The Hindu Publishing Co., 1912); v. Neelakanta Sastri, *Brahmins and Indian Civilization* (Madras: Saraswathi Printers, 1914); K. Unni Moosathu, *Arsha Paramparyam* (The Arsha Tradition) (Thrissur: Mangalodayam Press, 1920).

[46] Dr. Palpu, *Collected Articles of Dr. Palpu* (Trivandrum: Kairaly Press, 1934).

[47] See, Chapter Three.

The past in earlier Asari practice was not completely detached from the present. For example, in the selection of the proper location for a house, Asaris considered the past of the particular space an important parameter. This past was not something that had already happened but a force that lingered over the present. A. B. Shivan explained that "the moothasari observes the signals and learns who from the past are still residing in the location, what elements of the past are active in that space and determines the proper place and design of the house."[48] Kidangoor Raghavan Achari observed that "the younger generation of Asaris considers that what happened yesterday is not important; they did not have the faculty to see the presence of the forces from the past."[49] This was different from the idea of the alterity of the past from the present which dominated in the new form of history writing.

The imagination of space in earlier Asari constructions of the past was also different from the imagined spaces in new histories. Desham, not nation, was the genuine boundary condition in earlier stories of the past. As History became the dominant form of the knowledge of the past in the postcolonial situation, the earlier Asari ways of invoking the past became local myth and folklore. The use of vernacular language, the absence of written texts and making of desham as the location combined to prevent the Asari past from becoming the *history* of the community. It was in this situation that the Kerala Viswakarma Sabha turned to the Sanskrit tradition and began constructing a history of Viswakarma which included five artisanal Jatis in Keralam.

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[48] A.B. Shivan, *Viswakarmeeyam* (Kottayam: D.C.Books, 1999), 21.

[49] Kidangur Raghavan Achari, "Vedangalum Thachushastravum," *Karmabhumi*, November, 1998.

The idea of a group of five artisanal Jatis was not completely new in the region. In the early literature in the Malayalam-speaking region, there were a number of mentions of *Aynkammalar* (five hand-working castes). The colonial censuses of Malabar in the late nineteenth century categorized Asaris within the Aynkammalar. This was based on the local vernacular stories of Aynkammalar which originated in a very different historical period. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, these five Jatis did not participate in any common Jati practices: they did not intermarry within these communities, there were no common rituals, and common dining was not allowed. Aynkammalar was more a taxonomical category than an identity and the varied rules of the individual Jatis of the members determined their daily life. Still, through colonial categorization mediated by the Brahmanical stories and myths, Aynkammalar became the vernacular equivalent of the category artisan. P. Bhaskaranunni observed that, in the context of colonial ethnographic practices, Brahmins as interlocutors imposed their ideas of caste into the colonial anthropological knowledge. "The colonial writings in the nineteenth century, mediated by the Brahmins, determined the twentieth century commonsense regarding Jati in Keralam."[50] Within this colonial /Brahmanical notion, the Aynkammalar story was a story of the local practice of Jati unlike the Sanskritized Brahmanical stories which were 'national.'

In their attempt to write the history of the community, the Viswakarma Sabha did not choose the local history of Aynkammalar; rather they invoked the Sanskritized myth of Viswakarma and presented this story as part of the history of the nation. In

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[50] P. Bhaskarnunni, *Keralam Irupatham Noottandinte Arambhathil* (Keralam in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2005), 176.

this history, God Viswakarma originated as the founding figure of the community and this history described the Brahmanical tradition as a later manipulation of Hindu civilization.

Viswakarma, which means the creator of the universe, was a god with five faces. In the beginning of time, the five Brahmas, who were the gods of carpentry, goldsmithy, sculpture, blacksmithy and coppersmithy, emerged from the five faces of Viswakarma. These five Brahmas created the material world which laid the foundation of human civilization. Many authors, mainly from Asari and Thattan Jatis, started to publish articles and books based on the Sanskrit puranas interpreting the story of Viswakarma as the originary moment in the history of the community.[51] This selection was important because through the assertion of Sanskritized history, the Viswakarma communities claimed a higher status in the order of knowledge. In 1994, one of the articles in *Karmabhumi* articulated this claim as follows:

> All the great temples, forts, statues and other buildings are representation of the knowledge of Viswakarmans. But in the present, nobody recognizes this as such. How do we make this historical fact known before the common public and before the authorities? Only by establishing the connection between the Indian civilization and Viswakarma theories as explained in Sanskrit texts can we prove

[51] The major Malayalam publisher D.C. Books published five books between 1998 and 2003 on Vastu and Viswakarma with interpretations by authors from the Viswakarma community. Devi Books, Kodungalloor published seven books on Viswakarma myth between 1994 and 2001. For example, see, B. Raghavanachari, ed., *Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Kodungalloor: Devi Books, 1994); K. V. Achuthan Achari, ed., *Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Kottayam: D.C. Books, 1998); K. Neelakantanasari, ed., *Maha Manushyalaya Chandrika* (Kodungalloor: Devi Books, 2000). These books, while targeting a wider audience outside the Viswakarma community, were part of the individual and organized attempts by the Viswakarma community to popularize the origin story of the community.

> the importance of our knowledge; and only by establishing the importance of our knowledge can we regain the status of our community in the society.[52]

In Chapter One we saw that, in the first half of the twentieth century, in order to resist the interventions of the colonial knowledge, Asaris kept asarippani outside the purview of knowledge. Asari representative practices were inseparable from asarippani which included discursive and non-discursive elements. Even if we consider objects such as houses or sculptures as signs and in that way related to language, the representative strategies of these objects were very different from oral or written representations like stories or songs.[53] In the changed circumstances in the 1980s, the contemporary society recognized knowledge only in the written form and hence the community had to establish its relation to written texts in order to claim a higher position in the order of knowledge. Knowledge, which was earlier a part of action, became a *representation* of actions and objects in the form of writing.

The Viswakarma histories written in the last decades of the twentieth century had many similarities with the reform histories of other communities written in the early twentieth century. These Viswakarma historians used the same narrative pattern in earlier reform histories, one that described a glorious past in a time immemorial and an invasion by a foreign culture which enforced the current subaltern position of the community.[54] At the same time, Viswakarma histories differed in many ways from

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[52] V. Shanmughan Achari, "Viswakarmajante Bhavi" (the Future of Viswakarmajan), *Karmabhumi*, November, 1989, 15.

[53] See Chapter One.

[54] Many of the Dalit Reform leaders considered Brahmins as foreign invaders and imagined a golden period before this invasion where Dalit practices were respected and society was more egalitarian. For example Mahatma Jyothiba Phule in his works reinterpreted the Brahmanical myth of Vishnu's ten incarnations as a story of Aryan invasion of India and argued that the society before Aryan domination was more egalitarian. See G.P. Deshpande, ed., *Selected Writings of Jyotiba Phule*, (New Delhi 2002).

the early twentieth century community histories written by the reform leaders of both the upper and lower castes.

The Nampoothiri reform movement in the 1930s re-defined the daily practice of acharam according to the protocols of scientific knowledge. In this process, the reform movement produced a notion of continuity between traditional knowledge and scientific knowledge. The Ezhava and Pulaya reformers in the early twentieth century also spoke about a glorious past in a time immemorial, but they focused more on the necessity of breaking with the immediate past dominated by the Brahmins. The dominant colonial /Brahmanical discourse had made their contemporary practices, including their very occupation, impure or even culturally invalid. These reformers in the early twentieth century urged the community members to move away from these traditional occupations to modern ones based on colonial education and scientific knowledge. The attempts of the major reform writers from the lower caste communities were not directed at establishing the historical importance of their traditional occupation. Rather, their focus was more on the need for reform in the current practices of the community members.

In the early twentieth century, Sri Narayana Guru, the spiritual leader and philosopher, firmly discouraged Ezhavas from participating in the traditional occupation of toddy taping. He directed the community members to enroll in the colonial education institutions and participate in as many different government jobs as possible. Guru never attempted to analyze work as a spiritual concept. For him, knowledge was the more important concept. However, Guru's philosophical works did not attempt to create a history which would connect Ezhavas with knowledge in an

immemorial past.[55] Similarly Ayyankali, the Pulaya reform leader, focused on creating a rupture with the traditional Pulaya practices by urging the members of the community to discontinue the traditional occupation of agricultural labour. Even though the colonial – Brahmanical discourse had not demonized agricultural labour as they did toddy tapping and leather-work, it was still considered an impure work which supposedly did not require the application of mind or knowledge. For Ayyankali, the low status of his community members was directly linked to the assumed impure nature of the traditional occupation.[56]

The Viswakarma movement in the last decades of the twentieth century, on the other hand, attempted to create a continuity of their traditional occupation from the past to the present. The colonial -Brahmanical mapping of traditional occupations of the five Jatis within the Viswakarma had not marked their occupations as impure or invalid. At the same time, occupations of these communities had a lower status compared to Brahmanical knowledge. Hence, the objective of the Viswakarma movement was not to create a break with the traditional occupation but to connect it with written traditions or to connect it with traditional knowledge in the colonial sense.

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[55] Scholars now map Sri Narayana Guru's meditations on knowledge in the phenomenological tradition, where the difference between the knower and knowledge is transcended in the process of knowing. Hence, for Guru, the practical work did not qualify even as an object of knowledge. For an explorations of Guru's deliberations on knowledge see Osella and Osella, "From Transience to Immanence: conception, Life-cycle and Social Mobility in Kerala, South India", *Modern Asian Studies*, 33 (1999): 989-1020.

[56] Ayyankali, unlike Sri Narayan Guru, did not attempt to create an abstract theory of knowledge. On the one hand, Ayyankali attempted to show the upper castes the importance of agriculture labor by organizing a labor strike in 1903 demanding changes in the social attitude of the upper caste people. But at the same time, he encouraged the members of his community to join colonial educational institutions and move into occupations which were more respected and valued by the upper castes. For the details of Ayyankali's efforts on this regard, see M. Nisar and Meena Kandaswamy, *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest* (Calicut: Other Books, 2007).

Prajabodhanam (Enlightening the Subjects), written by Sri Karthika Peruman in 1998, shows how the Viswakarma historians negotiated with the challenges mentioned above as part of writing a national history of Viswakarmas.[57] Peruman introduced his work as a product of "factual experience." According to him, "a future with justice is impossible without the historical consciousness which has surpassed the test of fire of the past: the past which is an evolution of the material and spiritual history of Bharata."[58] Peruman invoked historical consciousness as a necessary element in the imagination of future and for him it was a consciousness of the history of the Nation, Bharata.

In the first chapter, Peruman compares the stories of the origin of the Universe as told by science and by the Vedas and Puranas. The similarity between the story of science and the origin story based on the Viswakarma God makes the latter a fact or truth. Peruman asserted the validity of the Viswakarma story by comparing it to the big bang theory in science.[59] This method was not different from that of the upper caste revivalist historians in the early twentieth century who attempted to explain Sanskrit texts according to scientific principles. The difference of Peruman's text with the Brahmanical interpretations becomes visible only when he discusses the story of the manipulation of Vedas by the Brahmins.

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[57] It is important to note that amidst all the claims of the universal nature of scientific knowledge, the nation has been considered as a genuine boundary of knowledge production. The Nation's presence is not limited to the nationalistic organization of scientific institutions, but is extended even to the epistemological characteristics. For an analysis of the relation between Nation and science, see Petitjean, Jami and Moulin, *Science and Empires: Historical Studies about Scientific Development and European Expansion* (Vienna: Springer, 1992).

[58] Sri Karthika Peruman, "Prefacce," *Prajabodhanam* (Thrissur: Kainur Kandrenkavu, 1998),

[59] Ibid., 1-3.

According to Brahmanical interpretation, four was the important number in the Vedas and puranas. There were four faces for the creator Brahma, there were four Vedas, and human beings were classified into four Varnas (colors). Peruman – quoting the same Vedas and puranas – argued that in the origin it was not Brahma but Viswakarma, who has five faces, who created the Universe. There were five Vedas, and there were five Viswakarma sages who created the human civilization.[60] The details of his argument are not important for our purposes, but we underscore the difference between his explanation of the origin of the Universe and the Brahmanical interpretation.

The word *Karmam*, work, is the central organizing category of Peruman's text. By shifting the focus from the Brahmanical concept of Karma – the propelling force of all the living beings – to the Viswakarma concept of Karmam, Peruman attempted to underline the divine and spiritual nature of work which created and sustained the universe. For Peruman, work was not just an action but a divine source, a force that was embedded in all objects and living beings. Peruman's attempt was to elevate the status of work from the position of bodily action to a concept which could explain all the phenomena in the universe, or in other words, to relocate the category of work from the domain of practice to that of theory. Quoting Viswakrma purana, a Sanskrit text, Peruman explains that "karmam (work) is the expression of divine knowledge, which actualizes in the world through five elements and perpetuates through the actions of the five Viswakarma traditions."[61]

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[60] Ibid., 9-17.

[61] Ibid., 117.

A. B. Sivan, another scholar from Viswakarma group, also attempted to establish the theoretical nature of the Viswakarma tradition. In his interpretation of the text *Viswakarmeeyam,* published in 1999, he stated that "the practices of Viswakarma people are the continuation of the knowledge originated from Atharva Veda. It was the priestly traditions of Brahmins which created a distinction between the Vedic tradition and Viswakarma traditions."[62] Similarly, another Viswakarma author Raghavan Achari asserted that, "it was through the Viswakarma people that the *theorems* of *Manushyalaya Chandrika* (a Sanskrit text on architecture), was handed over from one generation to another."[63] In all theses works, authors created a historic past – a past in which knowledge and Viswakarma practices were inseparably aligned. These works also expressed concern over the negligence of theoretical knowledge by the young generation of the community. In an interview, Shanmukhan Achari expressed this explicitly:

> We Asaris always lament that society does not respect us anymore. How can we gain respect, if we are engaged only in such kind of work which can be easily replicated by a machine? My grandfather was very much respected even among Brahmins because he could explain every work based on theorems. The key is the knowledge not the physical work; even animals which do not have any capacity to think can do work.[64]

In the Viswakarma attempt to elevate the ascribed status of the community from that of practitioners to knowledgeable experts, the difference of theory and practice become reinforced and work in its embodied form became degraded and devalued. The reform leaders attempted to position the Viswakarma Jatis as the

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[62] A.B. Shivan, "Preface," *Viswakarmeeyam* (Kottayam: D.C.Books, 1999).

[63] Kidangur Raghavan Achari, "Vedangalum Thachushastravum," *Karmabhumi*, November, 1998.

[64] Interview with Shanmughan Achari, December 30, 2009.

communities of expert knowledge of manufacture. In the practical sense, this was a difficult task considering the dominance of colonial – Brahmanical knowledge which was disseminated through wide networks of education institutions, art, literature and electronic and print media. The attempt of Kerala Viswakarma Sabha, however, helped Viswakarma communities claim a historical tradition similar to Brahmins and which was part of the history of the nation. In order to understand the effect of the Viswakarma reform movement on the Asari community, we have to explore the circulation of the reform discourse within and outside the community.

The reform discourse in the last two decades of the twentieth century had a significant impact on the younger generation within the Asari community, especially on those who were still engaged in asarippani. Unlike the previous generation, they began learning Sanskrit versus and focused more on the ritualistic practices assigned to Asaris during the construction work.[65] The availability of the printed copies of the old Sanskrit texts, which were now translated and interpreted in Malayalam, was one of the important factors that enabled this change. Many of these young Asaris started following the traditional rituals in their daily practice more strictly than the generation before. It is important to note that, unlike the early rituals which were an integral part of asarippani, these rituals were less based on specific Jati practices than on a understanding of common Hindu religious practice.

The community leaders took initiatives to revive a number of Asari temples which were in a state of neglect for decades. Earlier, the Asari temples had specific

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[65] V Rajan, a leader of the youth wing of the Kerala Viswakarma Sabha, in an article pointed out that after a decade's work by the Sabha, a number of young members have absorbed Viswakarma principles in their daily life both in the home and the work place. See V. Rajan, "Yuvajanangalum Viswakarma Sabhayum (The youth and the Viswakarma Sabha)", *Karmabhoomi*, December, 2004.

Jati-based gods and goddesses, and Jati-based worship practices. These gods and goddesses were now renamed and transformed as part of the Hindu pantheon.[66] The worship rituals were also transformed based on the Brahmanical model. The new tradition which emerged through opposition to the Brahmanical ideology ironically became more Brahmanical than in the pre-reform period.

Through the reform processes, the Asari rituals which were the integral part of asarippani formed their own domain separating themselves from actual moments of work. In this situation, many of the Asaris who were now specialized in the ritual practices did not participate in the actual carpentry work; rather, they became the experts of the traditional knowledge of asarippani.

If carpentry moved beyond the perimeters of Asari Jati, Asaris themselves moved into other non-Asari occupations in the last decades of the twentieth century. Many scholars who have studied aspects of the Gulf migration from Keralam have pointed out that the migrants in the Gulf engaged in the kind of work in which they would never consider engaging in Keralam.[67] Many of the Asaris who migrated to

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[66] Christian Missionaries starting from the early Nineteenth century, while condemning all the caste practices in India as idolatry, paganism and superstition, specifically targeted the lower caste practices of witch-craft, magic and other worship forms such as animal sacrifice. The upper caste reform movements attempted to divert the missionary criticism towards the lower caste practices to save and create a civilized Hindu religion. Later in the twentieth century, in the wake of the strengthening of the revivalist forces in the name of the Hindu religion, the remaining lower caste gods and goddesses were absorbed into the 'great pantheons of Hindu gods'. For an analysis of the revivalist politics, see K Jamanadas, "Saffronization, Hinuization or brahmnization,?" *Counter Current* (accessed on January 23, 2010), http://www.countercurrents.org/dalit-jamanadas011204.htm.

[67] The reluctance among Malayalees to engage in any kind of physical work has many genealogies including the denigration of practical work in the colonial discourse. It would be interesting to observe how people negotiated the contradiction of the above idea and the increased financial difficulties especially among the lower strata of the society. Gulf migration came as a blessing in this condition. The anonymity in the foreign space helped many migrants to shed the social stigma regarding physical work. See K V Joseph, *Keralites on the Move: A Historical Study of Migration from Kerala*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).

Gulf had to take up unskilled manual labor work, especially in their initial days of work abroad. When opportunities allowed, they worked as assistants in shopping malls, offices and in other jobs which did not require their traditional skills or capabilities. This engagement with non-Asari occupations encouraged Asaris, not only in the Gulf countries but in Keralam itself, to venture into other occupations. By the 1990s, the presence of Asari men and women became visible in sectors like engineering, education, agriculture and in different kinds of service jobs in various government offices.[68]

The movement of asarippani beyond the Jati boundaries and the involvement of individual Asaris outside the Jati occupation redefined the earlier role of asarippani as the central organizing category of the Jati Asari. The knowing practices of Asaris transformed significantly in the last three decades of the twentieth century. In the first chapter we observed how in the first half of the twentieth century, Asaris successfully assimilated the transformations taking place around them into the existing norms of their world without changing the basic principles of their knowing practice. In the last decades of the twentieth century, asarippani itself transformed into new forms and methods and this resulted in changes that were seminal to the knowing practice of Asaris. Asarippani moved from its earlier location of desham to the new location of nation. The Viswakarma reform discourse attempted to connect asarippani to theoretical knowledge, a category which Asaris deliberately ignored earlier. The written texts – especially Sanskrit texts – became an important element in the practice

[68] According to the estimate of Kerala Viswakarma Sabha in 2000, around 35% of the community members have moved out of the traditional occupation and have entered into government or private sector jobs. See "The Editorial", *Karmabhumi*, December 15, 2000.

of carpentry. Unlike in asarippani practiced in the pre-reform period where the discursive and non-discursive elements were entwined, in the new form, they functioned separately and independently. In the new form, asarippani became a hybrid activity located in the overlapping space of the production of knowledge and the practices of knowing.

Conclusion

By tracing the genealogy of the production of knowledge, I have attempted to demonstrate how knowledge attained such an unquestionable status and describe the effects of this ascendancy on various sections of the society in twentieth-century India. This analysis explained the production of knowledge as a political activity which was a negotiation between different actors such as the state, colonial officers, community organizations and individuals. It also pointed towards the dangers of assimilating different acts of knowing into a single category of knowledge. I used the category *production of knowledge* to map the genealogy of certain forms of knowledge which emerged in the colonial context and which continued to exert its presence and domination in the postcolonial world. More importantly, I demonstrated that the production of knowledge faced severe political challenges from various sections of the society in its process of becoming dominant and failed in many situations in its attempt to assimilate varied forms of knowing.

This exploration focused on how different caste communities in India interacted with the process of the production of knowledge and what effects this interaction created in the daily life of community members. By focusing on daily life, I shifted the discussion of knowledge production from the domain of discourse analysis to a field of actions where discursive and non-discursive elements intertwined and became inseparable. This shift also resulted in a change in the location of analysis from the institutional *sites* of knowledge production to the *circulation* of knowledge where different actors received, adapted, and transformed knowledge in various ways.

In its colonial version, knowledge was a hierarchical series with theoretical knowledge in a written format its highest, most developed form. In this hierarchical arrangement of knowledge, artisanal practices were considered traditional/ practical knowledge positioned at the bottom. Production of knowledge, in the colonial and postcolonial context, is located in the space of nation in the sense that the activity is organized at the national level which enables concepts such as 'Indian science' or 'Japanese technology.' While the nation is the location of production of knowledge, the knowledge produced has universal claims as well.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, the construction of the hierarchical series of knowledge was one of the central features of the colonial governing activities. Colonial governments attempted to order various sections of the population in hierarchical series according to each group's imagined historical connection to knowledge. In India, the British adopted the Brahmanical idea of caste as a measure for understanding the historical relation of the various sections of the society with the production of knowledge. In other words, they mapped the hierarchical order of caste into the hierarchical series of knowledge.

In the order of knowledge, Brahmins attained the highest position among the natives because of their supposed connection to written texts. The colonizers imagined Brahmins as the proper section of society who could be trained in the higher forms of knowledge. In this conception, technical training and practical work was the domain assigned to artisans. By the end of the nineteenth century, the colonial government established a series of institutions through which they desired to bring all caste communities under the governing activities. Universities and higher studies

centers were the most advanced of the institutions and were where the upper castes received higher forms of knowledge. Industrial training centers and technical schools targeted artisans and lower caste communities.

Through the analysis of carpentry practices in the first half of the twentieth century in Malabar, I mapped different ways of knowing that co-existed with colonial practices. I argued that Asaris' practices of knowing differed significantly from the colonial forms of knowledge. In their struggle against colonial intervention, Asaris emphasized the difference of asarippani from colonial definitions of artisanal practices. In the first half of the twentieth century, Asaris refused to enter into the knowledge series by keeping asarippani as a located practice outside the purview of the nation. The colonial attempt to bring Asaris into the industrial training centers and to make them participate in construction works under the Public Works Department generally failed in this period. In the process of the avoidance of colonial intervention, Asaris foregrounded asarippani as the organizing factor of their world. In this period, they re-defined the meaning and modes of asarippani in order to keep asarippani as a practice of knowing, rather than part of the production on knowledge.

Asaris imagined asarippani as an activity located in a specific geographical location – desham – outside which it was impossible to conduct the practice. Asarippani required bodily experience of the location in which it was conducted, and hence, learning of asarippani was also learning of the specificities of the surroundings. One had to be located in a specific space for long time in order to understand that space and desham was the space that Asaris considered the limit of this experiential understanding. In other words, those who moved out of the desham were incapable of

conducting asarippani. Asaris constructed desham as the boundary of asarippani in their attempt to avoid the colonial endeavors of bringing them to the towns and cities. Asaris invoked the idea of evil/ bad time to restrict the movement of individuals outside desham. They described the colonial temptations and offers as a sign of bad time in which one had to restrict one's own movements and be located in familiar spaces.

The Asari struggle against the colonial intervention produced new concepts of caste and gender within the community and realignments based on these concepts. Earlier, Asari women used to participate in asarippani from the home by making kitchen utensils and small wooden handles for agricultural tools. As the community began understanding asarippani as a male profession, women were excluded from manufacturing activities. Asarippani at this period became a practice by engaging in which a person transformed into Asari man. Asaris distanced themselves from the colonial bio-logic of gender differentiation where individuals are born as men and women. Each boy has to attain manliness by practicing asarippani.

Each caste group defined Jati differently with some category or the other as the central organizing feature of the respective Jatis. For Asaris, asarippani was this central activity of organizing Jati and the measure of including an individual within the Jati. If one had to become an Asari man, it was not enough to be born into the Asari Jati; he had to practice asarippani within its prescribed rules and methods. The interpretation of an action (asarippani) as the central organizing feature of Jati challenges the dominant ways of understanding caste practices based on ideology or describing it as based on a general principle applicable to all caste groups.

By the last decades of the twentieth century, technological changes in the construction field forced Asaris to incorporate elements of "modern knowledge" which transformed asarippani into a new form. By the 1990s, Asaris lost their authority as designers of houses as the engineers took over this role. Now working from small workshops instead of at the construction site, Asaris started using new measures, tools and materials in their manufacturing. They incorporated different types of objectified knowledge such as manuals and models into asarippani. Still, Asaris did not consider asarippani an objective or universal knowledge.

Asari reform organizations in this period attempted to create "knowledge" of carpentry in written form. History writing became an important factor in their reform activities. In this process, they invented a new identity of Viswakarma and created a body of literature around the mythological figure of Viswakarma. Through the above corpus of texts, the reform leaders claimed a theoretical status for asarippani. The creation of history was part of the reform organizations' negotiations with the state. In short, by the end of the twentieth century, asarippani moved into an overlapping field of production of knowledge and practice of knowing.

If the stories from the Asari world demonstrated avoidance as a strategy of resistance to colonial intervention, the Nampoothiri stories from the same period explained how the assimilation of caste into colonial conceptions of knowledge helped Nampoothiris maintain their dominance in the society. In the nineteenth century, Nampoothiris dominated other caste groups in Malabar based on their capacity to enforce social customs as landlords and on their power to control nonhuman forces. At this period, Nampoothiris considered acharam, performed on an everyday basis, as

the factor that maintained their domination. In other words, in this period, neither was knowledge part of their dominating power nor did they claim that it was.

By the end of the nineteenth century, some of the upper-caste communities, especially Nairs, began participating in colonial educational institutions and attained administrative positions in the colonial bureaucracy. The expansion of colonial activities in the field of education and public works brought along with it new moralities and mentalities, which challenged the Nampoothiri idea of acharam. The major challenge against Nampoothiri domination was based on the claims of knowledge, which was now understood according to the colonial conceptions of knowledge. The new measures of evaluation of authority based on knowledge defied discursively and materially the Nampoothiri claims of authority based on acharam.

Analyzing the colonial and vernacular literature in the first half of the twentieth century, I explained how Nampoothiris, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, struggled to maintain the domination based on acharam against the claims based on knowledge. As it became obvious that it was a losing struggle, by the 1920s they began participating in colonial education. I demonstrated that this participation transformed both the nature of colonial institutions and Nampoothiri ideas of acharam. Nampoothiris, through the so-called reform movement, attempted to establish a continuity between the 'traditional' Brahmanical knowledge and 'modern' scientific knowledge. The reform literature created a logic to differentiate acharams which were scientific from acharams which were just superstition. In this process, they were partially able to transform acharam into knowledge and hence able to maintain the status of acharam in its reformed forms.

The comparative analysis of production of knowledge and practice of knowing in this dissertation contributes to a politics which challenge the homogenizing tendencies in the contemporary institutional practices of knowledge. On the one hand, I demonstrated that what is currently understood as "modern forms of knowledge" in India is colonial and Brahmanical in its form and practice. On the other hand, through the example of Asari practices in Malabar, I pointed towards the possibilities of alternative trajectories of knowing. The dominant forms of knowledge produced through academic and research institutions have marginalized the space of alternative practices of knowing, but the former has not completely eliminated the latter.

The above interpretation of the past and the present of the production of knowledge stands alongside criticisms of disciplinary knowledge already raised by Dalit and feminist scholars in the South Asian context. In a series of articles written in the 2000s, Gopal Guru noted that the present academic production of knowledge is based on the institutional reproduction of "theoretical Brahmins" and "empirical Shudras."[1] He argued that "there are historical reasons that gave a structural advantage to the top of the twice-born (Brahmins) consolidating its privileged position in doing theory."[2] The historical analysis in this dissertation adds to this argument that the Brahmanical domination in the field of knowledge production is not only anchored in the reproduction of theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras, but also on the very existence of the dichotomy of theory and practice based colonial and Brahmanical ideas of knowledge. To challenge the Brahmanical domination it is not

[1] Gopal Guru, "How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, 50 (December, 15 – 20, 2002): 5003 - 5009.

[2] Ibid, 5005.

enough to make theory more egalitarian and inclusionary, as Guru suggested; rather, it is important to challenge the very idea of the superiority of theory over practice through which the Brahmanical knowledge-power asserts its domination over other practices of knowing in the first place.

The Asari practices described in this work show us how the elements of what we call 'theory' and what we call 'experience' could be entwined in the process of intervening in and reconstituting the material world. Theory's ambition, in its colonial and Brahmanical versions, is to universalize, or in other words, to abstract at a universal level. From the history of this ambition we can deduce that this desire to extend the abstraction at a universal level is a desire for power at a universal level: *an imperialist desire*. The process of abstraction is not absent in the Asari practices, but Asaris limit this abstraction to the level of lived experience and return to the particular through the execution of work. The academic and disciplinary form of knowledge not only attempts to maintain theory in its abstract mode, but also positions the move from general to particular as inferior within the series of knowledge. In this model, the more generalized the theory, the higher its status and value.

Sundar Sarukkai explained Gopal Guru's criticism of the practice of Social Science in India as an argument that "[t]heory is to be felt, is to embody suffering and pain, is to relate the epistemological with the emotional, that is, is to bring together reason and emotion."[3] Sarukkai poses this against Habermas's concept that "theory is legitimated by its distance from experience."[4] The Asari practices signals to a third

[3] Sundar Sarukkai, "Dalit Experience and Theory," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 42, 40 (October 6 -12, 2007): 4048.

[4] Ibid.

possibility, one of moving beyond the dichotomy of theory and experience: neither that of connecting theory and experience nor that of distancing them. In this understanding, what we call theory and practice are two instances of action which are not separable and hence cannot be named as theory and practice.

This way of understanding Asari practices poses certain challenges to the current methods of doing History in general as an academic discipline, and specifically to the way the debates are set up in its South Asian context. The action-oriented way of engaging with the past and present shows the limitations of understanding the past based on textual evidence and the problems of creating objectified knowledge of that past. This objectified knowledge draws its authenticity from its claims of the truthful representation of the past by separating this representation from the represented. The question here is not that whether this claim is true or not but about the implications of such practices. Disciplinary history necessarily excludes the actions and experiences in the past which have not been transferred into written or oral forms of knowledge. Considering the fact that the majority of practices of the marginalized sections of the society – in the field of agriculture, medicine and crafts – are 'remembered' and transferred through embodied action, it is clear that disembodied, objectified, written history has very limited possibilities in representing these practices regardless of how sympathetic or sensitive historians are to these practices and practitioners. The arguments in this dissertation attempt, in a self-critical mode, to understand the limitations of the very method that it followed and underscore the possibility of different ways of knowing and being in this world.

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