# *Doing the intellectual history of colonial India*

*Dilip M.Menon*
*University of the Witwatersrand*

> '*Thinking, analysing, inventing...are not anomalous acts; they are the normal respiration of the intelligence. To glorify the occasional performance of that function, to hoard ancient and alien thoughts...is to confess our laziness or our barbarity. Every man should be capable of all ideas and I understand that in the future this will be the case.*'
>
> *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*
> *Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths (1970)*

South Asian history after the subaltern moment has moved to a writing of the intellectual history of colonial India. While at one level this signifies an attempt to take seriously forms of intellection by indigenous intellectuals, in its form and method it may signify a return to an elite history that privileges elite thought, national identity, and a hermetic understanding of writing and texts over the contextual and miscegenated spaces of historical imagination. Moreover, it continues with the dichotomy instituted by subaltern history of doing elite thought and subaltern action. I suggest we need to look at the idea of itinerant thought, of the circular relation between text and contexts and the necessarily transnational space of intellection.

All writing begins with a provocation; at times with an extreme one. Reading Akeel Bilgrami on Gandhi was the first provocation. Bilgrami speaks of his exasperation with Gandhi's willful, and at times, apodictic argumentation. "The truth of his claims seem to him so instinctive and certain that mere arguments seem frivolous even to readers who

disagree with them. Being trained in a discipline of Philosophy of a quite different temperament, I will try to not get distracted by the irritation I sometimes feel about this. In reading Gandhi recently I have been struck by the integrity of his ideas. I don't mean simply that he was a man of integrity in the sense that he tried to make his actions live up to his ideals, though perhaps in fact he tried more than most to do so. I mean something more abstract: that his thought itself was highly integrated." The upper case characterization of Philosophy as opposed to "instinctive claims" immediately sets up an opposition between those who merely think and those who think systematically. The history of ideas needs to be done at one remove from the thought that it studies. Second, Bilgrami immediately leaps towards a solution that does away with instinct as much as an inconsistency generated by context, by suggesting that we need to do away with the messiness of contradictory assertions and historical circumstance by asserting (apodictically, in turn) the "integrity" of Gandhi's thought. To assume that there is a singular consistency in Gandhi is reassuring to the Philosopher. It makes texts hermetic, constant and wrinkle free. It does away with the porosity of texts to history, changing contexts of argument, individual idiosyncracy, and uproots it from local arguments to the universal plane of reified thought. In this instance, it also sidesteps the important issue of language. One of the notorious problems of reading Gandhi is the fact that his English and Gujarati texts are at variance with each other (Bilgrami reads no Gujarati), as the ongoing work of Ajay Skaria and Tridip Suhrud among others has instructed us. To argue for a putative "integrity" does away with this problem as well its important entailments: that texts are constructed in an imagined dialogue with a constituency of readers and that readers may construct texts through variant readings. To iron out a multiplicity of readings makes the task of the intellectual historian much easier.

The two volumes of the journal *Modern Intellectual History* on thought in colonial India and modern readings of the *Bhagavad Geeta* provide further provocation. They largely comprise essays written on individual texts by individual writers and are exercises in masterful textual exegeses: hermeneutic exercises without an engagement with historical context. Again, the problems are many. First, none of the authors knows an Indian language, preferring to work with either translations or with the English texts produced by political figures who otherwise wrote in Indian languages. At one end we have Chris Bayly writing on the 18th c Bengali intellectual Rammohun Roy's English works within the context of liberal thought and on the other Shruti Kapila writing about the Maharashtrian intellectual and political moderate, BG Tilak's text on the Bhagavad Geeta without a knowledge of either Marathi or Sanskrit. Such behavior would be regarded as intellectually lethargic, or risible in those who attempted a similar strategy to work with the French or Italian intellectual tradition, but it appears to be open season as usual with "native" texts. Second, it is not clear how this is intellectual history as opposed to a history of ideas since there is only an exposition of the ideas within a text (showing the same irritation with "inconsistency" as Bilgrami displays towards Gandhi) without a sense of the larger tradition of thinking within which an intellectual is located or the historical and transnational context of thinking and writing. Moreover, there is an impossible clarity in the idea of Tilak's thought or Rammohun's thought which does not take into account ongoing dialogues, borrowings and creative misunderstandings located within a world of polemical debates, interaction with the realms of popular religion and ideas, and an obsession with the idea of thought as proceeding full blown from the heads ("brains in a vat" as Latour puts it) of elite "thinkers". As Karin

Barber puts it evocatively: how do we engage with the addressing of "an imagined world and an imagined public that is simultaneously very local, and of vast, borderless extent"? More than a generation ago, Carlo Ginzburg writing on the deeply imbricated nature of elite and popular thought spoke about the "circularity of influence" in which we can neither posit autonomous cultures of thinking nor assume an unmediated downward filtration of "ideas" from intellectual elites and institutions to popular forms and traditions of thinking. Finally, what does it mean to return to the tired and worn strategy in which intellectual history deals with the thought of social elites rather than the subaltern (despite the fact that we have exemplary older models like Ginzburg, the magisterial study by Christopher Hill *World Turned Upside Down* of popular radical thought in the Civil War period in England, or indeed Karin Barber's work on plebeian intellectuals?

How do we bring the world of social history and intellectual history together without losing our way in the strategy of a history of ideas that reinstitutes history as the study of social elites (with the conceit instituted by subaltern studies that colonized elites are subalterns in the larger scheme of things). Subaltern intellectualism has been either ignored or insufficiently theorized in Indian academic writing. Even within well-intentioned efforts like that of the Subaltern Studies, lower castes or subalterns **act**, and in that lies their heroism and their entry into the realm of history. Intellection is seen as something that the elites do habitually, either in the creation of ideological apparatuses to rehabilitate structures of coercion or to recover selves damaged in an engagement with modernity. Subalterns situate themselves within insurgency, elites within discourses (derivative or otherwise). Possible instances of subaltern creative enterprise, of "everyday literacy" as Karin Barber puts it,  are treated with proper suspicion: do they contain

within themselves the Trojan horses of elite thought *pace* Ranajit Guha? This problem, whether expressed as 'false consciousness' or 'replication' of elite structures of thought within the subaltern consciousness, has crippled attempts at understanding the "normal respiration of intelligence".

This paper engages with two concurrent quests. First, how did indigenous intellectuals in colonial India conceive of the project of power and imagine them through alternative constructions of history? Second, how does one write post-national histories of thinking? How do we engage with times other than the putatively regnant empty homogeneous time of empire or nation? It can be argued that the colonial/national can be seen as the mere occasion for, rather than the determinant of acts of thinking and writing in modern India. There is an immanent time *in* the text (arising from the conventions, protocols of the form and the predilections of the thinker) and the historical time *of* the text and these two “presents” ceaselessly intersect as Deleuze puts it. To write one time in terms of the other draws us towards either the aestheticism of immanence (the notion of autonomous form) or the politics of historicism and sociological determinism. Paradoxically, post-colonial theory has veered towards the latter strategy and tends to render native imaginations in the prison house of the colonial paradigm. Alongside this, there has been a tendency to see the colony and the metropole; the regional and the national; and the local and the cosmopolitan as hard, binary options rather than as moments in the trajectory of thinking, and as overlapping circuits of experience and imagination.

My present work attempts to make a distinction between the singularity of the historical discipline with its claim to power in

constituting national narratives and the multiplicity of historical imaginations within putative national spaces; the latter nearly always exceeds the attempts of the former to define it. In the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty *et al* there is a suggestion that under colonialism one regime of historicity and one set of protocols were instituted by the transfer of the Enlightenment project which then rendered the history of the colony in terms of categories derived from European historical experience. Arguably, Chakrabarty's work is partly an autobiographical exercise of exorcising the ghost of a former adherence to the grand narrative of a formulaic Marxism. Hence: the call to provincialize Europe; even though Europe has always, already, been present and provincialized in the historical imaginations of the colonized. A more productive way of thinking the engagement with Europe would be to follow Fanon and argue that without colonialism there could have been no Europe. The idea of Europe arose as a result of the colonial encounter that required both colonizer and native to imaginatively construct a coherent monolith. If Chakrabarty represents one end of the Eurocentric response to the issue of the anxiety of intellectual influence, Ashis Nandy's is a robust rejection of all influence that draws a picture of indigenous categories and protocols of thought that have an autarkic and oppositional character. Kipling couldn't have put it better: East is East and West is West…

The question before us then is a very specific one: what were the unprecedented forms of thinking that emerged within the space of the consistent engagement with Europe from the 16$^{th}$ century? How do we think about a distinctive modern way of thinking about a modern form of power? For native intellectuals not concerned with professional protocols (history, for instance, cannot be reduced to the tautology that it is what historians write) the act of recovering and writing about

the space of lived experience happened amidst narratives of circulation; the mobility of people, material and ideas; and the miscegenated space of thought, where the provenance of ideas is not as important as their prospective uses. What is the space of thought, given that the human imagination exceeds the territory which physical bodies inhabit? The tendency to incarcerate thinking - whether about power, identity or history – within territorially confined traditions of nation, region or language arises from the imperatives of disciplinary formations rather than accounting for the actual, historical experience of thinking. The trajectory of disciplinary thinking in the aftermath of colonialism and nationalism has tended to be constrained by a notion of territory arising from the logic of governmentality. The sedentarization of peoples in the interests of law, order and revenue (those Weberian imperatives of the state); an attendant cartography that delineated borders; and a historiography centred on land and state formation have been the crucial, if not the only, determinants. In particular, the hubris involved in imperial map making has been blatantly inherited by the post-colonial state as much as disciplinary formations. Post colonial theorizing, logically therefore, is the highest stage of nationalism.

We need to rethink borders (of colony, nation, region and locality) as being contingent, contextual and fluid; as shadowlines that can be neither the constraint for nor the condition of thought. Moreover, we should look beyond the binary relation of empire and colony: the territories in India as influenced by British and European intellectual traditions; those in Indonesia by Dutch; and those in Vietnam and Cambodia by the French to reiterate the binaries that Benedict Anderson’s work suggests. Simply put, what difference did empire make? There were connections with contiguous spaces (literary,

philosophical and religious traditions in Asia and Africa) that preceded, existed alongside and continued beyond colonialism as much as the drawing of national boundaries. Territory should be conceived not as the static, bounded space that people inhabit, but as made by their movement through networks of thinking, religion, labour and trade. IN the work of Aihwa Ong and others there is the implicit proposition that transnational practices and imaginings are a symptom of how nation-states articulate with capitalism in late modernity. It can equally be argued that such spatial expansiveness of thought reflects the persistence of an imagination that always exceeds territorial loyalty. As Braudel reminded us, it makes little sense to speak of India as a unitary entity in the 17th century when its south west coast was one with SE Asia, the middle East, Venice, Amsterdam and London through maritime trade; its south east coast integrated into movements of men and material through south east Asia to China; and its north west part of the networks of trade and knowledge running through to the Ottoman and Safavid Empires. Or Enseng Ho's recent work *The Graves of Tarim* which looks at the movement of Muslim traders, religious specialists and political actors from Yemen through to the western coast of India and to SE Asia, creating both local loyalties as well as cosmopolitan affinities. This is an *itinerant territoriality* to borrow a phrase from Achille Mbembe. And it is but consonant with this that we should be speaking of itinerant thought: thought that reflects the multiple histories of movement of people, ideas and objects.

The idea of itinerant thought allows us to recognize the historical production of territory and to move away from the agoraphobia induced by the construction of national and regional traditions of intellection. A further problem is that two limiting frameworks have come to determine our understanding of so-called "Indian" intellectual

traditions. The first is the idea of a "greater", "*marga*" or sanskritic, cosmopolitan tradition that is opposed to a "lesser", "*desi*", vernacular and regional tradition which then constrains our thinking anachronistically to present day national boundaries. As Enseng Ho's work magisterially reminds us, traditions of thinking cannot be contained within national and regional polarities but need to be thought within a matrix of movement of people and materials and languages across the ocean. The second framework is determined by the implementation of mono-linguality after 1956 and the linguistic re-organization of states in India. We read back from our monolingualism (as Bengalis from Bengal; Malayalis from Kerala and so on) to understand a time when spaces were shot through with languages and dialects reflecting the constant movement of people and intellectual currents. Raja Serfoji II of Thanjavur's court in the 18$^{th}$ century, where the king himself composed single texts that were multilingual for an audience that was so as well, is only one magnificent example of the fact of the polyglot nature of life and thought in India. To understand the intellectual traditions of Kerala for example, one would need to think with Arabic, Malayalam, Tamil, Tulu, Kannada, and Gujarati to name but a few of the languages that were spoken at different times in different parts of the region that became Kerala by different people, as also the circulation of texts and debates from the European intellectual milieu through travellers, missionaries and government officials.

The question of space is crucial. Where does Kerala belong: as the southwestern Malayalam speaking region on the south west coast of India; as three regions consisting of two princely states and one district of the Madras Presidency in the colonial period; to West Asia (Dubai is only half jokingly referred to as a district of Kerala by Malayalis) through circuits of labour, trade and pilgrimage; to south east Asia via

Sri Lanka through the export of labour, professional groups and merchants; to west Africa again through similar circuits? Or to invoke earlier integrations, as the literary critic Balakrishna Pillai asked in his idiosyncratic articles on the history of the Malayalam speaking regions in the 1930s, is Rome a chapter in the history of Kerala or is Kerala a chapter in the history of Rome, referring here to the pepper trade with the Roman empire in the early centuries of the Christian era?

The space within which power is conceptualized is multiple, contingent and miscegenated. While researching anti-Christian missionary polemic in late 19th century in Kerala through the writings of a religious figure Chattampi Svamikal, it became clear to me that not only were several conceptions of power involved here but also differing conceptions of territory. The enterprise of colonial history writing had created a unilinear narrative of native political and social decline within a territory produced and defined by conquest. Chattampi Swamikal attempted to recover religious traditions not only from a larger Dravidian space to counter this delimiting of territory; he also drew upon the circulation of polemic generated by centuries of Protestant-Catholic conflict in Europe as much as rationalist critiques of the very idea of Christianity itself proceeding from the Enlightenment. Added to this mix were the Hindu apologetics generated by Brahmin intellectuals in Jaffna, Bengal, and Maharashtra which drew upon indigenous philosophical traditions as much as the detritus of intra-Christian debate. Pilgrimages, itinerant preaching, pamphleteering and the movements of labour from SE Asia and Ceylon carried these debates across political, religious and linguistic boundaries.

Alongside the miscegenated space of thought we have to consider the concatenation of multiple times (religious, political, maritime) within

the space we conceive of as the colonial. Alongside the new time of modern bureaucratic rationality instituted by the colonial administration, which is then narrated through new histories framed by the tropes of disorder, conquest and settlement, other times continue to proliferate. If the *sudra* mystic, Chattampi Svamikal, strategically invokes a deep religious time to contend with the degraded time of the present, someone like the Brahmin practitioner of traditional architectural style Kanipayyur Sankaran Nambudiripad in his histories of Kerala in the 1960s writes the history of a space that stretches from Kanyakumari all the way up to Surat into Central Asia invoking the putative migration of Aryans from Central Asia. Not only is Kerala located in a mythical space but is characterized by a Brahminical present ruled by a ritual time which can be controlled as opposed to a time gone awry. In yet another maneuver, the lawyer KP Padmanabha Menon, wrote his history of Kerala in the 1930s through the artifice of critical annotations (running to 1000 pages) to a brief collection of 27 letters written in the 1740s by a Dutch priest, Jacobus Canter Vischer, to his sister back home. Here the longer rhythms of a maritime geography and an earlier colonialism are summoned up to address the exigent question of European knowledge of native society, which then provoked native questioning about self and history.

While these imaginings of self, community and history find expression in the time of British colonialism, it would be inadequate to see these as merely instances of thinking under colonialism. Other geographies as much as other times are summoned up and we need to think of a para-time that is both besides and beyond the time of the colonial. The persistent engagement with the maritime as much as with the circulation of people and ideas within colonial space reflected the presence both of a pan-regional as well as transnational archive that

exceeded colonial space and time. The very invocation of this archive showed the limits of the projects of colonial governmentality: the creation of borders; the sedentarization of people; and the narration of linear histories of transition to the colonial present. The imperial archive and the language ad protocols of modernity were but one resource as also project of power among many. It was not just that this project itself was riddled with internal contradictions, an anxiety regarding its own ambitions and the haunting recognition of the Sisyphean enterprise of amassing accurate knowledge. In exploring the intellectual history of the modern world we must recognize the existence of multiple spaces and times alongside the seemingly unitary regnant space and time of colonialism, of modernity or any such facile characterization of the territory and temporality of thought.

What is interesting in the instances alluded to above is the lack of concern either with a singular idea of tradition or a sense of drawing upon presumed canons of intellection. Though Chattampi Svamikal may have drawn on Saivite critiques of Brahminical religion, arguably, the heated atmosphere of public debate and thinking on the hoof, as it were, determined that everything was grist to his mill. Kesari Balakrishna Pillai, literary critic in the 1930s, saw the very idea of tradition as hindering the unprecedented aspects of thinking made possible by newer conceptions of space under colonialism. Through his reading of Proust and Freud (and arriving at an understanding of the unstable and contingent self) he challenged the possibility of the construction of an unbroken geneaology of thought within Europe as much as in India. Looking at the engagement with the idea of history by a wide variety of intellectuals-writers, religious figures, professionals-in Kerala between 1850 -1950, what is clear is the attempt to historicise the very experience of the modern itself. None of

these histories of Kerala have the same idea of the actual location of Kerala on the map and instead summon up multiple geographies. These acts of writing history were an alternative conception of power premised on the conceit of geography, history and identity as matters of choice, contingency and individual affinity rather than as given products of governmentality.

## 2

This section will take up the intellectual and spatial context of the thinking of a religious mystic from the erstwhile princely state of Travancore (since 1956, the southern part of the state of Kerala) in the late 19th and early 20th century. Christian missionaries from the early 19th century posed a challenge to indigenous religion on the Indian subcontinent and I shall attempt to map out the space of intellectual debate and circulation of polemics that was inaugurated by this encounter. Discussions on what Hinduism or Islam were, as much as what it meant to be Brahmin, Sudra or Muslim were entangled with other debates on rationalism, atheism, and theosophy that were happening in the public sphere. The late 19th and early 20th century witnessed levels of public debate and polemic that were the apogee of Christian missionary critique of indigenous religion and the generation of a Hindu and Muslim apologetics in response to this. When we consider ideas such as Hindu and Muslim revivalism we are largely forgetful of the context of public polemic within which intellectuals turned inward towards something that they wished to constitute as tradition: a place of grace secure from the miscegenation of belief, representing the putative fundamentals of religion. Arguably, in the constitution of a timeless tradition, public intellectuals and religious figures drew upon the detritus of earlier debates between as much as

within religions. Hence, the Protestant critique of Catholicism in its Indian renditions; the *bhakti* reevaluation of Hindu hierarchy; 18th century European rationalism; and late 19th century atheism in Britain formed a common set of themes which were drawn upon as contestants fought with weapons seemingly derived from hermetic native religious traditions.

The life of Chattampi Svamikal (1853-1925) as available in the brief formulaic accounts available to us charts a trajectory from the simple unmarked name of Kunjan/ Ayyappan/ Shanmughadasan to *Paramabhattara* Chattampi Swamikal: a title given by the Namboodiri Brahmin lineage of Kooppakara *matham*. This transition from a bare name unmarked by caste or status to a title conferred by a Brahmin house renowned for its Vedic scholarship reflects a desire within hagiographies for a chronicle not only of increasing respectability but also of an exalted narrative climax of recognition of non-Brahmin scholarship by Brahmin authority. These accounts bounce off each other in their spare biographical details; the anecdotes and the linearity of the story told follow a template. We know that he was born in a poor, *shudra* Nair family; some accounts introduce the possibility of his father having been a Nambudiri Brahmin. This is an ambivalent move. On the one hand, it might reflect the search for a respectable geneaology to mitigate the sheer temerity of the acquisition of textual authority by a mere *Shudra*. However, the relation between Nair and Nambudiri (Brahmin and *sudra*) in Kerala was complicated by the fact that till almost the middle of the 20th century there were what might be called liaisons between younger Nambudiri men (only the eldest son married within the community) and women of the better off Nair households. This continued despite the growing tide of resentment against this practice by both Nair and Nambudiri reformers from the

1900s which was to result in a Marriage Commission in 1890 and a Matriliny Act in 1933 that officially instituted marriage among the Nairs and cut them off from the dubious connection with the Nambudiri community. The attribution of Nambudiri paternity might then have been deployed to explain both his scholarship as well as the deep animosity that Chattampi Svamikal's prose shows towards Brahmins in general.

Legend has it that Chattampi's first words were *athavathu* (that is to say), an early indication perhaps of his formidable expository skills! He is believed to have learned Sanskrit for 2 years till the age of 13 at a local *pallikoodam* or traditional school, but given the straitened circumstances of his family began manual labour at 14. Shortly thereafter he joined a small school run by Raman Pillai *asan* which taught the basics of Malayalam, mathematics, Tamil and music; an eclectic but seemingly standard rubric. It was here that he was appointed chattampi or *sattam pillai*; class monitor, as contemporary parlance would have it. In 1869, at the age of 16 he resumed a life of manual labour in the building of the new Trivandrum Secretariat under Dewan Madhava Rao's tenure. Being literate he moved to preparing legal documents and was appointed petty clerk in the Secretariat after a chance encounter with Dewan Madhava Rao. Chattampi continued to drift and left the steady but numbing security of petty clerical employment to learn painting, wrestling, music and astrology. His biographers do not express much surprise or feel the need to elaborate further on this miscellaneous assortment of interests or where and how he learnt these skills. That training in this diverse portfolio was possible, even to someone with such limited means that he possessed suggests a network of institutions the history of which remains unknown as yet. Rather like the networks of *akharas* (wrestling

gymnasiums) that we are familiar with from the histories of Benares or *swadeshi* period Bengal, there appears to have been a public set of institutions in Travancore parallel to the literary societies and royal *soirees* that we are slowly acquiring some knowledge of. In addition to these diverse skills we know that he "learnt" Vedanta and Hatha Yoga from Thycaud Ayya (1814-1909) who has a similarly intriguing biography. Ayya was born in Chengalpet (near Madras) and traveled to south east Asia and Africa before becoming tutor in Tamil to the Collector McGregor in Travancore. He was appointed Manager of Thycaud Residency (1873-1909) and founded the Jnanaprajagara Sabha that included the renowned lower caste Ezhava intellectual and social reformer Narayana Guru as well as members of the royal family.

The presence of such a figure and of a society that managed to include such diverse social categories again leads us to some unanswered questions. Was there an alternative intellectual sphere where it was not caste or status but adherence to a religious figure that determined sociability rather like the group that gathered around Ramakrishna Paramahamsa in Bengal in the late 19$^{th}$c? What were the kinds of institutions in which instructors imparted skills that ranged from the physical to the aesthetic? Did these constitute an *intellectual underground* that as yet we can glimpse only in outline? We are told that Chattampi travelled within Travancore interacting and staying with lower caste Ezhava families known for their scholarly engagement with traditional medicine, including the family of the social reformer Dr. Palpu. Here again, the supposed boundaries between castes seemed to have broken down within circuits of intellectual exchange. His decision to travel all over India was precipitated by a meeting with Subbaraya Jadapatikal, a scholar from the Tamil region who came for the annual

*Navaratri* celebrations in Trivandrum where Brahmins from across the southern region gathered for disputation and free food.

In the course of his travels he encountered Muslims and Christians and engaged them in public dialogue. The late 19th century was a period of peripatetic religious preachers and public debates on religion all over India following missionary public polemic and the introduction of bazaar preaching. The indigenous reaction, loosely termed as Hindu and Islamic 'revivalism', included such diverse phenomena such as the institution building and Hindu pedagogy of the Arya Samaj; the nomadic intellectualism of Swami Vivekananda; the geographical reach of Deoband reformist Islam from Chittagong in eastern Bengal to Peshawar in the western Punjab; and the *tanzim* movement of the Jamaat-i-Islami. In fact, when Vivekananda came to Kerala in 1892, Chattampi met him and engaged in a dialogue, accounts of which unfortunately, do not survive. These attempts at defining religious identity in exclusive terms hardening the boundaries of "religions" had an all-India character that we need to take seriously. Public debates involving itinerant preachers, networks of pilgrimage, the dispersion of texts and pamphlets, need us to situate our discussion beyond regions and the artificial separations between religious traditions. Opponents and debaters in the heat of public disputation drew upon consciously, and sometimes unwittingly, the materials that were available in the public sphere. Aspiring Hindu reformers drew upon Christian critiques of Islam and Protestant critiques of Catholicism as much as Christian missionaries drew upon internal critiques of the Hindu religion by dissenting *bhakti* traditions. Debates on rationalism, theosophy and atheism contributed to the polemical engagement with religion and identity as much as the discovery of Buddhism with its rational critique of the rigidities of Hinduism.

This paper looks at the intellectual context and content of two early texts by Chattampi Svamikal: *Kristumatachhedanam* (An exposure of the Christian religion) 1890 and *Pracina Malayalam* (The ancient Malayalam region) 1899. They were written in the heat of public debate and reflect the formation of identities in the crucible of polemic and particularly missionary critiques of Hinduism. It is here that we must turn to the centrality of religious polemics in the public sphere of *fin de siecle* India and address the issue of the shaping of the public imagination by a Christian critique of Hinduism and Islam. As of now the jury is out on the question of the relation between Empire and Christian mission. Andrew Porter's balanced and anodyne account stresses denominational differences and the conjunctural affiliation of missionary ideology with empire, at times taking for granted missionary rhetoric of the providential narrative i.e. that colonialism constituted a favourable moment within which the church could expand. Recent feminist scholarship on Christianity and empire has been more insistent on the imperial connection. Kathleen Wilson has stressed the missionary contribution to the English sense of themselves as a superior Protestant nation as against benighted populations elsewhere. Catherine Hall's work goes further in seeing missions as popularizing Empire and strengthening race hierarchies through their rhetoric of salvation and chosen peoples. However, even in these critical accounts there is a non-engagement with theology and the actual violence of religious debates on the ground which suggest that the debates were as much about issues of modernity and power as religion. Richard Young's studies on the debates between missionaries and Hindus and Buddhists in India and Ceylon have been significant in pointing to the militant drawing of lines and the

generation of an indigenous apologetics. His considered judgment may well provide a new starting point:
“To say that missionaries were regarded as dangerously subversive to the social order and insultingly provocative towards indigenous religions is to remark on the obvious.”

Two instances from the mid 19th century in Travancore will suffice as reported by John Abbs a stalwart of the London Missionary Society. Writing on the introduction of a school in a certain area, the logic of confrontation is presented: “the schoolteacher being welcomed, the way was soon open for a Scripture Reader. The idols were in a number of instances destroyed; the heathen temple pulled down or enlarged & by the construction of windows and other alterations fitted up for a school or place of Christian worship. In the Western Division three idols were announced and their temple appropriated to Christian purposes.” An earlier account states: “In 1836, a number of the people of the place determined to destroy these idols and about 300 Christians from the neighbouring village of Kotnavilly came to witness the demolition. The idols were soon defaced (with an Indian spade *deleted*) & while the coolies or labourers cleared out the fragments & rubble the missionary & people gathered together under the verandah outside the temple sang a Christian hymn and read a portion of the scripture & united in prayer to the living God. When this timely act of worship was ended a large idol of wood called Paramasattee was brought of [*sic*] the temple with a view to its being burnt but the missionary begged it of the people, brought it afterwards to England and placed it in the Missionary Museum. The temple emptied of its huge idols was made suitable for the service of the true God. The priest, an intelligent man more than 70 years of age, received the message of salvation, was baptized.” The metaphor of bringing light into a benighted area was

rendered rather literally in many instances. “Whenever a number of families desired instruction a building of some kind as a place of meeting became needful. Sometimes the idol temple was cleaned ventilated and light admitted by the formation of windows. This latter alteration significant of the change of use was always necessary. The temple had been dark, the school must be light”.

From the mid 19th century the emergence of an Evangelical thrust meant a modified Calvinism of salvation for all and hellfire for the rest. Even as late as 1882 the idea of heathens being bound for hell held sway within missionary circles. Therefore, there was an insistence on street preaching to bring in converts as much as to radically destabilize native beliefs till the end of the 19th century. During the last decade of the century, the idea was dominant that itinerating was preferable to pedagogy in schools and the setting up of institutions and this was stressed again and again at national conferences. Confrontation was the preferred mode and in May 1886, 26 preachers drawn from different Protestant societies took the initiative by preaching at the great Hindu festival at Conjeevaram. In June 1886, 64 preachers including Anglican, Methodist and Congregational missionaries manned 8 different places in the city and preached morning and evening, between 5-6 hours daily for a week, an exercise both exhaustive as well as exhausting. This heated atmosphere of challenge to established religion and religious festivals led to a reaction. The provocation for Chattampi’s book was missionary preaching at temple festivals particularly at Ettumanoor. Within Travancore, itinerant preachers believed in confrontation even to the point of precipitating violence. The diaries of Mr. Cumberland reveal such an encounter in 1830, when he decided to engage Hindus and Muslims in a debate in a local bazaar.

> There were several heathens present during this conversation I then asked them whether they believe that God is most Holy & just & merciful. They said 'Yes'. 'If God is holy and just, think you that he would have sent one into the world to teach men doctrines and precepts which are contrary to his perfections and to his will before revealed to mankind as Mohammad did? Surely not.' Again, 'if God is most merciful would he have sent one into the world to spread a religion by fire and sword putting to death all who refused to embrace it as Mohammad did?' The heathens immediately replied 'God would never send such a person. The character of Mohammad shows that he was a bad man'. At this the Mussulman was exceedingly enraged and abused the heathens in most shameful language'. I said to them, 'What these men have said is true. Why do you abuse them?' They then turned upon me calling me a liar...As they seemed to be very violent I left them...

The phenomenon of late 19th c revivalism was framed by such verbal confrontations on the street and at temples as much as the more abstract arguments that scholars like Partha Chatterjee focus on that stress more the loss of political agency of native elites under colonialism. Revivalism is seen by Chatterjee et al as a retreat into the space of tradition and religious reform; the only space within which a degree of autonomy could be exercised. Such arguments neglect the fact that even the space of religion was under threat from missionary attack and had to be constituted as a site for intervention. Revivalism must be rethought within a space of Christian polemic, Hindu apologetics, atheism, rationalism and revivalism spurred by Theosophists as much as neo-Vedantins like Vivekananda. Between 1825 and 1850, societies like the Tatvabodhini Sabha in Calcutta and

the Sadur Veda Siddhanta Sabha in Madras were organized to defend Hinduism against missionaries through preaching and distributing handbills. In 1880, the Hindu Freethought Union, a branch of Charles Bradlaugh's National Secular Society was established in India with its headquarters at Madras (the only branch outside of England). The works of Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Robert Ingersoll and David Hume were stocked and distributed. A measure of this dissemination of agnosticism and atheism among intellectuals is the presence of a chapter in the first Malayalam novel *Indulekha* (1889) that consists of a discussion between the novel's main protagonists on religion, rationalism and atheism with the views of Bradlaugh given pride of place. Into this soup was stirred the maverick ideas of theosophy, a recent entrant in the intellectual life of the Presidency. *The Theosophist* published articles attacking Christianity and also included scurrilous attacks on the character and methods of Christian missionaries. When in Madurai, some 27000 copies of an outrageous song against the Bible and Christ were circulating; missionaries were particularly resentful about the fact that these pamphlets were filled with jokes "from Ingersoll and Bradlaugh". Hindu apologetics and polemics drew upon a wide range of sources and histories and revivalism drew on a tradition invented on the hoof in the middle of intellectual street fighting.

The circulation of ideas and the space of polemics drew in other geographies and deeper histories. In Ceylon, Maharashtra, Madras and Bengal Presidencies, and Punjab similar ideas were making the rounds. In 1719, the Danish missionary, Bartolomaeus Ziegenbalg's dialogue with 34 *pandits* in Tranquebar had generated a critique of Brahminical religion that saw it as an unreconstructed Catholicism with arcane rituals, the predominance of venal priests and the exclusion of the lay

worshipper from worship. The 1832 debates in Bombay between John Wilson and *pandits* reprised some of these arguments a hundred years later leading to texts like Morobhatt Dandekar's *Srihindudharmasthapana* that argued among other things that Christ was human and died a reproachable death or Narayana Rao's *Svadeshabhimani* which stated that Jehovah was lazy because he rested on the seventh day. These down to earth refutations of the theological pretensions of missionaries were to surface time and again in pamphlets and texts from Travancore to the Punjab. One of the earliest responses to missionary critiques of Hindu beliefs had come from the Brahmins of Batticotta in Ceylon to American missionary propaganda in Jaffna. A text titled *Ten Death Blow Questions to Christianity* (1830) raised commonsensical yet polemically devastating objections to the Christian rendition of the origin of the world and the place of the human within it. It argued that God created the world because he lacked in self-esteem: human beings and their devotion were necessary for the self-affirmation of Jehovah. The notion of human beings as being sinners was pernicious: why did Jehovah make a tree, if he knew that the apple would tempt Adam and Eve? The idea of absolute judgement of sinners leading to eternal damnation was presented as both unfair and a tyrannical exercise of divine power. Arguing that animals too have souls, the founding of Christianity on human salvation alone was presented as an incomplete vision of the universe and its sentient beings. Cankara Pantitar's *Kristumatakantanam* (1882) (a title echoed in Chattampi's own polemic against Christianity) saw original sin as nothing more than "sexually transmitted congenital disability" devoid of any theological sophistication.

It is important to remember that there were several levels of debate. These polemical maneuvers were not concerned with either argumentative rigour or theological niceties. We are far removed from the sophisticated rebuttal of Padre Pfander by Rahmatullah and Wazir Khan in 1854 at Agra, where the Muslim intellectuals deployed the most recent debates within theological circles in Germany to confound their opponent. Similarly, John Muir while writing his *Matapariksana* in 1839 deployed the Orientalist scholarship of Colebrooke and Franz Bopp's works on Indo-European linguistics. Ram Mohun Roy a few decades earlier had argued on the basis of Trinitarian theology against the exceptionalism of Christianity. The world of itinerant preachers and Tract Societies was the underside of revivalism drawing upon the intellectual underground and the circulation of ideas within the sphere of public religious debate. The tone was violent and confrontational matching the combativeness of itinerant Christian preachers. For instance, Capapati Mutaliyar's *Kristumata kandanam* had a graphic critique of Luther as a corruptor of virgins. In his last moments "he tore out his own tongue, wallowed and rolled about in a privy, and whilst his excrements[*sic*] were actually gushing out of his mouth he perished". This may too easily be seen as an indigenous scatology if we do not remember that these images drew upon the Jesuit Beschi's critique of Ziegenbalg's representations of Catholicism. As late as 1854, the London Missionary Society preachers were concerned with their labours among the trinity of "idolaters, Mohammadans and Romanists".

Itinerant preaching in Travancore had resulted in occasional violence against missionaries and there were incidents in 1858 and 1899 in the southern districts where Christians were attacked. As early as 1887, in Kerala Hindus had begun to open reading rooms and lecture halls

delivering lectures on Hindu scriptures. Samuel Mateer , observed in 1887 that " Some, chiefly Tamilians, have attempted to revive Hinduism and for this purpose, in rivalry to us erected a Hall and Reading Room in which I understand their sacred books are expounded occasionally by the Gurus..." They also attempted to prevent Hindus from attending lectures by Christians. There was a new architecture to accommodate the explosion of religious polemics in the public sphere, the growth of public oratory so well charted by Bernard Bate, and the proliferation of halls also meant that perhaps the scope for public dialogues was diminishing in the face of more closed communities of discussion. What added to this withdrawal into smaller and more intimate collectivities was the intervention of the colonial government that saw such public preaching as a source of disorder. In 1896, the District Magistrate at Chengannur intervened to prohibit missionaries from preaching in the vicinity of temples. From 1839, Tamilians and Malayalis had begun working in plantations in Ceylon and they carried back some of the fervour of public debates that they were auditors to in Jaffna and elsewhere. Muslim preachers too weighed in, attacking Christianity and distributing pamphlets at public meetings. Samuel Mateer mentions a pamphlet with 18 questions circulating in Trivandrum in the 1890s, which harks back to the *Ten Death Blow Questions to Christianity.* The imprint of 60 years of polemical debate is evident in this circulation occasioned as much by the movement of people as ideas.

Chattampi, in his text *Kristumatachhedanam,* begins with the assertion that all religions are true since for everyone their God is supreme. This seemingly innocent assertion is followed by an appeal to the idea of logic and reason and belief in Siva; it is clear that it is a contest for supremacy rather than an acceptance of diversity. However, the years

of Christian polemic against an unreconstructed Hinduism are sedimented in his critique of the absorption of *pandits* in ceremonies rather than engaging in public work. There is an assertion of the exigent need for combative engagement. What is even more piquant is his recovery of Saivism to fortify Hinduism against the missionary critique, since missionaries attacking what they saw as superstition and hierarchy within Hindu religion had deployed Saiva Siddhanta. H.M.Scudder's *Bazaar Book* of 1869, that was intended as a guide for missionaries preaching in Tamil had a set of themes arranged around central concepts like "Guru", "Transmigration", "caste", "Brahmins", "sin and expiation" and so on. Hindu scriptures, Thirukkural and the poet Thayumanavar, were the chosen weapons buttressed by apt quotations from the Bible. The mid 19$^{th}$ c was a time of renewal of saiva Siddhanta by *sudra* castes in Tamilnadu and its proclamation as the true Dravidian faith and oldest religion of the world. To a large extent the missionary recovery of Saivism against Brahminical Hinduism did much to promote this resurgence. When the Saiva Siddhanta Sabha was formed in 1886 with the *vellalar* JM Nallaswami Pillai as its guiding force; missionaries attended conferences of the Sabha and saw it as an ally against the abstractions of the Vedanta. The American Mission Press had discovered *cittar* anti-Vedic poetry as a useful counter to the formalizations of Brahmanism and brought out the *Akattiyar nanam* as the *Dawn of Wisdom* in 1837 and 1841. If the Hindu polemicists drew upon the history of the internal rivalry of Protestantism and Catholicism in their critiques of missionary positions, the missionaries were not far behind in drawing upon the dissenting traditions within the putative Hindu fold.

*Kristumathachhedanam* [KS] begins with a brief summary of the Bible from creation to crucifixion taking 4004 B.C. as the date of creation.

The attempt here is to present the case fairly, as it were, and the account is succinct and unobjectionable. However, the text divides evenly into two halves; one half expository and the other half polemical. Therefore the initial section is the lull before the storm. It is important to stress that this text was written within the crucible of confrontation and bears the imprint of rhetorical address.

> "*Allayo mahajanangale!* [Hear me! O gathered populace] Christian missionaries are attacking Hindu religion and writing books with titles like *Ajnanakootharam* [The edifice of ignorance] *Kuruttuvazhi* [The way of darkness] *Satyagnanodayam* [The awakening of true knowledge] etc. as also *Pulleli Kunju*. They have been drawing [lower castes like the] Parayars, Pulayas and Shanars away from the Hindu faith by giving them hats and dresses and we have remained despondent while ***over twenty per cent of Hindus have been drawn into the devices of the missionaries***. If our own *pandits* had not been so absorbed in their own pursuits, and had taken up this public service, we would not have been reduced to this state. This is more important than *vratam*, *danam*, *japam*, *yajanam*, *adhyayanam* [fasting, gifting, prayer, rituals and study] that are undertaken for oneself. If we engage in this public work we ourselves, our children as also the extreme sinners who have fallen into the pit of Christianity will be helped." [emphasis added]

The anxiety about diminishing numbers arising from the rift within the Hindu religion reflects the modern engagement with the politics of numbers of community and representativeness instituted by colonial governmentality. While arguments about the "dying Hindu" community were to surface with greater vehemence in the early 20$^{th}$ century in

Bengal, Chattampi was already signaling the bleeding of community numerical strength. The text goes on to state that missionaries have approached Hindu devotees as they were leaving temples and told them that they were worshipping Satan. This was followed by injunctions to worship the true god through converting. In 1895, the publication of *KM* was a response to this environment. At Ettumanur temple festival, missionaries would turn up regularly to spread the good news. Chattampi wrote the text so that it could be used by two of his trusted aides to spread the good word against the bad, as it were. Kalikavu Neelakantha Pillai was instructed in the text *KM* and Chattampi made his first speech from it at Ettumanur. After this, Neelakantha Pillai and Karuva Krishnan Asan traveled all over Kerala, the former to the north of Kottayam and the latter to the south, and spread the message of the *KM*.

The object of *KM* was to not only criticize Christianity but to explain its principles to Hindus as much as to lay Christians. Chattampi felt that even the Christian preachers needed instruction since they did not have much knowledge of Biblical criticism or theology and merely knew the stories of the Bible alone. The key concepts of Christianity from the idea of original sin, which came in for much ridicule, to Christ's sacrifice were spelt out. It is significant that the New Testament was taken up for discussion with a particular emphasis on baptism and communion. In the early debates in Jaffna in 1840, polemical orators like Arumuka Navalar had stressed the continuity of Christianity with Judaism with its emphasis on ritualism and hygiene through which as Richard Young puts it, he Dravidianised Moses. The missionaries were berated in this early conjuncture for having forgotten the teaching of the Old Testament and for not being ritually pure. When Chattampi begins his critique of the missionaries, the

shades of earlier debates hover over his shoulder. His first question regards the *nimittam* (occasion, cause) for creating the world. In a reprise of the response of the Brahmins of Jaffna to American missionaries he argues that it was *svartham* [self interest] on god's part to show his greatness. For what is greatness without an adoring audience? If god lacked self-sufficiency and a sense of self-esteem, he was also iniquitous in creating human beings without knowledge leading to their fall through no fault of their own, except that they had been encoded thus. The state of grace that was offered to humans was too dependent on a notion of punishment, hence lacking in an idea of *anandam* [transcendental happiness]. These arguments originating in a Hindu apologetics found their way into the armory of intellectuals across India. For instance, in Benares, Nehemiah Goreh observed in 1845 that the Christian god was "solitary and melancholic" and needed people for his pleasure. Another common theme across India was that Jehovah was possessed of *kama* [lust], and *krodha* [anger] (the instances of impulsive punishment of innocent populations in Exodus and Leviticus) and was not therefore *satcittanand* i.e. in a complete and transcendental state of detached joy. Chattampi cited chapter and verse from the Bible but followed a general template while in the case of Dayanand Saraswati, in Punjab, his monumental text *Satyarth Prakash* of the 1870s makes similar arguments in chapter 13 without scholarly citation.

The cluster of questions raised in the text addressed the creation of the world, the nature of the Christian god and the culpability of the human with regard to the stain of original sin. As to the question of whether the world created out of nothing, there is an extended discussion on whether anything can be created *ex nihilo*. It is the application of rationality and logic to questions of theology, a tradition

that came as much from Chattampi's engagement with traditions of argumentation within Hindu philosophical traditions as much as the resurgence of interest in Buddhism in southern India as a rational, dissentient tradition. There are three central elements in the mode of argumentation that he employs in his critique of Christianity as also the history that he then constructs of the region of Kerala. One is the use of *yukti*-reason and the other is the category of *anubhavam*-experience. We shall return to these later in the essay. The third is that of a mode of presentation of the argument that proceeds through the pointing out of internal contradictions: *samadhanam* or a proposition followed by its *nisedham* or refutation. So for instance, the idea that god created humans in his own likeness. So did god have a form? The idea that he does runs counter to both the categories of reason as well as experience. Moreover, if Adam indeed had the form of god; did that imply only external appearance (a shallow idea of resemblance) or did he possess the same knowledge as well. In which case it is not clear why Adam went astray despite possessing the form i.e. knowledge as god? If Christ is compassionate and heralded the beginning of a new age of redemption in the universe, why then was his birth attended by the massacre of children? We are told that Christ was born like any other human i.e. through the vagina of Mary (here there may be a bow to the scatological interests of the presumed audience) and died a death of suffering. This in no way marks him out as exceptional, but rather assimilates him into the larger run of humanity. There are further discussions of the rational explanation for many of the miracles as also the textual variations between the accounts of the apostles of the life of Christ. This close textual reading leads to the central question of sin: can original sin be transmitted through semen? How exactly is original sin (if it indeed was a sin, or iniquitously constructed by god as such) passed on through

generations without any idea of individual redemption through good deeds? ( Chattampi deploys his skepticism and derision towards the idea of original sin to extraordinary ends in his text on the history of Kerala as we shall see later). The notion of *karma* offers redemptive possibilities from one birth to the next; the idea of perfectibility as much as allowing for the fact that animals have souls since they form part of the continuous chain of being ascension into higher forms. There are references to Baron d' Holbach's *Systeme de la Nature* the Atheists Bible as also Friedrich Buechner's work with his scientific materialism and here there is another history of scientific rationalism in 18th century Europe that circulates. Did Chattampi read these authors or did he receive them filtered through the atheism of Charles Bradlaugh? Was this acquired through reading or through the engagement with these ideas and the circulation of an alternative canon of names within the public sphere? More research is needed on this issue of the circulation of the detritus of European debates and their appropriation within new contexts in India.

The historical reading of Christianity that follows the section on its logical deconstruction emphasizes the persistent political context of Christianity and its location within struggles for power and the constitution of political authority. The benchmarks are the Nicaean Creed and the systematization of the Church and authoritative texts; Constantine and the forcible imposition of Christianity on a subject population; and finally the Inquisition and the purging of dissent and reason. It was only with the rise of scientific rationalism in the 18th century that the forces of reason could raise their enquiries again. The texts that Chattampi cites are Draper's *History of Conflict between Religion and Science* and Hume's *Students History of England*. Here again one cannot be sure what role these citations play. Are they

evidence of reading or are they heraldic symbols of an aspiration to scholarly apparatus? However, Chattampi's reading of the history of Christianity is again echoed in similar such understandings elsewhere in India. PC Mozoomdar in his work *The Oriental Christ* (1883) was certain that the popularity of Christianity in India was the result of the "imperial prestige of a conquering race." Dayananda's remark on Christianity as a religion of barbarism and ignorance raised the crucial issue of what race was God? The rejection of Christianity or its appropriation by Mozoomdar within the framework of the then regnant paradigm of Fulfilment Theology (Christianity was the apogee of religious development: as JN Farquhar put it succinctly "Hinduism must die so that Christianity may live") happened within the recognition of the political nature of religion in modernity. While the suggestion here is not that these diverse intellectuals were actually reading one another, it is to raise the issue of the provenance of ideas within the public sphere of debate and of the circulation of ideas and texts across the space of India within the perfervid atmosphere of polemic in the late 19$^{th}$ and early 20$^{th}$ century.

Chattampi's idiosyncratic and confrontational engagement with the Bible and Christianity was the reaction of an indigenous intellectual whose conception of the world and the political order had been shaped by the modern. Debates about rationality and religion, protocols of argumentation, the connection between religion and politics (in this case colonialism and Evangelical Christianity), and the idea of writing a traditional history of the Modern under conditions of modernity informed his enterprise. Traditions were being invented on the hoof as it were, as intellectuals all over India drew upon resources from rationalism, atheism as much as religion in order to forge a notion of independent systems of thought and living. Exploring the intellectual

life of religious polemic in 19th and 20th century India, reminds us how entangled the debates were and how histories of shared rebellions against hierarchy, irrationality and institutionalization of belief were to be forgotten in the attempts from the 1920s to generate autarkic spaces of religious tradition.

3

*Pracina Malayalam* (The history of the ancient Malayalam region) written in 1899, while overtly a work of history follows on in interesting ways from the polemical text against a militant Christianity. If the first text attempted to recuperate a space for the Hindu religion within modernity by arguing for instance, that Hinduism respected all sentient beings and was, moreover, a rational faith not founded on fear of a vengeful god, the second text engaged frontally with the issue of the intimate connections between region, religion, identity and history. There is an effortless seguing from the critique of Christianity in the first text to a critique of brahminical Hinduism in the second one. The Protestant missionaries had cast the Brahmin as the irresponsible and iniquitous custodian of an unreformed Hinduism that in their rendition bore an uncanny resemblance to the priest ridden and superstitious Catholic Church. Chattampi rejected this characterization of the Hindu religion but took on board the critique of the Brahmin to locate himself in the rising tide of anti-Brahminism in the Madras Presidency. The political project of the non-brahmins in the late 19th and early 20th century was spurred by a variety of factors: secular economic forces that led to caste reform movements particularly among the Nadar castes associated with the coconut palm and its products; rising literacy among non Brahmin groups who then confronted a Brahmin monopoly of government service; and the recuperation of histories of

the non Brahmin as the indigene as opposed to the Brahmin who was portrayed as a conquering Aryan immigrant from northern India. The project of history writing drew as much from the "discovery" by Hamilton-Buchanan and Alexander Cunningham of Buddhism in the 19th century and its underground histories of rationalism as the establishment of the Dravidian languages as a distinct sphere of study in the work of scholars ranging from FW Ellis to Bishop Caldwell. These unrelated projects created a counter narrative to the late 18th century project of the early Orientalist school of William Jones et al that recuperated a history of Hinduism and Islam alone, and one that was preponderantly textual at that. The project of history writing was crucial to the political project of what came to be called the Dravidian movement that brought together an amorphous group of non-brahmins around the struggle for both political recognition as well as entitlements.

In *Pracina Malayalam,* Chattampi deploys his method of *bricolage*, drawing upon a vast range of texts and traditions to create a space for the non-brahmin (in this case, the Nairs) within modernity. In this case at least, we know how he accessed the English sources (ranging from the 1891 Census, district gazetteers, the Tellicherry Factory Records to the Hakluyt Society's edition of Duarte Barbosa's travels in the 16th century and Rowlandson's 1833 edition of Zainuddin al-Mabari's *Tuhfat-al-Mujahideen*) despite his poor knowledge of the language. He mentions that Meenakshisundaram Pillai, a staunch votary of the emerging non Brahmin movement, who taught at Maharaja's College, Trivandrum, guided his reading and translated relevant passages for him. The central question that animates the book is the question of whether Brahmins are entitled to be *gurus* and deserve to hold land as absolute landlords under the British dispensation of land revenue

administration. Here, unlike the earlier text there is a more nuanced discussion on what constitutes evidence, other than an insistence on rationality alone. Interestingly, while objectivity is lauded as the touchstone, Chattampi cautions that this must be tempered with *anubhavam* or individual experience and knowledge. While one must rely on "old documents, traditions, customs and widely accepted arguments" which underwrote a conjunctural historical consensus on truth, there remained the fundamental question of who generates documents. His excoriation of Christianity had arisen from an understanding of the tendentious arguments of missionaries who drew upon a select body of texts in making their critique of indigenous religion. Moreover, the language in which a text was written also raised questions about its objectivity: while texts in English carried the taint of imperial power, those in Sanskrit too had to be regarded with hermeneutic suspicion since they might purvey a brahminical view of the universe. Malayalam and Tamil sources, on the other hand, would help reconcile the demands of objectivity to the touchstone of experience.

The central question that animates the text is the rights of Brahmins to the land. All along the western coast of India this was determined by the legend of Parasurama, the Brahmin warrior who slew 24 generations of Kshatriyas, and then to expiate for his sin threw his bloody axe into the ocean prompting the ocean to retreat. The land thus reclaimed, the legend went, was granted to the Brahmins. This legend had come to be contested by anti Brahmin crusaders like Jotiba Phule in Maharashtra in the late 19$^{th}$ century and this particularly coastal obsession predominated Chattampi's reading of the ancient history of Kerala. Arising from this, four questions animate the text. First, if Parasurama (Bhargavan) donated the region of Malayalam

(Kerala as the region of speakers of Malayalam) to the brahmins as expiation for the killing of 24 generations of Kshatriyas, what was the relation between *danam* (donation) and *paapam* (sin)? Second, what is (should be) the true status of Brahmins? Third, who were the Nairs (the would be inheritors and the true possessors of the Malayalam region)? Fourth, what was the status of the idea of *varna* and the real status of the *sudra*? These are seemingly arcane questions but it is in the exposition of these that Chattampi posits a new history of south India and of caste. It must also be borne in mind that, as Washbrook has astutely observed, it was anti brahminism rather than anti colonialism that agitated the public sphere in south India in the 20th century. As I have argued elsewhere even communism was rendered as an anti caste egalitarian ideology in Kerala leading to the first ever communist ministry that was elected to power in 1957. If Chattampi had been derisive, as had most Hindu polemicists and apologists in the 19th century about the doctrine of original sin, in this text he domesticated and deployed this critique to an understanding of the history of the coast and its social relations. If Parasurama had incurred sin through his killing of generations of Kshatriyas, then why should this taint determine the history of the region, giving status to the Brahmins and denying the Nairs rights to status as well as property?

Chattampi's first move was to relocate the Malayalam region within a Dravidian and Tamil space on the fringes of Aryavarta or Aryan territory. If the Parasurama myth absorbed the region into the territorial narratives of the Aryans/Brahmins, then history needed to be reconstructed from other sources less tainted. Chattampi recovers an "ancient" Tamil Saiva text, the *Skandapuranam*, in which a chapter-the *Sahyadrikhandam* [section on the mountains that separate the Malayalam region from the Tamil regions to the east]-presents an

alternative version of the Parasurama story. Parasurama after killing Kshatriyas created a land, which he donated and then created another land. The Brahmins refused to perform ceremonies for him so he created a new class of Brahmins from the *mukkuvas* or fishermen, using the thread from their fishing nets to make the sacred thread. After his departure when these new Brahmins repeatedly called on him without reason, he cursed them to be poor, ugly and servitors of the *sudra* castes. The region stretching along the coast from the southern tip of India to Maharashtra, thus, belonged to the Dravidian cultivators.

Having established the Brahmins as interlopers and reversed their status into servitors, Chattampi takes on the notion of sin and donation inherent in the Parasurama myth: the central question he raises is whether sin is a perpetual state that can be transferred across generations or whether it is a transient one with a recourse to nullify its effects. He offers a range of arguments to counter the criticality of *danam* and its relation to the expiation of sin. First, he resorts to the idea of duty; that Parasurama by killing the Kshatriyas was merely performing a duty to kill the wicked, echoing the reconfigurations of the Gita and the message of the battlefield that were set in motion in the 19$^{th}$ century. Then he goes on to argue that if Parasurama was able to push back the ocean, it meant that he was free from sin since such an act required considerable reserves of inner power and grace (he quotes from the *Brahmasutra* and the *Bhagavad Geeta* at this juncture, despite his avowed punctiliousness in preferring Tamil and Malayalam sources over Sanskrit ones). Then there is a brief excursus on the notion of *dana* itself; that those who accept donations are lower in status since they receive inauspiciousness as part of the poison inherent in the gift/donation. If they are lower in status, it could mean that they were incapable of destroying the poison inherent in

absorbing the sin of Parasurama, which entailed that they were not those following proper ritual procedures and thus, were degraded Brahmins to begin with. There is an inexorable logic that establishes not only the transience of sin, but the lack of virtue in those unable to absorb and digest sin.

So the question then arises as to why Chattampi chooses to base himself on the *Skandapuranam*. Did this not run counter to his own insistence on the provenance of texts determining their objectivity since the *Skandapuranam* arguably ran down the Brahmins as its central thrust? Here he introduces another criterion for the objectivity of texts: thickness of description of both historical as well as customary detail. If only *yukti* (reason) and *pramanam* (proof), were to be invoked then the choice of archive or source could not be determined, once and for all. It was a reader's experience- *anubhavam*- that allowed judgement since as in this case, the thick description in a text could be evaluated only through the category of experience. If one rejected all three categories and appealed to absolute objectivity then *arajakatvam* or anarchy in argument could be the only result. On the other hand, the act of interpreting needed to strike a balance between these two elements of proof and experience. Here Chattampi introduces another crucial element in evaluating sources for the writing of histories. In Chattampi's eyes, the Brahminical account, receiving its classic expression in the *Keralamahatmyam*, of the origin of the Malayalam region being inextricably linked to the grant of the entire land to the Brahmins, only promoted *anyonyaspardha* (mutual animosity) and *aikyamatanasham* (destruction of consensus). The aim of recovering the political should be rather to promote *atmabhimanam* (self respect) among the interpretive community of readers. As he puts it, "the possession of self respect, which humans should have as a

matter of course, and which Nairs should have in particular, does not do anyone any harm". Interpretation and evaluation should be centred less on notions of absolute truth and more on notions of what was just and promoted the well being of a people through restoring their psychic self-esteem. The emphasis on consensus, harmony and the promotion of *atmabhimanam* were to provide both the radical and conservative thrusts of political movements like the Dravidian movement as much as the communist movement in southern India.

With the erudite dismissal of brahminical claims to ritual status and material power based on a sacred inherited right to land ownership, all that remained for Chattampi was to assert the *atmabhimanam* of the sudra. And here the text suddenly takes wing with passionate, eloquent polemic against the iniquity of Brahmins.

> The entry of a Brahmin is the occasion for the division and loss of property, shame and retarded children that characterize many Malayali homes. The entry into a prosperous house has the effect of a forest fire on dense foliage in the summer, or a stroke of lightning in the monsoons on a tree with a rich canopy of leaves…No other caste respects and fears another caste as does the Malayali sudra the Brahmin: as a Brahmin, as a father, and as deciders of their fate.

Once again, the category of experience is drawn upon to refute the Brahmin claim to power and status. "While the Brahmin centred texts like the *Keralamahatmyam* speak of the superiority of the Brahmin and the inferiority of the Nair, documents (*pramanam*), reason (*yukti*) and experience (*anubhavam*) show us that the reverse is true. Since the former [documents and reason] has been refuted, it follows that only the latter is true and Malayalam belongs to the Nairs". In fact, it could be shown that the word Brahmin did not exist in Malayalam: "this

recent and useless word needs to be removed". Or it should be treated as a foreign word and "no honour should accrue to the use of the word Brahmin". Even the word *sudra* is a word derived from Sanskrit rather than local experience and thought. It is interesting to see how English and its uses get domesticated indigenous argumentation and in this particular instance, Sanskrit is rendered as the foreign category since it deals in categories that promote lack of consensus and mutual discord.

4

This paper has tried to address the central question of modern ways of thinking about power in India. It moves away both from the tropes of the anxiety of influence (Europe and the Enlightenment as the constraining factors of thought) and the celebration of autonomy ("Indian" traditions that remain unsullied by history and influence and enable the fighting of the good fight against colonialism, modernity and all comers). All thinking happens within the miscegenated space of experience, travel and imaginations of affinity: Chattampi draws upon the echoes of debates in 18$^{th}$ century Europe about rationality versus religion as much as indigenous recoveries of Saiva Siddhanta occasioned by the quest of both missionaries as much as non Brahmin intellectuals for dissentient traditions. It is crucial that we see his texts as forged within the space of public debate and the itineracy of debates and ideas in a public sphere that embraced the sub continent. An intellectualist insistence on protocols, consistency and provenance in themselves would not allows us to engage with the energy and the unprecedented concatenations of ideas present in the texts. Chattampi effortlessly segues from a discussion of original sin and the inherent absurdity of generational transference of iniquity to deploying the critique to reconstruct a new history of Kerala that undermines the

Brahmin. Indigenous religious texts, tracts, gazetteers, colonial histories, treatises on atheism and rationality all are grist to his mill. And it is this *bricolage* that characterized a modern form of political thinking that sought to escape both from the prison house of a putative tradition as well as reverence for ideas that came from elsewhere and were associated with colonial power.