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Colonialism, Nationalism and Legitimacy  
An Essay on Vaikunda Swamy Cult, Tirunelveli

by

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I

In the discourse of the nationalist historiography, 'nation' and 'nationalism' are privileged categories with an aura of utmost sacredness. Given this, the practioners of such history writing essentialise the relations of power under colonial conditions as a singular relationship between the subject nation and its colonisers, and they endow nationalism with a monolithic anti-colonial content. Like every essentialist position, this too is flawed. Basically, neither the domination exercised by the colonisers nor the hegemony of the nationalist movement over the political life of the 'nation', was ever complete. In other words, relations of power even under colonial conditions had existed as a multi-layered reality, mediated not always and not merely by colonialism and nationalism. Even in those situations in which power relations were mediated by colonialism and nationalism, there were different degrees of mediation depending on specific contexts. Thus, there cannot be only one history of nationalism or colonialism, but multiple histories.

The present paper illustrates this need for multiple histories of nationalism and colonialism by tracing the trajectory of events sparked off by the proselytizing efforts of

the Protestant Church among the Shanars of South Travancore during the 19th century and the founding of a popular Hindu religious cult - the Vaikunda Swamy cult- as a result of this process. The events that will be narrated in the succeeding sections, unfolded during a period when the princely state of Travancore was under the overlordship of the British.

## II

The Shanars were primarily tappers of palmyrah toddy in the caste-based occupational hierarchy of the early nineteenth century south Travancore; and a section of them toiled as tenants under the Nair and Vellala landlords, who were the landowning castes in the region. Shanars being one of the lowest castes in Travancore, their social condition, at the turn of the nineteenth century, was extremely oppressive and degrading. As Hardgrave (1969 : 57) puts it,

A Nadar must remain thirty-six paces from a Nambudiri Brahmin, and must come no closer than twelve to a Nair. As members of a degraded caste, Nadars were prohibited from carrying an umbrella, and from wearing shoes or golden ornaments. Their houses could not be higher than one storey. They were not allowed to milk cows; Nadar women were not permitted to carry pots of water on their hips, as was the custom among the higher castes; nor were they permitted to cover the upper portions of their bodies. They were subjected to heavy taxation, and while they were not enslaved, as were the Paraiyans, the Nadars were forced to

perform corvee labor in service to the state.

Of the numerous taxes levied on the Shanars, perhaps the most onerous one was the head/poll tax. They were to pay a poll tax not only for the living members of the caste but also for those who were dead. To escape this, they often migrated to the neighbouring Tirunelvelly district, which lay outside the royal jurisdiction of the Travancore kings (Agur: 1903, 151). Importantly, the upper caste Nairs in south Travancore were well organised into a caste council known as the National Council of Pidagaikars. The members of the council, numbering over 200 and drawn from different villages, met once in a year at Suchindram and reviewed whether caste codes were strictly adhered to by different caste groups : "One of the chief topics discussed in this annual council was whether all the individuals of their caste and other castes had duly observed their respective caste customs and manners, and whether any one class had adopted the costumes, food, speech (provincialism or brogue) and general habits of the other class, and if the council discovered that any individual violated or trespassed his caste rules and limits, it took the law into its own hands and brought him to judgement..." (Ibid : 147).

This asymmetrical situation of power and economic resources slowly changed with the establishment of a Protestant church at Mylaudi village in September 1809 by Rev. W.T. Ringeltaube of the London Missionary Society (LMS). The British Residents [of the

East India Company] in Travancore took special interest in the growth of Protestantism and used their official position to ameliorate the social disabilities of the Shanar and other lower caste converts to Christianity.

In 1812, Colonel John Munro, the British Resident in Travancore had issued a proclamation permitting the Shanar women who had converted to Christianity, to cover their breasts. Two years later, it was specified that the Christian Shanar women were allowed to wear a kuppayam, a loosely stitched jacket, like the Syrian Christians and the Muslims, but not a shoulder cloth above the jacket as was the practice among the upper caste Nairs (Koolman, 1989 : 149). Though the new dress worn by the Shanar Christian women was not similar to that of the upper castes, it was still a matter of subverting the symbolic order that endowed the upper castes with power and legitimacy to dominate. Being bare above the waist was a symbolic caste code which affirmed the powerlessness of the subordinate castes in front of the upper castes in Travancore.

Similarly, at the intervention of Ringeltaube and Munro, the Travancore government issued a proclamation on June 29, 1814, exempting the Christians from paying the burdensome poll tax. In 1815, certain other discriminatory taxes imposed on the lower castes were abolished (Yesudas, 1980 : 44). The other inequitous feature of the South Travancore society that was altered by the British Resident was the forced wage free labour (Uliyum)

extracted from the lower castes, including Shanars, by the Travancore state for the construction of tanks, dams and other public utilities, and by the Hindu temples for the preparation of elaborate temple festivals. The Uliyum demands were severe and the new converts appealed to the church to relieve them of it:

When Mr. Ringeltaube returned home from his visits to the congregation, the first spectacle that would often strike him was the numerous cudjan petitions the people used to hang on the low roof of the Verandah of his small bungalow that he might pursue them and redress their grievances against forced labour rendered to the sirkar (Agur : 1903, 137).

Munro used his official position and got the Travancore state to free the Christians converts from rendering Uliyum on Sundays and for the Hindu temples and Hindu festivals (Yesudas, 1980 : 44, 46).

Munro not merely helped the lower caste Christian converts, but the church itself by influencing the Travancore throne. He persuaded the queen of Travancore to gift the LMS two government-owned paddy fields, which yielded two crops annually worth Rs 1200, a substantial sum in those days. The queen also reduced the revenue demand on those paddy fields. Again in 1818, the queen of Travancore as well as the king of Cochin, a neighbouring princely state, granted Rs 5000 to the LMS (Kooiman, 1969 : 54, 58). All these royal gifts put the LMS on a sound financial footing.

The first question that needs to be answered is how the privileged sections of the indigenous society, especially the Nairs, reacted to these changes. Perhaps the best way to begin an answer to this question is to see how the church at Mylaudi got established. On May 15, 1806, Ringeltaube met the Dewan of Travancore, Velu Thampi, and sought his permission to erect a church at this village and the Dewan refused permission which was in consonance with his hostile attitude towards the British (Agur, 1903 : 81). The deteriorating relationship between the Dewan and the British Resident finally exploded into an anti-British insurrection in 1809. The rebels led by Velu Thampi viewed Christianity and British power as undifferentiated.

On 16 January 1809, Velu Thampi proclaimed, "...The English will... get low caste people to inflict heavy punishments for slight faults, put up crosses and Christian flags on pagodas [Hindu temples], compel intermarriages with Brahmin women, without reference to caste or creed and practice all the unjust and unlawful things that characterise Kaliyuga..." The rebels, inspired by this Hindu upper caste nationalism, "destroyed the old residences of former Dutch Governors, and marched with guns embellished with garlands of flowers dedicated to Siva the god of destruction" (Ibid : 113). They targetted everything that was foreign, including the whitemen's religion and its local adherents. The rebellion left, according to a European Christian estimate, nine Christian priests and over 3000 Christians "maimed, tortured and butchered and thrown into the backwaters" (Ibid : 114). The congregation of Christians at Mylaudi hid

themselves in the nearby mountains to escape the wrath of the rebels.

The rebellion was eventually crushed by the British troops and Velu Thampi committed suicide to escape dishonour at the hands of the British. Thus establishing the supremacy of the British in Travancore, which was at that time ruled by Balarama Varma, the Resident did not face any difficulty in getting Ringeltaube the government permission to erect a church at Mylaudi. The church was consecrated in 1809, the very year in which Velu Thampi died.

Following the death of Balarama Varma in 1810, the British Resident overlooked the claim of Elaya Raja Kerala Varma, who had been groomed to succeed Balarama Varma all along and was a confirmed anti-British, for the throne. The British banished him from Travancore and kept him as a prisoner. And, in his place, Rani Lakshmi Bayi was appointed as the queen and the Resident assumed the office of the Dewan as well. After her death in 1814, Rani Parvathi Bayi, who was merely thirteen years old at that time, was appointed as the queen and she continued to rule Travancore till 1829 (Sobhanan, 1979). What has to be borne in mind is that this period when the Travancore royal power was extremely weak was precisely when Christianity and the lower caste Christian converts flourished in south Travancore with official patronage.

Even this period of British ascendancy and consolidation

witnessed oppositions from the upper castes to the Church, though it was never very articulate unlike in the subsequent years. For instance, in 1820, the LMS opened a boarding school for the girls, which was opposed by the caste Hindus. The missionaries were suspected of improper motives in educating the girls (Yesudas, 1980 : 134, 136). And in 1822, the queen of Travancore, believing that the behaviour of the Christian converts was not in consonance with the established customs of the land, instructed her officials to strictly enforce Uliyum services on the Christians except on Sundays and other festival days (Ibid 1980 : 228).

The real trouble, however, started in 1828. During the riots of late 1828, "Men were seized on the Sabbath for public works, schools were occasionally interrupted, the books were thrown into the streets or torn to pieces, and the women were beaten up in the public bazaar for wearing the upper cloth over their bosoms, and the cloths were stripped from their bodies" Chapels and mission-run schools were burnt down and an attempt was made on the life of Rev. Charles Mead, who was in charge of the LMS. Finally, troops were sent into the area to control the riot (Hardgrave, 1969 : 61). The Travancore state sided with the Nairs who were the main rioters. The royal proclamation of February 3, 1829, stated, " As it is not reasonable on the part of the Shanar women to wear clothes over their breasts, such custom being prohibited, they are required to abstain in future from covering the upper part of their body." The proclamation accused the Shanar Christians for desiring to wear the shoulder-cloth



contrary to ancient customs and asked them to wear only kuppayams. It prohibited the building of places of worship without the prior consent of the government. Most importantly, it directed the Christians to lodge their complaints with the government instead of the missionaries (Yesudas, 1980 : 178). The last of the directives is significant as it shows how the Travancore state viewed the church and the British political authority as overlapping.

The persecution of the Christian converts continued as a regular affair in the subsequent years. Detailing instances of such acts of oppression by the upper castes, Mead wrote in 1842, "The object of the native government is to discourage and defeat our attempts to propagate the truth, and to compel the people who are now coming to the light, to return to the gloom of heathenism" (Yesudas, 1980 ; 230). We may note here that Vanji Pala Rama Varma, who ruled Travancore from 1829 to 1846, was a man of great devotion to Hindu religion and exhibited bitter contempt for the British (Menon, 1984 : II, 430-31).

In July 1855, the missionaries, presented a joint petition to the Government of Madras giving details of the difficulties faced by the Christians and sought "the appointment of a Commission of well qualified Europeans, with full powers first to secure the records in the courts and cutcherries, and then to enquire into the whole affairs of the government" (Yesudas, 1980 : 234). Thus the Church turned overtly political as an ally of British power, while facing opposition from the indigenous elite

and the Travancore state.

The last major Nair-led riot against the Shanar Christian in South Travancore, burst forth in October 1858 and continued till February 1859; and it witnessed twenty days of intense rioting. Petty state officials, claiming official sanction, stripped Shanar women of their shoulder clothes in public and armed gangs of Nairs attacked Shanar settlements. During the rioting nine chapels and three schools were destroyed. Also the thatched bungalow of the British resident in Nagercoil was gutted (Ibid,

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1969 : 65-66). At the intervention of the Madras government, at last the king, more or less, conceded the demands of the Shanars. In 1859, the Dewan wrote to the British Resident, "His Highness now proposes to abolish all rules prohibiting the covering of the upper parts of the persons of Shanar women and to grant them perfect liberty to meet the requirements of decency any way they may deem proper, with the simple restriction that they do not imitate the same mode of dress that appertains to the higher castes" (Ibid, 1969 : 68). Though this and other legal sanctions gave the Shanars certain freedom, in their everyday social life they continued to suffer from several civil disabilities such as access to public roads.

While threat from the British government in Madras forced the Travancore state to concede the demands of the Shanar converts, the actual stance of the Travancore government was quite the opposite. On November 24, 1868, the Dewan, T Madhava Row, informed the British Resident, "The Hindoo inhabitants of

Travancore in general seriously entertain the impression that the Sircar is too much influenced by a leaning to Missionary views, and that, while the state religion is Hindooism, the state is identifying itself with efforts directed against that religion" (Yesudas, 1980 : 223). The Hinduism that was being referred to was the Hinduism of the elite which would legitimise and affirm the pre-existing relations of power.

Thus the church, which was viewed by the upper castes and the Travancore state as an ally of British imperialism, reworked the power relations within the indigenous society in favour of the lower castes. The Orientalist project of the church, i.e., its mission to liberate the 'natives' from the "gloom of heathenism" and bring them to "the light", worked in favour of the lower caste Shanars. To contain this breakdown of 'consent', based on caste rigidities, the elite resorted increasingly to coercive action against the Shanars and accepted the new situation of power only in the face of British threat.

Let us now move on to see how the Shanars, especially the converts to Christianity, viewed the Church. Their position was just the reverse of the upper castes. As Kooiman (1989) has ably shown, the new adherents of Christianity in south Travancore used, more often than not, the missionary efforts as a means to address temporal questions of power within the indigenous society. Whenever missionary efforts were perceived to be of help in shedding their caste-based disadvantages, large number of Shanars rushed to the LMS congregation; and when they found these

advantages to be petering off, they returned to their original faith. In 1818, when Rev. Mead was appointed as a civil judge in Nagercoil, about 3000 Shanars joined the LMS hoping for favours. Once this short-lived experiment of appointing missionaries as judges collapsed and Mead relinquished his post, most of the new converts left the LMS. In 1814, when the poll tax on the Christians was abolished, about 1000 families joined the church and when this advantage was subsequently extended to the Hindus also, only 20 of these families remained with the church. Similarly, during those months when extraction of Uliyum for Hindu festivals would reach their peak, there was a rush of Shanars to the LMS; and the converts left the congregation when the festival preparations got over (Ibid :73, 74).

The educational efforts of the LMS were also used by the converts for their own social and economic benefit and only a limited number of students served the mission as catechists or as school masters. A large number of them migrated to the coffee plantations of Ceylon as kanganis or in other positions; and some of them on their return developed interests in plantations in Travancore. The fascinating story of P.D. Devasagayam, which Koolman narrates in some detail, is worth mentioning in this context. Devasagayam, hailing from a poor Shanar family, got educated in Nagercoil seminary and went to Ceylon as a kangani. After accumulating money, he returned to South Travancore and invested in prosperous plantations. Also, he "invested his earnings... in paddy fields and in a magnificent house in his

native place Nagercoil. This two-storeyed building proudly challenged the old restrictions imposed on Shanars and similar castes, and after completing the house Devasagayam had to set an armed guard round the premises for about six months, as the high castes had threatened to set it on fire" (Ibid : 129).

Thus, it was not merely spiritual quest, but palpable worldly gains and questions of power, both symbolic and otherwise, which led to the spread of Protestantism in south Travancore, as the story of Devasagayam and other details demonstrate.

As a concomitant process of the converts using their new faith to address temporal issues and to rework the pre-existing relations of power, they did not fully denounce their cultural past. While they tried to alter the structure of power within the caste system, they retained caste as a part of their cultural milieu. In spite of being members of the LMS, they did not give up fully their faith in folk Hinduism. During times of distress, triggered off by famines and epidemics, they returned back to their original religious practices. For instance, in 1860, the region witnessed famine, cholera and consequently large-scale death. Fearing that "they had provoked the evil spirits by leaving their traditional worship", the Christian converts offered sacrifices to their indigenous deities (Ibid : 189). "Apart from this shifting loyalties", Kooiman (1989 : 189) notes, "people were used in case of trouble and illness, to visit both the Christian church and the demon shrine at the same time, keeping - as missionaries wrote disparagingly - their feet in two

boats." Thus, " ...the Travancore converts have embraced Christianity in accordance with their own values and without completely rejecting their own cultural past" (Ibid : 203). They practised a 'heathenised' Christianity.

One of the reasons for the Christian converts not surrendering completely their Hinduism and exhibiting certain ambivalence towards Christianity was, as Koolman has shown, their pre-existing religious faith that defectors would be punished with dearth and diseases by the indigenous gods. In other words, their socially constructed identity as 'Hindu subjects' still exercised its power over them. The other reason was, as the instances of riots have shown, the physical coercion employed by the upper castes. In addition to these factors, there existed an equally, if not more, important factor that relinquishing their religious past would lead to a loss of identity within the indigenous society as a whole, and especially within their own caste groups. In other words, they would be reduced to a position of social outcastes.

Let me illustrate this point. On February 1, 1853, two LMS missionaries and the ladies and children accompanying them were attacked with much violence at Suchindram by Brahmins for crossing the path of a Hindu religious procession. Interestingly, there was enough space on the road for both the missionaries and the processionists to travel. As a British official-cum-church historian recounted the incident, "This daring assault on a Christian missionary, and a European British subject to boot, by

a heathen mob and a set of rabble Brahmins who uncereemoniously pelted and hooted out of public road, an Englishman as a vile animal or as an unclean or polluting object, though so ignominious and insulting in its nature, was lightly investigated by the highest authorities in Travancore..." (Agur, 1903 : 492). The key words here are "an unclean or polluting object". In fact, in Travancore, as elsewhere in India, "Every European nation was considered... as low-caste, and reckoned as mlacha or hoonah (outcaste) and the High caste Hindus... would not approach a European too closely, for fear of being contaminated" (Menon, 1984 : II, 380). The Travancore sovereigns met even the British Residents outside their fort and after such meetings underwent "certain ablutions, ceremonies, and change[ed] ...[the] sacred thread..." This was discontinued only during the reign of Queen Lakshmi Bayi, despite Brahminical opposition (Ibid : 381). Association with the whitemen would, thus, mean a loss of one's social location within the indigenous society.

This phenomenon of the possible loss of identity will become clear once we look into the fate of the upper caste converts to Christianity, whose choice of religion was not motivated by temporal aspirations of altering the relations of power. The moment they left the Hindu fold, they lost their upper caste privileges and were treated as outcastes. During the late 18th century, when the Catholic church was already well established in south Travancore, "Neelam Pillai, an officer of a noble family, was shot at Aruvamozhi, because he refused to renounce the Christian religion" (Yesudas, 1980 : 22). The upper caste



converts/sympathisers of the LMS also faced similar alienation from the society. During the 1830s, there was stiff opposition against the LMS in the mountainous parts of the Neyyur mission district and Raman Thampi, an upper caste Hindu, helped the mission to acquire land at Neyyur. Consequently he was arrested and imprisoned (Yesudas, 1980 :66). The point to be underscored is that most of the officials in south Travancore and their Christian victims were both Nairs.

One may argue that Shanars were in any case at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and a loss of identity within the indigenous society would have mattered very little for them. This was not so since alienation within the society and alienation without the society were qualitatively different social situations. The dominant culture of the indigenous society was not merely exclusive, but inclusive too - a process which is essential for the elite to exercise hegemony. But alienation without the society was merely an exclusion without any process of inclusion accompanying it.

This dynamics would become evident when we look into the attitude of the Hindu Shanars towards their Christian counterparts. In 1813, Ringeltaube wrote, "[No persecution of the converts]... at present from the constituted authorities, but still much opposition from their relations, their masters and the rich Nodans" (Agur, 1903 : 175). Thus, here the converts stand alienated from their own caste, and their Hindu counterparts affirmed their social superiority within the indigenous society



by rejecting the converts - despite being at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Similarly, the moment they embraced Christianity, their relatives treated them as outsiders and were forfeited of their claim over the family property. And "The heathens also mocked their Christian neighbours that they had unwisely adopted the religion of certain foreigners" (Ibid :470).

To sum up the story so far, while the Shanar Christian converts wanted to consolidate the gains brought in by the civilising mission of the Church, the same process brought them into conflict with the elite of the indigenous society who viewed the 'civilising' mission as a threat to their authority. Thus their voices of protest were voices under domination, a domination which was coercive (as evident from the shoulder cloth riots) as well as ideological (as evident from the converts behaving as 'Hindu subjects' and their Hindu counterparts rejecting them). The Shanars, primarily the poorest of the poor among them, sought a resolution of this conflict in a popular Hindu cult, the cult of Sri Vaikunda Swamy.

### III

The Sri Vaikunda Swamy cult<sup>4</sup> took shape among the Shanars of south Travancore, during the 1830s, a period when there was organised repression against the Shanar Christian converts. The cult still survives and on Vaikunda Swamy's birthday in January (20, Masi) every year, several thousand Nadars, / mostly from

Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli districts congregate at Swamitoppu, where Vaikunda Swamy was born. And the adherents of the cult are today found all over Tamilnadu.

Vaikunda Swamy was born in a poor Vaishnavite Shanar family in 1809 at Sastankoilvilai, a small village in south Travancore (the present day Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu), located a few kilometers south-east of Nagercoil. The village is today known as Swamitoppu, after Vaikunda Swamy. Soon after he was born, his parents christened him as Mudisudum Perumal; since 'Perumal' was an exclusive suffix used by upper caste Hindus after their names, there was opposition from them to change the name. Mudisudum Perumal was, thus, given a new prosaic name as Muthukutty. Muthukutty's childhood was spent in the village pial school, learning religious and moral texts such as Naladi, Moodurai, Thirukural and Thiruvagasam. Born in an extremely religious family, where prayers were held everyday, he also became well versed in Hindu mythologies. Significantly, during this period, he learnt the Bible and became proficient in Christian teachings. It was even claimed by a Church historian that Muthukutty was a Christian for some time.

When he reached the age of twenty two, Muthukutty took a pilgrimage to the famous Murugan temple at Tiruchendur in Tirunelveli district, to attend the Masi festival and to get cured of a skin affliction which he was suffering from. After a holy bath in the sea at Tiruchendur, he claimed that

Vishnu/Narayanan had given him a rebirth as his son. And Muthukutty assumed the new name of Sri Vaikundar. (We may note here, Muthukutty's claim that he was reborn as the son of Vishnu may be due to the influence of Christianity. It exhibits a close resemblance to the Christian belief that Jesus Christ was the son of God.) He declared that he was born to salvage the Shanars and to establish the rule of Dharma. He returned to south Travancore and began doing penance which continued for four years. During the first two years of the penance, he sat inside a dug-out pit that was six feet deep and for the next two years, he wore only torn clothes, did not speak to anyone and subsisted solely on milk. This was the period when he became popular and people from various castes visited him. His fame became widespread because of the belief that he could cure the sick.

In his preachings he launched a vitriolic attack on the traditional Travancore society and its ruler. He condemned the state for collecting excessive taxes from the lower caste people. When the king Vanji Pala Rama Varma visited Suchindram, the upper caste Hindus informed him that a lowly Shanar was claiming to be the incarnation of Vishnu and had threatened to establish his rule over the country and give immortality to the Shanars. The king was also informed of the inter-dining promoted by Vaikunda Swamy without caste distinctions. Significantly, Vishnu at Padmanabhaswamy temple at Trivandrum was the presiding deity of the Travancore royal household. The king got Vaikunda Swamy arrested and brought him to Trivandrum. On his way to Trivandrum as a prisoner, the upper caste people abused and insulted

Vaikunda Swamy and threw stones at him. The king tried to question Vaikunda Swami about his divinity, but the latter refused to answer. Finally, he was kept as a prisoner at Singarattoppu, an open-air prison in the western side of the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple at Trivandrum. His imprisonment drew a large number of his followers from the Nanchilnadu region of south Travancore to distant Trivandrum. In the prison, he was said to have been forced to undergo ordeals of different kinds. He was believed to have been kept as a prisoner in a narrow dingy room and dried chillies were burnt inside the room; he was forced to walk on fire; he was thrown into a hot lime furnace and also inside a cage with a tiger. He survived all these ordeals and which was taken as a proof of his extra-human attributes. The king asked him to give a kaicheetu (written undertaking) that he would carry on his mission only among the people of his own caste. Though he refused to give the kaicheetu, he was at last released from the prison during the first week of March 1838. He returned back to Ampalapathi in a procession made up of his ecstatic followers. During the journey, he was carried in a cradle by his devotees and the cradle is still retained as a sacred object at Swamitoppu.

His mission continued for another twelve years and he died in 1851. During the later part of his life, he organised the Samathuva Sangam (Organisation for Equality) and appealed to his followers to become members of it. Also he chose five of his disciples - Sivanandi of Mylaudi, Pandaram of Kailasapuram,

Arjuna of Pillayarkudiyirrupu, Subbiah of Colachel and Hari Gopalan of Tamaraikulam, rechristened them respectively as Dharma Siddhar, Bhima Siddhar, Arjuna Siddhar, Nahular Siddhar and Sahadevan Siddhar, and asked them to propagate his ideas. The suffix 'Siddhar' in the new names given to his disciples is significant. Siddhars were the iconoclastic Bhakti poets of 13th to 18th century Tamil Nadu, who opposed, among other things, the caste system. To his followers, Vaikunda Swamy introduced himself as Lord Krishna and his five disciples as Pancha Pandavars. His followers referred to him as Aiya (Father) and his cult was known as Aiya Vazhi (the path of Aiya).

The preachings of Vaikunda Swamy and the ritual practices enunciated by him had two basic aspects. At one level, he tried to alter the folk Hinduism of the Shanars and make it cohere with that of the upper castes. At another level, he challenged the caste-based inequalities suffered by the Shanars and promised them to eliminate the present Kaliyuga and usher in a golden age of Dharma.

Let us first take up how Vaikunda Swamy altered the ritual and religious practices of the Shanars. The Shanars were, by and large, Saivites, but there was a small section of them who were Vaishnavites known as Perumal Vazhikkar. But their actual religious practices had very little relation to the doctrinal Saivism or Vaishnavism. Writing as late as 1906, Nagam Aiya (1906 : II, 57) noted, "...demon worship attended with animal sacrifice is the most prevalent among them, and it must also be admitted



that even amongst the Christian converts its influence has not entirely disappeared." One of the principal devil temples in south Travancore - the temple of Mutharamman - was located at Agastiswaram, which is the headquarters of the Shanar elite known as Nadans. This temple was believed to have been "built in ten days by the aid of demons" (Aiya, 1906 : II, 57). "The architectural tribute generally made in their [devils'] honour was that of a pyramid of mud, plastered and whitewashed, with the figure of a devil in front. A better kind of building was a small thatched shed, open in front, and containing some half a dozen idols of demons" (Yesudas, 1980:17). The Shanars usually sacrificed goats and roosters to these deities.

Contrary to these pre-existing religious practices of the Shanars, Vaikunda Swamy, first and foremost, instructed his followers to give up devil worship and idol worship. He claimed that he had already burnt all the devils and taken away the mantras (magical incantations) used by the Kanikaras (the local hill people) to drive the devils away. He also asked them not to offer sacrifices of goats, roosters and pigs to the deities. Not merely animal sacrifices, he preached, but no other offering such as eggs, fried meat and local edibles like Ponkal, Murukku, Paniyarram, Avalurundai and Kadaiapal was asked for by the gods.

He established simple hut-like structures in seven places, namely, Chettykudiyirrupu, Agastiswaram, Palur, Sundavillai, Vadaliavillai, Kadampankulam and Pampankulam, where all these

preachings were practised. These structures were locally known as Nilal Tankals or Inanthankals where religious rituals and idol worship were prohibited and offerings from the devotees were not accepted. Apart from feeding the poor, these places of worship, where caste-based restriction on entry was not imposed as a principle, were used for propagating the principles of Vaikunda Swamy. Interestingly, individual prayers were not held in Nilal Tankals, but only mass prayers, affirming the communitarian orientation of the cult. Over the years, such Nilal Tankals had proliferated in number and some of them doubled as village schools. As much as Nilal Tankals, the institution of Tuvaial Panthi established by Vaikunda Swamy was also important. Tuvaial Panthi was a set of practices which was essentially meant to establish the importance of cleanliness and simple (read as vegetarian) food and it was first introduced at Vagaipathi near Kanyakumari. The devotees who participate in Tuvaial Panthi had to take bath thrice a day and wash their clothes before attending Vaikunda Swamy's discourses. They had to give up their usual fare of fish, which the Shanars were obsessively fond of, and drink gruel made of rice and green gram. A number of families participated in Tuvaial Panthi, and it was claimed that, at one point, seven hundred families participated in it. The principle of cleanliness propagated through Tuvaial Panthi seemed to have become a general norm to the members of the cult. As an LMS report of 1892 puts it, "It is true that their [the devotees of Vaikunda Swamy] bodies and their houses are more cleanly than those of the rest."

In short, the cult propagated several practices such as giving up devil worship and animal sacrifices and adopting cleanliness and vegetarian food, which were all part of the upper caste Hinduism in Travancore. Thus, this was an effort to bridge the gap between the folk Hinduism of the Shanars and the elite Hinduism of the upper castes. The only exception to this was Vaikunda Swamy's opposition to idol worship which might be due to the influence of Christianity and his effort to wean away his followers from the numerous folk deities who were worshipped in idol form.

Let us now move on to the stance of Vaikunda Swamy on caste-based inequities and other sufferings of the Shanars and other lower castes. First of all, Vaikunda Swamy, in his preachings, opposed the excessive taxes and the Uliyum services imposed on the Shanars by the Travancore king. He told his followers that one of the crimes of Ravana, the mythological opponent of the mythological Rama, was excessive taxation, and a just king, like the ancient Chola rulers, would not demand more than a sixth of the total produce as tax, and such a king would not even insist upon that. He characterised the Travancore King as Neesan (oppressor) and emboldened his followers that if a Shanar woman cursed the king everyday, the king would die. He claimed, unless the king announced through drum beating that the Shanars were relieved of Uliyum services, he would lose his right to rule. Similarly, he opposed the denial of right to Shanar women to wear shoulder cloth. He asked his followers to wear turban while entering his place of worship. We may remember here, in real



life, shanars were prohibited from using turbans and even when they carry headloads, they were permitted to use only a bunch of dry hay and palm leaves, locally known as Summadu, on their heads. The practice of wearing a turban while entering the temple still continues at Swamitoppu. He promised to his followers that he would exterminate the Brahmins and when the Dharmayuga gets established in the place of the present Kaliyuga, there would not be any distinctions among human beings and the world as a whole would be ruled under one umbrella by a benevolent king.

To practice the equality preached by him, Vaikunda Swamy, got a community well dug at Swamitoppu. This well was (and still is) known as Munthiri Kinaru. While in Travancore society access to wells were discriminated on the basis of castes, Munthiri Kinaru offered its water, which was believed to have had curative power, to all castes - mostly of those castes which were below the Shanars in the caste hierarchy. And around Munthiri Kinaru, Vaikunda Swamy regularly organised inter-dining among different castes. People belonging to different castes brought uncooked food, cooked it with the water of Munthiri Kinaru and ate it in a community feast along with Vaikunda Swamy. In keeping with the cult's spirit of indiscriminating love, Samathuva Sangam founded by Vaikunda Swamy adopted a saffron flag with a white patch in the middle, known as Anbu Kodi (Flag of Love).

Thus, the Vaikunda Swamy cult, apart from attempting to bridge the gap between the folk and elite Hinduisms, articulates,

within its territory, the same aspiration as that of the Shanar Christian converts. In a sense, it was a 'Christianised' Hinduism that they practised.

The cult became extremely popular among the Shanars over the years, and posed a challenge to the spread of Protestantism in south Travancore. The LMS Annual Report of the Santhapuram Mission District for 1864, recorded, "Some years ago a palmyrah climber named Muthukutti claimed to be an incarnation of Vishnu and deceived many people. His followers have erected pagodas in many places. As they regard Muthukutti as an incarnation of Vishnu, they affirm that the worship of Muthukutti is really a worship of the Supreme being...This imposter is one of the chief obstacles to the spread of the Gospel in these parts." Ten years later, the LMS Annual Report of the Nagercoil Mission District for 1874, lamented, "In 1821, there were upwards of 1200 converts in these places. It seemed as if the whole population would be soon brought under the influence of the cross. But a terrible check was given to our operations by the rise of Muttukuttyism... Shrines rose, rites and ceremonies were initiated; temples were dedicated; and lastly a car festival was instituted at Kottayady to which thousands are annually drawn from towns and villages far and near. This cunning contrivance of Satan has much impeded our progress in these parts..." Though Vaikunda Swamy did not launch a systematic campaign against the white colonisers, he did refer to them as Venneesan (White Oppressor[s]). Significantly, during the riots of the 1850s, both the Hindu Shanars and the Christian Shanars joined hands in fighting out the Nair and the Vellala

opponents (Agur, 1903 : 508).

Let us situate the Vaikunda Swamy cult in the context of how the aspirations of the Shanars to subvert the power structure - which became articulate due to the 'civilising' mission of the Church - was hedged in and assaulted by the upper castes in south Travancore. We have already noted that the aspirations articulated by the followers of Vaikunda Swamy and by the Shanar Christian converts were not substantially different. Despite this, the Christians provoked the wrath of the upper caste Hindus, while the adherents of the Vaikunda Swamy cult got away unassaulted. We do not come across a single instance of any attack on the places of worship of this cult, while instances of attack on churches proliferated. This difference point to the fact that Vaikunda Swamy cult functioned as a disguise adopted by the subordinated Shanars to escape retaliation and at the same time to articulate their aspirations. As Jim Scott (1989 : 2) has argued, "The survival of subordinate groups requires...both a hard-won mastery over the open expression of hostile emotions to powerholders and the elaboration of indirect forms of resistance and aggression that minimise the likelihood of direct retaliation".<sup>5</sup>

What are the specific modes of political disguise deployed by the Vaikunda Swamy cult so that they were spared of open confrontation with the upper castes? First of all, it had displaced resistance from a vulnerable site to a more protected site. In other words, it was no more articulated within the

confines of churches but within Hindu places of worship and the upper castes, for reasons we shall specify below, could not exhibit the same irreverence towards folk Hinduism as towards Christianity.

The Hinduism of the Shanars and that of the upper castes were quite different in south Travancore. This difference, however, does not permit total irreverence towards the Hinduism of Shanars by the upper castes. The hierarchisation of Hinduism(a) and the power relations embedded in such hierarchisation would become legitimate only when the Hinduism of the Shanars were treated as part of Hinduism as such. Without this projected unity, the hierarchy (within the unity) will lose its meaning and hence communication of power would break down. This dual requirements of power (unity and hierarchy) is well captured by Pierre Bourdieu (1977): "The dominant culture produces its own ideological effect by disguising the function of division (or distinction) beneath the function of communication. The culture which unites (as a medium of communication) also divides (as an instrument of distinction) and legitimates distinctions by defining all cultures (designated subcultures) by their distance from the dominant culture (ie cultural deprivation)". In Travancore, for instance, "Demonolatary is absolutely unconnected with the higher forms of Hinduism, but a belief in the power for mischief possessed by the devils is widespread and even the Brahmins are not free from it" (Aiya, 1906:II, 55). Thus, both the upper castes and the Shanars were constituted as 'Hindu subjects', while distinct from one another, so that power could

be communicated. This unity, which was a sort of limit set on the irreverence towards 'lower' forms of Hinduism, was exploited by the Shanars in the form of Vaikunda Swamy cult to safeguard themselves against upper caste assaults.

Here, we have to also bear in mind that Vaikunda Swamy cult, while using the unifying aspect of power relations to its advantage, tried to subvert the hierarchisation by means of bridging the differences between their Hinduism and that of their oppressors. Subverting the hierarchisation was to subvert power itself.

The second mode of disguise deployed by the Vaikunda Swamy cult is encapsulated in the transition of Muthukutty into Vaikunda Swamy. After his holy bath at Trichendur sea, he ceased to be a mere mortal, but acquired a new geneology as the son of Vishnu. He demonstrated his extra-human attributes through penance and the ability to cure the sick. Even after his death, his followers, as an LMS Report puts it, believed, "...Muthukutti will come again, raise his followers from the death and take them to the heavens of the worshippers of Vishnu". But reincarnation was a belief shared by both the higher and lower caste Hindus. Vaikunda Swamy did survive the ordeals at Suchindrum and Trivandrum and through which affirmed his new identity even among the upper castes. To put it differently, while the message of protest was undisguised and open within the cult, its protagonist was disguised. It was a disguise drawn from the pre-existing idioms of Hinduism as a unifying cultural practice. This too

protected the followers of the cult - despite their heretical beliefs - from the upper caste assailants.

These were the modalities through which a section of the Shanars resolved the violent conflict they entered into with the power holders of the indigeneous society as a result of the Church-activated aspirations. While they carved out a space for protest within the Vaikunda Swamy cult, still one has to remember that the need for disguise while protesting affirmed their continuing subalternity.

#### IV

The story of the Vaikunda Swamy cult may in itself be an exploration into the forms of protest employed by the subordinate classes. But, as we have posed at the beginning of the essay, our concern is about the problems of the nationalist historiography. Let us, in this concluding section, place the Vaikunda Swamy cult in the context of nationalist historiography.

First of all, the story shows that colonialism and nationalism were on the wrong sides of the history - if one has to assess history from the values attached to these categories in the nationalist historiography. While the church could articulate the interests of the subordinated classes, it was the nationalists, or those who will be labelled as nationalists were the ones who suppressed them. In reality, when the subordinate classes abandoned the church as their ally, they were forced to resort to disguised and less effective forms of struggles as

exemplified by the Vaikunda Swamy cult.

These facts, at another level, imply that colonialism and nationalism were, as they had unfolded in the actual terrain of history, not univocal processes. They were categories, meaning different things at once. Velu Thampi's vision of freedom was different from - indeed the opposite of - the Shanar's vision of liberation; and his nationalism was not only directed against the British, but also against the Shanar Christian converts. In the same manner, colonialism meant for the upper castes an erosion of their pre-existing power, and it meant a possibility of empowerment for the Shanars. In fact, one of the first converts to Protestantism in south Travancore, Vedamanickam (who was however not a Shanar), used to pray, "O Lord God! Hasten the time when this abode of heathenism and superstition will pass into the hands of the Hon'able [East India] Company" (Agur, 1903 : 124). Thus, there was no one history of colonialism or nationalism - but at least one for the Shanars and another for the Nairs. In fact, not merely two but several, produced in the terrain of power struggle with several contestants. In the context of the specific case of south Travancore, if nationalism has to be salvaged as uncriticisably positive, it can be done only by silencing the voices of the Shanars. This is exactly the process in which the nationalist historiography and the elitist historiography get overlapped.

Secondly, the relations of power even under colonial



conditions cannot be fully explicated or contained within categories such as nationalism or colonialism. For example, the relationship between the monarchy in Travancore and the British Indian Government was qualitatively different from that between the Nairs and the Shanars at the local level. The former could have signified a 'nation' being dominated by a colonial power. The latter, however, was basically a contest for power relatively removed from questions such as 'national' liberation, and it was not the contradiction between the subject nation and its colonisers translating itself at the 'local level'. This point becomes clearer when we see the fact that the weakest of the Shanars sought a solution in the form of Vaikunda Swamy cult which could accuse both the Neesan (the king) and the Venneesan (the colonisers) simultaneously. Also those section of the Shanars who looked for a solution in the church neither viewed it as opposed to the nation nor adhered fully to its 'civilising mission'. They interpreted it in their own way and even succeeded in 'heathenising' it. These men and women cannot be located as allies of the colonisers, though they did not approve of the indigenous elite who opposed the colonisers. The parameters of their politics was far removed from the concerns of colonialism and nationalism.

The valorised master narrative of 'nation' and 'nationalism' would be, thus, often more a fetter rather than an aid in understanding the past and it will not accomodate the multiple histories played out in the actual terrain of politics. And one needs to unearth all those many histories that have been silenced



or marginally treated because of the misplaced efforts of the nationalist historians to decipher an ideological unity (in the form of nationalism) in the complex, shifting political life of a 'nation' under colonial conditions. That will help us not merely to develop a fuller critique of colonialism, but one of nationalism too. And a critique of nationalism is never more urgent than now: it is the 'nation' ("national interest", "national unity") which is the most fecund source of legitimacy today for the Indian state and the ruling elite to suppress the democratic aspirations of the oppressed.

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#### Notes

1. The Shanars of south Travancore are known today as Nadars. During the nineteenth Century, the bulk of them, who were poor, were known as Shanars, and a very thin stratum of rich Shanars carried the honorific title Nadans. With the Shanars achieving social and economic advances through the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, they as a caste group adopted the new name Nadars.
2. It is popularly believed today that the market at Kanyakumari acquired its name as Thali Aruthan Chandai ('Market where Thalis were torn away'), because of its association with the shoulder cloth riots. It is told, in the process of snatching away the shoulder cloth of the Shanar women who had gone to this market,

the policemen occasionally tore away their thalis (wedding chains) also. (See : Junior Vikatan, October 24, 1990).

3. We have elaborated this point in the following section of the paper where we deal with the Vaikunda Swamy cult.

4. The facts used in this section are primarily drawn from Ponnellan (nd), Ponnu (1983, 1987) and Sarveswaran (1980).

5. The following arguments on political disguise used in this section are based heavily on Scott (1989).

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