

# Perspectives on Social Change in a Kerala Village

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## **Abstract**

Regardless of the breakdown of the caste-occupation corresponding to the caste hierarchy system, caste considerations prevail in India. The rising incidence of honour killings and atrocities that the downtrodden communities are susceptible to are manifestations of this phenomenon. These factors, along with caste-based mobilisation and agitations reported in several places, indicate that Indian villages are emerging as conflict zones. An exception is Kerala which achieved a high level of social development. In this context, an investigation into the social changes of Kerala villages and the contributing factors assumes significance. This paper portrays the nature of social change realised by the Kerala village of Edakkad and the underlying factors. It reflects on a study that analysed primary data gathered from surveying 361 households, group discussions with various sections in the community and field observation, along with secondary data collected from village monographs and memoirs of the researcher as a native of the village for over six decades. It appears that profound changes took place in terms of inter-caste relationships, class structure and power structure. Apart from governmental initiatives, educational advancement, the emergence of the communist movement, industrialisation, reform movements, local mass mobilisation for development, alien rule and radical land reform measures were all instrumental in accomplishing social change.

## **Keywords**

social change, Kerala, caste system, social mobility

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## **Introduction**

The Indian caste system characterised by discrimination, economic exploitation and political inequalities has been a fertile area of research

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for centuries. Analytical findings paved the way for a series of reform measures which brought profound changes to the society, even during the British rule pursued proactively post-independence. The diverged social, political, and economic contexts across the regions circumscribed the impact of proactive policies. The transformation of Kerala from an infamous state for a pervasive caste system into a socially developed one stands out.

On the contrary, the social reality elsewhere in the country is that even if a breakdown of the association between the caste and occupation, and hierarchical relationships among castes resulted, caste consideration remains extensive. The growing incidence of shame killings and atrocities against the lower class are indicators of a persistent caste system. Moreover, the caste-based agitations and mobilisations turn several Indian villages into conflict zones. Hence, it is significant to explore the social changes and the favourable factors in Kerala villages. This paper describes a study that analysed the nature and extent of social change in a Kerala village over six decades and the propitious local factors underlying the change.

### **The Study Village and the Data**

The researcher conveniently selected his native village of Edakkad in the district of Kannur in the Malabar region for the study. His memoirs elucidating the emergence of this village as an eventually developed area over the past 60 years justified this selection. The village monograph published as part of the 1961 census provided an account of the early socio-economic structure of the village. The researcher collected primary data from 361 randomly selected households in Edakkad village using a self-administered questionnaire in 2017. Additionally, he conducted discussions with different sections in the village community and toured around observing the field.

### **Socio-Demographic Profile**

As per the Census of India (1966a), the village population was comprised of Hindus and Muslims where Christian households were absent. The Hindu community was further classified into different castes such as *Namboothiri* (priestly caste), *Variar*, *Nair* (locally known as *Nambiar*), *Marar*, *Ezhava* (locally known as *Thiyya*), *Chalivas* (the weaving community) and other castes. *Thiyyas* dominated with 50 per cent representation in the demography followed by *Nambiar*. Muslims and *Chalivas* were in third and fourth positions respectively. The other castes ranged between one or

two families to 20 or 25 families. By 2011, the demographic composition had diversified as Hindus (69.10%), Muslims (29.42%), Christians (1.06%), others (0.02%) and no-religion (0.39%) (Census of India, 2011). Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the households studied.

Table 1: Demographic profile of households

Religion	Per cent
Hindu	80.33
Castes	57.93
<i>Thiyya</i>	29.66
<i>Nambiar</i>	5.86
Scheduled Caste (SC)/Scheduled Tribe (ST)	4.14
<i>Variier/Marar</i>	
Other Backward Castes (OBC)	2.41
Muslim	17.73
Christian	1.94

**Social Structure and Social Relations**

In the early social structure, castes were positioned in the order of *Namboothiri*, *Variier*, *Nambiar*, *Marar*, other backward communities (OBC) and scheduled caste (SC) from top to bottom. *Nambiar* was further divided into aristocratic (locally known as *Esmam*) and non-aristocratic (locally known as *Moosor*). Regarding inter-caste relationships in the past, *Namboothiris*, *Variiers*, *Marars* and aristocratic *Nambiars* of the village acted as an orthodox set and observed traditional customs and conventions in their dealings with other castes. However, these practices underwent substantial changes even by the 1960s, except for the pollution and untouchability that *Namboothiris* followed in public while other upper castes practised it only in private places. *Thiyyas* and other lower caste people were not allowed in the houses of upper castes. Even if they were invited for the important social ceremonies of weddings and deaths, food was served separately. Friendship outside the caste was common and was not accompanied by shame or guilt. There was no restriction in accessing public wells and using streets and pathways. However, lower castes were never permitted to use the private wells of higher castes.

There was absolutely no segregation in settlement patterns and seating was mixed in schools; *Namboothiri* was no exception to this. It was also common that irrespective of caste, food used to be taken from restaurants

by the upper caste (except *Namboothiri*) locally and was taken out of the village. At the same time some rigid practices existed, and one was restricted temple entry confined to forward castes. Another was the rigidity followed in arranged marriages for caste-based alliances. Even the two *Nambiar* denominations did not inter-marry as it was considered a shame. Love marriage between castes was not tolerated by any community. In such cases, the punishment was also harsh among upper castes, and the practice was to expel them and perform the last rites on death (*pindamvekkal*) with absolutely no right to property. Still, there were isolated cases of inter-caste/inter-religious elopement defying the caste rules, even among the aristocratic *Nambiar* families. In inter-caste and interpersonal relationships, a constructive change process began quite early in the village. Consequently, there was no friction between the communities, and the social life was peaceful. Communal organisations were absent in the village studied while they were strong in certain villages of South Kerala (Census of India, 1966a).

Currently, the village displays the characteristics of a socially developed state. Caste plays no role in the interpersonal relationships of villagers where untouchability is no longer seen even in private places, except in the priestly duties of *Namboothiris*. Private wells in aristocratic *Nambiar* households open to others substantiate this view. While attending social functions like marriage, caste is not a criterion any more where inter-dining takes place. The inter-marriage of the two *Nambiar* factions is now normalised. However, in marriages arranged by parents, the selection is exclusively from the same caste by all categories. At the same time, many married by personal choice (love marriages), cutting across castes and even religion, for example Muslims although rare. The inter-caste or inter-religion marriages never caused any disharmony in the village or marginalisation of those families. In several cases, though families expressed their hesitation in accepting the couple initially, they accommodated them later. The change was evident particularly in the outlook of Hindu families. The practice of exclusion from families no longer exists, except for a few Muslims. For example, when an aristocratic *Nambiar* boy in the village fell in love with a *Thiyya* girl, his parents accepted the girl and carried out traditional wedding ceremonies. Similar cases of cutting across castes were observable throughout the village. One of the respondents remarked that while selecting a partner, one should not become a liability to the family. Financial strength should be the factor to be reckoned with, not caste or religion. Thus, significant changes have occurred in the mindsets of the Hindu people concerning

rigid caste beliefs. An exception to this social advancement is the Muslim community with stringent practices such as the *Purdah* system.

*Namboothiris* and aristocratic *Nambiar*s were absentee landlords. Apart from them, a few Muslim households also belonged to this category. Traditionally *Namboothiris*, *Varriers* and *Marars* were bound by temple duties. Although there was occupational segregation by caste, the social change was visible even by the 1960s. *Thiyyas* who were toddy tappers became workers in agriculture, construction, beedi (local cigarettes) and handloom industries. Other than *Thiyyas*, a few *Marar* boys and some *Moosors* also adopted these occupations. There was a substantial intrusion by *Thiyyas* both as owners and workers in the traditional occupation of *Chaliyas* since weaving was the dominant economic activity in the village. In the case of servicing castes like barbers and washers, while the upper middle-aged followed the traditional occupations, others moved away from them. Thus caste-based tight compartmentalised occupational grouping was absent in the village. Moreover, many Muslims were traders and labourers in the handloom and *beedi* (local cigarettes) industries as they moved out of their conventional occupation of fishing.

The study found that the village attained high-level occupational mobility in the contemporary scenario as a considerable number of lower castes engage in activities previously undertaken by the higher castes and *viceversa*. For example, a middle-aged aristocratic *Nambiar* (*Esmen*) now works as a woodcutter. While several *Thiyyas* work as carpenters and fish vendors, many *Nambiar*s and *Marars* work as daily wage earners in agriculture, construction, beedi rolling, and auto-driving. People adopt available employment opportunities irrespective of caste. The service castes abandoned their family occupations completely. Muslims also entered into diversified occupations. However, in the case of temple duties, the same old practices are followed. At the same time, there are no caste-based restrictions for temple entry.

The settlement patterns concerning caste, religion and class changed, despite a few pockets of concentration of Muslims in the village.

### **Family Structure and the Role of Women**

The joint family system was traditionally the practice among all communities. However, to a great extent, the village had left this system by the 1960s. This trend was prominent among *Nambiar*s and *Thiyyas*, while other lower castes practised the joint family system with few exceptions. Muslims were

a definite exception to this as the joint family system was popular. Over the years, the nuclear family formation gained momentum constantly among all Hindu castes and Muslims as well. Consequently, most of the households in the village are now nuclear families, with limited exceptions.

The traditional patriarchal practices in the village confined women to their homes regardless of their community. They were rarely allowed to go out except for medical care, close family functions and temple festivals. Their social contact was only with females of neighbouring households. While this was particularly the case of the higher castes, the *Namboothiri* denomination strictly locked up their women in homes. Marriage of girls at an early age was the usual practice in the village. The village denied education to girls, where many discontinued their learning at the primary level as higher-level education was considered deviant behaviour. The employment of women outside their homes was prevalent only among the economically weaker sections. While *Thiyya* women worked in agriculture, construction, and in the handloom and coir industries, women of the *Chaliya* community engaged in ancillary works of handloom weaving. In the washer community, older women were involved with their traditional occupation. The Muslim community confined women to their homes and restricted their interactions to only the immediate neighbouring female household members.

The growth in the social visibility of women over the six decades is notable in the village. Gender discrimination is absent in education enrolment. Women from all castes are increasingly participating in self-help groups, politics, local government affairs and non-governmental organisations. Women interact freely, and they take part in the household decision-making processes. Women dominate in a few households, although their number is insignificant. However, Muslim households are an exception to the change.

### **Class Structure**

Based on the economic strength, a hierarchical class structure prevailed in the 1960s. There were few affluent, as well as middle-class landlords, who belonged to *Nambiar*, *Thiyya* and Muslim households. The handloom industry was the dominant economic activity as, apart from contributing nearly three fourths of the total village industrial income in different capacities, it employed about half (50%) of the workers of the village. Thus there was a distinct class of entrepreneurs among the *Chaliyas* and *Thiyyas*

owning large, middle and small factory type handloom units with the network for marketing even in the far off states of Bengal and Assam (Census of India, 1966a). They constituted upper and middle classes, along with others from *Nambiars*, *Thiyyas*, *Chaliyas* and Muslims who engaged in industries and trades other than the handloom industry. Few migrant households in employment and their own businesses outside the village from these categories, namely, the *Nambiars*, *Thiyyas* and Muslims also belonged to the upper classes. Although class-based inequality was predominant in the village, caste to class correspondence was weak.

Many traditional industrial and agricultural workers were better placed on the social ladder as they took up different employment opportunities rather than depending merely on a single economic activity. Many wisely invested their payments in cultivation, whereas such cash flow was small among those who depended exclusively on agriculture.

One aristocratic *Nambiar* with an agriculture base expressed that he was jealous of workers' children who enjoyed occasional hotel food during the school days. Among *Nambiars*, land ownership was a significant factor for inequality even before the land reform measures. However, land reform left a few *Nambiar* families unaffected as they used to cultivate substantial land on their own. On the contrary, it endowed *Thiyyas* and *Moosors* with large chunks of land, as primary beneficiaries. The economic condition of *Namboothiris* was the worst as they lost all of their land due to the reform measures, except the land where they lived. Even before the land reforms, the absentee landlords were vulnerable as there was a default in the payment of rent and other contractual payments by the tenants (Census of India, 1966a). Also, as pointed out by a former tenant, the landowners were subjected to cheating in rent payment in the form of paddy by manipulating the measuring instrument. The measuring pot was partially filled with cloth or paper. Overall, extreme poverty was less prevalent, with few exceptions from all communities. The condition of all *Namboothiris* and some aristocratic *Nambiar* households was pathetic as they neither switched to any available occupation out of shame nor worked in their small piece of land to withstand the situation. Better positioned *Thiyyas* in the village sarcastically compared the pitiful condition of higher castes to their practice of pollution where they give way to lower castes.

As far as the prevailing situation is concerned, the overall observation is that the initial caste structure more or less remains. However, many moved up the social ladder, and some drifted. In the initial phase, inequality and

deprivation mainly pertained to food, dress, consumption, housing, and possession of wealth. In the contemporary era, these are most conspicuous when seen in the lifestyle and wealth accumulation of a demographic segment. A new class of ultra-rich has emerged. In the past, inequality was primarily due to land ownership and employment in selected sectors, trade, ownership of industrial units and migration. Land inequality was altered radically by land reform in the 1970s. In 1961, three-fourth of landowners owned less than one acre and only 3.92 per cent owned above 10 acres (Census of India, 1966a:128). As per this study, the average size of ownership was 0.46 acres and no participant held more than 1.5 acres. Hence, land-based inequality is of peripheral importance. Over these years, entrepreneurship also weakened as the handloom industry is almost extinct, as per the field observation. Some entrepreneurs were reduced to penury so that investors are now risk averse. Therefore, current inequality can be cited as the result of unequal access to the means of economic empowerment such as education, employment, and other avenues like migration. Opportunities for higher education and employment are equally open for all in the private sector, although the government sector seems unattainable for many due to limited openings. Socially backward communities enjoy better access to education and employment through the pro-active policy of reservation. The pertinent question that the current scenario raises is whether all communities equally avail themselves of the benefits of development. While some belonging to the four dominant social groups such as *Nambiars*, *Thiyyas*, Muslims and *Chaliyas* gained notable prosperity, others were marginalised, with few exceptions. The members of this marginalised group predominantly belong to the backward communities other than *Thiyyas* and SC. Hence, the development resulted in a new form of inequality.

One of the factors identified as a contributor to unequal social development and the new form of inequality was migration. Even by the 1960s, there was considerable international and intrastate migration, especially among *Nambiars*, Muslims and *Thiyyas*. While some flourished with their businesses, others pursued job opportunities that many migrants, Gulf migrants in particular, attained economic betterment. The initial condition of the household was not a decisive factor in the course of development. Field observations substantiate this view identifying poor households which made notable growth and several other households whose prosperity drifted. Educational opportunities cutting across caste and class



promoted development irrespective of the initial economic status of the family. Hence, regardless of the initial socio-economic status, those who used the opportunities for education and migration climbed up the social ladder while others failed. Consequently, some households with poor economic backgrounds moved up the ladder.

The following three cases are presented to prove that the motivation of parents and children to benefit from the available resources is a significant factor that determines social growth.

Case 1: A lady was married to a teacher endowed with sizable land producing surplus paddy. The couple had three sons and five daughters. One boy joined the defence service, and a girl who completed Plus Two level was married to a professional. Except for those two, none of the other children could go up the social ladder as they failed to use their chances to study despite a sound financial base.

Case 2: A wealthy *Thiyya* family owned more than 10 acres of land and paddy fields. In addition, they had a pair of bullocks, cows, a handloom unit with about ten handlooms and a tea shop combined with a provision store in the village. Despite better economic status, none of the children attained a higher education. Most of them were school dropouts and pursued some odd jobs. Together with land dispossession, this generation failed to maintain their family's economic status.

Case 3: As against the two previous cases, this person who belongs to *Nambiar* possesses less than an acre of land and worked as an insurance agent. He has two daughters and two sons. Despite his pathetic living conditions, he gave much importance to the education of boys. Both of them were well placed and made a profound economic improvement. One daughter died at an early age, but the other daughter is employed reasonably.

This research could find relatively few households belonging to the SC and OBC categories other than *Thiyya*, which moved up the social ladder.

### **Power Structure**

In the past, the aristocratic *Nambiar*s were the powerful class endowed with privileges under British rule, including administration of the village with the title of *Adhikari* (Village Officer). The *Nambiar* family played a prominent role in the village's social life and settling disputes in the locality.

Being economically well placed, *Thiyyas* were also at the forefront. Over the years, power has come to be shared by all. Caste is no longer a dominant factor in exercising power. To a large extent, economic power gave way to leadership talent, and the local leaders emerged from all castes and classes. Notably, most leadership emerged from the backward classes, the *Thiyya* community, and other marginalised sections. For about 17 years continuously a person belonging to a washer community was the Panchayat President. This study observed that in the composition of 21 elected ward members of the Panchayat, two belonged to forward castes, one was Muslim, and the remaining 18 belonged to other castes dominated by the *Thiyya* community. In the management of cooperative institutions, again the *Thiyya* community is found at the forefront. It is also the case with the most popular non-governmental organisation, the *Kudumbasree*, as most office-bearers are *Thiyya* women. In addition, currently an OBC person is entrusted with the village temple management, which was traditionally run by four prominent *Nair* families.

### **The Catalysts for Social Change**

Although governmental policies and programmes were instrumental in accomplishing change, the local/regional factors can also be cited as propitious factors. Education as an agent of social and economic change has played a significant role in social change. The village made educational advancement initiatives more than 300 years ago and developed primary educational facilities by the 1960s (Edakkad Panchayat, 1996). At the same time, facilities for middle-level education were scarce and absent above this level. The majority of the village population was literate by 1961, and the overall literacy rate stood at 53.95 per cent. However, there was a wide gender-wise disparity as the male literacy rate was 63.91 per cent and the female literacy rate was 44.49 per cent (Census of India, 1966b). At the educational level, most people attained the primary level education. Over the years, the literacy rate rose and stood at 86.43 per cent in 2011 (Census of India, 2011). The gender gap in literacy rate narrowed, and eventually the literacy rate of females exceeded that of males by a narrow margin. The village emerged as the most important educational hub of the district. Today it houses a professional college, a polytechnic, a vocational higher secondary centre, two industrial training institutes, a senior secondary school, an institute of handloom technology, and one arts and science college with post-graduate courses and research facilities bordering the

village. In line with infrastructure development, it made educational advancements resulting in 38.88 per cent of the total educated having above secondary level education. It was also found that a slightly higher proportion of 23.02 per cent of females were educated 12 years and above compared to the male percentage of 22.38. Community wise, except for the Muslim, SC and ST (scheduled tribe) populations, significant numbers from all communities were educated, although Christians and forward castes were still at the forefront of education.

Land reform measures played a no less significant role in altering the social structure in the village. Even before independence, it became difficult to evict the tenants, and payment of the agreed rent became casual, undermining the economic base of the *Nambiars* and *Namboothiris* and strengthening the economic base of the *Thiyyas* and a few *Moosors* (Census of India, 1966a). With the passing of the land reform measures and its strict enforcement, the process was complete, and many *Thiyyas* and *Moosors* became better off and, given their numerical strength, emerged as influential. It is also worth pointing out that there was much more unity and family bonds among the *Thiyyas* compared to the *Nambiars*. The *Nambiar* families started disintegrating and formed nuclear families. There were factional feuds among the *Nambiar* families. To cite an incident, the Village Officer sent a notice to a family member for the non-payment of land revenue. Becoming irritated, he and his guards set fire to the house of the Village Officer.

Another catalyst for change was the emergence of the communist movement. In some of the regions of Malabar the communist movement emerged and strengthened. In the village, the movement gained momentum as there was a propitious environment. One of the favourable factors was the presence of several workers in the *beedi* and handloom industries. Being the worker's party, the communist party attracted many in the village who became its followers. The *beedi* workers were much more addicted to the communist philosophy. They were also updated on news as the usual practice was to engage one of the workers who was able to read the party literature/newspaper aloud while others listened. He was compensated collectively by sharing his wage. Another factor that supported the growth of the communist party in the village was land reform. Since the communist government legislated land reform, most of the former tenant cultivators became followers of the party. Thus, with a strong

foothold, the communist party played an important role in the development of the village.

Industrialisation and collective workplaces had a socialising influence. The factory units with an employing capacity ranging from 2-100 provided an environment for social interactions among villagers. Several centralised *beedi* rolling centres functioned in the village and employed villagers across castes. As workers belonged to different castes, the workplaces promoted collective development initiatives irrespective of caste. Workers maintained close relationships, and they used to move in groups.

Historically in spearheading social reform, the alien presence and the British rule played a significant role. The Malabar Coast was the area arrived at by European merchants and adventurers. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Portuguese and French settled in the western part of the village. Later, the village became part of Malabar under the Madras presidency. As outlined by Rao (1957), changes have occurred more rapidly on the social front in the Malabar region, first to be reached by foreigners. Factors like the opening of avenues for living, new industrial organisations, the wide dissemination of technical knowledge and contact with the western culture had significant influence on accomplishing the changes (Rao, 1957).

Social movements are harbingers of change, and this study noted campaigns in the locality against caste-based discrimination in temples. Reading rooms, arts and sports clubs and cultural troops functioned in many corners of the village with the participation of different castes, which contributed considerably to the social change. They organised *pandhibhojanam* (serving free food for all in a common place) and occasionally debates on various issues and literary works. The mobilisation of local manpower resources for local development, particularly in road construction, played a commendable role in the development of the village. Initial road construction was by the voluntary participation of people irrespective of caste/religion. The transformation of the locality with limited road access to an area with roads extending to 81.44 per cent of the households studied is a clear indication of development. Thus the collective action of the people was a levelling social factor.

### **Conclusion**

The meticulously devised proactive policies and measures brought about transformations to the Indian society, alleviating social issues such as poverty and discrimination. Despite the mitigations, the pervasive caste system

persists in different parts of India. However, Kerala sets a developmental model by achieving a high level of social development. In this context, this paper describing the development patterns of a Kerala village over six decades remains significant. The studied village has been a home for different religions and castes for years. Nevertheless, it achieved a noteworthy development withstanding the pressures of caste-based discriminations in the past. The village contoured a class-based social hierarchy replacing the one based on caste. It encouraged occupational mobility across the castes, and the villagers benefitted from every opportunity opened for growth. Education and migration are the factors that expedited the social mobility of villagers irrespective of their initial situation.

The village was inhabited predominantly by Hindu castes, including various servicing castes and Muslims. It diversified with the settlement of Christian communities. Even by the 1960s, there was a change in inter-caste relationships as only *Namboothiris* practised untouchability and pollution in public. High castes other than *Namboothiris* forbade the lower castes from house entry and drawing of water from their wells. At the same time, all castes strictly followed the practice of marriage alliance within the caste. Over the years, many more changes occurred, and most caste-based restrictions vanished. Even in the rigid outlook of marriage, change is visible in terms of inter-caste marriages with parents' consent, even among the upper castes.

Females had a low status. The denial of education above primary level, low participation in work, life confined within the house with limited social life and absolutely no role in the family decision-making processes were some of the elements of gender discrimination. A profound change occurred over the years in education, as female enrolment at all levels stood comparable to men, and the proportion of literate and with higher educational qualifications was high for females. Rising participation in work, social, political, non-governmental organisations and cultural activities, including decisive roles in the family are other indicators of this change.

Caste-class correspondence was weak even in the 1960s, as apart from the *Nair* community, other backward communities of *Thiyya* and Muslim households were in the upper and middle class. At the same time, several *Nair* and *Namboothiri* households belonged to the economically poor category as they were dispossessed of land due to land reform measures. Many agricultural labourers, workers in traditional industries, SC and OBC were poor. By now, there was worsening of inequality as a category of ultra-

rich emerged. While land ownership is not a decisive factor for inequality, education-based employment and migration led to the emergence of inequality. Caste wise more or less the same pattern followed with few exceptions.

While parts of the demographics moved up the social ladder, others maintained the earlier position. On the contrary, a third category went down the social ladder with their failure to use the growth opportunities. Even by the 1960s, power exercised formerly by the aristocratic *Nambiar* community in the village weakened, and by now, a radical change occurred as power is no longer exercised by only one community. The leadership qualities are decisive, and this springs from several religions/castes. Apart from the governmental measures, the social reform movements, land reform, the emergence of the communist movement, centralised workplaces of traditional industries, the collective village development actions, the alien presence and British rule all played a significant role in accomplishing the social change.

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