

Cultural Taxation and Formation of Identity in Travancore

Ferzein. M

Research Scholar, University College, Palayam, Thiruvananthapuram

ABSTRACT

A tax system can be defined as the financial obligation levied or imposed upon subjects of a region or state, in order to generate revenue for its existence.¹ It is the basis of every economy and vice-versa, economy is the basis of every state.^[2,3] Hence, Travancore, a erstwhile native kingdom which had later developed into a princely state, too had levied different types of taxes from its subjects. Being a kingdom ruled by different dynasties, that can be traced back to the Ay dynasty, it had a tax system that could help the authority assert their dominance, legacy and authority upon the people.⁴ The different types of taxes that existed in Travancore included taxes on land, commodities, agriculture, commerce, trade, rituals, culture and so on with different dimensions. Mostly these taxes which had social implications were related to culture and further caste oriented, that in turn divided society into different groups on the basis of race, gender and occupation and helped to form and reveal the identity of a person.⁵

Keywords: culture, identity, cultural taxation.

INTRODUCTION

The sedentism, collective habitation, political territory and interaction were the key factors that determined the formation of society and culture. While the two concepts, society and culture are inter connected and exist due to mutual dependence, both convey different ideas.⁶ A system of human organisation sharing a common spatial territory and governed by a common political authority with persistent social interaction defines a society. As various societies vary on the basis of time and space, each constitutes a different set of relationship, identity, thought, norms and values.⁷ In a society, the different systems that have developed based on taxation could be asserted as one of its basic entities. Generally, all around the world these systems of taxation varied depending on geography, polity and society of a region. Thus, this type of system, which was prevalent in Travancore too, that could be demarcated as a regional tax system was also deeply connected to the society.⁸

As defined in “*Primitive Culture*” by Sir E.B. Taylor in 1871, the complex whole that includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society can be denoted as culture.⁹ It separates a specific society from “the other”.¹⁰ The term “the Other” that represents the people whose customs, beliefs, or behaviours are “different” from one’s own, is often used with the concept of culture.¹¹ Diverse concepts have been formed to signify culture such as ethnocentrism, cultural evolutionism, cultural relativism, enculturation, cultural determinism.¹²

Among these concepts, “ethnocentrism” defines the idea that one’s own group or culture is better

than any other.¹³ The belief that cultures evolved through certain stages such as savagery, barbarism, and civilization represents “cultural evolutionism”.¹⁴ Another person’s culture could be understood from the perspective of their own culture and not one’s own delineates the concept of “cultural relativism”.¹⁵ “Enculturation” is the process of learning culture, through the lives of individuals that leads to shaping of individual identity.¹⁶ The idea that behavioural variations are a result of cultural reasons, not racial or genetic causes denotes “cultural determinism”.¹⁷

Another concept that evolved on the basis of culture is cultural taxation.¹⁸ As cultural taxation, a term coined and defined by Amado Padilla in 1994, represents the extra burden of responsibilities placed upon a minority, the above stated caste - oriented taxes imposed on minority and marginalised could be termed as cultural taxes.¹⁹ Menipponnu, pulayattu pennu, polipponnu, thalakkaram, kuppakazhcha, valakkaram, meenpatom, thatatrappattom, ezha are certain taxes that could be included in this section of taxes.²⁰ Menipponnu is a cess on ornaments levied on lower caste women, pulayattu pennu is a tax levied on the family of a woman convicted for adultery, polipponnu also known as iravu coru or kuthali was tax based on sales, thalakkaram also known as talayara or talapanam is a poll tax or tax based life of person, valakaram is cess on fishing net, kuppakazhcha is a tax levied on house, meenpatom is tax on fishing, thatarapattom is a tax collected from goldsmith, ezha is tax based on collecting toddy levied from toddy tappers.²¹

Other taxes collected and that could be included in this group were rakshabhogam (protection tax), Purushantakam (inheritance tax), kazhcha (tribute), kappalvari (levy on shipping), angadipattom (market rent), tariyira (cess on handloom), dattukazhcha (fee on adoption), mechilkaram (cattle rearing cess), vivahakaram (cess on marriage), kusakkaram (cess on earthenware), Ponnarippu (cess on sifting gold), Panamadi (profits on coinage, which were estimated to be about 5000 rupees), Attaladakkam (cess on right of escheats, which is similar to purushantakam), Ara (cess for keeping a suspect in detention), Tura (poll tax levied at ports from boatmen), Tappu (cess on unintentional offences), Kola (contributions for particular emergencies), Changatam (cess for special protection in form of an escort for a long or short period, similar to rakshabhogam), Atinha urukkal or Utanha urukkal (cess on ships drifted ashore) and so on.²²

Identity and culture can be ascertained as two entities that are indivisible from each other. Culture which is composed of shared norms, values and beliefs is the basic feature of identity. The behaviour determined by culture, forms the self consciousness and self awareness of a person.²³ It can be noted that behaviour variations often depend on culture. Every group in a society has its own behavioural traits characterised by its own culture. Thus, persons belonging to a particular culture exhibit a similar identity.²⁴ This generalisation could be applied moreover in the case Travancore.

The Fixation or Formation of Identity

The aforesaid taxes revealed the identity of a person as all these taxes were paid by people who had similar norms, values and beliefs, which indicated that they had similar identity and belonged to a particular culture. It can be stated that the identity of a person was formed through the taxes he paid. In Travancore, this type of coexistence can be analysed through a study on the relation of caste and tax system. Menipponnu, pulayattu pennu and polipponnu were taxes typically based on gender, where the two

former were collected from women and the latter collected from men.²⁵ Hence, it can be stated that the gender of men and women was fixed and ascertained through such taxes.

Likewise, as different types of castes prevailed in the region, their nature, identity and characteristics could be identified with a review on taxes paid by the persons belonging to these castes. The ezha, enikaram, talakaram were levied from toddy tappers who basically belonged to Pulayas and Shanars or Channars.²⁶ The meenpattom, valakaram or valavari were collected from Parayas. The vannarapara, a cess on washermen, were predominantly collected from Pulayas and Parayas who were also called "Mannans".²⁷ In 1754, the talakaram or head tax came to be levied on Nadars also, mainly to meet the military expenditure of the state.²⁸ The kuppazhcha which was estimated as one panam for each hut was imposed on Nadars, Parayas and Pallas.²⁹

Here, the Pulayas were a marginalised group who could claim a prestigious past as put forward by Vishnu Namboodri in his work "*Pulayarute Pattukal*" which ascertains references on existence of illams or taravadus in history of pulayas.³⁰ This caste was further divided into several sub castes on the basis of culture and spatial differences as, *Vada* or *Northern Pulayars*, Eastern and Western Pulayas, Ina-Pulaya, Tanda-Pulaya, and Kana Pulaya. They were petty and tied agricultural serfs or labourers who stayed at the land of the jenmi or land owner.³¹ The term "Pulaya" has its etymological origin from the word "pela" indicating pollution or "pulam" denoting land. Thus, as they were considered as a polluted caste who had to maintain a distance of 64 ft from Brahmins, they were denied the basic amenities of life. This section also was detained as slaves, which can be analysed with the title deed of 1788 which entitles the jenmi with the right to sell the pulayas working in the land along with their property.³² The renowned historian, K.N. Ganesh claims, the manual labour, which was the basic need for agriculture, might have been the reason to place this group in the lowest of the hierarchy.³³ While, the Nadars, previously known as Shanars, are regarded to have derived their title from the word *Nelamaikkars* which denoted "aristocrats".³⁴ The people of the community believe that they were earlier known as *Shantror* or *Shandrar*.³⁵ In Travancore, the only caste which is prominent in Tamil were the Nadars. Robert Hardgrave, in his work "Political Culture of a Community in Change" asserts that the Nadars might have migrated to Travancore from Tirunelveli in the 16th century after the invasion of Tirunelveli by the ruler of the former region. They were divided into different sub castes such as *Karukkupattaiyathar*, *Mel-nattar*, *Nattathi*, *Kodikal*, *Kalla* and *Christian Nadars*. They often followed patrilineal system and were engaged in the occupation of cultivation of palmyra trees and jaggery, palmyra climbing, toddy tapping and toddy trade. Few among them claim to have been moneylenders and landlords.

The Paraiyar also known as Parayar, Maraiyar Pariah, Parea, a caste group paying these kinds of taxes who could be included with the above marginalised sections, were found in southern Indian regions like Tamil Nadu and Kerala.³⁶ There are views concerning the origin of the term Paraya. The common concept is that the term Paraya has originated from the Tamil word *Parai* which denotes 'drum'.³⁷ The Paraiyars are regarded as a community of drummers who performed at auspicious events like weddings and funerals.³⁸ The Madras Census Report of 1961, categorises *Koliyar*, *Panchamar*, *Thoti*, *Vettiyan*, *Vetti*, *Vellam*, *Vel*, *Natuvile*, *Pani*, *Pambaikaran*, *Ammaparaiyan*, *Urumikaran*, *Morasu*, *Tangalam*, *Samban*, *Paryan*, *Nesavukaraparayan*, *Thotiparayan*, *Kongaparayan*, *Mannaparayan*, and *Semban* into Paraiyar.³⁹ Francis Buchanan's report them as inferior caste slaves, who cultivated the lands held by

Brahmins.⁴⁰ British officials regarded them as an outcast or an untouchable community. Further the Sangam literature represents them as artisans, goldsmiths and cobblers.⁴¹ As these communities had specific disabilities, behaviour and nature, that was in a way characterised by these taxes, it could be concluded that the taxes they used to pay had determined their identity and thereby led to formation of their identity.

The thatarapattom was collected from goldsmiths who comprised Ezhavas.⁴² The Purusantaram, a tax on hereditary property was also collected from these marginalized castes.⁴³ These marginal castes to be specific Ezhavas, Pulayas, Shanars, Parayas, Nadars or Pallas had their own separate culture and identity. The Ezhavas who are also known as *Ilhava*, *Irava*, *Izhava* and *Erava in south Travancore*, *Chovas*, *Chokons* and *Chegons* in Central Travancore; and as *Thiyyar*, *Tiyyas* and *Theeyas* in the Malabar were people who had worked as agricultural labourers, toddy tappers, liquor businessmen, weavers, traders, physicians specialised in Ayurveda and local chieftains of native kingdoms in specific Kadathanad and Kurumbanad.⁴⁴ Apart from the above mentioned names, they were also known as *Channan*, *Thandan*, *Punampan*, *Villon*, *Billavn*, *Illathupilla*, *Ezhavan*, *Muthaliyar* and *Muthalali*. It is believed that they were earlier Buddhists who were later converted to Shaivism.⁴⁵ They lived in Nalukettu which was often called as illams. As they had served in militia, they were also often denoted as Panicker. Canter Vischer observes that Rama Varma II, the renowned ruler of Travancore had included Ezhavas in his troops.⁴⁶ Even Though they could claim high positions in Malabar and till the 18th century, in the later period they were confined as a marginal community.⁴⁷ Further, it can be concluded that the taxes levied upon certain caste and gender in regard to Travancore, were paid by people with similar identity.⁴⁸ Thus, this type of taxation that prevailed in Travancore led to the formation and demarcation of identity of those who were enshrined to the system.

CONCLUSION

Basically these cultural taxes such as menipponnu, polipponnu, thalakkaram, kuppa kazhcha, valakkaram, meenpatom, thatatrappattom were levied on certain sections or groups based on caste and gender that represents certain culture.⁴⁹ As concepts like enculturation, cultural determinism, both related to behaviour and identity of an individual, and cultural taxation were formed from the same concept that is indebted to culture, the concept of cultural taxation can be stated to be inter connected with the term identity.⁵⁰ Thus, the cultural taxes that prevailed in Travancore could be derived as the reason for the formation of identity in Travancore.

Moreover, an analysis on these taxes reveal that these taxes further fixed the occupation, status and thereby identity of several marginalised communities. The ezha, a tax on punishment, talakaram, tax on head, kuppa kazhcha, tax on hut collected particularly from the communities like Pulayas, Shanars and Parayas could be stated as a reason for the fixation and formation of the identity of these marginalised communities. Likewise, the thatarapattom collected from goldsmiths and purusantaram, a tax on hereditary property that were collected from Ezhavas in majority, could be stated as a factor for the fixation and delineation of specific identity to the concerned community.

As the two concepts culture and identity are inter related, the concept of cultural taxation, imposed particularly upon marginalised and isolated groups led to the coinage of the concept “*identity*”

taxation”.⁵¹ Further, it can be stated that “cultural taxation” and “identity taxation” are the same entities.⁵² Thus, the taxes such as menipponnu, polipponnu, thalakkaram, kuppa kazhcha, valakkaram, meenpatom, thatatrappattom, purushantakam formed both cultural and identity taxes.

References

1. Dincecco M, “Political Transformations and Public Finances: Europe, 1650– 1913”, Cambridge University Press, London, 2011, p.59
2. Smith Stephen, “*Taxation: A Very Short Introduction*” Oxford University Press, UK 2015, p.13.
3. P Sundaram Pillai, *Some Early Sovereigns of Travancore*. Addison & Co, Madras, 1943, p. 145.
4. T C Varghese, “Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences”, Allied Publishers, Madras, 1970, p.275.
5. Ramachandran S Nair, “The State and Economy in Colonial British Kerala”, Lipi Publications, Thiruvananthapuram, 1988, p.58.
6. Michael C Howard, Janet D H, “Anthropology : Understanding Human Adaptation”, Harper Collins, New York, 1992, p.68
7. R M Maclver, “Society - Its Structure and Changes”, Hay Long and Richard Smith Inc, New York, 1931, p.57
8. Louise Ouwerkerk, Dick Kooiman, “No Elephants for the Maharaja: Social and Political Change in Travancore 1921-1947”, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi, 1994. p.48
9. Edward B Tylor, “Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion”, Language, Art, and Customs, Cambridge University Press, London, 1871, p. 23.
10. Jonathan Swift, “Gulliver’s Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World”, Benjamin Motte, London, 1726, p.49.
11. Alfred Kroeber, “The Nature of Culture”, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1952, p.46.
12. Franz Boas, “Race, Language, and Culture”, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940, p. 87
13. Clifford Geertz, “The Interpretation of Culture”, Basic books, New York, 1983, p.67.
14. Pritibhusha Chatterji, “Language, Culture and Man In Knowledge”, Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi. 1976, p.152
15. William A Haviland, “Cultural Anthropology”, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, Florida, 1990, Sixth edition, p.126
16. Roop Rekha Verma, “The Concept of Progress and Cultural Identity”, Banarasidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1994, p.148
17. Graeme Turner, “British Cultural Studies: An Introduction” Routledge: New York.1996, p. 85 18 Padilla, Amado M. “Ethnic Minority Scholars, Research, and Mentoring: Current and Future Issues”, *Educational Researcher*, 1994, p.24 - 27.
18. Hirschfield, Paul J, and Joseph Gasper. “The Relationship Between School Engagement and Delinquency in Late Childhood and Early Adolescence.” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 2010, p.22.
19. Kondoor Krisna Pillai, Travancore and Its Ruler”, Sudharma Pub. House, Changanassery, 1941, p. 86.
20. Samuel Marteer, Native Life in Travancore, W H Allen & Co, London, 1883, p. 255
21. Padmanabha Aiyar, Revenue Settlement of Travancore, Government Press, Thiruvananthapuram, 1913, p.43

22. Brenda J Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity*, Waveland Pr Inc, Long Grove, 2011, 2nd edition, p.4
23. J N Martin, K Nakayama Thomas, *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*, McGraw-Hill, Boston, 5th edition, 2010, p.166
24. R N Yesudas, *Col. John Munroe in Travancore*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1977, p.98
25. Francis Day, *The Land of the Perumals or Cochin: Its Past and Its Present*, Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2006, p. 88
26. R N Yesudas, *People's Revolt in Travancore; A Backward Class Movement for Social Freedom*, Kerala Historical Society, Trivandrum, 1975, p. 30.
27. Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847- 1908*, Sussex University Press, London, 1976, p.123
28. Lt Benjamin Swain Ward, Lt Peter Eyre Conner, *Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States*, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Thiruvananthapuram, 1893, p.157
29. Rajan Gurukkal, *The Kerala Temple And Early Medieval Agrarian System*. Vallathol Vidyapeetham, Sukapuram, 1992, p.179
30. K. N. Ganesh, *Keralthinte Innalekal*, Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1990, p.121
31. Sunil P Elayidam, *Padarooopangalum Prathyayasasthravum*, Mathrubhumi Books, Kozikode, 2004, p.45
32. K. N. Ganesh, *Exercises in Modern Kerala History*, Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, Kottayam, 2013, p. 56
33. Kancha Ilaiah. *Post-Hindu India, A discourse on Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual And Scientific Revolution*, Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2009, p.128
34. Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State Travancore 1858 - 1936*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, p.112
35. A K Appukuttan, *Arivu, Thirivu, Thiricharivu: Parayarude Paattukal*, Kerala Bhasha Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, 2015, p.65
36. Thurston Edgar, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Government Press, Madras, Volume VI, 1909, p.48
37. McGilvray, Dennis B Paraiyar, *Drummers of Sri Lanka: Consensus and Constrain in an Untouchable Caste*, *American Ethnologist*, vol 10, 1983, pp. 97-115.
38. Samuel Mateer, *The Pariah Caste in Travancore*, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol 16, 1884, pp 180-195.
39. *Ibid*, p.120 - 128
40. *Op.Cit*, Paraiyar *Drummers of Sri Lanka: Consensus and Constrain in an Untouchable Caste*, p.167
41. Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity: A Description Account of Travancore and Its People with Special Reference to Missionary Labour*, John Snow and Co, London, 1871, p. 52
42. K Saradmoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1979, p.120
43. K Kunjan Pillai, "Census of India, 1931" Travancore Part I Report, XXVIII, 1932, pp. 23-30.
44. M Srinivasa Aiyangar, *Tamil Studies*, Guardian Press, Madras, 1914, p.56
45. *Ibid*, p.60
46. S N Sadasivan, *A Social History of India*, APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2000, p.386-

400.

47. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, Houghton and Mifflin Company, Boston, 1934, p.66. ⁴⁹ P Shungoony Menon, *History of Travancore from the Earliest Times*. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 1878, p.248.
48. J Brown, *The Self*, McGraw-Hill, Boston, 1998, p.43. Also see, C K Sigelman, *Life Span Human Development*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., New York, 1999. pp. 262 -272
49. E H Erikson, *Identity and Life Cycle*, Norton, New York, 1980, p.113.
50. E H Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Norton, New York, 1968, p.68