NMML
OCCASIONAL PAPER

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

New Series
59

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Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
2014

NMML Occasional Paper

Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011

e-mail : ddnehrumemorial@gmail.com

ISBN : 978-93-83650-41-5

Price Rs. 100/-; US $ 10

Page setting & Printed by : A.D. Print Studio, 1749 B/6, Govind Puri Extn. Kalkaji, New Delhi - 110019. E-mail : studio.adprint@gmail.com

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Dr. Palpu's Petition Writings and Kerala's Pasts*

Udaya Kumar

In his Preface to the first major attempt at a history of the Ezhavas—*Ezhavacharitram*, written by K. Damodaran and published in 1935, C. Kesavan, arguably the most prominent public figure from the community at that time, wrote:

> Although Ezhavas may have had the desire for a history of the community since prehistoric times, they began their historical investigations only recently. The first to begin this enquiry was Dr. Palpu, the guiding spirit behind all the recent prosperity of the Ezhavas, who is now living in retirement in Trivandrum, like an expended volcano. Forty years ago, he advertised a prize of a hundred rupees for the author of a history of the Ezhava community.[1]

Palpu's efforts at encouraging history writing among the Ezhavas through prizes and rewards were largely unsuccessful: the manuscripts he received, we are told, were not worthy of reward or publication. However, Kesavan was right in placing Palpu at the apex of historiographical efforts by the Ezhavas and more generally the lower castes. He was also right in comparing him—in his early seventies—to an extinct volcano: he was then in retirement after an intensely active life spent in campaigns against caste discrimination. This paper explores the relations between Palpu's activist interventions and his efforts to fashion a past for his community.

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* Revised version of the lecture delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 21 May 2013.

I am particularly interested in Palpu's use of a set of genres which I refer to as "petition writings", using this phrase in an extended sense. These include not only formal petitions but also other forms of writing aimed at securing state intervention as redress for grievances. Palpu began his activist career as a petitioner in a formal sense, first writing letters to authorities for securing for himself access to education and government employment. He went on to orchestrate large collective petitions as well as individual memoranda to demand remedy for the various disadvantages faced by his community on account of its lower caste status. In addition to these formal submissions addressed to the government, Palpu also wrote in newspapers to mobilize public opinion, and entered into personal correspondence with individuals in positions of authority or influence to persuade them to support his efforts.

These writings possess an interesting relationship to the public domain: while collective petitions and letters to newspapers are self-evidently public forms of expression, personal petitions and private correspondence with officials do not qualify as public genres. Nonetheless, Palpu's personal petitions and letters were in fact about issues that concerned an entire community; the writer's signature assumed a representational function in them, and his arguments showed close continuities with public discourses. Palpu's petitions and correspondence may be usefully regarded as "public" writing if we understand publicness in terms of themes and voice rather than scope of access. The genres used by Palpu share a set of features: firstly, they have the state as their primary interlocutor; secondly, they indicate the positions of the writer and the addressee, and the relationship within which the demands are made; thirdly, they have a clear first-person stake in the issues they foreground, enabling us to see in them expressions of individual or collective selfhood; and fourthly, they voice the writer's conception of obligations and duties vested in the addressee—i.e. the state, its functionaries and influential public figures. Even though these forms do not share all features of formal petitions, I call them "petition writings" on account of these common enunciatory characteristics.[2]

Recent studies on nineteenth-century India have highlighted the importance of petitioning within the administrative modalities of the

colonial state. Bhavani Raman places petitions within the context of a vast and intricate document regime characterised by the importance of scribes and the discretionary powers of lower officials.[3] The mode of the petition offered an avenue for subjects to approach the state for redress, and remained one of the few spaces for the expression of dissent, albeit couched in an idiom of obedience and appeal. The colonial state gave importance to documentary evidence in the adjudication of petitions, and past practice—especially related to religion—was a major ground on which subjects could make successful claims. Administrative stress on documentation had multiple consequences: for native subjects, it led to important changes in the way grievances were expressed and claims negotiated; for the state machinery, it created unremitting anxieties about forgery. The impact of the new document regime was not confined to the legal domain: it spilled over into the voice and dynamic of public discourses and the subject's discursive relationships with the state. Although Palpu's petition writings do not make legal claims, they need to be understood within the larger frame of documentary governance.

Palpu's speculations on history, which form an important part of his later writings, have another background as well. Early colonial writing on India by figures such as James Tod or William Jones has tried to extract history or reconstruct chronology from mythological narratives and folklore. This strand was continued in indigenous attempts to put into historiographical form beliefs, new and old, about communitarian pasts. While drawing on traditional lore surrounding rituals and practices, such writings responded to the new evidentiary demands and narrative idioms of emergent genres of history writing. They shared a common ground with the attempts made in petitions to create a "provable" past to ground claims. The articulation of the past in both these genres took shape in close engagement with the new evidentiary preoccupations of the colonial episteme and attendant anxieties around forgery and unreliability. Palpu's claims about Kerala's pasts were affected by the enunciatory form of the petition and emergent modes of history writing.

I

Palpu is best known as the moving spirit behind the formation of the SNDP Yogam in 1903, and as the author of the famous Ezhava memorial, a petition signed by more than 13,000 members of the community and submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore, demanding opportunities for education and employment in government service, at least on par with Christian subjects. He was born in Trivandrum in 1863, and acquired English education with the help of a Eurasian teacher.[4] Although he stood second in an examination for selection to medical studies, he was unjustly denied admission on the grounds that he had exceeded the prescribed age limit. Palpu believed that the documents he submitted to prove his age were not taken into account, and that the real reason for his exclusion was prejudice against his lower caste origins. With considerable difficulty he pursued medical studies in Madras and successfully obtained a medical degree, only to be refused employment in Travancore. He joined the Vaccine Institute set up by the Mysore Government in Bangalore in 1891, worked in various positions related to sanitation, public health and prisons, and retired as Lymph Institute Director in Mysore in 1920. Palpu travelled to Cambridge and Paris for higher studies in 1898–1900. He proposed several projects and reforms related to public health and devised a number of crafts and industries for prisoners.

Palpu met Swami Vivekananda in Bangalore in 1892, who supported his struggle against the disadvantages faced by his community on account of caste discrimination. He was apparently advised by Vivekananda to have a spiritual figure at the forefront of his campaigns. Palpu knew Sree Narayana from his childhood days, but re-established close contact with him in the early 1890s. Palpu became the first Vice President of SNDP Yogam when it was registered in 1903. He travelled extensively within Travancore and Malabar for collecting signatures for the Ezhava Memorial and to expand SNDP's membership base. He organized the first major exhibition of cottage industries and crafts in Kerala as part of SNDP's second annual conference in Kollam in 1905.

Dr. Palpu's favourite mode of intervention was the petition. His early efforts were as an individual petitioner. On his return to Travancore

after his medical studies in Madras, he engaged in sustained correspondence with Travancore state officials to seek employment in government service. These petitions were unsuccessful, and this led Palpu to join the Mysore government service. Later he played an important role in two highly significant petitions: he was the third signatory of the famous Malayali Memorial, the first major petition submitted in 1891 on community lines, jointly by the Nayars, Christians and Ezhavas against Brahminical dominance in Travancore government jobs, and—five years later—the author and the chief campaigner for the Ezhava Memorial. In addition to these two collective entreaties, Palpu made a series of individual submissions to State officials. These included detailed memoranda, like the one submitted to Travancore Dewan, Sankara Subrahmania Iyer, in 1895, or letters requesting the redress of specific grievances. He also wrote on the condition of the Ezhavas in Travancore in various newspapers such as *Madras Mail*, *Madras Times, Madras Standard*, *Times of India, The Hindu, Western Star, Malayala Manorama, Malayali* and *Kerala Sanchari*.[5] In 1896 Palpu published *The Treatment of Thiyas in Travancore*—the only book he authored—which was largely a compilation of his petitions, correspondence with government officials and letters to newspapers.[6] These texts are the most frequently cited documents in later accounts of caste inequities in government education and employment in Travancore in the late nineteenth century.

One may see two distinct idioms in Palpu's formal petitions and memoranda. The Ezhava Memorial of 1896 submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore adopted formulaic ceremonial signs of supplication in deference to the sovereign. Francis Cody has noted the similarities between the language of supplication and the formulaic prayer and praise addressed to Gods and Kings in the classical poetic tradition.[7] The Ezhava Memorial concluded with a flourish of ritual gestures of the subject's abject submission before the sovereign:

> Since humble subjects can weep before their affectionate sovereign as children do before their mother, we feel emboldened to submit this grievance at your sacred feet in the hope that the sovereign's compassion will awake and grant us quick deliverance. We pray to the Almighty that our

> precious King will end all our sorrows and protect us and flourish for a long time with health, life, wealth and all prosperity.[8]

These gestures of obeisance exceeded the signs of deference in Malayali Memorial submitted to the Maharaja in 1891 by Hindu non-Brahmins and Christians. It is possible that the excess of self-lowering displayed by the petitioning subjects is an indication of their lower status in the caste and social hierarchies. However, excess of humility is a disturbing element in the grammar of petitions: could it be a variety of sly civility? Interestingly, the petition also hinted, without changing the tone of submission, at a different set of gestures: with understated defiance, it obliquely suggested the menacing possibility of conversion to Christianity or migration to British India.

> We cannot but bring to your Highness's compassionate notice that even in these times when reforms are increasing by the day, there is no way for us to be delivered of these inequities except by leaving our sovereign's country which is our own country or our sovereign's religion which is our own religion.[9]

Palpu's petitions to the Dewan of Travancore and the Governor of Madras as well as his articles in newspapers, in contrast, did not show any of the gestures of self-lowering we found in the Ezhava Memorial; they adopted a distinctively modern idiom of citizens claiming rightful treatment from their government. Drawing on statistics, statements made by government authorities, evidence on specific cases that run contrary to avowed policies, and instances from one's own personal experiences, Palpu's petitions, correspondence and newspaper articles played an important role in shaping a new discursive space for articulating the demands of individual communities before the Travancore state and the general public. The contrasting tones of Palpu's petition writing—supplication before the Maharaja and the claiming of rights on the basis of administrative reasoning—can be understood in relation to idioms of sovereign and governmental power; both were at work in Travancore in Palpu's time, where rituals of royal sovereignty co-existed with an administrative apparatus which worked under close colonial supervision.

Palpu's early interventions were coeval with the emergence of a political print culture and new notions of readership, publicness and political subjectivity in Kerala. The relationship between the government and the people was a central concern of this moment, and early newspapers in Kerala often regarded this as shaping their political function. Kandathil Varghese Mappila, the editor of *Malayala Manorama*, saw the exposure of corruption among government officials as one of the key political functions of his newspaper.[10] In the first two decades of the twentieth century, K. Ramakrishna Pillai—a vociferous critic of the Travancore government—saw the newspaper as not only expressing public opinion but also constituting a public through its efforts.[11] The notion of a general public—predicated but not fully formed—emerged through a negotiation of the relations among various communities and with the state.

Writings in newspapers, essentially aimed at opinion making and rarely done by professional experts, constituted an important space where categories and idioms of vernacular social thought took shape. My use of the word "vernacular" draws upon some of the recent discussions on the discourse of social sciences in India. I am less interested in the vernacular as a linguistic indicator than as a space of thinking, argumentation and truth production which differs from, even as it interacts with, more professional, technically self-conscious writing. The vernacular designates a less disciplined and more openly political space of thought which does not work through strict adherence to canons of evidence, consistency in doctrines, and procedures of veridiction.[12] The petition-related genres of writing that Palpu engaged in need to be considered as an important part of early experiments in forging a language for vernacular social thought in Kerala.

This paper moves a little away from more dominant strands of scholarship which have considered Palpu almost solely as a campaigner and organizer and not as a social thinker. His texts, on account of their interventionist character and their being addressed to governments, have received little attention on their own as attempts to formulate and articulate new ways of imagining the social domain and for posing questions of justice and equality. The difficulty is exacerbated by two further factors. Firstly, a vast majority of Palpu's writings has remained

unpublished. He wrote extensively on issues related to public health while in Mysore government service but, except for *Health Drama* which was performed in Kannada, hardly wrote anything for the general public. Palpu's writings after 1920 which form the primary concern of this paper, extensive as they are, have remained unpublished; an exception to this is the address he delivered before SNDP's twenty-sixth annual conference in Kottayam in 1929.[13] Secondly, Palpu's ways of thinking about society and history show important differences in assumptions, arguments and style from the better known thinkers and writers of the Sree Narayana movement, especially Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan. Accounts of lower caste initiatives in Kerala have generally worked by focusing on the religious and philosophical slant of Guru's thought and the secular political initiatives spearheaded by Palpu and others, without exploring their conceptual commonalities and divergences and seeking to bring them into conversation. Thirdly, Palpu's later writings on society and history were highly polemical, and used unorthodox and eccentric modes of analysis and argumentation. This stands in sharp contrast with the coherent arraying of evidence and arguments in his early petitions and newspaper articles. All these factors contribute to the difficulty in finding, among the dominant critical models used in the study of social reform movements, a mode of hermeneutic attention adequate to the specific tonality of voice that animates Palpu's writings.

II

Much of Palpu's writings after his retirement in 1920 took the form of protracted correspondence with colonial officials, nationalist leaders and Travancore government officials. While such correspondence was, as we saw, also crucial to his earlier campaigns for the Ezhavas, the later work displays some remarkable new features. The first thing that strikes us is its expansiveness: sometimes, his letters to officials run into 100 or 150 typewritten sheets.[14] Secondly, these texts mark the appearance of a new idiom, unfamiliar in his early writing. Census figures and government reports recede into the background and often disappear; instead a speculative narrative on ancient Kerala society, the origins of caste inequality and the history of the Ezhavas advance to occupy the centre-stage. While the earlier petitions

presented contemporary inequality as the ground for their plea for justice, these later writings propose a historical frame for the problem, and see questions of justice in terms of historical recompense.

Central to Palpu's historical narratives on Kerala was the story of a Buddhist past and its suppression through Brahminical usurpation. This argument was not an unusual one in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in attempts to account for the origin and history of caste inequities. Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) reformulated Maratha history as a story of Aryan invaders usurping power from indigenous Kshatriyas and subjecting them to caste subordination.[15] Iyothee Thass (1845–1914) advanced elaborate arguments about a Buddhist past in south India in the context of the Tamil untouchable community of Parayars.[16] Thass argued that Parayars were the original Buddhists of the Tamil region and their lower caste status was a result of domination by Aryan Brahmins who came from outside the Tamil country. He offered fresh interpretations of popular Tamil festivals, attributing to them a Buddhist origin with a different, egalitarian meaning. Thass converted to Buddhism and campaigned for the conversion of Parayars to what he saw as their original religion. Thass's efforts at reinterpreting signs of Hindu culture to reveal their Buddhist origins had antecedents in Phule's reading of the Hindu mythology—especially the incarnations of Vishnu—as narratives of Aryan conquest of a Kshatriya country.[17] Palpu's arguments on Kerala's Buddhist past follow a similar vein, although they display some distinctive inflections as well.

In Kerala, questions of the Buddhist past were of particular interest to the Ezhava community on account of the belief that Ezhavas were originally immigrants to Kerala from Sri Lanka. The caste name "Ezhava" is seen as derived from "Elam" the Tamil word for Sri Lanka. "Thiyan", another name by which the caste community is referred to especially in north Kerala, was claimed to be a modification of "Dvipan" or the Islander.[18] Buddhism, according to this narrative, was introduced to Kerala from Sri Lanka after Emperor Asoka's time: the reference to "Ketalaputra" and Tambapanni in the second edict of Asoka are taken as indicating the prevalence of Buddhism in Kerala and Sri Lanka at that time.[19] Buddhist statues found in Mavelikkara, Bharanikkavu,

Ambalappuzha and other places in central Travancore are also invoked as evidence of Kerala's Buddhist ancestry.[20] An essay by Kodungallur Kunjikkuttan Thampuran from 1910 mentions these statues and recognizes the presence of Buddhism in ancient Kerala but suggests that it was Jainism (which Thampuran considered a variant of Buddhism) that had acquired greater popularity in the region. Thampuran considered Buddhism and Jainism as coming into Kerala which was already under the rule of the Brahmins and an Aryan religion which had incorporated into itself the practices of worship of earlier inhabitants.[21] He does not specifically associate Buddhism with the Ezhavas.

In the 1920s, when Palpu wrote extensively on Kerala's Buddhist past, Buddhism had become an important concern for several Ezhava intellectuals such as C.V. Kunjuraman, C. Krishnan, E.V. Ayyakkutti and K. Ayyappan. They argued that historically Ezhavas were not practitioners of the Hindu religion and that conversion to Buddhism may offer them an egalitarian alternative. C. Krishnan, the editor of *Mitavadi*, became an active campaigner for Buddhism after 1922, organizing events in Calicut, many of them with the participation of Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka. He, along with "Sahodaran" Ayyappan declared their allegiance to Buddhism in 1926 at a function held on Vaisakha Paurnami in Ernakulam.[22] C.V. Kunjuraman wrote several articles on Buddhism in *Kerala Kaumudi* and *Mitavadi* in the 1920s and, in the context of lower caste agitations for Temple Entry, suggested mass Ezhava conversion to Buddhism, causing demographic anxiety among some caste Hindus.[23] Campaigns for conversion to Buddhism also led to disagreements and debates within the Ezhava community and its principal organization, the SNDP Yogam. Sree Narayana Guru, the spiritual leader of the movement and the permanent President of the Yogam, did not explicitly support or oppose moves towards conversion. He upheld the ideal of "One religion for mankind" which simultaneously stressed the underlying unity of all religions and the possibility of constant evolution in individual beliefs.[24] He made a conceptual distinction between *abhyantaramatam* or inner religious belief and *bahyamatam* or the external aspects of religion, which he at times identified with *samudayam* or community.[25] Kumaran Asan, the Secretary of SNDP Yogam, in spite of his reverence for Buddhism, opposed proposals for mass conversion.[26]

One might expect these debates on conversion to Buddhism as a tool against caste inequities to provide an immediate context for Palpu's speculative writings on Kerala history in the 1920s. In fact, Dr. Palpu's name was invoked in some of the discussions; C.V. Kunjuraman described him as a Buddhist in spite of his not having taken formal vows.[27] Sree Narayana Guru is reported to have told K. Ayyappan that Palpu was in favour of religious conversion.[28] However, Palpu's writings from the 1920s do not address the question of religious conversion; he is less interested in Buddhism as a religious option in the contemporary context than in claiming a Buddhist lineage for the Ezhava community. What could be the uses of such a history?

The invocation of a Buddhist past performed several functions in Palpu's writings. Most importantly, it provided an account of the origins of caste discrimination in Kerala and a history for the Ezhavas. The contemporary experience of caste inequity could, in the light of this account, be reconfigured as a "historical" wrong. While Palpu's earlier petitions appealed to the values of fairness and equality of treatment of communities, his later writings foregrounded historical restitution as their principal demand. This can be understood to some extent in terms of the history of petitions: the past, as we saw, constituted the most persuasive ground for claims advanced in petitions to the colonial state. Palpu's turn to the past also had consequences for his conception of the community. His demand for historical recompense worked by identifying the Ezhavas with the masses in general, placing them in a locus of universality. The Buddhist past also supplied a normative ideal: it lent support to a comparative critical assessment of contemporary social arrangements and the formulation of an alternative moral imaginary. We shall consider these uses of the past in some detail.

III

As we noted earlier, Palpu's narrative of Brahmanical usurpation has striking similarities with those put forward by Phule, Iyothee Thass and Ezhava intellectuals in the 1920s. They present the emergence of caste hierarchy as a result of the defeat of Buddhism by Brahmins and the consequent subordination of people who tried to resist the new Brahmanical hegemony. However, there are interesting differences of

detail. Phule and Iyothee Thass saw this history in terms of a conflict between outsiders and indigenous people: in Phule's narratives, Kshatriyas—he derived this word from Kshetra in Marathi, which meant "place"—were dominant before the arrival of the Brahmins; for Thass, Parayas or Adi Dravidas were the original inhabitants of the Tamil country. Both these writers worked with versions of a theory of Aryan incursion to India.[29] Palpu's story did not raise claims of original indigeneity. He did not contradict the popular belief that Ezhavas came to Kerala coast from Sri Lanka or Ceylon. Some versions of this story credited Ezhavas with introducing coconut cultivation—a distinctive signature of the Kerala landscape—in the region. The Ezhavas were also believed to have brought Buddhism to Kerala. Palpu's account suggested that Buddhism in Kerala was not confined to one particular community; it was the religion of the entire masses. In his writings, Buddhism, introduced to the Kerala coast by the Ezhavas on their arrival from Sri Lanka, displaced earlier forms of religious and social organization. In some places Palpu seems to suggest that Brahmanical religion, with its varna hierarchy, was already in place in Kerala when Ezhavas arrived.[30] Buddhism displaced this religion and prevailed as the dominant creed for more than a millennium. During this period, the varna system disappeared and an egalitarian society without hierarchical distinctions emerged. This society was destroyed after the Brahmins appropriated power, and the caste distinctions that characterize modern Kerala—which made Vivekananda call it a madhouse—were instituted. Sections of the population who collaborated with the newly dominant Brahmins were rewarded with a higher status—although clearly lower than the ruling class: the Nayars were the prime example of this in Palpu's account. The Ezhavas by contrast continued to resist the new domination, which resulted in their stigmatization. Even after they gave up their Buddhist creed and accepted Brahmanical religion, the stigma persisted in the form of their low caste status.

The term "Ezhava" in Palpu's account possesses a double valence: it designates the Buddhists who came from Sri Lanka and introduced their religion in Kerala; at the same time, it also refers to those sections of the egalitarian Buddhist society of Kerala who refused to accept Brahmanical rule. While the first reference identifies the Ezhavas with a particular social group with a distinctive history, the second sense is

more expansive: Ezhavas stand for the general masses of the land who carry into modern Kerala the forgotten history of an egalitarian casteless society that had prevailed there. In the latter sense, the Ezhava is the representative of the oppressed masses of the land, whose country and religion have been snatched away from them.

This narrative shares crucial similarities with Iyothee Thass's account of India's Buddhist past. According to Thass, India was an originally Buddhist nation, and the name of the country, "Indiram" itself derived from *ayintiram*, a word associated with the Buddha to refer to his conquest of the five senses.[31] Further, he linked the word "Bharatam" to Buddha's names "varatar" or "baratar" which refer to his practice of *aram* or ethical conduct.[32] Thass also translated varna categories into a Buddhist horizontal system of division of labour, which was free from hierarchy and endogamy. Thass attributed the destruction of this Buddhist society to the incursion of Aryan outsiders or *aryamilechar*, whom he called pseudo Brahmins (*veshapiraminarkal*) on account of their false simulation of scholarly abilities and ethical standing. Gajendran Ayyathurai summarized Iyothee Thass's procedure of argumentation:

> Once those who claim themselves to be brahmins are portrayed as pseudo-brahmins, faking Buddhist theory and practice, then everything associated with them is seen as an imitation. … Thass deconstructs brahminical practices, such as, sacred thread ceremony (*upanayanam*), sacred ash (*vibuti*), fasting (*viratam*), sacrificial fire (*yakam*), temple (*kovil*), idols (*silai*), and internal-light (*brahmum / ulloli*), as originally Buddhist practices with humanistic aspects to them. However, the caste-brahmins/pseudo-brahmins/ *veshapiraminarkal*, in Thass's reading have only used them to disintegrate (*otrumaikedu*) and divide (*pirivinai*) humanity.[33]

These arguments enabled Iyothee Thass to contradict Saivite claims of indigeneity and place the original Indian society as Buddhist: Saivites in his view came from the *aryamilecha* incursion. Those who resisted the pseudo-Brahmins were named Parayas: Thass took the word *parayarkal* to mean "those who spoke against" (from the verb *parai*,

which means to speak), a shortening of *poiveshankaliparaikiravarkal* or those who spoke against the masqueraders. Pseudo-brahmins displaced these meanings of *parayar* with caste-based derogatory connotations of untouchability and stigmatized the community as those who bury the dead.[34]

Palpu's account, like Thass's, posited an earlier egalitarian society that followed Buddhist principles and attributed the origin of caste discrimination to a moment of Brahmanical usurpation of power. Unlike Thass, as we saw, Palpu did not see the original, indigenous society as Buddhist; for him, Buddhism was brought in by the Ezhavas to the Kerala coast. Palpu shared Thass's view that the Brahmanical conquest resulted in the institution of a semiological hegemony through the appropriation of words and meanings. Words that marked egalitarian distinctions in a Buddhist world came to signify discriminatory, hierarchical and stigmatizing identities. For Palpu, as for Thass, to recover the history of the downtrodden was to write a history of the defeated; this involved the recovery of lost meanings which were erased and overwritten by the victors. This project of recovery encountered a grave difficulty; as earlier uses of words were erased from documents and from collective memory, they could not be recovered through empirical procedures. Speculative etymologies were employed to fill this gap, and they played a prominent role in the historical accounts of Palpu and Thass. While Palpu's account strengthened attempts to forge a new historical imaginary for the Ezhavas as an alternative to Brahmanical and colonial accounts, his reliance on speculation was viewed with scepticism by many of his interlocutors, especially colonial officials. Before we examine Palpu's speculative etymological practice closely, it is important to consider the dynamics of his correspondence with government officials and nationalist leaders, which shaped the discursive space where his historical claims were made.

While clarifying the nature of petition writing, I had identified discursive indications of the relationship between the addresser and the addressee as an important element of this mode. This may be seen in Palpu's writings, where he uses the narrative of the Buddhist past to comment on his relationship to colonial administrators. A comparison between the ancient Buddhist Empire and contemporary British rule

undergirded the appeal made in these letters: both these empires, Palpu claimed, were similar in their rejection of caste discrimination, and stand in determined opposition to Brahmanical domination. "Fortunately for us," he wrote, "it so happens, as was the case in the past, our present Emperor and Princes do not recognize any distinctions of colour or caste or creed …"[35] However, he also hinted at differences in the way the two empires conceived the relationship between sovereigns and subjects. In a letter to T.E. Meir in 1922, Palpu argued that in "what is known generally as the 'Buddhist period', of which there is authentic history, our emperors belonged to us fully and they always lived in this country and looked after us"; in marked contrast, under the colonial regime "our present emperors belong to people elsewhere who have been persistently monopolizing them".[36] In another letter, addressed to G.F. Paddison in 1923, Palpu deployed the same comparison again, but this time to refer to the mutuality of this relationship: the loyalty of the subjects presupposes a conception of the duties of sovereigns:

> We had explained in our Representations how our traditional loyalty to our sovereigns was the result of the laws of Dharma (or Righteousness) regulating our conduct from the most ancient times. These laws also include certain corresponding duties and responsibilities on our Rulers. … It will be seen that these duties and responsibilities were being respected by even Muhammadan Rulers and their officers here who had any sense of justice and fairplay.[37]

The Buddhist narrative functions as a preamble to the spelling out of normative expectations vested by the petitioner in the authority he is addressing.

Not surprisingly, Palpu's idealized references to an ancient empire were met with scepticism by his colonial addressees. C.W.E. Cotton, the Political Agent of Travancore, to whom Palpu submitted a detailed and voluminous memorandum in 1927, demanded documentary evidence for these historical claims:

> I wish when we next meet you would refer me to documentary evidence as to the state of society in Kerala

> in Buddhist times, and also indicate how apparently a mere handful of Brahmins were able to impose their religion upon the unwilling masses. Who is your authority for the statement that Buddhism flourished on the coast for 1500 years, and what evidence is there of encouragement given by the Brahmins to Arab, Jewish and Syrian traders?[38]

Cotton's response expresses the colonial state's stress on documentary evidence as essential not only for determining the admissibility of petitions but also to dependable history writing. In his reply to Cotton, Palpu adopted a somewhat paradoxical, dual approach. Firstly, the historical truth of the Buddhist period was common knowledge and required no special demonstration; secondly, in contradiction to the first, the veracity of the claim was impossible to demonstrate as the usurpation of power by the Brahmins entailed a total suppression and distortion of all documentary evidence. Consider the following paragraph from Palpu's response to Cotton:

> … it was also impossible that you could have been completely unaware of the historical facts, that this Coast was Buddhist for over 1500 years, that the people here were even better Buddhists than those elsewhere, that the Sovereigns here then, though less widely known now, were even more virtuous and benevolent than Emperor Asoka, that they were got rid of, or converted, by treachery and deception, and the people subjected to atrocious persecutions, and that the Arabs and other people from outside were being specially encouraged at the expense, and in preference to, the masses, and utilized to keep the masses down, even after their conversion to Brahminism compulsorily. Nor could you have been ignorant altogether of the literature, records, traditions and relics of the Buddhist Period here which have survived Brahminical usurpation and vandalism, or of the ingenuity with which the ancient Buddhist institutions, festivals, customs, etc., still current here, have all been altered or transformed, so as to benefit the Brahmins solely, more or less, at the expense, general humiliation and ruin of the people. It was further unlikely that you could have had no occasion to at least suspect that, in the organized and persistent endeavour that was being made to screen and sanctify Brahminical

> falsehoods and crimes, even historical facts within the memory of the people, have become successfully suppressed or misinterpreted.[39]

Palpu's reply to Cotton highlighted a problem deeply inlaid within the colonial documentary regime: the possibilities of forgery, distortion, and destruction of evidence. He presented the Buddhist past as a site of contradictory modes of historical inheritance: it was self-evident, commonly shared recollection and—at the same time—an object of suppression and misinterpretation. Remnants of this past might be found in forms of memory rather than documented history, but memory too was vulnerable to distortion and even destruction. One needed an interpretative strategy which distrusted the ostensible meaning of recollected signs and treated them as instances of concealment. Nonetheless, the ultimate thrust of Palpu's reading were not sceptical: he was not content to show that available recorded history was misleading; it was more important to extract a truer, alternative account from beneath this account, even if this could not be established through documentary verification. This second version, in Palpu's case, drew its energies from a utopian ethical and political imaginary.

Palpu's descriptions of the Buddhist society in ancient Kerala displayed four crucial features: economic prosperity, cosmopolitan connections, ethical rectitude and the absence of caste distinctions. In a letter to Gandhi, Palpu turned to the *Mahabharata* for evidence of Kerala's economic prosperity:

> … during the great Mahabharata War, which is estimated to have been fought out at Kurukshetra somewhere between 3000 and 1500 B.C. this ancient kingdom of Chera fed all the vast armies of both the Pandavas and the Kauravas, without distinction, free, throughout the whole period, and that even the emperor of China, Kings of Persia, Egypt, Southern Europe and America, who are reported to have attended the Rajasuya of Dharmaputra then, had actually felt no caste or race scruples whatsoever, and were eating together from the same kitchen.[40]

The letter bore the distinctive mark of Palpu's method: the translation of the landscape of the Mahabharata war into a map of the modern world was an example of a larger tendency of mapping the ancient into the modern, antiquity into the pressing distinctiveness of contemporaneity. In Palpu's new cartography, Kerala was the centre of an ancient Buddhist empire spread over a vast expanse of modern territories, which were listed with minor variations in several of Palpu's writings. In a text written in the last years of his life, Palpu listed the expanse of the empire thus:

> The Empire had then included Tribishtapom (Tibet), Burma, Siam, Malaya, Cambodia, and the East India Islands, while in the west it included Afghanistan, Iran, Eastern Africa, Ethiopia and other areas in Africa, the West India Islands, and even Guatemala, Yuccatan, and Mexico in Central America.[41]

Interestingly Europe and America did not figure in this list; Palpu's map charted an alternative imperium, counterposed to the modern colonial cartography of the world.

In his Presidential address before the annual meeting of the SNDP Yogam in 1929, Palpu stressed another aspect of the glory of this empire. Unlike other empires, it was not built by force; the territories came together voluntarily in righteousness, universal love, and service without distinctions of any kind.[42] Nor was the enormous economic prosperity of the empire founded on conquest; its sources were the "then world-famous industries of the people here", and "the world-wide trade they were carrying on at the time".[43] Palpu argued that much of this trade was with the East, but "even the small portion that went to the West was so large that the duty paid by our forefathers here to the ancient Roman government in silks, muslins, and calicos (from Calicut) and other piece goods alone, imported into that empire exceeded over a million pound sterling in value annually".[44]

The beginnings of European trade which presaged modern empires were traced back to an ambivalent point of contact with the old empire, where old and new cosmopolitan imaginaries met. Palpu suggested

that western nations sent fraternal delegates like Vasco de Gama to the Malabar coast on account of

> [t]heir desire to get in direct relationship with the righteous, prosperous and benevolent people here who were kind to all strangers, and thereby to secure the then trade and influence of the Arabs here and thus free themselves from the supremacy of these Arabs who had established themselves over even portions of Europe then, as a result of the affluence they had earned here.[45]

The two empires, however, stood far apart from each other in their ethical attitudes to trade:

> [t]he greatness of the *Christian* nations in Europe was not based mainly on righteous or Christian principles, as in the case of the prosperous and benevolent empire here... . The Christian merchants ... have obviously been unable to realize the difference between honest profit earned by honourable business with a free people and what is acquired (a much less percentage than in the past) by exploiting a prostrate nation treacherously subjugated and unjustly held down for being so exploited.[46]

It is interesting that Palpu counterposed to modern imperialism not nationalism but an alternative cosmopolis, a universe of regions connected voluntarily through a shared ethics of trade and religion. In contrast to the valorization of indigenism, Palpu's speculative history stressed territorial expansiveness. This was a local story too: his imaginary map had Kerala at its centre; it was from there that global connections radiated outwards. However, location did not serve to provide a point of historical origin: Kerala and its Buddhism were consequences of migration, taking the account back to transregional movements and connections.

It is perhaps this sense of global coordinates and his resistance to indigeneism that connected Palpu's invocation of ancient history with his embrace of modernity. Unlike Sree Narayana Guru, a renowned ascetic with a deep engagement in Indian philosophical traditions,

Palpu's intellectual formation was in modern disciplines. Palpu was a trained physician and bacteriologist with wide-ranging experience in public health, and his thought often turned to idioms of scientificity even while dealing with religious traditions. In a report on public health, he considered the rituals mandated by the Indian tradition as predominantly aimed at the practice of personal hygiene. Practices which announced themselves as religious were translated here into an idiom of modern scientific healthcare. We can see similar gestures of translation in Palpu's projection of the Buddhist empire into a map of the modern world. Palpu's historical narratives show this propensity time and again.

IV

Palpu proposed a reading of the Hindu puranas, especially the mythological stories around the ten incarnations (*avatara*) of Vishnu. Jyotirao Phule had discussed the avatara narratives in detail in the conversation between Jyotiba and Dhondiba in *Gulamgiri*.[47] Iyothee Thass also had offered some comments on avatara narratives; he regarded Hiranyaksha (Iranyan), killed by Narasmihavatara of Vishnu, as a King from the Buddhist past.[48] Through a reading of Hindu myths, Palpu tried to extract a secret history of the destruction of a Buddhist society through Brahmanical conquest. It is instructive to juxtapose Palpu's and Phule's readings of myths as caste critique.

Phule framed his discussion in terms of the arrival of Aryans in India from Iran: Matsya, the first avatara of Vishnu in the form of fish, was identified as the chief of the Aryan hordes who came in small canoes. He rejected the account in the Bhagavata as implausible: how could a man be born of a fish, as they were "absolutely different from each other in their physical structure, food, sleep, sexual and procreative habits".[49] In Phule's narrative, Matsya usurps the kingdom of the native ruler Shankhasur and rules until his death, after which the fish hordes are driven away from India by Shankhasur's people. Then another horde from Iran arrives in India in bigger boats that moved slowly like a tortoise, which made their leader acquire the name Kachcha or tortoise—the second *avatara* of Vishnu. Varaha and Narasimha appear as the subsequent Dvija or Brahmin kings. Narasimha's form is

explained as masquerade: to assassinate Hiranyakashyapu, Narasimha painted himself "as a lion, as the Muslims paint themselves as tigers in their festival of Muharram, fixed some ferocious-looking fangs inside his mouth, arranged a false mane around his face and made himself up as a lion". [50] Phule's readings work by an appeal to the empirical and a rejection of the fantastic. The story of Vamana and Bali is also retold in the same way; Vamana's assumption of a gigantic form and his pushing down of Bali to the netherworld are rejected on grounds of implausibility. In Phule's narrative, Bali dies on the battleground. Baliraja, known for his egalitarian and prosperous reign, was an anti-Brahmanical ideal for Phule; later sections of *Gulamgiri* praise Jesus as a second Baliraja.[51]

Palpu's reading shared Phule's rejection of mythological narrative as implausible fantasy; myth is regarded as a strategy for concealing and displacing a sequence of real events, which tells a story of Brahmanical conquest. For Phule and Palpu, the demystification of the myth was not merely an act of removal of fantastic accretions from real events, but an act of positive production: in fact, they sought to replace the avatara story with an equally detailed narrative. The aim was to incorporate a non-fantastic version of some details from the mythical account into a sequence of events which fitted into the overall frame of Brahmanical conquest. Instead of the narrative frame of Vishnu assuming several forms to defeat adharma and restore the order of the universe, a secular narrative of human actions was proposed: of the war between two people. Phule and Palpu eschewed recourse to divine or superhuman agency; they saw that as the core of the mythical misrepresentation of history. Their critique proceeded by translating events represented in mythology into a political narrative of conquest and resistance in which divine interventions played no part. This was in effect no translation in the traditional sense; it was rather an imaginative production carried out under constraints set by the events in puranic stories. Events and details in the puranic story, detached from their embeddedness in the mythical, had to be accommodated in the new story of "real" events. While Phule's narratives were lean accounts of conquest and resistance, Palpu produced stories of treachery: they were colourful accounts of masquerade, adultery and murder. In the place of the mythical, Palpu placed another equally

extravagant narrative. The structure and idiom of the new fantastic in Palpu's writings differs from those in Phule, and possess some distinctive features that merit discussion.

Two features recur in Palpu's accounts on the avataras. Firstly, the geographical focus on Kerala even when the story spans continents. Consider his reading of varaha avatara.

> … when one of our ancient Emperors was developing his overseas dominions, the priests here alleged that he was carrying away this "Earth" into *Patal*. In order to bring it back to its former position, they helped an Arab pirate and plunderer, made him an Avatar by furnishing him the mask of a boar's snout, and this Boar had by repeatedly sailing in his vessel, managed to treacherously murder the Emperor and that is how his possessions there had gone to the Arabs, and thus the Earth became replaced to its former place. The first temple for this Boar avatar was constructed at Panniyur, and after it was destroyed, others were built elsewhere. The extent to which Ponnani, the present Headquarters of the Arabs here has become developed from the original Panniyur has been considerable.[52]

The story is situated in relation to north Kerala, to Panniyur and Ponnani. However, this is a prelude to the introduction of a rapidly expansive geography. Palpu continues his narration:

> When this Emperor was developing his overseas dominions the priests who were Vaidics had migrated and settled down there especially in Anuradhapura, Angkor Wat, Borobudur, Uoidong [Oudong], etc. on account of the larger "Sarvanees" and other perquisites available there. It was then alleged that the Vedas were carried away to Patal and another Avatar became necessary in order to bring them back.[53]

The *Patal* or the netherworld referred to in the Purana is plotted on to the modern map, and located in the transoceanic territories.

Palpu's reading of the Vamana avatara located Patala in Batavia, which could be Jakarta, as in some other writings Palpu refers to this

as East Indies.[54] This story was of particular interest to Palpu and for the advocates of Kerala's Buddhist past. Mahabali is celebrated as the ruler of Kerala in a mythical golden age of prosperity and equality; the Onam festival, observed annually, is considered as the occasion when Bali comes to visit his country and subjects. Palpu was not original in seeing Bali's expulsion as an instance of Brahmanical usurpation of power, but the way he demystifies the Puranic story and produces a more plausible substitute for it is interesting:

> The Brahmins however hated this benign Ruler in spite of all his virtues and charity, and, as a result a Brahmin Dwarf who obviously knew the special jugglery trick of bringing on temporary elephanti[a]sis on himself instantaneously, and was therefore assumed to represent a God, went to this Ruler and begged for 3 feet of ground for the Brahmins... . He gladly gave the Brahmin what he asked for. Therefore, the dwarf brought on temporary elephanti[a]sis on himself instantaneously and measure[d] with a tremendously big foot the whole of the kingdom and a great deal more, as Brahmin greed had no limit even then... . So, he demanded more. Having had nothing more to give, the Ruler offered his own head to maintain his word and the Brahmin placed his tremendously big elephantoid foot on his head and sent him away as an exile to Batavia or other island which was then considered to be the antipodes.[55]

The reference to elephantiasis stands out. Vamana's transformation into a gigantic, cosmos filling divine form is stripped of its mythological aura and revealed to be a magical trick. The illusion produced by magic is identified with the seemingly scientific description of a disease common in many parts of the Kerala coast. However, in order for this translation to work, the size of the elephantoid foot has to be exaggerated beyond all limits of scientificity or plausibility. If the myth relies on implausible exaggeration, the alternative account does so even more, despite its use of the deflating vocabulary of empirical experience and scientific precision.

Palpu's turn to a language associated with modern science to find explanations for mythological imagination was not confined to his writing

on the avatara. In his letter to Gandhi in 1925, he offered an explanation for the iconography of the principal idol in Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple in Trivandrum—that of Vishnu reclining on the thousand-headed serpent:

> It has also to be remembered that the usual way in which the Universal or Infinite was being understood in this country was from a study of the finite and the individual. It will thus be seen that the brain and the spinal cord together, floating in the cerebro-spinal fluid gave rise to the ideas of the thousand-headed snake (or intellect) floating on the sea of milk (or knowledge), and to the Supreme Wisdom from which those were believed to have descended became the All-Protecting Deity, symbolized as resting on the snake or intellect.[56]

It may be inaccurate to say that Palpu was offering a scientific explanation of religious iconography. His aim was, rather, to find a kernel of material truth behind a prominent figure in religious imagination. The connections he proposed were not explanatory; they highlighted similarities of shape. The use of a logic of similarities is also evident in the metaphorical reading of the idol, where the serpent stands for the intellect, the ocean of milk for knowledge, and the figure of the deity for wisdom. Even as he tried to ascribe to the religious image a material, non-religious foundation best understood in scientific terms, Palpu seems to be using idioms loosely associated with science more as a resource for an alternative imaginary. He did not offer a clear account of the processes that mediate between the religious idol and its material origin: as a result, his interpretation ended up offering a parallel mythology, peopled with magicians, masqueraders, jugglers, pirates and voyagers.

It is important to note that the invocation of science is not a simple valorization of modernity against the claims of tradition. Palpu's arguments sought an alternative tradition which prefigured the modern, cosmopolitan world. We saw this in Palpu's assessment of hygiene. Brahmanical religion with its mythology and iniquitous practices was for Palpu a distortion of that tradition which called for recovery and restitution in modern times.

The links between Palpu's reading of mythology and his preoccupations with Kerala history are most pronounced in his discussion of the figure of Parasurama. Myths around the origins of the Kerala coast attribute its creation to Parasurama who, in order to expiate the sin of matricide, performed protracted penance and threw his axe into the sea, thus creating a new land where the waters receded. The Parasurama myth is prevalent not only in Kerala but in the entire western coast of India. *Keralolpatti* and *Keralamahatmyam*, two texts written probably in the eighteenth century, use this myth to argue that the land of Kerala was originally gifted by Parasurama to the Brahmins, brought in from outside, as *prayaschitta*.[57] This account was vigorously contested in the early twentieth century by Chattampi Swamikal in his *Pracina Malayalam*, which argued that Kerala originally belonged not to the Brahmins but to the Nayars.[58] Palpu had read *Pracina Malayalam* and had found its critique of the Brahmanical narrative convincing.[59] His reading of the story did not dispute the historical existence of Parasurama; what he rejected was the story of his creation of Kerala; according to Palpu, Parasurama lived in the seventh century of the Christian Era, "when this country was still Buddhist more or less".[60] For him, the Parasurama myth was a distorted version of the violent story of Brahmanical usurpation; the killing of the Kshatriyas recounted in the myth was a displaced sign of the violent killing of Buddhists on the Kerala coast. Even as the myth rewrote this violence as a story of origins, expiation and gift, the stain of the murders stuck to the myth, in the recounting of the killing of Kshatriyas. This association with constitutive violence made Parasurama the epitome of all that Palpu fought against. In his letter to C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, congratulating him on his appointment as Dewan of Travancore, Palpu wrote:

> There are naturally two sets of examples for you to follow. The first of these is what has been nobly set by Dharmaraja and his followers, like Kasyapa the Great, Nagarjuna and others of old, whose principles were being maintained by even Sir Seshadri Iyer, Dr. Rabindranath Tagore and others of recent times. The most prominent leader of the second set here in particular, has of course been the notorious murderer, matricide and usurper who had introduced here a few "sanctified" followers of his own, and has therefore been specially deified by them.[61]

Parasurama figures as the prime antagonist of the Buddha in Palpu's ethical and historical universe. These two figures stand for two opposed moral universes and two antithetical accounts of history. It is by destroying and suppressing the Buddhist past that the Brahmanical account of Kerala history with Parasurama as the foundational figure instituted itself.

V

How do you recover this suppressed past? We saw that Palpu's accounts of the past did not conform to historiographical protocols, and that his materialist explanations of Hindu myths ended up by producing a parallel, alternative imaginary. He made gestures towards evidentiary demands by invoking problems familiar to this paradigm such as the distortion and suppression of records. His writings display a search for non-documentary grounds for justifying historical claims. This can be seen in his appeal to the history of languages and his reliance on speculative etymologies. Etymologies have been invoked as a resource in arguments about forgotten pasts: even when documents and artefacts are missing, language—it is expected—bears marks of history in the travel and the shifts in the meanings of words. The use of etymology as a resource for speculative history in Europe goes back at least to the seventeenth century, and one of the uses to which it was put was to reconstruct the language spoken in the Garden of Eden by the original parents of mankind![62] Etymology, Leibniz had suggested, offers the "Ariadne's thread" out of the labyrinth of languages.[63] However, speculative etymology, like Palpu's readings of mythology, also needs to be seen as an instance of positive imaginary production.

In his letter to Gandhi, Palpu advanced an argument about the contribution of Ezhava physicians from ancient Kerala to the spread of the science of medicine globally:

> … I am doubtful whether you have been able to discover that the Science of Medicine was originally spread in Europe by Ezhava physicians when they were Buddhists and were not subjugated by Brahminism. You know that at the time of Emperor Ashoka Vardhana, Buddhist missionaries, especially medical missionaries, were sent out from the country to

> distant lands. The occurrence of Malabar names for drugs like ginger (Zingiberis from the Malabar name Inchi Veru), Odalam, Vetti Veru (from the Malabar names Odalam Vetti Veru, etc.) in the ancient and faraway Latin, Hebrew, Greek and other languages, is very significant.[64]

Palpu might be right in connecting ginger with the Malayalam *inchiveru*. The second edition of *OED* considers the traditionally accepted derivation from Sanskrit *srngaveru* as folk etymology and connects it to the Dravidian predecessor of the Malayalam word *inchiveru*.[65] However, Palpu did not provide any further evidence to show that the word was carried by Ezhava Buddhist medical missionaries. In support of this narrative claim, he cited another set of etymological connections, around the word "therapeutics":

> The key to the mystery will be seen in the word "Therapeutics", or the science of dealing with the properties of drugs. The word means the science taught by a class of Malabar Physicians who had settled themselves in Crete, Egypt, Greece, etc. under the name "Dheeraputras", i.e. sons or followers of the Dheera, a special name for Buddha on account of his infinite courage. The Pali equivalent of "Dheeraputra" is "Theraputa" and it was from this word Therapeutics (the science taught by Theraputas) is derived.[66]

Skeat's Etymological Dictionary derives "therapeutic" from Greek "therapeutikos" which means "tending" and "therapeutics", "an attendant". These words are linked to the root "dhar", "to maintain, support" and notes its similarity to Sanskrit *dhri*, "to maintain, bear".[67] *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the word therapeutic is also used in connection to the Theraputae, a sect of Jewish mystics residing in Egypt in the first century of the Christian era.[68] The Buddhist or Kerala roots do not come up in the mainstream etymological understanding of these words. However, Palpu's etymology taps into existing speculations on a possible connection between the Theraputae and other Jewish mystic sects of around the beginning of the Christian Era.

"Therapeutics" was an object of discussion in the work of Arthur Lillie, a former soldier in the British army, who attempted to establish

Buddhist roots to Christian practices. In his *Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity* (1893), Lillie noted the similarities between the Therapeutae—a group of ascetic healers referred to by Philo of Alexandria—the Buddhists and the Jewish ascetic sect of Essenes.[69] In another book, he argued that Jesus was an Essene.[70] This line of argument appears to have had some influence on Palpu, who used it in his notes and letters. In a memorandum submitted to Cotton in 1927, Palpu wrote:

> The Essenes, the Theraputao, and others then living in the West have also been referred to as Buddhists from here. It was thus that Buddhist ideas and practices are admitted to have influenced the teachings of … even Christ, and to have further contributed largely to the form [in] which orthodox Christianity shaped itself. Monasteries, nunneries, tonsures, rosaries, confession, celebacy, etc., are all thus admitted to have found their way to Europe from here. Some of the earlier saints of the Christian Church are also believed to have been Buddhists.[71]

He developed this argument further in his Presidential address at the SNDP Yogam in 1936:

> [b]y thus rendering universal love and service without any distinctions of caste, creed, race, language, etc. and by their general character and conduct, our forefathers here had actually made themselves "true Christians", long before the birth of Christ, and the evidences of the extent to which they had benefited the various races then in the West by spreading their gospel of Dharma among them, and by initiating even Jesus, can be seen still surviving in the Christian scriptures, rituals, and institutions.[72]

In establishing links between Buddhism and Christianity, Palpu in his own distinctive way came close to Phule's characterization of Christ as a second Baliraja. While in Phule's *Gulamgiri*, Bali appeared as a recurrent motif marking the rise of liberating figures, Palpu's narrative focused on tracking the spread and spatial extension of Buddhism in an ancient cosmopolis. His story was also about a subterranean, lesser known history of ascetic and mystic practices which stood at a distance

from religious establishments and centres of authority. These, for Palpu, constituted an alternative source of normativity pitched against what he saw as hegemonic Brahmanical ideas of civilization and tradition.

Speculative etymologies and accounts of the changing meanings of words have played an important role in lower caste attempts at recovering forgotten histories. We saw similar impulses in Phule and Iyothee Thass as well.[73] Palpu considered many of the words associated with Travancore governance as concealing discontinuous histories of semiotic appropriation. The phrase used for indicating funds and property belonging to the princely state of Travancore was *pandaravaka* or that which belongs to the "pandaram", a word usually understood as a corruption of the Sanskrit word "bhandaram" which meant store-house and was by extension applied to the royal treasury. Palpu's account was totally different. He used two sets of linguistic connections: Pandaram was also the name of a low caste community, which according to Palpu, used to be caretakers of Buddhist resthouses and wayside inns for travellers and were known as Sangham Andi Pandaram. Their stigmatization in contemporary Kerala was a consequence of their earlier Buddhist connection.[74] Palpu came up with a second line of argument to explain the origins of the term "pandaravaka". The communal properties which belonged to the Buddhist Sanghams were, after Brahmanical usurpation, confiscated and made into Brahmanical state property referred to as "pandaravaka". He derived the word not from "bhandaram" but from "pandarudeyovaka" which means "properties which belonged to somebody in the past", which alluded to their suppressed Buddhist association. These accounts are connected with Palpu's larger claim that Buddhist associations or Sanghams were displaced by Brahmanical organizations or Yogams, which according to Palpu were first instituted by Parasurama. In contrast to the democratic practices of the Sanghams, the Yogams were an exclusive location of Brahmin privilege and domination. For example, the "ettarayogam" which controlled the affairs of the Padmanabha temple in Trivandrum had eight Brahmins and the king who had only half a vote as he was a non-Brahmin.

> ...the Yogam (or Association) which the notorious murderer sage, who usurped this coast for the Brahmins had organized

> in place of the Buddhist sanghas, consisted entirely of the Brahmins themselves to whom it is said he had distributed the whole country, and as these were few, they had to divide and subdivide the masses into numerous sects and subsects and introduce special customs in order to keep them separate in watertight and mutually jarring compartments so as to make it easier for themselves and their descendents to maintain their own power and position here, and exploit the country permanently.[75]

At the apex of these instances of semiotic corruption, Palpu placed the word "dharma": central to Buddhist ethics, the word had denoted high moral norms, but its deterioration into the sense of charity in modern times is an indication of the Brahmanical preoccupation with claiming rewards from the state and the people.[76] Travancore was often described as Dharmarajya, and Samuel Mateer had ironically used this as the title of his book *Land of Charity*, in which he commented on the caste inequities in the state.[77] Palpu's comments on the reversal of the meaning of dharma were harsher. One of his later, unpublished compositions summarizes this in the title: "Dharma vs Organized Perfidy, Both Priestly and Official".[78]

The opposition presented in the title is a sign of the polemical frame within which Palpu developed his reflections on the past. Unlike Sree Narayana Guru whose anti-caste arguments were founded less on historical claims than on the unity of the species character of man, Palpu's later writings, which I considered in this paper, looked to the past as the ground for demands of justice. The past he sought to recover as narrative was available neither in the modern cognitive framework of history nor in the institutionalized mnemocultures of mythology and literary tradition. Palpu's speculative etymologies and his eccentric translations of mythical elements into a modern scientific-sounding idiom are symptoms of his search for some form of grounding for his claims within a modern evidential paradigm. However, their inadequacy and the extravagance of his accounts point to an impulse in Palpu's writings which regards his discourse as supplying its own ground: it is as if the production of a past, using a discursive assemblage that mimics evidentiary imperatives, in itself constituted a forceful claim.

VI

Palpu's attempt to create a demystified, empirical substitute for mythology—in spite of its excess—was in tune with his larger preoccupation with this-worldly foundations for his ethical and communitarian initiatives. Although he followed Vivekananda's advice to have a spiritual leader at the forefront of the movement, his own initiatives remained steadfastly non-metaphysical. He organized the first exhibition of crafts and cottage industries in Kerala in 1905 as part of the Second Annual Conference of SNDP Yogam. Palpu claimed repeatedly that he had invented 150 new industries and entered into protracted correspondence with the government and with potential private sponsors to mobilize support, with no avail.[79] He was the first to introduce the idea of co-operatives in the Sree Narayana movement.[80] Palpu wanted to launch a lottery scheme called Dharma Shodathi for funding the branches of SNDP Yogam and to get others to join him to create a common fund with their private assets.[81] He even wrote a will in 1925, which donated his property to the Dharma Shodathee scheme.[82] None of these plans met with any success as his addressees found them unviable and eccentric.

Palpu's speculative historiography took shape among these unsuccessful—perhaps amateur—social and economic initiatives, and like them failed to meet the benchmark of a more accomplished conceptualization of projects for the modern world. Even as they mimicked modern procedures of sceptical reading and debunking of mythological accounts, Palpu's writings on the past defied the economies of restraint and reserve that characterize the disciplinary practice of history. Palpu asked of the past more than what it could deliver for contemporary use: he demanded from history not only an explanation of how the present came to be what it is, but also a grounding for political restitution and ethical rectitude, and a model for a cosmopolitan future. The excess of this demand possesses at the same time the audacity and the innocence of vernacular thought which regards the past not as an object of knowledge but as an actively claimed legacy and a talismanic resource for life.

One wonders whether Palpu would have had greater success if he did not adopt the petition as the principal frame for his writings and

had published his historical speculations to offer his ideas more directly to the public. Many of his interlocutors looked unsuccessfully for viable demands in Palpu's long letters.[83] What Palpu's petitioning letters demanded were not specific measures of redress, but some sort of absolute restitution. It is easier to conceive such a demand as addressed to a public, actual or imagined. However, the state remained Palpu's principal interlocutor, and the demands for restitution and justice formed the overall frame within which all memory and all projects—even his autobiographical recollections—found articulation.[84] While Palpu's early campaigns succeeded to an extent in persuading the state to grant rights to education and employment to the Ezhavas, his invention of a lower caste history, like the numerous cottage industries he claimed to have devised, did not find effective successors. Palpu's narratives of the past, oscillating between the marvellous and the demystified, sought a room for figures of plenitude and hope within the fantastic exuberance of an anti-mythological imagination. The orphaned lives of his speculative accounts of ancient Kerala testify to the incommensurable relationship between historical frames of intelligibility and the desire for irretrievable pasts.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Pradip Kumar Datta and Aparna Balachandran for patiently reading a draft of this paper and offering detailed, insightful responses and significant, critical clarifications. An earlier version of this paper was presented as a workshop on Caste/Anti-Caste Thought held at the Columbia Global Center, Mumbai on 21 June 2013. A shorter version in Malayalam was presented as the Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai Memorial Annual Lecture organized by Kerala Council for Historical Research in Thiruvananthapuram on 29 January 2014. I thank the participants of both these events for their valuable comments and criticisms.

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[2] A large body of scholarship exists on petitions, their discursive modes, history and relationship to configurations of power. See, for example, David Zaret, "Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 101, no. 6 (1996), pp. 1497–1555, several essays in *International Review of Social History*, Supplement 9: *Petitions in Social History*, eds Lex Heerma van Voss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Michael Katten, *Colonial Lists/Indian Power: Identity Formation in Nineteenth-Century Telugu-Speaking India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 88–127.

[3] Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[4] For biographies of Palpu, see T.K. Madhavan, *Doctor Palpu, D.P.H.: Jeevacharitram* (Dr. Palpu, D.P.H.: A Biography) (Kollam: K.P. Kayyalakkal, 1929), Velayudhan Panikkassery, *Do. Palpu* (Dr. Palpu) (Trissur: Current Books, 2002), and P. Vinayachandran, *Do. Palpuvinte Katha* (The Story of Dr. Palpu) (Kottayam: Current Books, 2005).

[5] P. Vinayachandran, *Do. Palpuvinte Katha*, p. 79.

[6] For a Malayalam translation of this book, see P. Palpu, *Thiruvitamkotte Ezhavar* (Ezhavas of Travancore), ed. N.K. Damodaran (Trivandrum: R. Sankaran, 1988).

[7]Francis Cody, "Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship: Petitions, Literacy Activism, and the Performativity of Signature in Rural Tamil India", *Cultural Anthropology*, 24: 3 (2009), p. 363.

[8] Slightly amended translation from the original Malayalam. For the original text, see Velayudhan Panikkassery, *Do. Palpu*, p. 44.

[9] Velayudhan Panikkassery, *Do. Palpu*, p. 44.

[10] See G. Priyadarshan, (ed.), *Kerala Navothhanam: Kandathil Varghese Mappilayude Mukhaprasangangal* (The Kerala Renaissance: The Editorials of Kandathil Varghese Mappila) (Kottayam: Malayala Manorama, 1997).

[11] For a discussion of K. Ramakrishna Pillai's concept of the public, see my "The Public, the State and New Domains of Writing: On Ramakrishna Pillai's Conception of Literary and Political Expression", *Tapasam: A Quarterly Journal of Kerala Studies*, 2: 3 & 4 (January and April 2007), pp. 413–41.

[12] Partha Chatterjee proposed a distinction between vernacular and professional social sciences. For an account, see Prathama Banerjee, "The Social Sciences in Post-1947 India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 April 2008, pp. 22–5. See also, Partha Chatterjee, "Introduction: History in the Vernacular", in *History in the Vernacular*, eds Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008), pp. 1–24.

[13] See Presidential address delivered at the 28th session of the SNDP Yogam, Kottayam (Kottayam: CMS, 1929).

[14] See, for instance, Palpu's letter to the Travancore Dewan Maurice Emygdius Watts dated 1 September 1925. Subject file no. 5, Private Papers of Dr. P. Palpu, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi (hereafter abbreviated as "Palpu Papers").

[15] See *Selected Writings of Jyotirao Phule*, ed. G.P. Deshpande (New Delhi: Left Word, 2002). See also Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[16] For an account of Iyothee Thass's work, see G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (New Delhi: One World, 1998); V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millenium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya Books, 1998); M.S.S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007); Gajendran Ayyathurai, "Foundations of Anti-Caste Consciousness: Pandit Iyothee Thass, Tamil Buddhism and the Marginalized in South India", unpublished PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2011.

[17] Jyotirao Phule, "Slavery" (1873), tr. Maya Pandit, in *Selected Writings of Jyotirao Phule*, pp. 22–99. See, for a discussion of these arguments, O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, pp. 137–73, especially pp. 143–6.

[18] For a brief summary of arguments on the origin of "Thiyya" and "Ezhava", see P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathompatham Nuttandile Keralam* (Kerala in the Nineteenth Century) (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Akademi, 1988), pp. 217–18. See also P.C. Alexander, *Buddhism in Kerala* (Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1949), pp. 123–4.

[19] P.C. Alexander, *Buddhism in Kerala*, pp. 21–4.

[20] Ibid., pp. 63–78.

[21] Kodungallur Kunjikkuttan Thampuran, "Malayalavum Buddhamatavum" (Kerala and Buddhism), *Mangalodayam*, 2: 8 (1910), p. 302.

[22] See K.R. Achutan, *C. Krishnan (Jeevacharitram)* (C. Krishnan: A Biography)(Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1971).

[23] See, for example, "Adhakritarkku Buddhamatamanu Nallathu" (Buddhism is the Best Religion for the Oppressed), *Kerala Kaumudi*, 27 February 1925; "Abhinavabuddhan", *Kerala Kaumudi*, 14 September 1922; "Buddhamatavadangal: Oru Samadhanam" (Debates on Buddhism: A Response), *Kerala Kaumudi,* 19 July to 30 August 1923; "Thiyyarkku Nallathu Buddhamatam Thanneyanu" (Buddhism is the Best Religion for Thiyyas), *Mitavadi Varshikapathippu*, 1926.

[24] See Sree Narayana Guru's conversations with C.V. Kunjuraman and with K. Ayyappan. "Oru Samvadam: C.V. Kunjuraman" (A Conversation: C.V. Kunjuraman) and "Sambhashanam: Sahodaran Ayyappan" (A Conversation: Sahodaran Ayyappan), in *Narayana Guru: Jeevitam, Kritikal, Darsanam* (Narayana Guru: Life, Works, Philosophy), ed. K. N. Shaji (Trissur: Current Books, 2002), pp. 459–66 and 467–9.

[25] For a discussion of these distinctions, see my "Self, Body and Inner Sense: Some Observations on Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan", *Studies in History,* n.s. 13: 2 (1997), pp. 257–60.

[26] Kumaran Asan, "Mathaparivarthana Rasavadam" (The Alchemy of Religious Conversion) (1923), *Kumaran Asante Gadyalekhanangal* (Prose Writings of Kumaran Asan), Volume 2, ed. N.K. Damodaran (Thonnakkal: Kumaran Asan Memorial Committee, 1982), pp. 300–13.

[27] C.V. Kunjuraman, "Thiyyarkku Nallathu Buddhamatam Thanneyanu", cited in K.R. Achutan, *C. Krishnan*, p. 235.

[28] See "Sambhashanam: Sahodaran Ayyappan", p. 467.

[29] For a discussion of the uses of theory of the Aryan race in constructing historical narratives about ancient India, see Romila Thapar, "Some Appropriations of the Theory of the Aryan Race Relating to the Beginning of Indian History", *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, ed. Daud Ali (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), pp. 15–35.

[30] "Notebook containing miscellaneous topics like Brahminical Hegemony, Incarnations of Vishnu", Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 4.

[31] Gajendran Ayyathurai, p. 88.

[32] Ibid., p. 89.

[33] Ibid., p. 93.

[34] Ibid., p. 96.

[35] Letter to G. F. Paddison, Commissioner of Labour, dated 5 July 1923, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 2.

[36] Letter to T.E. Meir, Commissioner of Labour, 19 October 1922, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 2.

[37] Letter to G.F. Paddison, Commissioner of Labour, dated 5 July 1923, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 2.

[38] Letter from C.W.E. Cotton to Dr. Palpu, 25 February 1927, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 6, p. 16.

[39] Letter from Dr. Palpu to C.W.E. Cotton, 25 March 1927, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 6, pp. 23–4.

[40] Letter from Palpu to Mahatma Gandhi, 12 April 1925, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 4.

[41] "Dharma vs. Organized Perfidy", 20 August 1947, Dr. Palpu Papers, Speeches and writings by him, Serial no. 3.

[42] Dr. Palpu, *8 May 1929: Presidential address delivered at the 28th session of the S. N.D.P. Yogam, Kottayam* (Kottayam: CMS, 1929), in Dr. Palpu Papers, Speeches and writings by him, Serial no. 1.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] *Selected Writings of Jyotirao Phule*, pp. 47–99, especially pp. 50–70.

[48] Ayyathurai, p. 88.

[49] Selected Writings of Jyotirao Phule, p. 50.

[50] Ibid., pp. 54–5.

[51] Ibid., pp. 73–4.

[52] "Dharma vs. Organized Perfidy", 20 August 1947, Dr. Palpu Papers, Speeches and writings by him, Serial no. 3.

[53] Ibid. "Sarvani" refers to "a fee given to common Brahmins at a feast". See Rev. H. Gundert, *A Malayalam and English Dictionary* (Mangalore: Basel Mission, 1872).

[54] "Memorandum: Some Additional Notes on Ancient and Modern History of Kerala", submitted as enclosure to Representation dated 30 June 1927 to C.W.E. Cotton, Dr. Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 6.

[55] Letter from Palpu to Watts, 1 September 1925, Dr. Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 5.

[56] Letter from Palpu to Mahatma Gandhi, 12 April 1925, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 4.

[57] For a discussion of *Keralolpatti*, see Kesavan Veluthat, "*Keralolpatti* as History", *The Early Medieval in South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 129–46.

[58] Chattampi Swamikal, "Pracinamalayalam" (1903), in K. Maheswaran Nair, ed., *Chattampi Swamikal: Jivitavum Kritikalum* (Trivandrum: Dooma Books, 1995), pp. 303–460.

[59] Palpu wrote in 1936: "The story that Parasu Rama created Keralam and gave it away to the Brahmins in expiation of his sins is false–vide evidence in Chattampi Swami's *Pracina Keralam* [in Malayalam in the original]." "Notebook containing miscellaneous topics like Brahminical Hegemony, Incarnations of Vishnu", Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 4.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Palpu's letter to C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, 8 October 1936, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 8. Dharmaraja refers to the Buddha. Sir Seshadri Iyer (1845–1901) was the Dewan of Mysore from 1883 to 1901. While in Mysore government service, Palpu had several opportunities to work under him and interact with him.

[62] Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure: Essays on the Study of Language and Intellectual History* (London: Athlone, 1982), pp. 59–69 and 84–100.

[63] Ibid, p. 100 n.

[64] Letter from Palpu to Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit.

[65] See *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition on CD-ROM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Walter W. Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology* (1884) (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993).

[66] Letter from Palpu to Mahatma Gandhi, op. cit.

[67] See Walter W. Skeat, The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology, op. cit., p. 504.

[68] See *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition on CD-ROM.

[69] Arthur Lillie, *The Influence of Buddhism on Primitive Christianity* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1893), pp. 106–7.

[70] Arthur Lillie, *"Buddhism in Christendom", or Jesus, the Essene* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co, 1887).

[71] "Memorandum: Some Additional Notes on Ancient and Modern History of Kerala", Submitted as enclosure to representation addressed to C.W.E. Cotton, dated 30 June 1927, Dr. Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 6.

[72] "1936: Presidential Address Delivered at the 33rd Session of SNDP Yogam, Chagnanassery", Dr. Palpu Papers, Speeches and writings by him, Serial no. 2.

[73] See, for a discussion of Phule's derivation of Mahar from *maha-ari* (great enemy), O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, p. 141. Ayyathurai discusses several etymological arguments in Iyothee Thass's writings, including the latter's derivation of Parayar. See Ayyathurai, "Foundations of Anti-caste Consciouness", pp. 96–7.

[74] Letter to Mahatma Gandhi, 12 April 1925, op. cit.

[75] Letter from Palpu to Watts, 1 September 1925, op. cit.

[76] "… the Brahminical interpretation of the sacred and comprehensive term 'Dharma' has been *charity* and the 'charity' has always been what begins and ends with themselves." Ibid.

[77] Samuel Mateer, *The Land of Charity: A Descriptive Account of Travancore and Its People, with Special Reference to Missionary Labour* (London: John Snow, 1871).

[78] "Dharma vs. Organized Perfidy", 20 August 1947, Palpu Papers, Speeches and writings by him, Serial no. 3.

[79] See for instance, "Cottage Industry and Crafts", Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 22; Correspondence with T.E. Meir, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 2.

[80] P. Vinayachandran, *Do. Palpuvinte Katha*, pp. 168–9.

[81] Ibid., pp. 170–2; Palpu papers, Subject file no. 26.

[82] "Will of Dr. Palpu", 22 March 1925, Palpu Papers, other papers, Serial no. 2.

[83] See for instance, Palpu's correspondence with C.W.E. Cotton, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 6, and his correspondence with C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 8.

[84] Palpu's personal and familial histories entered his narratives of injustice at times. For an example, see his letter to M.E. Watts, Palpu Papers, Subject file no. 5.