

ABSTRACT

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DISTANCIATION AND SPATIAL
IMAGINARIES ON A CASTE-BASED
SOCIAL NETWORK.

Jillet Sarah Sam, Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

Directed By: Professor George Ritzer, Sociology

This thesis studies the potency of place in mobilizing social categories, and its implications for both social categories and places. I use the theory of distanciation to study associations between caste identity and place. I conducted an ethnographic study of a caste-based digital group, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, to understand the connections and disconnections between the Thiyya caste and Malabar from the perspectives of different sets of actors involved in the identification of caste, namely the nation-state and members of this caste-based network. The nation-state knows the Thiyya caste in a manner that is disconnected from Malabar, while the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* seek to re-emphasize the identification of this caste through the region. Participant observation and in-depth interviews indicate that through references to Malabar, the group seeks to establish a Thiyya caste identity that is distinct from the Ezhavas, a caste group within which the nation-state subsumes them.

I demonstrate that references to Malabar serve to counter the stigma that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* experience when the spatially abstract categorization of the Thiyyas interacts with notions of caste inferiority/superiority. Further, it serves as a mobilizational tool through which they hope to negotiate with the nation-state for greater access to affirmative action. I also demonstrate that caste identification continues to be relevant to the production of place. Place-based identification of the Thiyyas influences the manner in which the group envisions the physical boundaries of Malabar and how other social groups can belong to this region. Based on this analysis, I argue that framework of distanciation should incorporate not only the experience of place and social relations, but also how they are known and represented.

This dissertation establishes that even though social categories such as caste and place are not conventionally understood to be connected to each other, it is important to study the associations between them. Although the new media and globalization may prompt to us to think that place does not matter anymore, I establish that this caste group uses the language of place to organize and mobilize itself on a stronger basis in precisely this context.

PLACE AND CASTE IDENTIFICATION: DISTANCIATION AND SPATIAL
IMAGINARIES ON A CASTE-BASED SOCIAL NETWORK

By

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Dedication

To my family.

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The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* have made this project possible by generously sharing their time and experiences with me in true Malabari fashion.

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Malabar 1921 census

Table 2- Descriptive Summary of Respondents

Chapter 1: Empirical Background and Statement of the Problem

Introduction: Knowing Caste through Place

I spent much of summer 2011 conversing with different middle-class Delhi residents about how they used matrimonial websites to secure a caste-specific marriage partner for themselves or their children¹. I was interested in capturing the processes through which prospective brides, grooms and their parents negotiated such websites by drawing on a combination of both digital and physical resources to deal with the uncertainties of using a website to locate a bride or bridegroom from an appropriate caste. The intersection of the ways in which caste was identified and its specific regional context² was something I had not expected, and yet I periodically encountered it in these conversations. For instance, many respondents shared that for them the region of origin and caste combined to form non-negotiable parameters of the search on these websites.

One of the most exciting connections that emerged in this project was that place seemed to form an important variable for knowing caste identity. Sarla, an upper caste respondent who was searching for a bride for her son shared that one of the

¹ One of the ways in which caste boundaries are maintained is through strict rules about marriage within a certain sub-castes, castes, or a range of caste groups. A family's caste status will not be maintained if the offspring, particularly the daughters, marry someone from a sub-caste or caste that is considered relatively lower in status than their own.

² For instance, families had preferences for brides or bridegrooms not only from within the same caste, but also from within the same region of the state they belonged to.

ways she identified the caste of the prospective bride was by focusing on the fairness of her skin in the photograph and description provided on the website. She explained her emphasis on skin color both in terms of caste and region: in the region she hailed from, Eastern Uttar Pradesh, fair skin colour was interpreted as proof of birth in a higher ranking caste. Consequently, in her choice of a bride for her son, Sarla had to consider the community in her region of origin, along with the symbolism through which caste identity was understood in that region.

My conversation with Rudrakumar Nair also provided an interesting insight into how caste is known through place, and how this knowledge was utilized as a digital resource. Like many other young adults in the 1970s, Rudrakumar had left his home in this case to migrate more than a thousand miles north to New Delhi, the Indian capital. He had spent the rest of his adult life employed as a mid-level government servant in this city, where he and his wife had raised their only daughter.

Do you think that the caste details that people mentioned on the website are correct? Or do some people lie about that?

That also not sure, we can't say. Because some people will do something, we don't know what they're writing. Even they may not be able to know. They may not be familiar with the actual caste. (*I mean*) those who are feeding no, the information, they (*themselves*) may not be able to say what is it. "Vaniya Nair"!!! What is "Vaniya Nair"? They may be thinking that they are Nair also! ... "Vilakkitala Nair" - people may think that they are Nair. Actually, they are not **actual** Nair.

So when a situation like that arises how do you check?

That you have to check from the neighbourhood only. That is the only solution. You have to visit the (*neighbourhood in Kerala*). Actually whether they are Nair family or not.

But what if this person is settled in Delhi?

Then I'll tell you... There is the other way of checking - that is Certificates. Certificate is the correct information.

(Rudrakumar, Nair caste, late 50s, retired civil servant, New Delhi)

Rudrakumar was using the website to search for a groom for his daughter from his own caste, a relatively higher ranking caste called the Nairs. However, identifying a groom of appropriate caste status was a challenge for Rudrakumar due to the shifting contours of caste boundaries over time. The Nair caste is a large caste group from Kerala, which was previously divided into differently ranked sub-castes³. The Vilakkitala group, which had previously been located on the outer periphery of this broad and heterogenous caste group, is now included within the Nairs due to the efforts of the Nair caste association (NSS) and the government in the 20th century, although this inclusion of the Vilakkitalas was not uniformly accepted within the broader Nair caste group (Fuller 1975). While they are categorized as Nairs today, Vilakkitalas are also recognized as a group that has been socially disadvantaged within the caste system, and so are identified by the Central and state governments as Other Backward Classes⁴ (National Commission for Backward Classes 2010b, Kerala Public Service Commission 2013). This is in direct contrast to most other Nair sub-castes, which are categorized as “forward castes”⁵ today. A pressing dilemma for Rudrakumar was that on the matrimonial website, Vilakkitala families might identify themselves simply as part of the larger caste group, as Nairs. Yet, for his own family, which belonged to a relatively higher ranking sub-caste within the Nairs, marriage with a Vilakkitala Nair would be anathema.

³ These subcastes did not intermarry among themselves. Towards the middle of the 20th century, in the face of the expediency of caste politics, the Nair Service Society (NSS), the representative caste association, made an effort to consolidate all these sub-castes into a single cohesive caste, downplaying the difference between sub-castes (Fuller 1975).

⁴ Other Backward Classes (OBC) is a term used by the Indian State to identify social groups that have experienced disadvantages due to a combination of unfavorable caste status and economic factors.

⁵ This is a term used by the Indian nation-state to refer any group that was relatively privileged within the caste system and which currently does not qualify for affirmative action benefits from the government.

Rudrakumar had proposed that to correctly identify the caste status of any prospective groom, it is important to trace his family back to the ecology of castes within their geographical region of origin, or the “neighbourhood” in their native state of Kerala. For Rudrakumar, place held the key to the correct identification of caste, where self-identification could be corroborated with identification by others.

This conversation was also interesting because it points to another background variable - the way the State knows the caste of its citizens. Although, in Rudrakumar’s opinion, place held part of the answer, in this case correctly identifying the caste of a prospective groom was further complicated by migration to distant places such as Delhi and the seeming disconnect from physical places through the new media. It was striking that for him, the answer rested on how the government identified the groom and his family, through the documentation of caste status in a variety of “certificates”. Rudrakumar’s expectation was that place-based caste identification would correspond to identification through “the certificate”.

As I studied the caste-based use of matrimonial websites, I dwelt on the manner in which caste is known through place. I had started out thinking how some truth about caste identity on websites can be ascertained, or verified through a reference to places. However, the problem turned out to be more complex. My understanding of caste itself had improved- rather than thinking of castes as social groups fixed over time, I came to understand them as groups whose boundaries changed all the time, such as in the case of Nairs.

This led to a shift in the focus of my enquiry. Rather than searching for some essential truth about caste identity through place, I started to think about why it was important for groups or individuals to identify caste through place in the first instance? I became interested in understanding the shift in this association between caste identity and place over time. Might there be situations where place-based ways of identifying caste cease to matter for some social agents and institutions, but retain, or indeed, even regain significance for others? In thinking about this connection, I also mused about Rudrakumar's other solution - the "certificate"? Where is the "certificate", or identification by the State, located in these associations of caste identification and place? Did the manner in which caste was identified through place always correspond to identification by the State, or was it used to pose a challenge to how the State knows people as members of caste groups? This set of enquiries form the basis of this dissertation.

The central problem addressed in this dissertation is *how and why are caste identification and place linked to each other?* Within the literature on caste, the connection between identity and place has been acknowledged in a rather brief and tangential way. In some contexts, caste identity acknowledged regional origins through a reference in the caste name (Pant 1987). It has also been noted that castes with the same name can occupy different statuses in different geographic areas (Srinivas 1970, Raheja 1988, Appadurai 1986). Further, social distance between castes was often translated into rules about physical distance between members of

different castes (Ghurye 1969). Finally, spatial segregation by caste is an important reality in both rural (Miller 1954, Béteille 1965) and urban areas (Singh and Vithayathil 2012, Dupont 2004, Trivedi 1996, Gandhi 1983). While these studies are to be commended for establishing the initial basis for a study of spatiality as linked to caste identity, most tend to construct a stable rather than fluid relationship between them.

In contrast, this dissertation adopts a process-based view of both caste identity and place. Instead of focusing on how a fixed caste identity *is* connected to a fixed place, the focus in this dissertation is on understanding the *becoming* of both caste identity and place through their linkage with each other. In other words, it proceeds from the understanding that *at specific junctures, the constructs of caste identification and place become significant inputs into the collective creation of the other*. That is to say, this study is about how ideas regarding belongingness to one's caste are collectively constructed through reference to a specific place. Although the identification of "our" caste by self is by no means disconnected from the identification of "our" caste by individuals and groups from other castes, in this dissertation, the focus is on the former rather than the latter.

The course of the Dravidian movement provides an interesting instance of such a yoking together of these two constructs. In the 19th century, a combination of ideas in European academia, colonial ethnography and colonial administration merged caste and race with each other, equating the Brahmins and upper castes with Aryans of

“superior” blood and the Dravidians of “inferior” blood with the lowest ranking castes (Jaffrelot 2003: 151-152). In the next century, these ideas were drawn into one of the most famous caste-based agitations, the Dravidian movement. Here, a broad panoply of non-Brahmin castes⁶ in Madras Presidency spearheaded a campaign against the Brahmins, who in addition to their high-status ranking within the caste system, had also dominated privileged positions in academia and employment during the British colonial rule. Interestingly, a key assumption within this caste-based movement was one where caste was associated with geography. The assumption was that the Aryans, considered synonymous with the Brahmins⁷, were northern invaders, who had destroyed a once flourishing southern Dravidian civilization of non-Brahmin castes (Dirks 1997, Hardgrave 1979).

Within the Dravidian movement, this conflation of caste and region not only served in self-identification (as the “us” of a broad caste-based alliance challenging caste inequality), it also influenced the manner in which place itself was envisioned. This place-based assumption about caste became the basis of a demand for a separate Dravida Nadu/Dravidisthan, in conjunction with linguistic divides in India (Hardgrave 1979, Manor 2001, Widmalm 2006, Annamalai 2010). Envisioned as a separate land for Dravidian castes, Dravida Nadu was to be characterized by caste equality and serve as a haven for a Dravidian culture that had suffered under Aryan

⁶ As Hardgrave (1979: 35) explains it, the composition of the castes towards which the movement was oriented, shifted over time. In its initial stages, in the early 20th century, the movement was oriented primarily towards the prosperous middle-ranking, non-Brahmin, agricultural castes (such as the Vellala) under the leadership of EVR Naicker. In the following decades, under the leadership of CN Annadurai, the movement explicitly focused on the lower-ranking non-Brahmin castes such as the Nadar, Maravar and castes categorized as untouchables.

⁷ As Dirks (1997) explains, the Dravidian movement drew on certain key assumptions based on the European conflation of race and caste, such as the equation of Brahmins and Brahminism with Aryans and Aryanism.

hegemony (Barnett 1976: 93). The demand for a separate Dravida Nadu was a significant force that provided a strong impetus to the Dravidian movement. At its heights, it took the form of a demand for secession from the union of India itself (Manor 2001). However, over time, the demand for a separate Dravida Nadu was gradually sidelined within the movement, and it was eventually dropped by the mid-1960s (Hardgrave 1979, Manor 2001, Widmalm 2006).

As illustrated in this historical example, narratives regarding place can emerge as a powerful means for constructing the self-identity of caste groups. In addition, caste identification itself can play a crucial role in shaping place, both in terms of boundaries, as well the right of various social groups to access places. For instance, the role played by caste communities in shaping contemporary regional politics, specifically in the demand for creation of new states such as Telangana and Bundelkhand (Gudavarthy 2012: 61), can also be understood as testament to the powerful outcomes of connecting place and caste identification. Gudavarthy (2012: 61) cites the instance of the contemporary agitation for the creation of a new state of Telangana from contemporary Andhra Pradesh. The OBCs have been at the vanguard in this agitation, which in its most recent phase, succeeded in bringing the state to a standstill on multiple occasions since 2009. Apart from demanding access to economic resources, through the agitation for a separate Telangana these castes are also agitating for the social recognition of their culture and cultural symbols.

Consequently, there is much to be learned from studying how and why these two constructs are associated with each other. It is noteworthy that in the above-

mentioned instances, the cultural evaluation of the castes in question, and of their rituals and practices, play a key role in the connection between these two constructs. Further, many of these agitations have also involved a conversation with the State, as well as about how it identifies the caste(s) in question.

In this dissertation, the connection of caste identification to place is studied through an ethnographic account of a digital caste-based group, which is referred to using the pseudonym, *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Through its name and conversations, this digital group seeks to associate its collective caste identity, Thiyya, with the region of Malabar. The choice of a digital group to study the association between caste identification and place might be considered odd. After all, a very small percentage of India's population has access to the new media, and so, a digital group is by no means representative of the identity of an entire caste. On the other hand, it is precisely because of its non-representativeness that a digital group could be an appropriate choice, because it highlights the manner in which a specific self-identification is constructed around caste in the context of the various interests and experiences of the members of a group, through many contestations within it. Further, as scholars of caste such as Béteille (1997) have emphasized, castes are increasingly marked by class distinctions within themselves, a consideration that is highlighted through the choice of a digital group.

The rest of this chapter is divided into 5 sections. The first section provides an introduction to caste as a system. Section 2 contains a discussion of the State-based

identification of castes in the colonial and post-colonial periods, as well as some of the implications of such identification. The caste-based use of communication technologies, particularly the new media, is discussed in section 3. A description of the Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar is provided in Section 4. Section 5 contains a discussion about the region of Malabar and the Thiyya caste.

Caste as a System

Caste is understood as a system of hierarchical differentiation involving multiple social groups, or castes. There is considerable debate regarding the basic organizing principle for caste as a system. While some consider the relative purity and pollution of the hereditary occupations associated with these social groups as the key [Dumont (1966) 1970], others consider inter-caste endogamy as the key (Gupta 2005) to the organization of caste. In its current form, inter-caste differentiation is not adequately explained by either principle alone.

While much of his analysis has been soundly critiqued, it is possible to start with Louis Dumont's argument that caste is a system where differentiation is based on the relative opposition between what is considered pure and what is considered impure (castes, activities, food etc). In particular, it explains the textual fourfold division of castes, referred to as the *varna* classification, recorded in *Purusa Sukta* legend in the *Rg Veda*. As per the legend, the four broad categories of castes are differentially ranked since they originated from different ritually pure or impure parts of the

Supreme Being, *Purusa*. The Brahmins, who head the hierarchy, emerged from the mouth; the Kshatriyas emerge from his arms; the Vaishyas from his thighs; and the Shudras who emerged from the feet were placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. Empirically, there are multiple castes located in each of these four broad *varna* categories. However, in different regions the same caste may be accorded a varying rank. In addition, this fourfold division does not exhaust all castes. For instance, the castes that experienced untouchability were placed outside this fourfold classification. Further, the fourfold division of caste was not uniformly found in all parts of India - in some areas one or more of the *varnas* did not exist. Providing an essentialist explanation, [Dumont (1966) 1970] argued that in its essential form, caste was a system marked by interdependence between these different caste groups.

It is important to note that Dumont's analysis primarily relies on Hindu religious texts, which may differ considerably from the manner in which castes are organized on the ground. It also does not take into account the manner in which different castes locate themselves hierarchically, something that Dipankar Gupta (2000) has drawn attention to by suggesting that we think of the existence of multiple caste hierarchies. Gupta's field work demonstrates that most castes, even those that are ranked low as per the textual hierarchy, often have a different, contradictory view of what the hierarchy is and where they are placed on this hierarchy. Apart from its contribution to the phenomenological approach to caste (Khare 1984, Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma 1994, Gorringe and Rafanell 2007), and the insight into varied forms of resistance to caste oppression, this work begs the question of how the legitimation of

a certain hierarchy, and placement of castes within it, is achieved. In other words, granted that multiple caste hierarchies exist, it is important to consider that not all of these hierarchies and placements gain equal legitimacy. This indicates that we need to study the complex processes through which legitimation and delegitimation of any hierarchical ordering of castes takes place, which in today's context involve the State as well as the mobilization of multiple interest groups within a caste.

A particularly relevant critique of Dumont's framework is that it appears to envision some true, ahistorical form of caste, where political aspects were always secondary to the system's religious aspects. Other scholars (Appadurai 1986, Berreman 1992, Inden 1986), particularly historians of caste (Bayly 1999, Dirks 2001), are uncomfortable with this interpretation and they have demonstrated the significance of political considerations in the organization of and mobility within the caste system. In other words, rather than assuming that caste was a system that has remained unchanged over the course of time, irrespective of the historical and political circumstances, we need to consider that caste as we know it today is the product of different mutations, including that of colonial intervention and knowledge production (Inden 1986, Pant 1987, Appadurai 1996, Jaiswal 1997, Bayly 1999, Dirks 2001).

In the post-independence context, scholars have suggested the progressive weakening, and perhaps even the end, of caste as a system. For instance, MN Srinivas (2003) argued that caste as a system of rural economic mode of production, where interdependent castes were engaged in patron-client relationships, was on the decline

even in rural India. Yet, at the same time he reiterates that such an end does not indicate that castes as groups and identities no longer have relevance - indeed they continue to be strong. While caste as a system has changed in terms of interdependence of caste groups⁸, caste as identity has become significant for mobilization to reach different types of political, social and economic resources.

One of the most profound changes in caste as a system was the emergence of classificatory schemes developed by governments during the colonial and post-colonial eras in enumerative projects (like the counting of caste in the Census) and in an effort to implement affirmative action schemes. Together, they led to a shift on the manner in which caste identity and place were related. In addition to the existence of the broader, textual four *varna* classification, caste identity was known and recognized through an intricate connection with the local regional contexts (Srinivas 1970, Pant 1987, Appadurai 1996, Jaiswal 1997). These contexts were important in the day-to-day life of the members of a caste, since physical mobility and governance were tied to specific and relatively small geographical units (Miller 1954). Identification of caste by the State in colonial and post-colonial periods created broader regional contexts (spanning the entire state or nation) in which caste identity was known. Further, they also influenced the self-mobilization of castes. Caste organizations started to engage in multiple dialogues with the State for recognition under varying categories at different times. The following section provides an

⁸ An argument that caste as a system has changed may also overlook the persistence of the structural and institutional caste inequality in India. Further, the dominant hierarchy based on the fourfold *varna* categorization continues to organize social life. For instance, even in university dining halls in metropolitan India, the introduction of beef, a food considered polluting as per this hierarchy, has been violently opposed by the Hindu Right.

introduction to the identification of caste by the State in colonial and post-colonial periods, as well as some of its implications in terms of politics and caste-based mobilization.

Identification of Caste and the State in the Colonial and Postcolonial Eras

This section provides a background on the identification of caste by the State, as well as its relationship to self-identification through mobilization around caste. Sudipto Kaviraj (1997) traces contemporary caste mobilization to the governing practices of the British colonial state which continued to add a dynamism to politics in India after 1947. Kaviraj argues that the colonial state initiated a logic of enumeration by first counting colonial subjects in terms of social groups such as castes, and then predicating social policy on the numerical strength of these groups. He explains that while previously social categories such as castes were used to determine who the other person was and the rules of interacting with them, following colonial administrative practices such as the census, these categories were used to map social groups in terms of strength of numbers and location.

Kaviraj also explains that in response to such enumeration, caste groups themselves started to mobilize around collective identities. For instance, as historical studies of colonial India demonstrate, during colonial censuses, caste associations mobilized their members to supply specific responses regarding their own caste and caste status in order to attain upward social mobility. Indeed, while discussing the instance of the

Mahtons from Jalandher who petitioned the District Census Officer in 1911 to be recorded as Rajputs in the census, Bernard Cohn (1987 : 249) even suggests that the formation of caste associations may well have been influenced by an interest in how the caste was being enumerated in the census.

Appadurai (1996) argues that while the counting of caste in the census was discontinued in 1931⁹, the logic of enumeration continued to influence Indian politics even after independence. Caste was an important, if somewhat implicit and unacknowledged, element of mobilization in Indian democracy from its early days (Kothari and Maru 1965, Rudolph and Rudolph 1967). Caste-based strategies and alliances played an influential role in voting behavior. However, the dominant discourse in Indian politics remained tied to that of western liberalism in the initial decades after independence from British rule in 1947. As Kaviraj (1997: 334) explains, in this early period, politicians, who hailed overwhelmingly from the upper castes, were likely to represent themselves as liberal individuals focused on promoting social justice, rather than members of a particular caste. The assumption was that the newly independent nation should focus on a national identity rather than on seemingly divisive issues of caste, and that by promoting a broad agenda of social justice, problems related to caste would also be automatically addressed (Jaffrelot 2006: 178-9). However, within a decade of Independence, politicians, particularly from the middle-caste and lower-caste groups tried to bring caste oppression and interests directly into the dominant discourse (Kaviraj 1997). This shift was prompted

⁹ It was only after a gap of 80 years that the enumeration of caste in the Indian census was recently revived in 2011. This enumeration has been the subject of fierce debates. John and Deshpande (2010) provide a good summary of the key arguments for and against the enumeration of caste in the census.

by the persistence of caste oppression, as well as the failure of social justice programs and the Left-based movements to address issues related to caste (Kothari 1994).

The affirmative action framework in India has also had a key influence in shaping contemporary caste relations. Historically, affirmative action policies in India have primarily taken the form of the reservation of positions in employment and education through the creation of specific quotas for castes indicated under the rather broad term of “backward classes”. As noted by Galanter (1978), from its earliest days, the term “backward classes” has been used by various governments, both in the colonial and post-colonial periods, to indicate a varying collection of castes. In some cases, the term was used to refer to all castes other than non-Brahmins. At other times, it was used to designate a combination of Shudra castes as castes who experienced by untouchability. Finally, it was also used to specifically designate only those castes that experienced untouchability, who had previously been referred to as “depressed classes”¹⁰ and today have adopted the self-referential term Dalits. The flexibility in the lay interpretation of the term “backward classes” arises partly from the fact that all these interpretations were often used coterminously by different governmental units at any point in time.

Affirmative action policies were first implemented in India in the late nineteenth century. This was the colonial period, where the administration of India was divided between the colonial empire, referred to as British India, and nearly 600 states

¹⁰ (Jaffrelot 2006: 174-5) notes that up until the 1930s the term “depressed classes” was used officially to denote castes that experienced untouchability. After 1935, they were renamed “Scheduled Castes”. This terminology was adopted in the constitution of independent India after 1947.

administered by indigenous rulers, referred to as Princely States. Scholars (Das 2000, Jaffrelot 2005) point out that despite the popular assumption that affirmative action policies were first initiated in British India, it was in fact Princely States such as Mysore, Baroda and Kolhapur that pioneered these initiatives. Taking the case of the Princely State of Kolhapur, Jaffrelot (2005) explains that this pioneering impetus came from the fact that the ruler of the state, Shahju Maharaj, was from a Shudra farming caste. In order to address the disproportionate representation of Brahmins in the state's administrative structure, Shahju Maharaj initiated an affirmative quota policy, and half of the vacant seats were reserved for backward classes by 1902. Jaffrelot (2005) also notes that it was the southern Princely State of Mysore that implemented the most extensive affirmative action policies. The program was started in 1920 when Mysore was a princely state, and continued after independence until 1959, at which point 59 per cent of civil service jobs were set aside for backward classes.

In British India, efforts were made to apply affirmative action policies in education, electoral politics, and employment in the civil administration. In 1892, the British established special schools for castes that experienced untouchability since they could not access other schools due to rejection by parents and teachers. They also established scholarships for students from these castes (Jaffrelot 2006). In 1919, the British colonial government created caste quotas on seats in the Bombay and Madras legislative councils (Jaffrelot 2005). In 1932, the British colonial administration created a Communal Award, whereby separate electorates would be created for

minority communities. This included the creation of a separate electorate for the depressed classes, where voters from castes that experienced untouchability would elect their own representatives. However, this Award was ultimately rejected by mainstream Indian nationalists led by Gandhi in the Poona Pact of 1935 (Das 2000, Jaffrelot 2006). Consequently, instead of a separate electorate limited to members of depressed classes, a certain number of constituencies were reserved for untouchable candidates, where all Hindu voters irrespective of their caste would have to choose between different candidates from the depressed classes (Jaffrelot 2006). Employment quotas for the depressed classes were instituted by the British in 1934 in the civil services, and these were raised from 8.5 % to 14.6% in 1946 (Jaffrelot 2006).

After India gained independence in 1947, affirmative action policies for the erstwhile depressed classes (who were now renamed Scheduled Castes) were continued in electoral politics, education and employment, and were also extended to tribal populations (identified as Scheduled Tribes) (Jaffrelot 2006). When the Constitution of India was drawn up in 1950, specific provisions for affirmative action were drawn up for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). At the national level, the Constitution has created quotas of 15% and 7.5% for SCs and STs respectively, in education and employment in public institutions. These figures are based roughly on the proportion of these castes and tribes in the Indian population. Further, at the state levels, additional reservations are in place. In electoral politics, at the national parliament (Lok Sabha) as well as state legislature, the reservation of certain constituencies for candidates from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes continues.

Currently, each voter in a reserved constituency chooses between candidates from the relevant caste group. At the state level, the reservation of legislative seats for SCs and STs is based on the proportion of their population in each state. The reservation of constituencies is rotated on a periodic basis.

While the constitution also mentions a third category, the Other Backward Classes (OBC), the criteria for their identification was not linked as clearly to caste or tribe status as the other two categories. Dudley-Jenkins (2003) identifies the OBCs as referring to economically and socially depressed castes or communities, such as castes that are low ranking, but not considered untouchable, and other similarly located non-Hindu communities. Reservations for the OBCs were not as clearly defined in the Constitution. As compared to affirmative action policies for the SCs and STs, they have attracted much more upper-caste resistance (Jaffrelot 2006, Deshpande and Yadav 2006).

While many states had long implemented reservation quotas for OBCs, at the central level, these reservations were adopted recently and much more contentiously (Dudley-Jenkins 2003). Following the constitutional decree, Backward Classes Commissions were set up twice. The first commission recommended in 1953 that the caste be taken as the criteria for identifying backwardness, and made suggestions for quotas accordingly. These recommendations were rejected. The second commission, headed by BP Mandal in 1978, bore in mind the legal stipulations specified by the Supreme Court in the case of *Balaji vs the State of Mysore* (1963), that the quota total

must be kept under 50%, and suggested a quota of 27% for OBCs. In the face of much violent resentment from the upper-castes, this suggestion was adopted by the VP Singh government in 1990. In 1990s, the Supreme Court validated caste as a legitimate, and indeed the sole, criterion for determining OBC status. Jaffrelot (2006: 186) also notes a shift in the Supreme Court's stance in the Balaji decision in the 1990s, when it ruled that the 50% ceiling for quotas was no longer applicable. Consequently, states began to increase the OBC quota level.

Currently there exists a two-tier system for OBC quotas - at the national level and the state level. The list of castes identified as OBCs at the national level is determined by the National Backward Classes commission. The national OBC quota is capped at 27%, and its implementation is subject to an income limitation. Known as the "creamy layer limitation", it stipulates that job and employment reservations cannot be availed of by individuals whose annual family income exceeds a certain limit. While the initial limit was determined at an annual income of Rs 100,000 (Gudavarthy 2012), it was modified to Rs 600,000 per annum in June 2013¹¹. Many states have separate OBC lists, and placement of castes within these lists is determined by the respective state backward classes commissions (Dudley-Jenkins 2003). There are significant differences in the national and state OBC lists. Consequently a caste that features on the national OBC list, may not be recognized as an OBC in some states, or certain regions of specific states.

¹¹ The Rupee (Rs) is the currency of India. The exchange rate between the rupee and the dollar has tended to fluctuate within the range of Rs 40/1 dollar and Rs 60/1 dollar over the past 2 decades.

Since this dissertation focuses on a digital caste-based group, the following section provides an introduction to the caste-based use of the new media.

Caste-based use of the New Media

Despite predictions to the contrary¹², technological innovations ranging from British steam to the introduction of communication technologies such as the telegraph and the printing press have been utilized by castes, particularly caste associations, to organize on a scale beyond their local spatial boundaries and to reach caste members who have moved to cities across India. Not surprisingly, the new media is also being used extensively with caste-based interests in mind.

By extensive usage, the reference here is to the multiple forms of caste-based usage of the new media. It does not imply, however, that all members of all castes have universal access to the new media. To begin with, in India, access to the new media is constrained through lack of physical infrastructure such as electricity, computers, and other telecommunications components. The International Telecommunications Union, a UN body that monitors new media usage, estimates that in 2011, only 10.7% of the Indian population had Internet access¹³. Although actual data on caste-based usage of the new media is likely to include a larger population of users when diasporic Indian populations are taken into account, this figure does make it clear that many people

¹² In a much cited essay on imperialism in India, published in 1853, Karl Marx (1978: 662) famously predicted “Modern industry, resulting from the railway-system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labour, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power.”

¹³ Data accessed from the website of the International Telecommunication Union: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

who have an interest in caste do not have access to the new media. Since caste and class intersect in powerful ways, and this influences access to scarce resources such as the new media, it is not unusual to see more representation for higher ranking caste groups than lower ranking caste groups in new media usage. Consequently, the forms in which caste is manifested digitally cannot, by any means, be understood as representative or a mirror image of physical caste relations and caste interests.

Different forms of the new media are being utilized for caste-based representation and mobilization, as well as to extend physical caste-based debates. The caste-based use of the new media takes both individual and collective forms. Many caste associations have created websites as a complement to their physical activities¹⁴. Websites dedicated to particular castes and their histories and practices have also been set up by collectivities of people who may not belong to specific physical caste associations, often in an effort to connect with others from the same caste who are located across large distances¹⁵. These conversations are continued through webpages (such as for instance Wikipedia), as well as multiple blogposts and digital forums. Matrimonial websites, both caste-specific sites as well as general matrimonial websites which provide caste filters, have also provided an important way in which caste relations through marriage can be sustained across large distances. Of late, the new media has been used by individuals to connect to a collectivity belonging to the same caste

¹⁴ The following link connects to the website of the caste organization of the Nair caste, the Nair Service Society: <http://www.nss.org.in/>

¹⁵ For instance, the following is the link for a website dedicated to the broad caste category of Brahmins from Tamil Nadu: <http://www.tamilbrahmins.com/>

through social networking sites such as Orkut.com, Twitter.com, facebook.com and Meerkat.com.

It is only in the past decade that a handful of academic publications have begun to engage with the multiple caste-based usages of the new media (Chopra 2006, Sharma 2008, Thirumal 2008, Langran 2011, Thirumal and Tartakov 2011). While addressing a significant lacuna, most of these studies also reflect some of the limitations of the initial literature on the new media. For instance, most of these studies create the impression of a separate “online” sphere of the Internet, seemingly distinct from physical caste activity. Further, they tend to address the new media solely from the perspective of the theorist. In the rare instance when the voice of the users is included, analysis is focused on a content analysis of the digital text generated. In contrast, in this study, data generation is not limited to digital text. In this study, attention is focused on the voice of the users through personal interviews which provide a richer analysis of their caste-based usage of the new media. Rather than limiting itself to studying only what people do online, this study also examines what significance people attach to online activities and posts. However, in this study, there are no pretensions about how the representation of the users’ voices is not influenced by the perspective of the scholar¹⁶. The following section provides an introduction to the digital group in question.

¹⁶ I seek to avoid any illusion that the current study is value-free or devoid of subjective influences from the researcher. Consequently, the study does not labour under the assumption that the results presented in this ethnography are the result of what H.F. Wolcott refers to as “immaculate perception” (1994: 13). In other words, it recognizes that the researcher’s subjectivity actively shapes the study in selective ways - even acts which seem to present the seemingly real and unedited voice of respondents (for example, selecting and presenting quotes from them) involves interpretation on the part of the researcher. However, through combining different sources of data

The Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar

This dissertation draws from an ethnographic study of a digital group, identified here by the pseudonym, *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The research was undertaken between August 2012 and October 2013, through observation of the public discussions in the group, combined with in-depth personal interviews with a smaller sample of members. This section provides an introduction to the digital platform used by the group, and structure and history of the group itself.

Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar was created on an international social networking site, which will be identified here through the pseudonym, Meerkat.com. Users of this social networking site register by creating a user profile, which enables them to establish contact with other registered members. Meerkat.com is very popular with new media users within India, and with Indian diaspora located in locations such as the Middle East, Australia, Europe and USA¹⁷. Apart from creating individual profiles, Meerkat.com is also designed to provide registered users with the ability to create and join digital groups. In any Meerkat.com group, a large number of members can engage in multiple public conversations simultaneously. These conversations can

(such as participant observation and interviews), the effort has been to focus on certain themes or interpretations that might be more significant for the group members themselves.

¹⁷ While social networking sites potentially provide access to communicate with individuals across international borders, their use often varies by physical location. For instance, most social networking sites are characterized by a design where a registered individual's ability to interact with others depends, in part, on whether known others are registered as members who would be willing to share access to their social information. Consequently, digital networks very often reflect physical social networks such as relatives, friends, neighbours (Hampton and Wellman 2003, Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield 2006). Further, digital infrastructure is subject to regulatory action by national governments, and hence access to websites varies by the physical location of the user. For instance, a website such as Facebook which is accessible in the USA cannot be accessed in China due to the latter country's digital surveillance policies.

occur through the sharing of different types of documents - group members can upload (and discuss) text messages, text documents, photographs and videos, which appear on a public digital interface. These uploads are visible to all members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* in a fairly chronological order. All members of a particular Meerkat.com group can respond to each upload on that group, and, in turn, others can respond to any comment made regarding an upload. Just how public these conversations are, depends on the privacy-related settings of the digital group. The conversations in *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* are visible only to members who are part of this particular digital group. Other registered members of Meerkat.com can only see the description of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* and a list of the people who have joined this particular group.

Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar was created in January 2012 by Murali, a middle-aged man who lives in the south Indian city of Kannur. From the very outset, through the common introduction visible to all registered Meerkat.com members, the group has described itself as a group of Thiyyas from Malabar who are striving to unite the Thiyya caste community. During discussions, the founder and early members shared that they were motivated to create this Meerkat.com group because they were looking for a forum where they could discuss the uniqueness of the Thiyyas as a caste. In particular, they were striving to establish a Thiyya identity that was separate from the Ezhavas, a caste that the former is often considered to be synonymous with. They had previously encountered considerable resistance to this idea, from other Thiyyas, Ezhavas and others in various physical forums, as well as on various digital forums

such as on Wikipedia, and similar caste-based groups on social networking sites such as Meerkat.com, Orkut.com and facebook.com. Finally, *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was created on Meerkat.com, where the idea was to create a group comprised of Thiyyas who would discuss what was unique about this caste, and its future as such a unique caste. However, not everyone was equally convinced of the essential difference between the Thiyyas and the Ezhavas. Occasionally members, particularly new additions, would bring up issues which discussed what Thiyyas and Ezhavas shared with each other, which always led to intense and often vicious debates on the group. After one such debate on the group in January 2013, the group's digital description was modified to specifically mention that Ezhavas were not welcome in this group.

Access to *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is moderated by a small set of people, referred to on the group as the "admins". With the exception of Murali, the composition of the admins has varied over time. During the period that the group was under observation, the admins of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* numbered between 3 and 11 people. So far all admins have been male¹⁸, a reflection of the predominantly male composition of the group itself. Initially, the admins were primarily people who were physically located within India. However, since December 2012, a conscious effort has been made to appoint admins from the diaspora. Both the admins and non-admin members can add other Meerkat.com users to the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* group. However, admins do exercise power over membership of the group. They try to monitor the

¹⁸ In November 2012, the group had considered including a female admin. Murali shared that he thought including a female admin would attract more female members and also elicit greater participation among women on the group. However, so far, no female admins have been appointed on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

addition of new members, particularly watching to weed out anyone who they consider as an Ezhava or an Ezhava sympathizer. Those registered members of Meerkat.com, who want to join *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, but do not have any acquaintances in the group, apply for membership, after which they need to be approved and added by admins. Further, only admins have the power to remove members from the group. While both admins and ordinary members of the group can upload text, photographs and videos to the public interface of the group, only the former have the power to delete any public thread of conversations visible in the digital interface of the group.

At the start of the study, in August 2012, the group consisted of less than 500 members. Since then, this number has expanded exponentially, fuelled by a sustained membership drive undertaken by the admins of the group. They encouraged members of the group to add as many Thiyya relatives and acquaintances they knew on Meerkat.com to the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. By June 2013, this number had climbed to more than 3500 members. While these are large numbers of people, the members themselves make a distinction between mere members and “active” members on the group. They bemoan the fact that despite such large numbers, there exist only around 100 “active” members, referring to those who contribute regularly to the public conversations on the group either by initiating them, or by uploading responses to ongoing conversations.

On the one hand, this complaint may be used to understand that some members only looked up the conversation on the group at the time that they were added there. This rather passive membership may be attributed, in part, to the very manner in which members are added to the group. Some members reported that even though they did not solicit membership in the group, they found themselves added to it by relatives or common acquaintances, and this was communicated to them through an electronic notification on Meerkat.com. Although initially they were not very interested in being part of the group, they did not want to offend these acquaintances and so did not remove themselves from the group. At the same time, such members did not feel a compulsion to check on the conversations on the group, or participate in any other way. Others only periodically checked the conversation that was happening on the group. Indeed, even those labelled “active” members, tended to have periods of intense activity in, as well as prolonged absence from, the conversations on the group.

On the other hand, this distinction between mere members and “active” members tends to obscure the different ways in which people participate in digital groups. For instance, some members did not participate in discussions, but regularly uploaded photographs and videos. Further, during the study, it emerged that there were other members who although they had not uploaded a single text message or document, regularly read the conversation on the group. Similarly other members, who may be considered to be not active, participated by adding new members to the group at regular intervals.

The members of the group are physically located in many different places. Many members are located in North Kerala, mostly in urban centres such as Kannur and Kozhikode, but also in semi-urban and rural locations. Within India, members are also located outside the state of Kerala, in urban centres such as Bangalore, Pune, Chennai, Pondicherry and New Delhi. The group also has a significant number of diasporic members. Outside India, many members are located in different countries in Middle-East Asia, which has been a popular destination for migration from the state of Kerala since the 1960s. A smaller number of the diasporic members are located in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia.

When the study started in 2012, the admins were either functionaries, registered members, or closely associated with a relatively new, physical, caste organization called the Thiyya Mahasabha (TMS), based in northern Kerala. During 2013, a breakaway group called the Malabar Thiyya Mahasabha (MTMS), centered in Kannur, was formed and all of the admins of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were either senior functionaries in the MTMS, or were aligned with it. Similarly, most of the vocal and influential members in *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were either officially affiliated with one or both of these caste associations, or were favorably considering joining them. Since both TMS and MTMS were at a relatively early stage of formation, these admins and influential members considered the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* as a digital platform that could provide significant support to these caste associations.

One of the key means through which the Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar identifies being a Thiyya is by associating Thiyyaness with the region of Malabar. The final section of this chapter describes this region and the caste.

Malabar and the Thiyyas

This section provides an introduction to Malabar, and the Thiyyas as a caste in this region. This is a purposive introduction that is aimed to facilitate an understanding of themes that are commonly discussed in the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. This section includes a discussion of the ritual status of the Thiyyas, their political affiliations, and their historical interaction with other social groups in Malabar. In addition, it provides details about the varying identification of the Thiyyas in affirmative action policies by the state. The introduction to these aspects is accompanied by a brief description about how they are approached in the dominant public narrative of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

The term Malabar, as used by members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, refers to an erstwhile revenue district located in the Madras Presidency of British India. Prior to its conquest by the British, Malabar was already well established on world trading routes. By the 1300s, Malabar was an important part of the thriving medieval trade in the Indian Ocean, with the port of Calicut serving as a point of intersection for Arab and Chinese trade (Das Gupta 1967, Ilias 2007). Later, Calicut and other parts of Malabar such as Cannanore (present day Kannur) also served as a crucial part of trade

with the Dutch and Portuguese at the start of the colonial era in India (Das Gupta 1967). From the late 1500s to mid-1700s, administration of the region was divided between two indigenous rulers, the Kolathiri Rajas (of Kolathunadu) and Zamorins (of Calicut) (Dale 1980: 12), areas that came under the overlordship of Kingdom of Mysore during the late 1700s (Das Gupta 1967). Malabar was conquered by the British in 1792 through the defeat of the Mysorean ruler, Tipu Sultan. Under the British, the district of Malabar was further subdivided into 9 administrative units (or *taluks*) - Chirakkal, Kottayam, Kurumbranad, Wynad, Calicut, Ernad, Walluvanad, Palghat, and Ponnani. A map of Malabar from this period (1909) has been included as Appendix 5a.

After Indian independence in 1947, Malabar continued to exist as part of the Madras Presidency until the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956. As part of this reorganization, the Malayalam speaking regions of Malabar, the state of Travancore-Cochin¹⁹, and present-day Kasaragod were combined to create the present day state of Kerala in South India (Joseph 1997). Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of Travancore-Cochin, was retained as the capital of the new state and is located at the extreme southern end of Kerala. A map of present day Kerala has been included as Appendix 5b.

In terms of current political geography, Malabar has been reorganized to form the northern regions of Kerala. Malabar was reorganized to create 4 whole districts

¹⁹ Travancore-Cochin (Malayalam name - ThiruKochi) was created through the combination of the two Princely states of Travancore and Cochin. This state was created at the time of Indian independence in 1947 and lasted until 1956 when it was included within the new state of Kerala.

within the present-day Kerala, namely Kannur, Mallappuram, Wayanad, Kozhikode. In addition, some parts of Malabar district were included within the current day districts of Palakkad and Thrissur. Although the present day district of Kasaragod was not part of the British Malabar district, most members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* tend to include this area when referring to Malabar²⁰.

The Thiyyas form the largest caste group in Malabar (Miller 1954). When analyzing the status of Thiyyas as a caste in Malabar, we can consider three inter-related aspects - control over economic resources, ritual status and legislative power in an area. Ideally each caste should be considered as a social group that is constantly in formation - the component groups of a caste vary in terms of class and power, and the social boundaries of a caste are constantly drawn and redrawn in context of time and specific events. With this caution in mind, it should be mentioned that what follows is a basic introduction to the Thiyyas in Malabar.

The pre-British history of the Thiyyas (prior to 1792) is not very well catalogued in written accounts. Some insight can be gained by focusing on the centuries immediately preceding British annexation (1600s and 1700s). The caste has been mentioned by European travelers who visited Malabar when it was indigenously administered by the Kolathiri Rajas and the Zamorins, such as Duarte Barbosa (a Portuguese traveler who visited Malabar in the early 1500s) and Francois Pyrard (a French traveler who visited Malabar between 1600 and 1611). They observed that the

²⁰ Under the British, the present day district of Kasaragod, was part of the South Canara district, rather than the Malabar district within the Madras Presidency (Joseph 1997: 268).

Thiyyas were subject to the rules of pollution in this period. The members of the caste were engaged in a variety of occupations such as working in palm groves, quarrying, agricultural labour and military service (Logan 1989, Dale 1980, Mailaparambil 2012). Indeed, Mailaparambil (2012: 20) notes that in Francis Buchanan's 1799 survey, conducted immediately after British annexation, it has been observed that the Thiyyas had gradually established a strong position in Kolathunadu by the eighteenth century. In the discussion that follows, we will focus primarily on the caste status of the Thiyyas during the British colonial and post-colonial period.

Around the British colonial era, the ritual caste hierarchy within the region of Malabar was roughly as follows: the top tier was comprised of the highest ranking Nambuthiri Brahmins, followed by the Nair caste. The middle tier consisted of the Muslims and the Thiyyas, who were considered to be a polluting caste. The bottom tier consisted of other castes that were considered polluting such as the Cherumas and Pulayas, as well as local tribes. This ritual hierarchy roughly corresponded to the hierarchical access to economic resources and power, although regional variations existed within Malabar.

The Nambuthiri Brahmins, or the priestly caste, occupied the highest ritual status.

Large joint families from this caste owned²¹ extensive tracts of land and occupied

²¹ Ownership of land in Malabar was complex since land was communally owned and most castes had a certain type of claim to it. We can find a succinct explanation in Radhakrishnan (1980: 2095-6) who reports that, "Since virtually all groups had an interest in land, all of them, with the exception of the Nambutiris and the artisans, qualify themselves to be considered peasants. While the Nambutiris were the real janmis, the artisans were also some sort of janmis, but who depended for their livelihood mostly on their crafts. This large class (page break) of peasantry was in turn organised into a hierarchy in which Nayars were at the top, Tiyyas and Muslims in the middle, with the Harijans at the bottom, forming as they did a large group of landless agricultural labourers or

landlord, or *jenmi* status (Radhakrishnan 1980). The Nambuthiris occupied a much higher rank than the Thiyyas, and were not very numerous in north Malabar as compared to the southern part of the region (Gough 1952). The ranking of the Thiyyas as compared to the Nair warrior caste, who were predominantly landlords and upper-level agricultural tenants in the region, is more complicated. The academic consensus has been that the Thiyyas occupied a lower rank than the Nairs in terms of ritual status (Karat 1973, Dhanagare 1977, Hardgrave Jr 1977, Radhakrishnan 1980 , Menon 1994) and that they were governed under the overlordship of Nair *tharavadus*²² (Miller 1954, Menon 1994). Others note the existence of a regional variation. They have pointed out that in some pockets in Malabar such as the northern regions of erstwhile Chirakkal and Kottayam *taluks*²³, large Thiyya *tharavadus* also occupied landlord or *jenmi* status (Menon 1994, Kodoth 2001). Anthropologist Adrian Mayer (1952), who observed Malabar around the time of the Indian independence, notes that Thiyya *jenmis* existed in both the north and south of this region. At this point, the Thiyyas were important *jenmis* in the Palghat taluk of South Malabar, whereas in North Malabar they were smaller *jenmis* (Mayer 1952: 96-97).

It is important to note here that a regional variation is also observed in the mode of kinship between the Thiyyas of North Malabar and South Malabar, who were

serfs.” When the British conquered Malabar they tried to translate this ownership structure into a legal framework based on individual ownership as understood in the West, particularly for taxation purposes. Many scholars have commented on the turmoil and disenfranchisement created by such a translation and it is considered to be one among many factor that led to events such as the Mappilla Rebellion (Karat 1973, Karat 1976, Karat 1977, Dhanagare 1977, Hardgrave Jr 1977, Radhakrishnan 1980 , Menon 1994, Kabir 1997) and the rise of communism (Karat 1973, Karat 1976, Karat 1977, Radhakrishnan 1980 , Menon 1994, Kabir 1997) in this area.

²² Abraham (2006: 149) explains that the Malayalam word *Tharavadu* was used to refer to a matrilineal joint family. In contemporary usage the word is used to refer to a joint family household which is not necessarily matrilineal. All Nairs, and a certain section of the Thiyyas, followed matrilineal kinship.

²³ Chirakkal Taluk refers to a British census town located 7 kilometers from present day Kannur City. The Kottayam Taluk refers to present day Thalassery.

separated by the Korapuzha river. Until 1975²⁴ Thiyyas in North Malabar were characterized by matrilineal kinship, or *marumkathayyam*, while those in the South of Malabar tended to follow patrilineal kinship, or *makkathayyam*. For a long time, these two groups tended not to intermarry. During the period of observation, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was dominated by Thiyyas from the Northern part of Malabar, particularly those originating from the present-day district of Kannur, in terms of numbers of members, admins and influential members.

In terms of ritual status, Thiyyas were considered to be a polluting caste (Radhakrishnan 1980, Menon 1994, Abraham 2010). The Thiyyas occupied the highest rank among the polluting castes such as the Cherumas and the Pulayas and exerted administrative control over them - either as landlords or as intermediaries in areas where a Nair tharavadu was dominant (Miller 1954, Menon 1994). Although situated in a position of power over other polluting castes, the Thiyyas themselves experienced considerable disadvantages through restrictions regarding untouchability and unapproachability (Abraham 2010: 116). One of the ways we can understand this is by considering the Thiyyas differential access to two types of places of worship - the temple (*kshetrams*) and shrines (*kavus*) (Menon 1994: 41 - 61). While the Nairs and Nambuthiris could approach and worship at the *kshetrams*, castes from the

²⁴ The *Marumakkathayam* system of inheritance was one in which the female offspring and their sons and daughters received one share each in the property. The male offspring received only one share and their sons and daughters were not entitled to a share. This system of inheritance was codified by the Madras *Marumakkathayam* Act 1932 (for a discussion of the same refer to Kodoth 2001, Arunima 1996). It was abolished by the Kerala State Legislature through The Joint Family System (Abolition) Act of 1975, although it has not completely died out in practice (Kodoth 2008).

Thiyyas downwards were barred from them²⁵. These castes could only worship at *kavus*. While they were not allowed access to the *kshetrams*, the castes considered to be polluting were expected to contribute different types of produce and services for the temple festivals. In contrast, in the *kavu* system of worship, Thiyyas occupied a much higher status²⁶. For instance, some *kavus* were aligned to Thiyya *tharavadus*, and Thiyyas often officiated as priests in these shrines²⁷ (Menon 1994: 51).

The dominant narrative on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* constructed a complex picture about the ritual caste status of the Thiyyas, drawing on the language of caste inferiority and superiority, while simultaneously distancing Thiyyas from the hierarchical ranking of castes. The ritual status of the caste is a significant topic that is referred to constantly in the group's public narrative. Here the Thiyyas are portrayed as a caste which is inherently of superior ritual status, reflecting Gupta's (2000) work on multiple hierarchies. The caste history is proclaimed as such: in the days of yore Thiyyas used to occupy very high ritual status but had in more recent times been placed lower down in the hierarchy. For instance, many conversations traced the origins of the Thiyyas as a powerful group from which the highest-ranking Brahmins themselves had been created, or as foreigners (from Sri Lanka, Krygyzstan or Greece), who were later punished for their defiance of Brahmin domination by being marked

²⁵ Abraham (2010: 126) notes that Thiyyas trying to worship at *kshetrams* had to suffer the indignity of having the temple offering thrown to them by the Nambuthiri priests who officiated at the temples.

²⁶ Menon (1994: 41-61) described the *kavus* as the basis of a community of worship in Malabar, where caste inequality was both reinforced and challenged. On the one hand *kavus*, which were aligned with specific *tharavadus*, emphasized the interdependence of castes and mutual obligations by expectations of caste-wise contributions to *kavu* festivals. On the other hand, the *kavus* were also centres where a community of worship of castes as equals could be formed. The *kavus* were characterized by practices such as Thiyya priests, the worship of lower caste victims of upper caste authority and the sharing of *kavu* pilgrimages by all castes.

²⁷ Noting the contrast with the lack of access for Thiyyas to *kshetrams*, Menon (1994: 51) notes that at the beginning of the *kavu* festival, a Thiyya priest would perform a worship ceremony, and it was only after this ceremony that Nambuthiris and Nair overlords were allowed to worship at the structure.

by a comparatively lower ritual status. At the same time, in the public conversation in *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, a certain distancing from caste ranking can be observed. For instance, the Thiyyas are often proudly portrayed by some members as a caste that was *avarna*, or a social group that was placed outside the boundaries of caste classification in India. In the textual understanding of caste, to be an *avarna* caste was to indicate a status so low that the group was placed outside the boundaries of classification. Yet, in the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the understanding of *avarna* is used to challenge classification as a ritually impure caste, and *avarna* status is proudly proclaimed on a periodic basis.

The Thiyyas continued to follow a variety of agrarian occupations during the colonial period, although they are most famously associated with the profession of toddy tapping²⁸, which was assumed to be their hereditary occupation in colonial ethnographies (Kodoth 2001). At the start of the British colonization of Malabar, many Thiyyas were middle-level agricultural tenants (see Dhanagare 1977, Kabir 1997, Radhakrishnan 1980). Prakash Karat (1973) observes that over time, in light of the British translations of customary land rights in India to fit a legal framework of private ownership, many of these Thiyya tenants were further disenfranchised and reduced to the level of poor peasants and agricultural wage labourers.

However, particularly between 1900 and 1920, some Thiyyas also gained substantial mobility through their interactions with the British (Menon 1994). The Thiyyas were

²⁸ Toddy, or palm wine, is a popular South Indian alcoholic beverage created from the sap of coconut palms. Tapping is a term used to refer to the multiple successive steps involved in extracting the wine, and sometimes the unfermented sap, from the coconut palm.

among the first to make use of the educational and employment opportunities created by the colonial and missionary institutions²⁹ in Malabar. A considerable Thiyya elite emerged which was engaged in occupations such as *tehsildars*, sub-judges and deputy collectors in the colonial administrative service, and other service professions such as the law (Menon 1994, Abraham 2010). This group also included the families and offspring resulting from liaisons between Thiyya women and British men (Abraham 2006), although they had been excommunicated from the community for a certain period³⁰. The Thiyya elite was concentrated in colonial coastal towns such as Thalassery, Kozhikode and Kannur³¹ (Abraham 2010). The following table, reproduced from Sivanandan (1979), is based on census records from 1921 and provides the occupational breakdown for the Thiyya caste at that time.

²⁹ As Menon (1997: 64-65) notes, the Swiss Basel Evangelical Mission established a network of elementary and high schools in Malabar and the Thiyyas were among the first to join them. This mission also set up weaving and tile factories in Malabar where many Thiyyas were employed. Some Thiyyas converted to Christianity under these evangelical missions. A few of them, such as Churikkat Samuel, maintained links with their families and the caste community while moving up the occupational hierarchy the mission factories.

³⁰ Abraham (2006: 135-6) notes that the attitude of the caste community to these women and their offspring varied over time. While they were initially accepted, they were later excommunicated by the caste leadership in the context of marriage reform during the late nineteenth century. These Thiyya women and their offspring were referred to within the community, through the derogatory term *Velavagas* (those who took the white path). During the 1920s and 1930, this boycott was removed and on these offspring and their families were accepted back into the fold of the community. The reason cited was that they chose to remain Hindus and did not convert to Christianity even though they could have accessed benefits reserved for Anglo-Indians. Further, the community leadership also reasoned that such offspring had, on their own merit, instead achieved success in the Indian Civil Services and Indian Economic Services.

³¹ During the British era, these towns bore the Anglicized names of Tellicherry, Calicut and Cannanore respectively. Members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* tended to slip back and forth between these Anglicized names and the current Malayalam names while talking about these places. The cities of Thalassery/Tellicherry and Kannur/Cannanore are located in the present day district of Kannur, and the latter is actually the district capital. Kozhikode/Calicut city is the capital of Kozhikode district.

Table 1: Caste and Occupation (Proportion of Workers in each category of occupation)

Malabar 1921 census

| Occupation/Caste | Nambuthiri Brahmin | Nair | Thiyya | Mopla Musli m | Cheruma |
|---|-----------------------|-------|--------|---------------------|---------|
| Rentiers | 41.2 | 5.9 | - | 1.8 | - |
| Cultivators | 9.0 | 50.4 | 20.9 | 33.4 | 0.5 |
| Agricultural labourers | - | 17.2 | 44.4 | 23.8 | 91.2 |
| Toddy drawing and selling | - | - | 7.0 | - | - |
| Trade and commerce | - | - | - | 23.7 | - |
| Public administration, learned and artistic professions | 35.4 | 18.5 | 9.3 | 11.6 | - |
| Others | 14.4 | 8.0 | 18.4 | 5.7 | 8.3 |
| Total | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Sivanandan (1979: 476)

Between 1900 and 1920, many Thiyyas also migrated out of Malabar. Since, due to their ritual status, they were not allowed to access institutions of higher education such as the Zamorin's Guruvayoorappan College and Brennen College in Malabar until 1918, many Thiyyas often headed to the colonial metropolis of Madras during this period (Menon 1997: 64). Malabar in general had a rather high rate of out-migration (Joseph 1997). The Thiyyas accounted for slightly more than a tenth of the migrants from Malabar between the years 1906 and 1920 (Menon 1997: 64).

This history of migration and employment could also be observed among the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Some members split time between their homes abroad and in India. Others were located at the intersection of migration routes - they or their parents had returned after working for years in other regions in India or in Middle East Asia. Members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* who were working abroad had a complex employment profile ranging from construction crew workers to software engineers. Within India, many members were located in Malabar, while others were currently located outside Malabar in urban areas. In India, access to the new media is heavily restricted by the households' economic status. Given this limitation, it is not surprising that most of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* members located in India could be characterized economically as ranging from lower middle class to upper middle class. Most of these members were engaged in professional services, and were not involved in occupations such as blue collar work or agricultural labour.

Political affiliations are taken extremely seriously in Malabar. In this region, Thiyya affiliations are split among three political divisions - the Communist Left, the Centrist Congress and the Hindu Right. One of the reasons for such a high migration from Malabar was the substantial degree of peasant unrest³² (Joseph 1997). As a consequence of this unrest, Malabar became one of the first regions in India where

³² This peasant unrest was initially manifested in the form of the Mapilla uprisings from 1836 to 1921 led by the Mapilla Muslims, and was later spearheaded by the Thiyyas and the Nairs in its second phase (Radhakrishnan 1980). Eventually, this momentum played an important part in the formation of the Kerala Communist Party when it splintered from the nationalist Congress Party in the Malabar region in 1940 (Karat 1973, Karat 1976, Karat 1977, Radhakrishnan 1980, Menon 1994).

Communists were able to establish control and participate in democratic elections. As a large caste where many members occupied middle to lower peasant status, or the even more vulnerable status of an agricultural labourer, the Thiyyas have traditionally formed a strong base for the Communists in Malabar. They continue to do so today as well, particularly in the rural areas. For much of the British period, the Thiyyas viewed the Congress with suspicion as an upper-caste party. However, some of the Thiyya elites started to align with it in beginning with the mid-1930s (Menon 1994). From the 1970s onwards, a certain section of Thiyyas has also extended support to the Hindu Right through political organizations such as the RSS. Indeed, the violent clashes between Thiyyas aligned with the Communist Left and those aligned with the Hindu Right, have emerged as one of the more perplexing features of the political clashes that have been troubled North Malabar (specifically the district of Kannur) since the 1980s (Chaturvedi 2011)³³. The members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* reflected all three affiliations, although the dominant narrative in the group, as represented by the admins and influential members, tended to veer more in favour of the Hindu Right.

In order to understand how Malabar and Thiyyaness are constructed on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, it is important to consider the historical interactions between the Thiyyas and other social groups in Malabar. In particular, the Ezhava caste was often referred to in conversations on the group as the primary caste Other for Thiyyas. In the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, much of the conversation was explicitly focused on

³³ Chaturvedi (2011) observed that the majority of the victims as well as the perpetrators of this violence in Kannur were from the Thiyya caste.

establishing how the Thiyyas were different from the Ezhavas. To a comparatively lesser extent, the Nair caste and religious minorities such as Muslims and Christians in Malabar were also constructed in the conversation as groups that posed competition to the Thiyyas in terms of state benefits and social status. These are groups that have historically been located at a relatively close social distance from the Thiyyas in terms of ritual status, as well as economic and political distinctions.

Although the Nairs are considered to have occupied a higher ritual status than the Thiyyas in Malabar, these castes were placed in close interaction in terms of economic resources and power. At different times and situations the relationship varied from competitive to cooperative. Menon (1994) provides a good insight into the contentious relationship between the two castes during the British era. Here, most Thiyyas occupied a social and economic role that was subservient to the Nairs. The Thiyyas were predominantly engaged as middle-level to lower-level peasants, while the Nairs were predominantly higher-level to middle-level peasants. Further, during this period, the elite of both these castes were experiencing social mobility that was previously inaccessible to them, through English education, employment in colonial administration and economic prosperity through land ownership and business transactions. During the colonial period, the Nairs were mostly associated with the Congress Party, while the Thiyyas were reluctant to align with it for a long time³⁴.

³⁴ Menon (1994: 191) argues that between 1900 and 1920 the Thiyya elite was trying to construct a religious community of equals consisting solely of the Thiyyas, standing apart from Hinduism. Thus they were wary of the Congress as a party of upper caste Hindus. However, by the mid 1930s a younger generation of Thiyyas aligned themselves with the Congress as Hindus.

In post-independence India, the relationship continued to evolve in a complex fashion. For instance, in his 1954 study, Miller notes that the caste cleavage between the Nairs and the Thiyyas could be clearly observed as a class division, where other castes were drawn to these two castes as centers of the class. At the same time, the Thiyyas and Nairs were also thrown together for work in factories, political organizations such as the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], as well as being drawn into a united Hindu formation pitted against the Muslims. Today, Nairs and Thiyyas continue to participate in common political organizations such as the Congress, the CPI (M) and the RSS.

The dominant narrative on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* portrayed the Thiyyas as being of commensurate ritual status with, if not superior to, the Nairs. Instances where Nairs tried to establish dominance over Thiyyas on the basis of caste superiority were periodically discussed and denounced with much enthusiasm in the group.

Interactions between the Thiyyas and Mappilas have shifted from symbiotic religious co-existence towards the hardening of polarized religious identities as Hindus and Muslims. Dhanagare (1977) explains that Mappila Muslims³⁵ of Malabar are a social group that emerged from intermarriages between Arab traders who have long

³⁵ As is the case with the castes discussed here, the Muslims were not a single coherent group, but rather they consisted of many internal subdivisions along caste and economic distinctions. The events surrounding the Mapilla uprisings, the British and nationalist response to these uprisings, as well as the pan-Asian pan-Islamic Khilafat movement contributed significantly to the creation of a strong Muslim identity in the early twentieth century. For an excellent discussion on this see Dhanagare (1977), Hardgrave Jr (1977) and Panikkar (1978). For a discussion on contemporary Muslim politics and identity in Malabar see Engineer (1995), Chiriyankandath (1996), Dale (1980), Dale (1997), Ilias (2007) and Osella and Osella (2008).

frequented the Malabar coast for trade and women primarily from the Nair and Thiyya castes, as well as conversions that provided social mobility to the lower ranking caste of the Cherumas among Hindus. The Thiyyas and Mappilas seem to have had much in common. Dhanagare (1977) argues that the Thiyyas and Muslims occupied similar social status in terms of the ritual and economic hierarchy, particularly in South Malabar, where both were pitted in opposition to the dominance of Nairs *tharavadus*³⁶. Further, Menon (1994: 47) points to the existence of a symbiotic system of religious practices between Mappilas and Thiyyas, such as for instance the worship of Mappila deities in Thiyya houses³⁷.

However, as Menon (1994: 61-88) explains, this relationship was transformed into one of intense rivalry and bitter conflict from 1900s onwards. Conflict between the Thiyyas and the Mappilas initially emerged during the decades between 1900 and 1920, primarily as intense business rivalries in the North Malabar cities of Thalassery and Kannur. Revolting against Nair dominance, both Thiyya and Mappila elites were attempting to create a sense of a self-contained religious community around themselves around 1914-1915. However, at this point the conflict was not constructed in the communal sense of Hindu Thiyyas in opposition to Muslim Mappilas, primarily due to the fact that it was the elites in both groups who were in conflict with each other. Further, the Thiyya elite was challenging their caste status within

³⁶ Events during the rule of Tipu Sultan, the Mappilas and the Nairs *tharavadus* led to a conflict over access to land. The Nairs had experienced religious persecution during this period and fled to the states of Cochin and Travancore. The Mappila Muslims had been forced by Tipu to take over the leases that these Nairs left behind. This conflict was exacerbated after the British conquest of Malabar when the Nairs returned and demanded the return of the land (Dhanagare 1977).

³⁷ Menon (1994: 47) shares that the colonial administrator Edgar Thurston observed the worship of a Nair and his Mappila friend Kunhi Rayan in the houses of a large number of Thiyyas in Malabar. Similarly, he also observed Mappila devotees collecting alms for a snake mosque.

Hinduism and constructing a religious community among themselves as Thiyyas rather than as Hindus. However, Menon (1994: 191) notes that by the 1936 the conflict had taken a communal turn, particularly through a younger generation of Thiyyas who aligned themselves as Hindus with the Congress through the temple entry movement³⁸ and were polarized against Mappila Muslims. The communal conflict has continued to manifest itself even after Indian independence in 1947.

In the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the public conversation tended not to dwell on the Muslims as much as it did on the Ezhavas and Nairs. However, members often referred to Muslims during the relatively private in-depth interviews, particularly when they referred to how Malabar had changed for the worse.

Ezhava is a caste group that much of the literature considers as being synonymous with the Thiyyas, with the assumption that the Thiyyas are the northern counterparts of the Ezhava caste who are concentrated in South and Central Kerala (Hardgrave Jr 1964, Abraham 2010, Nag 1989, Osella and Osella 2000). In contrast to this dominant strain, some scholars have noted that the Thiyyas claim a higher caste ranking in comparison to the Ezhavas (Thurston 1909, Nossiter 1982, Gopinath 1993, Kodoth 2001, Mailaparambil 2012). There are considerably fewer Ezhavas than Thiyyas in Malabar, and the former settled there as part of the great migration from

³⁸ The temple entry movement was a social reform movement against caste untouchability which spanned from the 1860s to 1940s (Jeffrey 1976). The movement was heavily influenced by the teaching of Sri Narayana Guru and spearheaded by TK Madhavan and Kesava Menon among others. A major defining event in this movement was the satyagraha (civil disobedience) of 1924 in Vaikom, South Kerala. In this satyagraha, a Nair, an Ezhava and a Pulaya courted arrest by attempting to approach the Siva temple at Vaikom, a mainstream Hindu temple which they were legally barred from entering as non-Brahmins.

Travancore into the eastern highlands in Malabar in first half of the twentieth century (Varghese 2006: 238, Kodoth 2006: 9).

The Ezhavas and Thiyyas are also considered as synonymous in the popular imagination due to the historical association of the Thiyya elite with the Sri Narayana movement. The movement, which was influenced by the Ezhava Hindu reformer Sri Narayana Guru and promulgated by the institution of the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), stressed achieving caste equality³⁹. The Thiyyas appear to have had a complex relationship with this movement, partly reflecting internal contradictions within the community. In the early 1900s, the Thiyya elites, congregated in the form of the Gnanodaya Yogam in Malabar, attempting to create a religious community centered exclusively on Thiyyas⁴⁰. The Gnanodaya Yogam proposed that exclusive temples be established in north Malabar for the sole use of the Thiyyas and considered it prudent to align itself with the Sri Narayana movement, which had gained considerable traction in the South of Kerala. Consequently, Sri Narayana Guru was invited to lay the foundation for three Thiyya temples in Malabar - Jagannath (at Thalassery in 1908), Srikateswara (at Kozhikode city in 1910) and Sundereswara (at Kannur city in 1916). These temples were wholly financed through donations from prosperous Thiyyas. Influenced by the teachings of Sri Narayana

³⁹ Menon (1994: 67) explains that the Narayana Guru movement worked to establish a society that did not differentiate on the basis of caste. Narayana Guru and SNDP argued for a twofold path to attaining caste equality for lower ranking castes such as the Ezhavas. One was to adapt the social and religious practices of upper castes, such as worshipping Brahmanical gods. The other was to develop self-esteem through developing economic strength.

⁴⁰ Menon (1994) demonstrates that the Thiyya elite rejected the conventional forms of worship which they felt reinforced their low ritual status in Hinduism - the mainstream *kshetrams* denied physical access to Thiyyas while demanding economic contributions and the rural *kavus* incorporated supposedly impure practices such as blood sacrifices and the use of toddy.

Guru, the Gnanodaya Yogam tried, although not without internal opposition, to steer all Thiyyas towards worship at these Thiyya temples rather than at *kavus* and mainstream *kshetrams*. However, in rural areas Thiyyas continued to worship at *kavus*.

Although they were focused on establishing separate temples for themselves, the Thiyya elite distanced themselves from the temple entry movement in Kerala, where lower ranking castes agitated successfully to gain entry and worship in mainstream Hindu temples. Further, Menon (1994) notes that for a considerable period of time, castes that ranked lower than the Thiyyas such as the Cherumas and Pulayas, were prevented from accessing these Thiyya temples. It was only in 1930s that these temples were opened up in the context of support from a younger generation of Thiyyas who favoured the Congress led Guruvayoor Satyagraha and its attempts at forging a united Hindu identity and rejected the Gnanodaya Yogam's attempt at creating an exclusive Thiyya community located outside Hinduism.

The association between Thiyyas in Malabar and the SNDP itself is also complex, and seems to historically have been divided by class. As we can see, in the early half of the twentieth century, it is the Thiyya elites in urban areas who aligned themselves with the SNDP, which was not reflected as strongly in rural areas. Kodoth (2008: 270-271) has also observed contemporary disaffection between the SNDP and Thiyyas in rural areas in Malabar. For instance, during the course of her fieldwork in a village in Malabar, Kodoth noted that local Thiyyas in the area were wary of the

SNDP, and associated the organization with Ezhavas who had migrated from the South. A more detailed discussion regarding the caste status of the Thiyyas vis-à-vis the Ezhavas is included in Chapter 4 (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

The dominant narrative in the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was antagonistic towards Ezhavas, and extremely distrustful of the SNDP. The Ezhavas and SNDP were portrayed as immediate threats to Thiyya identity and culture as a whole. In an attempt to differentiate Thiyyas from Ezhavas, the members associate being Thiyya with the region of Malabar.

In the nation-state's categorization of castes, the status of the Thiyyas has been recorded differently in the colonial and post-colonial period. In the British era, Thiyyas were considered on par with other non-Brahmins castes such as the Nairs and so were not provided caste-based concessions from the state in the Madras Presidency (Menon 1994: 66). In the 1960s, under the regime of Chief Minister R Shankar, the Thiyyas successfully lobbied to be identified as part of the Other Backward Classes (OBC). Today Thiyyas are included in the national OBC list for three states - Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Thiyyas are also included in the state OBC list in Kerala (National Commission for Backward Classes 2010a⁴¹, National Commission for Backward Classes 2010b, National Commission for Backward Classes 2010c).

In the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the attitude towards affirmative action policies in India was primarily hostile. The dominant narrative constructed these policies as

⁴¹ A current copy of these lists have been provided in Appendix 1a, Appendix 1b, Appendix 1c

unnecessary State handouts, which the Thiyyas should not lose out on nonetheless. The attitude towards the Thiyyas categorization within these policies was complex. On the one hand, there was much resentment against the popular identification of Thiyyas as “backward”, and many conversations were devoted to highlighting that this had not been the case under the British. The dominant narrative was that in fact the Thiyyas were a “forward” caste which had been rather badly categorized as backward either due to misfortune or political expediency. On the other hand, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were not entirely willing to reject their categorization within the OBCs since it also entailed access to economic resources through education and employment. The dominant narrative dwelt on constructing a history of the Thiyyas as a caste that had controlled much material wealth and power. As per this narrative, in the contemporary scenario as well, most Thiyyas did not need financial assistance, but the affirmative action policies were required for the supposedly small proportion of Thiyyas who had become materially disadvantaged over time.

In this chapter the problem of caste identification through place was introduced empirically. In the chapter that follows the pertinent literature from the disciplines of sociology and social geography are discussed. In light of this review of the literature, the problem of caste identification through place is clarified and the major hypothesis for the dissertation is presented.

Chapter 2: Review of Literatures

In this dissertation, the central problem is to understand how and why the members of the digital group, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, reconnect the caste identity of being Thiyya with the region of Malabar. In this chapter the various literatures relevant to this problem are reviewed, with the purpose of introducing key terms. Further, this chapter establishes the preferred theoretical approach to the study of place, identity and caste adopted in the dissertation.

This chapter consists of seven sections. In Section 1, the field of social geography is introduced and the critical social constructivist approach to the study of place is explained. The second section involves a review of the identity literature, specifically the cultural studies approach to studying identity. In the third section, two distinct approaches to the study of identity as linked to place are compared, and the concept of spatial imaginaries is clarified.

Section 4 includes the analysis of Anthony Giddens' theory of distanciation, which has provided important theoretical tools to understand the linking and de-linking of social relations from place. It is argued that this theory would benefit from the incorporation of a critical social constructionist approach to the study of place. Section 5 reviews the caste literature from the specific lens of place and distanciation. In section 6, the major hypothesis and sub hypotheses of the dissertation are outlined.

Further, the specific empirical questions addressed in the dissertation are outlined. The concluding section provides an outline of the dissertation chapters.

Social Geography, Place, Study of Place

Social Geography: Why study Place in Sociology?

In this dissertation spatiality is considered as an important object of sociological analysis. This entails following a somewhat marginal theoretical tradition which explicitly emphasizes a central role for the study of spatiality in sociology in particular and social theory in general.

Within the sociological tradition, Georg Simmel⁴² [(1908)1997] was an early theorist who recognized the salience of spatiality, and proposed a “sociology of space”. Michel Foucault, a scholar whose work has progressively enriched sociology, also periodically concentrated on the analysis of space, after his emphatic call in [(1967) 1986)] for the return to the analysis of space in social theory⁴³. Indeed, within a few years, a French sociologist, Henri Lefebvre, soon emerged as a key figure in the contemporary analysis of spatiality. With the publication of his influential work *The*

⁴² Apart from his famous 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Simmel engaged with questions related to space in his book 1908 book *Soziologie: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, which included such now-translated essays as “The Stranger”, “The Bridge and the Door”, “Space and the Spatial Order of Society” [see Frisby and Featherstone (1908)1997]

⁴³ In his 1967 essay “Of Other Spaces”, Michel Foucault famously argued that while previously social sciences had exclusively directed much attention to the study of time, a return to spatial analysis was now imperative. This English translation of the essay by Jay Miskowiec was published in 1986.

Production of Space, Lefebvre [(1974) 1992] demonstrated how the rather artificially separated disciplines of sociology and geography could be successfully bridged. The resulting hybrid sub-discipline of social geography, owes much to his nuanced theoretical approach. Within sociology, Anthony Giddens (1984, 1990, 1991) and George Ritzer (2003, 2004) are two influential theorists who have explicitly theorized spatiality in recent times. In contrast to its slow progress within the discipline of sociology, social geography⁴⁴ has attracted more mainstream attention within the field of geography particularly after the humanistic turn influenced by the works of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and Edward Relph (1976), and the critical (constructivist) orientation introduced by David Harvey (1990)⁴⁵, Doreen Massey (1993), Derek Gregory (1989, 1995, 2000, 2000b) and Gillian Rose (1995).

Some sociological theorists have painstakingly established that spatiality is as valid an object of analysis in sociology as any other. For instance, in his exposition of the influential theory of structuration, Anthony Giddens (1984: 363-368) made a case for the study of spatiality as a central aspect of sociology, arguing that “spatial forms are always social forms” (1984: 367). While engaging with the physicality of different types of spaces, an equally, if not more, important aspect of enquiry in the above-mentioned analyses has been to explore the social significance accorded to these spaces. A salient precursor for such an analysis would be Georg Simmel’s contention that space is an activity of the mind which is sociological because in it sociologists

⁴⁴ In this dissertation, I will be using the term social geography, although a synonymous term, human geography is popular within the discipline of geography.

⁴⁵ Cresswell (2009) provides a useful guide to the historical fluctuations in the approach to place within the field of geography.

can observe the crystallization of social formations⁴⁶ [Simmel (1908)1997:138]. Consequently, from a sociological perspective, all space is what Henri Lefebvre [(1974) 1992: 26-27] referred to as social space, which combines an analysis of materiality with the ways in which space is experienced, conceived and represented.

In response to Giddens' (1984) lament that sociology has not paid attention to spatiality, urban sociologist Peter Saunders (1989) has argued that within empirical sociology, as opposed to sociological theory, the study of spatiality has always been important, as demonstrated in diverse sub-fields such as globalization, world systems analysis, urban sociology, rural sociology, community studies and social psychology. Within American sociology, Andrew Abbott (1997) points out that although spatiality received much emphasis in the heyday of the Chicago school, its salience slowly petered out. The study of spatiality within sociology is slowly undergoing a revival of sorts, as demonstrated by the recent publication of two review essays in the Annual Review of Sociology (Gieryn 2000, Logan 2012) within about a decade of each other.

⁴⁶ Simmel described spatial relations as the “documentation” of social formations. He observed that even though “space in general is only an activity of the mind ... the emphasis on the spatial meanings of things and processes is not unjustified. For these actually often take a course that the formal and negative conditions of their spatiality stands out especially *for reflection*, and that in it we possess the clearest documentation of the real forces” [(1908)1997:138]. For instance, in establishing the differences in the linkages between social boundaries and spatial boundaries, he notes “the incompatible firmness and clarity which the social processes of demarcation received from being spatialized” [(1908)1997:144].

Connecting Space and Place: From Space to Place and Back?

Within the sociological study of spatiality, place is very much an area of significant interest in this dissertation. Specifically, the focus here is the instrumental role of place in constructing identity, and the story of their disconnections and reconnections. As a result, it is important to clarify what place is, particularly by discussing how it is connected to space.

A common understanding of *space*, even within academia, is that it refers to “abstract geometries (distance, direction, size, shape, volume) detached from material form and cultural interpretation” (Gieryn 2000: 465). In this approach, *place* is defined, in contrast, as a smaller bounded sub-section of space which has been infused by a combination of materiality, cultural interpretations and representations. As a result, a certain temporal sequence is attributed to space and place - space is what is pre-existing and place is what follows when a smaller meaningful portion is carved out from it⁴⁷.

However, this distinction between space and place has been critiqued from the phenomenological perspective (Tuan 1977, Casey 1996) where the pre-existence of space is questioned. The phenomenological perspective, which prioritizes the experience of space, argues that all experience of space occurs first in a certain place. Consequently, space is what is generated by interactions from, and often within, a

⁴⁷ Scholars such as Ritzer (2004) and Augé (1995) also make a related distinction between place and non-place. In contrast to place, they offer the concept of non-place to refer to spaces characterized by homogenization and rationalization.

particular place⁴⁸. Cresswell (2009:2) traces this understanding back to Plato who suggested a dual understanding of place - it is a location in space *and* an entity within space that is continuously “becoming” through experience. For the purposes of this dissertation, we need not chalk out definitions of space and place that are mutually exclusive to each other. For the current project would suffice for us to move ahead from this debate with the understanding that spaces and places are interconnected: while places are particular locations in space, space is also generated through interactions in place.

Apart from the phenomenological perspective, this dual connection between space and place is also significant because, as discussed in the next paragraph, this dissertation is influenced by a different approach - critical social geography. This approach is also concerned with the becoming, or production of place, but from a critical social constructionist approach, which focuses on both experience as well as representation of space. In trying to understand place by stressing the connection between space and place, this dissertation draws on Massey's (1993: 68) work. She recommends this approach since a *differential* approach, focusing primarily on border formation, results in a very narrow and parochial understanding of place itself. She specifically raises questions about the salience of boundaries in defining place within the contemporary context of time-space compression (Harvey 1990) and distancing

⁴⁸ Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) explains this through an example from the life of the theologian Paul Tillich. As a child growing up in a small town, Tillich experienced the place as narrow and constrained, and longed to escape to the vast expanse of the Baltic ocean where he and his family would spend their vacation. Relph argues that Tillich's understanding and appreciation of this unbridled space arose from his experience in the bounded place of his hometown.

(Giddens 1984). For Massey, while place is a *where* in space, it need not be understood as a closed-off and bounded part of space⁴⁹.

How to Study Place

Over time, distinct theoretical approaches have been developed to understand and study place within social geography. Here, these approaches are presented in a roughly chronological order. This is followed by a discussion of the approach adopted in this dissertation - the critical social constructionist approach to place

Cresswell (2009) argues that place itself was self-consciously and reflexively examined as a concept, only in the 1970s with the humanistic turn in geography. Prior to the 1970s, under the influence of logical positivism, while place was still very much a part of the lexicon of geography (and other disciplines, including sociology), it was used quite uncritically as a medium of explanation.

The humanistic turn, pioneered by the works of Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) and Edward Relph (1976) drew on Heidegger's phenomenological approach, and argued that place has to be studied from the perspective of how the social agent experiences it. As

⁴⁹ For a sympathetic approach which similarly interrogates the role of the boundary in understanding place and identity within cultural anthropology see Gupta and Ferguson (1992). Although these authors also prioritize mobility, they take a slightly different approach and argue that by equating space, identity and difference, anthropology has uncritically approached boundaries (often as national boundaries) and neglected the hybridity represented by those who reside at boundaries. They also echo Massey's (1993) emphasis on understanding *difference* or uniqueness by prioritizing the *connections* between different spaces.

Relph⁵⁰ explains it, what needed to be examined was the “essence of place” Relph (1976: 29-43). Here they drew on Heidegger’s connection between place and existence, who argued that to be-in-the-world was to be located in a particular place (Cresswell 2009). As Harvey (1993: 11) notes, in his call for a reinforced focus on place, for Heidegger this concept was very much about the experience and retention of meaningful roots. Further, by stressing the study of direct experience as a way to study place, the phenomenological approach emphasized that place is a way of relating to the world. Consequently, within this approach place was understood as made (through experience), and plural (through the varying experiences of individuals and groups [Relph 1976]).

However the phenomenological approach to place did not reflect on how power is instrumental in its construction and maintenance. Cresswell notes that it was in the 1980s that a social constructivist turn occurred in the study of place, where geographers influenced by Marxism, feminism and post-structuralism started to critically evaluate “how power was implicated in the construction, reproduction, and contestation of places and their meanings” (2009: 5). In terms of a broad influence, we can consider the works of Henri Lefebvre to be instrumental in this line of studying place in social geography, which stressed how spaces and places are produced through a combination of materiality, experience, and representation. In particular, the role of representation in the production of place was highlighted in this approach.

⁵⁰ Another key contribution of this approach has been to reject the idea that place refers to a particular local or small scale spatial unit - Relph (1976) successfully demonstrates that places can vary from small scales such as street corners up to a global scale.

As a result, Harvey (1993) argued that places should be examined, first and foremost, as social constructs. Harvey (1993: 12) particularly challenged the equation of experience of place with idea of authenticity as rootedness in place, by exploring how this very idea was often dangerously used to construct idealized versions of the past (and present) to exert power over others. Coming from a Marxist tradition, Harvey stressed the need to study domination and oppression with regard to social relations in places. Yet he also appreciated the significance of the need to study places as experienced precisely due to its salience in the social construction of place⁵¹. It is not insignificant that Harvey resolves this dilemma by reverting to the work of sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who adopted a dialectical approach to study the inter-relationship between the experience, construction and perception of places, where materiality, representation and imagination had to be simultaneously studied to understand place and power relations. However, Harvey (1993: 17) also suggested that this combined and nuanced approach towards place should also be sensitive to the effect of time-space distancing (Giddens 1984, 1990, 1991) and compression.

This dissertation adopts the critical social constructivist approach to the study of place and its Lefebvrian emphasis on the “production of space.” The critical social constructivist approach is particularly well suited to studying the connection between caste identification and place because it enables an analysis of both as social constructs whose meanings and boundaries change over time. In particular this

⁵¹ Nigel Thrift (2004) has written about the increasing significance to study the role of “affect” in the spatial politics around cities in the context of neo-liberalism and the need for a progressive politics.

approach facilitates the study of the production of certain meanings about caste through the narrative representation, and experience of, place. In challenging the idea of the authenticity of place, it enables an analysis of how certain ideas about caste identity are legitimized and challenged through constructing its rootedness in a particular place. Further, it will enable an analysis of how ideas about caste identity are used to construct and shape the narratives regarding place, and potentially, the material dimensions of the place itself.

Within this broad approach, the work of Doreen Massey (1993) specifically provides an exciting way of thinking about place, particularly her suggestion that places be studied relationally. While Massey locates herself squarely within the critical social constructivist approach through a power geometry of place, she suggests a more nuanced approach by prioritizing the question of mobility in understanding place. She critiques the Heideggerian influence on the phenomenological approach to studying place, because it assumed that the identity of place was inward-looking - the identity of a place (and social agents within it) was to be found within specific boundaries. In contrast, Massey calls for a “progressive sense of place”, where place should be understood as a locus of social relations (Massey 1993: 64-68).

what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated at a particular locus...Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings.

Massey (1993:66)

For Massey, *place is best understood as a process* where many social interactions are tied together. Consequently, she argues that boundaries are not essential for defining

places, rather they *should be studied relationally*. In other words, Massey is arguing that rather than taking boundaries as natural components of place, we must explore how (and why) they are constructed. Massey stresses that this approach does not deny that *places have specificity, but it interprets this uniqueness neither as internal or natural, but as something that is constantly reproduced through discursive articulations*.

Digital Production of Place

Academic focus on the new media has re-invigorated these questions regarding space and place, and the study of spatiality. Initially, the literature on the new media followed an approach of digital dualism (Jurgenson 2012). The new media was primarily conceptualized as a separate realm, and its spatiality was rejected by highlighting its transcendental characteristics (Rheingold 1993, Cairncross 1997). Geographers have contributed much to counter this tendency by reinforcing the spatiality of the new media (Dodge and Kitchin 2001). The digital divide literature highlighted how the material infrastructure was unevenly distributed in physical places (Ebo 1998, Zook 2005). Others have noted the use of spatial metaphors (ex. cyberspace, chat room) to conceptualize and articulate “virtual places” (Adams 1997, Adams 1998, Graham 1998, Cohen 2007).

Over time, this literature has moved in the direction of an augmented reality approach (Graham, Zook, and Boulton 2013, Jurgenson 2012) by examining how the new

media is used in multiple ways for the production of space. Dodge and Kitchin (2005) focus on the material aspects of this production, by noting the manner in which digital code influences the material dimensions of space, such as the opening and closing of doors through computer technology. Further, the literature has gradually started to examine the use of the new media in the production of space in terms of how places are experienced and represented. For instance, Valentine and Skelton (2008) explore how new media use is informed by the actual and desired offline spatiality of its users, and in turn also serves to shape that spatiality. Similarly, de Souza e Silva and Sutko (2008: 458) argue that not only are online games inseparably connected to offline physical spaces, they also add imaginary layers to urban spaces which facilitate a new negotiation and understanding of familiar urban spaces. Such trends in the literature have enabled the *study of the production of places through various digital practices of representation and experience*.

Since this study is focused on the analysis of how the representation of self and others on the basis of caste is undertaken through place, the following section provides a purposive introduction to the literature on identity.

Identity

Identity as Cultural Identification

The concept of identity has been approached in different ways within different academic domains. In this dissertation the focus is on understanding how and why the caste of self is represented through narratives regarding places. Here, rather than discussing how an individual alone consciously constructs identity, there is a need to discuss how entire groups of people are known collectively through cultural representations and how counter representations are constructed. Consequently, this study draws on the concept of cultural identity as it is utilized within the field of cultural studies.

The concept of cultural identity has been a significant unit of analysis within cultural studies from the early days of its inception. In his essay *British Cultural Studies and Pitfalls of Identity*, Paul Gilroy (2001) explores the manner in which the exploration of cultural identity, particularly British working class identity, was an important, if sometimes implicit, part of foundational works in cultural studies such as *The Uses of Literacy* (Hoggart 1957), *The Long Revolution* (Williams 1961) and *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson 1964). Considering the trajectory of this concept in the context of the evolution of cultural studies as a discipline, Gilroy notes

that it provided a common rallying point for the congregation of the diverse disciplinary interests within cultural studies

a tacit intellectual convergence around problems of identity and identification was indeed an important catalyst for cultural studies, and by implication, that identity's capacity to synthesize and connect various enquiries into political cultures and cultural politics is something that makes it a valuable asset even now- something worth struggling over.

Paul Gilroy
(2001: 388)

Stuart Hall (1996) has noted the paradoxical development within cultural studies where while increasing scholarly attention was focused on it, the concept itself was being critiqued as being a hopelessly modernist endeavour, particularly in its implicit equation with a single, true, all-knowing self. He notes that the critique stemmed from a variety of disciplines - while the idea of a self-sustaining subject was critiqued within philosophy, feminism and cultural criticism raised the question of the unconscious processes associated with subjectivity, and post-modernism challenged the idea of an invariant and unitary identity (Hall 1996: 1). Despite the severity of the critique, like Gilroy, Hall notes that the concept itself still needs to be used. Hall prompts us to consider the concept of cultural identity as an idea "under erasure", which cannot be used in its unreconstructed form, but without which key questions cannot be conceptualized at all (Hall 1996).

As Barker (2004a, 2004b, 2004c) notes, within cultural studies, the concept of identity is approached as a cultural construction, and particularly as entailing performative dimensions in accordance with the various discourses which produce an individual. Hall (1996) traces the historical-theoretical trajectory of the concept of

cultural identity, particularly the emphasis on its connection with subjectivity and performativity, through the works of Althusser (1972)⁵², Foucault (1972)⁵³ and Butler (1993)⁵⁴. This shifts the conceptualisation of cultural identity from who-is-a-person, which presumes an individual acting independently outside of history; to what-is-a-person, which refers to a discursively produced person.

Further, bearing these interpretations in mind, Hall suggests that the deconstructed, yet useful, idea of cultural identity should be approached through a processual lens - as *identification*, rather than identity. Rather than imagining cultural identity as a position into which individuals are born and stay attached to throughout their life course, within cultural studies the emphasis is on studying *how cultural identity is produced*. For Hall, cultural identity is always constituted within representation, which involves representations of an imagined past as well as a desired future.

Though they seem to invoke an origin in the historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: *not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves.*

Hall (1996: 4,
emphasis mine)

Hall also cautions us to think of *identity as a transient and strategic position*, from which individuals represent themselves and others. Rather than assuming that an individual will be permanently associated with a particular identity, he prompts us to think of multiple, sometimes contradictory articulations since identities are

⁵² Here Hall refers to Althusser's concept of interpellation, or how the structure hails the individual into the appropriate place.

⁵³ Here Hall refers to Foucault's work on the production of the subject through various discursive regimes.

⁵⁴ Here Hall refers to Butler's work on performativity, or how the subject learns to respond to the hailing

“multiplate constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.” (Hall 1996: 4)

Further, Hall argues that in this deconstructed form, *cultural identity as identification can be thought of as an articulation, or a “suturing” (1996:3), between the discursive regimes that produced the self and the manner in which the self recognises its position.* Such a suturing requires a necessary act of imagination, where a particular self attaches itself to the structuring discourse through emotional investments

They rise from the narrative isolation of the self but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the ‘suturing into the story’ through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as a symbolic) and therefore always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a phantasmatic field.

Hall (1996: 4)

In analysing this process of *identification*, scholars within cultural studies have placed tremendous emphasis on the concept of difference (cf Morley and Robins 1995). Drawing upon the works of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, a strong emphasis here was to show that identities are constructed through processes that involve not just a recognition of that which is common. Rather, *identification* also proceeds through the demarcation of that which is not common, or the “constitutive outside”: that sameness cannot be constructed without referring to difference (Hall 1996: 4). In order to stress the transience of this recognition, Hall draws upon Derrida’s concept of *differance* from linguistics, which he understands to be a combination of “to differ”

as well as “to defer” or postpone (Hall 1990: 229). Translating this concept from linguistics into cultural studies, Hall argues that the concept of cultural identity does not imply a permanent positioning; rather it implies a temporary association of meaning. Commenting on *identification*, Gilroy cautions that the relationship between difference and identity is complicated

Difference should not be confined exclusively to the gaps we imagine between whole, stable subjects. One lesson yielded up by the initial approach to identity on subjectivity is that difference exists within identities- within selves-as well as between them.

Gilroy (2001: 386)

Consequently, Gilroy exhorts us to *pay attention to the management of the interplay between inner and outer differences within a cultural group*. He gives the example of how within a group that organizes itself through reference to a common cultural identity internal differences may be minimized to enhance the difference of the group from others outside it.

The cultural studies approach can be characterized as what Karen Cerulo (1997), in her review of sociological approaches to the study of identity, classified as a macrosociological approach. Cerulo (1997) explains a historical distinction between the microsociological approach which focuses on individual identity and more macrosociological approaches which focus on collective identity. She observed that microsociological perspectives, originating in the works of Cooley and Mead, were preoccupied with the individual and offered a sense of individual cognition and power, which does not take into account how these individual identities are located within the context of broader discourses on collective identities. Cerulo (1997)

highlighted that the advantage of the microsociological approach was that it was able to study how identity emerges in a complex interplay within particular contexts of interaction as well as their attention to how individuals actively engage in choosing and selectively manipulating different aspects of their identity in these contexts. However, this approach was marred by its assumption that the individual was all-knowing and all-powerful with respect to his or her identity. This limitation contributed to an inadequate focus on how individual identity was influenced by power relations, and was constructed through different discourses. On the other hand, while the macrosociological attention to collective identity has contributed significantly to our understanding that our identity is heavily influenced by its social construction and social discourses, hence limiting an individual to choose from among a finite range of identity positions, it was not able to pay attention to the negotiations of identity which individuals engage in on a continuous basis.

In this study the cultural studies approach is preferred over other microsociological approaches to the study of identity because it enables the study of the caste identity as a narrative product of an individual's interaction with cultural constructions about social groups that the person is associated with, and the reflexive position that such individuals (and groups) adopt in response to these constructions. Cerulo's critique of macrosociological approaches as being short on the analysis of individual agency (in terms of choice and simultaneous negotiation of identity) in the construction of identity is valid for the study of cultural identity in cultural studies. However, this limitation is partly addressed by the understanding that cultural identity is a time-

specific identity position that is adopted by a collectivity. More significantly, this lacuna can be addressed by incorporating Gilroy's caution of attending more closely to the internal differences within the group during the study of cultural identity.

Identity and Identification through the New Media

The concept of identity has often been invoked to study interaction online, perhaps most famously in Sherry Turkle's (1997) work *Life on the Screen*, which represents cyberspace as a space where individuals can try out new and multiple identities. As Kennedy (2006) rightly points out in her review, this was a foundational work in the literature on identity research online. She notes that much of this literature has taken anonymity to be the starting point of the analysis of identity online and encourages a move towards the cultural studies model of the study of identity.

While Kennedy's observation about the bias in the literature is relevant, the problem has its origins in the rift within the broader sociological discussion of identity that was discussed by Karen Cerulo (1997). This rift is reflected in the literature on identity online. On the one hand, studies take a microsociological approach to identity online, thereby focusing on anonymity, multiplicity and fragmentation (Kennedy 2006), particularly utilizing the Goffmanesque approach of the presentation of self⁵⁵. On the other hand, scholars have been engaged in an analysis of collective identity online which focuses on how social groups use online spaces to reproduce (and

⁵⁵ These works have particularly gained from the dramaturgical aspect of Goffman's (1959) work which explores how individuals willfully manage their identities, as if they were acting out roles on stage.

sometimes challenge) discursively formed collective identities. While the former microsociological approach is better known, perhaps since it complemented the initial celebratory vein of the academic approach to the new media which was highly focused on individualism and heightened notions of the private, the latter approach can be observed in studies of nationalism (Ericksen 2007), diasporas (Axel 2004) and identity politics (Chopra 2006) online. This latter approach has been interested in studying those people and social groups which have taken to the new media to highlight, rather than hide, their identities. As noted at the outset of this section, *in this dissertation I am interested in identity as cultural identity, and particularly in studying it through Hall's (1996) suggestion about the temporary articulations of identification.*

The following section reviews two distinct theoretical approaches adopted towards studying the connection between place and identity. Further, it clarifies the spatial imaginaries approach adopted in this dissertation.

Place and Identity: Sense of Place vs Spatial Imaginaries

Based on the epistemological approach towards place and identity, their connection has been studied through two broad frames⁵⁶, both of which are multidisciplinary. The first frame, which can be categorized as “sense of place”, draws from the

⁵⁶ Even though I distinguish them as two epistemological frames, there is a certain degree of cross-pollination when it comes to their linguistic usage as terms of reference. The term “sense of place” is more mainstream than the term “spatial imaginary”. Therefore, in some cases (cf Rose 1995, Dixon and Durrheim 2000), even though the connection between place and identity is made by using the term “sense of place”, the ontological orientation is more in line with the critical and social constructivist aspect of the spatial imaginary approach.

phenomenological approach which prioritizes direct experience of a place, and tends to focus on the microsociological aspect of identity. *The second frame, categorized here as “spatial imaginary”, derives from a critical social constructionist perspective in social geography. In this approach both place as well as identity are visualized as continuously socially constructed discursive resources (Natter and Jones 1997). In this dissertation, the spatial imaginaries approach is adopted to study the connection between identity and place.*

Sense of Place

This first frame understands the connection between place and identity through the ontological approach of how place is experienced. This frame draws primarily from the humanistic turn in social geography, particularly the work of Relph (1976). However, it has also travelled over to other disciplines. On the one hand, it has travelled to the fields of environmental psychology and social psychology, where the effort has primarily been to measure it in quantitative terms through the use of scales and surveys. On the other hand, it has travelled to social anthropology, where it has been applied more sympathetically and closer to the manner in which Relph intended it⁵⁷.

⁵⁷ A useful review of the mutli-disciplinary trajectory of the ontological approach involved in “sense of place” can be found in Convery, Corsane, and Davis (2012), Graham, Mason, and Newman (2009), Shamai and Ilatov (2005), and Dixon and Durrheim (2000). For a discussion of the use of the term in anthropology see Feld and Basso (1996).

The concept of sense of place draws from Relph's argument about the "essence of place" (Relph 1976: 29- 43). Relph himself cautioned that although places are sensed through a wide array of material aspects of place, ritualistic elements, practices, and care and concern for our home, it is also important to understand that they are sensed in context of other places and other people. Further, he referred to the "drudgery of place" (1976:41) to indicate that places are not always experienced in a positive manner. Consequently, when Relph discusses place and identity he is careful to state that more than understanding the "identity *of* a place" (referring to what is distinctive about a place), it is important to pay attention to "the identity that a person or a group has *with* that place, in particular whether they are experiencing it as an insider or outsider." (1976: 45). This is an important and helpful insight which draws attention to the salience of studying not only the experience of a place, but also that in generating a "sense of place" social agents are making sense of their own (individual and group) identities.

This experiential insight into place has been selectively adopted within environmental psychology and social psychology. In these fields, this concept has been explored through a variety of sub-concepts such as place-identity, place-attachment, and place dependency, where the emphasis has been on quantitatively measuring a sense of place through exploring the different attitudes that people have towards place (Convery, Corsane, and Davis 2012, Shamai and Ilatov 2005). Further, through its adoption in the self-efficacy literature, there has been an attempt to understand sense of place as the manner in which the social agents' identify with place based on

whether they feel enabled (or disabled) in achieving life goals by that place (Graham, Mason, and Newman 2009). Researchers within environmental and social psychology have remarked on the difficulties of creating scales to measure sense of place since it has been defined very differently in different disciplines (Shamai and Ilatov 2005).

A more sympathetic interpretation of sense of place has travelled to the field of social anthropology, which has prioritized the need to explore sense of place through the livedness of a place, and so rejected the idea that this can be captured through quantitative measures (Geertz 1996). In this field, it is pointed out that measuring a sense of place is difficult precisely because it refers to the complex “livedness” of a place (Stewart 1996) which can only be studied through thick descriptions of how specific groups of people experience place in their daily lives.

Although there are disagreements on approaches to measurement, some commonalities do exist between these disciplinary approaches. The attempt in social psychology, environmental psychology and social anthropology seems to be to understand how people actively make sense of both themselves (or their social groups) and the places they occupy through the manner in which they experience that place. The connection between place and identity here is understood as some measure of a sense of belongingness (or, reflecting Relph’s caution about non-positive feelings, the lack of the sense belongingness) to a particular place.

Dixon and Durrheim (2000) have launched a sympathetic, yet significant, critique of the concept of sense of place. Although they are working from within the fields of social psychology and environmental psychology, Dixon and Durrheim's critique is also relevant to the manner in which the concept is utilized within social anthropology. Adopting a discursive approach to social psychology, they argue that in prioritizing the manner in which places are experienced, the concept of sense of place overlooks the social construction of place. Consequently, echoing Harvey's words from a decade ago, Dixon and Durrheim (2000: 33) suggest that the focus should be placed on how sense of place is a socially constructed symbolic resource which not only captures how people experience belonging to places, but also as a "rhetorical warrant through which particular social practices and relations are legitimated."

I would argue that another key limitation of the sense of place literature, as it exists in the fields of social anthropology, social psychology and environmental psychology, is that its focus on interpreting sense of place primarily in terms of belongingness to a place overlooks Relph's caution that places are often sensed in respect to other people and other places. Consequently, following Massey (1993) and Rose (1995)⁵⁸ I would argue that there is considerable value in visualizing the connection between identity and place as a social construction of belongingness or lack of belongingness to "our" place, but also how that is relationally drawn up in conjunction with perceptions of other places. To understand this, let us look at the literature on spatial imaginary which prioritizes a more critical interpretivist approach to the connection between

⁵⁸ Although Rose and Massey have used the term "sense of place", I would categorize their work under the frame of spatial imaginaries, based on her intellectual influences and discursive approach to the study of place.

identity and places which owes much to the works of Henri Lefebvre (1974) and Edward Said (1979).

Spatial Imaginary

The term “spatial imaginary” is used here to refer to a frame where both identity and place are understood as processes - each drawing upon the other in its construction. Consequently, in this frame, identity is approached through the cultural studies approach of *cultural identification*, where place-based narratives are being drawn upon to discursively represent the cultural identity of a group. Further, in this frame, Lefebvre’s “production of space” (1974) approach is used in understanding place with respect to cultural identification. In other words, apart from materiality and experience, the representation of places is considered to be significant in studying how places are continuously produced. In this frame, place is being discursively produced based on the identification of “us” as opposed to “them”. Further, place is being produced because specific representations of inclusion and exclusion are generated based on identification. While some definitions of the spatial imaginaries consider place internally (Boudreau 2007, Anderson and Taylor 2005, Hage 1996, Lipsitz 2007, Crang 2009, Dempsey, Parker, and Krone 2011), the epistemological approach of scholars such as Said (1979), Massey (1993), Gregory (1995, 2000a, 2000b) and Rose (1995) have influenced the approach in this dissertation to consider place in relational terms for the construction of this concept.

The concept of spatial imaginaries has been previously defined as “mental maps representing a space to which people relate with and with which they identify. They are collectively shared internal worlds of thoughts and beliefs that structure everyday life.” (Boudreau 2007:2596). This is a partial but useful definition - it draws our attention to collective visualizations of a particular place in which social groups are invested as also how these groups are mobilized to structure the place itself. These groups are articulating that this is “their” place⁵⁹ and they have a vision for it, in terms of its boundaries and its usage. Boudreau's (2007) definition invokes an important relationship between how representation shapes the contours and components of the place itself, a common translation of the concept of spatial imaginaries within the literature on nationalism (cf Anderson and Taylor 2005, Hage 1996, Lipsitz 2007) and media studies (Crang 2009). Boudreau’s analysis highlights the manner in which such representations mobilize people to translate talk about place into action to structure place. Her essay explores how Toronto is used as an object of mobilization by different collectives of actors in the context of neo-liberalism. She explores how these different groups present and use their idea of the essential identity of Toronto. This understanding of spatial imaginary as a collective symbol which is used to mobilize others who are similar has also been invoked in the literature on transnational movements (cf Dempsey, Parker, and Krone 2011:208). The attractive aspect of Boudreau’s definition is that the focus on *mobilization of cultural groups based on place-based narratives* makes it possible to articulate questions related to *power in how place is produced through issues of inclusion and exclusion*.

⁵⁹ Such claims are not always focused on the rights to exclusive ownership to the space.

Although this dissertation is interested in Boudreau definition of spatial imaginaries as involving collective mobilizations through discourse and the resulting production of place, here a broader definition is suggested for spatial imaginaries as a study of *how do people use spaces (or places) to identify themselves?* Boudreau's analysis has some limitations, which can be overcome by a return to pioneering work on "imaginative geographies" observed by Edward Said (1979), and the work of social geographers who have been much influenced by him such Doreen Massey (1993), Derek Gregory (1995, 2000a, 2000b) and Gillian Rose (1995). In his magnum opus *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1979) refers to this concept to explain how ideas about Self and Other are constructed through the use of spatial narratives. What is particularly useful to this study was Said's suggestion that this difference is constructed by extrapolating the differential characteristics of Our-Land as opposed to Their-Land to define the Self and the Other respectively. In other words, in this representation, the Self draws from the characteristics of Our Land, which is essentially the inverse of the characteristics of Their Land which defines the Other.

The Saidian treatment corrects three major limitations of Boudreau's envisioning of spatial imaginaries. First, while issues of spatial inclusion and exclusion are important, Boudreau's interpretation restricts its attention on the place itself, rather than what the social group is communicating through the language of place. In contrast, rather than a singular focus on the production of place, where cultural identity is assumed to be static, Said reinforces the idea that *both place and identity are being discursively produced simultaneously*. An important consideration for this

dissertation is to examine how the language of space and place is used to construct social groups through discourse (Sun 2006), or how social groups counter their discursive construction through spatial narratives (Gorman-Murray 2006, 2009).

Second, Said's approach opens up the possibility to *understand places in relational terms* - identification is undertaken not only based on "us" and "our land", but also "them" and "their land". Third, in the Saidian approach, identification with places is understood not only in positive terms, but also, in a Relphian manner, in negative terms. As a result, it becomes possible to *explore the process of identification both in terms of places that the group identifies with, as well as places that the group does not identify with.*

Finally, as Rose (1995), drawing upon Said's work, remarks on the connection between identification and place, *a focus on representation and discursive construction does not indicate that affect and experience of places do not matter.* Boudreau's definition follows a single direction in the connection between representation and experience of place. Her definition emphasized the analysis of how the representation of a particular place ("collective mental maps") by a social group influences the manner in which that place is experienced ("how can we change or not change the place of Toronto?"). However, the inverse of this relationship is also worth exploring - how is it that experiences in a particular place (and its Others) influence the manner in which that place is represented? Consequently, the understanding of spatial imaginary in this dissertation brings under scrutiny the

multiple ways in which social groups use the language of space to collectively identify themselves and how these representations are connected to affect and experience in these places.

After clarifying the theoretical approaches to studying place and identity that are adopted in this dissertation, it is time to turn to a theoretical format which can help shed light on how they are connected and, more significantly, reconnected. Anthony Giddens' theory of distanciation provides a framework to explore the manner in which caste identity and place become connected, disconnected and reconnected.

Distanciation: Locating Place and Caste Identity

Giddens is one of the few contemporary sociological theorists who have considered space and time as central to understanding the organization of social systems as well as social change. For Giddens, not only do space and time constitute the background in which social life unfolds, they are integral to the fundamental organization of the social system, and how power is organized within it. In his analysis of social change Giddens (interview with Rantanen 2005: 69) emphasizes the process of time-space distanciation, or "re-ordering of time and space in relation to the structuring of social relationships and social institutions." Distanciation refers to the ability of the social system to exist beyond the immediate contexts of presence through the restructuring of social relations across various combinations of space and time. Apart from the

manner in which social relations are organized in space and time, distanciation also incorporates how time and space themselves are organized to connect presence and absence (Giddens 1990: 14).

Since the focus of this dissertation is on caste identity and place, let us look at what Giddens has to say about spatiality and distanciation. He suggests that with the emphasis on standardization in modernity, both time and space undergo an emptying of local referents. With the development of standardized mechanical clocks and calendars, “when” is no longer necessarily connected to a “where” (1990:17). Space is emptied because it becomes possible to represent it “without reference to a privileged locale which forms a distinctive vantage-point” (1990: 19). According to Giddens, under conditions of time-space distanciation, it becomes possible to generate universal maps to represent space. He argues that in such cartographies, no one perspective is privileged in the representation of geography. Space is also separated from place. Prior to modernity it was dominated by presence or local activity. Because of distanciation, place becomes “phantasmagorical” (1990:19), or is increasingly influenced by interactions with absent others, and distant influence.

The story of what happens to place with time-space distanciation is only part of the inquiry in this dissertation⁶⁰, and as it happens, the approach preferred here diverges considerably from Giddens’ approach to studying place. That said, his analysis on what happens to social relations, such as means of identifying caste, as connected or not connected to place, is still provocative and relevant to this study. For Giddens,

⁶⁰ The other part of the focus being what happens to caste identity with distanciation.

social relations themselves, which were once tied to, or *embedded*, in place, are progressively disembedded from them. Giddens (1991:2) defines *disembedding* as consisting of “mechanisms which prise social relations free from the hold of specific locales, recombining them across wide time-space distances.” Giddens specifically prioritizes an institutional and phenomenological analysis of disembedding at the expense of a cultural analysis. Giddens explains that disembedding occurs through the mechanisms of symbolic tokens and expert systems. The symbolic token refers to “media of interchange which can be “passed around” without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture.” (Giddens 1990: 22) He offers the example of money as a symbolic token – in his view it is a standardized medium of exchange which is unchanged by any individual or group that handles it. Further, money does not vary temporally or spatially; in fact its use structures, or “binds”, time and space. Expert system refers to how, for mundane activities, such as driving a car, people progressively rely on the expertise of unknown others, such as the engineers who design it.

Bearing in mind the non-linear movement of social change, Giddens offers a parallel concept of *re-embedding* (1990: 79-80). This refers to the pinning down of disembedded social relations to other local conditions of time and place. However, in Giddens’ opinion, unlike the seemingly stable trends of disembedding, these re-connections are relatively ephemeral, and he relegates them as “temporary or partial” (1990: 79). Giddens also notes that tools of communication, such as print media, and particularly electronic media, facilitate distancing, both in terms of disembedding

as well as re-embedding. In this dissertation the focus of analysis is the re-embedding conducted in *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, who use the digital media to facilitate re-embedding of caste identity with place.

While I agree that re-embedding needs to be understood as occurring at specific temporal junctures, Giddens' treatment of this process as being relatively temporary and of less consequence than disembedding is rejected in this dissertation. Although they provide a partial description of some important developments, the terms *disembedding* and *re-embedding* are misleading to a certain extent. Specifically, we need to consider the question that when social relations are disembedded from more intimate spatial contexts, what happens to knowledge generated in these older contexts? For example when the standard calendar was adopted universally to tell time, what happens to older ways of knowing time which are linked to place? They do not fade away from everyone's memory- they often exist simultaneously, although perhaps surreptitiously since they have lost the broader legitimacy they occupied previously. And, at crucial historical junctures they re-emerge in significance, a process which we can categorize as re-embedding. Consequently discussions of distanciation must be supplemented by the following questions: for whom are social relations and place disembedded and/or re-embedded?

Further, Giddens (1990, 1991) explains the connection between disembedding and re-embedding primarily through a phenomenological emphasis. He argues that social agents experience considerable anxiety due to risks associated with time-space

distanciation. As a reaction, Giddens argues, social agents engage in re-embedding social relations in older spatial and temporal contexts in order to generate ontological security. Giddens conceptualizes the significance of re-embedding, and its relationship to disembedding, in a limited manner. This lacuna stems from an analysis which does not take into account the cultural evaluations and representations of the outcomes of disembedding, and restricts itself to the institutional and phenomenological levels. While there is much value in recognizing the institutional nature of disembedding mechanisms and its impact on the experience of individuals experiencing it, to adequately analyze the significance and persistence of re-embedding, it is important to consider how disembedding mechanisms intersect with various cultural processes. It is argued in this thesis that cultural evaluations of the outcomes of disembedded social relations provide an important driving force for the process of their re-embedding in place.

Giddens (1990:1) interrogates modernity⁶¹ at solely the institutional level, and primarily as a discontinuous project⁶² fuelled by distanciation and disembedding. As a

⁶¹ In the *Consequences of Modernity*, Giddens (1990) attributes the dynamism of modernity to time-space distanciation. He further clarifies that he is interested in studying modernity and globalization from the institutional perspective rather than the cultural perspective.

⁶² While modernity is often explained in terms of a radical rupture from the pre-modern (Giddens 1990), in this dissertation I understand it from a perspective of its continuity, or its entanglements (Therborn 2003), with what is categorized as pre-modern. In doing so, I follow a well-established academic tradition of the post-colonial critique of modernity (Fanon 1968, Sarkar 1985, Cohn 1987, Cohn and Dirks 1988, Sangari and Vaid 1990, García Canclini 1989, Appadurai 1996, Bhabha 2004, Dussel 2000, Quijano 2000, Quijano 2007) which challenges the mutually exclusive categorization of the modern and the pre-modern. Theorization within the post-colonial perspective has provided multiple critiques of the linear narrative of modernity as espoused in the West. Scholars (Dussel 2000, Quijano 2000, Quijano 2007, Said 1979) have demonstrated the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of the modern construction of the hegemonic Western European subject in relation to whom all other people and socialities exist as mere objects of knowledge. They have explored how this assumption has actively constructed pre-modern categories as well as assumed their pervasiveness – the Orient itself (Said 1979), religious and caste communalities (Appadurai 1996, Cohn 1987, Cohn and Dirks 1988, Kaviraj 1997, Sarkar 1985), race (Dussel 2000, Quijano 2000), and gender relations (Mani 1990, Sangari and Vaid 1990, Sinha 1999). They also brought to our attention the various ways in which the modern is itself constructed through the pre-modern, be it through acknowledging the construction of the modern Occident as an inverse of pre-modern Others (Said

result, his own cautions about the non-linear movement in the emptying of space and time, and the re-embedding of social relations within them, tend to get obfuscated in the literature. Many scholars, particularly in the fields of globalization (Williams and McIntyre 2001, Brocklehurst 2003, Robinson 2003) and new media studies (Adams 1998, Kynaeslahti 2003), have been quick to focus exclusively on the process of disembedding while discussing distancing. For instance, distancing has previously been erroneously interpreted as indicating a situation where space and time themselves become progressively irrelevant (Kynaeslahti 2003, Robinson 2003). Even those who understand that Giddens is referring to a re-organization of social relations in the context of newer combinations of space and time, tend to present their arguments as if the older organizations of time, or space, and social relations within them cease to matter. For instance, in the globalization literature a common interpretation of distancing is that it causes action or social agents to become disconnected from places (Williams and McIntyre 2001, Brocklehurst 2003, Robinson 2003).

Fortunately, overcoming the limits of Giddens' own presentation, in other parts of the literature, his theoretical ideas have been applied to foreground continuities through a focus on re-embedding (Rodman 1992, Gabbert 2007, Jin and Robey 2008). In particular, scholars have drawn attention to the re-embedding of social relations in

1979), or through disturbing the linear narrative of Western modernity which only acknowledges a mythical Western European pre-modern ancestry while obfuscating the pivotal contributions of major pre-modern cultures (Dussel 2000) as well as of colonized populations (Fanon 1968). From its earliest days, this approach has problematized the emancipatory project of modernity by exposing the violence inherent in modernity and its complicity with colonial violence (Fanon 1968). As a corrective these scholars urge us to examine the "ambiguous double function" (Dussel 2000: 474) of modernity by recognizing both its explicitly rational and implicitly irrational (violent) projects. They have also provided important correctives to the euphoria surrounding globalization by encouraging an exploration of the hybridity (Bhabha 2004, Garcia Canclini 1989) between the modern and the pre-modern, and multiple modernities (Chatterjee 1982).

place (Rodman 1992, Gabbert 2007). Here, it is especially useful to reflect on Rodman's (1992: 647) ethnographic insights, when she suggests that the re-embedding of Vanatau identity to a particular place is being undertaken as a counter to the time-space distancing initiated through colonial processes. As such analyses demonstrate, the cultural evaluation of the consequences of distancing and disembedding motivate the process of re-embedding, which also significantly takes the form of cultural representations. In other words, in addition to studying institutional and ontological factors, these studies demonstrate that it is important to include epistemological analysis of distancing, and the processes of disembedding and re-embedding.

In this dissertation, this parallel process of re-embedding is foregrounded when analyzing the relationship between caste identity and place. In other words, while studying how the connection between caste identity and place become weak is important to understand the context, in this dissertation the greater focus is on studying how, when, why and for whom it becomes important to re-connect them. Further, rather than limiting the analysis to the institutional and ontological sphere to study disembedding, this dissertation prioritizes an epistemological analysis. Consequently, it takes on a more productive enquiry of how disembedded social relations interact with prevailing cultural interpretations to generate tendencies towards the re-embedding of caste identity in place. In pursuing the relationship between disembedding and re-embedding, rather relying on Giddens' explanations of ontological security as a cause for re-embedding, in this

dissertation the preference is to incorporate the consideration of what social geographer Derek Gregory (1989: 206) refers to as the “structures of signification and legitimation”.

In a provocative analysis, social geographer Derek Gregory (1989) presented a spatial challenge to Giddens’ theory of structuration by arguing that he does not consider the symbolic and normative aspects of space. Giddens defines place or locale as “the use of space to provide the settings of interaction” (1984: 119). Gregory argues that Giddens’ conception of space demonstrates a limited understanding of space and place as mere containers for interaction, or as distances to be overcome. For Gregory, such a conceptualization precludes the analysis of the symbolic, particularly the normative aspects of space. Speaking from a critical Lefebvrian perspective, Gregory argues this definition leaves no room for the “production of space” (Lefebvre 1974) which includes a combined analysis of the material, experiential, and representational aspects of space. As a consequence, Gregory argues, structures of signification and legitimation, referring to projects of representation and knowledge-generation, are given short shrift in the analysis of time-space distancing. He makes the case that these structures need to be more fully incorporated in this model.

The approach in this dissertation is sympathetic to much of Gregory’s critique, and also follows his Lefebvrian and Saidian approach to the study of space. However in contrast to his critique, I would argue that while Giddens does consider signification and legitimation in his model of distancing, such as through references to the

symbolic aspects of space and place, his understanding is limited to the experiential rather than representational level. Further, the normative aspects are applied unevenly in his analysis, particularly in his ideas regarding distancing and disembedding.

Within Giddens' own framework, to a certain extent, there is potential to analyze the symbolic associations of spatiality. For instance, in defining locale, Giddens (1984: 118-119, 367) cautions us that apart from its mere physical features, a locale necessarily involves the recognition of this physical structure by its users or observers as a specific context for certain interactions⁶³. For Giddens, these symbolic aspects of space in fact are crucial in the way social agents organize and experience sections of space for interaction. Similarly, he argues that symbolic aspects such as a "sense of place" (Giddens 1984: 367) are important in sustaining ontological security in the context of uncertainty and risks generated through distancing. Rather than arguing that the symbolic aspects of space tend to get "occluded" (Gregory 1989: 206), a fairer assessment would be that it tends to get overshadowed by Giddens' focus on modernity in terms of a discontinuous event and more importantly his institutional analysis of modernity.

The normative aspect of the re-organization of time, space and social relations is also an important, yet curiously incomplete, part of Giddens analysis of modernity. In his analysis of late modernity and disembedding in works such as *The Consequences of*

⁶³ Giddens (1984: 118) explains it in the following way - "It is usually possible to designate locales in terms of their physical properties, either as features of the material world, or more commonly, as combinations of those features and human artefacts. But it is an error to suppose that locales can be described in those terms alone - the same form of error made by behaviourism with regard to the description of human action. A 'house' is grasped as such only if the observer recognizes that it is a 'dwelling' with a range of other properties specified by the modes of its utilization in human activity."

Modernity (1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Giddens' prior emphasis on the connection between power and distancing⁶⁴ is strangely missing. In proposing his theory of structuration, Giddens identifies time and space as being constitutive, rather than containers, of social life, precisely because the way they are organized can determine the degree of control over social agents and activities through the setting of normative standards. Building on Foucault's work, Giddens (1984: 119-162) remarks extensively on the disciplinary potential of both space and time, and how their organization is used to exert disciplinary power over populations. In this capacity, Giddens is very much concerned with the normative representation of social relations in certain temporal-spatial contexts as ideal⁶⁵. But, when it comes to the discussion on modernity and the processes of disembedding and re-embedding, this insight on the normative re-organization of time, space and social relations is passed over very quickly, or not mentioned at all, since he is eager to represent modernity and globalization primarily as being experienced uniformly⁶⁶.

This recognition of the normative aspect of distancing is significant when we try to understand social relations as being disembedded across space and time, particularly through symbolic tokens. In his earlier work on structuration, Giddens (1984) comments on the storage of information as an important aspect of time-space distancing. Here, the classificatory projects of modern nation-states come to mind.

Giddens also identifies such storage of information as normative and instrumental in

⁶⁴ This connection is quite pronounced in his theory of structuration in *The Constitution of Society* (1984: 258-262)

⁶⁵ Consider for instance, Giddens' observations on the routinization and the farming of space in spaces of disciplinary power such as schools.

⁶⁶ However, as Tomlinson (1994) competently demonstrates in his analysis of media and globalization, it is erroneous to assume that such an experience is uniform.

the reproduction of structures of domination. Since in this work, Giddens observations regarding storage of information, distanciation and power are instructive and it is useful to quote him at length:

...of essential importance to the engendering of power, is the storage of authoritative resources. 'Storage' is a medium of binding time-space involving, on the level of action, the knowledgeable management of a projected future and recall of an elapsed past. In oral cultures human memory is virtually the sole repository of information storage. However, as we have seen, memory (or recall) is to be understood not only in relation to the psychological qualities of individual agents but also inhering in the recursiveness of institutional reproduction. Storage here already presumes modes of time-space control, as well as the phenomenal experience of 'lived time', and the 'container' that stores authoritative resources in the community itself. The storage of authoritative and allocative resources may be understood as involving the retention and control of information or knowledge whereby social relations are perpetuated across time-space.

Giddens (1984: 261, emphasis mine)

It is rather unfortunate for the analysis of distanciation that this early emphasis on the normative aspect of distanciation becomes progressively weaker in Giddens' (1990, 1991) later discussions of modernity and disembedding mechanisms, where the latter are supposed to quite neutrally fuel the former.

Gregory's critique raises questions regarding how some representations of space, or even of social relations through space, become more powerful than others, and how this process is connected to time-space distanciation. By prioritizing questions of signification and legitimation, or questions of epistemology, Gregory helpfully challenges Giddens' suggestion that space is emptied due to the development of universal printed maps, by creating representations of space where no particular place is prioritized. Through his discussion of the project of cartography as tied to colonial

ambitions, Gregory correctly points out that map-making is a discursive project⁶⁷ rather than a neutral activity, since it involves the imposition of a certain “geographical imagination” (1989: 209) based on specific politico-economic ways of knowing and representing spaces. The broader lesson for the study of time-space distanciation from Gregory’s critique is that we need to go beyond observing institutional mechanisms and ontological experiences, and consider how the resulting distanciated knowledge is established as the correct way of knowing through interactions with cultural representations. This prompts an analysis of re-embedding that is sensitive to both the role of place in structures of signification and legitimation, as well as how place itself is constructed by drawing on social relations.

From the perspective of this dissertation, let us consider how caste identity undergoes time-space distanciation. As will be elaborated in the next section on the review of the caste literature, caste identity was progressively disconnected (or to use Giddens’ original emphasis, ‘disembedded’) from previous spatial contexts through the institutional mechanisms of classificatory projects of the colonial state, the related mechanism of the logic of enumeration, and the creation of classificatory categories constructed by the colonial and post-colonial states for affirmative action. Together, they created a distanciated body of knowledge, a symbolic token as it were, about caste identity. It is not the case that this distanciated body no longer has spatial contexts. Rather, for identifying caste, new spatial contexts, such as the national or

⁶⁷ For instance, let us consider the discursive struggle involved in the manner in which the political boundary of India is cartographically represented today. Depending on which place-based perspective is prioritized, the northern border may or may not include Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Political maps generated in India would include this area within the borders of India, while political maps generated in Pakistan, or its allies such as the United States are not likely to include this region. This cartographic representation varies based on privileging of place determined by geo-political interests, and may well shift back and forth over time.

state contexts, are created and gain significance and legitimacy. However, we must bear in mind that the older spatial contexts of caste identity do not cease to exist, and indeed it is their revival in significance that we can study as a case of re-embedding.

For this dissertation, a further line of enquiry which stems from Gregory's observations is to study the cultural processes by which this distanced knowledge enters other frameworks of knowledge about caste. How is the distanced body of knowledge about caste read and represented by drawing on older frameworks of knowing caste? As we shall see in the review of the literature on caste, the distanced categorization of caste based on affirmative action is read through the older ways of knowing caste, and these caste categories offer a new language for the continuance of discrimination.

In addition, Gregory (1989) also indicates the need to analyze counter-representations in an analysis of distancing. Following a critical social constructionist approach, he also points out an additional, and very salient, critique about the different ways in which different social agents critically "read" or interpret maps which are often contradictory to the official representations. What is of importance in this observation is that it makes a case for studying an institutional disembedding mechanism by placing it at the intersection of multiple cultural processes. This interaction between distanced knowledge about caste identity and cultural representations about the inferiority and superiority of caste groups forms a crucial backdrop for the project of re-embedding of caste identity in place.

The disembedded way of identifying caste is legitimated through the State machinery, yet the older forms of knowing caste, which are connected to more intimate places, also continue to exist simultaneously. At particular historical junctures the older forms gain a certain momentum through specific projects of re-embedding. These projects of re-embedding establish a mutual connection between caste identity and place: caste identity is constructed through reference to place, and the production of place draws on caste-identity.

The section that follows provides review of the literature on caste identity and the variations in its association with place.

Caste

The framework of distancing is well-suited to analyzing the identification of caste from the perspective of the nation-state. This section reviews the literature on caste with a view to applying the concepts of distancing, embedding and disembedding to place and caste identification. After reviewing the literature on caste identity and identification, the embeddedness between caste identification and place are discussed. Subsequently, the literature is reviewed to discuss the formation of a disembedded knowledge about caste from the nation-state's perspective. One must bear in mind, however, that in this section the concept of disembedding is being applied as originally envisioned by Giddens. However, as discussed in chapters 3, 4

and 5, this framework only provides a partial explanation when the specific case under consideration is taken into account.

Studying Caste as Identity and Identification

The hierarchical approach to studying caste has been exemplified by Louis Dumont's [(1966)1970] structuralist epic *Homo Hierarchus*, which explains the caste system as a ritual hierarchy in which interdependent castes are ranked based on their relative purity and pollution in comparison to each other. Over time, the understanding of caste as a single and rigid hierarchy, has been challenged within the academic literature, particularly from the postcolonial perspective, and to a lesser extent in ethnographic studies (Fuller 1997, Berreman 1992, Gupta 2000, Gupta 2004), which noted the inadequacy of an exclusive reliance on the Hindu textual understanding of caste. This work indicated that such an understanding did not take into account the tremendous variation of castes on the ground⁶⁸ or the temporal mutability of the caste system and castes⁶⁹. Further, more recent scholarship has suggested a more fluid approach to caste (cf Berreman 1992, Mencher 1992, Khare 1984, Fuller 1997, Gupta 2000, Gupta 2004) which takes into account how different castes (and members of

⁶⁸ The disjuncture of this fourfold *varna* classification and the castes as they existed on the ground (or *jatis*), is something that scholars were aware of from the time of early colonial studies on caste. For instance, the large number of castes categorized as “untouchables” (who use the self-referential term Dalit to identify themselves) were not included in the classification although they were an integral part of society (MN Srinivas 1970). This classification also excluded the tribal population of India.

⁶⁹ From the late 1980s onwards, postcolonial scholars have stressed on the contribution of British colonial knowledge production to this understanding of caste, arguing that this was used to legitimate the British governance of India.

those castes) perceive their own position in the hierarchy⁷⁰. Gupta (2005) in particular urges academics to approach caste as cultural identity rather than only as a hierarchy, arguing that lay interpretations of the caste system and caste identity are an important part of the analysis of caste. *In this dissertation, the focus is on caste identification - partly the manner in which others draw on hierarchical understandings to identify a particular caste, but more significantly the manner in which these identity constructions are contested by counter-representations by members of that caste*⁷¹.

For the purposes of this study on caste identification, Dumont's concept of substantialized castes is of great importance in understanding contemporary collective caste identities. Dumont used this term to refer to what he perceived to be a new type of relationship between castes in modern India. He argued that while castes were traditionally bound together through ritual interdependence based on obligatory exchange of services and patronage, over time their relationship had become increasingly characterized by competition with each other⁷². He observed that

⁷⁰ Berreman (1992: 91) provides a forceful critique of this approach. He argues that analyzing caste through the sole perspective of the religious textual interpretation is similar to an analysis of contemporary race relations in the US on the basis of only the US Constitution or the Declaration of Independence.

⁷¹ Although the emphasis in this study is on studying caste identification, it is not as if the hierarchy ceases to matter. The hierarchical aspects of caste continue to be important in the organisation of daily life in India. For instance, something as basic as the consumption of food is organized according to caste. The common association of India with vegetarianism stems from its dominance in the hierarchical aspect of the caste system, in which vegetarian food is associated with the purity of higher ranking castes and non-vegetarian food with lower ranking castes.

⁷² Dumont defined substantialization as the "transition from a fluid, structural universe in which the emphasis is on interdependence and in which there is no privileged level, to firm units, to a universe of impenetrable blocks, self-sufficient, essentially identical and in competition with one another, a universe in which caste appears as a collective individual (in the sense we have given to this word), as a substance." (1966)1970: 222). Some scholars rejected the process of substantialization as not being a "characteristic" (Leach 1960) part of caste, and heralded such a substitution of competition for interdependence as the death of caste. However, others have argued that rather than the destruction of caste, substantialization actually contributes to the strengthening of caste, primarily through an emphasis on caste identity (Dirks 2001: 7, Fuller 1997: 12-13, Deliege 1996: 81, 90). The shift in the village economy from an interdependence of castes to economic contractual relations prompted Srinivas (2003) to proclaim the death of caste as a system. However, he clarified that substantialization had also led to the growth as well as solidification of individual castes.

substantialized castes competed with each other “as collective individuals” [Dumont (1966)1970: 222] for access to economic and political resources at local, regional and national levels.

Some scholars (Béteille 1997, Parry 2007) have correctly cautioned that the concept of substantialization may prompt an analysis that is based on a false assumption of internal homogeneity within each caste, and it may inadequately theorize internal differentiation based on occupation, education and income within each caste. While recognizing this differentiation, in this dissertation, I am more sympathetic to Fuller's (1997) more complex characterization of substantialization as an inherently self-contradictory process, wherein increasing internal differentiation within each caste accompanies heightened normative emphasis on the difference between castes.

Further, some of the literature seems to suggest that we take a broader view of substantialization which focuses upon the tendency to form competitive groups whose composition varies over time, rather than assume that each caste always becomes a substantialized entity as a single competitive group. These scholars insist on considering the broader political context within which castes operate. Ishii (2007) and Fitzgerald (1996) have suggested approaching substantialization as a partial shift, or a process. As Ishii (2007) has pointed out, substantialization is best seen as a process that is temporally specific and does not follow a unilinear direction. In a study of a village in Nepal, Ishii observed that at certain temporal junctures, a caste was mobilizing itself as a substantialized group in itself. However, at a later point in time,

the same caste was mobilizing itself to be a part of a broad coalition of castes, where that coalition functioned as a substantialized group. Interestingly, Parry (2007: 487) has reflected on the need for studying the interaction between the process of substantialization of caste groups (a substantialized group comprising all other castes in competition with former untouchable castes) and the substantialization of religious groups (a substantialized group of all Hindus in competition with Muslims).

Following their lead, in this dissertation, I understand substantialization as a process, and a partial one at that. It is important to study identification in light of mobilizations to create substantialized caste blocs. In different political contexts, which vary over time, these caste blocs vary in composition: at one point in time the bloc could be limited to one caste, while at another point it could consist of a combination of castes. This process also interacts with the formation of religion based on substantialized blocs. When studying this process, we need to consider that due to increasing differentiation within each caste, it is likely that not all members of a caste understand and represent their caste position uniformly (neither at a single moment in time, nor unvaryingly over their individual lifetimes). In other words, at any point in time, different interest groups within the same caste may adopt different substantialization strategies. Consequently, within the same caste, we may observe sections that highlight alliances with other similarly placed castes and call for a complex and selective erasure of caste boundaries, to sections which seek to highlight differences between their caste and all others. Since I wish to avoid the assumption of an illusory homogeneity within a caste, this dissertation does not claim that this study of

identification in one caste-based digital group is an indicator of how all members of that caste identify themselves. Rather, I am interested in studying the process through which this particular online group is engaging in caste identification. Indeed as we can observe in the study, even within this one digital group, identification is a contested process.

Embeddedness of Caste Identity in Spatial Contexts

In India, space is often read, or understood, from the perspective of collectively generated caste-based meanings. Consequently, space becomes significant for identifying caste. On the one hand, the structure of and access to space is based on caste identity. The maintenance of social distance between castes was often implemented through rules about physical distance between members of different castes. To take one example, the Namboodiri caste of Kerala stringently enforced elaborate rules regarding the amount of spatial distance to be maintained between themselves and other castes that they considered to be inferior (Ghurye 1969: 9-10). Ensuring the correct distance from the members of other castes in physical space continues to be an important means through which relations between different caste groups are established and reproduced. This can be most clearly observed through studies of residential segregation in India. Ethnographic village studies of the 1950s and 1960s in India demonstrate that space within a village was often clearly demarcated along caste lines⁷³. Similarly, research indicates that urban areas in

⁷³ For instance, in his study of Sripuram village in Tamil Nadu, Beteille (1965: 25 - 39) notes that the village was divided into three well-defined physical segments – the *agraharam* (brahmin quarter), the *kudiana* (streets where the non-Brahmin caste Hindus reside), and the *cheri* (Dalit residential area). Beteille notes that at that time the

contemporary India continue to be characterized by caste-based residential segregation (Singh and Vithayathil 2012, Dupont 2004, Trivedi 1996, Gandhi 1983). Contemporary India continues to be marked by struggles over access to space based on caste⁷⁴.

On the other hand, caste identity is also shaped in reference to its spatial context. Castes are identified within specific territorial contexts. As mentioned earlier, the fourfold textual division of caste as *varna* was not observed in all regions in India (Jaiswal 1997:7). Further, caste groups were territorial in nature – not only are specific castes found in specific geographic areas of India, caste groups often identify themselves (and distinguish themselves from others) through reference to specific geographical regions. For instance, Rashmi Pant (1987) observes that caste groups have specific caste names within a particular spatial context – for instance, a Brahmin is referred to as a Pant in the Kumaon region. She also notes that when members of these caste groups migrated within India, they would indicate their region of origin in their caste name⁷⁵ as a means of identifying themselves.

Other studies also indicate that although caste was initially perceived by early Western observers as a single and homogenous system of stratification, there existed

Agraharam was organized as an exclusive space for Brahmins – while entry was denied to all Non-Brahmins (including those residing in the village), it was open to Brahmins from all parts of India. Further, even within these broad cleavages, residents resided along caste lines. For instance, within the Dalit *cheri*, members of the 2 main Dalit castes resided on separate streets.

⁷⁴ For instance, in 2010, upper caste villagers in a village in the state of Tamil Nadu erected a barbed wire fence around public roads to prevent access to Dalit villagers, stating that frequent use of these roads by the latter would pollute the sanctity of an adjoining graveyard used by the former group (Shaji 2010).

⁷⁵ To explain this phenomenon Pant (1987:154) provides the following example - “Thus, a Brahman who in Kumaon was a Pant, in Benares would refer to himself as a ‘Deshastha Brahman’; while a Joshi Brahman of Kumaon could in Benares call himself by his section and geography as Kanoujiya Kurmachali, particularly as the Joshis of the plains were considered very inferior.”

tremendous variation in the valuation of different caste groups based on the spatial context in which they were located (Srinivas 1970⁷⁶, Appadurai 1996). It is not unusual for a caste group to be considered to be of middling rank in one geographic area, while it is ranked in a lower category in another area. For instance, Raheja (1988: 4) notes that the Gujar caste is accorded higher ritual status in the Upper Doab region, as compared to the Gujar caste in other parts of North India where they occupy a lower ritual status. *While such embeddedness is relevant, in this dissertation, since both caste identity and place are understood in processual terms, I am much more interested in exploring when, how and why such connections are highlighted, and re-embedded.* To understand this we must first reflect on modern disembedding mechanisms and their effect on the connection between caste identity and place.

Disembedding of Caste Identity from Spatial Contexts

In this section, I examine the time space-distanciation of caste identities due to multiple processes. In other words, here I am exploring how caste identity has been stretched across spans of space, beyond their local contexts, through modern, institutional disembedding mechanisms. Caste identity has been selectively disembedded from its local spatial contexts through multiple processes – Orientalist attempts at standardization of caste classification; the logic of enumeration; and

⁷⁶ As MN Srinivas (1970:67) observed: “it is not only that the hierarchy is nebulous here and there, and that castes are mobile over a period of time, but the hierarchy is also to some extent local.”

classification based on affirmative action policies of the colonial and post-colonial state. These processes are described in the paragraphs that follow.

An important institutional disembedding mechanism which abstracted caste from its spatial contexts was its encounter with the Orientalist project of classification (Cohn 1987, Pant 1987, Cohn and Dirks 1988, Appadurai 1996) – a project which was in accordance with the modern distinctions regarding subject (the modern colonizers) and object (the pre-modern colonized) of knowledge (Dussel 2000, Quijano 2000, Quijano 2007, Said 1979). As can be observed from the discussion that follows, the primary effort here was to squeeze a rather messy, very context-specific and extensive system of classification such as caste into its modern variant - a neater system of classification, capable of being used and applied without having to take spatial and social contexts into account (Pant 1987:151) - a body of knowledge which could be handled with ease by anyone⁷⁷. Various post-colonial scholars have demonstrated the consequences of the encounter between the very modern classificatory and exoticizing colonial gaze and the pre-existing system of knowing caste in India. Orientalist knowledge production about the peoples and communities that populated the newly conquered colonies⁷⁸ (Dirks 2001, Bayly 1999, Gupta 2004,

⁷⁷ This has been identified as a characteristic tendency of the modern nation-state by another great scholar of modernity, Zygmunt Bauman (1989). Speaking in the context of the oppression faced by Jewish peoples, he identifies racism as a specifically modern phenomenon, which was, among other things, based on a shift in the model of the nation state – from a pre-modern “game-keeper”, which acknowledges difference yet does not intervene to establish separate boundaries; to a modern “gardener”, which not only is preoccupied with difference but intervenes to the maximum possible extent to establish and maintain mutually exclusive boundaries between social groups.

⁷⁸ (Bayly 1999: 371-2) posits that existing caste-building tendencies in pre-colonial India were reified by the colonial state’s emphasis on ethnographic data collection and classification. She argues that caste boundaries were reinforced through the adoption of caste-specific legal codes and administrative practices. Apart from providing a direct justification for colonialism, the knowledge of caste, in the form of the caste census, was also essential to the control and management of the Indian population. The British response to the diversity of caste resulted in

Quigley 1993, Cohn and Dirks 1988, Pant 1987, Cohn 1987)⁷⁹ as well as colonial practices of governance such as the caste census⁸⁰ contributed to the envisioning of caste as a pan-Indian, unitary hierarchy, in contrast to the diversity of castes on the ground in their specific spatial contexts⁸¹. For instance, by examining colonial census records, Pant (1987: 152) demonstrates that colonial administrators acted on the need to standardize what appeared to them to be a baffling range of castes through strategies such as the removal of secondary additions to the caste name which indicated their locality or profession, thus rolling into a single unit very different castes, which had previously been embedded in distinct spatial contexts.

Another distinct, but very closely related, institutional mechanism through which caste was disembedded from its spatial contexts, is what Sudipto Kaviraj (1997: 328) refers to as the “logic of enumeration”. This mechanism was introduced by the modern states’ project of “knowing” its population through counting bodies. In comparison to previously fluid communities, individuals and communities must be

practices where classificatory “pigeon-holes” (Pant 1987:154) imposed a considerable degree of rigidity on a much more fluid system that existed on the ground. Pant notes that the British effort at classification itself led to changes within the caste system, since colonial officials often dealt with the confusing array of castes through standardization (for instance, lumping together castes which had similar names, but very different ritual status and occupations) and recording only castes that constituted proportionately large sections of the population.

⁷⁹ For instance, these scholars argue that, to a significant degree, British knowledge production about their colonial subjects through administrative literature and the lay Western imagination contributed to the hegemonic position of Brahmins in India, a position which had not been accepted uniformly and unequivocally on the ground in different geographical areas in India. The colonial understanding of caste not only assumed that there was a single unambiguous interpretation of the varna system, but also that Sanskrit scholars (from the Brahmin caste) were the only authentic source of knowledge on caste (Quigley 1993: 16). For instance, (Gupta 2004: xii) notes the reliance of British colonizers on the Brahminical view of caste as the correct interpretation of culture and custom, (ex in Sir Henry Maine’s drawing up of legal codifications) . (Bayly 1999: 371) notes that this literature contributed to the expansion and reification of the pollution barrier (the idea that physical contact with lower ranking castes would make members of the higher ranking castes impure – something that was taken for granted in academic works such as *Homo Heirarchus*) by the end of the 19th century.

⁸⁰ The colonial census had the unintended effect of providing a route for upward mobility, and it was utilized by many castes to petition for a change in status categorization (Srinivas 1970: 18).

⁸¹ Appadurai (1996:127) refers to this as a situation where “human groups (castes) are treated to a considerable extent as abstractable from the regional and territorial contexts in which they function” starting in the British colonial era.

counted and mapped (specific enumerated bodies fill particular spaces) into distinct and mutually exclusive categories. In the colonies, this logic was also translated in very specific ways, particularly through the colonial caste census. In the Orientalist gaze, where assumptions of biological racial differences between the colonizer and colonized were taken for granted, the basic unit of political activity was assumed to be the religious or caste community (as opposed to the individual in the West). Consequently, as Appadurai (1996) demonstrates, the enumerative logic, or the power of statistics, was particularly strong in the colonial state's imagination because of a justificatory function – the numerical size of communities was utilized as an important tool for the formulation of policy in colonial India. As both Kaviraj and Appadurai point out, in response to the colonial state's gaze, this logic was adapted by caste communities themselves (Appadurai 1996, Kaviraj 1997). Consequently, the gaze bequeathed a specific type of political agency to caste communities – they started to think of and mobilize themselves around the idea of enumerated (how many of us are there?) and mapped (how far are we spread?) entities, abstracted from local spatial contexts.

A third institutional mechanism through which caste is disembedded from place and re-embedded in national and state level contexts is that of the affirmative action policies of the nation state. It is not that pan-Indian contexts for caste identities had not been constructed earlier (through the Hindu textual interpretation of caste and its Orientalist classification by colonial regimes), or that these ways of knowing caste are disconnected from the construction of affirmative action policies themselves. And, as

will become clear through the analysis in this chapter, it is not as if these older contexts of caste disappear. However, through the logic of enumeration (how does the modern nation-state know its subjects by creating social groups as the focus of social policy, and consequently how do the subjects know themselves and others), this way of knowing caste and these spatial contexts of caste have become increasingly legitimized. More importantly, this distanced body of knowledge intersects with these older cultural interpretations based on the previous pan-Indian understandings of caste, such as the textual four fold classification enumerated in Hindu religious texts.

As explained in the introductory chapter, affirmative action in India has primarily taken the form of reservations or quotas. Currently, affirmative action policies in India are focused on three broad categories - the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) - for whom special access provisions have been instituted in education, government employment and electoral politics. The term “backwards” may also be used refer to a combination of all three identificatory categories⁸², although it is more likely to be used to refer to the first two categories. Those who completely fall outside the purview of these policies are frequently identified as the “forwards”, again both by the state as well as in general parlance.

⁸² (Galanter 1978b) provides an excellent history of the term “backward” and how at different points in time it has been used to refer to a varying list of castes, both in the official discourse of the state, as well as popular discourse. Froystad (2010) has also made interesting observations about the shifting contexts of conversation where “backward” and “scheduled castes” may be used synonymously.

Interacting with each other, these three institutional processes – 1. Orientalist caste classification 2. logic of enumeration 3. categorization based on affirmative action - also significantly influenced the political imaginary (Dirks 2001: 236, Appadurai 1996) of the nationalist discourse as well as post-independence democratic politics. As Appadurai (1996) notes, although the caste census was discontinued after 1931, it had given root to “the idea of politics as the contest of essentialized and enumerated communities” (Appadurai 1996: 131), which continues in contemporary Indian politics.

Further, these institutional mechanisms create a distanced body of knowledge about caste. This body of knowledge was a symbolic token, an institutional disembedding mechanism that (Giddens 1990:22) defines as “media of interchange which can be “passed around” without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups that handle them at any particular juncture.” This distanced body of knowledge standardizes knowledge about castes which is frozen with respect to space-time – it appears to be invariant regardless of spatial or temporal contexts. This body of knowledge is also invariant according to who handles it – the state, the caste members themselves, different caste groups, although they do engage in efforts to change this classification.

Some scholars such as (deZwart 2000: 35) have argued that the affirmative action policies of the post-colonial state have reinforced the caste system in post-independence India. Here, it would be wise to go back to the work of scholars such as

Shah (1993) and Alam (1999) who have demonstrated that a claim for political, social and economic resources based on substantiated caste identities does not imply a reinforcement of the entire caste system, particularly when it can become the basis for challenging caste-based inequalities. Dudley-Jenkins (2003) has also provided an interesting analysis of caste identification based on the affirmative action policies of the state, where she seeks to answer the question as to whether these policies have ended up reinforcing the very differences they were meant to address. She demonstrates a dual movement - while caste differences are reinforced, in some cases these distanced caste categories are also consciously embraced in an effort to challenge prevailing caste inequalities by some of the most disenfranchised caste and tribal groups. While I am sympathetic to much of Dudley-Jenkins observations, in this thesis I draw on Aloysius (2011) response to her work: any consideration of state-based identification through these categories must also observe prevailing older and newer cultural discourses which legitimate caste inequality.

In other words, it is important to consider how this symbolic token (distanced body of institutional knowledge about caste) interacts with prevailing and new cultural interpretations which legitimate caste inequality through caste-based stigma. In recent years, scholars have started to observe that classificatory terms based on affirmative action policies, such as forwards, backwards, SC, ST and OBC are read through the lens of superiority and inferiority and result in a coded, yet stigmatizing, discourse (Still 2013, Gudavarthy 2012, Froystad 2010, Jodhka and Newman 2007, Vasavi 2006, Mitra Channa 2005, Dudley-Jenkins 2003) involving these categories. In part

this discourse draws on older language of caste and draws upon the perceptions of purity of blood and natural intelligence as being inherently distributed unequally based on biological differences between castes (Still 2013, Gudavarthy 2012, Froystad 2010, Vasavi 2006, Mitra Channa 2005). However, as Jodhka and Newman (2007) have pointed out, this stigmatizing discourse also incorporates more recent understandings of caste drawing on neo-liberal global logic which portrays affirmative action as promoting inefficiency and those who are classified in distanced categories such as SC, ST, OBC and the blanket term “backward” as inherently lacking merit. *The interaction between the institutional mechanisms - classification of colonial and post-colonial state and enumeration - and their cultural interpretations creates, at specific temporal junctures, the impetus for the re-embedding of caste identity with place.*

Hypothesis and Empirical Questions

Hypothesis and sub-hypothesis

This dissertation extends Giddens’ major hypothesis regarding distanciation to the study of caste identity and place. Specifically this study tests that:

In the context of heightened time-space distancing, ways of identifying caste become disembedded from places they were intimately tied to, and can only be partially and temporarily re-embedded in these places.

Due to various processes associated with time-space distancing (classification and logic of enumeration) caste relations of identification, are disembedded, or “lifted out of local contexts of interaction” and reorganized “across indefinite spans of time-space”. Clearly, such disembedding creates new spatial contexts in which caste relations and caste groups are known (or identified), and Giddens’s analysis has contributed significantly to our understanding of time-space relations as constitutive of power. However, although he dwells briefly on re-embedding, the (experiential rather than representational) production of space, and some structures of signification and legitimation, these aspects often tend to get overshadowed in Giddens’ discussions of analysis of time-space distancing.

The argument here is that through the interaction of institutional mechanisms and cultural processes, disembedding mechanisms provide the impetus for a re-embedding of caste relations within the older spatial contexts of interaction. Further, the very concepts of disembedding and re-embedding need to be understood as shifts in the legitimacy of multiple narratives whereby social relations are known through place. To do so, I study how and why members of a caste-based online group (*The Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*) re-embed their caste identity (Thiyya) in the region of

Malabar. In this process, these members are simultaneously constructing Thiyya identity as well as the place of Malabar itself.

For convenience, I break the major hypothesis into two sub-hypotheses that guide this study:

- i. Identification of caste is no longer based on representation and experience of place, and is only temporarily and partially re-embedded in place:

This sub-hypothesis enables testing whether the creation of disembedded caste categories necessarily involves the lack of significance of older and more intimate spatial contexts for representing caste identity. How is caste identified in situations where cultural evaluations about the inherent superiority/ inferiority of caste groups interact with the symbolic token of a distanced body of knowledge about caste that privileges newer spatial contexts? How does this interaction provide a driving force for the re-embedding caste identity in places, or in other words, for the identification of caste through reference to older spatial contexts? Such an identification of caste relies not just on the experience of place as argued by Giddens, but also on the representation of such places.

- ii. The production of place, through discursive representation, is no longer based on caste identification:

This sub-hypothesis tests whether caste identity continues to influence the discursive production of place. Giddens has not adequately pursued the connection between the symbolic aspects of place and power in terms of representation of social groups. Through this sub-hypothesis, the aim is to test whether caste identification can influence place. More specifically, to what extent can such identification influence the manner in which the physical boundaries of place are conceived? Further, how does the identification of caste influence the manner in which membership in place - of the Self as well as of Others - is claimed?

Empirical Questions

In order to establish that place is not uncoupled from caste identification, their mutual influence on each other is studied in this dissertation. Older ways of knowing place continue to be significant for caste identification. Consequently, this dissertation involves a study of how members of the group re-embed their caste identity in place, using narratives about place (Malabar and its “Others”) to re-construct their Thiyya caste identity in light of disembedding. Similarly, caste identification continues to be a significant influence on the manner in which meaning is assigned to a place, contributing to the production of place. Caste identification influences the manner in which meaning is assigned to Malabar and the way in which physical place of

Malabar is shaped. The group members represent a close connection between what happens to the place of Malabar and what happens to the Thiyyas. More significantly, disembedding processes and caste identification also influence the manner in which group members envision that the place of Malabar should be shaped and who should be included or excluded from this place.

Drawing from the two sub-hypotheses, the following empirical questions will be focused on in the dissertation:

- a. How do members of this online group identify their caste based on how they understand and experience Malabar (and its “Others”)?
- b. Discursive Production of place: How do members of this online group envision the area of Malabar, based on their caste identification?

These empirical questions will be addressed separately in the two analytical chapters (Ch 4, 5) of the dissertation.

Outline of Remaining Chapters

Data and Methodology: In this chapter the methodology used in the dissertation is discussed, specifically the ethnographic approach to studying spatial imaginaries. It also includes a discussion of peculiarities of online ethnography, which has utilized to study this digital group.

The Spatial Imaginaries of Identifying Caste: Distanciation and Re-embedding Thiyya identity in Malabar: The first empirical question is the focus of this chapter. It

involves a study of how members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* experience time-space distancing, specifically the disembedding of caste identity from place. An immediate impetus for the formation of this online group is anxiety generated around caste identification by the nation-state (identification as Ezhavas). In this context, the Ezhava caste is constructed as a significant caste Other by many members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Next, this chapter includes an analysis of how, in the context of these disembedding mechanisms, members re-embed Thiyya identity with the place of Malabar. They identify Thiyya through a complex mixture of positive and negative associations with the region of Malabar and its geographical “Other”, South Kerala. In doing so, members of the group draw on their differential experiences as Thiyyas, within Malabar as well as places outside of Malabar. The social and cultural capital which mediates their experience of Malabar very often does not translate well when they experience places outside Malabar.

The Spatial Imaginaries of Place: Reconstructing Boundaries and Belongingness of Malabar: In this chapter focus is placed on the second empirical question. It includes an analysis of how caste-based identification plays a significant role in the production of the place of Malabar, and how caste based mobilization has the potential to influence the shaping of the physical place of Malabar itself. The members of the group are invested in events within the physical place of Malabar, particularly since they experience a conflation of the disadvantages of caste as well as regional location. Many members argue that a key means to addressing challenges faced by Thiyyas is through a greater policy focus on the area of Malabar itself. Here we can observe a conflation of a regional mobilization alongside that of caste mobilization, with a view

to produce the place of Malabar. More significantly, as a reaction to the distanced caste identities, some members envision drawing boundaries to membership within Malabar as a means to maintain the group boundary of the Thiyyas themselves. Anxiety over caste identification by the nation-state (identification as Ezhavas) prompts these members to make a case against what they perceive to be the colonization of Malabar land. In the light of this way of being identified by the nation-state, it becomes important for these group members that physical regional separation be maintained between the Thiyyas and their caste Others (Ezhavas).

Conclusion: Here the preceding chapters are tied together and summarized. It includes a reflection on the implications of this dissertation for Giddens's theory of time-space distanciation. Specifically, an argument is made for a renewed focus on re-embedding, production of space, and attention to the structures of signification and legitimation through a study of the interaction between institutional mechanisms and cultural representations. The implications of this dissertation for the study of caste online and offline will also be discussed.

Chapter 3: Research Design: Studying Spatial Imaginaries through Ethnography

In this dissertation, Giddens' hypothesis regarding distanciation is extended to the study of caste identity and place. Specifically the study tests that in the context of heightened time-space distanciation, ways of identifying caste become disembedded from places they were intimately tied to, and can only be partially and temporarily re-embedded in these places.

In other words, the focus is on studying the process of re-connecting, or *re-embedding*, caste identity and place, in the aftermath of their disconnection, or *disembedding*, from each other. In studying this problem, it is crucial that we consider how, why and for whom it becomes important to re-connect caste identity and place.

In the previous chapter, I clarified that the focus of the investigation bears primarily on the representation of caste identity and place, although the experience of caste in place is not completely outside the pale of the problem. A process-based view of both caste identity and place are adopted here: the focus in this dissertation is on understanding the *becoming* of both caste identity and place through their imaginative linkage with each other. The attempt is to study how and why caste identity and place are imaginatively and collectively produced through reference to each other.

In other words, the dissertation is trying to capture the spatial imaginaries of caste identification. The project examines two specific research problems:

- a. how and why is the identification of caste imaginatively constructed through references to the representation (and experience) of place?
- b. how and why is place imaginatively constructed through a reference to caste identification?

This chapter provides details regarding the research design of the study, and comprises of three sections. Section 1 contains a discussion regarding the methodology used for the study. Section 2 offers an elaboration of the processes of data collection and data analysis. In the final Section, an introduction to the study participants is provided.

Methodology: Ethnographic Approach to an online group

Studies of spatial imaginaries, or the mutual articulation of space and identity, have conventionally relied on discourse analysis as a method (cf Anderson and Taylor 2005, Bailly 1993, Boudreau 2007, Cameron 2008, Crang 2009, Dempsey et al. 2011, Eperjesi 2004, Gregory 2000a, Gregory 2000b, Hage 1996, Larner 1998, Lipsitz 2007, Said 1979, Whatmore and Thorne 1998). In contrast, in this project, the methodology of ethnography is adopted to study the spatial imaginaries of caste identification. Here, the collective imaginative construction of caste identity and place is examined through the study of an online group.

As a methodology, ethnography is particularly well suited to the study of spatial imaginaries since the aim is to generate what Creswell (1998: 60-61) refers to as a “holistic, cultural portrait of a social group”. As Creswell explains, ethnography employs a combination of different methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and collecting narrative myths and documents. In this methodology, the priority is on understanding the meanings that a social group attributes to its language, behavior and social interactions. Through the use of ethnography, therefore, we can study what the spatial imaginaries of the chosen group are, how they are generated through collective representations, and their significance for the group and its members. Baszanger and Dodier (1997) identify the study of representations and their utilization in social interaction to be a crucial feature of contemporary ethnographies:

Beyond any methodical planning of observations, the fieldworker must remain open in order to discover the elements making up the markers and the tools that people mobilize in their interactions with others and, more generally, with the world. By markers, we mean representations of the world, or normative expectations, but also the linguistic and para-linguistic resources that are displayed in contact with the environment...

Baszanger and Dodier (1997: 9)

Therefore, an ethnography provides a good methodology to study not only the ‘what’ of a spatial imaginary, but also the ‘how’, or the process through which it is constructed on a group as part of mundane interactions. Through the attention to the meanings members attribute to these representations, ethnography also facilitates an understanding of ‘why’ a spatial imaginary emerges in the first instance.

Indeed ethnography is a methodology that is particularly effective in understanding the ‘why’ or the significance of spatial imaginaries for the people who either create them or are subjected to them. Another characteristic feature of ethnography is the expectation that the researcher will describe the representations and connect them to a variety of contexts. This involves juxtaposing the group’s spatial imaginaries against the historical and cultural background in which they occur (Creswell 1998: 60-61, Baszanger and Dodier 1997: 10). In addition, an attention to contexts in ethnography is also understood, especially where representations are concerned, as a recognition of the audience(s) towards whom they are directed (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 126).

It has even been argued that representations and imaginative constructions are now central to the business of ethnography. Appadurai (1996: 31) observes that in a global and modernizing world, imagination has gained an unprecedented salience in social life. He identifies the *imagination as a social practice* in contemporary times, something that emerges from the combination of media outputs (the image), imagined communities (the imagined) and collective aspirations (the imaginary). In this context, Appadurai (1996: 54-64) argues that ethnography itself has to change: “complex, partly imagined lives” now make for primary material in ethnographies. In evaluating this formulation of the imagination as a social practice, Mankekar (2008: 153) reminds us of the need to consider that such imagination is not unfettered. Imagination has a dialectical relationship with what Mankekar calls the socius - how

and what is imagined is shaped by structural locations, which in turn affect the limits and form of imagination.

Emergence is an important characteristic in ethnography as a methodology (Baszanger and Dodier 1997, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Boellstorff et al. 2012) . For instance, Baszanger and Dodier (1997: 9) discuss the question of emergence with respect to the data collection procedures in ethnography, and characterize the “*in situ*” nature of this methodology. They argue that the ethnographer has to display a remarkable openness to new data. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) outline how ethnography is marked by emergence at almost all stages of the research, starting from the choice of research problems and settings at the research design stage, to the iterative and continuous process of data analysis.

Although it is often assumed that no priori theoretical preparation is undertaken before an ethnography, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 25) argue that in fact this methodology is not incompatible with theory testing or development. Indeed they argue that ethnographies can start with a chosen theoretical framework that will be developed during the course of the study, and even some form of research questions may be developed before the researcher enters the field. At the same time, they note that the approach to the theoretical framework and the research questions tend to be modified after entry into the research setting.

In the case of the current study as well, the theoretical framework of time-space distanciation was explored prior the commencement of fieldwork. The relationship between caste identity and place through a focus on the theoretical framework of distanciation was a key concern for this project even in the pre-fieldwork stage. However, the approach to the distanciation framework and the research questions themselves were modified once fieldwork started. Once different groups started to be followed on Meerkat.com, it was observed that often competing groups from the same or aligned castes would make a variety of place-based claims about their caste identity. For instance, some Thiyya groups on Meerkat.com claimed that their origin in Malabar was what set them apart from the Ezhavas of the South. On the other hand, many Ezhava groups and groups which consisted of both Ezhavas and Thiyyas claimed that the north-south origin was merely a superficial one, and that it was essentially the same caste that was known by different names across the state of Kerala. In light of the multiplicity of narratives encountered on Meerkat.com, the focus of this study shifted from an examination of the embedding and disembedding of caste identity from place. In other words, the question of whether or not the Thiyyas of Malabar were in fact distinct from the Ezhavas of the South gradually ceased to be important. Instead, the project became focused on studying the narrative constructions of place and caste (as identification). Consequently, the project focused more on how the Thiyyas were being represented through reference to Malabar on a specific Meerkat.com group, and why it was important to the members that Thiyyas be recognized in this manner.

Baszanger and Dodier (1997: 12- 13) note that over time an important shift has occurred in the manner in which researchers are expected to approach the various forms of data generated during an ethnography. Conventionally ethnographers were expected to act as “mirrors” of the social worlds they were studying. By gaining empathetic access to way in which the group or people under observation viewed their world, the ethnographer was expected to ‘infiltrate the expressional universe of the other’ (James Clifford cited in Baszanger and Dodier 1997: 12).

In recent times, however, post-structural and post-modern approaches to ethnography have posed a challenge to this assumption of the ethnographer as a straightforward mirror who simply reflects the viewpoint of the other through an empathetic relationship with them. In contrast, these recent developments have characterized ethnography as a necessarily interpretative and representational act, where the ethnographer is an active part of the data that is generated rather than simply an empathetic and supposedly neutral conduit for the voices of those who are studied. Further, even to generate valid interpretations of data, ethnographers need to maintain what Baszanger and Dodier (1997: 12) refer to as “the right distance” between their feelings and the perspectives of study participants.

The observer establishes a sort of parallel between what s/he feels and what the people observed feel, or the phases they pass through. S/he uses a form of introspection to reveal how s/he develops new attitudes or borrows new roles and what that ‘does for him/her’. In this way, s/he has fleeting insights into the possible functions or meanings for the people observed, which s/he then tries to verify in the field, at which point s/he either recognizes their validity or rejects them.

Baszanger and Dodier (1997: 13)

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 124-126) resolve the problem by suggesting that the ethnographer often strikes a balance between ‘information’ and ‘perspective’, two legitimate and equally important ways of approaching the accounts of study participants. They argue that data is never invalid, rather it is the interpretations of data that can be valid or invalid. They suggest that as per the ‘information’ approach, data generated by the participants themselves, through accounts or narratives or myths, continue to be an important resource for the ethnographer. At the same time, they should not be accepted at face value by the ethnographer, any more than other sources of data would be. Consequently, it is important to balance it with the ‘perspective’ approach to data where we use the data to learn more about the viewpoint of those participants who generate it.

the two ways of reading accounts - what we might call ‘information’ and ‘perspective’ analyses, respectively - are complementary. The same account can be analyzed from both angles, though in asking questions of informants we may have one or another concern predominantly in mind.

Separating the question of the truth or falsity of people’s beliefs from the analysis of those beliefs as social phenomena allows us to treat participant’s knowledge as both resource and topic, and to do so in a principled way.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 126)

In this study the attempt at all levels of the research including data collection, analysis and representation has been to strike a balance between these perspectives. For instance, study participants often argued that the Thiyyas were an affluent caste, both in online discussions and personal interviews. Yet, the fact that many Thiyyas also worked in menial and low paying jobs was also referenced in a separate set of discussions, particularly when the question of affirmative action policies were being discussed. Trying to achieve a balance between ‘information’ and ‘perspective’, this study took into consideration that although some Thiyyas were certainly both affluent

and influential especially in the urban areas of Malabar and in the diaspora, it did not imply that other Thiyyas were not poor. The analysis did not conclude here and these statements were also pursued in order to examine why it was important for the group members that Thiyyas be perceived as an affluent caste. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 222-223) have pointed out, the study respondents in an ethnography definitely engage in impression management. However, rather than discarding the data as invalid due to the effort at impression management, the researcher considers this exercise itself as a source of data.

This section provided an introduction to the methodological approach adopted in the study. The following section contains a discussion of the research design and data collection procedures.

Research Design: Data Collection and Analysis

This section contains an elaboration of the manner in which the research study was undertaken. The approach to sampling and access to the field are discussed. It also contains a description of the data collection process itself. The section is concluded with a discussion of data analysis in this project.

Research Setting and the Ethnographic Case: Sampling, Entry and Access

In discussing ethnographic research design, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 40-42) make a very pertinent distinction between the research setting in which the data collection occurs and the case that is being studied. They note that although the term ‘studying a setting’ is commonly used, it is a misleading representation

In producing descriptions we always rely on criteria of selection and inference. There is an important sense then, in which even in the most descriptively oriented study the case investigated is not isomorphic with the setting in which it takes place. A setting is a named context in which phenomena occur that might be studied from any number of angles; a case is those phenomena seen from one particular angle. Some features of the setting will be given no attention at all, and even those phenomena that are the major focus will be looked at in a way that by no means exhausts their characteristics.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 41)

In this study, the primary research setting was an online caste-based group named the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* which convened on Meerkat.com, a social networking site. The case itself, or the specific ‘angle’ through which this research setting was studied, can be identified as the spatial imaginaries that were produced on this particular online group. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 42) also point out that a case may not be limited to the boundaries of a particular setting. The online group has been deliberately identified as a “primary” research setting since members of the group interacted with each other and with the researcher outside the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Apart from studying the representations on the group itself, this case was studied through a prolonged visit to meet members and admins in Malabar. Further, it was also supplemented by non-Meerkat conversations with members and admins who resided outside Malabar.

The choice of setting and case were partly influenced by the theoretical questions at hand, and it was to that extent a strategic one⁸³. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 42-43) observe that where the project seeks to contribute to theory development, the strategic choice of case and setting are important. Since the aim of the study was to understand how caste identification and place are linked to or re-embedded in each other, I did not study a caste group which was representative of all caste groups in general. I chose to study a setting and case that was atypical or ‘extreme’ (Flyvbjerg 2006) because it could provide richer information about *how* this association between caste identification and place is undertaken. Flyvbjerg (2006: 230) identifies as ‘extreme’ those cases and settings which are unusual, either because they are ‘problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense’. As Flyvbjerg (2006: 229) explains, in contrast to representative cases, an ‘extreme’ case can provide more and richer information because the focus of analysis shifts to studying the basic mechanisms of re-embedding of caste identities in place in greater detail. *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was chosen because it was actively and explicitly engaged in caste identification through place.

Even then, the choice of an online group may appear to be a puzzling one. It was not useful to merely choose a representative or typical research setting and case which would primarily catalogue the features common to all such associations between caste

⁸³ Scholars differ on whether theoretical sampling can be the basis for setting and case choice in ethnography. Some, such as Walford (2007) are not entirely convinced that settings and cases can be chosen on the basis of *a priori* theoretical considerations. Walford (2007) for instance suggests that settings and cases should be chosen on the basis of some inherent characteristic that is unique or interesting. On the other hand, scholars such as (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) do not think that settings and case choice should necessarily be devoid of theoretical considerations.

identification and place, or even count the frequency of such associations. To a certain extent the choice of an online group - the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* - was deliberate since it helped highlight that castes are internally striated by economic, political and other interests. It is but to be expected that the form of the re-embedding of place and caste identity will vary due to different historic factors and social experiences of the members of specific and different groups within each caste. In this context, an online group was chosen precisely because it cannot be assumed to be a representative example. Rather the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is a very peculiar social entity, where people are mobilizing themselves around a common caste identity which is under construction. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is, in this sense, very much a *community of practice* (Baym 2000: 21), where members engage in the shared practice of identity construction. The choice was also influenced by Appadurai's admonition that the "ethnoscapes" of group identity "are no longer tightly territorialized" (1996: 48). In this way the study of an online group made the analysis richer: it enabled the consideration of not only how being Thiyya and being Malabari are co-constructed inside Malabar, but also how this process is undertaken by people living within as well as outside Malabar. Despite their disparate physical locations, the members of this group of Thiyyas were attempting to locate Thiyyaness in Malabar.

Having noted this, it must be mentioned that as is the case with any other ethnography, the choice of setting and case were also influenced by pragmatic considerations. This study too involved what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 37-

38) refer to as ‘casing the joint’. In this exercise, a variety of cases and settings are considered in order to determine factors such as suitability, the feasibility of carrying out research in that setting and whether access may be available. In this study as well, various caste-based groups on Meerkat.com were observed covertly and overtly to determine the fit between these settings and the research project itself. As mentioned in the previous section, such casing also led to the development and refinement of the research problem itself, since it provided exposure to the multiplicity of ways in which spatial narratives about caste are used for identification.

I joined the social networking site Meerkat.com in 2007. Since 2011, I had been a “lurker” (Sanders 2005) on multiple caste-based groups on Meerkat.com. In this role, I was essentially a non-participating member of these groups, who observed interaction on these caste-based groups unobtrusively. Although by virtue of my membership I would have been able to gain IRB permission to analyze the content generated on these groups, bearing in mind the ethical concern of “informed consent” (Sharf 1999) as also the establishment of rapport for in-depth interviews, I formally requested permission from the moderators of some of these caste-based groups.

Since the textual conversations on these online caste groups were often conducted in a mix of English and specific Indian regional languages, I decided to narrow in on caste groups conversing in Malayalam, the language of the state of Kerala from where my parents had migrated. I contacted the moderators of 5 different groups from the Nair, Ezhava and Thiyya castes where the discussion was active, in the hope that I

would gain entry into at least one group. Some of these groups belonged to the same or allied castes, while others belonged to different castes. For each group I sent in a customized introductory letter which outlined my basic research questions, how I would go about the data collection, how I would maintain privacy for the members of the group, and the value of the research for the group.

The field of caste groups that existed on Meerkat.com was complex. Further the strategy of simultaneously contacting multiple groups was a risky maneuver, and I went about it very selectively. On the one hand, since they belonged to different castes most of these groups view each other suspiciously and monitor each other (sometimes even those that belong to the same caste) due to conflicting political ambitions and methods. On the other hand, some of these Meerkat.com groups were allied with one another. As a result, publicly failing to gain entry into one Meerkat.com caste group meant that I might well be rejected by other allied Meerkat.com caste groups.

Through my experience interacting with the various caste groups on Meerkat.com, I learned that entry into the research setting is not the same as gaining access. Harrington (2003: 599) makes an important distinction between gaining entry and gaining access. She argues that unlike the former, gaining access specifically refers to the ability to acquire information. Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) further clarify access as the ability to negotiate for information. I learnt this lesson through my experience with *MahaThiyyars*, a Meerkat.com Thiyya caste group affiliated to the *Cyber*

Thiyyars of Malabar. The admin on the *MahaThiyyars* group had initially granted access to the group allowing me to enter the group and also access to information through observing group activities and interacting with group members. However, soon after I was provided this access, the negotiation process went awry and my membership in the group was revoked arbitrarily while I was in the process of clarifying the project through “public”⁸⁴ discussions on that group. However, during the course of my unsuccessful experience on *MahaThiyyars* some of the admins and members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* became familiar with my project. Consequently, this event facilitated a robust entry discussion and the acceptance of my project on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

Initially, gaining access to the caste-based groups on Meerkat.com depended primarily on the ability to negotiate with the admins, who functioned as “formal gatekeepers” (Reeves 2010). Although I pushed for and engaged in a public conversation at the outset of the study to generate informed consent in these different caste groups on Meerkat.com, access eventually depended on my ability to convince the admins and ensure that I did not displease these powerful gatekeepers. In conventional ethnographies, gatekeepers may problematically provide or revoke access to field sites without the consent of other participants (Gajjala 2002, O’Reilly 2009). This was also very much the case with caste groups on Meerkat.com: while access (or the lack of access) by the admins was crucial it did not indicate the consent

⁸⁴ I use the term “public” with respect to the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* and *MahaThiyyars* to refer to those conversations which were visible to all members of the group. This term does not imply that these posts were accessible for any member of Meerkat who was not a member of the digital group, or to people who were not registered on Meerkat.com. These conversations can be contrasted with the more private nature of one-on-one chats among group members on Meerkat.com.

(or lack of consent) from the members of the group. During later conversations with those admins and members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* who had also been a part of *MahaThiyyars*, it emerged that many people on that group had been extremely interested in my project and had been left non-plussed by my sudden lack of response to their questions.

In some ways even as I initiated the first contact with admins, they were evaluating different aspects of who I was to consider my request for access. My own subject positions played a complex role in my ability to contact and access different groups. I found that I had to engage in a presentation of self which simultaneously emphasized my status as an insider as well as an outsider to the group (Chaturvedi 2011). My ethnic and religious background as a Syrian Christian from South Kerala was problematic in some of these groups because of historically strained relationship between these castes and this ethnic group. However, in the case of the Meerkat.com group which finally agreed to be part of this study, this ethnicity actually served to be advantageous for entry. The admins of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were far more concerned about me being a spy for someone from the Hindu Ezhava caste. Consequently they were more likely to trust someone who was a Christian, and a diasporic Malayalee.

I also found that I had to engage in active presentation of self to not only gain access, but also maintain it. Harrington (2003) and Dhand (2007) have discussed how the strategies of presentation of self are significant in gaining access in research settings.

For instance, I had to *convince* the admins of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* that I was not Hindu, but rather that I was a Christian, after which I was provided access to the group. My identity as a scholar and student from the United States provided an enormous amount of symbolic capital in this endeavor.

Harrington (2003: 609) notes that ethnographers gain access to the extent that they can either demonstrate that they share a certain valued social identity with the participants or are seen as enhancing that identity through that research. Many of the admins and members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* that I spoke to expressed happiness that a student from a university so far away from India was interested in their caste and its rituals. Anticipating this as a source of capital, I had stressed on this part of my identity during each attempt to contact Meerkat.com groups. In the case of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, I had also scanned a copy of my university identity card to establish the authenticity of my identity as a student in the United States. Shaffir and Stebbins (1991) also note that access is an interactive process which necessarily involves negotiation for information, and it must be repeated through the course of the study with many different participants. For instance, in this study I had to negotiate not only during entry into the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* but also during each set of interviews I conducted.

Initially, the primary formal gatekeeper *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was Murali, the founder-member of the group. In order to establish rapport, on my request, first Murali introduced me as a student from the US on the discussion space. I

immediately followed that post up by a post reiterating my research questions and encouraging members to ask me any questions they desired, with my photo id attached to that post. I also put up the 4 documents I had sent to the moderators on the “files” section of this Meerkat.com group, as one of the steps to generate informed consent in the group. These documents were placed in this section throughout the duration of the participant observation, so that new and old members could go access them as they wished. Further, I periodically reminded people I was doing this project by posting reminders on the group to read the documents and encouraging people to address any questions they had about my project.

Murali also facilitated my introduction by posting a “Yowzza!!!” symbol on each post I made and reply I gave – this was an important symbolic act since it communicated to the rest of the members he appreciated my post and that I had been checked out. During the initial two weeks, I gradually answered questions raised by the admins and members about the project. I had hoped that this act of inciting discussion regarding my project on the relatively public discussion board, rather than through the more private means of exchanging messages, would help disseminate news about my presence and make it easier for me to interact with members at a later stage.

Like access, generating informed consent was a continuous process through various stages of the study. Apart from sharing details about my project at the outset of my entry into the group, I also reiterated the study objectives during successive interviews and public conversations on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. For instance, I

used occasions when members would describe or refer to my project as an event for periodically generating informed consent on the group as a whole by clarifying and reiterating the research goals.

Procedures of Data Collection and Analysis

This dissertation involves the study of an online group. Consequently, it can be characterized within the category of netnography (Kozinets 1998, Kozinets 2006), which is defined as an “ethnography conducted on the Internet; a qualitative interpretive research methodology that adapts traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of the online cultures and communities formed through computer-mediated communications” (Kozinets 2006 : 193). The term virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) is also used to refer to such studies. Although these ethnographies involve the study of cultures or communities enabled by computer mediated communications, over time scholars have become reluctant to characterize themselves as virtual ethnographers (Boellstorff et al. 2012). In part, such reluctance stems from the tendency to erroneously interpret terms such as netnography or virtual ethnography as studies that lack any offline interaction. To that extent, these terms should be applied cautiously to this study since online interaction and participation was combined with a significant amount of offline interaction with group members.

In this study, data was collected through interactions both within the online forum in Meerkat.com, as well as through interactions outside of Meerkat.com. While the “net” in netnography might imply that all interaction is limited to online encounters, it has been observed by other scholars (Hine 2005) that a combination of both online and offline participative and interactional mechanisms is desirable in this approach. From the perspective of the researcher utilizing this mix of interactions generates two key advantages- it facilitates rapport with the respondents from settings that are otherwise difficult to access (Sanders 2005) and enables a richer analysis of the respondents themselves (Mackay 2005). Consequently, I lived in the region of Malabar during the month of November 2013. Since the founding admin and many members I had been in touch with hailed from the district of Kannur, I lived in Kannur City. During this visit, I lived in the historic area of Talap, which coincidentally was a Thiyya stronghold. Apart from this I also travelled to other cities in Malabar (Kozhikode, Thalassery), Kerala (Thiruvananthapuram, Cochin), India (New Delhi) to meet with members and admins. In addition, I also interacted with members and admins through text chats and video and telephone conversations.

The interaction which occurred outside the parameters of Meerkat.com was crucial in developing rapport with group members and admins - they could connect a face to the posts and documents I had uploaded on Meerkat.com. These interactions also enabled me to get a better sense of who these people were, and to situate what they said and did on the group in the context of their everyday lives. Further, my stay in Malabar in particular, helped me develop an understanding of the amazing degree to which

offline interconnections of friendship and kinship existed between people hailing from the district of Kannur on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. This interconnection is consistent with the observations made by Wellman and Gulia (1999), who noted that very often there exists some degree of correspondence between people's online and offline ties.

This study involved two primary procedures of data collection. First, I undertook participant observation on the online forum in Meerkat.com, where I observed and participated in various public conversations as they occurred on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* between August 2012 and October 2013. While the frequency of my own posts was most intense between the period August 2012 - January 2013, I continued to observe the group until October 2013. Second, I conducted in-depth interviews with key members of the group outside of Meerkat.com by means of face-to-face, telephonic and video chat conversations. In-depth personal interviews were conducted in two rounds - between October 2012- March 2013 and July 2013 - August 2013.

The combination of these procedures, and the time lag involved in the participant observation and the successive rounds of interviews were deliberately designed to improve validity of study. Creswell (1998: 211) identifies the collection and comparison of information from different phases of fieldwork and from different temporal cycles in the setting as an important source of validity. In the current study, it also facilitated a narrowing of the focus in data collection. For instance, at the point of my introduction to the group, the Kyrgyztan theory of origin of the Thiyyas was

extremely popular on the group. However, within 6 months, this theory was being questioned on the group and Thiyyaness was being formulated differently where the Kyrgyztan narrative was increasingly melded within the Malabari origin narrative. The combination of data collection procedures and the time lag incorporated into the research design made it possible to capture both the significance of the Kyrgyztan theory of origin and the shift in the spatial narrative itself.

Boellstorff et al. (2012: 4) also raise the point that terms such as virtual ethnography, online ethnography and digital ethnography are merely conversational rather than strictly academic. They argue that ethnography does not fundamentally change when applied to the study of online interaction to justify the adoption of separate terms such as netnography, online ethnography, digital ethnography or virtual ethnography. Boellstorff et al. (2012) argue that ethnography in its conventional understanding as a methodology is well-suited to studying online interactions, although some specific features need more attention than if the setting was based in a bounded location such as a village or a city.

The emphasis on textuality is one such specific feature that becomes significant in the context of the present study, partly due to the research questions and partly due to the primary research setting itself. In this study, the textual approach towards the online group was influenced by the research questions at hand, since the aim was to understand the manner in which caste identity and place were represented through reference to each other. So the manner in which people “talked” about caste and place

were the focus of the study. Since this was a group was enabled by computer-mediated communication, much of the “talk” between the geographically dispersed members and admins took the form of textual conversations on Meerkat.com. These textual conversations provided important insights into the spatial imaginaries of members. Consequently, attention to textuality has larger significance in this study than in other ethnographies, although this should not imply that the actions of the members and admins of the group were considered to be irrelevant. Of course, apart from the textual conversations between group members, a variety of documents and images were also shared on the group. I also explored the documents and pictures uploaded by the members of the group, and the discussion generated around these documents. I was aware of the intertextuality of the digital texts (Mitra and Cohen 1999: 182) on this site – often newspaper articles, other digital texts and hyperlinks-containing significant spatial references were uploaded and discussed on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

In this study, both types of textual products were approached through the conventional perspective towards the ethnographic study of texts. In this perspective, the focus is not restricted to the context of the text, but also includes the circumstances of its production and circulation (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 173, Titscher et al. 2000, Atkinson and Coffey 1997). Although textual analysis *seems* to be located at the fringes of conventional ethnographic research, Atkinson and Coffey (1997: 45) note that it is essential that ethnography incorporates the study

of the manner in which many contemporary groups and organizations are progressively representing themselves collectively through a variety of texts.

In ethnographic research, data collection follows the “funnel” structure (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 206). In this structure, the research initially focuses on broad research questions which narrow down to more specifically formulated problems over time. A concurrent shift is likely to occur with the data collection focus as well. The current study also followed this funnel structure. At the outset of participant observation and interviews, since the problem was defined more broadly, data were collected regarding multiple spatial themes of caste origin about places such as Malabar, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka and Greece. However, as time progressed it became clear that caste narratives regarding Malabar were the most enduring in the group. This led to a narrowing of the research question. It also led to a concentration on different narratives about Malabar in terms of data collection.

In this study I explored the spatial imaginaries on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* by focusing specifically on origin narratives on the group. Consequently, from the early stages itself, the focus was on the above mentioned places in both participant observation as well as during interviews. Apart from these places, members also talked about other places, particularly referring to Kerala. However, in this study I did not explicitly focus on Kerala since the group did not apply an origin narrative. Although at the outset this lack of focus on Kerala might seem like a disadvantage, it can be observed that narratives about the state of Kerala are actually present

throughout the study. In fact, by not focusing on Kerala as a unitary spatial entity, but rather as something that encompasses both Malabar and South Kerala, places which were widely divergent from the perspective of group members, this study presents a more detailed, albeit indirect, portrait of the group's spatial imaginary of Kerala itself.

i. Participant observation

I started data collection for the study through participant observation of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. I had started my observations in mid-August 2012, even as I was negotiating entry to the group and describing the project to members. I was added on to the group by Murali, with whom I had gained an acquaintance on *MahaThiyyars*.

Although I joined the group in August 2012, I was able to access a partial transcript of the public discussions since its inception in January 2012. This insight into the history of the group was an advantage stemming from the textual nature of online ethnography, which may not be available in a conventional ethnography. I refer to this transcript as a partial one since like most digital texts in Meerkat.com it was open to modification over time. To begin with admins may have deleted some public posts before I joined the group. Further, members may have themselves modified conversation threads and posts uploaded by them. Finally, some posts may have been automatically deleted when members de-registered from Meerkat.com.

Silva (2002) argues that a major question that is raised about ethnography of online interaction is whether observation in the ethnographic sense is possible. She refers to Baym (2000) who argued that unlike conventional ethnographies, here the researcher is present in the setting for a limited amount of time, and may often not have information about the lives of the subjects. Baym resolves the problem in two ways: by conceptualizing online groups as communities of practice who are engaged in some common projects, and by adopting discourse analysis as an important theoretical tool. In other words, researchers can observe the projects that members of the groups participate in as a collectivity, and the manner in which they participate in them. This form of observation of course, highlights people who participate in visible ways. This can be addressed if we take an expanded view of the participation of members, not only in terms of engaging in conversations, but also taking into account other forms such as uploading pictures, or sharing of non-linguistic symbols. For instance, in the current study I noted not only the public conversations on the group, but also how other members participated in alternate ways, such as those who only added photographs, or only added new members to the group. These members were then also included within the pool of interview respondents.

Within this approach however, it is also difficult to observe dissent or those who refuse to participate. Here, Baym's suggestion of paying attention to the form of discourse on groups may be helpful. Attention to talk, or textual participation, is an important aspect of participant observation in ethnographies of online worlds or communities. At the same time attention to what cannot be said, or who is being

stopped from talking can also address problems of participant observation online. Consequently I paid attention to those people whose posts had not been well received on the group, and what it is about the posts that had caused displeasure. Here it also helped that I had combined participant observation with ethnographic interviews. In a similar vein, Mitra and Cohen (1999) use the metaphor of “voice” to study online interaction and suggest the adoption of a critical textual analysis approach towards studying interaction online. They identify three components of a critical textual analysis of text produced online – what is said, what is its impact and what does it say about the communities that consume and produce that text.

On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, my involvement veered towards observation more than participation. The distinction between participation and observation is, to a certain extent, one that is artificially created. After all, even when a researcher participates in the research setting, he or she is participating to a specific desired end, which is to gain access to information. In this sense, participation always entails observation.

It would then be better to clarify that by participation, I refer to activity that was publicly visible to all members on the group, such as public posts that I had initiated or my responses to other’s posts. Due to my own insider-outsider status and the extreme suspicion that existed on most caste groups on Meerkat.com, I asked very basic questions through such public posts on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. I started my own posts trying to understand what members and admins consider to be some

important aspects of being Thiyya, or how they themselves would like to represent Thiyyas. I did so by soliciting and observing how they explained things about the Thiyya caste to a relative outsider like me. I noted what aspects of being Thiyya they emphasized upon. Through these posts, I was also trying to understand some of the key concerns about Thiyyas on the group. Further, I also tried to gain some insights into the visible spatial narratives on the group, such as the way in which members had previously connected Thiyyas to Malabar, Kyrzgytan, Sri Lanka and Greece in their posts.

As a non-Thiyya, my primary identity on the group was understood to be that of a researcher. In this capacity, I also specifically participated on the group by sharing academic literature on the Thiyya caste. Through this form of participation, particularly through the manner in which members responded to the literature, I started to understand how members and admins on the group wanted Thiyyas to be represented, and also why it was important that they be represented in particular ways. For instance, the main criteria of evaluation of such texts, was whether, according to the members, the author(s) had noted that Thiyyas and Ezhavas were different castes. The members would sometimes thank me for the literature I had shared and refer to specific passages which may note the status difference between the two castes. Through this interaction, I started to understand that the distinction between Thiyyas and Ezhavas was important for these members at least in part due to the need to maintain status difference. Further, I could compare these actions to other

instances where the same members may argue that status differences in caste were not important to them.

The extent to which I participated publicly in group discussions varied over time. For instance, at the time of my introduction and in its immediate aftermath, my participation on the group was much more intense. However, once I started to conduct in-depth interviews, I emphasized more on observation rather than participation in *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. To a certain extent, this decision was influenced by practical considerations - when I was travelling in India to conduct interviews I found it difficult to access the online forum of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* due to lack of electricity and internet connectivity.

More significantly, I also varied the mix between participation and observation on the group based on what I considered to be the particular requirements for information at different points in time. For instance, during my introduction, and for a while afterwards, I was trying to achieve various objectives which necessitated a more intense degree of participation. Towards this end, I either uploaded posts regularly on the group, or shared academic literature. Apart from trying to assess attitudes to caste and place on the group, during this period, I was also trying to understand the structure of interactions of the group. Consequently, I noted the different ways through which people participated in the group, who was allowed to speak and what was allowed to be spoken. In other words, I was developing a feel for some of the basic but unspoken rules of interaction on the group. Through these instances of

public participation on the group, I was also, of course, engaged in the continuous generation of informed consent and access (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991). Through these interactions, I wanted myself to be visible to the members, so that I could interact with them in more private conversations.

However, after I had had a chance to observe the pattern of interaction to my posts for a couple of months, I realized that public posts on the group were not a particularly rich source of information. Through public interactions what I had access to were the dominant narratives on the group. Moreover, I observed that some admins and members were able to steer the conversation away from those who were less reticent or those who held more subversive views. As a result, after the initial months I stressed far more on observation of the group, and my participation was mostly, but not exclusively, restricted to one-on-one interactions with people on the group.

Through public participation and observation, I was engaged in what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:45) refer to “sampling within the case”. In particular, I paid attention to “talk” about origin narratives on the group, and what people said about these places of origin. By observing how and what people discussed on the group, and the documents and images they shared on the group, I recorded what the members said about different places of origin in their posts. For instance, in what the context did they discuss Malabar or Greece or Kyrgyzstan or Sri Lanka? Or what kind of pictures or news articles were they sharing on the group? In this manner, I was able to record the spatial narratives about caste that were prevalent on the group. Further, I

was able to record things such as how the members on the group represent the Thiyyas as a caste, how they represent the interactions between Thiyyas, and other castes. This included their references to the Ezhavas who were particularly vilified on the group. Apart from that, I also followed how other castes such as the Nairs and Brahmins were referred to on the group, because even though the focus was on the Ezhavas, it was clear that these conventionally higher ranking groups were certainly part of the frame of reference. Finally, I also followed the manner in which the group referred to other religious minorities, since it was clear from posts on the group that Muslims and Christians were considered to be competitors to the Thiyyas. In this manner, even though I had not originally included it within the research design, I started to pay attention to the emergent theme of the manner in which the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were constructing a complex identity as Hindus in both Malabar and Kerala.

In the ethnographic approach, texts, whether as documents or as more mundane conversations, are never considered to be just “transparent representations” (Atkinson and Coffey 1997: 47). Consequently data collection focuses on production (who created the text, why was the text created) of the texts as well as their circulation and reception (who reads them, for what purpose) (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 173, Titscher et al. 2000, Atkinson and Coffey 1997). Further, in the ethnographic approach, the analysis of context is an integral component of text analysis (Titscher et al. 2000: 98).

Initially, participant observation enabled me to understand some of the ways in which the group connected caste with place, and why this connection was being made. For instance, at the time that I was engaged in intensely publicly participating in group conversations, the group was vigorously discussing the theory that Thiyyas originated from Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, I was able to access the collective spatial imaginaries on the group, narratives about the caste which were acceptable for public discussion. As a method of data collection, participant observation primarily gave me insight into the production of the text of the group. In other words, I got some sense of who said what about Thiyyas or Malabar. This method was of limited significance when it came to understanding why these posts were put up. Similarly, it provided limited understanding about the circulation of the text, or how these posts were received by others on the group. It was necessary to combine participant observation with interviews in order to get a deeper understanding of the production and circulation of texts, as well as their context.

Through participant observation, I was also making other choices for sampling within the case. I was paying attention to what type and form of discussion were welcomed on the group and how deviation from the dominant representation of Thiyyas was dealt with on the group. This facilitated sampling for interviews and more covert one-on-one interaction, since the fissures that existed in this online group were exposed, if only momentarily.

ii. In-depth interviews:

For data collection, in addition to participant observation this study relied extensively on ethnographic interviews. I conducted in-depth interviews with members and admins of the group outside of Meerkat.com by means of face-to-face, telephonic and video chat conversations. In-depth personal interviews were conducted in two rounds - between October 2012- March 2013 and July 2013 - August 2013. I was simultaneously undertaking participant observation between August 2012 and October 2013.

Although in the conventional understanding, an ethnography is associated heavily with participant observation, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 131) encourage the use of interviews as a data collection procedure wherever it is viable. They see interviews as an important method through which the ethnographic researcher can generate data which may otherwise be difficult to access. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 130-132) insist that participant observation and ethnographic interviews supplement each other in important ways. The researcher's experience as an observer can affect how he or she interprets what people say in interviews. At the same time, what one hears in interviews can affect what is observed in the field.

In this project, ethnographic interviewing facilitated a deeper understanding of what was being observed in the primary research setting. In particular, during the interviews, my aim was to understand both the production and circulation of texts

about caste and place on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Miller and Glassner (1997: 100) argue that one of the strengths of non-positivistic interviews is that it provides access to the meanings that people associate with their experiences and social worlds. I used the interviews to understand the ‘why’ of the posts and documents shared on the group. To begin with, interviews gave me an opportunity to explore what meaning was attributed to the posts by those who shared them on the group. For instance, when I observed that Siddharth had uploaded a post on “colonization” of land in Malabar, at the outset it seemed as if he was concerned about the ownership of land in Malabar. In a private interview he also explained what motivated him to upload the post on the group. It became clear that rather than ownership of land per se, he was using the language of “colonization” to refer to communicate his anxiety about the progressive influence of the SNDP and Ezhava migrants in Malabar.

Apart from this, the interviews also enabled me to understand the circulation of the texts. In other words, I was able to understand the variety of ways in which the posts and documents were received by those who read them. The interviews were invaluable in capturing the ways in which people responded to posts, particularly their subversive readings which would not have been welcomed on the group. For instance, Shantanu had uploaded a post comparing the inherent selfishness of Ezhavas stemming from the selfish culture of South Kerala with the sacrificing nature of the Thiyyas which he argued stemmed from the sacrifice culture of Malabar. When Shantanu had uploaded this post, it had been met mostly with positive encouragement through symbols and textual responses. However, many who had read the post

differed from it in various ways and yet were reluctant to record their objection to it publicly on the group. I was able to gain an understanding of such readings through ethnographic interviews.

Within ethnography, participant observation and interviews are not always understood as complementary procedures. Participant observation has its roots in naturalism, while interviewing is often perceived to be a more artificial interaction outside of the research setting. However, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 140) argue that the very “artificiality” of the interview can be used to clarify aspects of the research setting. Further, Miller and Glassner (1997: 103) observe that during interviews researchers can start to develop an understanding of the ‘anxiety, ambivalence, and uncertainty that lie behind the respondents’ conformity’. Consequently, by observing how respondents act during an interview outside of the setting, the researcher can gain a better understanding of the setting and their behavior in it.

For instance, during my interviews with Suvinay, an admin on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, he shared his anxiety and frustration that by using terms such as “inferior” to describe “Ezhavas”, some people on the group were engaging in discriminatory behavior. He shared that although he had tried to stop people from engaging in this form of discourse, he had been unsuccessful and had become restrained in his own participation in the group for a while. Although he was an admin, Suvinay was interested in ways of conceptualizing the difference between Thiyyas and Ezhavas

which was somewhat distinct from the dominant mode of discussion on the group. Through this interview I was able to better understand Suvinay's perspective as well as the group itself.

In conducting the interviews I combined both the 'information' and 'perspective' approaches suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 124-126). At the same time, in deciding my approach to the interview respondents I was influenced by Holstein and Gubrium (1997:117) suggestion that rather than viewing the respondent as a passive vessel of information researchers should try to discover the "subject behind the respondent". They argue that the respondent-subjects are, in communicating their experiences to the researcher, are also simultaneously creating it. Further, I operated on the understanding that since each interview is an interactional event, the respondents will not replicate answers to the same questions on different occasions (Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 117). I was also aware that both the interviewee and interviewer are acknowledged as participants in the process of meaning making, and a different listener may get a different response, not in the least due to who the interviewer is in terms of gender, class (Miller and Glassner 1997: 101) and in this case, caste and regional origin.

Similar to participant observation, ethnographic interviewing also involves "sampling within the case" Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:45). For the interviews I had to make 2 broad decisions regarding sampling - who to talk to and what to talk about.

In sampling for people, I used a combination of both ‘member identified categories’ (folk categories) and ‘observer identified categories’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995:50) in sampling for people. For instance, in my sample of thirty five people, I wanted to include both admins and members which are member identified categories. As mentioned earlier, not only did I interview people who participated actively in public discussions on the group, but also those who would be considered to be “not active” because they participated in alternate ways such as through sharing photographs or adding members to the group.

Apart from this, I also employed my own categories for respondent sampling. For instance, I tried to interview those who resided in urban areas, diaspora members, as well as people who resided in more rural areas. I also wanted to make this sample “representative”. Apart from hearing from those who represented the dominant voices on the group, such as the admins and members aligned with the Malabar Thiyya Mahasabha (MTMS), I wanted to talk to people who held contrary attitudes. I was able to locate such members by observing the pattern of conversation on the group. I observed that every once in a while people would post photographs or texts which generated tremendous opposition on the group. For instance, in January 2013 one such dispute arose when a female member uploaded a public post complaining that the group was engaging in discriminatory remarks against Ezhavas. She was immediately chastised by the admins and some other members, and temporarily removed from the group before being re-instated. Meanwhile, some others, who had hitherto been mostly silent on the group, expressed support for her post by either

commenting or through the “Yowzza!!!” symbol. Although the original post was actually deleted from the group, I was able to include some of these oppositional voices in my study. Finally, I also tried to include a wide range of political affiliations. In the sample, I included those who supported the MTMS, and those who were ambivalent towards it. Apart from including the voices of those who opposed the SNDP, I also interviewed those who were not entirely averse to SNDP. I also interviewed members who identified themselves through a pro-Dalit approach. Further, I included those who identified themselves as supporting the Congress, the Hindu Right as well as the CPI(M).

The selection of who to talk to was not an easy one and I learned to be careful about mentioning the composition of the interview sample with others. For one thing, some of the formal gatekeepers, such as some admins on the group, were initially under the impression that they could use the interviews as a way to spy on others on the group. I maneuvered myself out of these situations by pleading (successfully and truthfully) that my hands were tied by ethical considerations imposed by the University IRB. In some cases, such as in the instance of the dispute mentioned above, I would lie about being in contact with these “errant” members. I wanted to include their perspectives in the study, but did not want to violate their confidentiality. More importantly, I also wanted to avoid giving these powerful gatekeepers the impression that I was plotting against the group itself. Some gatekeepers also specifically tried to influence respondent selection by either suggesting that I interview a particular person, or by discouraging me from interviewing specific people especially when I was residing in

Malabar. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:133) note it is important for the researcher to retain leeway in choosing informants. I was fairly successful in doing so, unless the people I wished to speak with opted themselves not to grant me an interview.

In ethnographic interviews, sampling within the case also involves choosing what to discuss in the interview. In the interviews I encouraged members to discuss how they perceived their caste and the different theories of origin. Apart from this, as mentioned earlier, in interviews I also referred to specific events or referred to posts that I had encountered during participant observation as discussion topics. In this manner, there was a very important iterative process as regards to participant observation and interviews since I continuously drew on the conversations on the group to structure interviews.

In the interviews, the questions were intended to trigger discussions (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 151-2, Holstein and Gubrium 1997: 12-123) about caste, place and the relationship that members may draw between them. In this sense they tended to be mostly directed, although non-directed questions were also employed. I also tried to strike a balance between generating some structure and keeping the format of the conversation open to the exploration of new themes and sub-themes. Although the questions varied on different occasions and did not follow a fixed sequence, I did enter each conversation with a list of topics I wanted to cover (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 151-2). A list of such topics is provided in Appendix 3.

The interviews were conducted in three languages - English, Malayalam and Hindi - based on the preference of the respondents. The interviews were mostly conducted on a one-to-one basis. However, in some cases members preferred to have other people present during interviews. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:133) observe that while the presence of others may actually encourage discussion in some cases, it may create distractions in other cases. For instance, when I went to visit Harish in his Kannur home, he asked Murali to escort me to the house. Once we reached there, Harish wanted Murali to be part of the interview as well. The interview provided richer data since the interaction between the two admins created a good dynamic. I also supplemented this interview with others where I was able to talk to Harish on a one-on-one basis. However, in the case of Samrat, I conducted the interview at his Thiruvananthapuram home where he lived with his ageing mother. In this interview, the presence of Samrat's mother served more as a distraction particularly when we would discuss events in the group. Since Samrat's mother was not part of the group, and felt excluded, she would steer the conversation away from those topics.

I conducted two rounds of interviews as part of this study. One of the motivating factors was that I wanted to observe changes over time Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:136), both in terms of group composition as well as events and discussions. Conducting two rounds of interviews allowed me to include references to a set of events and topics that had come up over a period of time on the group. Further, it also enabled me to identify and include members who were consider errant as also those

new members who were heavily involved in discussions on the group. With most respondents, I conducted interviews at least twice. In the case of some respondents, such as Suriya, I actually conducted 4-5 interviews due to a variety of factors. In the first interview, Suriya was extremely wary of me and due to lack of rapport his responses barely went beyond “yes” or “no”. However he gave me permission to visit him a few more times. On those occasions the dynamic improved after I engaged in some self-disclosure and discussed my own concerns against caste discrimination which were broadly complementary to his pro-Dalit perspective. As noted by (Harrington 2003: 598), in ethnographic research, the researcher gains access through different presentations of self with different people. For instance, I would not have engaged in such a pro-Dalit presentation of self with other members of the group since they were antagonistic towards it. In most interviews, I tried to present myself as a “researcher” who was neither too closely aligned with the mainstream opinions on the group nor with any particular minority opinions (Miller and Glassner 1997: 103)

iii. Data analysis:

Due to the emergent nature of ethnographic research, the analysis of data is neither a distinct stage nor something that only occurs at the very end of the research process. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 205) observe that in ethnography the analysis of data is conducted continuously: it starts from the pre-fieldwork stage, continues during the formulation and clarification of the research problems, and persists through

to the process of writing articles and books. Consequently, I have outlined pertinent issues regarding data analysis in all of the preceding sections in this chapter.

Fieldnotes and analytic memos are important tools in the formal analysis of data in ethnography. As I was engaged in the process of participant observation, I took notes about what I was observing and what I thought was occurring on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Transcription of interviews was also an important part of the analytical process and although tedious it turned out to be useful that I personally transcribed all the interviews. Transcription not only helped me listen to each respondents' narrative, but also helped me focus on thematic patterns I could observe in these conversations. In addition, I also drew up analytic memos periodically, where I tried to sketch out themes and ideas based on the review of my fieldnotes and interview transcripts. Since I conducted interviews over two phases, I was able to go back and check some of analytic ideas such as the distinction between "OBC" and "backward" as having different semantic values for the respondents. This sort of analytic checking and testing are consistent with what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 206) refer to as the "funnel" structure of ethnographic research.

I drew on the interview transcripts, documents circulated on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* and my analytic memos to code for "analytic categories" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 208). I used both "member identified categories" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 50, 211), such as the category of "Ezhavanization" as used by the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* themselves, as well as "observer identified categories"

(ibid) which were based on my analysis as well as the literature I had reviewed, such as the category of “substantialization”.

I formally coded for categories in three successive rounds. Initially I coded the texts to develop basic categories. In the first two stages, I was using the data to “think with” (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 210), considering how it would relate based on my common-sense knowledge as well as the theoretical basis of the study. Apart from checking for interesting patterns, I was also analyzing obvious contradictions among different sets of respondents as well as among contexts (for instance, what was said in public versus what was said in private). In these successive rounds of coding, new categories were also generated, and I had to go back to the data and code for these new categories. By the second round of coding, I tried to ensure that all the data was coded in terms of the list of categories I had drawn up. In the next round, I went through a process of picking and choosing from this large body of categories, since not all of them were relevant to the particular research questions at hand.

Subsequently, I tried to sharpen and improve the focus of these categories by comparing them with other categories. Through this I was able to generate sub-categories. Further, this comparison also helped me to think through the relationship between these categories. Although this process of sifting and comparison seems to be similar to Glaser and Strauss’ constant comparative method, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995: 214) note that it is not quite as induction-reliant. A list of the categories used for analysis is provided in Appendix 4.

Introduction to Interview Respondents

This final section consists of a brief introduction to 35 people on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* who participated in the study through in-depth personal interviews. Apart from these members and admins, I also interacted with others on a less in-depth basis. Their details are not included in this table. One member who had previously granted a series of extended interviews chose not to be a part of the study at a later point. Details regarding this member are not included in this table.

Table 2- Descriptive Summary of Respondents

| Name | Location | Time in Malabar | Time outside Malabar | Affiliation | Occupation | Age | Education | Status in online group |
|---------------|-----------------|--|--|---------------------------|------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Cedric (Male) | Hyderabad | 10 years to early adulthood. Travels to Malabar often due to residence in South India. | Early childhood - Malaysia. Spent most adult life outside Malabar. | N/A | Educational Consultant | late 40s | Under-graduate degree from Kannur | Member |
| Harish (Male) | Kannur City | Mostly lived in Kannur | - | Ex-SNDP. MTMS functionary | Family Business | early 30s | Under-graduate degree from Kannur | Admin |
| Pran (Male) | Kozhikode City | Grew up in Malabar | Spent a lot of time outside | Ambi-SNDP | retired PSU executive | early 70s | PG degree XLRI | Member |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|--|----------------------------|-----------|--|---------------|
| | | | Malabar | | | | | |
| Shashi (Male) | Bangalore | Lived in Kannur till 20 years of age | Lived outside Malabar, visits periodically | N/A | Works in Logistics Company | early 40s | Undergraduate degree Kannur | Member |
| Suriya (Male) | Village on outskirts of Kannur city | Has lived primarily in Kannur. Works in Kannur city. | N/A | Pro-Dalit | Health Counsellor | 26 | Postgraduate degree in Social Sciences | Member |
| Raman (Male) | Thalassery | Spent childhood in Thalassery | Resided in different parts of India as well as in the Middle East | Pro-TMS/MTMS | retired engineer | early 60s | BTech through Indian Defense Services | Member |
| Shantanu (Male) | Dubai | Grew up in Malabar | Has worked off and on in the Middle East and Mumbai | Pro-TMS/MTMS | IT professional | mid-20s | N/A | Admin |
| Murali (Male) | Kannur city | Has lived in Malabar since teenage | Formative years in Karnataka. Worked in Middle East and travels to South Kerala for work. | Pro-TMS/MTMS and Pro-Right. MTMS functionary | manager in private firm | mid-40s | Undergraduate degree Kannur | Founder-admin |
| Sarthak (Male) | Gurgaon | Grew up in Palakkad | Left Malabar for undergraduate studies in Thiruvananthapuram. Pursued postgraduate studies in Gurgaon | Pro-TMS/MTMS and Pro-Left | student | early 20s | Postgraduate diploma from Gurgaon | Member |
| Radha (Female) | District of Columbi | Grew up in Kannur | Left Kannur after | N/A | businesswoman | early 50s | Postgraduate diploma from Delhi | Member |

| | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|----------------|--|---|---------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|--------|
| | a | City | marriage to first live in Delhi and then in the US | | | | | |
| Arun (Male) | Hyderabad | Grew up in Kannur | Left Kannur to work in Middle-East and Hyderabad. Travels to Kannur on a fortnightly basis | Pro-Right | IT professional | Mid-30s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur | Admin |
| Vijay (Male) | United Kingdom | Grew up in Kozhikode City | Left Malabar after schooling for undergraduate degree in South Kerala. Post graduate Studies and worked in United Kingdom | N/A | Researcher | early 30s | Doctoral Studies in UK | Member |
| Arjun (Male) | Abu Dhabi | Grew up in Kannur City | Left Malabar after schooling to work in Middle East | Congress and pro-TMS/MTMS | Human Resources | Late 30s | N/A | Member |
| Suviny (Male) | Abu Dhabi | Grew up in village 2.5 kms from Kannur City | Left Malabar to work in Bangalore and then in the Middle East | Pro TMS/MTMS | Early management in logistics firm | early 30s | Undergraduate degree in Kannur | Admin |
| Manjushri (Female) | Mumbai | Grew up in Delhi, Nairobi, Singapore, and then Kozhikode | Travelled all over India with husband who worked in defense | N/A | Retired School teacher | Early 60s | Undergraduate degree in Chennai | Member |

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|------------------|---|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------|---|--------|
| | | de City | services | | | | | |
| Vimal (Male) | Kannur | Grew up in village 4 kms from Thalassery town | Has lived for a few months in Bangalore and Mumbai | Pro-Left and Pro TMS/MTMS | Seeking employment | Early 20s | BCA and MCA in Kannur | Member |
| Renjith (Male) | Middle-East Asia | Grew up in Mahe and Kozhikode City | Has lived in Middle East for a decade | N/A | Ayurvedic doctor | Late 40s | Ayurvedic medical training from Kottakal Ayurveda Sala | Member |
| Rakesh (Male) | Kannur City | Grew up in Kannur City | Apart from a few years working in Goa and South Kerala, has mostly lived in Malabar | Pro TMS/MTMS . MTMS functionary | mid-level government official | Early 40s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur, Postgraduate degree through correspondence | Admin |
| Siddharth (Male) | Bangalore | Grew up in Bahrain and Kannur | Works in Bangalore , but travels frequently to Malabar to meet parents | Pro TMS/MTMS | IT professional | Late 20s | N/A | Admin |
| Tejas (Male) | Dubai | Grew up in Kannur City | Left Malabar to work in Tamil Nadu and then moved to Dubai | Ex-SNDP | Engineer | early 40s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur | Member |
| Jinumon (Male) | Kannur City | Born in the middle-east. Grew up in Kannur City | - | Pro TMS/MTMS | Family Business | Early 40s | Completed high school and pre-university education in Kannur | Member |
| Jairaj (Male) | Oman | Grew up in a village located 40 kms | Left Malabar to work in Oman | Pro-Right | subcontractor | Early 20s | Completed high school in Kannur | Member |

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------|--------------------|---|--|---------------------------------|----------------------|-----------|--|--------|
| | | away from Kannur City | | | | | | |
| Anish (Male) | Russia | Grew up in Kannur City | Left Malabar for postgraduate studies in Russia. His wife and child live in Kannur | N/A | Ayurvedic Doctor | Early 30s | Ayurvedic medical training from Kottakal Ayurveda Sala | Member |
| Samrat (Male) | Thiruvananthapuram | Grew up in Cochin, but used to travel to Malabar during vacations | Has spent most of his life outside Malabar, in Cochin and South Kerala | N/A | Online Transcription | Early 30s | Undergraduate studies in Kerala | Member |
| Sathish (Male) | Bangalore | Studied at Boarding school in Ooty. So visited Malabar for vacations. | Has spent most of his life outside Malabar. However, travels to the region fortnightly for business. | N/A | Family Business | Early 40s | Undergraduate studies in Bangalore | Member |
| Rajesh (Male) | Kannur City | Grew up in Kannur City. | Based mainly in Kannur City. Periodically travels outside to South Kerala for business. | Pro-TMS/MTMS . MTMS functionary | Electronics Business | Early 40s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur | Member |
| Grishma (Female) | Middle-East Asia | Grew up in Cochin and Thalassery. Lived in Malabar for during childhood and | Moved to the Middle East with her husband. Travels to Malabar occasionally. | N/A | Housewife | Early 50s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur | Member |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-------------|---|--|--------------|----------------------|-----------|---|--------|
| | | early adulthood | | | | | | |
| Rajan (Male) | Middle East | Grew up in Chennai and Thalassery. Spent teenage and early adulthood in Thalassery. Travels to region occasionally. | Travelled extensively across India and Asia | N/A | Aviation technician | Early 40s | Completed high school from Chennai | Admin |
| Sreeram (Male) | Kannur City | Grew up in Pune. Moved to Kannur City in early adulthood. | Spent most of his adult life in Kannur | Pro-Right | IT professional | Early 30s | Completed high school from Pune | Member |
| Jayesh (Male) | Bangalore | Grew up in Kannur City. Frequently visits his parents in Malabar | Left Malabar to work in Bangalore and then various places in India and outside India | Pro TMS/MTMS | Financial Consultant | Early 30s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur. Postgraduate diploma from Pune | Admin |
| Gayathri (Female) | Virginia | Grew up in Kannur City. | Moved to US after marriage | N/A | Language Teacher | Early 50s | Undergraduate studies in Kannur | Member |
| Jayan (Male) | Coimbatore | Grew up in Kannur City | Moved out from Malabar for undergraduate studies and job | N/A | IT professional | Mid 20s | Undergraduate studies in Coimbatore, Postgraduate studies in Coimbatore | Member |
| Rajdeep (Male) | New Delhi | Grew up in Mahe | Moved out from Malabar for undergraduate studies | Pro TMS/MTMS | Engineer | Late 40s | Undergraduate studies in Karnataka, postgraduate studies in Pune. | Member |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---------|-------------------------|---|-----|---------------|---------|------------------------------------|--------|
| | | | and job in Mumbai | | | | | |
| Parvathi (Female) | Cochin | Grew up in Mahe | Moved out from Malabar for undergraduate studies and jobs in Bangalore and Cochin | N/A | Businesswoman | Mid-30s | Undergraduate studies in Bangalore | Member |
| Ramesh (Male) | Chennai | Grew up outside Malabar | Settled in Chennai. Occasional Visits | N/A | Businessman | Mid 40s | N/A | Member |

Chapter 4: The Spatial Imaginaries of Identifying Caste: Time-Space Distanciation and Re-embedding Thiyya Identity in Malabar

This chapter includes an examination of the manner in which Thiyya caste identity is re-embedded in the region of Malabar on the digital group, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. In studying the form and motivations for re-embedding, I argue that the distanciation of caste identity, or its disembedding and re-embedding from places, needs to be studied not only in terms of the experience of place, but also in terms of its representation through places. It is demonstrated that the concepts of disembedding and re-embedding can be understood through the perspective of representation, by analyzing the form in which Thiyya identity is articulated through reference to the region of Malabar.

This chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 describes the emergence of a disembedded form of identification of the Thiyyas, specifically as it is constructed by the state government of Kerala. Through such an identification, the representation of Thiyyaness in terms of the region of Malabar is delegitimized. Instead, a different representation, wherein the Thiyyas are subsumed under the Ezhava caste, and where by implication Thiyyaness is embedded in Kerala, is legitimized by the nation-state.

Section 2 demonstrates the manner in which the digital group, *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, engages in a re-embedding of Thiyya identity in the region of Malabar. This section consists of the analysis of the identification of caste on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* by exploring the spatial imaginaries of the group, as well as its members. Specifically, this section provides an analysis of how the group and its members discursively construct Thiyya identity by connecting it to the region of Malabar. The significance of the establishment and naming of the group is discussed in the first part. Next, the manner in which Thiyyaness is constructed through imaginative geographies on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is examined. Here, being Thiyya is constructed in explicit opposition to being Ezhava by associating the former caste with Malabar and the latter caste with South Kerala. Finally, the analysis ends with the consideration of how Thiyyaness is represented through a positive association with the perceived defining characteristics of Malabar and through a negative association with the perceived defining characteristics of South Kerala.

Section 3 outlines the manner in which the disembedded identification of caste itself influences the re-embedding of Thiyya identity with the region of Malabar. The analysis starts with a consideration of how the project of re-embedding is motivated by a response to the prejudice generated by how people from other castes identify the Thiyyas, through cultural evaluations of the disembedded category of “backward”. Next, the immediate impetus for the re-embedding of Thiyya identity in Malabar is analyzed. This impetus stems from the groups’ anxiety related to the manner in which

the nation-state identifies them as part of the disembedded category of Other Backward Classes (OBC), and the material outcomes of such identification.

The symbolic token of knowing caste: The emergence of a disembedded Thiyya identity separate from Malabar

The Thiyyas of Malabar and the Ezhavas of South Kerala have long been constructed as synonymous or equivalent castes in the academic literature as well as in the popular imagination in Kerala. Although the Thiyyas and Ezhavas have been known to observe status differences between them with the former claiming a higher caste ranking (Thurston 1909, Nossiter 1982, Gopinath 1993, Kodoth 2001, Mailaparambil 2012), much of the literature understands them to be the same caste that goes by different names in different regions (Hardgrave Jr 1964, Abraham 2010, Nag 1989, Osella and Osella 2000).

The colonial administrator Edgar Thurston (1909: 36-39) notes that although status differences were observed between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas⁸⁵, an equation among these castes seems to have been enforced by higher ranking castes in the recording of

⁸⁵ Thurston (1909: 40) makes the following observations regarding the display of caste differences through the exchange of food between Thiyyas and Ezhavas: “An Izhuvan will eat rice cooked by a Tiyan, but a Tiyan will not eat rice cooked by an Izhuvan — a circumstance pointing to the inferiority of the Izhuvan. A Nayar, as well as a Tiyan, will partake of almost any form of food or drink, which is prepared even by a Mappilla (Malabar Muhammadan), who is deemed inferior to both. But the line is drawn at rice, which must be prepared by one of equal caste or class, or by a superior. An Izhuvan, partaking of rice at a Tiyan's house, must eat it in a verandah; he cannot do so in the house, as that would be defilement to the Tiyan. Not only must the Izhuvan eat the rice in the verandah, but he must wash the plates, and clean up the place where he has eaten. Again, an Izhuvan could have no objection to drinking from a Tiyan's well.”

land deeds. On the other hand, Kodoth (2001) argues that despite the observance of status differences, it was the colonial and post-colonial administrators who categorized both castes as being of equivalent rank. She argues that this equation was based on the assumption that the Thiyyas and the Ezhavas share the same so-called hereditary occupation of toddy tapping. As indicated in Chapter 1, scholars have noted that in Malabar, the Thiyyas have actually been engaged in a variety of other occupations such as quarrying, agricultural labour, port labour and military service atleast since the 1500s (Dale 1980, Mailaparambil 2012).

To a certain extent, the place-embedded construction of the Thiyyas and Ezhavas was likely to have been strengthened during the colonial period since these regions were administered by different regimes. At the very least, Thiyyas and Ezhavas experienced differential levels of social mobility under these regimes. Malabar, the region where the Thiyyas are concentrated, was administered directly under the Madras Presidency by the British colonial regime. Historians such as Gopinath (1993) and Mailaparambil (2012) observe that during the colonial period, Thiyyas in Malabar claimed a non-polluting status because they occupied an economically and ritually higher status than the Ezhavas in South Kerala. Under the British regime, the Thiyyas achieved considerable mobility and were not accorded the benefits of affirmative action (Menon 1994). This regional disparity has also been noted by others

Under British administration the Thiyyas of the North did not suffer the disadvantages of their counterparts in Travancore in seeking admission to education or government service. Further, social and economic disadvantages did not run along caste lines to quite the same extent as in the South.

Nossiter (1982: 31)

In contrast, southern Kerala, where the Ezhavas are concentrated, was administered in the form of two distinct princely states - Travancore and Cochin. In these regions, the Ezhavas were accorded the benefits of affirmative action from 1935 onwards, through their classification as a “backward” caste (Osella and Osella 2000: 211).

In the popular imagination itself, the Thiyyas have been understood as aligned with the Ezhavas at least since the early decades of the 20th century. In 1906, the Thiyya elite in Malabar aligned themselves with Sri Narayana Guru and invited him to establish three temples in Malabar. Menon (1994) notes that although elite Thiyyas in the urban centres of Thalassery and Kannur were fairly well aligned with these temples, Thiyyas in the rural areas were not as well incorporated within this new system of worship. It has also been observed that although aligned with Sri Narayana Guru, the Thiyyas were reluctant allies and late entrants in the temple entry reform movement initiated by him (Nossiter 1982, Menon 1994). Today the Thiyyas are broadly considered as aligned with the Ezhava caste under the aegis of the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). This popular identification of the Thiyyas as part of the Ezhava caste also seems to have been cemented by the accordance of affirmative action benefits to the former in decade of the 1960s. It was in this decade, during the R Shankar regime in Kerala (1962-1964), that the Thiyyas were identified by the state government as an OBC caste. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* themselves acknowledge this historical alliance between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas by periodically recounting that the Thiyyas gained OBC classification in

exchange for voting R Shankar, an Ezhava leader from South Kerala, into power from Kannur.

In the post-colonial period, both castes have been included in the same disembedded category - the OBCs. In the popular imagination, the Thiyyas and Ezhavas have also been included in the disembedded category of “backward”, a term which at its broadest level of usage is used to refer to all castes that are beneficiaries of the affirmative action program in India (Galanter 1978a). As will be explained later, more than denoting any specific administrative category, in common parlance the term “backward” is significant for an implied association with caste inferiority.

Today, the national government list of OBCs makes a distinction between the Ezhavas and Thiyyas in Kerala (National Commission for Backward Classes 2010b), included as Appendix 1a). Significantly however, over the past decade, the state government of Kerala has started to record the Thiyyas as a sub-caste of the Ezhavas in the state OBC list (Kerala Public Service Commission 2013, included as Appendix 2). The disconnect between caste identity and region through such a recording in the state list has legitimated a disembedded body of knowledge regarding the Thiyyas in Kerala. The project of re-embedding of Thiyya identity in the Malabar on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* needs to be understood in this context. The manner in which the Thiyya caste identity is represented as part of this re-embedding is examined in the next section.

The Spatial Imaginaries of being Thiyya: Representing Thiyyaness through Malabar

This section contains an analysis of the spatial imaginary through which the Thiyya caste is identified on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. A spatial imaginary refers to how people use spaces (or places) to identify themselves. The framework of “spatial imaginary” involves a process-based understanding of both caste identity and place. It is assumed that each draws upon the other in its construction. Here the study of place is understood to be relational: identification is analyzed both in terms of places that the group identifies with as well as places it does not identify with. While the focus in spatial imaginaries is concentrated on representation, affect and the experience of places are also taken into account.

The formation and naming of Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar: Malabar as Origin

The dominant spatial imaginary on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, reflected in its very name, was that authentic Thiyyas hailed from the region of Malabar⁸⁶. As I negotiated entry into the group with the founder-admin, Murali, I began to understand just how significant this particular name was and the deliberation with which it had been chosen. During our initial chat conversations on Meerkat.com, Murali had painstakingly explained that he chose the name *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* because

⁸⁶ Although the name *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* has been used as a pseudonym to preserve the privacy of the digital group, it sufficiently reflects the simultaneous emphasis on both Thiyyas and Malabar that exists in the original name.

he wished to signify that this digital group was open for Thiyyas everywhere, but who by the very fact of being a Thiyya would have to had to originate from the region of Malabar in the course of either their individual or family history. Further, the bond between caste and region was woven into the group's membership structure itself. As part of the cursory verification of potential members, the admins tried to check not only their family name and surname, but significantly they also checked their physical location (were they located in/ migrated from Malabar?), and the regional spread of their social networks (were they linked to any familiar Thiyya families in Malabar?).

The association of Thiyyaness with Malabar was a crucial component of the group's desire to establish a Thiyya identity that was completely distinct from the Ezhavas, a caste they were often subsumed under in popular narratives. However, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, bitterly and vocally contested this popular identification. Indeed, in narrating the circumstances under which they had come to establish the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the admins shared that they had felt the need to create this digital group precisely because they had found it an uphill task to separate the Thiyya identity from that of the Ezhavas in most off-line discussions, as well as in other digital forums. Even on the group, periodically, some new entrants would question the separation of the Thiyya identity from that of Ezhavas, and reiterate the disembedded narrative. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* addressed such events quickly and through heavy censure. Such posts would be critiqued extensively. It was

also not unusual for such posts to be deleted and for the errant member to be removed from the group.

The popularity of the broader disembedded narrative, as well as the relative novelty of the counter-narrative that re-embeds a distinct Thiyya identity in Malabar, can be observed in the manner in which Cedric reminisces about his initial reaction to the online group:

What were some of your expectations from the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* when you joined the group?

No, I do not have any expectations. But it was more because of a curiosity to find out why people had formed a “*Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*” group. Why “*Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*”?! Because you have Thiyyas from all over the state and then you have them all over the world! So, I was curious to find out about why *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*? And then I found out that people were starting to create an identity that there are Thiyyas in central Kerala, there are Thiyyas in South Kerala, but the Thiyyas in Malabar are more unique.

(Cedric, member, late 40s, educational consultant, Hyderabad)

In this excerpt, it is important to note that through the phrase “you have Thiyyas from all over the state”, Cedric himself is sympathetic to the popular disembedded manner of identifying the Thiyya caste as an interchangeable synonym for the Ezhava caste. Cedric’s surprise and confusion had been echoed by a small and considerably less vocal subsection on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* who recollected during one-on-one interviews that since childhood they (and their parents) had considered the Thiyya and Ezhava to be fairly synonymous. Such reflections were usually privately narrated to me. They were rarely articulated publicly on the group since they were likely to be greeted with fierce opposition there.

Some respondents from North Malabar acknowledged that the Thiyyas have been equated with the Ezhavas in other parts of Kerala for a while. Yet, they would often follow this up with the clarification that Thiyyas within Malabar, particularly the older generations, expressed disdain for such an equation and stressed a distinct Thiyya identity that was rooted in Malabar. Others, while they were sympathetic towards such a re-embedding, acknowledged that the resurgence of this association between caste identity and place was something that was relatively recent. On the whole, the ongoing re-embedding of Thiyyaness in Malabar clearly resonated with large section of the members of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. For instance, Renjith, a member of a prominent Thiyya family from Mahe, explains:

Why is the group called "*Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*"? Why not just call it thiyyas?

That is because thiyya groups are mainly in North Malabar from Calicut to Kannur side. These people (*on Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*) are now telling it is not related the Ezhava groups. Usually, all over it is considered that Ezhava and Thiyya is same. But now they are telling that it is different. And I also think that there is a lot of difference between the Ezhavas and Thiyyas.

(Renjith, member, late 40s, ayurvedic doctor, Middle-East Asia)

These seemingly contradictory instances narrated by Cedric (“Thiyyas all over the state”) and Renjith (“thiyya groups are mainly in North Malabar”) should draw our attention to the time-specific contestation involved in the identification of caste. Moreover, this suggests that in understanding disembedding and re-embedding of caste identities from/in places, it is important to consider the delegitimation and legitimacy of different ways of knowing caste at these specific junctures of time. This approach is important in understanding both the disembedding of Thiyya identity from Malabar, as observed in its subversion under the Ezhavas, and the re-embedding of Thiyya identity in Malabar, as can be observed by the resurgence of a Malabar-

specific reconstruction on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The reflections of these members indicate that both ways of representing Thiyyaness - as disembodied from Malabar and as embedded in Malabar - have coexisted simultaneously even among the Thiyyas themselves. These reflections provide an insight into the ongoing struggle for the construction of a Thiyya identity - at certain time periods one representation may be delegitimized in favour of the other representation.

On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the region of Malabar is considered to be the source of origin of the Thiyyas. Some members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* presented an inextricable connection between being a Thiyya and belonging to Malabar. They felt it was impossible to conceive of Thiyyaness without situating the community in the context of Malabar. For instance, Shashi, a Bangalore based member explains how he considers Thiyyaness to have emerged in interaction with Malabar:

On the group there was a poll conducted which asked where Thiyyas are from. Four options were given-Kyrgyzstan, Greece, Sri Lanka and Malabar?

(Interrupts the question) No, no. Because what I did was when I wrote that particular point down, I said that once you reach Malabar, you became a Thiyya. That particular option was something that was not there, it is something that I made. Yeah, because see when you left Kyrgyzstan, you were never a Thiyya. That is the most strangest of thoughts that you can ever have. I mean these are vain and vanity thoughts that runs on because of your stupidity, you know. This is all your vanity which is talking "Thiyyas came from Kyrgyzstan"! You were never a Thiyya when you left Kyrgyzstan! You were a Kyrgyzstani then and you migrated and through many years of being in Malabar and eating the fish from the Arabian Sea, you became a Thiyya! So it's not as if you left there as a Thiyya.

So you're saying that for Thiyyas to have become Thiyyas, it was their peculiar interaction with being situated in Malabar?

Yeah, absolutely. Because what you are ... you are a Thiyya **because** you come from North Malabar. Because that is why there is a certain distinction of why you are a Thiyya and the way you are as a Thiyya. That is because of the cultural evolution that has happened from being in that location, having a lot of influences from the Middle East, the Portuguese, the British and

French and so on and so forth. Which is evolved and which is why it has made a distinguished identity for yourself.

(Shashi, member, early 40s, Logistics, Bangalore)

In this excerpt, Shashi is reacting to a recent theory of origin that had been attracting considerable attention on the group, which stated that the Thiyyas initially originated in Kyrgyzstan and migrated to Malabar. This theory was attributed to research conducted by Dr Nelliatt Shyamalan, a Thiyya medical doctor settled in the United States⁸⁷.

Although his research was unpublished at the time of data collection, Dr Shyamalan's ideas were tremendously influential on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. In the period that immediately preceded the formation of the group, Dr Shyamalan had conducted a series of presentations in Kerala, and had received much media attention in the state. His findings were enthusiastically discussed on the group, where they were represented as proof that the Thiyyas and Ezhavas originated from different geographical origins. Interestingly, much of this conversation drew on the idea that the Kyrgyzstan link established the Thiyyas as being of Aryan origin, which was interpreted as proof of having a high caste status⁸⁸. By referring to the Kyrgyztan theory, the Ezhavas were conversely represented as originating in Sri Lanka, which was then interpreted as proof of their Dravidian origin, and hence of a relatively lower caste status. On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the Kyrgyztan theory was

⁸⁷ By analyzing the samples of his own blood along with his mother's blood, Dr Shyamalan had proposed that the roots of the Thiyyas can be traced back to the Tian mountains of Kyrgyztan. Dr Shyamalan's popularity on the group can also be attributed to the fact he belonged to an old and prominent Thiyya family from Mahe. Further, on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, both Dr Shyamalan and his son (the Hollywood director - M Night Shyamalan), were championed as famous Thiyyas who had achieved considerable success in their fields of work.

⁸⁸ On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the Kyrgyztan theory of origin was also superimposed by members onto an older theory of origin which suggested that they had originated from the island of Crete in Greece. This theory, which has been outlined by MM Anand Ram (1999) also made similar observations regarding the Aryan origins of the Thiyyas.

further used to counter an older origin theory which posited that both the Thiyyas and Ezhavas had both originated in Sri Lanka.

Although different members expressed differing levels of skepticism or faith towards the Kyrgyztan theory (or other centres of origin such as Crete and Sri Lanka), they were more confident about the connection between Malabar and the Thiyyas. Further, as the excerpt from Shashi's interview indicates, a belief in centres of origin such as Kyrgyztan, Crete or Greece was incorporated into belonging to Malabar. In the preceding excerpt, Shashi responds to the debate about centres of origin by arguing that for him, Malabar has had a much more foundational relationship to the formation of Thiyyas as a social group than a place like Kyrgyzstan which was distant not only in space but also in historical influence.

It is important to note that in the reconstruction of Thiyya identity on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, not only is the caste associated with Malabar in terms of origin, but it is also tied to authenticity of caste. In the following excerpt, Rakesh, an admin from Kannur explains the connection he perceives between the Thiyyas and Malabar:

Can you explain it a little? What is this connection?

I told you, thiyyas originated from Malabar only. Originally thiyyas are in Malabar only, no other place. Malabar means Kasarkod, Kannur, Mallappuram, Wayanad, Palakkad and then part of Thrissur district. From there they went to other districts and other states and all over the world for employment and all that. And the customs and all the original customs of the thiyyas are being performed in Malabar only. And for marriage purposes and all, and death and other ceremonies, the original thiyya culture and all that is even now carried out in Malabar.

(Rakesh, admin, early 40s, mid-level government official, Kannur)

Here, apart from representing Malabar as the source of origin of the Thiyyas, Rakesh also attributes an additional significance to the region. For Rakesh, Malabar is an area that can establish the distinctiveness of Thiyya culture, since it is only in this region where Thiyya culture is practiced in its “original” form.

Imaginative Geography: Identifying Thiyyas/Malabar in opposition to
Ezhava/South Kerala

The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* constructed Thiyya identity as distinct from Ezhavas in other ways as well. An influential narrative on the group also constructed the difference between Thiyyas and Ezhavas through a projection of the assumed characteristics of the different geographical areas they were associated with. In other words, this was the group’s narrative of what Said (1979) has conceptualized as an “imaginative geography”, where ideas about Self and Other are constructed through the use of spatial narratives. The concept is particularly useful since it demonstrates how this difference is constructed by extrapolating the differential characteristics of Our-Land as opposed to Their-Land to define the Self and the Other respectively. In such representations, the Self draws from the characteristics of Our Land, which is essentially the inverse of the characteristics of Their Land which defines the Other. Said points to the arbitrariness of these narrative associations. The conceptual boundaries of the lands, both of the Self and the Other, are often not clearly demarcated. More significantly, what the Other thinks of such place-based projections, or whether or not the Other acknowledges them, is immaterial in an imaginative geography.

The imaginative geography on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* distinguished between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas by projecting the characteristics that the group associated with Malabar and South Kerala respectively. This narrative drew on an older, popular construction of the difference between the people of Malabar (as trusting) and South Kerala (as calculative), and used it to define the difference between the Thiyyas and the Ezhavas.

In the group this construction could be most clearly observed in multiple posts by Shantanu. Apart from his authoritative capacity as admin, Shantanu was also well respected on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* because he represented himself as someone dedicated to the research of Thiyya history. Such posts by Shantanu were often encouraged by other admins, and more importantly were not openly challenged on the group. For instance, in the following post on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* we can observe how Shantanu draws on an imaginative geography to distinguish between the Ezhavas and the Thiyyas in an oppositional manner. This post is also important because we can observe that it has been accorded further legitimacy on the group through the approval of Murali the founder-member in the form of a “Yowzza!!!” symbol.

Shantanu This is because of Malabar culture is based on Sacrifice not based on Seek or suck. Thiyas utmost higher level practice was Chekava (Shikava) or peak level of thiyya. When tow Thiyyas attempt Ankam one Thiyya will survive and another will die so the survive Thiyyan will become chekavan, believing who survive in an Angam the truth is with his side so Angam is for prove truth that means Thiyya is ready for die for truth. The truth which cannot recognise by dharma shastram Angam was practiced. So a Chekavan means who ready for die for truth. Whatever it is still thiyyas are ready for di, without any practice their mind set is brave for die for political party or to

stand on their belief. But can't see this type sacrifice culture with any other community earlier Nambiar and Nair had this culture but they were trained under Thiyya Kalari so they were brave warriors but after stop Kalari training can't see braveness in sacrifice their life for anything. So Malabar have culture based on Thiyya sacrifice culture but in South Ezavas have utter seek culture which just opposite to Malabar

Yowzza!!! **Murali**

(Shantanu, admin, mid-20s, IT professional, Dubai, posted 16 May 2012)

As can be observed in Shantanu's post, the imaginative geography on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* took the following form:

The Thiyyas belong to Malabar. Malabar as a region has a culture of *athmarthatha*, or selflessness. Consequently, the Thiyyas have a selfless nature. What sets the Ezhavas apart from us is that they belong to South Kerala. South Kerala as a region has a selfish culture. Consequently, the Ezhavas have a selfish nature.

Not only was this a familiar narrative on the group, it also repeatedly surfaced as a theme during the initial interviews with members and admins in Kannur. As a result, this narrative construction was included as part of all the individual interviews, in order to gauge how the different members of the group read this narrative. This narrative resonated with a third of the interview respondents. Considering that this pool of respondents included both people who disagreed with the dominant narrative on the group as well as important admins and members, such resonance indicates that this was not an insubstantial narrative. In particular, this narrative resonated strongly with most of the admins who exerted considerable control over the group. For instance, as the following excerpt indicates, Murali reiterates the narrative construction of Thiyyaness in opposition to Ezhavaness through spatial characteristics.

So what characteristics do Thiyyas have?

I told you no- Illam, kulam, kavu, kalari. They are all always having that trustfulness in them. They have courage. They are sincere. They have all that hospitality. They doesn't care of themselves-they work for others. So you take my example. Even if I am busy, I like to take you and show you different places. But if you take southern people, they never do. They only take their part. Others like Ezhavas do not look at anybody else's suffering. Thiyyas even though... You see in the recent killings, everybody who was killed and who murdered are Thiyyas. They know that they will be hanged or legally punished, still they're not bothered. For somebody else they're doing this. We're very sincere in these things. They are courageous. They are sincere. You can trust a Thiyya. See I have been to many parts of the world. So wherever I find, I believe my Kannur people- Thiyyas- very much. And after going around all the world, I hate these South Ezhavas. We can't trust them. The next morning they will be like how can I take that tea from the other part. They will be thinking that how can I thief (*steal tea from others*)? Because we will be mingling with those people - Ezhavas.

Can you tell me a little bit about your interactions with them?

Yeah, when I was in Dubai and Bombay also, Malabaris they have a very good name there. You see in Bombay if you go "Malabari, Malabari - he's a very good man." In Dubai also Arabs like these Malabaris-they're very sincere. Like that, the southern (*Kerala*) people also migrated to Dubai, (*but*) they started cheating. Because of the sincerity, these Arabs used to be free (*that*) they won't cheat. But these people cheated. For example if you're travelling on a bus, if you're in a queue we can see, one fellow from the South, he's an Ezhava, he will not stand in the queue. He will say "oh, I really want.." And he will come and jump inside. So from that (*the residents of Dubai start saying*) "oh! That mad man is Malabari!" So then people start saying that Malabaris don't have any integrity, they are selfish. Because actually these Malabaris who went earlier, they were very sincere. But now it has been changed because the Ezhavas they came there. And traffic rules also... Earlier they were telling that "Malabaris are very good people!" But now they're telling "oh Malabaris are cheats!"

You just mentioned that Malabaris are cooperative, sincere. So is that something that all Malabaris have or only Thiyyas have?

All Malabaris mostly. Muslims and Thiyyas. Some Muslims have it and all the Thiyyas have it.

(Murali, founder-admin, mid-40s, manager in private firm, Kannur town)

Here it is significant that while Murali was reflecting on what he perceived to be the characteristics that distinguished Thiyyas from the Ezhavas, very often he would equate caste with region. For instance, in the preceding excerpt, Ezhava was used interchangeably with belonging to the South, and Thiyya was equated with being Malabari. Such an instinctive substitution between caste and region could also be

observed in the descriptions of some of the other admins and members who vigorously expressed this imaginative geography.

In contrast however, some others on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* associated caste and region more consciously and deliberately. For instance, in the following excerpt, Arun, a Hyderabad-based admin of *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, clarifies that he observes a very strong geographical influence on the behaviour of the Ezhavas and other communities in South Kerala.

Some members have explained the difference between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas to me in this way: Because the Thiyyas come from Malabar they have a very sacrifice-based nature, whereas the Ezhavas because they come from the South, they have a very seek/selfish-based nature.

Yes that is there. Although I do not completely agree with that because... Sometime back we **did** mention that (*on the group*). Because that is more a... further... I feel a geographical attitude also. Because, if you look at it, it's not just one community which is more selfish. And one of the interesting things I've observed about that behavior is it is based more on your social structure there. Because if you look at us (*Thiyyas*), we don't believe in dowry and stuff... So there seems to be a social need for human beings to have a self-centered approach there (*in South Kerala*). See that is more of a social demand thrust upon those individuals. See that is my understanding based on what I have observed. So that could be one of the reasons for those people behaving in that manner. See for example, it's not just the Ezhavas. Even the Christian community has that attitude of self-centeredness, whoever has moved from the South (*to Malabar*). Whereas if you move back and see the Anglo-Indian community of Kannur, they are very open. So what I feel is, it has played its part on that behavior.

(Arun, admin, mid-30s, IT professional, Hyderabad)

Here, Arun represents the perceived selflessness of the Thiyyas as a direct consequence of the selfless nature of all the different communities in Malabar, including the Anglo-Indian Christian community in Malabar. Similarly, he projects the perceived self-centeredness of all communities in South Kerala as an explanation

for the self-centeredness associated with the Ezhavas on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

As mentioned previously, this imaginative geography, whereby Thiyya selflessness was attributed to Malabar and Ezhava selfishness was attributed to South Kerala, did not resonate with two-thirds of the members interviewed. A small minority of the respondents rejected this construction outright in individual interviews. Others, most of them members but also including one admin, expressed varying degrees of ambivalence towards this imaginative geography. In particular, they were reluctant about the second part of this narrative construction. That is, while they readily associated selflessness as a quality of Malabar and projected this characteristic on to the Thiyyas themselves, they were reluctant to represent Ezhavas as a whole as selfish. While some of this hesitation may well be attributed to their reaction to my own identity as the daughter of migrants from the south of Kerala, I found that this did not deter others who agreed with the construction, such as during my conversation with Murali⁸⁹. These differential readings may also be explained by my choice of the sample of interviewees - I chose to speak to not only those who would reflect the dominant voice on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* which subscribed to the imaginative geography, but also to incorporate oppositional or subversive voices.

⁸⁹ During interviews, I made it a point to stress that since I had not grown up in the state of Kerala, my links and allegiance to the region were tenuous at best. I especially provided these assurances to those members who remarked that they felt uncomfortable in characterizing South Kerala negatively in front of a southerner, so as to put them at their ease during the conversation.

Some members countered this imaginative geography with differential readings of what it meant to be “selfish”. For instance, Radha, a middle-aged businesswoman residing in the United States, also challenges the meaning of "selfish" as a negative characteristic. She bases her critique on her own experiences as an internal migrant within India and in other countries.

So ‘the people are more sincere in the Malabar and North area’: that is what I’ve heard from Delhi and Kerala House (*a social club for Keralites in Delhi*). (*But*) see, even if you looked at Delhi, there were many different types of people. For example the Punjabis - people used to say that they’re very selfish. But if you look at it in the long run it’s just because they have suffered a lot because of the Partition. And so they have to be selfish for survival.

(Radha, member, early 50s, businesswoman, District of Columbia)

Radha’s oppositional reading of this imaginative geography is particularly interesting because she was one of the few members who vocally opposed similar negative constructions of Ezhavas. In January 2013, amidst calls for her removal, she had temporarily left the group in protest. In her reading, Radha is drawing upon her experience of interacting with the ethnic group of Punjabis⁹⁰ in Delhi, many of whom had survived a traumatic migration from their homes in current day Pakistan. In re-interpreting the meaning of “selfish” as street-smart, she draws on this group of people who had to build their lives over from scratch in Delhi to eventually become one of the most economically successful ethnic groups there.

⁹⁰ Punjabi is a term used to refer to people from the multiple castes and religions that hail from the Punjab. The Punjab area is spread across the national boundaries of both India and Pakistan.

“Forward Thinking” and the *Atmarthatha* of the Thiyyas: Positive

Identification with Malabar and negative identification with South Kerala

Although I encountered these oppositional readings of the imaginative geography around Thiyyaness, I found that the idea that the distinctiveness of being a Thiyya was connected to belonging to Malabar still appealed to such members. For most of the interview respondents who were reluctant to categorize the Ezhavas as selfish, caste identification involved a complex mixture of identifying positively with Malabar, while simultaneously identifying themselves negatively with South Kerala. Although this identification has something in common with imaginative geography mentioned in the previous section, it is distinguished from it through a lack of explicit focus on the Ezhavas. They made these associations on the basis of both the perceived “forward”-ness of thought in Malabar relative to South Kerala, as well as the older narrative of the *athmarthatha* (selflessness) that characterized Malabar in contrast to the selfishness that characterized South Kerala. “Forward”-ness as a characteristic was used to highlight their perception that the Thiyyas had the ability to treat everyone equally irrespective of their caste and class status. *Atmarthatha* was utilized to highlight the military antecedents of the Thiyyas and represent it as a military, and highly-ranked, caste in Malabar.

During our conversations, many of these members pointed out that for them the quality of “forward thinking”, or lack of adherence to religious or caste-based restrictions, was an important characteristics of being a Thiyya, as associated with

belonging to the land of Malabar, and in direct opposition to belonging to South Kerala. They explained that they saw Malabar as a region where people were not typically bothered to mobilize around caste or religious issues. Some among these members attributed this forwardness in thought to the cosmopolitanism of Malabar. They pointed out that through its status as a port that was significant in global trade Malabar had a long history of interaction with outsiders such as the Arabs, the British and the Portuguese.

These members argued that within Malabar, the Thiyyas in particular had adopted this stance of equality wholeheartedly. In this context, customary practices such as the laws of matrilineal inheritance among the Thiyyas of North Malabar (*marumakkathayam*) and the stated aversion to the exchange of dowry among them were often referred to as instances of the importance given to gender equality within the caste. They inferred that since women were customarily accorded an unusually high status compared to other castes in Kerala, the Thiyyas as a whole were a very forward thinking caste.

In a similar vein, these members also often pointed out to the Thiyyas long-standing allegiance with Communism, to indicate the “forward”-ness of their caste in terms of class equality. Further, they made references to the participation of Thiyyas in egalitarian caste-based reform movement within Hinduism led by Sri Narayana Guru. Although they were eager to dissociate themselves from any associations with Ezhavas in general, these members took a more complex approach to the link

between Thiyyas and Sri Narayana Guru. Their contention was that it was due to the Thiyyas' forwardness of thought that they had embraced Sri Narayana Guru's message of "there is only one caste, one god, one religion: that is man". At the same time, however, they also expressed a deep disappointment with these two social movements. They felt that while the Thiyyas had wasted time by dedicating themselves to the struggle against class and caste inequality, other communities had benefitted by mobilizing on the basis of caste.

The use of the term "forward thinking" by members and admins on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is significant because it was also a response to the discursive construction of Thiyyas as being part of the disembedded caste category of "backward". Consequently, it was not uncommon for members to characterize the Thiyyas as being "forward thinking" in terms of their social practices and then argue on the basis of this characterization that they were miscategorized as a "backward" caste.

Atmarthatha, or selfless dedication, was another characteristic that was vociferously identified by these members as something that was shared between the Thiyyas and Malabar. The difference here was that rather than constructing the *atmarthatha* of the Thiyyas in opposition to the selfishness of the Ezhavas of the South per se, these members constructed it as based on a more general distinction between the nature of people in Malabar in contrast to those in South Kerala. *Atmarthatha* was used to refer to a key definitional aspect of the selflessness of the Thiyyas: their ability to sacrifice even their lives for a valued cause. Some of them argued that as the largest Hindu

caste in the Malabar area these were essentially characteristics of the Thiyya caste that were later adopted by broader Malabari society. However, others argued that these were characteristics that all Malabar, including the Thiyyas, inherently exhibited.

The quality of *athmarthatha*, as sacrifice, that these members associated with the Thiyyas and Malabar is significant because many of them also argued that although this was a virtuous characteristic, it had been detrimental to the welfare of Thiyyas. For instance, Sarthak, a student who is based in North India, explains how he interprets the selflessness as a detrimental characteristic:

So people in Malabar are more loyal?

Yes loyalty and the people are...for everything... This is what I think okay - for a religion and even for politics they devote themselves as they should do. You must have heard about the political killings in Kannur. What I think is that people when they start loving that thing.. When they associate themselves with something, they associate with it fully. So they are willing to even kill themselves, or kill others for that particular ideology or faith. So that is happening there. So you will not find that so prominent in the south because they just know what the limit is. They wouldn't do anything beyond. I mean it's quite a selfish point also, but it's quite a good point also.

(Sarthak, member, early 20s, student, Gurgaon)

In this excerpt, by referencing the political violence in Kannur, where Thiyyas account for the majority of the perpetrators and victims, Sarthak expresses ambivalence towards the quality of selflessness associated with Malabar and the Thiyyas. For Sarthak, the quality of *athmarthatha*, or selflessness is not quite the positive virtue it is made out to be. Rather, he argues that it often serves as a limiting characteristic for the Thiyyas. Further, he interprets the virtue of “selfishness”

associated with people from the South as a useful quality that the Thiyyas may well benefit from adopting.

Often, *atmarthatha*, as sacrifice, was used to communicate a difference in caste status between Thiyyas and Ezhavas, by referring specifically to their historical participation in the military labour market. In explaining this characteristic, members would draw on the martial arts tradition among the Thiyyas to portray it as a military caste. Many members represented both the ability to sacrifice and a perceived history of military service in the caste as the key definitional characteristics of the Thiyyas. Such military antecedents were then used to represent the Thiyyas as having a caste status that was higher than that of the Ezhavas. In the following excerpt, Sarthak laments that through an association with the Ezhavas, the Thiyyas had lost much of the caste status they had acquired in Malabar through their military history.

One of the members of the group made a distinction between the Ezhavas and the Thiyyas in this way: they said that since the Thiyyas are from Malabar, consequently they have a sacrificing culture.

Yes, yes. That is true.

But they said that the Ezhavas, because they come from the South, they have a very seek or selfish culture.

Actually this sacrifice I have to point out something. In Thiyya community there were so many duels. Actually there were some warriors in every family. They will fight duels. I mean the rich people will come and adopt them like the fighting cocks. Then they will have a duel between two people, and these two people will be sponsored by some rich people. So it means that if there is a debate between these two rich people. "Rich" meaning - if they are the rulers or something. These two rich people will get there to fight us to fight. And if one fighter wins over the other, then that means that the corresponding ruler also wins. So thiyyas were associated with these sort of duels. So I think what he meant by sacrifice was that thing only.

But in your own experience, does this sort of a distinction makes sense, or does it even appeal to you?

Actually I don't know. I mean this is *angam (duel)* and all are associated with thiyyas from Malabar so they might be having some sort of an affinity towards the sacrifice. Which is quite different from the South because they never had a chance to be someone else. I mean they were always been

rejected to these... I mean the Ezhavas were always looked down upon in the South. The high-class was very prominent in the South. I mean obviously you can think that it was the time of the Raja, so the social structure was such that you could not challenge them. I mean if the Nairs were above them on the social structure, I mean it will be like this only. I mean you don't have a direct access to the schools or jobs. So they never enjoyed anything just like the thiyyas enjoyed in Malabar. So I don't know there might be some kind of an attitude difference. Because if for a long time a person is subjected to something like this, their community may also develop such a feeling that they are inferior. I mean the confidence level will be very low. Because you may have seen it in some Hindi films- the Thakur (*feudal landlord*) will be considered as God by someone who is upper-class. I mean even if someone challenges the Thakur, the father (*of the protagonist*) would say "What are you saying? The Thakur is a God!" I mean that kind of belief usually takes root in those kind of communities because they have been subjected to these kind of activities for such a long time.

Some people on the group also thought that the Ezhavas had an inferiority complex. And they said that if the thiyyas are associated with the Ezhavas, even they would get that sort of an inferiority complex.

Yeah actually that is the main problem. The thiyyas actually enjoyed a kind of social status before the coming of the SNDP and all. So when this SNDP and all came, they had also started considering themselves as ezhavas. That in the whole, Thiyyas are considered as ezhavas. So those people from the South who consider Ezhavas as inferior, also consider Thiyyas as inferior. So this is affecting the thiyyas actually. They are revolting against this by saying that, "no, no we are not the same as Ezhavas", "we are superior to Ezhavas". I mean this will be the driving force behind these activities such as the rejuvenation of caste and all."

(Sarthak, member, early 20s, student, Gurgaon)

Here, Sarthak refers to the Thiyyas perceived ability to make sacrifices as a consequence of their military past in Malabar. It is significant that he utilizes this characteristic and its association with the military past to specifically contrast the caste status of the Thiyyas in Malabar in opposition to the caste status of Ezhavas in South Kerala.

These members also construct South Kerala as a place marked by selfishness. In particular, and in contrast to Malabar, the region was represented as a place where caste relations are strictly adhered to. This relative centrality of caste in South Kerala

is understood by some members to be the cause of the self-centeredness that they perceive to be the major distinguishing feature between the Ezhavas of that region and the Thiyyas of Malabar.

Some of the members of the group have argued that the distinction between the two castes is that the thiyyas come from Malabar which has a sacrifice-based culture, while the ezhavas come from the South which has a selfish or seek based culture. Consequently the thiyyas are sacrificing, while the ezhavas are selfish.

I would actually... Look I am a believer in saying that every human is equal. So I would not say that Ezhavas are completely a bad race of people. Just like what I explained before, that the Thiyyas were, the Thiyya community got uplifted by, during the Madras Presidency when the British were there and they opened up the doors of education. So that literally got Thiyyas on to a better level than the Ezhavas. What I would say about the Ezhava thing is that they were trodden down upon for a longer time than the Thiyyas. So for them basically, it might be that, I want to get on to a better life by hook or crook because there weren't much people to help them. You know open up the life through education and stuff. So it's more or less like they were looked down upon and treated down for a longer time. And they probably just said "Enough is enough! Now I need to get a better life by hook or crook. I don't care if I'm going to do it the right way of the wrong way." So it's probably the attitude that they have.

(Suvinay, admin, early 30s, IT services, Abu Dhabi)

As can be observed in the reflection of Suvinay and Arun, many members on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were not unsympathetic to the oppression faced by the Ezhavas in South Kerala. At the same time, it was clear that they felt compelled to distance the experience of the Thiyya in Malabar from the Ezhavas in South Kerala. For instance Arun, like Suvinay, conceded that the Ezhavas had experienced tremendous caste discrimination in South Kerala. At the same time, in most of our chat conversations he would allude to the caste distinctions observed by his own family when they interacted with Ezhava migrants in their area. He would also rue that the Thiyyas chose a historical alliance with the SNDP, instead of opting to align themselves with the Nairs, a path chosen by the Vaniya Nairs in Malabar. The

following section contains an analysis of the reasons due to which the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* felt compelled to reiterate such a social distance between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas.

Re-embedding through Representation: Countering Knowledge of Caste in the aftermath of disembedding

As demonstrated in the previous section, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* identified the Thiyya caste through an association with the region of Malabar, and in opposition to the region of South Kerala. Through such a re-embedding of caste identity in place the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* sought to reconstruct the Thiyya identity. Their attempt at such a reconstruction was motivated by the manner in which Thiyya is identified as part of the disembedded knowledge about caste. Both ways of identification - as embedded and disembedded from Malabar - seem to have historically coexisted within the Thiyya fold. However, the emphasis and legitimacy accorded to each manner of identification has shifted over time. This section contains an analysis of the factors which have prompted a legitimation of the re-embedding of Thiyya identity in Malabar on this digital group.

The group's introductory description provides a good starting point to understand their need to re-embed Thiyyaness in Malabar:

A group of Thiyyar in Malabar, joined for an active discussion and debate to the path of integrity and unity among our community. We are the largest community with an awesome culture. We have been ignored to reach up to the level we can. In the Malabar Gazette, it is clearly mentioned that

Thiyyas of Malabar are one of the most advanced and sophisticated communities in India. Thiyyas were forward caste before Independence when Malabar was under Madras Presidency same time Ezhavas were backward caste, now Thiyyas were clubbed with Ezhavas and one of the sub-caste of Ezhavas, Thiyya community stands eliminated from the books of Kerala Government and they consider us as Ezhavas - which is NOT ACCEPTABLE TO every Thiyyan. Thiyya and Ezhava are two distinct communities, having totally different ideology, belief and custom. Our aim is to maintain our Thiyya identity and our rich Cultrural Heritage and also improve the living standards of our fellow brothers and sisters by providing better education, better job opportunity and better financial support for the needy. Lets unite again!

(Excerpt of introductory description of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, Meerkat.com)

This description indicates that on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the re-creation of caste identity through its re-embedding in place is driven by the need to counter the existing representation of Thiyya in two distinct but inter-related ways. First, a less immediate, but extremely pertinent motivation for the re-embedding to occur is that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* are concerned about how people from other castes identified them as part of the disembedded category of “backward”. Here, not only are the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* concerned about how knowledge about caste identity is disembedded from the regional context of Malabar, but they are also affected by the negative cultural evaluation of such disembedded caste categories on the basis of ideas about the inherent and biologically determined merit and worth of people from different castes. Their experience is that the severity of the consequences of such identification varies by region, and is particularly intense outside Malabar.

Secondly, the immediate driving force for such a re-embedding on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* stems from their anxiety about how the nation-state itself identifies Thiyya as part of the administrative caste categorization of Other Backward Classes (OBC).

Identification by the nation-state determines access to the benefits of social policy accorded to caste groups. Consequently, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* are driven by the anxiety that under the OBC categorization, Thiyyas are progressively being identified as part of the Ezhava caste by the nation-state rather than as a separate caste unto themselves. They are motivated by the fear that through such categorization, the nation-state would cease gradually to identify Thiyyas completely. They fear that, in turn, this would affect the material well-being of the members of the caste through its impact on access to employment and education.

In this particular project of re-embedding, we can observe that an older way of knowing caste - knowledge through a particular place - is being re-legitimated in order to address the consequences of disembedding. The tension between two categories of the knowing caste - OBC and backward - is crucial to understanding the consequences of the disembedding of caste identity and place from the perspective of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. In contrast to the term OBC, which tends to be primarily interpreted as an administrative categorization of caste, the term “backward” is also used to allude to the negative cultural evaluation associated with this disembedded category. Consequently, these two disembedded terms, both of which are based on the separation of Thiyya identity from Malabar, resonated very differently with the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. While the members did not have a uniform approach towards the caste-based affirmative action in India, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were, in general, reconciled to the idea of Thiyyas being categorized as “OBC” as a pragmatic consideration. At the same time however, the

Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar vigorously contested the categorization of Thiyyas in everyday discourse as “backward”, since the term invoked negative connotations about caste status and they had experienced considerable prejudice on the basis of such categorization.

“The Ezhavas give us a ‘backward’ tag”: Contesting the identification of Thiyyas as “backward” through the caste-based experience of places

Through associating their caste with Malabar, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were contesting how Thiyya was identified by people from other castes as part of the disembedded caste category of “backward”. Some on the group were less comfortable than others about explicitly engaging in the language of superiority and inferiority to describe the Thiyyas and Ezhavas. Yet, the idea that the Thiyyas had been socially degraded as “backward” through an association with the Ezhava was commonly expressed in conversations in the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* as well as in personal interviews with members.

As noted by Galanter (1978), as an administrative term, “backward” has long been used to refer to a broad panoply of caste groups in affirmative action programs in India. At different points in time, the term has been used to refer to various agglomerations of castes. However, the potency of the term derives from its broader cultural interpretation in the context of the perception of the inherent inferiority associated with lower ranking caste groups. These disembedded categories of caste -

“backward” and “forward” - are also interpreted culturally where their meanings come to be conjoined with the lack or abundance of being inherently “civilized”. In this context, these administrative terms acquire the connotation of *savarna/ avarna*, or “high caste”/“low caste” and the assumption of the superiority/inferiority inherited by members of such caste groups at birth. Significantly, these assumptions become further entrenched due to the increasingly hegemonic appeal of discourses about merit and efficiency in India in the context of globalization and neo-liberalization, generating additional stigma associated with the term “backward”. Consequently, in the post 1991-era the term “backward” has also come to indicate that people from castes that are accorded affirmative action benefits by the state are inherently incapable (constructed as lacking merit) and indolent (constructed as those looking out for government handouts rather than working hard to get a position) (Jodhka and Newman 2007, Still 2013).

In the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar's* introductory description the aversion towards the identification of Thiyyas as a “backward” caste is clearly visible. This description also includes a theme that was often raised on the group - the group’s perception that it was an association with the “backward” Ezhavas through which the “forward” Thiyyas also started to be identified as “backward”. Further, in this description we can also observe the link between this theme and the group’s attempt to counter the “backward” identification through re-embedding Thiyyaness with Malabar. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was engaged in recreating the Thiyya identity through Malabar in order to challenge the current identification of Thiyyas as “backward”.

The narrative followed in the introduction is that unlike the Ezhavas of South Kerala who had always been identified as “backward”, the “forward” character of the Thiyyas of Malabar had previously been identified and documented by the British. Here, the reference a colonial document (the Malabar Gazetteer) in the group’s introduction highlights the crucial link between being “forward” and the region of Malabar. It refers to how the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* value the manner in which the Thiyyas were identified by the nation-state during the colonial period in Malabar. It also reflects their sense of loss of prestige through the disembedding of caste from place in the post-Independence era. The description implies that it was only in the aftermath of Indian Independence and the creation of the state of Kerala that the previously “forward” Thiyyas located in Malabar were amalgamated with the “backward” Ezhavas of the south of Kerala. Through this narrative, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* are challenging the identification of Thiyya as “backward” by people from other castes within the amalgamated regional setting of the state of Kerala. On the group, Thiyya is being reconstructed as a “forward” caste which has, over time, been miscategorized as “backward” through an association with the Ezhava caste. The popularity of this narrative (the Thiyyas’ loss of “forward” status / miscategorization as “backward”) on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* can be gauged by the fact that this was uploaded as the introduction to the group.

This narrative of loss and miscategorization was also consistently reflected in the individual interviews with members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Of the 35

members interviewed for this study roughly half identified the Thiyyas as a *savarna* caste. Many of these members particularly emphasized that *within* the region of Malabar itself, they felt themselves to be a *savarna* caste. While the other half argued that they were *avarna*, their definition of this term was different from its textual understanding. They argued that the Thiyyas were *avarnas* in the sense that in the region of Malabar this caste was located outside the conventional four-fold caste categorization. By stressing that the Thiyyas were located outside the categorization of caste, these members were specifically rejecting the hierarchy as represented by dominant caste groups such as Brahmins, and Nairs and Nambiaris. At the same time, however, through such an emphasis, these members were also rejecting any association with other lower ranking castes. Consequently, although on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* the position of Thiyyas in the caste hierarchy was questioned, it was not as if the concept of a hierarchy or the act of categorizing castes as inferior or superior itself was challenged.

The reconstruction of Thiyya as a “forward” caste can also be observed in the manner in which its history was discussed on the group. Many conversations were dedicated to the military past of the Thiyyas and the wealth and riches of the previous generations, with a particular focus placed on the mobility achieved by Thiyyas in the colonial administration in Malabar. Yet, on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, there was very little scope to discuss the struggle faced by even such highly placed Thiyyas to counter the caste-based oppression and discrimination they had experienced. Even when they were reminded of specific instances of discrimination faced by illustrious

Thiyya families as shared by their descendants⁹¹ who were part of this group, most members were reluctant to acknowledge this historical experience. When they were not rejected outright, such instances of caste discrimination in the past were usually brushed aside as either being part of medieval history, or as a universal experience of all castes in Kerala other than the highest ranking Brahmin caste.

Such instances indicate that the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* felt a need to distance themselves from caste-based discrimination faced by the Thiyyas in the past in an effort to avoid categorization as “backward”. Interestingly, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were also trying to promote the use of the word “Thiyyar”, rather than “Thiyyan” or “Thiyya” to refer to their caste. Kamal, an admin who otherwise chose not to participate in the study through an in-depth conversation, made it a point to contact me to demand that I use the term Thiyyar rather than Thiyya or Thiyyan. Kamal explained that this decision was taken by the admins because the names of many other “forward” castes in Kerala ended in an “ar”, such as Nair and Nambiar. Similarly, through public posts on the group, other admins also started to openly advise people that they should use the term Thiyyar to refer to their

91 For instance, during our conversation, Pran narrated an instance from the relatively recent family history where his ancestor had been discriminated against within Malabar because he was a Thiyya. Pran, who belongs to one of the most famous Thiyya families in Malabar - the Moorkoth family - narrated the following story about someone who went on to become a tehsildar in the colonial administration: “One of our ancestors - later on he became a tehsildar. A tehsildar in those days was a big thing because the district collectors were all British (***the post of tehsildar was the highest post that could be achieved by an Indian in the colonial period***). So the first day that he joined as a clerk at the Thalassery tehsildar’s office a Brahmin was the head clerk, or the superintendent of that office. So normally, when a new entrant comes in he is given a bench or a stool or a table. But this fellow was given only a mat. This fellow... See thiyyas are all... I should say, they don't take things lying down. They protest and if they feel that they are not being treated properly they show it up. So when he saw the Deputy Collector come in, he slowly laid down on that mat in the office. And the Britisher saw that somebody was lying down in the office. He said, "Who is this fellow who is sleeping in the office?" He was told that this is the new fellow who had joined. So he said “Call him!” That they could talk in English was a big help. He said, "Why are you sleeping in the office?" He said "Sir, I am sorry. I am new to this office and I am coming here for the first time. I was given the mat. In our house we use the mat for sleeping. So that is why I was sleeping." So then this fellow knew that the Brahmin had not treated him well. Immediately he was given a table and bench. So that man went on to become a big man in those days.” (Pran, member, early 70s, retired PSU executive, Kozhikode)

caste. In popularizing the term Thiyyar, the group was specifically attempting to challenge the categorization of their caste as “backward”.

Although it is connected to the representation of caste through place, the re-embedding of Thiyyaness with Malabar in opposition to South Kerala also has much to do with the members’ experience of these places on the basis of how people from other castes identify Thiyyas. In other words, the representation of Thiyyaness through Malabar and South Kerala is intimately connected to how members experienced these places based on how their caste was identified there.

In contrast to their experience of Malabar, many members reported that they had experienced South Kerala as a place where caste was central to the identification of a person. For instance, in the following excerpt, Vijay, who grew up in the city of Kozhikode in Malabar, reflects on his experience of pursuing undergraduate studies in South Kerala:

Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Calicut?

Yeah, it was a normal childhood of living in a small city. Not getting exposed to too much of a metropolitan lifestyle. But talking about my caste, I never thought about my caste until I started my Masters in Kottayam (*in South Kerala*), because well while we were in Calicut, being a thiyya, it was like normal you know. We don’t have any... actually I never thought about my caste. But when I started living in the south part of Kerala, when people ask, “Okay what is your name?” And I will say, “I am Vijay Kumar Manakat.” So they would ask me “Okay, okay. Tell me your **full** name.” and I would say “Yeah - this **is** my full name.” So these people basically want to know my caste! So then in the end they will ask, “Which caste do you belong to?”

(Vijay, member, early 30s, researcher, UK)

Like many others on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, Vijay portrays Malabar as a place where questions about caste are not asked openly, in contrast to South Kerala

where it is acceptable to openly talk and mobilize around caste. In the preceding excerpt, Vijay shares the intense focus on caste-based identification that he experienced in South Kerala; when he was not asked directly about his caste, other proxies for caste identification, such as enquiring about his full name, were employed.

However, despite their general characterization of Malabar as a place where people do not emphasize the caste of a person, some members did acknowledge that as Thiyyas they had experienced prejudice even within Malabar. For instance, Suvinay, shared that even within Malabar the Thiyyas are identified as “backward” and narrates the prejudice he experienced on account of this:

My generation would be the - I am 30 years old right now - so I can say the older generation would be somewhere around in their 50s. So those people, they still, because in their childhood, probably a Thiyya or any other lower caste member would be looked down upon. They would not be allowed to come near to them, they would not be allowed to enter the temples. So when these kinds of things are going on, they did definitely treat people of Thiyya and Ezhava communities as a lower and backward caste. So that preconceived notion, it comes into their minds somewhere. Some people, somewhere in the head they have the notion that “these people are not the same as us.” They (*think that we Thiyyas*) are little... what do you say?... a little socially backward. They are just... they don't treat us like equals!

Is this experience in Kannur (*in Malabar*) as well as the rest of Kerala?

It is there everywhere. It is there in Kannur. Because the two examples which I told you, both of them were from Kannur.

(Suvinay, admin, early 30s, IT services, Abu Dhabi)

Earlier in our conversation, Suvinay, had narrated that his friendship with two female Nair friends had generated panic among their Nair parents in Kannur. Suvinay shares that even though these were not romantic relationships, these Nair parents were extremely anxious to make it clear to him that he should not even think about any chances of marriage because of his caste. In the course of conversation, Suvinay went

on to clarify that although he had experienced such prejudice within Malabar, the experience of being marked by his caste identity was relatively less pronounced there in comparison to South Kerala.

Vijay's description of his experience of being a Thiyya in Malabar helps to shed some perspective on the seeming contrast between his experiences and the events experienced by Suvinay. Vijay's narration - that unlike South Kerala, in Malabar the experience of being a Thiyya felt "normal" - is particularly pertinent here. Similar to Vijay's narrative, many of the interview respondents shared that their early *awareness* of being a Thiyya was often prompted through their experience of being marked by their caste South Kerala or in interaction with South Keralites. In other words, even though some amount of prejudice towards their caste in Malabar was not unusual, as Thiyyas they felt they were well within the bounds of what was considered to be the normal caste status in the region. Consequently, they felt that in Malabar they did not have to even think about identifying themselves on the basis of their caste. In contrast, in South Kerala they experienced constant scrutiny and evaluation on the basis of their caste.

In part, this experience of being normal in Malabar was grounded in the social and cultural capital of the Thiyyas in the region, which mitigated the members' experience of prejudice based on caste status in Malabar. For instance, as one of the largest communities in Malabar, the Thiyyas have considerable social capital in this region. Within Malabar, the Thiyyas are particularly concentrated in the urban centres of Kannur city, Kozhikode city and Thalassery . These are also places where many of

the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* either resided currently, or had spent their formative years. For instance, in the following excerpt Ramanan narrates that growing up in the Thiyya stronghold of Dharmadom, he had experienced life in the region as a *savarna*:

On the group there was a lot of discussion about whether thiyyas are *avarna* or *savarna*. What would you say about this debate, based on your experience?

Actually I was born in Dharmadom. And in Dharmadom, Thiyyas are in forward community. And we never felt that we are *avarnas*. That may be because the majority is Thiyyas there, I don't know. We never mingled with a lot of other communities, or they (*never*) called us *avarnas*. We were always forward class - like *savarnas*. When you say *savarnas* it means forward class. And when I asked my grandfather and all, he said that particularly in this Dharmadom place, the Thiyyas outcasted the Namboothiris. That theory we can't rule out - my grandfather said like that.

Did he mean that Thiyyas threw out the Namboothiris?

No. He said that the Namboothiris had been out-casted for some reason and those have become Thiyyas. But as from my childhood itself, I never felt that I was *avarna*.

Why do you think that some people on the group argue that Thiyyas may be *avarna*?

That's because I will tell you... Here are a little above forward class are supposed to be Nairs and Nambiars (*These castes are often ranked as ritually higher than Thiyyas*). But here they don't show that, anything. In Malabar area, we are only supreme, and we always have supremacy! But I felt this (*diminished caste status*) when we were working in Kuwait. There you will find to take a Thiyya may be very less there. There you will find other community more. So I have felt some supremacy on their part there.

(Ramanan, member, early 60s, retired engineer, Thalassery)

Apart from their numerical concentration in parts of Malabar, the Thiyyas had also garnered considerable cultural capital in the region. The Thiyyas as a caste group had achieved considerable upward social mobility from the time of the British and French colonial regimes in the area (Abraham 2006, 2010). Not only did they occupy important posts in the colonial as well as post-colonial administration in this region, up until fairly recently, they also exerted considerable dominance over trade in the urban centers of Malabar. Consequently, there was a long, and *locally recognized*,

history of prominent Thiyyas in Malabar. For instance, Renjith, a doctor employed in the Middle-East, shared that many of the Indian mayors of Mahe (formerly a French municipality in the Malabar region), had been from his family. It was not that the members I spoke to claimed that all Thiyyas in the region were affluent, or held the same degree of prestige. For instance, Suriya, a 26 year old counselor in Kannur town, mentioned that his brothers were engaged in *coolie* (daily wage) labour in rural Kannur. Rather, it was the case that this made for visible capital in the place of Malabar which created an additional, more favourable discursive axis for the identification of Thiyyas there, as compared to South Kerala.

For instance, in the following excerpt, Harish, a Kannur-based admin explains the kind of cultural capital that the Thiyyas have in the region of Malabar:

Some people said that one of the reasons why they did not want Thiyyas and Ezhavas to be confused was that they feared that this way the Thiyyas would get a backward tag. Is this something that concerns you?

Yes that is it. It is like that also. We usually...earlier I told you right...we have a status here. When you say Thiyya, Nair, Nambiar, the status is the same. Even though the Thiyyas are OBC, everyone gives a similar respect even today. It an equal type of... even the organization it is the same treatment. So because we are thiyyas ... but if you go to Travancore side, it is considered like a little inferior... among the Nairs, Ezhavas are definitely considered like inferiors. That is the difference. Here we don't have that thing among us. So now we are at that level. In our dressing and all, over here, we are a little modern. Similarly if you look at the Ezhavas on the Trivandrum side, in their dressing and all you can see that they are a little backward. So now, the marriage function of a Thiyya is of a very good standard, everyone. If you see the same thing there (*among the Ezhavas in South Kerala*), you can observe a significant difference.

(Harish, admin, early 30s, businessman, Kannur)

As Harish is trying to explain in the excerpt above, although the Thiyyas, like the Ezhavas, are categorized as OBC, *in the region of Malabar*, their identification interacts with other mitigating and regionally recognized constructions of their

identity. The Thiyyas as a caste group have a considerable degree of social and cultural capital within Malabar, which interrupted their discursive construction as "backward" in that region and alleviated the consequences of such identification.

During the interviews it also emerged that the members' anxiety over the identification of Thiyyas as "backward" is deeply connected to their experiences as Thiyyas in South Kerala or their interactions with South Keralites in other places. In these conversations, many members articulated their fear that the continuing association with the Ezhava caste resulted in the identification of Thiyyas as a "backward" caste, particularly citing their experiences in the South of Kerala as an instance.

It emerged that many members of the group, particularly those who were part of the mobile, urban, upper or middle-class, experienced that when they moved to South Kerala, or interacted with people from South Kerala, they were likely to be identified as Ezhava, rather than Thiyya. Further, these members intensely experienced the stigma associated with the Ezhavas in South Kerala. When they moved out of the region of Malabar, they were much more likely to be constructed outside the boundary of the normal, as "backward". As Murali explained, to be identified as Ezhava, was to be automatically recognized as being of inferior status in the South of Kerala.

Okay so that sense that "all Thiyyas must unite"-when did that sense come to you?

Because I told you no, when I go to the southern part, they treat us inferior. In southern Kerala. Because when Ezhavas and Thiyya are amalgamated,

they (*people from South Kerala*) feel that Ezhava is equivalent to Thiyya. We are inferior there.

Can you give me some examples of your experiences there?

So what happened was that my manager was Brahmin- SC Shekhar. So when we were going there, suddenly when we were in Ernakulam (*South Kerala*), he asked me “what is your caste?” I said " Thiyya" and he was not knowing that. And then he said "oh! It's a backward caste." And then he started treating us differently. But in Kannur and all we didn't face those things you know. Then another thing, when we were having drinks, you know, my friends, one Christian friend was there, then another Nambiar was there and I was there. We were having drinks and in that time this Christian friend was from South Kerala. So he was asking me "what is your caste?" So I said " Thiyya". Then the Nambiar was telling "He is a Chovvan, backward caste, like that”. That made me feel very bad. So from there only I developed that Thiyyas should bring back the lost glory of the Thiyya.

When did these incidents happened?

This happened I can tell you, some 7 to 8 years back. This is around 2002-2003.

And the experience with your manager?

That happened earlier. Maybe 10 years back. Maybe 2000-2001.

(Murali, founder-admin, mid-40s, manager in private firm, Kannur town)

Outside the region of Malabar, the members experienced a delinking of the regional identification from their construction as individuals marked by the disembedded contexts of caste (as “backward”). Indeed, during the interviews it emerged that it was fairly common for Thiyyas to navigate this delinking through the strategy of passing as other “forward” castes such as Nairs or Brahmins. As this excerpt from Siddharth’s interview establishes, not only did his family feel compelled to engage in such passing within India, but they also did so even when they migrated to places outside India.

Actually one of the members on the group complained that his promotion got stopped because his boss was Nair, when he found out that this member was a Thiyya. Have you heard or experienced something like this?

No actually I don't look like a Thiyya. But I haven't experienced any problems till now. But people will ask simply. Because based on my merit only I got this job. I didn't go and ask for any reservation or something. I want to know whether this person is working in government or private?

No, this person was actually located in the Gulf.

Okay. I don't know about the people who are there in the Gulf. They are working in a Muslim country and they are doing... okay! But I haven't faced in India. I am working in Bangalore. We do not have many Malayalees in our place. So they will ask, but I think that's just because they do not know. So they will simply ask. Many of them have heard of Nairs. So they will ask "are you a Nair?" And I am not ready to tell them that I am Ezhava because I know that I don't belong to that community. So it's a question of identity.

So when you tell them that you are a Thiyya how do they react?

They don't know. So they may think that it is a branch of Nair or something.

Some people also told me about Thiyyas who are very hesitant to acknowledge that they are Thiyyas. They would much rather be known as Nairs in their neighbourhood.

Yeah some of my close family members... Most people they tell that they are Nairs only. Even my mother and all used to tell that... We were in Bahrain at that time, when I was studying. Till class 12 I was in Bahrain. So over there, we use to tell that we are Nairs only, when somebody asked us. Like when family friends, or work friends asked.

So why would you say that you are Nairs?

Because we don't feel ourselves as Ezhavas. Because people where they come from the South... People who come from the South they don't know about this thing... And the Kerala government shows that Ezhavas and Thiyyas are the same so... And we're not ready to say that we are Ezhavas, because we feel ourselves to be more close to Nairs because our characteristics are also.

(Siddharth, admin, late 20s, IT professional, Bangalore)

Here it is significant that Siddharth explains the common act of passing in terms of a reluctance to be categorized as Ezhavas by arguing that the Thiyyas had more in common with the Nairs. Earlier in our conversation he had explained that the Thiyyas were similar to the “forward” Nairs, and were completely unlike the “backward” Ezhavas⁹².

⁹² Siddharth explains the distinction from Ezhavas and similarity with the Nairs in the following manner: “ See, actually what is caste? Currently the forward caste of people who belong to that is chaturvarna, it means four varna. So status full of people are very much forward. For example Nairs and Namboothris are economically and culturally and educationally forward, means they are more educated and more well to do people. And *avarna* people there are different people who are very poor and doesn't have much of a culture. For example in *avarna* there are so many category people like scheduled caste and scheduled tribes. SC like Pulaya, Paraya like this. But Thiyyas, character-wise, they are not similar to those people. They are similar to Nairs and Namboothiris. If you interact and analyze the Thiyyas people their character wise... and the situation in Malabar is that they are not similar to Pulayas and Palaya, SC and STs. So based on that people are not very happy that they should be considered as backwards. Because when they are considered as backward class means that they are bracketed into this lower caste community. So that why they are not happy about mentioning as backward caste because they don't like to be identified with SC and ST and all the other tribes. So they want to be identified with people having the central status like Nairs and Menons. If you go to the southern Kerala you will find most of the respected people there are Nairs, Menons like that. So if you come to Malabar, Kannur and Calicut most of the people are

“OBC Separate - 7% like us, 7% for Ezhavas”: Identification with the disembedded category of the OBC

Clarifying how the nation-state knew the Thiyyas as part of the disembedded administrative category of OBC provided a pressing impetus for the re-embedding of caste identity in place on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Over the past decade, this cross-section of Thiyyas had started to become progressively anxious about the manner in which the nation-state identified them. Their concern was focused not so much on the identification of Thiyyas as OBC, as on their categorization as a sub-caste of the Ezhavas within that disembedded category by the state government of Kerala. Further, they were also concerned about the implications of such identification in terms of access to the benefits of the policies of affirmative action. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that due to their classification as a subcategory of the Ezhavas, Thiyyas would be unable to fully utilize the benefits of categorization within the OBCs.

Sudipto Kaviraj (1997) uses the term the “logic of enumeration”, to refer, in part, to the anxiety over the nation-state’s identification of social groups in colonial and post-colonial contexts during modernity. Here, the colonial/postcolonial nation-state compartmentalizes previously fuzzy social affiliations such as castes and religions

Thiyyas. So when Thiyyas are branded as lower caste people, for example when people say that they are ezhavas... if we go to southern Kerala Ezhavas are the backward communities.”

into mutually exclusive social categories, and proceeds to address social policy towards groups based on this categorization. In turn, this provides a significant impetus for the mobilization of social groups around such mutually exclusive categories. As noted by Kaviraj (1997) and Appadurai (1996), the logic of enumeration came to dominate the field of politics in post-colonial states, wherein each group that is mobilized around caste become progressively sensitive to the questions of “how many are we” (enumeration) and “where are we located” (social mapping). Under the logic of enumeration, the question of how the nation-state identifies the social group gains a particular salience since identification is directly tied to the allocation of social benefits. This concept includes within its purview, relationships of identification and negotiation between the nation-states and particular castes. By implication, it also includes the relationship among castes, which is increasingly predicated on their identification by the nation-state and competition over access to resources dispensed by the nation-state. The analytical focus in the logic of enumeration, however, is placed on the relationship between the nation-state and castes, rather than the relationship between different castes.

For many of the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, their identity as Thiyyas had taken on a renewed significance in recent times in relation to the logic of enumeration. In describing how they came to be a part of a caste-based group on Meerkat.com, members often argued that until a couple of decades ago they did not hold such an active interest in discussing or organizing around their Thiyya identity. Their renewed awareness in Thiyya identity was related to the logic of enumeration in

two ways. For some members, their immediate motivation in mobilizing around a Thiyya identity and consolidating social organizations around this identity came from the realization that the Thiyyas were being *officially categorized* as a sub-caste of the Ezhavas rather than as a separate caste in itself. Irrespective of the scale at which this official categorization may actually be taking place (note for instance the disparity between the national and state OBC lists), it is significant that many people who were joining the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were quite convinced that this was occurring extensively and were extremely worried by it.

Others explained that the resurgence of their awareness of themselves as Thiyyas had come about more recently when they observed that other castes, which were numerically smaller than the Thiyyas, had successfully gained access to the benefits of social policy by explicitly mobilizing around their caste identity. These members lamented that this kind of mobilization had not occurred among the Thiyyas themselves, impairing their ability to negotiate with the nation-state.

The prevalence of the logic of enumeration on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* can be observed in the members' description of a process that came to be referred as *ezhavanization* on the group. The term was occasionally used by members to refer to a purposive identification of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas during marriage searches⁹³ and

⁹³ For instance, a popular topic of conversation on the group, which was also reflected in the personal interviews was the experience of Thiyya brides and grooms being categorized as Ezhavas in matrimonial agencies and on matrimonial websites. Members argued that this was the case both within the region of Malabar and outside it.

cultural representation⁹⁴. However, a more commonly recognized connotation of *ezhavanization*, and one which was particularly vexing for each member interviewed, was as a reference to what they perceived as the progressive identification of Thiyyas as a sub-caste of the Ezhavas in official documents pertaining to the identification of caste by the government of Kerala. This recent and explicit amalgamation of Thiyyas and Ezhavas by the government of Kerala provided one of the primary reasons for the current effort towards relegitimizing the identification of Thiyya identity through Malabar on this digital group. As mentioned previously, there exists a long history of the popular identification of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas. However, it was only in the last decade that the Thiyyas have begun to be explicitly categorized as a subcaste of the Ezhavas in official documents in Kerala where caste details were recorded such as birth certificates, high school certificates, public examinations and scholarship forms. The admins of the group even argued that such amalgamation had been underway even in the census, and was only corrected after the intervention of Mullanpalli Ramachandran, a minister in the government of Kerala. This could not have been the case for the 2011 population census since caste names were only recorded if an individual was categorized as SC or ST. However, we can infer that the admins are referring to a smaller survey, such as a coastal survey of Kerala that was initiated by this minister, or surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Organization.

During interviews, members recollected that prior to the decade of the 2000s, while Thiyyas were identified as OBCs, or even if they were popularly considered to be a

⁹⁴ For instance, members cited instances of cultural appropriation such as Thiyya worship rituals and places of worship in Malabar being identified as related to the Ezhavas in the popular media, particularly through the new media channels of youtube and Wikipedia.

part of the Ezhavas, as far as official documents were concerned, they had had the option to mark themselves as Thiyya (Ty). However, over the past decade they had had no option but to mark themselves as Ezhavas (Ez) in such official documents. In the following excerpt, Vijay, explains that shift in categorization is relatively recent:

Does the rest of your family also feel the need for a separate thiyya identity?

Yes, we all want our caste to be written as Thiyya. We don't want our caste to be written as Ezhavas. See its like losing our identity. As Thiyyas we are losing our identity and we are forced to write Ezhavas which we don't **want**.

Where are you forced to write this?

No the thing is, me, I never had to. Because in those days (*in the early 2000s when he was filling out college application forms*) the Thiyyas had an option of writing our caste in every government record. But lately, because of the influence of Ezhavas, they are trying to take off Thiyya from that. And they are trying to make it as a sub-caste. You can even see that in Wikipedia. There, in 2005-6 the heading used to be Thiyya/Ezhava. And now it is just Ezhava. And we have tried our level best to write it as Thiyyas. They want to write us as a sub-caste of Ezhavas which is not true at all. We have our own identity.

So how recently did this happen

I think the past one or 2 years I guess. Because I heard one of my dad's cousin saying that when she was applying for PSC (*Public Services Commission exam*) there was no option for Thiyya and she was forced to write Ezhava. And one more thing that happened was like one of my dad's friends who is from the Moorkoth family. He was from Trichur and when his kid was born there, when he asked them to note Thiyyas as his caste in the birth certificate, they actually were saying that it was not possible. But he literally fought and they were forced to write Thiyya. So it is like losing our identity - why do people have to take our caste name? So it is like calling a Hindu a Muslim or a Brahmin a Nair. Do you think that a Brahmin will allow to take his identity? Or will a Nair allow it? So it is the same kind of thing with us. So we want our identity back. We don't want this false identity as Ezhava.

(Vijay, early 30s, researcher, UK)

Vijay's description of the loss of identity as part of a deliberate tactic of the Ezhava caste indicates that the shift in the categorization (of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas), and the reaction of a certain section of the Thiyyas (such as the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*),

also needs to be understood in the context of the shift in the substantialized identity of this caste in Kerala.

As we saw earlier, substantialization [Dumont (1966)1970] refers to a consolidation of a single caste (or even a group of castes) into a single bloc that is in competition with other substantialized blocs over access to various economic, political and social resources. Like the logic of enumeration, the concept of substantialization is also concerned with studying the identification of castes, and the relationship between a particular caste, the nation-state and other castes are an important part of this concept. Unlike the logic of enumeration, however, in substantialization the analytical focus is placed on the relationships of identification among various castes groups, rather than on their relationship with the nation-state. Bearing in mind the difference in class (and other) allegiances that exist within a single caste, Ishii (2007) has suggested that substantialization is necessarily a partial process. More significantly, Ishii demonstrated that substantialization was best understood as a multi-directional. A caste that acted in competition with other castes in one time period, could subsequently join them as part of a single substantialized group of castes or vice versa.

Such multi-directionality and in-caste fracturing also be observed in the case of the Thiyyas. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* (in addition to other digital and physical groups) was attempting to forge a new substantialized identity for the Thiyya caste. As explained in Section 1, for much of the 21st century, the Thiyyas had a broad, if

tenuous, alliance with the Ezhavas through the SNDP. Under the aegis of the SNDP, the Thiyyas and Ezhavas together had acted as a substantialized caste bloc in Kerala. Although they were keen on establishing a separation between the Thiyyas and Ezhavas, members and admins readily acknowledged that the classification of the Thiyyas as OBC in 1960s Kerala was a direct consequence of this historical alliance. Anecdotal evidence, from middle-aged members such as Manjushri (aged 60) and Sathish (aged 44) who recounted the days of their childhood, also suggests that during this period the Nairs were considered as the primary caste Other against which this substantialized alignment of Thiyyas and Ezhavas had competitively positioned themselves. Today the focus, atleast for a majority of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, seems to have shifted away from the Nairs to the Ezhavas. That said, the Nairs are not completely outside the pale of the conversation. As can be observed in the previous analysis on “backwardness”, considerations such as ‘what do the Nairs think of the Thiyyas’ and ‘how do the Nairs stand in relation to the status of the Nairs’ was very much implied in the creation of this new substantialized identity.

The motivations for a renewed emphasis on linking Thiyyas with Malabar are of course influenced by political developments in Malabar and Kerala. Over the past 4-5 years a certain section of the Thiyyas had started to organize themselves separately in the region of Malabar, particularly in the districts of Kannur, Kozhikode and Kasaragod, under the aegis of budding organizations such as the Thiyya Mahasabha (TMS) and Malabar Thiyya Mahasabha (MTMS). Consequently, the formation of a new substantialized identity of the Thiyyas was in progress, away from the old

substantialized identity where the Ezhavas and Thiyyas were aligned with each other. Within the Thiyya caste itself, a considerable section was still sympathetic to the older substantialized identity where the Thiyyas and Ezhavas were aligned with each other. However, in the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the emphasis was on generating a new substantialized identity of the Thiyyas as an autonomous bloc.

The influence of various political parties and caste organizations on the emergence of such a substantialized identity is certainly not insignificant. Attitudes towards different caste organizations - the MTMS/TMS and the SNDP - varied considerably on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Most of the admins on the group had either formally joined the MTMS, or held office in its administrative structure. Nevertheless, not everyone on the group was associated with the MTMS. Indeed, during interviews some of the members privately expressed mistrust towards this organization. Others were ambivalent towards it - some who had initially shared plans to join MTMS had later abandoned the idea. Similarly, animosity towards the SNDP was extremely high among the admins and members who had joined the MTMS. Yet, there were other influential members on the group who took on a cautious approach - although they expressed dissatisfaction with the current management of the SNDP, they saw some merit in in co-operative relationship with the organization in the future.

That said, with the exception of two people, the idea of *a* representative caste organization (whether that would be the TMS/MTMS/ something else) for the

Thiyyas resonated strongly with all respondents. Most members argued that the Thiyyas' Malabari spirit of excessive *athmarthatha* had done the community a deep disservice in the long run. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that it was due to the *athmarthatha* of the Thiyyas that they had participated so whole heartedly in egalitarian movements around class-equality (communism) and caste-equality (alignment with Sri Narayana Guru). However, they felt that in the process the Thiyyas had neglected to mobilize around their caste in a climate where other castes had organized in this manner and had gained from the benefits of such mobilization. Consequently, many members felt that the time had come for the emergence of a representative organization comprised of and focused mainly on the Thiyyas. Though many of these members argued that they would not like such an organization to get involved in politics, a political role for such an organization was envisioned nonetheless. The frequent exhortation of respondents that the representative caste organization should "stay away from politics" meant that a representative organization was expected not to formally affiliate itself with any particular political party, especially since different sections of the Thiyya caste were aligned to parties along the political spectrum - Left (CPI(M)), Centre (Congress) and Right (RSS). Yet, a political role for such a caste-based organization was definitely envisioned, since most of the respondents felt that an organization was needed which would represent Thiyya interests and negotiate with the nation-state.

While these political developments are not irrelevant, the emergence of such a Thiyya-only substantialized identity from the perspective of the members and admins

of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is more important in the current analysis of distanciation, disembedding and re-embedding. Despite the variety of affiliations that existed on the group, each respondent expressed concern about the manner in which the Thiyyas were identified by the government of Kerala. On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the argument was that the Thiyyas should be identified as a caste that is separate from the Ezhava caste, rather than as a sub-caste of the latter.

The emphasis on the need for government recognition of a Thiyya identity that was distinct from the Ezhavas was also motivated by how it influenced access to the benefits of affirmative action. Attitudes towards affirmative action policies, and the categorization of the Thiyyas therein, differed considerably on the group. A vocal section on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* did not approve of affirmative action, and would preface conversations about the OBC status of the Thiyyas with declarations of opposing the system of reservations in India⁹⁵. These tended to be the predominantly urban and middle-class members on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The aversion to

⁹⁵ An interesting tension that I observed among most members I spoke to was that although they were part of this online group which was mobilizing on caste lines, they also participated in the prevalent discourse of efficiency and merit around caste mobilization (particularly around the OBC, SC and ST categories) which is popular in urban, upper-class or middle-class India. Consequently, many of them had to reconcile an acute sense of discomfort regarding caste-based mobilization with membership in caste-based group like the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. For instance, here Arun, an admin of the group narrates his approach to caste mobilization:

Based on whatever interaction I had with the people from down South, I was never comfortable. The way they tried to mingle with you... I don't know, there was always this uncomfortable feeling you get.

Where did you meet them and at what point in time?

Yeah most of them I met in my work places only, different workplaces. And slowly they tried to bring this caste issue, in a sort of not a comfortable way.

(Arun, admin, early 30s, IT professional, Hyderabad)

During our conversation Arun also narrated that he was uncomfortable not only with the ease with which people from South Kerala engage in discussions about caste, but also because they would attempt to organise the workforce based on caste lines. He was particularly incensed at their attempts to include him within their caste-based group in office, and considered this to be activity that propagated caste inequality. At the same time, Arun viewed his own participation in the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, or the offline organizations like TMS and MTMS as an important means to end caste inequality.

the system of affirmative action stemmed, in no small measure, from the fact that as per the creamy layer limitation applicable to the OBC category, such members were often unable to access the fruits of affirmative action. In contrast, members who had grown up in rural or semi-rural areas of Malabar, and belonged to lower middle-class families, tended to express support for affirmative action policies.

Irrespective of the differences in political affiliations and attitudes towards affirmative action, nearly all respondents emphasized that OBC classification of the Thiyyas still needed to be continued. The term OBC was primarily interpreted by these members as an administrative categorization. Most members, irrespective of their personal attitudes towards affirmative action, were reconciled to the classification of Thiyyas as OBC. The need for the continuation of this classification was justified primarily in practical terms. Although much of the discussion on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was devoted to stressing that the Thiyyas on the whole were very affluent, these members also argued that OBC reservations were required for the benefit of a small proportion of Thiyyas who were less affluent. Alternatively, the OBC status of the thiyyas was also justified through the argument that it would be imprudent of the Thiyyas to give up on a pre-existing classification, when all other communities were vying with each other to be classified as OBC, SC or ST.

Although the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* wished to continue the categorization of the Thiyyas under the OBCs, there was considerable debate on the group about whether this classification had been beneficial to the Thiyyas. The overwhelming sense on the

group was that while only a small section of Thiyyas had been able to avail the benefits from their classification as OBC, their caste as a whole had been disparaged through an association with the Ezhavas. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that it was the OBC classification that had enabled the equation of the Thiyyas with the Ezhavas in the first instance. Secondly, they argued that such an equation of Ezhavas with the Thiyyas had in turn led to their categorization as a “backward” caste, and led to their degradation from an erstwhile “forward” caste. Consequently, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that the Thiyyas had lost social prestige, but had largely been unable to use the benefits of OBC classification.

The logic of enumeration was employed strongly and vocally on the group, where the argument was made that in being clubbed under the Ezhavas, the Thiyyas were being deprived of the benefits they were entitled to under the OBC classification. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that although as part of the combined categorization the Thiyyas and Ezhavas together were entitled to 14% of all OBC benefits in the state of Kerala, the Ezhavas had usurped the lion’s share of these benefits. As will be detailed in the next chapter, the perceived inability of the Thiyyas and the perceived ability of Ezhavas to access these benefits were often expressed through spatial imaginaries. It was referred to as yet another instance where the calculating Southerners (Ezhavas) had exploited the naivete of the selfless Malabaris (Thiyyas). The expectation was that once the Thiyyas were categorized separately, they would be assigned a separate 7% of the OBC benefits.

As can be observed in this chapter, over the past decade, the nation-state had legitimized a disembedded manner of identifying the Thiyyas by subsuming them as a part of the Ezhava caste in official categorizations. The disembedded identification of their caste made these Thiyyas more vulnerable to stigmatization on the basis of their caste identity in other regions. In this case, we can observe that such disembedding, in interaction with the emergence of a new substantialized autonomous Thiyya identity and the pressures of the logic of enumeration, prompted the re-legitimation of a Malabar-based narrative construction of caste identity on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. In other words, the re-embedding of caste is occurring in response to the very consequences of the disembedding of caste for a particular set of actors. Here, the group is reviving a co-existent yet delegitimized manner of identifying Thiyyaness (through Malabar) in order to specifically counter the manner in which the nation-state identifies their caste.

Chapter 5: The Spatial Imaginaries of Place: Reconstructing Boundaries and Belongingness of Malabar

In this chapter, I study how the identification of caste shapes the manner in which the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* visualize the region of Malabar. In particular, I analyze how the re-embedding of Thiyya identity in Malabar on this group shapes discussions about what the boundaries of Malabar are, who belongs to the region, and just how they can belong in Malabar.

The chapter consists of two sections. In Section 1, I analyze how the members of the group articulate connections between the well-being of the Thiyyas and the well-being of Malabar. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how this group constructs the Thiyyas as the legitimate representatives of the interests of Malabar. In Section 2, I analyze the manner in which the region of Malabar is envisioned on the group, particularly the form Malabar should take and questions of which communities belong to Malabar. In this section, I demonstrate that the way in which the boundaries of and access to Malabar is envisioned by the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* is influenced both by the popular and disembedded identification of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas, as well as the substantialization of the Thiyyas as Hindus in Malabar vis-à-vis the Muslims and Christians in the region.

Connecting the Welfare of the Thiyyas and Malabar: Thiyyas as **the** legitimate representatives of Malabar

On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* much of the discussion about events and issues related to the Thiyyas was focused on the region of Malabar. To an outsider, the preponderance of Malabar-centered discussions may have been puzzling. After all, Thiyya migration to destinations within India and abroad is considerable. More significantly, those Thiyyas who were either currently residing outside Malabar, or had done so over their lifetime, are somewhat disproportionately over-represented among the vocal members and admins of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. However, the group's continuing perception of a strong connection between the well-being of the Thiyyas and the well-being of Malabar was demonstrated in the manner in which members and admins publicly responded to my posts, particularly one where I had solicited comments about what they considered to be the key challenges experienced by their caste. While some members framed their responses only in terms of what was happening to the Thiyyas, most other members articulated the key concerns about their caste in terms of what was happening to the Thiyyas *in* Malabar.

To substantiate this observation, during the course of the one-on-one in-depth interviews, different group members were asked to reflect about what they thought of such Malabar-centered discussions when it came to talking about Thiyyas. It became clear that despite the substantial differences in opinions among members on the group, they did not consider such Malabar-centeredness to be out of the ordinary.

From the perspective of the members and admins, it was but natural that conversations on the group would be focused not only on the Thiyyas, but what was happening to the Thiyyas in Malabar. In this section, I analyze the manner in which the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* perceived the well-being of the Thiyyas and Malabar to be inter-linked.

An important way in which a large section of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* (particularly the admins but also members) visualized the interconnection between caste and place was by arguing that the Thiyyas had a crucial role to play in the welfare of Malabar. Most people on the group represented Malabar as a region that was lagging behind the other parts of Kerala in a variety of development indicators due to the lack of access to physical infrastructure, particularly in terms of educational institutions. Although the tendency to reflect on such deficiencies in the Malabar region was the most intense among those who were physically based in the region, it was also echoed by those members who lived elsewhere. Only a minuscule minority of those interviewed expressed the opinion that Malabar was not falling behind developmentally; these people resided outside Malabar.

What is particularly interesting in the group's attitude to Malabar is that in articulating the intersecting interests of caste and place, these members and admins constructed Thiyyas as *the* legitimate representatives of Malabar. In making such an argument, they varyingly stressed on factors such as the size of this caste relative to the population of Malabar, and the athmarthatha (or sacrifice) with which this caste

had contributed to the region as compared to other caste and religious groups. The dominant section of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was making a case for the need for Thiyyas to mobilize as a caste in the region, not only so as to benefit the caste itself but also because they considered it to be a crucial means of negotiating for resources for the region of Malabar itself.

These members and admins would often allude to the numerical dominance of the Thiyyas in this region to discuss the lack of resources for Malabar itself. They argued that since the Thiyyas were numerically the largest Hindu caste in the region of Malabar, the welfare of this caste in particular would significantly determine the welfare of the Malabar region as a whole. This manner of thinking can be observed in the following excerpt from my conversation with Rakesh, a Kannur-based admin on the group. Except for a few years in Goa and South Kerala, Rakesh has spent much of his life in Malabar. He currently resides with his wife and children in Kannur, a city where much of his extended family is settled.

Do you think that the Thiyyas have been at a disadvantage because they did not organize earlier?

Yes. “Thiyyas were disadvantaged” means the northern side, in the northern districts of Kerala population is mostly are Thiyyas. And we were not getting education institutions, industries, roads and electricity, water like that. We were not really getting our due because these people (*Thiyyas*) were not much organised in the name of caste. Development was not coming to the northern side. Even now there is a little change in this part, but still now it's like that. Malabar is backward. If you go through the budget of the Kerala government or Central government of the railway, we can see that a major portion is earmarked for the southern side. There is no equal distribution. That is one of the reasons which prompted us (*Thiyyas*) to organise.

Do you think that there is a connection between the problems that Malabar is facing and the problems that the Thiyyas are facing?

Yes, because in Malabar are most people are Thiyyas. Major portion belongs to Thiyya caste, I think. The latest census I don't know, we... Because the caste census started in 2011. Caste census was undertaken by the government to know the exact population of the various castes, but it is still not

completed. Probably after that we will get the correct population of the various castes. Anyhow we are the biggest caste, in population in Malabar.

(Rakesh, admin, early 40s, mid-level government official, Kannur)

In this excerpt, is it significant that in order to articulate the challenges faced by Thiyyas, Rakesh draws not only on the lack of caste-based mobilization of this community but also on the disadvantages of Malabar. Further, Rakesh sees the welfare of Malabar as organically connected to the Thiyyas on account of their numerical strength in this region. Here, Rakesh argues that Malabar lags behind on various development indicators because as the largest caste group in the region, the Thiyyas have historically not organized themselves on the basis of caste. In Rakesh's opinion, the Thiyyas have as a result, been unable to utilize their potential strength in negotiating with the nation-state not only for the benefit of the caste but also the benefit of Malabar. The employment of the logic of enumeration can be observed in such a stress on the numerical dominance of Thiyyas in Malabar. Both enumeration (how many are we) and mapping (where are we located) are important components of the logic of enumeration.

Thus, a large and vocal section on the group considered the Thiyyas to be *the* appropriate source of representation as far as a struggle for resources related to Malabar was concerned. As can be observed in the following excerpt from Ramanan's interview, members often argued that for Malabar to develop, more representation from the Thiyya caste was required. Ramanan's family is based in Dharmadom, a town that is famous as a stronghold of the Thiyyas in Malabar. Although he has traveled extensively within and outside India as a naval engineer, he and his wife chose to settle in the city of Kannur after his retirement.

When did you start thinking more about the problems that Thiyyas are facing?

No that is basically, whoever is Kerala government... Basically this was under Madras presidency, Malabar during the British times. And that side was under Travancore king. So the thing was after that Madras presidency was gone and whatever happening development in Malabar was very slow. You know even if we want a bridge we have to fight and struggle with the government. So Malabar is right now also it is neglected. That is because other communities taking advantage of developing their own places. So we have no much Thiyya representation from Malabar in the ministry because of the politics here. And you know because of our brazenness they used ask for other purposes, not as a leadership.

Which other communities, and which other places got developed?

Okay, for example if you take the ministry of Kerala you will find that the major people on the top positions are Christian community, then you will find the Muslim community. Then you will find very few you will find Ezhavas and... In thiyyas community, you will not find many leaders in there. See when you have a (*Thiyya*) leader, you have a representation from Malabar for development. Or some other people... There were **some** leaders but they are not from our community and they did not do much... So we start feeling "why our Malabar is not...?" Since the British our roads are same. The British made... You have seen our roads. They made it for bullock carts and horse carts and now the vehicles are so much congested. They did not even give for a highway, or bypass, or big roads or something like that. The British who made the bridges are still used, you know! But all the expansions are there on the other side of Kerala, in South Kerala. Even if you go to the estates (*within Malabar*), where rubber things are planted you'll find very good road and bridges where the people are very less. Because money is diverted and pumped for by certain communities (*here Ramanan is referring to the Christian settlements in the eastern part of Malabar*) for their own interest and purposes. So then I start feeling that we're neglected, you know.

(Ramanan, member, early 60s, retired engineer, Thalassery)

Like Rakesh, Ramanan response situates the problems of the Thiyyas more broadly within problems in the region of Malabar ("development was very slow"). It is significant that he identifies the major reason for the neglect of Malabar to be the selfishness of other caste and religious groups both within Malabar and in South Kerala. For Ramanan, the solution to the problem of Malabar's development was not simply one of representation, or the emergence of "leaders" from the region. Rather the solution lay in correcting a more basic problem - representation of Malabar by the

Thiyyas (“there were **some** leaders but they are not from our community and they did not do much”).

Indeed, a few members who were closely aligned with the MTMS on the group, such as Arjun and Shantanu, even went to the extent of attributing the relatively unequal distribution of resources between South Kerala and Malabar to a power struggle between the Thiyyas and their caste Others, the Ezhavas. Such members argued that through their dominance in the state government administration or as elected officials in the state government, the Ezhavas had succeeded in a concerted effort to draw resources towards the regions of South of Kerala and thus deprived the region of Malabar. This view however, did not have sufficient traction on the group, neither among others who were explicitly aligned with MTMS nor among those who were more ambivalent towards it. The broader consensus favoured on the group was that although there were quite a few elected Thiyya political leaders, Malabar did not have access to adequate resources because these leaders did not work for the benefit of the Thiyya caste per se.

Some members of the group, particularly those who reside in the rural parts of Malabar, further suggested that the fate of the Thiyyas is crucial in understanding the current state of Malabar because this large group of people has experienced intense disadvantages relative to other social groups in the region. That is, they argue that even within Malabar, a region that already experiences considerable neglect the Thiyyas are a group of people who experience considerable lack of access to

educational and physical resources. In this context, the members and admins specifically engaged in a critique against the Thiyya engagement with Communism in the region of Malabar.

Here, members drew on the *athmarthatha* or sacrifice of the Thiyyas that had specifically contributed to Malabar. An argument commonly articulated on the group was that while the Thiyyas had worked tirelessly for the cause of Communism, they had in the process failed to mobilize as a caste. As a consequence, the members argued, the Thiyyas themselves had become impoverished over time while other communities had progressed through caste-based mobilization. On the other hand, some members attributed a much more active role of the Left parties in obstructing the mobilization of Thiyyas as a caste.

Here the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were constructing the Thiyyas as a set of people who had selflessly put in the most amount of effort in developing Malabar. At the same time, many in the group identified the Left-based alignment of the majority of the caste as a factor which prevented the caste-based mobilization of the Thiyyas. They argued that this in turn had left the Thiyyas as vulnerable actors without adequate representation in Malabar. To explain this, the speedy prosecution conducted in the case of the 2012 political murder of TP Chandrasekharan, a Nair, was frequently discussed on the group as well as during in-depth interviews. The admins in particular contrasted it with lack of action in many older cases involving Thiyyas murder victims in Malabar. They argued that unlike the Nairs who had

successfully mobilized on the basis of caste, the Thiyyas lacked representation in Malabar particularly since they did not think of themselves in caste terms. This critique of Communism was expressed as an absence of those who would account for the interests of the Thiyya community and get what was rightfully due to them (“*njanakku kannakku parayan aarumilla*”). Interestingly, this critique was widely echoed on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, often across the varying political affiliations of members. This included those members on the groups who explicitly aligned themselves with the Left in Malabar as well as those who adopted a pro-Dalit agenda.

The broad narrative on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was that the development of the region depended on the caste-based mobilization of the Thiyyas. Further, the welfare of Malabar was tied to a particular form of Thiyya engagement. In order to channelize resources towards Malabar, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that what was required was not only a greater number of elected Thiyya leaders but also that such leaders should work to represent the Thiyyas rather than pledge their primary alliance to Communism.

Constructing Place through Caste: Thiyyaness and the Boundaries of Malabar

In this section I analyze how the identification of caste influences the manner in which the boundaries of place are envisioned. I study how the *Cyber Thiyyars of*

Malabar construct both the physical and social boundaries of Malabar based on their identification of the Thiyya caste.

Here, I will explore the degree to which caste identification influences the visualization of the physical boundaries of place. In the process, I will also provide an insight into the manner in which social boundaries in place are envisioned. In other words, how does the identification of caste shape questions addressing the belongingness of different social groups in place. To study the visualization of Malabar on the group, it is important to consider how it envisions the membership of the Thiyyas and other social groups in Malabar, and the extent to which they can lay claim to this place.

I will conduct this analysis by examining the group's approach to the secession of Malabar from Kerala. The approach on the Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar is shaped, in part, by their dissatisfaction as Malabaris, and the connection they observe between the place and caste. At the same time, the approach to secession is also shaped specifically by caste interests. To a certain extent, a separate Malabar is considered to have the potential to improve both the material and social well-being of the Thiyyas. In this context, the physical boundaries of Malabar are visualized in a manner that is peculiar to the caste. However, the translation of the caste-specific vision of a separate Malabar is unlikely to be translated into action because it is over-ridden by the perception that the Thiyyas are positioned competitively as Hindus vis-à-vis the Muslims and Christians in the region. Consequently, the group's approach to the

secession of Malabar is shaped both by their dissatisfaction with the disembedded identification of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas, as well as the substantialization of Thiyyas as Hindus vis-à-vis the Muslims and Christians in Malabar.

Dissatisfaction from Kerala as Malabar and Secession of Malabar

For the most part, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* expressed considerable resentment against the union of Malabar with the state of Thirukochi. These regions were united in 1956 in the aftermath of Malabar's separation from the erstwhile Madras Presidency as per the linguistic reorganization of states in India. The question of the impact of this amalgamation for Malabar in general and the Thiyyas in particular manifested itself periodically in various public conversations on the group. The predominant attitude expressed on the group was one of dissatisfaction: at the very least the union was considered to not have brought any significant positive changes to the region, or resulted in the betterment of the plight of the Thiyyas. Indeed, some even argued that the union had actually led to a deterioration of both place and caste.

Sometimes, members would push the envelope even further: on such occasions they would raise the topic of the secession of Malabar from the state of Kerala in public posts and comments on the group. In July 2013, the secession of Malabar was revived once again as a major point of discussion. The topic gained a new fluency on the group in the aftermath of the official announcement of the formation of the new state of Telangana through a division of the nearby state of Andhra Pradesh. In relative

terms, the demand for a separate Telangana was more recent than similar demands for Malabar. The tangible success of the separate Telangana movement had piqued the interest of members on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Consequently, the group discussed whether a similar feat may be achieved as far as Malabar was concerned, what the potential role of Thiyyas could be in achieving this, and how this would affect the interests of the Thiyyas. Since this topic was encountered sporadically on the group as well as during the initial in-depth interviews conducted in Malabar, it was included as a theme in successive interviews with various members and admins.

On the whole, despite the degree of resentment against the amalgamation, there was not a large degree of public support for the secession of Malabar from Kerala on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Public conversations would often boil down to the conclusion that the secession of Malabar from Kerala was a quixotic venture: a dream that may well be justified but whose time had nonetheless passed. Similarly, in private conversations, some members and admins would fondly consider the idea of a separate Malabar before acknowledging that the Thiyyas should not divert their energies towards achieving what seemed to be an unattainable goal. However, these discussions were valuable since they provided an insight into how the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* visualized the physical and social boundaries of Malabar through the prism of caste interests.

A popular and clearly observable sentiment on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was that, as a region, Malabar had experienced tremendous neglect from the rest of

Kerala, particularly from the government of Kerala. In articulating the experience of such neglect, the members negotiated their dual identities of being Malabari as opposed to a broader identity of being Malayalee. Malayalee is a term used to refer to people who speak the Malayalam language. Since Kerala was formed on the basis of the linguistic reorganization of states, it is supposed to be the home of all Malayalam speakers. Consequently, the term Malayalee is broadly used as a synonym for anyone who originates from the land of Kerala. This usage was not unusual on the group. However, as can be observed in the analysis that follows, on the group the term had multiple connotations in different contexts. In some cases, members also used the term Malayalee to refer specifically to people from South Kerala in order to indicate the relative exclusion of the North from the dominant idea of Kerala and Keralites.

As Malabaris, members discussed the neglect of the region by drawing on the distance between Malabar and the concentration of power in the Kerala. Here, the members variously referred to the physical location of Malabar vis-à-vis the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram and the cultural marginalization of Malabar within the idea of Kerala. Further, members also referred to the theme of regional selflessness/selfishness while considering the unequal relationship between Malabar and the rest of Kerala in terms of budgetary allotments.

An idea that was often reiterated on the group was that the region of Malabar was considered to be a distant outpost the government of Kerala. In expressing the disadvantages encountered by the region, members often drew attention to the

physical distance between Malabar and Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital, which was located at the southern end of Kerala. They argued that due to this physical distance, it was easier for the government of Kerala to neglect the region. In the following excerpt, Siddharth articulates the sense of relative invisibility that develops due to the distance between Malabar and Thiruvananthapuram. Through most of his life, Siddharth has split time between Malabar and other locations. His childhood was spent in Bahrain and Malabar. Although he currently works as an IT professional in Bangalore, a city located in the neighboring state of Karnataka, Siddharth frequently visits to Malabar to spend time with his parents who are settled there.

Some of the members that I spoke to were upset about what they thought was a stepmotherly treatment to the region of Malabar. What do you think about this observation?

Yeah, I think that is true. Because initially most of the political area was located in Malabar - it was the main area like Samodiri and Kolathunadu (*precolonial feudal states*). So in olden times this is the main area where all the revolutions and all those things happened. Then finally after the formation of Kerala they shifted (*the center of political power*) to Trivandrum (*the old name for Thiruvananthapuram*). And that is very far from our North Malabar. So we're receiving the differential treatment because they believe that we are very away. So they don't care. So that's what, I'm not very happy with the way that the southern Kerala government is handling matters. They are more inclined towards the south part, they are not much concerned about the North. This usually happens. But that is what is the problem with them.

(Siddharth, admin, late 20s, IT professional, Bangalore)

Here, Siddharth argues that because of the distance between Malabar and Thiruvananthapuram, this region is off-the-radar as far as governance and policy decisions are concerned. In this excerpt, it is also interesting to note that Siddharth expresses this distance by characterizing the entire state machinery as being southern (“southern kerala government”) referring to its concentration at the extreme end of South Kerala.

Since Thiruvananthapuram is the state capital, members understood physical distance from it not only as a lack of visibility but also as lack of access to a place where important decisions were taken. In particular, this was most intensely articulated by those members who were based in the rural areas of Malabar, and did not have the kind of mobility that more urban members such as Siddharth had access to. For instance, in the following excerpt, Suriya, a member on the group, discusses the limitations that emerge from this physical distance. Suriya resides with his mother and brothers in a village outside Kannur and travels into the city every day to work as a health counsellor.

People complained that Malabar has been neglected as a region because Thiyyas have been neglected as a caste because of a conscious strategy of the Ezhavas of the South. What do you think?

No that actually, it is not only in the matter of caste reservations alone. Because Malabar as a region has been neglected. Because, the decision making power in the state is concentrated in the South. Basically it is in the Travancore region that these things proceed. And so there is a routine neglect of the Malabar region itself....

Some of those who complained that Malabar was neglected by the government also argued that it would be better if Malabar seceded and became a separate state along with Mangalore. What do you think?

Yes I am interested in that concept. Because first of all, the capital is not even located in the middle of the state. The capital of Kerala is located near Kanyakumari. It is (*in*) a district right at the end, towards Tamil Nadu. So actually speaking in effective terms, it is a waste for us. So I personally would like this concept.

What would be the benefit of this to the Thiyyas, or Malabar?

If that happens there will be a change to the situation of Malabar as a whole. And when that happens, because Thiyyas are the majority community here, they would also benefit. It will not only benefit this community, but also other communities in this region. But (*the benefit will be*) more so for this community (*the Thiyyas*).

(Suriya, member, mid 20s, health counsellor, Kannur district)

As can be observed in this excerpt, as a Malabari, Suriya communicates a strong sense of disconnect from the region where significant policy decisions are taken and which deeply affect everyday life in Malabar. He also predicated his argument about

the secession of Malabar on the difficulties that arise from the fact that the state capital was physically located so far away. Like Suriya, other members who were located primarily in rural Malabar were much more articulate about the manner in which this distance affected the everyday life of a citizen in Malabar. In particular, they drew attention to the challenge of making day long journeys across the state to the capital in order to participate in administrative proceedings.

Indeed, some members argued that a cultural difference between Malabar and South Kerala also complements the physical distance. For instance, in the following excerpt, Suvinay refers to the colonial past of Malabar to argue that in cultural terms, this region has been considered as less than an equal part of the state of Kerala since 1956. Suvinay is currently working in Abu Dhabi. Despite various links with South Kerala (for instance his wife originates and resides in the region), he plans to ultimately retire to Malabar where his parents and extended family are settled.

Some folks on the group argued that Malabar has always received stepmotherly treatment from the Kerala government. These members explained this treatment in terms of the Thiyya-Ezhava difference. To what extent would you agree/disagree with this?

I agree that the above stated is true. The government does more for the southern districts than the Malabar area. Cochin should have been the capital of the state. That would have made a equally accessible governing body. For a person staying in Kasargod it's a strain to go to Trivandrum for government related matters whereas for people in southern districts have easier access to the same. Malabar, Cochin and Travancore united to form Kerala. Since Malabar was never under the rule of either the Cochin or Travancore kings, they have a step sibling attitude towards us.

(Suvinay, admin, early 30s, IT services, Abu Dhabi)

Here it is pertinent to observe that Suvinay expresses a sense of the neglect of Malabar both in terms of physical distance as well as cultural distance from the south of Kerala. He argues that Malabar experiences neglect partly because it was governed

by the British, rather than indigenous royalty. Suvinay wishes to stress that Malabar was not under the same feudal culture as the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. Suvinay, like other members on the group, attributes the neglect of Malabar partly to the cultural marginalization of the region in the idea of Kerala and ideal Keralites. Other members had previously expressed this cultural distance in various ways. For instance, they referred to the marginalization of the Malabari dialect as being less pure than the Southern Kerala dialects of Malayalam. As active migrants, many members on the group had felt the pressure to “correct” the way they spoke Malayalam in places outside Malabar. Further, they also pointed out to the prominence given to South Kerala in official narratives of the history of Kerala.

A common refrain on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was the disparity in the budgetary allotments provided to Malabar. The members argued that an important indicator of the systematic and regular neglect of the region was the disproportionately low share of government revenue earmarked for development projects in Malabar. For instance, in the following excerpt, Rakesh expresses his anger at the unequal distribution of resources between the different parts of Kerala.

In general do you think the region of Malabar has suffered because the Thiyyas were neglected?

Yes, that is one of the reasons, because the Thiyyas are the backbone of the Malabar. Majority population of Thiyyas is in Malabar and we can say Thiyyas are the backbone of Malabar. Negligence of Malabar means negligence of the Thiyyas. And there are concrete proof for that. Today I put a post in Meerkat...if you go through the budget of state, i.e. Kerala, central government or even the railway budget you could see that out of the total allotment for Kerala state a major portion goes to the South. There is, it is a proof to show that Malabar is neglected. Yesterday or day before I put on (*the*) Meerkat group regarding (*a post in which*) somebody had argued for a separate state for Malabar and like that. Upon that I commented.

(Rakesh, admin, early 40s, mid-level government official, Kannur)

As can be seen in this excerpt, on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* the conversation around secession from Kerala was informed by considerable anger at the relative lack of public investment in the region of Malabar. Education was a key area that most members concentrated on in discussions regarding neglect from the Kerala government. Another area that was often raised in such discussions was the extent of public investments in the transport infrastructure in Malabar. Members argued that the current state of road, rail and air linkages were deplorable and much of these facilities had been built by the British colonial rulers rather than the government of Kerala. For the members, the lack of transport infrastructure exacerbated the problem of distance from the south and intensified the isolation faced by Malabar. In this excerpt, it is also important to note that most members on the group perceived the state's neglect to be a deliberate choice where the region of South Kerala was consistently favored over Malabar in public investments.

It is also important to recognize that on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* the theme of regional selfishness/selflessness was often employed in order to discuss the Malabari dissatisfaction with the government of Kerala. This dissatisfaction was often conflated with resentment towards South Kerala. For instance, in the following excerpt, Vijay discusses why it is that he thinks Malabar has been neglected by the government of Kerala. Vijay's family has been settled in the city of Kozhikode, in South Malabar. Although Vijay has spent time in South Kerala as a student, and is currently studying in the United Kingdom, he continues to have very strong connections to Malabar since his parents still reside there.

Some members of the group complained that Malabar has received a step motherly treatment from the GoK. What do you think?

Yeah, yeah. I agree with that. Because it used to be Thirukochi and Malabar before. And when the state was formed like uniting them, Malabar district was stitched to Thirukochi. And you know malayalees have a reputation of being selfish: “malayalees are crooked”, “they know how to make money.” So the thing is that Thirukochi was already an entity there. Because even though they joined Malabar together, they were still not ready to give all the resources to Malabar. And they want to take resources from Malabar. Like the same thing that happened between East Pakistan and West Pakistan - money was coming in from East Pakistan and it was spent in West Pakistan. So Malabar used to have a lot of revenue and they used to spend a lot of it in South Kerala. See when you consider the number of schools and colleges there is a sharp divide between the north and the south. I am talking about government schools. We have more private schools and colleges in Malabar. But when you go to the south you can see more government schools and colleges. So that itself is a proof that we are sidelined. But still Malabar is growing and is financially safe because of hardworking people who are outside of India.

Some people on the group actually connected the problem that Malabar is facing with the political neglect of the thiyyas - it’s a conscious strategy on the part of the Ezhavas of the south.

Its not particularly against the Thiyyas. I would say it is particularly against Malabar. There are certain lobbies who take away from Malabar and who do not give it back. There are certain area specific lobbies such as the Cochin lobby and the Trivandrum lobby that want development only in that area. They always hijack the projects that are marked for Malabar.

(Vijay, member, early 30s, researcher, UK)

In this excerpt, Vijay portrays the relationship between Malabar and the rest of Kerala as an exploitative one. He argues that for the most part, the government of Kerala takes away much more from the region in revenue than it invests back into Malabar. It is also significant that in expressing this relationship through specific reference to the theme of the naïve northerner (Malabari) versus the selfish southerner (Malayalee). Vijay articulates the neglect of Malabar as a consequence of the selfish and calculating nature of South Kerala/Malayalees which is employed to deprive the region of both public and private investment. Like Vijay other members also expressed that not only are facilities concentrated in the South, the naïve Malabaris

are no match for the cunning Southerners who have mastered the *kali* (game) required to corner various resources in Kerala.

As can be observed in these excerpts, the dissatisfaction of place was often, but not always, connected to caste. In the following sub-section, I consider how the identification of caste explicitly influenced discussions regarding the physical and social boundaries of Malabar.

Secession and Disembedded Identification: Ezhavanization and the form of Malabar

The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* often drew connections between place and the disembedding of caste identification. For instance, the need to challenge the disembedded identification of Thiyyas as Ezhavas partially influenced the demand for the secession of Malabar as a separate state. Some drew on a caste-based perspective (Thiyyas are not Ezhavas) to visualize a separate state of Malabar created through a combination of areas where they perceived that castes similar to the Thiyyas resided. Murali, the founder-admin was particularly enthusiastic adherent of this view. As we sat watching the ritual of Velattam at a kavu near his house, Murali had taken the time to elaborate on his dream of a separate Malabar. Remarking on what was unique about this ritual, Murali had observed that other communities such as the Kodavas of Kodagu in Karnataka practiced similar rituals and maintained cultural links with key

Thiyya *kavus* in Malabar. Murali had suggested that the Thiyyas *needed* a separate state of Malabar which also incorporated areas similar to Kodagu.

You had mentioned earlier that culturally the Malabar area is more similar to South Canara as compared to the rest of Kerala. Can you explain that?

Because geographically it comes like that. Because Malabar, Coorg, the Nilgiri Hills and South Canara, this should be formed as a state. But the only thing is that linguistically we're different - Tamil, Tulu and Malayalam. That is why we are not joining. But the same thing the Muslims are also fighting for the same - Malabar as a separate state. They (*Muslims*) are not fighting to join the other areas (*with Malabar*). What we Thiyyas (*require is a separate state combining Malabar with these areas*) ... Because when we came from Kyrgyzstan, the culture also is there (*in these other areas*). You know there is this Kottiyoor Ulsavam, there is a temple here. For that (*temple*) the people come from Coorg with a cow. And in Parassini Kadavu also they come for that, they bring rice here. So that is a custom that is happening.
(Murali, founder-admin, mid-40s, manager in private firm, Kannur town)

Here Murali is articulating that what the Thiyyas require is the creation of a state which will be formed through the secession of Malabar from Kerala and its combination with the areas of Kodagu, South Canara (in Karnataka) and the Nilgiri Hills (in Tamil Nadu). In doing so, he is drawing on the Kyrgyzstan theory of origin which was popularly referred to on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* to distinguish the Thiyyas: as opposed to the sea-faring Ezhavas who originated from Sri Lanka, the Thiyyas are a part of a martial group that migrated from Kyrgyzstan. On the group, members frequently argued that sections of this large migratory group from Kyrgyzstan had settled in various locations, including the three places that Murali mentions above. While not all members adhered to the idea of a geographic unit that took on this precise form, the imagination of a Malabar that unifies the Thiyyas with a set of castes that they rightly belong to was not an unpopular one on the group.

Apart from its explicit influence on the visualization of the physical boundaries of Malabar, on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* the disembedded identification of the Thiyyas was perceived to have a strong influence on the welfare of this caste within this place. For instance, the members often discussed the manner in which the consequences of disembedded caste identification were exacerbated by the problems associated with Malabar. Further, over time, Ezhavas had migrated to the region, a movement which was also connected to the disembedded identification of the Thiyyas on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. They argued that in some significant ways, this migration had important consequences for the welfare of the Thiyyas.

i. Place and its influence on the consequences of disembedding:

The dissatisfaction that the group expressed as Malabaris was intertwined with their sense that the caste itself had experienced considerable loss in status and material well-being after the incorporation of Malabar within Kerala. As discussed in the previous chapter, the vocal majority on the group often contrasted the “forward” caste status of Thiyyas in colonial Malabar with their inclusion within the category of “backward” caste in the amalgamated state of Kerala. On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* such a change in categorization was often referred to as the Thiyyas being “downgraded” after the formation of the state of Kerala. Further, they considered such disembedded categorization to have adversely affected the relative well-being of Thiyyas. There was a strong sense on the group that in Kerala, the Thiyyas have faced

the dual disability of region (secondary status as Malabar within Kerala) as well as the loss of caste status.

For many on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the disadvantages stemming from the disembedded identification of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas was exacerbated by their disadvantaged position as Malabar. As the members saw it, the disembedded identification had generated a loss of caste status, while simultaneously denying them relative access to the benefits of affirmative action as compared to the Ezhavas. A common refrain on the group was that while the Thiyyas had been “downgraded” by their disembedded categorization within the Ezhavas, the latter had garnered the lion’s share of the common quotas in government employment. In their view, the limitations of place strongly influenced the inability of the Thiyyas to access these resources. Here, members referred to both the infrastructural constraints in Malabar as well as general cultural attributes among Malabar.

That the members perceived a connection between the decline in well-being among the Thiyyas and the poor infrastructure in Malabar is clear in this excerpt from my conversation with Rakesh. Not unlike others on the group, Rakesh worried that over time the Thiyyas as a caste “came down” because they no longer dominated government service like they did during the colonial period.

You mentioned that although the reservation is combined for both, it is the Ezhavas who are taking maximum benefit. How is this situation coming about?

Situation came because this (*Kerala*) government was not ready to give education institutions and other facilities for education in north Malabar. There were very few colleges in north Malabar, some 30-40 years back. I think only 2 to 3 colleges were there. At the same time, in southern side there

were many colleges for higher studies. So that was a big disadvantage for us. You see our people could not go for higher education. Only the people who had money could go outside the state, ie Mangalore or Chennai, for higher education. So deprived of our rights. That's how, that's how we came down. Otherwise, before the formation of Kerala state, Thiyyas were dominating the government service. And almost in higher posts we were dominating. Even then, at that time, there were no Ezhava in any of the higher posts.

(Rakesh, admin, early 40s, mid-level government official, Kannur)

Here, Rakesh, who himself is a government servant, makes the observation that over time more Ezhavas than Thiyyas have availed the jobs earmarked through combined reservations for both castes. Here it is significant that Rakesh presents this as a problem the Thiyyas face on account of the limitation of place, i.e. the drawbacks faced by Malabar in general. He argues that the Thiyyas lost their hold over government service because of the lack of educational infrastructure in Malabar. As compared to South Kerala, where the Ezhavas reside, the facilities for higher education in Malabar are relatively limited. Consequently, the Thiyyas along with other Malabaris have suffered. As it was understood on the group, this place-specific problem had constrained the Thiyyas in caste-specific ways. The lack of education has affected their ability to access employment opportunities as part of affirmative action. In turn, Rakesh perceives that not only have the Thiyyas lost out on caste status, but they have also lost out on other forms of social status such as the prestige and power invested in government service.

The Thiyyas inability to access reservations was also explained in terms of cultural constraints peculiar to the region of Malabar. Here, the spatial imaginary of the Thiyyas as naïve Malabaris and the Ezhavas as calculating Southerners was often employed on the group to discuss why the former were less successful in entering

government service. For instance, in this excerpt, Tejas, a Thiyya settled in the Middle-East, identifies the limitations of Malabari culture vis-à-vis Southern Kerala culture and its impact on Thiyya employment:

Has your awareness of being a Thiyya changed over time?

See basically I am a Thiyya, but sometimes when issues came... Nowadays the Ezhavas, they are replacing our name from the government sector, in our school certificates and employment register and all these things. They are replacing the name Thiyya with Ezhava. Its not a right practice. And they are getting the benefit like in government sector jobs they are getting the opportunities for... And we are from Malabar, specially Malabar people... If you take the statistics of the employed people in the government sector, you can clearly see that these people from South, they are given more importance in these fields.

You said that Malabar people in general are less represented in Government service as opposed to South Kerala people right. Why do you think that happens?

Initially I told you that we do not practice bribes, favoritism, dowry and all those things. These (*southern*) people, they are giving the money and gaining things. And they have got a system, if one Ezhava is there he will help out other caste members to get things done. We don't have such unity or such a closely knitted society. We are lacking these skills.

(Tejas, member, early 40s, engineer, Dubai)

Over the course of the interview Tejas bitterly recounted how, as a youngster in the 1990s, he struggled to find employment within Kerala. In doing so, Tejas employs a commonly used metaphor of Ezhava as southerners and Thiyyas as Malabaris. In articulating his experience, he specifically highlights the limitations that he faced as a Malabari. After many unsuccessful attempts Tejas left Kerala for a job in the city of Coimbatore and eventually migrated abroad to Dubai, where he is currently settled. As can be observed in the excerpt provided above, in explaining the problems faced by Thiyyas, Tejas refers to the cultural traits that he thinks holds Malabaris back in general. He argues that the Thiyyas, like other Malabaris, are not particularly adept at utilizing kin networks for employment or negotiating the system through bribery. Further, he argued that these were attributes that the Ezhavas possessed through their

immersion in South Kerala culture which he portrays as being very calculating. Although he expressed considerable anger in these reflections, Tejas, not unlike other members of the group, also thinks that these are “skills” that Malabaris in general, and the Thiyyas in particular, need to inculcate.

In discussing the relative inability of Thiyyas to access reservations, members also referred to the general Malabari preference for business or employment abroad over a government job. This, they argue, is diametrically opposite to South Kerala, where the tendency is to seek government employment. Some members traced this preference to the historical location of Malabar as a significant coastal city with long established business and trade relations. At the same time, others referred back to the spatial imaginary of the naïve Malabari who is discouraged from even applying for government service since they assume that such jobs require “skills” such as nepotism and corruption.

ii. “Ezhavanization” of Thiyyas and the presence of Ezhavas *in* Malabar:

The migration of Ezhavas into Malabar generated some concern for the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, primarily through the perceived connection between such migration and the impact of the disembedded classification of Thiyyas. In contemporary history, Ezhavas had first started to migrate to Malabar in the first half of the twentieth century, primarily as agricultural laborers accompanying Christian farmers from the South (Varghese 2006, Kodoth 2006). This form of migration

gradually petered out by the 1970s. Ezhavas have continued to migrate to the Malabar after this period, primarily in the form of professional workers employed in the state administration and other service-based professions. Despite this long history of migration, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* consider Ezhavas in Malabar to be outsiders on account of both their caste and their Southern origins.

The group's concern about the migration of Ezhavas to Malabar was sometimes explicitly discussed through posts. For instance, Siddharth, an admin on the group, initiated a discussion on the "colonization" of Malabar by Ezhavas, regarding the formation of Ezhava dominated settlements in Malabar. Apart from such explicit posts, issues regarding Ezhavas in Malabar also featured in mundane discussions on the group. Significantly, this topic emerged as an important theme during the initial in-depth interviews, particularly with those members and admins who were residing in Malabar. Consequently, Siddharth's colonization post was incorporated in the interview schedule so as to initiate a discussion regarding perspectives on Ezhavas in Malabar.

For the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the problem of Ezhava migration was not so much connected to the sheer number of people migrating to Malabar. Most members considered the scale of migration to be a fairly small one. Rather, it was concentrated on how such migration would influence *ezhavanization* and its consequences for the Thiyyas. In all, the presence of Ezhavas in Malabar was considered to be more of a *potential* problem.

To begin with, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* considered the presence of Ezhavas in the region as a source of the blurring of social boundaries between the two castes.

This can be observed in the following excerpt from my conversation with Sarthak:

I wanted to talk to you about that post on the colonisation of land in Malabar. Siddharth had put up that post on the group where he said that one of the things that really bothered him was that between 1930s and 1970s there was a huge migration of Christian and Ezhavas from Travancore to Malabar. So that sort of entry of the Ezhavas into Malabar is something that really bothered him.

(He chuckles) Actually, a part of that is true. A part of that is like... I mean you can see that in every country nobody supports migration. Even the BJP is telling that Bangladeshi migrants are causing problems in India. So in a way, in my place, when I talk to my friends, they are very hesitant... I mean they are less happy about this. They are very rude about this kind of migration like people coming from the South and settling here and they are starting their own things and they are planting rubbers. I mean they are like not even... they are bothering too much about this migrations I think. And as Siddharth said, it's like... Partially it's true because if these people (*Ezhavas*) comes and settles down they will be starting their organization here. And most of the society thinks that the people here, I mean the Thiyyas and the SNDP Ezhavas are same. And that can cause an misunderstood. I mean people can misunderstand easily. That might be the problem we will be facing.

(Sarthak, member, early 20s, student, Gurgaon)

It is significant that despite his disinclination towards the explicit anti-migrant attitudes that is common among his peers, Sarthak is perturbed by the migration of Ezhavas in Malabar. His concern was shared by others on the group. For them, Malabar held the key to the distinction between Thiyyas and Ezhavas. What distinguished these two groups was that Malabar was the homeland of the Thiyyas. However members worried that the presence of Ezhavas in Malabar would reinforce the broader perception that both Ezhavas and Thiyyas are the same.

Others attributed a much stronger agency to the Ezhavas when it came to the disembedded identification of Thiyyas with Ezhavas. These members expressed wariness towards Ezhavas in Malabar, and argued that these migrants were consciously categorizing themselves as Thiyyas in the region to obfuscate the distinction between the two castes. Further, some members also argued that these migrants contributed more directly to a process of the erasure of the distinction between Thiyyas and Ezhavas, by facilitating the disembedded identification of Thiyyas. This can be observed in the following excerpt from my conversation with Murali.

So how do you think that decline in number has come about? (*Murali had been expressing his concern that the number of Ezhavas had ballooned over time as compared to Thiyyas*)

Yeah, because decline in number came... There are two reasons. One reason is that Thiyyas are literate. They reduce the population to one or two children only. Where Ezhavas didn't look for that. They give birth to four or five, like that. One is that reason. The other reason is most Thiyyas started writing "Ezhavas". Because as I told you the college principals and college headmasters and school headmasters from South, Ezhavas, came to work at Kasarkod and remote areas (*of Malabar*). They made the children, they told the children that "both are same, so start writing 'Ezhavas'". So from childhood itself they started writing "Ezhavas". It happened!

(Murali, founder-admin, mid-40s, manager in private firm, Kannur town)

Here it is significant that Murali attributes a perceived fall in the number of Thiyyas to the active participation of Ezhava migrants in Malabar. He suggests that Ezhavas who migrated from the South into Malabar have been engaged in an insidious programme of encouraging Thiyyas to self-identify themselves as Ezhavas.

On the group, particularly among those residing in Malabar, there was a fairly strong perception that Ezhavas were increasingly able to corner government jobs even in this

region, due to the advantages of their Southern origin. Although they observed that this was not happening on a large scale, the members would nonetheless refer to this as an instance of how the Thiyyas were losing out on combined reservations, even in an area where they are in the majority. For instance, in the following excerpt, Siddharth refers to this issue while assessing the disembedded classification of the Thiyyas:

So yesterday I think we were discussing the OBC classification of the Thiyyas and whether they have helped the community or not.

There was some benefit, some people got jobs and all. But generally you can see that most people go for private jobs. So there is no reservation in private. That means that there is no benefit for everyone, maybe some people got it. If you compare it with Ezhavas... Actually if you see it in our place only, there are many Ezhavas coming to our place for work.

Do you mean in Malabar?

Yeah. Because they're saying that 14% of reservation is given to Ezhavas. But actually it's not happening like that. Like currently we are considered as part of Ezhavas. But we're not getting the due share of reservation. And most of the people are actually Thiyyas. More than Ezhavas there are Thiyyas actually in Malabar. So all the reservation is actually taken by the Ezhava people. So finally there is no benefit for us.

Can you tell me a little more detail about how they end up taking up all the reservations benefits?

Okay, for example if you go to the Wayanad region. In that region after writing the PSU exams, if you look at all the railway jobs, and other jobs, they are mainly Ezhavas actually. So there is actually no benefit for most of the Thiyyas from reservations actually. But still we are included as part of Ezhavas but there is no use actually. It's just namesake.

(Siddharth, admin, late 20s, IT professional, Bangalore)

Here Siddharth is articulating a very common refrain on the group that Ezhavas often migrated into Malabar to access jobs earmarked under a common quota for both Thiyyas and Ezhavas. As can be observed from the excerpt above, Siddharth clearly resents that Ezhavas have “taken” away jobs in “our place”, positions that he thinks rightfully belong to the Thiyyas as a numerically dominant community in Malabar. As people who were embedded in circuits of migration themselves, most members of

the group did not favour measures such as expulsion as a solution. Rather, what they considered to be more significant in this instance was that due to the disembedded caste classification the Thiyyas were being shortchanged by southerners in a place they claimed as their own.

The mistrust expressed towards migrant Ezhavas on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* also drew heavily on the assumption that they were aligned with the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP). The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* considered the SNDP to be an organization that was instrumental in the disembedded classification of the Thiyyas as Ezhavas⁹⁶. The SNDP was often portrayed as an organization with a vested interest in this identification: with the inclusion of the northern Thiyyas in the Ezhava fold the SNDP could claim to represent a larger proportion of the population of Kerala. Members argued, that while the SNDP had claimed representation, it had not actually provided any substantial representation to the Thiyyas of Malabar.

A pro-SNDP perspective was not tolerated on the group. A large part of this silencing stemmed from the direct association between organizations such as MTMS and TMS and the admins of the group. However, as mentioned earlier, in more private conversations, a few members of the group displayed a more tolerant attitude towards the SNDP. Nonetheless, what most group members had in common with each other was a sense that SNDP was an organization that had not provided much caste-based representation for the Thiyyas in Malabar, but had continued to focus on

⁹⁶ This was a perception shared even by members such as Pran who while interested in a separate Thiyya identity, was not averse to a continued symbiotic relationship with the SNDP.

the Ezhavas of the South. At the same time, even those members who adopted a skeptical approach towards MTMS/TMS argued that the Thiyyas had not gotten as much out of a relationship with the SNDP as had the Ezhavas. On the whole, on the group the SNDP was portrayed as a southern organization which had reaped much monetary benefit from Thiyyas in Malabar and then channelized it for the benefit of Ezhavas in the South.

The approach that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* adopted towards Ezhavas in Malabar should also be understood in the context of the perceived relationship between the latter and the SNDP. To a large extent, the group viewed them as proxies for the SNDP and its activities in Malabar. Indeed, some of the dissatisfaction that they felt towards SNDP came to be concentrated on these migrants. For instance, admissions and jobs in the SNDP managed educational organizations in Malabar were at the center of vociferous discussions on the group. Here, members argued that Thiyyas received no preference in admissions or jobs even though they contributed generously to these SNDP. Rather, it was the Ezhavas who were brought in from the South for teaching and administrative positions in these institutions. On the one hand, the group considered this to be yet another instance of the increasing influence of the Ezhavas as compared to the Thiyyas. On the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, this was considered as a symbol of the SNDP's disregard for Thiyya interests in Malabar.

Sometimes the displeasure regarding the presence of Ezhavas in Malabar was expressed in terms of decline in the numbers of Thiyyas vis-a-vis Ezhavas in the region. Here members referred both to the migration of Ezhavas into Malabar as well as the co-optation of local Thiyyas into the Ezhava fold through inter-marriage with these migrants. This fear can be observed in the following extract of my conversation with Siddharth where he clarifies his post on the “colonization” of Malabar by the Ezhavas:

I wanted to talk to a little bit about your post about the colonization of land in Malabar. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Yeah, actually many Ezhavas have migrated from south to the Kannur area. Kannur, then Wayanad and all these things. Maybe immediately after the British left, I don't know maybe there was some other reason. I'm not very sure. But so many people have left southern Kerala and move to the North. And they have moved towards the hilly areas, hilly regions. For example, the forest regions for cultivating rubber and all these things, for plantation purposes. And these people are the main supporters of the SNDP. If you see in our area also there are people who are very much deeply involved in SNDP. And they are doing that because they have some relation with the people who migrated there. But the ordinary Thiyyas they are least concern about which community and which caste you are, they are not concerned. But these people they migrated 50 years ago . They have married into Thiyya community. Thiyyas have married people in Ezhava. So the relation between Thiyya and Ezhava has increased over the past 50 years because of intercommunity marriages. So it is a problem because they are the main supporters... So if you create a fully Thiyya community, these people will be the most opposed to that. Even in my relation, there are intercommunity marriages. And that is why many people are not very happy with discussing this thing because they feel "okay if we are different. It already happened. So what can we do now?" So if you have mistaken marriages then you will not be so deeply involved in the community because... Ezhavas something... Because you feel that you're not exactly that (*fully Thiyya*). It usually happens.

So how is this connected to the "colonisation" of land?

Yeah, if you see in Iritti and Keloth ... It's actually near... It's a hilly area... So in the Iritti and Keloth area there are many Ezhava families. So they had migrated from the South and settled there. And now they are somewhat in majority, so that's what we have seen an effect in that. So since there are slight majority areas in Kannur itself, where there are Ezhavas. It is a problem because... it could be a problem for Thiyya people there. And those people are marrying into Thiyyas and like this they are trying to become Thiyyas... Because the separation between Ezhava and Thiyya in these

regions is coming to, or is getting extinguished. So that's what the same thing is happening to.... There are people in my family also who are moving towards that direction. So I am not happy with that - what to say?
(Siddharth, admin, late 20s, IT professional, Bangalore)

As can be observed here, Siddharth is concerned about the presence of Ezhavas in Malabar because he worries that in some pockets in the region they are beginning to outnumber Thiyyas (“somewhat in majority”). Significantly, he connects this to the problem of the erasure of social boundaries between Thiyyas and Ezhavas in Malabar, particularly through inter-marriage between these groups. There was also some concern in the group regarding intermarriage and its effect on the numerical strength of both groups in the future. The worry was that if Thiyya women married Ezhavas, their offspring would be classified as Ezhava rather than Thiyya. However, on the group, this was considered to be a general problem, rather than a pressing issue within the region. For the most part, this anxiety about numbers of Thiyyas vis-a-vis Ezhavas *within* Malabar was relegated to that of a potential problem.

Instead, the influence of the SNDP in these pockets of Malabar was a much more significant and immediate problem for the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The presence of Ezhavas in Malabar was significant in terms of the identification of Thiyyas and who had the right to represent the latter in a region where they were predominant. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were not only resentful of the disembedded identification of Thiyyas as Ezhavas, they were also dissatisfied with how the SNDP used this narrative to claim that it represented Thiyya interests. It is in this context that the use of the term “colonization” becomes significant. This term was particularly resonant

among those admins and members who were closely aligned with the MTMS. They portrayed the presence of Ezhavas in Malabar as an attempt by the SNDP to create strongholds in various pockets in the region. For instance, in the following excerpt, Murali expresses concern about the increasing dependence of Thiyyas on Ezhavas and SNDP in these pockets.

I discussed Siddharth's post on colonization. He said that he was worried because in earlier times are lot of Christians and Ezhavas had come in and bought for cheap in Malabar.

Yeah, yeah. In hilly areas. That also is there. That is there, that is there. Christians and Ezhavas.

He seemed to be quite unhappy with that situation.

Yeah. That also is happening. In hilly areas, no. In hills, they get in very low prices. And they started colonising in that area and slowly they come here and capturing. Like capturing itself. Now also, some issues are happening here...

Is it continuing, or has it stopped after a certain point?

Yeah, it's continuing. Its continuing. But now they have started dominating also.

How have they started dominating?

Yeah, they... Like I said they became self-sufficient. They have enough money. They have enough power from politicians. So some people, Thiyyas also started to depend on them.

Sorry who? The Christians and Ezhavas?

In some areas, Thiyyas who are in population, they are strong in Malabar, they started depending on these Ezhavas who had colonised in those hill areas.

How are they dependent on them?

Because they have money power, they have political power.... Vellapalli (*leader of the SNDP*) and all will help them. Anything for them: Vellapalli will feed them and give help for them. Okay? And they will make some artificial ways. That Vellapalli and colonised leaders you know, they are for the benefit of the... They will do some help (*for thiyyas*). Just for one time they'll do one help to them (*local Thiyyas*), and they'll think that this is the lifetime help for them. They'll be happy with that. They started colonising those areas. It's all happening, ya.

(Murali, founder-admin, mid-40s, manager in private firm, Kannur town)

In this excerpt, we can see that despite using the language of the “capturing” of land to discuss the migration of Ezhavas in Malabar, Murali does not dwell on the question

of land ownership by the Ezhavas in the region. Rather, through the language of “colonization” Murali’s emphasis is that in pockets of Ezhava concentration, the influence of the SNDP is progressively increasing among both the Ezhavas as also local Thiyyas. Further, as a functionary of the fledgling MTMS, Murali is concerned about the influence of the long-established SNDP since the latter took an oppositionary stand towards the separate mobilization of Thiyyas outside its fold. Admins such as Murali were also concerned that among such pro-SNDP Thiyyas, this influence translates into self-categorization in line with their disembedded classification as Ezhavas.

However, even others who were more ambivalent towards the MTMS were concerned about the influence of the SNDP through the pockets of Ezhava concentration in Malabar. For instance, in the following excerpt, Vijay tells me about the recent Maha Sangamam conducted by the SNDP in Kozhikode.

(We discuss about the TMS) To be honest I don’t know when this TMS was formed. Because it was only recently, when I joined the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* that I came to know there was an organization like TMS (*at this point the TMS had not bifurcated into the TMS and MTMS*). Its literally a new organization and its on the path of progress I would say. Murali is the president right?

I am not sure- they themselves seem to be figuring out those details.

Yes, that is why I said its a very new organization. That is why SNDP is calling it a paper organization. Because they know Thiyyas don’t want to associate themselves with Ezhavas. That is why they were organizing that Maha Sangamam in Calicut. And do you know the fact that all the buses were coming straight from the South like Cochin and... 90 percent of them were from the South.

So very few people from Malabar?

Very few. I have never heard any one from my family talking about it. And there were very few people from Kannur and Calicut. Yes people from Mallappuram and Wayanad came - but they were immigrants (*Ezhavas*) from the South.

(Vijay, member, early 30s, researcher, UK)

The SNDP's Ezhava/Thiyya Malabar Maha Sangamam was organized in February 2013. This event was vigorously discussed event on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The organization of the Mahasangamam was interpreted on the group as a signal that the SNDP had acknowledged the discontent among Thiyyas in Malabar, and particularly was troubled by the emergence of the TMS and MTMS. However, admins such as Suvinay also rued that the SNDP had "painted Calicut yellow"⁹⁷. They were concerned that due to its own financial clout and the relative lack of caste mobilization among the Thiyyas, the SNDP event had garnered heavy participation. At this point, like Vijay, many members, had explained that it was not the local thiyyas who had turned up for this event. Rather it was the Ezhavas who had migrated to Malabar who had attended the event. These members were agitated about the misrepresentation of Ezhavas as Thiyyas in Malabar for the benefit of the SNDP.

In this section, I have analyzed the different ways in which the members of the group established a connection between the limitations of place and the consequences of the disembedding of caste identity. On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, dissatisfaction with the status of this region combined with dissatisfaction about the identification of Thiyyas (as Ezhavas) contributed, in a small way, to the imagination of a Malabar that should be separate from the state of Kerala. Despite such musings, the secession of Malabar was not heavily favoured because it was perceived to be an unfeasible division on account of factors such as the division of the existing infrastructural

⁹⁷ Yellow is a colour that is associated with the SNDP in Kerala (much like red symbolizes the Left and saffron symbolizes the Right). Through this phrase Suvinay is referring to the physical and symbolic display of influence by the SNDP in the city of Kozhikode during the Mahasangamam.

resources in the state of Kerala. Further, a much more significant obstacle in the mobilization of a strong demand for a separate Malabar on this group, and something that is more pertinent to this particular analysis, was the consideration of Thiyya interests from the perspective of its intersection with a religious identity as Hindus.

Secession and the substantialized identification of Thiyyas as Hindus

The anxiety surrounding the need to identify Thiyyas as distinct from Ezhavas was an important consideration in shaping the demand for a separate Malabar on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Yet, this influence was overshadowed by the group's religious identification of the Thiyyas as Hindus who were competitively located in opposition to other religious communities, such as the Christians and the Muslims.

While the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were keen on identifying Thiyyas as distinct from Ezhavas, they were just as committed to identifying themselves as Hindus. Members had a distinctive manner of identifying themselves as part of a Hindu religious entity. When the group was started initially, the identification of the Thiyyas as Hindus was relatively muted since the focus was on clarifying the identification of their caste. This approach was also partly developed as a counter to the broader narrative which equated the Thiyyas and Ezhavas, within which, as many members noted in the in-depth interviews, the Thiyyas were not encouraged to mobilize separately as a caste on account of the need to maintain unity among all Hindus in Kerala.

In contrast to this initial silence, in the summer of 2012, the identification of Thiyyas as Hindus on the group became particularly visible through the public discussions initiated by Suriya, a member who had adopted a Dalit perspective. Suriya had put up a series of posts asking members to reflect on whether the Thiyyas should align themselves as Dalits and what they thought of the position that Hinduism accorded to their caste. In his posts, Suriya specifically suggested a Thiyya identity which was outside of, and even oppositional to, Hinduism. Suriya's identification with the Dalit perspective was not well received among the vocal sections of the group, and he was castigated by most as a potential trouble maker. Considering the enthusiasm with which these questions were discussed on the group, members were asked to reflect on these posts during the in-depth interviews. They were also asked reflect on whether and how they considered the Thiyyas and Hinduism to be connected to each other.

The group was extremely vocal in its critiques of the Brahminical strand of Hinduism: it was not uncommon to find discussions challenging the dominance of Brahmins and Brahminical practices in Kerala. At the same time, members made it very clear that it was important to situate Thiyyas as Hindus. In negotiating their place within the Hindu fold, the members would argue that the manner in which Hinduism was practiced in Kerala and particularly in Malabar was very different from other parts of India where the Brahmins were acknowledged as heading the caste hierarchy. Through reference to this place-based history of caste, the members argued that the Thiyyas were originally a caste that had controlled much of Malabar. It was

only in more recent times that the Brahmins and aligned castes such as the Nairs and Nambiars had been able to subjugate them. From the perspective of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the Thiyyas were squarely located within Hinduism, although the rituals and deities associated with this Hindu caste took on a peculiar form in this region.

Not only did the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* strongly argue in favour of a Hindu identity for the Thiyyas, there was also a strong sense on the group that as Hindus this caste was pitted against other religious communities in Malabar. This intersection of a substantialized caste identity and a substantialized religious identity for the Thiyyas as Hindus, significantly influenced the question of whether Thiyyas should be committed to creating a separate state of Malabar. The negation of the secession of Malabar was particularly determined by the perception that the Muslims were in competition, and indeed posed a substantial threat to, the interests of the Thiyyas as Hindus in Malabar. This logic is clearly visible in the following excerpt from my conversation with Arun.

On the group some people had posted about the formation of a separate state of Malabar. What is your opinion about this?

That was there. I heard during the Kerala formation itself, there was a talk on that one. But now I don't know how much of it will be helpful. Maybe it will be helpful.

In your opinion, is something that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* or even the MTMS should be focused on?

Not really. Because that (*new state*) could go either way. Because need not that Thiyyas to get prominence in such an eventuality. I mean, you have a good percentage of other communities (*like Muslims*). So it doesn't mean that Thiyyas has to be prominent.

(Arun, admin, mid-30s, IT professional, Hyderabad)

As can be observed above, on the one hand, Arun considers that the creation of a separate Malabar might potentially benefit the Thiyyas. As a numerically dominant caste in the region, part of the expectation is that the Thiyyas would figure prominently in the new state's administrative and political machinery, and will also be better placed to access other resources in the region. On the other hand, however, Arun considers the comparative influence of other communities such as the Muslims to be a factor that would limit the benefits that Thiyyas can reap in the event of the secession of Malabar. As a result, although he is not favorably disposed to South Kerala especially from the Thiyya perspective, Arun does not think that the current mobilization around caste should include the secession of Malabar as a goal.

A similar argument was articulated by Murali, who had initially explained the grand idea of a separate state of Malabar with great enthusiasm.

You had mentioned this earlier and a few people also put up posts about this on the group. They were discussing the possibility of Malabar being formed as a separate state?

Yah, yah, yah. Because as per cultural rituals, anthropology... But language is different... Malabar has a separate region you know. Like Malabar starts from Calicut, Kannur, Wayanad, Kasarkod and part of Mallappuram. These makes all Malabar region. Okay? Then other region is this Nilgiri areas - Coonoor, Ooty area and all. Then Kodaikanal, Palani area. Then Coorg or Kodagu area and all that is South Canara - South Canara, Mangalore that area and Chikmalglur that area. (***The area that is formed after combining all these regions***) that to be a separate state! But we are not demanding (***it currently***). If we demand, another peoples (***the Muslims***) are more to demand. Their supporters. And it will become a big political problem. So we're keeping quiet. Later when we (***MTMS***) become strong, we will ask for a separate state. Not now, later.

(Murali, founder-admin, mid-40s, manager in private firm, Kannur town)

Here it can be observed that although Murali is attracted to the vision of a separate Malabar which will unite the Thiyyas with other castes perceived to be similar to them in neighbouring areas; he does not consider this to be feasible at present.

Although there is support for the creation of a separate state of Malabar among some sections of Muslims in the region, Murali does not think that the Thiyyas should join such a mobilization. To begin with, the current demand is focused on the secession of Malabar from Kerala, whereas from the Thiyya perspective the cognitive map of the new state of Malabar would include other areas. More significantly, he argues that the Muslims in Malabar are relatively well organized, and in comparison the Thiyyas would be no match for them in competing for resources or power in the new state. Although he is still committed to the idea of a separate Malabar, Murali argues that the Thiyyas should not mobilize to translate this dream into a reality until they have consolidated their own bases and organized sufficiently as a substantialized bloc that can compete with the Muslims.

The manner in which the issue of the colonization of land was discussed by members provided an important indication that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* felt the need to identify themselves simultaneously as Thiyyas and Hindus specifically in opposition to other religious communities in Malabar. It may be recalled that this term was initially used on the group by Siddharth to specifically refer to the presence of Ezhavas and the SNDP within Malabar. However, it is significant that when members were invited to reflect on this term during in-depth interviews, for a lot of them it also evoked the threat that they perceived emanated from other religious communities in Malabar, such as the Christians and in particular the Muslims. For the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the term colonization evoked very different understandings with respect to their caste Others as compared to their religious Others. In the case of the Ezhavas,

rather than a reference to land ownership, the term colonization was used to refer to the perception that their influence was progressively increasing in this region. In contrast, in the case of the Christians and Muslims, the term colonization was specifically used to refer to articulate unease regarding land ownership and perceived mobilization by these groups.

When the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* used terms like colonization in the context of the Christians, in the main the reference was to the Malayora Meghala, or the hilly regions in eastern Malabar. Between the 1930s and 1970s Christians from the South of Kerala had migrated to Malabar and converted dense forests into commercial plantations. On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the approach to this Christian presence in Malabar was complex. On the one hand, there was resentment about the amount of land that was owned by the Christians in this region. Many members portrayed it as an invasion, where Christians had come in to Malabar and bought land for very cheap prices. This was often portrayed as the naïve Thiyyas having been cheated out of land ownership in Malabar. On the other hand, this migration was also considered by most members to have been an indication of the enterprising nature of this community. Consequently, even those who complained about this “colonization” appreciated that the Christian migrants had worked very hard to reap profit from a terrain that most locals at that time considered to be wild and inhospitable. This tension can be observed in Ramanan’s description.

Malabar is forgotten even for any development even now. I don't know why because those people are... You go to the hilly area side (*Malayora Meghala*), there are people who can fight for the farmers there. I have travelled once. Beautiful roads through rubber estates! Beautiful bridges through the rivers of the rubber estate! So somebody was there to fight for

that from the government to make all these things. But you see the main roads of the Tellicherry. Because there is nobody to ask and fight, it doesn't mean that the total community and the total people are neglected by the government. Because we are not saying anything. There are people there who were elected from there and became ministers. These people are just neglecting. You have seen Malabar roads, right.

Do you think that the neglect that Thiyyas have been facing is connected to the neglect that Malabar has been facing?

Actually Malabar attention is not there because of the supremacy of... Before itself Kerala was... Malabar was under the Madras presidency and it was detached from that. So earlier it used to be Travancore and (*later*) we were joined with it. Still the preference is Travancore again. But as I said, you go to the hilly areas of Malabar (*now*). The hilly areas of Malabar are occupied by, they call Christians who are farmers, they occupied that land and they cultivate and work hard. But for them there is somebody to talk. The representatives are there to talk to the government and they get the benefits such as road and infrastructure. Here (*in Thalsseri*), who is there to talk? Thiyyas - there is nobody to talk. Here I tell you, something happens, the politicians will say go to the Collectorate. What will it do their-will be open onions or what?

(Ramanan, member, early 60s, retired engineer, Thalassery)

Ramanan was the first to refer to the Christians in using the term colonization in his post on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Although he was appreciative of the hard work that the Christian farmers put in to cultivate the land, it is significant that Ramanan characterizes their ownership of land here as an occupation. This excerpt is also significant since it indicates that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* considered Christians as being a community with a high degree of mobilization based on religion. It was through such organization, members argued, that Christians were able to collectively bargain for disproportionately greater access to state resources such as roads and bridges. Other members also considered Thiyyas to be at a disadvantage with respect to the impact of Christian mobilization on the political mix in Malabar. Christians in the South are understood to be traditionally aligned with the Congress party. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* complained that the mobilization of Christians also

indicated a greater presence for this party in Malabar. In contrast, they argued that most Thiyyas worked for various political outfits but were not mobilized as a community. In all, however, the focus on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was not so much on the Christians as it was on the Muslims in Malabar.

The ownership of land by Muslims in Malabar emerged as a tremendous source of concern among the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Through the use of terms like colonization, members were referring to their perception that the Thiyyas as Hindus were being edged out of land ownership in Malabar by Muslims. This perception was vigorously articulated by almost all members of the group, particularly during in-depth interviews. While the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were fearful of Muslim land ownership in general, they were particularly vexed by a declining share of Thiyya ownership of land in the urban areas of Malabar. They saw this as a problem that was combined with the acquisition of businesses that were previously owned by Thiyyas by the Muslims. This anxiety can be observed in my conversation with Ramanan:

Last time when I visited, members in Kannur had complained about the increasing power of Muslims. Some said they were buying up more land. What do you think?

Actually, this is money power because they have many source of money nowadays. I don't know illegal or legal, something like that and their plan is to have... and another thing is they can have any amount of children. Our government is campaigning for 2 children. But for them there is no restriction of having children, any amount. They don't care the government says like that or like this. They said "Allah gives, no problem!" And money most of the... you will find they are working outside in Gulf countries. Those who are bringing money in a normal earned way, other people who is getting money... I don't know from where the money comes, the big, big lands are purchased by them. So it is a ...if you say it is a threat, those who have land, why they sell to them? This is another problem. If you don't want to sell, don't sell to them. But they (*Muslims*) throw money, any amount you know, to get some places.

But do you think this is a threat to the welfare of Thiyyas in Malabar?

See owning a land... owning a land is not a threat for a community... You need not own a land to complete...because here nobody... (**but**) business land are a problem. They (**Muslims**) are concentrating on business land, not agricultural land. So they are basically business community. And they are concentrating in each cities business land to have their own mall or something like that and money is pumped from all over the world for this purpose. I don't know from where they arrange and things like that. It is not a threat for the common man like me because now I am living... You have come to my home - I am living in a one acre land. Nobody will purchase this - no muslims will purchase this. And I am not intending to give to them also this land (**or**) any part.

I am curious. A lot of Thiyyas also migrate to the Gulf. How is it that they are not able to bring back that sort of money?

No in most of the case... because I brought the money and I bought the land. I bought the land as an investment. I found it is grown maybe about 200 percentage now in 10 years time. So people like me brought the land. Some people are not ... (**they are a**) little poor in investment. And most of the (**thiyya**) people who goes, its not in a higher position. They have many things to look after - their home. And whatever money they earn they spend like on their own house. By the time they come you will find they don't have much balance to buy this thing. Other people (**like the**) Muslim community is basically the business community. They go there and do business also. And the illegal business also, they are ready to do it. And when the money is brought nobody is thinking "how it is made - legally or illegally?"

(Ramanan, member, early 60s, retired engineer, Thalassery)

Here it is significant that Ramanan explains the decline of Thiyya entrepreneurship in Malabar through a reference to the Gulf migration among the Muslims in Malabar. Ramanan's perception that in comparison to the Thiyyas, the Muslims had reaped unfair benefits from their migration to the Gulf was shared by others on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. It was not uncommon to hear members complaining that Muslims were either engaged in "illegal" activities, or had received preferential treatment as Muslims in the Muslim dominated countries of the Middle East.

The anxiety over urban land and business ownership was also extended to general ownership of land in Malabar. It was often combined with the rhetoric that the Muslims were planning to usurp as much land as possible in Malabar through both

buying and selling practices. For instance, in the following excerpt, Jairaj, a young member based in Oman, initially responds to the post on colonization by referring to land ownership by Muslims in Malabar:

Did you see the post about the colonization of land in Malabar?

Yes, that is going on. In Malabar there are some dealings going on associated with land. It is a current thing. And it is happening a lot in our area.

So what is going on?

I'll explain it to you. You know the Muslim community right? In our area the Muslim community, Muslims mostly... Our area is one in which Muslims, Christians and Hindus are all equal, in the sense that people from all religions are there. So in our area, if a person from the Muslim community wants to sell their land, if the land is to be sold, that person will never give it to Christians or Hindus. If a person has that sort of desire to sell his land, he will tell his mosque committee and will give it only to people from their community. That is so that their land, the area does not leave their hands. This is something that I am seeing more of now. So for them it is a way on which it does not go to outsiders. I don't know if this is happening outside in other areas, but it is something I can see in our area.

So when that happens, does it affect the Thiyyas?

Well to tell you the truth I am against it. It is only after the sale happens that we get to know about it on the outside. This is a definite thing that is done. Those who do it, they are definitely doing it.

(Jairaj, member, early 20s, subcontractor, Oman)

Here Jairaj is articulating a common argument on the group: the Muslim community seeks to consolidate its power in Malabar through tightly controlling the ownership of land. He argues that unlike the Hindus and the Christians, the Muslims only sell land to other Muslims and not people from other religious communities. This perception, that the Muslims as a community were hoarding land, either through control over the sale of their own lands, or through an aggressive pursuit of lands owned by Hindus, was fairly common on the group. Although Jairaj depicts that the Thiyyas as Hindus do not follow this practice of selling land only to others within their community, it was clear from the anecdotes shared by older members on the group, that the practice

of not selling land and houses to Muslims has historically been prevalent even among the Thiyyas in Malabar⁹⁸.

It was clear that such a tussle over land ownership was a metaphor for the members' perception that the Muslims were becoming more powerful in Malabar. This sense of a loss of power from the Thiyyas to the Muslims was often expressed in everyday conversation on the group as well as in in-depth interviews. It is significant that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* perceived this as a threat not only as Thiyyas but also as Hindus. This can be observed in the following excerpt from my conversation with Rakesh:

Some of the members told me that they were worried the Muslims were becoming more powerful in Kannur. They seemed to think that this could harm Thiyya interests. What do you think about this?

Yes, it may harm. There is chance of harming Thiyyas because monetary wise some of them (*Muslims*) are very rich. And they are getting funds for help from Gulf countries and all that. They are getting help from almost all Gulf countries, Muslim countries and all, like that. We (*Thiyyas*) do not have such facilities. So they are buying not only our property.... but this Vaniyas, Nairs and all their property, they (*Muslims*) are buying. It is a trend.

And how do you think this will affect Thiyya interests?

On the one hand, the Muslim population is increasing. On the other hand, our population is decreasing. And if this goes, ultimately... and on the one side, they are buying our property on a large scale. So finally after many years I think, they can demand that ... and based on the population, the election is all based on voting all that... they will demand more seats in the assembly, Lok Sabha and all, like that. Ultimately they will be having control over Malabar - some people are fearing like that.

(Rakesh, admin, early 40s, mid-level government official, Kannur)

Rakesh response is interesting because it highlights two aspects of the threats that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* perceived as emanating from land ownership by Muslims.

⁹⁸ For instance, Manjushri recollected that during the sale of *tharavadu* houses in her family, a primary consideration was to avoid selling them to Muslims.

First, he articulates that the Muslim pursuit of land is not something that is limited to the Thiyyas alone, but is common to all Hindu castes in the Malabar. Secondly, he articulates the fear that such land-ownership by the Muslims will ultimately translate into their overwhelming “control” over Malabar itself.

Many members saw the loss of power as a challenge that Thiyyas not only experience as part of their caste, but also as part of a beleaguered Hindu community within Malabar. Just as they had perceived a lack of mobilization among the Thiyyas as a caste, most members also commented on what they perceived was a lack of unified mobilization among the Hindus in Malabar. For instance, in the following excerpt, Arun responds to Rakesh’s concern about the decline in Thiyya majority by referring to the lack of mobilization among them, both as a caste in itself and as part of a religious group.

Rakesh, had put up a post on the group that said that "Malabar is the land of the Thiyyas". He followed this up by saying that at one point Thiyyas were a majority in Malabar, but now they feel like a minority there. What do you think?

That is... Like there are a lot of factors to that. Muslim population has been growing and Christian migration has happened. So that has contributed. And the growth of the population has a lot to do with the way it is. One is if you look at most of these Hindu and Christian families, they adhere to the population policies, which is two kids mostly. Whereas, that hasn't been the case of the Muslims. And another issue related to the growth of Muslim populations, what I understand is... See they, even among my friend circle, most of them got married around before 25... say around 24 like that. Whereas Christians and Hindu crowd usually get married around 32, 33 on an average. You have more or less a ten-year gap there, so the cycle repeats for a couple of generations... The number, the growth difference will be huge, right? Because by the time you have your children ready for marriage, the Muslim grandchildren will be ready for marriage.

It seemed that he was referring to majority in terms of political power and economic resources, apart from just numbers of people. So this sense is that the kind of political power and economic resources which

the thiyyas enjoyed earlier, that has been going down. Is that your sense as well?

That, if you look at last few years the way the political this one is kind of... It's more of a pressure group I would say... Like you see Muslim parties forcing for certain benefits to be given to their communities. Same with Christian parties. Whereas usually the Hindu kind of community is divided across party lines, most of them. I mean when you compare the other communities a good part of, a good chunk of them align to a certain party, which is not the case with the Hindu groups. They are just spread across party lines. So because of that they are not able to act as a pressure group. I would say more than community, these groups (*Hindus*) are affiliated on the political lines.

So that has become a disadvantage for the Thiyyas also?

Yes.

(Arun, admin, mid-30s, IT professional, Hyderabad)

It is significant that Arun considers the mobilization of the Muslims and Christians in Malabar as a challenge to the numbers and influence of the Thiyyas in the region. As Arun explained it, for him the mobilization of both Thiyyas and Hindus vis-à-vis the religious minorities in Malabar is crucial. He considers the mobilization of Thiyyas to be an integral part Hindu unity, a goal that was quite important for him, rather than as a movement that stands in opposition to it. Here he explains that the relative consolidation among Muslims and Christians in Malabar has emerged as a disadvantage to the Hindus in general and the Thiyyas in particular. It is interesting that Arun considers the mobilization around caste by the Ezhavas and around religion by the Muslims and Christians as an unwelcome divisive element in Malabar. Yet when he was asked how he would characterize the current mobilization among Thiyyas, he argued that he saw this as a means to correct the divisiveness in Malabari society, rather than as something that would contribute to it.

On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, a connection was made between the lack of mobilization by Thiyyas and its influence on what was happening to Thiyya ownership of land in Malabar. On the group this was brought to the fore in 2013, due

to a furore over the transfer of control of a cremation ground used by the Thiyyas in Payyambalam Beach in Kannur city. This cremation ground had been managed by a committee formed by the Thiyyas for many years. However, recently its management had been transferred to the local panchayat after a court order. Although there were a few different root causes that were cited behind this move, a refrain that was commonly heard on the group in connection to this issue was that it would have never happened to lands managed or owned by the Muslims or the Christians in Malabar since they were much more organized than the Thiyyas. This can be observed in my conversation with Vimal:

When we spoke the last time you had mentioned that communism does not take into account differences based on caste. You also said that this has harmed the Thiyyas. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

You want me to explain that? Most of the Thiyyas are of a secular mindset. So asking about caste et cetera has not come up as an issue in our area. Other than in marriages and things like that, this caste spirit... I'd say 90% of the Thiyyas do not bear this in their minds. So even if an outsider comes to our house, we never enquire about what his caste is. So if someone comes because they have a need or whichever way they come to our house, we do not enquire about this thing. But the problem that has come up is that because we have become excessively secular. When everyone else collects benefits by citing numbers ("*kanakku paranju vaangumbol*"), because the Thiyya community is not organized, they have not been able to achieve this. That is the main problem. That is there in whichever area. Right now the management of the Thiyya community cremation ground has been usurped. If this had happened to the grounds for any other religion, I think they would have organized against it and the government would not have been able to give this order.

(Vimal, member, early 20s, postgraduate seeking employment, Kannur)

Like other Thiyyas in his neighborhood in rural Kannur, Vimal is openly and strongly committed to the CPI (M). At the same time, he expressed that the allegiance to Communism had come at a certain cost to the Thiyyas. He argues that in combination with the athmarthatha of Thiyyas, their adherence to Communist principles had made them "excessively secular". It is significant that Vimal chose to talk about the

Payyambalam cremation ground as an instance of the Thiyyas being “excessively secular”. In explaining this term Vimal is referring to what he perceives to be a lack of organization among the Thiyyas both as a caste and as part of a religious community. It also indicates that he perceives a threat both as a Thiyya and as a Hindu.

Significantly, when the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* drew on the substantialized identification of being both Thiyyas and Hindus, the scope of the region in question expanded. They were identifying themselves as not only a caste in Malabar, but also as part of a larger religious community in Kerala, one which they perceived was in competition with the Muslims and Christians in this state. Members often made a reference to their perception that due to their unity and organization, the Christians and Muslims had successfully been able to access various benefits from the state government. This can be observed in my conversation with Anish, a member studying in Russia:

So what do you think makes better sense for Thiyyas: align with the SNDP or with the TMS? Because from the group I understand there is some tension between these two.

Yes there is some tension. But it's like one person is now ruling there is SNDP. Because it's like a - I don't know how they manage it. They have some sort of internal democracy and all. And we Thiyyas are not satisfied with the organizational setting. And one more point I'd like to add is that the Thiyyas were not organized at all in the past. And that was the reason for their failure also. They were not organized at all.

Can you explain what you mean by organized?

Organized means like for example vote bank politics. If we organized ourselves we could have had a better deal.

So you're saying that there was not that sort of unity?

Yes that is what I mean. But at the same time I don't think that we should be like apart. We should not be like pockets or islands. In the long run it's not too good for the community either.

What do you think are the top five things that Thiyyas need to do for themselves in the future?

The first one is know your political strength. Know your strength. Like numerically and in other aspects. So there should be a common platform to unite other than this SNDP.

For the Thiyyas themselves?

Yes. Then second one is that now in the politics of Kerala more importance is given to the minorities (*he is using the term to refer to religious minorities, specifically the Christians and Muslims*). So I am somebody who has been... Of course minorities should not be denied any rights, but they should not be given any special rights. So Thiyyas should do something in electing leaders to do something for the community.

The Thiyya community?

The Thiyya community. To do something for the general community rather than appease any particular community. Now the Muslim league is having a major role in Kerala politics. And there is a development between... There are two organizations one for the Nairs and one for the Ezhavas. So they have come to a common platform to do something politically. I support that. It doesn't mean that everything should be given to the majority community (*the Hindus*). But even a term like majority I don't know if it is applicable for a state like Kerala because of the percentage of the population of Hindus. So everybody should be given an equal right. Because it's a policy of the federal government that they are giving some scholarship for the minorities.

I see. I wasn't aware of this.

Yes, of course they're giving. But that far exceeds what they are giving for the SC, ST community. It's a technical problem that the money given for the scheduled castes, they are following the old pattern. That's why minority communities are given more importance.

(Anish, member, early 30s, Ayurvedic doctor, Russia)

Anish was one of the first people on the group to publicly post about how the amalgamation of Malabar with ThiruKochi had been detrimental for the Thiyyas in the region. It is significant that when he is prompted to consider how Thiyyas can help themselves, Anish suggests that they should consolidate not only as a caste in the region but also as part of the mobilization of Hindus in the state of Kerala.

This chapter considered the becoming of place through caste on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The identification of caste on the group shapes the manner in which the membership of Thiyyas in Malabar is envisioned, as well as the manner in which other caste and religious groups can claim belongingness in the region. The substantialized identification of caste also shapes the manner in which the physical

region of Malabar is envisioned on the group. However, it is subsumed by the emergence of a simultaneous substantialized identification of the Thiyyas as Hindus who are perceived to be at odds with Christians and Muslims in both Malabar and Kerala.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Section 1

This study explores the mutual production of caste identity and place through reference to each other. The aim was to understand how and why the members of the digital group, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, connect Thiyya caste identity with the region of Malabar. Since Giddens' theoretical framework of distanciation is one of the few sociological theories that explicitly addressed the connections between space and social relations, it seemed to be the correct place to start such an analysis. Consequently, the framework of distanciation was extended to the study of caste identity and place.

The study began with a rather close reliance on Giddens' suggestion of a concrete break between social relations and place as social systems start to exist beyond the immediate contexts of physical presence. Consequently, at the outset of the study the focus was on tracing the rupture between caste identity and place, following which only an ephemeral connection can be established between them. After all, the contemporary reality of the categorization of castes through the institutional mechanisms of the nation-state seemed to make complete sense from the confines of this framework. These institutional mechanisms create a standardized categorization of castes through which the nation-state knows them, where each caste is abstracted

from prior spatial contexts. When we consider the way the nation-state understands caste, the place and caste are indeed disconnected, or disembedded.

However, once interactions with the digital group itself were underway, it was observed that for the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* the moment of disconnection between the Thiyaness and Malabar seemed not to have occurred. If anything multiple and contradicting place-based narratives seemed to exist within the same caste. This was reflected in the struggle regarding the identification of the Thiyyas within the online group, where the connection between Malabar and Thiyyaness was enforced. Further, from the perspective of many of these members Thiyya and Malabar had always been connected to each other, and some even found it difficult to think of one without the other. Indeed, for them, over the past few years there seemed to have been an intensification of this association between the identification of caste and place. More interestingly, the intensification of the way members connected place and caste was based on a reaction to how the nation-state classified the Thiyyas. As far as the objectives of the study were concerned - a moment of pause occurred. Although the framework of distancing in its present state is useful in partially explaining the connection between caste identity and place, it seemed that there needs to be a shift in the manner in which the very concepts of disembedding and re-embedding are currently visualized. As the study progressed, it became important to bring under scrutiny the explanatory theoretical framework itself.

Through the ethnographic study of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the following hypothesis was tested:

In the context of heightened time-space distancing, ways of identifying caste become disembedded from places they were intimately tied to, and can only be partially and temporarily re-embedded in these places.

This hypothesis was then translated into two empirical research problems. First, *how and why do members of this digital group identify their caste by referring to Malabar?* Second, *how do members envision the area of Malabar based on their identification of caste?*

This chapter consists of three sections. Section 1 includes a discussion of the theoretical contributions of this dissertation. Here the empirical findings of the dissertation are discussed in the context of lacunae in the existing literatures covered in the dissertation. In section 2, the empirical contributions of the dissertation are discussed. Some suggestions for future research are noted in the concluding section.

Theoretical Contributions of the Study

Distancing, disembedding and re-embedding

Based on the empirical findings outlined in chapters 4 and 5, I reject the hypothesis regarding caste identity and place that was constructed by utilizing Giddens'

theoretical framework of distanciation. In so rejecting the hypothesis, it is not my contention that the theory of distanciation is no longer useful. Rather, the theoretical approach to place and identity adopted in this study and the findings outlined above indicate that the concepts of disembedding and re-embedding require modification.

As originally envisioned by Giddens, distanciation refers to the re-ordering of time and space with respect to social relations in a manner that the social system can exist beyond the immediate context of physical presence. Here Giddens specifically adopts an institutional and ontological approach. Distanciation occurs through disembedding mechanisms which pull social relations out of more immediate spatial contexts to recombine them across wider spatio-temporal contexts. Giddens identifies symbolic tokens as a type of disembedding mechanism. These are media of interaction which can be transferred without being influenced by the specific characteristics of those people or groups which handle them. In order to avoid the suggestion of a unilinear movement of social change, Giddens developed a paired concept of re-embedding, whereby social relations can be reconnected to older, intimate spatio-temporal contexts. For Giddens, any such reconnections can however only be partial and temporary.

As outlined in chapter 2, Giddens' framework of time-space distanciation and the concepts of disembedding and re-embedding are partially useful in understanding the relationships between caste identification and place. The literature has long acknowledged the multiple ways in which caste identity is embedded in place. The

structure of and access to space is based on caste identity (Béteille 1965, Ghurye 1969, Gandhi 1983, Trivedi 1996, Dupont 2004, Singh and Vithayathil 2012). Further, caste identity has also been known to be shaped in reference to the immediate spatial context (Pant 1987, Srinivas 1970, Raheja 1988, Appadurai 1996, Jaiswal 1997).

The institutional and ontological emphasis in Giddens' original theoretical exposition is useful to the extent that it facilitates understanding of the manner in which the nation-state generates knowledge about caste. Caste identity becomes disconnected from place through the generation of a symbolic token of knowing caste on the basis of orientalist attempts at standardization of caste classification; the logic of enumeration; and classification based on affirmative action policies of the colonial and post-colonial state. Consequently the nation-state does generate a body of knowledge about caste which freezes caste identity into a standardized, spatially (and temporally) abstract entity that does not change based on those who refer to it. Giddens' theoretical framework is useful particularly since his original aim was to illustrate "the unifying features of modern institutions" (Giddens 1991: 27).

However, as this study demonstrates, the connection between place and caste identity continues to exist despite the prevalence of such disembedding mechanisms instituted by the nation-state. Indeed there seemed to be a struggle between multiple spatial narratives, often within the same caste itself. Within the broader Thiyya fold two place-based narratives about caste existed. One stressed on the Malabari origin of the

Thiyyas to distinguish them from the Ezhavas. The other one was aligned with the state's favoured narrative that the Thiyyas and Ezhavas were the same caste with different regional monikers. The struggle over these narratives was also reflected in the digital group itself, where the former narrative was enforced.

It may be argued that from within Giddens' framework, this multiplicity can be explained through the concept of the reflexive project of the Self. Giddens (1991: 244) identifies this as a peculiarly modern phenomenon whereby self-identity is based on the "reflexive ordering of self-narratives." He further suggests that this reflexivity also involves a choice among "counterfactuals", where individuals are actively "choosing between possible worlds" (Giddens 1991: 28-29). As per this perspective, the multiple spatial narratives of place are but different options that individual Thiyyas can choose from in constructing their self-identity in conditions of high-modernity.

However, the concept of reflexive self-identity, as envisioned by Giddens, is not neatly applicable to the current case. We can only get a partial explanation from within the original framework of distanciation. To begin with, in this concept of reflexive self-identity, Giddens prioritizes identification by self over identification by others. This emphasis is chosen by Giddens because it enables his argument that in modernity, the individual has a greater (although not absolute) freedom to pick and choose narratives about the self. However, as can be seen in this case, the identity ascribed by others to the self is an important aspect of the place-based identification

of caste. At the heart of this emphasis is Giddens' tendency to approach modernity as being essentially discontinuous, where the pre-modern/modern are considered as mutually exclusive. At the very least, this results in the loss of analyses that consider the continuities between the pre-modern and modern.

The problem also appears in sharper contrast when the scale of understanding identity is broadened from the microsociological category of self-identity adopted by Giddens, to the macrosociological category of self-identification (via cultural studies) as adopted in this dissertation. As explained in Chapter 2, the former approach to identity has the tendency to overstate the agency of the individual at the cost of understanding the discursive construction of the self. In this case, the place-based narratives of caste, even in their multiplicity, are projects of the identification of the self, not in terms of the individual per se, but in terms of the attempt to identify the self as part of a caste group. Even if, as Giddens suggests, it is indeed so easy to pick and choose aspects of individual self in modernity, this certainly is not the case when it comes to the identification of larger groups. Groups necessarily have to respond to identification by others, engaged though they may well be, in temporary and strategic articulations.

Similarly, it may also be argued that it is possible to explain the continuing reliance on place in defining caste through a faithful reading of Giddens. It can be argued that this is precisely the kind of rekindling between social relations and place that he had suggested through the concept of re-embedding. However, this study also

demonstrates that the moment of rupture that Giddens envisions through the term disembedding does not necessarily occur for everyone. Instead, the connection with place continues to exist within the caste, although attention to the spatial connection may wax and wane with the demands of time. Further, re-embedding is not quite as inconsequential as originally envisioned in distanciation. The attachment to place that was encountered in this case was not the feeble effort at re-embedding that was promptly dismissed in Giddens work as being “too vague to recapture a glimmer of what used to be” (Giddens 1991: 147). In addition, re-embedding as Giddens envisions was not exactly applicable in this case since place retained its significance as something more than simply a container where people lived. While many Thiyyas who connected their caste to Malabar in this digital group lived in this place, there were many others who had ceased to reside there many decades ago. Place was still an important element of their caste membership for these Thiyyas. This suggests that within a section of the Thiyyas have always continued to represent both as being connected to each other. In other words, although the rupture between caste identity and place may be valid from the perspective of the nation-state and some interest groups (within and outside the caste), it is not the case for other interest groups within the caste.

This suggests that although the symbolic token of knowledge about caste is generated, and may gain legitimacy due to the nation-state’s influence, older place-based ways of knowing caste continued to exist at a more subdued level, and regained significance for some Thiyyas in the contemporary context. The emergence of the

symbolic token therefore needs to be analyzed in the context of a continuing struggle regarding how caste is known and represented by multiple groups, within and outside the caste. Consequently, both the disembedding and re-embedding of caste identity in place should not be understood as points of disconnection and re-connection alone. Rather, they need to be studied as points where some ways of knowing caste gain more power and legitimacy for specific social groups.

i. Implications for knowing place:

Divergent approaches to studying spatiality explain the partial manner in which the theory of distancing can explain the relationship between caste identity and place on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. In this dissertation, the approach to studying space and place differs from Giddens's approach. Within the framework of distancing, Giddens has clarified that he is primarily concerned with the phenomenological approach to the study of space and place. Therefore, Giddens argues that the reordering of social systems under distancing also influences time and space. The representation of space becomes standardized and is not restricted to any one perspective. Further place is increasingly influenced by interactions with absent others and by distant events.

However, from within the critical social constructionist approach adopted in this thesis, the geographer Derek Gregory (1989) has pointed out some important flaws in Giddens' social geography. He argues that Giddens fails to consider the role played

by the structures of signification and legitimation in the study of space and place. Gregory correctly challenges Giddens' argument about the standardization of the measurement of place, pointing to the peculiar representation involved in official cartography which is often at odds with other representations of place. Gregory argues that Giddens' conception regarding place is limited to envisioning it as a mere container, and therefore it does not include its normative and symbolic elements.

An overview of Giddens' social geographical approach, however, indicates that within his preference for the phenomenological approach, Giddens does accord some recognition to the symbolic aspects of place⁹⁹. Further, if we follow the trajectory of Giddens' approach to time-space, it can be observed that in his initial work he does consider the normative elements involved as well. For instance, in his early work on structuration, Giddens (1984) has drawn on Foucault and written about the organization of space as a tool of disciplinary power. Here Giddens (1984: 261) has also made observations regarding the normative connection between restructuring of social systems, and time-space that are important for this particular study. Here Giddens refers to the role of the storage of information with respect to time-space as something that generates power. Therefore, in his earlier work, apart from experience, Giddens does concede a part for the knowledge and representation of space in the theory of structuration. However, this emphasis seems to have been dropped in Giddens' (1990, 1991) later work elaborating on globalization and distancing.

⁹⁹ See for instance Giddens' (1984) reference to the role of "sense of place" that agents use to experience spatiality.

Using Gregory's critique as a starting point, this study seeks to re-infuse some of this emphasis on knowledge and representation of space into the concepts of disembedding and re-embedding. The representation and knowledge of places are not fully congruent with how they are experienced. Neither are these representations stable or fixed by the nation-state alone. Consequently, along with the original emphasis on stretching out of social systems across larger chunks of time-space, based on the findings of this study I would suggest the incorporation of the discursive elements of spatiality within distanciation.

Thiyya identity and Malabar may well have been disconnected due to the nation-state's narrative of knowing caste. Further, in official cartographies of India, Malabar has primarily been relegated to an odd historical and geographical category - it is unlikely to figure in official maps of Kerala or India. However, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* have not ceased referring to Malabar, nor from representing it from the perspective of their caste. This continues to influence their vision of this place - the cognitive map of Malabar for them corresponds greatly to a place where Thiyyas reside. It also influences the manner in which they represent the place of different social groups in Malabar - Thiyya interests represent Malabar above other social groups for many on this group. Finally, the Thiyya specific cartographic vision of Malabar may well influence its physical boundaries at some juncture in time, based on the mobilization of the Thiyyas vis-à-vis other caste and religious groups.

Places are not limited to boundaries within which interaction and experience occur. They have a powerful function in discourses - they are used in a struggle over how social agents are known and how they want themselves to be known. Therefore the negotiation over legitimizing narratives about caste identity and place is important in gaining a fuller understanding of this case. The incorporation of the discursive aspect of place has important implications for how we can approach distanciation and understand the relationship between disembedding and re-embedding.

ii. Implications for distanciation, reconceptualizing disembedding and re-embedding:

Giddens argues that under distanciation, the experiential connection between social relations and place is severed due to changes at the institutional level. However, this generates a great amount of ontological insecurity - social agents become progressively unsure of themselves. Consequently, he argues that sometimes they use the very tools which facilitate disembedding - such as the new media - to re-embed social relations in place. Since this analysis does not provide much room for multiple representations - either of caste or of place - it can only partially explain how and why caste identity and place are reconnected on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

In contrast, once connections between place and social relations are considered from the perspective of representation as well as experience, we can start to understand that the generation of the symbolic token around caste by the nation-state is only one

among multiple narratives. This symbolic token of knowledge around caste does not exist in a vacuum determined only by how institutions know people and how people experience their lives in place. It also interacts with culturally specific ways of evaluating caste groups. As can be observed in this study, the institutional classifications of caste generated by the nation-state are incorporated within prevailing dominant notions regarding the biological basis of caste and the unequal status of caste groups.

Conversations within the group and interactions with members indicate that these are not simply people who have lost their bearings on how to be simply because the nation-state now knows them in the context of the historico-spatial stretch of Kerala rather than Malabar. In reconnecting the Thiyya caste with Malabar through an online forum they are not just warding off a great modern dilemma of existence and negotiating time-space.

Instead, they are anxious because the way the nation-state knows them, as being the same as Ezhavas and as being part of the “backward” category, is drawn into the broader discourse of caste inequality. This interaction between an institutional classification and the older discourses on caste inequality serves to stigmatize them (“those categorized as backward are inherently inferior and incompetent”). Further, they also perceive a connection between the manner in which the state identifies them and the extent to which they can access the benefits of social policy through the state. They argue that when the government of Kerala identifies Thiyyas as a subcaste of

the Ezhavas under the broad category of Other Backward Classes, they are unable to access much of the 14 percent reservation allocated to them. Consequently, they seek to revive the Malabar based identification of the Thiyyas to distinguish themselves from the Ezhavas as well as to negotiate for access to 7 percent of these affirmative action quotas. Both of these factors influence the current instance of the re-embedding of Thiyya identity in Malabar on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.

From this case, the disembedding of caste identity and place does not appear quite as permanent as implied in the original exposition in Giddens later work. Nor does the re-embedding of caste identity in place seem quite as temporary or ephemeral. If anything it seems rather persistent, a linking together which is likely to resurface periodically.

Implications for Studying Caste

The connection between identity and place is discussed rather briefly and indirectly within the literature on caste (Ghurye 1969, Srinivas 1970, Barnett 1976, Hardgrave 1979, Appadurai 1986, Pant 1987, Raheja 1988, Manor 2001, Widmalm 2006, Annamalai 2010). Further, where the connection between both is taken into account as a central part of the analysis, the discussion often occurs at the level of a fixed identity that influences or is influenced by a fixed place (Miller 1954, Béteille 1965, Gandhi 1983, Trivedi 1996, Dupont 2004, Singh and Vithayathil 2012). In contrast, in this dissertation, a process-based approach was undertaken to study how, at certain

junctures in time, the constructs of caste identification and place can significantly shape the collective creation of the other.

i. Place and the Identification of Caste:

By adopting a fluid approach towards the construction of caste identity (through place), this study also demonstrates that both its identification and composition can become sites of contestation within the caste itself. Despite the existence of status differences (Thurston 1909, Nossiter 1982, Kodoth 2001), the Thiyyas had previously been identified as synonymous with the Ezhavas in a disembedded manner within academic writings and popular discourse (Hardgrave Jr 1964, Abraham 2010, Nag 1989, Osella and Osella 2000). This identification also emerged partly as a reflection of the political alignments between these groups through the course of the past century, which at its peak resulted in providing access to OBC benefits for the Thiyyas in the 1960s. Over the past decade this identification has congealed through the classification of these castes by the government of Kerala (Kerala Public Service Commission 2013).

It was in opposition to this coagulation that the region of Malabar was used in the collective conversation on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* to identify the Thiyyas as a caste that is distinct from the Ezhavas. Over time, the alignment with the Ezhavas seems to have soured, at least for a small but growing section of the Thiyyas, including those who were part of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. The disaffection

towards this identification by the nation-state stems from a combination of factors including the stigma generated from it and its influence on the caste-based experience of places outside Malabar, the progressive entrenchment of the logic of enumeration, and a shift in the substantialized identification of the Thiyyas.

ii. The identification of caste and stigmatization

The Thiyyas are currently classified under the Other Backward Classes (OBC). While the national list of OBCs lists them as a caste that is separate from the Ezhavas, the state government list locates Thiyyas as a subset of the broader category of the Ezhava caste. Anecdotal evidence from members of the group indicates that this difference in the state list has been a recent occurrence. Apart from this list, the identification of Thiyyas as Ezhavas was also reported for things like public examinations and school records. Members of the group narrated multiple instances where they had experienced ridicule and even discrimination on the basis of their identification as “Ezhavas” and “backwards”. This stigmatization was particularly intense in Southern Kerala, or when they interacted with people from south Kerala in places other than Malabar.

In analyzing the impact of caste identification by the nation-state on resolving caste inequality, Dudley-Jenkins (2003) identifies a dual movement. While in some cases these disembedded caste categories are consciously embraced in an effort to challenge prevailing caste inequalities by some of the most disenfranchised caste and

tribal groups, caste differences are also reinforced through the potential for further stigmatization. An important addition to this analysis would be Aloysius (2011) response: any consideration of state-based identification through these categories must also observe prevailing older and newer cultural discourses which legitimate caste inequality. In other words, it is important to consider how this symbolic token (disembedded institutional knowledge in the form of caste identification as SC, ST or OBC) interacts with prevailing and new cultural interpretations which legitimate caste inequality through caste-based stigma.

Groups categorized as SCs and STs have conventionally been the most disenfranchised and experienced the most stringent discrimination within the caste system. Consequently, the literature on the contemporary stigmatization of caste, particularly in terms of these disembedded institutional categories, has been concentrated on the SCs and STs. Research indicates that classificatory terms based on affirmative action policies, particularly the term SC, ST and “backwards” are read through the lens of superiority and inferiority, resulting in a coded, yet stigmatizing, discourse (Still 2013, Gudavarthy 2012, Froystad 2010, Jodhka and Newman 2007, Vasavi 2006, Mitra Channa 2005, Dudley-Jenkins 2003) involving these categories. As part of this discourse, these terms are infused with older notions of purity of blood and natural intelligence as being inherently distributed unequally based on biological differences between castes (Still 2013, Gudavarthy 2012, Froystad 2010, Vasavi 2006, Mitra Channa 2005). This stigmatizing discourse also incorporates resentment that draws on a neo-liberal global logic which portrays affirmative action as

promoting inefficiency, and those who are classified in disembedded categories such as SC and ST are portrayed as inherently lacking merit (Jodhka and Newman 2007).

The stigmatization of groups classified as OBCs also warrants some attention since research also indicates that as compared to affirmative action policies for the SCs and STs, OBC reservations have attracted much more upper-caste resistance (Jaffrelot 2006, Deshpande and Yadav 2006). The question of how the OBCs respond to this kind of stigmatization is an interesting one, given that they may be better positioned to counter it on the basis of their relatively better material position and social status.

In his analysis of destigmatizing affirmative action in India, Gudavarthy (2012) suggests that since OBC as a category comprises heterogenous and differentiated groups, stigmatization is likely to be relatively ineffectual. However, as this research indicates, the Thiyyas continue to experience stigmatization on the basis of caste, particularly on the basis of their disembedded caste classification by the nation-state. Further, in everyday discourse, the term “backward” has become a blanket term to incorporate various groups covered under affirmative action policies, covering the OBCs along with the SCs and STs (Galanter 1978). In this manner, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* also find themselves to be discursively produced as “backward”.

In part, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* counter this stigmatization through employing spatial imaginaries of caste to refer to region-specific social and cultural capital. The critique of other caste groups is another strategy through which they counter this

stigmatization. However, this does not always entail a direct critique of the higher ranking castes that engaged in attaching the stigmatizing labels. Instead, in the immediate situations where they experience stigma, many of them still resorted to passing as the Nairs, who are understood to be a higher-ranking caste in the conventional caste hierarchy. The critique was engaged in a more covert form, in the relative safety of areas where their numbers are higher such as on the digital group. They also sought to direct a much more concentrated critique at caste groups who they considered to be the source of the stigma – such as the “backward” Ezhavas who have made Thiyyas “backward” by association.

Gudavarthy (2012) further argues that unlike the SCs and STs who have adopted a moral position of the “victim-subject” in the context of reservations, the OBCs have the potential to resignify the discourse on affirmative action. He argues that the OBCs, in contrast, have adopted a pragmatic approach using the language of rights and legal and constitutional entitlements to justify reservations. The current study can only partially corroborate Gudavarthy’s observations. While the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* did adopt the pragmatic-legal narrative to claim reservations, they also combined it with the narrative of a “victim-subject”. They adopted this approach through the language of place: by referring to their caste-based experience of places outside Malabar and by referring to the limitations of region combined with caste.

Gudavarthy (2012) invests considerable confidence in the ability of the OBCs to resignify the currently stigmatizing discourse around affirmative action in India. In

his empirical work, he found that OBC respondents justified reservations for SCs as well. He suggests that rather than altruism, this approach is adopted because OBCs cannot justify affirmative action policies for themselves without fully legitimizing them for the SCs as well. Gudavarthy also points out that the dominant discourse stigmatizes the SC and ST reservations as something that is mainly utilized by successive generations of elites within these groups. In contrast, since OBC reservations are limited through a “creamy layer” restriction, he argues that this is also used to resignify affirmative action as time-bound and as limited to those who truly deserve them.

However the current study suggests that these observations regarding the seemingly uniform resignifying potential of OBCs needs to be modified. On the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* the approach to affirmative action varied on the basis of class divisions. Gudavarthy’s observations better applied to those rural members who belonged to lower middle-class families such as Suriya and Vimal. The majority of the members, who were urban and belonged to the middle and upper classes, seemed to reject the reservations in their entirety. They pointed out that personally affirmative action had only been the source of stigma, since they were unable to access the affirmative action policies due to the creamy layer restriction. Further, although they were unwilling to give up on the OBC classification, stating that poor Thiyyas would benefit from them, they were also resentful of other groups that utilized them. In particular they reserved strident critique for the affirmative action policies designed for SCs. In the case of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the blanket categorization of

“backward” seems to primarily have generated resentment against the SCs rather than solidarity with them.

iii. Identification of caste and the Logic of enumeration:

Sudipto Kaviraj (1997) uses the term “logic of enumeration” to refer to a reciprocal movement regarding the identification of caste between the nation-state and caste group. He argues that the colonial (and post-colonial) state initiated a logic of enumeration by first counting colonial subjects in terms of mutually exclusive social groups such as castes, and then predicating social policy on the numerical strength of these groups. In response to such enumeration, caste groups themselves started to mobilize around collective identities (Appadurai 1996, Kaviraj 1997). Kaviraj argues that caste groups gained a specific type of political agency– they started to think of and mobilize themselves around the idea of enumerated (how many of us are there?) and mapped (how far are we spread?) entities, abstracted from local spatial contexts.

The logic of enumeration was particularly strong on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabars*. It was, in some ways, the driving impetus on the group since the prevailing assumption was that unlike other castes, the Thiyyas had so far failed to organize themselves as an enumerated whole to negotiate for various resources from the nation-state. Indeed for many of the members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, their identity as Thiyyas had taken on a renewed significance in recent times in relation to the logic of enumeration. They explained that the resurgence of their awareness of

themselves as Thiyyas had come about more recently when they observed that other castes, which were numerically smaller than the Thiyyas, had successfully gained access to the benefits of social policy by explicitly mobilizing around their caste identity. These members lamented that this kind of mobilization had not occurred among the Thiyyas themselves.

They also justified the current mobilization of Thiyyas through *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* and the offline organizations of MTMS and TMS as a response to the strategy of enumeration by the Ezhavas. They considered the previous alignment with the Ezhavas as detrimental: although the Thiyyas had added their numerical strength to the Ezhavas, they had not received any benefits from it. Indeed the use of the term *ezhavanization*, reflects anxiety of the members that this state of affairs would become permanent. The term was occasionally used by members to refer to the incorporation of the Thiyyas as a sub-section of the Ezhavas, during marriage searches and cultural representation. A more common and related connotation of *ezhavanization* was as a reference to what they perceived as the progressive identification of Thiyyas as a sub-caste of the Ezhavas in official documents pertaining to the identification of caste by the government of Kerala. This recent and explicit amalgamation by the government of Kerala provided one of the primary reasons for the current effort towards re-legitimizing the identification of Thiyya identity through Malabar.

Consequently, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* wished to create separate Thiyya organizations which would use the logic of enumeration to negotiate directly with the nation-state to secure benefits for Thiyyas first. The idea of a representative caste organization for the Thiyyas resonated strongly with most respondents. Consequently, many members felt that the time had come for the emergence of a representative organization comprised of and focused mainly on the Thiyyas. Though many of these members argued that they would not like such an organization to get involved in politics, a political role for such an organization, which would engage in account keeping particularly with respect to the nation-state, was envisioned nonetheless.

The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* argued that although as part of the combined categorization the Thiyyas and Ezhavas together were entitled to 14% of all OBC benefits, the Ezhavas had usurped the lion's share of these benefits. Those members and admins who were explicitly affiliated with the MTMS and TMS had in mind a clearer strategy of how this logic of enumeration might be employed. Citing various calculations regarding their numerical strength, they expected that once the Thiyyas were categorized separately, they would be assigned a separate 7% of the OBC benefits.

The enumeration of caste also had implications for the region of Malabar. This digital group constructed the Thiyyas as *the* legitimate representatives of Malabar by citing the large size of the caste relative to other Hindu castes in the region. Here the vocal section of the group, particularly those who were officially members of the TMS and

MTMS, focused on counting and mapping the members of the caste in the region of Malabar. Consequently, they argued that what happened to the Thiyyas *in* Malabar would determine not only the well-being of the members of the caste but also the region itself. The majority of the group perceived the lack of consolidation among Thiyyas as a caste to be the central problem. They considered the lack of mobilization of the Thiyyas to have been an important detriment in negotiating with the nation-state to access benefits not only for members of the caste but also for the region of Malabar (such as educational and transport infrastructure).

iv. Substantialization and the identification of caste:

The concept of substantialization was most famously suggested by Louis Dumont [(1966)1970] to characterize what he visualized as a complete shift from a relation of interdependence between castes towards a relation of competition between them, wherein each caste positioned itself as a competitive bloc against others to access economic and political resources. The narrative use of place to identify caste on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* certainly reflected the mobilization of the Thiyyas as a substantialized bloc against a relatively recent caste other, the Ezhavas. Irrespective of various internal differences, including political affiliations, all members on the group argued that it was important for the Thiyyas to be united and known as a caste that was distinct from others.

Scholars of caste (Béteille 1997, Parry 2007) have fittingly questioned the utility of the concept of substantialization since it tends to lend itself to an assumption of internal homogeneity within each caste. This caution proved useful in understanding events on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* which pointed to a struggle over the narrative characterization of the Thiyyas within the group. However, the narratives themselves indicate that despite this critique of the concept of substantialization was not devoid of utility. I encountered two contradictory narratives regarding the place-based identification of the Thiyyas, both of which highlighted the need for the development of castes as united blocs in competition with others. The dominant narrative in this group was that Thiyyas are from Malabar, and on this basis sought to posit the Thiyyas as a separate and united bloc against all other castes, including the Ezhavas, and religions (Christians and Muslims). The second narrative, was that the Thiyyas and Ezhavas are essentially the same caste known by different names in the north and south of Kerala. This narrative supported the formation of a substantialized bloc which incorporated both Thiyyas and Ezhavas unified in opposition to other castes (particularly the Nairs) and religious groups (Christians and Muslims). The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* reiterated the first narrative on the group, while the second narrative was muted through threat of expulsion from the group. As the furore over Radha's¹⁰⁰ comments indicates, those Thiyyas who tried to voice the second narrative on the group were silenced with accusations of being Ezhavas disguised as Thiyyas or even simply being confused.

¹⁰⁰ Radha was a member on the group who had expressed her discomfort at the anger expressed against the Ezhavas, since she subscribed to the narrative that the Ezhavas and Thiyyas are essentially the same caste in different parts of Kerala. Her post in early 2013 had generated a tremendous backlash in the group. Radha had temporarily left the group in protest in January 2013, amidst calls for her removal on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*. Her oppositional reading of the imaginative geography on this group is discussed in Chapter 4 (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

The literature seems to indicate the existence of a history of class-based striation within the Thiyya fold. In his observations about the establishment of Thiyya temples in Malabar, Menon (1994) notes that rather than Thiyyas in rural areas, the Thiyya elites in urban areas had aligned themselves with the SNDP.

In the current study, the form of counter accusations and the composition of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* also indicated that the popularity of the first substantialized identification partly reflected class-based differentiation within the Thiyya caste. Those who were removed from the group protested that the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were elite Thiyyas who were not considering the interests of poor Thiyyas who, through the second strategy of substantialization, could access the substantial network of educational institutions and hospitals run by the SNDP across Kerala. The composition of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* was also such that each member interviewed could not access the OBC quota reservations since their annual income was greater than the creamy layer cut-off (greater than Rs 6 lakhs). This formed an important component in the members' perception that the Thiyyas had not gained anything from being aligned with the Ezhavas. They often referred to the creamy layer ceiling when labeling the accusation that the Ezhavas of the South were usurping the majority of OBC reservations since they tended to be more impoverished. Other admins, such as Siddharth, also lamented that the Thiyya-only substantialization would likely be limited by the fact that the average Thiyya was

motivated by concerns of food and education rather than the mobilization around caste.

This dissertation also observed that substantialization as a complex phenomenon, a process that is inherently self-contradictory (Fuller 1997) and partial (Fitzgerald 1996, Ishii 2007). This study bears out the observation made by Fuller (1997) that internal differentiation within each caste accompanies a heightened normative emphasis on the difference between castes. The existence of multiple place-based narratives reflects internal differentiation within the Thiyya caste. At the same time their form also indicates that both narratives supported the creation of substantialized blocs – what was debated was the composition of the caste-bloc, rather than the need for a substantialized bloc itself.

This study also supports the work conducted on Nepali castes by Ishii (2007) and Fitzgerald (1996). They had observed that the substantialization of caste in Nepal was not unilinear – it fluctuated, among other things, according to the broader political climate. This can also be observed in the case of the debates on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* and the anecdotes narrated by some of the members. The alignment of the Thiyyas and Ezhavas seems to have been acceptable to even Thiyyas in the group at a previous point in time. Some members narrated family history that indicated prior involvement with or support for the SNDP. However, today they were not willing to accept this substantialized identity. Kodoth (2008: 270-271) had also observed disaffection between the SNDP and Thiyyas in rural areas in contemporary Malabar.

Many on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* voiced their disaffection with the leadership of the SNDP by Vellapalli Natesan, who they considered to be nepotistic and corrupt. A common argument on the group was that the SNDP had only drained resources from the Malabari Thiyyas in the name of Sri Narayana Guru and it had not represented Thiyya interests. An over-riding fear was that under the influence of the SNDP, the Thiyya identity would be lost forever.

Finally, the study also supports Parry's (2007: 487) suggestion that substantialization-as-caste-groups interacts with substantialization-as-religious-groups. As this study demonstrates, on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* there existed a complex interaction between the need for a substantialized Thiyya bloc and the need for a substantialized Hindu bloc. On the one hand these were seen as competing issues. Members often questioned whether Hindu unity had to be achieved at the expense of Thiyya unity, citing that when they had raised the issue of a Thiyya identity distinct from Ezhavas on other forums they had been silenced through a reference to Hindu unity. On the other hand, as the discussion of the secession of Malabar indicates, the substantialization of Thiyyas as Hindus was still important to most members of the group. They perceived the Christians and Muslims in both Malabar and Kerala as highly organized groups that the Thiyyas were in competition with in terms of access to the benefits of social policies instituted by the nation-state.

Implications for studying Place

In this dissertation the broad focus was on studying the connection between identity and place. Within the social sciences, this relationship has conventionally been studied through material and phenomenological approaches, particularly in the form of the influential “sense of place” framework which predicates the experience of place. Since this literature has some important limitations mentioned in Chapter 2, in this study, a critical social constructivist approach was adopted to study identity and place. Consequently, the analytical framework of spatial imaginaries was adopted to study how the becoming of caste identity and place can influence each other. This framework combines a consideration of both representation as well as experience of place.

In this study, the term spatial imaginary was used to cover talk about places, rather than the being limited to the translation of this talk into action. Here, spatial imaginary incorporates not only how people identify places, but also how they identify themselves *through* places. Identification through places involves not only the identification of self, but also identification of others. For instance, thorough the narrative construction of Thiyya identity through Malabar on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the group also conveyed how they identified their caste Others (the Ezhavas). Although much of the study explicitly concentrated on identification *through* place, it also necessarily involved a consideration of positive or negative identification *with* places. As can be observed in this thesis, while the explicit narrative of the group mentioned the region of Malabar (a place with which they identified positively), there were important implications for the way they envisioned

and experienced South Kerala (a place with which they identified negatively). Since the question of how place was used in the construction of caste identity has been discussed in the previous section, in the following section the focus will be on how caste identification was used in the construction of place.

i. The construction of place through caste identification:

The existing literature on the identification of caste mentions its influence on the imagination of place in a peripheral manner, such as in the imagination of the Dravida Nadu in the Dravidian movement (Barnett 1976, Hardgrave 1979, Manor 2001, Widmalm 2006, Annamalai 2010). This study also provides a detailed demonstration of the manner in which caste identification influences the shape that place can take. Malabar, portrayed as the land of Thiyyas, was imagined as a land inherently characterized by selflessness (*athmarthatha*). South Kerala, in contrast, was perceived as a place of inherent selfishness. At one level, the equation of the Thiyyas with Malabar and selfishness was undertaken to establish the distinction from the Ezhavas of the South. However, this thematic equation also served as a metaphor for the perception that the Thiyyas had been shortchanged not just by the Ezhavas of the South alone, but also by the state machinery of Kerala which was concentrated in the South. Malabar was hence constructed as a place that contributed a valued, though flawed, virtue (selflessness) to the Thiyyas. Malabar was also envisioned as the place which through its own secondary status in Kerala contributed to the marginalization of the Thiyyas.

The identification of caste itself can also play a crucial role in the determination of the physical boundaries of place. For instance, Gudavarthy 2012 notes that the identification of caste by OBCs in the region has played a crucial role in shaping contemporary regional politics, specifically in the demand for creation of new states such as Telangana and Bundelkhand. The current study analyzed the extent to which the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were willing to connect their identification of the Thiyya caste to the issue of the secession of Malabar from Kerala. It was observed that the identification of the Thiyyas as a substantialized caste did influence the vision for a separate Malabar. From this perspective, it made sense to have a separate region where the numerically dominant Thiyyas could suitably represent the interests of both the caste as well as the region. Further, to the extent that the group grounded the Thiyyas squarely in this region, such a vision was also fuelled by their disaffection from Kerala as Malabaris. However, at present, apart from pragmatic considerations, this vision is also interrupted due to the construction of a substantialized identification as both Thiyyas and Hindus.

Finally, the identification of caste can also influence the manner in which social boundaries within place are drawn up. Here we can concentrate on how the identification of caste influences the manner in which a particular caste stakes claim to membership in places, and further, how it envisions the existence of other social groups in that place. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* constructed the Thiyyas as the legitimate representatives of the region due to their numerical dominance as well as

the *athmarthatha* through which this caste has served the region. From their perspective, other castes in the region may well have been elected to power in Malabar, but they have been too preoccupied in caste-based mobilization to attend to the problems of Malabar. At the same time, members also argued that the problems of Malabar would be solved not just when Thiyyas started to represent the region, but rather when they started to mobilize as Thiyyas.

Based on the identification of caste, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were particularly concerned with the presence of Ezhavas in Malabar. While the concern was not precisely with the land they occupied, or even with their numbers per se, this group was concerned with the manner in which their presence would propagate the influence of the SNDP in this region. The identification of the Thiyyas in terms of both caste and religion also had implications for the manner in which they thought the Muslims and Christians could claim membership in the region. The Christians were primarily perceived as outsiders to Malabar, as migrants who had usurped land in the region through the selfishness characteristic of Southerners. Although the Muslims were not perceived as external migrants, they were certainly portrayed as a radicalized community whose allegiances were not completely towards Malabar or Kerala, or even towards India.

Empirical implications of the Study

When narrowed down to its basic elements, this thesis examines how the imagination of place figures in the struggle between the solidified manner of caste identification by the State, the symbolic and material resources at stake in such identification, and the shifting manner in which castes (and different interest groups therein) seek to identify themselves in response. Relegitimizing narratives about the connection between caste and place provide an important tool to challenge the influential but sticky manner in which caste identity is officially classified. It can also provide a crucial resource in the negotiating the consequences of such identification. In this case, the revival of the Malabar-based identification of caste enables the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* to challenge the stigma emerging from the state's identification while simultaneously making a case for access to affirmative action on the basis of both caste and regional identity.

Census Enumeration and recording the fluid identification of caste in India

Given that the study records the stigma associated with the dis-embedded caste classification by the nation-state, somewhat paradoxically, one of the implications of this study is that the enumeration of castes in the national census is all the more necessary. The census can potentially provide a platform where the self-identification of caste can be recorded and contrasted against the caste-based identification by the nation-state.

This study catalogues the intense anxiety about the manner in which the nation-state classifies castes in India. The enumeration of caste has certainly resulted in the solidification of caste boundaries (Appadurai 1996, Kaviraj 1997, Bayly 1999, Dudley-Jenkins 2003). This is in large part due to the association of social policies with caste identification since the colonial era, although the implication of this differs in the colonial state vis-à-vis the post-colonial state. In the post-colonial state, the classification of castes is required for affirmative action. In the case of the OBCs, currently this classification is conducted in a rather thorough manner by the national and state commissions¹⁰¹ (Dudley-Jenkins 2003).

Given that the pursuit of caste equality is, and should be, an important consideration in the manner in which the state's resources are distributed, are we to be reconciled to knowing caste in this fixed form? This is an important question since in this study, we can observe that the contours of any caste group are fluid, and are quite responsive to the vagaries of political alignments and disaffections. The shift in the boundaries of caste groups over time, results in shifts in legitimacy accorded to identification narratives by different interest groups within the caste.

On the basis of this study, I would argue that the census needs to move beyond the limited manner in which caste data is currently captured, and include data about Other Backward Classes in its ambit as well. Further, and more specifically, it calls for the

¹⁰¹ These lists are drawn up at the national level by National Backward Classes Commission which reviews the lists once in a decade. At the state level the identification is conducted by State Backward Classes Commissions instituted in different states.

feature of self-reporting of caste to be an integral feature of how the enumeration is undertaken. The enumeration of caste has recently been revived in restricted form in 2011, wherein only data about Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are currently collected. Currently, the census records whether the respondent is SC or ST: an affirmative response is followed by categorizing the respondent within the existing list of SCs and STs¹⁰².

In contrast, this study would suggest that it is important to collect data about the OBCs as well. Further, in the census, respondents need to be provided the voice to categorize their caste themselves. For instance, instead of asking respondents to identify whether they are currently categorized as SC, ST or OBC, and checking for the name of their caste group in the existing lists, respondents can be asked whether they are categorized as SC/ST/OBC and provided the option of recording the name through which *they* refer to their caste. This is not an unusual feature of censuses conducted elsewhere - for instance this approach has been adopted in the recording of race and ethnicity in the United States. If data about Other Backward Classes is included in successive censuses, it would provide for an additional channel for recording the shifts in the substantialization of castes. Consequently it would facilitate a clearer dialogue between the nation-state and caste groups. It would also make available clearer data on the socio-economic conditions of caste groups, albeit in terms of a numerical gist.

¹⁰² The SC and ST lists have been drawn up in the Constitution of India. Dudley-Jenkins (2003: 220 footnote 18) notes that the composition of these lists can be changed, that is castes and tribes may be included or excluded, only after modifications in the law by the national Parliament.

Caste, its place-based capital and translocalism

Another implication of this study is that the connections between caste identity and region need to be acknowledged. The study of castes needs to recognize the varying composition of caste groups in particular regions, as also the connections that members of castes draw between these constructs. Of course, this regional ecology of castes has to necessarily be understood as subject to fluctuations over the course of time. As recorded in this thesis, serious disruptions include events such as enhanced migration as well as classificatory programs of the nation-state. However, as can also be observed from this study, at specific historical junctures, these disruptions can actually contribute to revive the regional identification, rather than simply subdue the connection. Once the place-based identification of caste is acknowledged, it paves the way for the articulation of two further implications of this study. First, symbolic resources accrue to caste members from the regional identification. Second, the identification and the experience of caste are embroiled in a translocal matrix through migration.

This study highlights that resources of caste membership can be region-specific: although they are recognized and acknowledged in the place of origin they do not translate well in other regions. For instance, the numerical strength of the Thiyyas and the history of this caste were quite well recognized in Malabar and certainly generated important material resources for people from this caste. Even more significantly for the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the recognition of Thiyya history and numbers contain *symbolic* value within this region. Yet, who the Thiyyas are, and

what is their place in Malabar, did not immediately translate in regions outside Malabar. Provisionally, we can identify this as a place-specific symbolic capital of caste. To some extent, the concept of dominant caste (Srinivas 1955, 1987) captures the specific resources that a caste enjoys within a region. The concept of a dominant caste includes both material and symbolic resources that this group would enjoy in a specific area, such as a village or even a larger region. The original articulation however has primarily emphasized on material resources such as the ownership of land, political dominance and Western education among members of the dominant caste. Further, in its application the ambit of this concept typically been limited to one caste in a region, although Srinivas does suggest the possibility of a small number of dominant castes in a rural area (1966: 11).

Although it has been subjected to critiques from a variety of perspectives (Oommen 1970, MacDougall 1979), the concept of dominant caste has specific limitations from the perspective of understanding the symbolic capital of caste that is peculiar to a particular place. The concept of a place-specific symbolic capital of caste enables the examination of how multiple caste groups enjoy different types of symbolic capital within a region. Oommen (1970) also launches an important critique of the concept of the dominant caste on the basis that it implies that the entire caste is homogenous. The concept of a place-specific symbolic capital of caste can also facilitate the articulation of how a caste group, and different interest groups in it, may try to employ place in the generation of symbolic capital outside the region. In this respect, unlike the concept of the dominant caste, which is primarily used to discuss the caste

group in the context of its “local” village or area, this concept can also be used to discuss the spatial capital of caste in the context of places outside of these “local” boundaries.

A second and related implication of the study is that both the experience and identification of caste can be categorized as what Brickell and Datta (2011) refer to as translocal. Translocalism refers to how social relationships across the boundaries of particular places shape migrant networks as well as the social and economic exchange in a diaspora. This study highlights that the experience of caste, particularly the stigma of caste identification, is something that is still relevant within Indian diaspora outside the country. To that extent, it reflects that tiny part of the literature on the Indian diaspora which has focused on, rather than simply nodded to, the significance of caste and caste-related practices in the diaspora (Bhatt and Mukta 2000, Kurien 2001, Kumar 2004, Fuller and Narasimhan 2008, Jodhka 2009). However, this study puts into sharp focus some additional and specific aspects of the contemporary translocality of caste.

To begin with, through its starting premise of how people project a close association between caste identity and place, the study demonstrates the very value of paying attention to the diasporas of caste. Further, unlike the work done on caste in the Indian diaspora, which focuses on migrants who live outside India, this study demonstrates that diasporas of caste can exist both within and outside the boundaries of the nation-state. In the case of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the most vocal

voices often belonged to people who were had either presently or previously moved out of Malabar to other places in India and outside the country. Such conglomerations can be classified as the internal versus external diasporas of caste. To the extent that their ability to convene as caste groups and exert influence increases through improvements in communication technology, it becomes even more important to study these different types of caste diasporas. The translocal framework is important precisely because it muddies the previously straightforward association between migration and national boundaries.

Even more significantly, this study highlights the use of translocal geographies for the mitigation of caste stigma as well as caste identification. For the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, the stigma of caste identification is not limited to Malabar. In many ways, it has been intensified as they have migrated away from the region. As can be observed in this study, the internal and external Thiyya diaspora heavily rely on Malabar to negotiate their experience of caste, particularly to address stigmatizing encounters, outside the region. The translocal aspects of caste are likely to gain in significance in the future, particularly since new media have enhanced the capacity of the internal and external diasporas to contribute to and be immersed in caste groups.

The identification and mobilization of caste and implications for new media

In its influence on caste relations, new media, like other channels of communication that came before, serve primarily as reflexive mirrors. As has been observed about the

new media in other contexts, in the case of caste as well, new media certainly contributes to “augmenting” offline discourses and experiences (Graham, Zook, and Boulton 2013, Jurgenson 2012). On the one hand such media reflects the contemporary caste relations and movements which organize offline life. It should come as no surprise that the new media are being used by various groups both enforce and resist caste inequality.

That said, the impact of the new media extends beyond that of a simple mirror. Such media also help shape caste in the offline context in powerful ways. Access to new media is still restricted to a relatively tiny percentage of the population of India. Nonetheless, new media as “voice” (Mitra and Cohen 1999) is still influential in their contributions to broader offline discourses through intertextuality of digital and physical texts and conversations. This dissertation provides an insight into this reflexive mirroring regarding both the identification of caste as well as the mobilization of caste. As new media access improves in India, and more significantly, as the convergence between old media and new media continues (Jenkins 2006), it is likely that they will continue to exert a powerful influence on both the identification of caste and its mobilization.

As can be observed in this study, new media are used as important platforms in the struggle over identification of caste. To those who are able to access new media, the opportunity for the self-documentation of their caste-group is unparalleled. While digital platforms can be used to reiterate the identification of caste, in particular, they

serve as convenient and efficient means to challenge popular narratives regarding how a particular caste is known in physical groups and interactions. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were particularly invested in the digital platform since they had found themselves unable to draw a distinction between the Thiyyas and the Ezhavas in physical interactions. Thirumal (2008) has made a similar observation in the case of the Dalit middle classes in India. He argues that in contrast to their conventional exclusion in older print media, the newly educated Dalit middle class has seized upon the new media with a particular vigour to establish a pan-Indian presence. This development can also be observed among other caste groups, including in this case, the OBC Thiyyas, who consider the new media as important in their endeavor to recast their discursive production.

New media also serve as repositories of tools which could aid in the struggle over identification. For instance, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* used this particular digital platform as a convenient means to recount an idealized version of Thiyya history. Here, they share information, documents and photographs regarding the Thiyyas which could potentially aid in clarifying a separate identity. The digitization of a variety of official colonial documents regarding Thiyyas were particularly appreciated and shared on this group. New media are also being used by caste groups to document idealized caste rituals and practices. For instance, on the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*, part of the public conversation regarding Thiyya identification was dedicated to recounting the location of *kavus* and also the variety of rituals associated with both *kavus* and Thiyya households.

Needless to say, the project of caste identification is not limited to platforms such as digital groups alone. Indeed Meerkat.com, like many digital arenas, is the site of vigorous identification and counter-identification by caste groups, each seeking to ensure first that the caste is *known*, and second it is known in the *correct* manner. The members of the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were actively engaged in establishing a unique Thiyya identity not only within Meerkat.com, but also through other digital platforms such as Wikipedia and Youtube and other social networking sites such as Orkut.com and Facebook.com. Indeed, during the time of fieldwork, many of the younger and more technically adept admins on the group were intensely involved in the identification of the Thiyyas as a distinct caste on Wikipedia. They had been involved in this activity for over 5 years during which the Thiyya page on Wikipedia automatically re-directed readers to the page on Ezhavas. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* had emerged as a platform to not only voice their concerns but also solicit knowledge from other Thiyyas who could provide folk and academic documentation regarding the distinction from the Ezhavas. The intertextuality between digital texts created on these different platforms, as also between digital and physical texts, provide a vital component for countering popular narratives with less accepted ways of knowing caste. In the current case, since there are not many representations of the Thiyyas as a separate caste in the print media, the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* serves as an important platform where the few media reports that do so are well highlighted and publicized.

Apart from the identification of caste, new media is also being used to facilitate the mobilization of members of a caste into caste-specific organizations. The *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* made for a very obvious case of this development. However, the same can be observed, if in a less obvious fashion, for innumerable digital caste groups which work closely and support physical caste organizations.

As many of the MTMS (and TMS) allied admins explained during the course of fieldwork, digital groups such as the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* and the *MahaThiyyars* had contributed in no small part to the momentum that these Thiyya organizations went on to achieve. As mentioned earlier, not all members on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* were affiliated to either of these organizations, yet they all agreed that this group had been instrumental to their introduction to these caste organizations. This particular digital group provided an important source of information regarding meetings and activities of these physical Thiyya organizations within Malabar itself. It also facilitated the mobilization of internal and external diasporas of caste. Where people had previously found themselves to be the only Thiyyas for miles around in their city of residence in Middle-East Asia, through new media they were able to track developments of these caste organizations in Malabar. Although it had not yet occurred for the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* during the period of fieldwork, other caste groups on Meerkat.com have witnessed members from the external diaspora mobilize themselves into other digital offshoots such as Thiyya America.

These projects of identification and mobilization of caste on various digital platforms are bound to proliferate over time. The number of digital groups from some of the well-recognized Indian castes on Meerkat.com alone has increased in leaps and bounds as the numbers of subscribers of Indian origin have increased on this social networking site. Apart from this, these projects are continued in other digital platforms as well. Even those castes which have so far been digitally invisible, either due to their small numbers, or the poverty of their members, are likely to register a digital presence over time.

This study on a digital caste group suggests that the use of new media needs to be studied from outside of perspectives focused on the West alone. Popular discourse regarding the new media in the West has been concentrated on their role in the creation of radically new, spatially disconnected and anonymous identities. While these are not completely inapplicable in other places, this study indicates the need to make room for discussions about how new media is being used to reiterate and refashion much older, spatially entrenched projects of collective identification.

Future Directions

One of the most important requirements in terms of the scholarship on caste is further socio-historical work on the regional variation in caste organization and identification. The last work which took this as its primary focus was conducted by Miller in (1954), based on the regional variations in caste organization in the region

of Malabar. As this dissertation indicates, there is space for more of such scholarship. At the very least, it is important that a place-awareness be incorporated in future work on caste.

Another area of future research indicated by this study is the impact of discourses of neo-liberalization on attitudes to caste-based affirmative action. Such research could examine the variation of attitudes towards caste-based affirmative action within the same caste, and focus particularly on the degree to which they are influenced by these new discourses regarding “merit” and affirmative action. A different line of research could be to engage in a comparative analysis of this impact among castes that are categorized differently. For instance, attitudes within OBCs, SCs and STs could be analyzed on a more thorough, comparative basis. Although Gudavarthy (2012) has attempted something along these lines, this study has established that there are some important limitations in that work. In addition, variations in attitudes among the “forward” castes as they are known popularly, or other castes not included under the ambit of affirmative action, can also be included in such a comparison. This research would be of immense value in terms of the potential for comparison between contemporary attitudes to caste based affirmative action and race-based affirmative action. Here, the attitudes among diasporas of caste, particularly external diasporas of caste, could also be of particular interest.

Although instances of people passing as members of other castes were encountered during the study, the phenomenon was not adequately explored due to time and theoretical limitations. A review of the existing literature on caste also suggests a scarcity of work on what appeared to be a very common phenomenon. Again, an important site for studying caste-passing would be among the internal and external diasporas of caste. Older concepts such as Sanskritization (Srinivas 1952) do not adequately capture the fluidity of the phenomenon. Apart from a study of the factors that prompt passing behavior, research is also required to look into caste-passing specifically as an interactional strategy to negotiate stigmatization. Further, as the complex attitudes among the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar* suggests, people who engage in passing take a pragmatic approach to it. While they may engage in passing as other castes in public, in more private arenas they engage in a vigorous critique of the same castes. Rich research could be conducted on the use of caste-passing as a complicated strategy of resistance as well as acquiescence to caste hierarchy and stigmatization.

Finally, this dissertation has focused on a digital caste based group which was actively engaged in the caste based mobilization of the Thiyyas. Fieldwork, particularly in Malabar, did provide some insight into its impact on the offline mobilization of the Thiyyas. Nonetheless, explicit research is required on the intricacies of the impact of new media on offline mobilization of caste. As this study further indicates, such studies would also benefit from adopting a translocal approach to such interweaving between physical and digital mobilization of caste.

Appendices

Appendix 1a: CENTRAL LIST OF OBCs FOR THE STATE OF KERALA

| Entry No | Caste/ Community | Resolution No. & Date |
|----------|--|---|
| 1. | Agasa | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 2. | Ambalakkaran | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 3. | Anglo Indian | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 4. | Aremahrati | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 5. | Arya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 6. | Bandari | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 7. | Billava | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 8. | Chakkala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 9. | Chavalakkaran | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/1995-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 10. | Chetties (Kottar Chetties, Parakka Chetties, Elur Chetties, Attingal Chetties, Pudukkada Chetties, Iraniel Chetties, Sri Pandara Chetties, Telugu Chetties, Udayamkulangara Chetties, Wynadan Chetties & Kalavara Chetties, Sadhu Chetties & 24 Manai Telugu Chetties) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/1995-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12011/68/98-BCC dt. 27/10/1999 |
| 11. | Devadiga | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. |
| 12. | Devanga | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 13. | Dheevara (Araya, Arayavathi Mukkuvan or Mukaya, Mogaveera, Valan, Bovi Mukayar, Nulayan, Valinijiar and Paniakkal) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. 15/05/1995 12011/96/94-BCC dt. 09/03/1996 12011/12/96-BCC dt. 01/09/1997 |

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| 14. | Ezhava, Izhavan, Ishavan, Ezhavan, Ezhuva, Izhuva, Ishuva, Izhuvan, Ishuvan, Ezhuvan, Izhava | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/88/98-BCC dt. 06/12/1999 |
| 15. | Ezhavathi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 16. | Ezhuthachan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 17. | Ganika | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. |
| 18. | Gatti | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 19. | Gowda | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 20. | Hegde | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 21. | Izhavan, Ishavan, Illuva, Illuvan, Irava, Iruva, Thiyyan, Thiyya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/88/98-BCC dt. 06/12/1999 |
| 22. | Jogi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 23. | Kaduppattan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 24. | Kaikolan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 25. | Kelasi(Kalasi Panicker) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 26. | Kalari Kurup or Kalari Panicker | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 27. | Viswakarma, including Assari, Chaptogra, Kallassari, Kammala, Karuvan, Kitaran, Kollan, Malayala Kammala, Pandi Kammala, Moosari, Perumkollan, Thattan,Pandithattan, Vilukurup, Villasan, Viswabrahmanan or Viswabrahmanar and Viswakarmala, Thachan, Kalthachan, Kamsala, Kannan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. 15/05/1995 12011/68/98-BCC dt. 27/10/1999 |
| 28. | Kannadiyan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. 15/05/1995 |
| 29. | Kanisu or Kaniyar Panicker, Kani or Kaniyan (Ganaka) or Kanisan or Kamnan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |

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| 30. | Kavuthiyan, Aduthon | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/68/98-BCC dt. 27/10/1999 |
| 31. | Kavudiyaru | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/1995-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 32. | Koteyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. 15/05/1995 |
| 33. | Krishnanvaka | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 34. | Kerala Mudali | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 35. | Kudumbi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 36. | Kusavan (Kulala, Kulala Nair, or Andhra Nair or Anthura Nair) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 36 A | Kumbaran | 12011/96/94-BCC dt. 09/03/1996 12011/12/96-BCC dt. 01/09/1997 |
| 37. | Latin Catholic | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 38. | Madivala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 39. | Mappila | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 39A | Other Muslims excluding (i) Bohra (ii) Cutchi Menmon (iii) Navayat (iv) Turukkan (v) Dakhani Muslim | 12011/96/94-BCC dt. 09/03/1996 |
| 40. | Maravan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 41. | Maruthuvar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 42. | Nadar (Hindu Nadar, Nadar included in SIUC & Nadar belonging to Christian religious denominations other than the SIUC) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/36/99-BCC dt. 04/04/2000 |
| 43. | Naikkan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 44. | Odan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 45. | Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 46. | Pandithar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 47. | Panniyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 48. | Pattariya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |

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| 49. | Peruvannan (Varanavar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 50. | Pulluvan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 51. | Rajapur | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 52. | Chakravar, Sakravar (Kavathi) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 53. | Sourashtra | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 54. | Saliya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 55. | Senai Thalavar (Elavaniar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 56. | SIUC (excluding Nadar Specified in Item No. 42 which is item No.49 of the State List) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/36/99-BCC dt. 04/04/2000 |
| 57. | Tholkolan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 58. | Thottian | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 59. | Vaduvans Vadugan Vadukar Vaduka (Vadukan) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 60. | Velaan (Velaar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 61. | Vanian (Vanika, Vanika Vaisya, Vanibha Chetty, Vaniya Chetty, Ayiravar, Nagarathar, and Vaniyan) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 62. | Vaniar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 63. | Vakkaliga | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. |
| 64. | Veerasaiva (Yogi & Yogeeswara). Poopandaram/ Maalapandaram and Jangam | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. 15/05/1995 12011/68/98-BCC dt. 27/10/1999 |
| 65. | Veluthedathu Nair (Veluthedan & Vannathan) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 66. | Vilakkithala Nair (Vilakkithalavan) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt. 15/05/1995 |

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| 67. | Yadava (Kolaya, Ayar, Mayar, Maniyani & Iruman) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 68. | Ganjam Reddi (in Malabar District referred to in Sub-section (2) of Section 5 of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 69. | Vishavan (in Malabar District as referred to in Sub-section (2) of Section 5 of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 70. | Kammara (excluding Malabar District as referred to in Sub-section (2) of Section 5 of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 71. | Malayekandi (excluding Malabar District as referred to in Sub-section (2) of Section 5 of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 72. | Reddiar/ Reddian(excluding Malabar District as referred to in Sub-section (2) of Section 5 of the States Reorganisation Act, 1956) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 73. | Marati (excluding Kasargod Taluk of Malabar District) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt. 10/09/1993 |
| 74. | Thachar | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. |
| 75. | Vettuva Navithan | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. |
| 76. | Kongu Navithan | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. |
| 77. | Saraswat Non-Brahmin | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. |
| 78. | Odde, Boyan (in Malabar District as referred to in Sub-section (2) of Section 5 of the States Reorganisation Act,1956) | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. 27/10/1999 |
| 79. | Kallan Mooppan or Kallan Mooppar | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. 27/10/1999 |
| 80. | Mukhari alias Moovari | 12011/68/98-BCC dt. |

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| 81. | Kongu Vellala, Gounder including Vellala Gounder, Nattu Gounder, Pala Gounder, Poosari Gounder and Pala Vellala Gounder | 12015/13/2010-B.C.II. Dt. 08/12/2011 |
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Source: <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Pdf/kerala.pdf>

Appendix 1c: CENTRAL LIST OF OBCs FOR THE STATE OF TAMILNADU

| Entry No. | Caste/Community | Resolution No. |
|------------------|--|---|
| 1 1 | Agamudayar including Thozhu or Thuluva Vellala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 2 2 | Alwar, Azhavar and Alavar (in Kanniyakumari district and Sheencottah Taulk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 3 3 | Ambalakarar, Ambalakaran | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 4 | Andi pandaram | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 5 | Arayar, Arayan, Nulayar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 6 | Archakari Vellala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 7 | Aryavathi (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 8 | Attur Kilnad Koravar (in Salem, South Arcot, Ramanathapuram Kamarajar and Pasumpon Muthuramadigam district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 9 | Attur Melnad Koravar (in Salem district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 10 | Badagar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 11 | Bestha Siviar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 12 | Bhatraju (other than Kshatriya Raju) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 13 | Billava | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 14 | Bondil | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |

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| 15 | Boyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 16 | Oddar (including Boya, Donga Boya, Gorrela Dodda Boya, Kalvathila Boya, Pedda Boya, Oddar, Kal Oddar Nellorepet Oddar and Sooramari Oddar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 17 | Chakkala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 18 | Changayampadi Koravar (In North Arcot District) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 19 | Chavalakarar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 20 | Chettu or Chetty (including Kottar Chetty, Elur Chetty, Pathira Chetty Valayal Chetty Pudukkadai Chetty) (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 21 | C.K. Koravar (in South Arcot district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 22 | Converts to Christianity from Scheduled Castes, irrespective of the generation of conversion for the purpose of reservation of seats in Educational Institutions and for seats in Public Services | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |

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| 23 | C.S.I. Formerly S.I.U.C. in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 24 | Dabi Koravar (in Thanjavur, Trichirapally, Pudukkottai and North Arcot district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 25 | Dasari (including Donga Dasari and Gudu Dasari) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 26 | Dekkani Muslim | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 27 | Devangar, Sedar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 28 | Dobba Koravar (in Salem district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 29 | Dobbai Koracha (In Tiruchirappally and Pudukkottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 30 | Dommar (including Domb & Dommar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 31 | Donga Ur. Koracha | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 32 | Dudekula | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 33 | Enadi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 34 | Eravallar (except Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district where the community is a Scheduled Tribe) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 35 | Ezhavathy (in Kanyakumari District and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 36 | Ezhuthachar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |

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| 37 | Ezhuva (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 38 | Gandarvakottai Koravar (In Thanjavur, Tiruchirapally Pudukottai and South Arcot districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 39 | Ganagavar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 40 | Gavara, Gavarai (Kavarai) and Vadugar(Vaduvar) (other than Kamma, Kapu, Balija and Reddi) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 41 | Gounder | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 42 | Gowda (including Gammala, Kalali and Anuppa Gounder) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 43 | Hegde | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 44 | Idiga | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 45 | Illathu Pillaimar, Illuvar, Ezhuvar and Illathar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 46 | Inji Koravar (In Thanjavur, Tiruchirapalli and Pudukottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 47 | Isaivellalar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 48 | Jambuvanodai | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 49 | Jangam | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 50 | Jhetty | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 51 | Jogi (including Jogis) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 52 | Kabbera | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 53 | Kaikolan, Kaikolar , Sengunthar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 54 | Kaladi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |

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| 55 | Kala Koravar (In Thanjavur, Tiruchirapally and Pudukottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 56 | Kalari Kurup including Kalari Panieker (In Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 57 | Kalingi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 58 | Kalinji Dabikoravar (In Thanjavur and Pudukottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 59 | Kallar (including Easanattu Kallar Gandarvakkottai Kallar Koottappal Kallar Piramalai Kallar and Periasooriyur Kallar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 60 | Kalveli Gounder | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 61 | Kambar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 62 | Kammalar or Viswakarma, Viswakammala (including Thattar, Porkollar, Kannar Karumar Kollar, Thacher, Kalthacher Kamsala and Viswabrahmin) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011 / 21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12015/13/2010-B.C.II. Dt. 08/12/2011 |
| 63 | Kani, Kanis Kaniyar Panikkar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011 /21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 64 | Kannada Sainegar, Kannadiyar (throughout the State) and Dasapalanjika (Coimbatore, Erode and Nilgiris districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011 /21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12011 /4/ 2002 – BCC dt 13/01/2004 |

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| 65 | Karuneeagar (Seer Karuneeagar, Sri Karuneeagar, Sarattu Karuneeagar, Kaikatti Karuneeagar Mathu Vazhi Kanakkar Sozhi Kanakkar and Sunnambu Karuneeagar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/ 21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 66 | Katesar Pattamkatti | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 67 | Kavuthiyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 68 | Kepmari (in Chengalpattu, Pudukottai and Tiruchirapalli districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/ 21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 69 | Kerala Mudali | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 70 | Kharvi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 71 | Khatri | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 72 | Kongu Chettiar (in Coimbatore and Periyar district only) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 73 | Kongu Vellalar (including Vellala Gounder Nattu Gounder, Narambukatti Gounder, Tirumudi Vellalar, Thondu Vellalar, Pala Gounder, Poosari Gounder, Anuppa Vellala Gounder, Padaithalai Gounder, Chendalai Gounder, Pavalankatti Vellala Gounder, Pala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12015/13/2010-B.C.II. Dt. 08/12/2011 |
| 74 | Vellala Gounder, Sanku Vellala Gounder and Rathinagiri Gounder | |
| 74 | Koppala Velama | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 75 | Koracha | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |

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| 76 | Koravar (in Chengalpattu, Ramanathapuram, Kamarajar, Pasumpen Mutouramalingam, Pudukottai, Thanjavur, Tiruchirappalli, Tirunelveli, Madras ,Madurai and the Nilgiris districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 77 | Koteyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 78 | Krishnanvaka (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 79 | Kudumbi (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 80 | Kulala (including Kuyavar, Kumbarar and Velar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011 / 88/98-BCC dt 06/12/1999 |
| 81 | Kunchidigar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 82 | Kunnuvar Mannadi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 83 | Kurhini Chetty | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 84 | Kurumba (where they are not Scheduled Tribes), Kurumba Gounder, | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12015/13/2010-B.C.II. Dt. 08/12/2011 |
| 85 | Labbai, Rowthar and Marakayar (whether their spoken language is Tamil or Urdu) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12011 / 88/98-BCC dt 06/12/1999 |
| 86 | Lambadi | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 87 | Latin Catholic (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |

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| 88 | Jangama | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 89 | Mahratta (non-Brahmin) (including Namdev Mahratta) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/ 21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 90 | Mahendra, Medara | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 91 | Malayan, Malayar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 92 | Male | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 93 | Maujagar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12015/9/ 2000 dt |
| 94 | Mapilla | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 95 | Maravar (including Karumaravar, Appanad Kondayamkottai Maravar and Sembanad Maravar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 96 | Maruthuvar, Navithar, Mangala, Velakkattalavar, Velakkattalanair and Pronopakari | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12011/68/98-BCC dt 27/10/1999 |
| 97 | Meenavar, Parvatharajakulam, Pattanavar, Sembadavar(including converts to Christianity) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 98 | Monda Koravar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 99 | Mooppan | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/ 95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 100 | Moundadan Chetty | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 101 | Mukkuvan, Mukkuvar or Mukayar including converts to Christianity) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 102 | Muthuraja Muthuracha Muttiriyar Muthiriyar Mutharaiyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 103 | Mutlakampatti | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/ 95-BCC dt |

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| 104 | Nadar, Shanar and Gramani, including Christian Nadar, Christian Shanar and Christian Gramani | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 105 | Nagaram | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 106 | Naikkar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 107 | Nanjil Mudali (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 108 | Narikoravar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 109 | Nokkar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 110 | Odar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 111 | Odiya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 112 | Ovachar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 113 | Pamulu | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 114 | Panar (Except in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district where the community is a Scheduled Caste) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 115 | Pannayar (including Kathikarar in Kanniyakumari district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 116 | Pannirandam Chettiar or Uthama Chettiar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 117 | Paravar including converts to Christianity (except in Kanniya- kumari district and Shenocottah taluk of Tirunelveli district where the community is a Scheduled Caste) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |

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| 118 | Parkavakulam (Suruthimar including those Suruthimar who call themselves as Moopanmar, Nathamar including those Nathamar who call themselves as Nainar, Malayamar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12011/68/98-BCC dt 27/10/1999 |
| 119 | Perike (including Perike Baliya) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 120 | Perumkollar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 121 | Ponnai Koravar (in North Arcot district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 122 | Poraya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 123 | Pulluvar or Pooluvar, Pooluva Gounder | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/44/99-BCC dt |
| 124 | Pusala | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 125 | Sadhu Chetty (including Telugu Chetty, Telugupatty Chetty, Twenty- four Manai Telugu Chetty) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 126 | Sakkaravar or Kavathi (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 127 | Sakkaraitamadai Koravar (in North Arcot district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 128 | Salem Melnad Koravar (in Madurai, Coimbatore Periyar, Pudukottai, Tiruchirappalli, Salem and North Arcot districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 129 | Salem Uppu Koravar (in Salem district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 130 | Salivagana, Salivahana | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |

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| 131 | Saliyar Padmasaliyar Pattusaliyar Pattariyar and Adhaviyar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 132 | Saranga Palli Koravar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 133 | Sathatha Srivaishnava (including Sathanai, Chattadi and Chattada Srivaishnava) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 134 | Savalakkarar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 135 | Senaithalaiivar, Senaikudiyar and Illaivaniar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 136 | Sourashtra (Patnulkarar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 137 | Sozhia Chetty | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 138 | Sozhia Vellalar (including Sozha Vellalar, Vetrilaikarar, Kodikalkarar and Keeraikarar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 139 | Srisayar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 140 | Thalli Koravar (in Salem district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 141 | Thogamalai Koravar or Kepmari (in Tiruchirappalli, and Pudukottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 142 | Thogatta Veerakshatriya | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 143 | Tholkollar (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 144 | Tholuva Naicker and Vetalakara Naicker | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 145 | Thondaman | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 146 | Thoriyar, Badaga Thoraiyar of Nilgiris | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/68/98-BCC dt |
| 147 | Thottiya Naicker (including Rajakambalam, Gollavar, Sillavar, Thockalavar and Tholuva Naicker) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |

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| 148 | Uppara, Uappillia and Sagara | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 149 | Uppukoravar or Settipalli Koravar (in Thanjavur, Pudukottai, Madurai and North Arcot districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 150 | Urali Gounder, (throughout the state) and Orudya Gounder, or Oorudaya Gounder (in Madurai, Coimbatore, Periyar, Tiueechirapalli, Pudukottai and Salem districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 151 | Vaduarpatti Koravar (in Madurai, Ramanathauram, Pasumpon Muthuramalingam, Kamarajar, Tirunelveli, Tiruchirappalli and Pudukottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 152 | Valaiyar (including Chettinad Valaiyar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt |
| 153 | Vallambar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 154 | Valmiki | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 155 | Vaniyar, Vania Chettiar (including Gandla, Ganika, Telikula and Chekkalar) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 156 | Vannar (Salavai Thozhilalar) including Agasa, Madivala, Ekali, Rajakula, Veluthadar and Rajaka (except in Kanniyakumari District and Shencottah Taluk in Tirunelveli District where the community is a Scheduled Caste) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/68/98-BCC dt 27/10/1999 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |

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| 157 | Vanniyakula Kshatriya (including Vanniya, Vanniyar, Vannia Gounder, Gounder or Kander, Padayachi, Palli and Agnikula Kshatriya) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 158 | Varaganeri Koravar (in Tiruchira Palli and Pudukottai districts) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 159 | Vayalpad or Nawalpetta Koracha | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 160 | Veduvar/Vettaikkarar (throughout the state) and Vedar (except in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district where the community is a Scheduled Caste) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 161 | Veerasaiva (in Kanniyakumari district and Shenocottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 162 | Vellan Chettiar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 163 | Veluthodathu Nair (in Kanniyakumari district and Shencottah taluk of Tirunelveli district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 164 | Vetta Koravar (in Salem district) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 165 | Vettuva Gounder, Punnan Vettuva Gounder | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 165A | Virakodi Vellala (former Panisaivan only) | 12011/96/94-BCC dt 09/03/1996 |
| 166 | Vokkaligar (including Vakkaligar, Okkaligar, Kappiliyar, Kappiliya, Okkaliya, Gowda, Okkaliya Gowda, Okkaliga Gowda, Okkaliya Gowder) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 12015/15/2008- BCC dt. 16/06/2011 |
| 167 | Wynad Chetty (The Nilgiris dist.) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |

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| 168 | Yadava (including Idaiyar, Telugu speaking Idaiyar known as Vaduga Ayar or Vaduga Idaiyar or Golla, Mond Golla and Asthanthra Golla) | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 169 | Yavana | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 170 | Yerukula | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt |
| 171 | Yogeeswarar | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 12011/21/95-BCC dt 15/05/1995 |
| 172 | Christian converts from any Hindu Backward Classes | 12011/68/93-BCC(C) dt 10/09/1993 |
| 173 | Battu Turkas | 12011/68/98-BCC dt |
| 174 | Devagudi Talayari | 12011/68/98-BCC dt |
| 175 | Podikara Vellalar | 12011/88/98-BCC dt |
| 176 | Pulavar | 12011/68/98-BCC dt |
| 177 | Nangudi Vellalar | 12011/68/98-BCC dt |
| 178 | Kuga Vellalar | 12011/88/98-BCC dt |
| 179 | Kallar Kula Thondaman | 12011/44/99-BCC dt |
| 180 | Thiyya | 12015/9/2000 dt 06/09/2001 |

Source: <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/Pdf/tamilnadu.pdf>

Appendix 2: Kerala government classification of OBCs - KPSC list of OBCs

List of Scheduled Tribes in the Kerala State

(As amended by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order (Amendment Act) 1976 and as amended by the Constitution (Scheduled castes) Orders (Second Amendment) Act, 2002 (Act 61 of 2002) vide Part VIII- Kerala- Schedule I notified in the Gazette of India, dated 18 December, 2002) and (As amended by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders (Amendment) Act 2002 (Act 10 of 2003) vide Part VII- Kerala- Second Schedule notified in the Gazette of India dated 8 January, 2003)

1. Adiyar
2. Aranda (Arandan)
3. Eravallan
4. Hill Pulaya(Mala Pulayan, Kurumba Pulayan, Karavazhi Pulayan, Pamba Pulayan)
5. Irular,Irulan
6. Kadar (Wayanad Kadar)
7. Kanikkaran,Kanikar
8. Karimpalan
9. Kattunayakan
10. Kochuvelan
11. Koraga
12. Kudiya,Melakudi
13. Kurichchan (Kurichian)
14. Kurumans (Mullu Kuruman, Mulla Kuruman, Mala Kuruman)
15. Kurumbas (Kurumbar, Kurumban)
16. Mahamalar
17. Malai Arayan (Mala Arayan)
18. Malai Pandaran
19. Malai Vedan (Mala Vedan)
20. Malakkuravan
21. Malasar
22. Malayan, Nattu Malayan, Konga Malayan (Excluding the areas comprising the Kasaragod, Kannur, Wayanad and Kozhikode Districts)
23. Mavilan
24. Malayarayar
25. Mannan (to be spelt in Malayalam script in parenthesis)
26. Muthuvan,Mudugar,Muduvan
27. Palleyan, Palliyan, Paliyar, Palliya
28. Paniyan
29. Ulladan, Ullatan
30. Uraly
31. Mala Vettuvan (in Kasaragod and Kannur Districts)
32. Ten Kurumban, Jenu Kurumban

33. Thachenadan, Thachenadan, Moopan
34. Cholanaickan
35. Malapanickar
36. Vettakuruman

List of Other Backward Classes in Kerala State

I Throughout the State

1. Agasa
2. Ambalakkaran
3. Anglo Indian
4. Aremahrati
5. Arya
6. Bandari
7. Billava
8. Chakkala
9. Chavalakkaran
10. Chetty/ Chetties (Kottar Chetties, Parakka Chetties, Elur Chetties, Attingal Chetties, Pudukkada Chetties, Iraniel Chetties, Sri Pandara Chetties, Telugu Chetties, Udiyankulangara Chetties, Peroorkada Chetties, Sadhu Chetties, 24 Mana Chetties, Wayanadan Chetties, Kalavara Chetties and 24 Mana Telugu Chetties)
11. Devadiga
12. Devanga
13. Dheevera (Arayan, Valan, Nulayan, Mukkuvan, Arayavathi, Valinjjar, Paniakkal, Mukaya, Bovi, Mukayar and Mukaveeran)
14. Ezhava and Thiyya
15. Ezhavathi
16. Ezhuthachan
17. Ganika
18. Gatti
19. Gowda
20. Hegde
21. Jogi
22. Kadupattan
23. Kaikolan
24. Kolasari, Kalasi Panicker
25. Kalari Kurup or Kalari Panicker
26. Viswakaramas including Asari Chaptogra, Kallassary, Kalthachan, Kammala, Kamsala, Kannan, Karuvan, Kitaran, Kollan, Malayala Kammala, Moosari, Pandikammala, Pandithattan, Perumkolllan, Thachan, Thattan, Vilkurup, Villasan, Viswabrahmanan or Viswabrahmanar and Viswakarmala
27. Kannadiyans
28. Kanisu or Kaniyar Panicker, Kani or Kaniyan (Ganaka) or Kanisan or Kamnan
29. Kavuthiyar

30. Kavudiyaru
31. Koteyar
32. Krishnanvaka
33. Kerala Mudali
34. Kudumbi
35. Kusavan(Kulala,Kulala Nair,Andhra Nair or Anthuru Nair)
36. Kumbarans
37. Kuruba
38. Latin Catholics
39. Madivalas
40. Mahendra-Medara
41. Maravans
42. Maruthuvar
43. Muslim or Mappila
44. Nadar (Hindu)
45. Naikkans
46. Odans
47. Scheduled Castes Converted to Christianity
48. Pandithars
49. Panniyar
50. Pattariyas
51. Peruvannan (Varanavar)
52. Rajapur
53. Chakravar,Sakravar(Kavathi)
54. Sourashtras
55. Saliya, Chaliya (Chaliyan)
56. Senai Thalavan (Elavaniar)
57. S.I.U.C (Excluding Nadar)
58. S.I.U.C
59. Thachar
60. Tholkollans
61. Thottian
62. Vaduvans,Vadugans,Vadukkars and Vaduka (Vadukans)
63. Velaans (Velaan, Velaar)
64. Vanian (Vanika,Vanika Vaisya,Vanibha Chetty,Vaniya Chetty,Ayiravar, Nagarathar and Vaniyan)
65. Vaniar
66. Vakkaliga
67. Veerasaivas (Yogis and Yogeewara, Poopandaram/ Malapandaram and Jangam)
68. Veluthedathu Nair (Veluthedan and Vannathan)
69. Vilakkithala Nair (Vilakithalavan)
70. Yadavas (Kolaya, Ayar, Mayar, Maniyani and Iruman)
71. Kongu Navithan, Vettuva Navithan and Aduthon
72. Moopar or Kallan Mooppan or Kallan Mooppar.
- 73.Kongu Vellala Gounder (Vellala Gounder,Nattu Gounder,Pala Gounder, Poosari Gounder and Pala Vellala Gounder)

II In Malabar District

1. Boyan
2. Ganjan Reddis
3. Visanavan

III. Throughout the State except Malabar District

1. Kammara
2. Malayan
3. Malayekandi
4. Reddiars

IV Throughout the State except Kasaragod Taluk Malabar District

1. Marati

Explanation :- Malabar District shall mean the Malabar District referred to in sub-section (2) of section 5 of the State Reorganisation Act,1956.

This list has been reproduced from the website of the Kerala Public Services Commission website

Source: <http://www.keralapsc.org/obcs.htm>

Appendix 3: List of topics included in interviews

The following is a rough list of questions covered in personal interviews with each respondent. This is not an exhaustive list. The order of questions varied with each respondent. The linguistic form of these questions also varied in different interviews.

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself
2. Tell me a little bit about yourself
3. Do you think of yourself as a Thiyya? Has this changed over time?
4. Tell me a little bit about Malabar.
5. Do you identify yourself as a Malabari? Has this changed over time?
6. What is Thiyya (are they Hindus, a caste or tribe, avarna or savarna)
7. Why is this group called *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*?
8. Do you think Malabar and being Thiyya are connected?
9. Do you think Thiyyas need reservations?
10. What do you think about the inclusion of Thiyyas in OBC list?
11. Checking response to “Ezhavas = South = Seek” vs “Thiyyas = Malabar = Sacrifice”
12. What do you think about Dr Shyamalan’s study?
13. Do you think there is a connection between Sri Narayana Guru and the Thiyyas?
14. Can you tell me a little bit about the SNDP?
15. Can you tell me a little bit about the TMS/MTMS?
16. What do you think of the caste census?
17. What are some of the main challenges faced by the Thiyyas according to you?
18. Checking response to post on colonization of land in Malabar - about Ezhavas, about Muslims, about Christians.
19. Some members on the group shared that they had experienced people from other castes putting them down because they are Thiyyas. Have you faced or heard of something similar?
20. Some members on the group mentioned that sometimes hesitated to let others know that they are Thiyyas. Have you faced or heard of something similar?
21. When and how did you join *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*?
22. What were some of your expectations when you joined *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*?
23. What are some things (posts, discussions) that you would like to see more of on the group?
24. What are some things (posts, discussions) that you would like to see less of on the group?
25. Can you describe how you use the *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*? How often do you check the group?
26. Discussions about different photographs of kavus and temples shared on *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*.
27. Do you think it is important to have these kind of Meerkat.com group for Thiyyas?

28. Discussions about different photographs of old Thiyyas houses shared on the group.
29. On the group, there is an effort to list out important Thiyyas. What do you think of this activity?
30. Some posts mention the secession of Malabar from Kerala. What do you think about such posts?
31. Other posts mention that this secession should be accompanied by a combination with areas such as Nilgiris, Coorg etc because groups such as the Kodavas are similar to the Thiyyas. What do you think of this suggestion?
32. How does it feel to be a Thiyya in Malabar? Is it different from how it feels to be a Thiyya outside Malabar?
33. Some members shared that they do not like Thiyyas to be known as Ezhavas because it gets Thiyyas a “backward” tag. What do you think?
34. For you, how are TMS/MTMS connected to *Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar*?
35. Some members think more power to the Thiyyas will help Malabar. What do you think?
36. Some members posted that because Thiyyas are neglected Malabar is also neglected. What do you think?
37. Some members posted that because Malabar is neglected Thiyyas also suffer. What do you think?
38. Some members posted that “Malabar is the land of the Thiyyas”. What do you think about this post?
39. Members have mentioned that Muslims are growing very powerful in Kannur and this is hurting the Thiyyas. What do you think?
40. Discussions about the Thiyya Shmashanam posts.
41. I have come across the term “Ezhavanization” on the group. Is this a term you use? What do you think this means?
42. Does “Ezhavanization” affect Malabar in some way?
43. On the group, being Thiyya seems to be strongly connected with belonging to Malabar. Do you personally think the connection is so strong, now that you are no longer living in Malabar?

Appendix 4a: List of codes generated

- Imaginative geographies,
- caste matters less in Malabar
- Thiyyas Social and Network capital recog in Malabar
- caste stigma in South Kerala
- caste stigma in Malabar
- caste stigma elsewhere in India or abroad
- fate of thiyyas is fate of Malabar
- fate of malabar is fate of Thiyyas
- secession from Kerala
- neglect from Govt of kerala
- colonization of malabar land
- substantialization of caste
- logic of enumeration
- what are thiyyas like
- what is malabar like
- function of representative organization
- Thiyya identity separate
- what is south kerala like
- what are ezhavas like
- what do upper castes think of us
- interactions with castes not ezhava
- interactions with other religions
- thiyya awareness source
- passing as other castes
- SNDP
- attitude to TMS
- caste status of thiyyas
- thiyyas relationship to Hinduism
- reading thiyyas=sacr ezhavas=selfish
- class interacts with caste status
- internal differences within Malabar
- internal differences in south kerala
- reactions to OBC status of Thiyyas
- attitude to reservations
- connecting Malabar to thiyyas on FB
- Ezhava advantage with South region
- thiyya disadvantage with Malabar
- backward vs OBC
- thiyyas in malabar
- migration of ezhavas into Malabar
- ezhavanization affects Malabar

- outmigration of thiyyas from Malabar
- critique of communism
- cognitive map of Malabar
- reaction to majority of thiyyas slipping in malabar
- attitude to Thiyya shmashanam
- TP Chandrasekharan murder

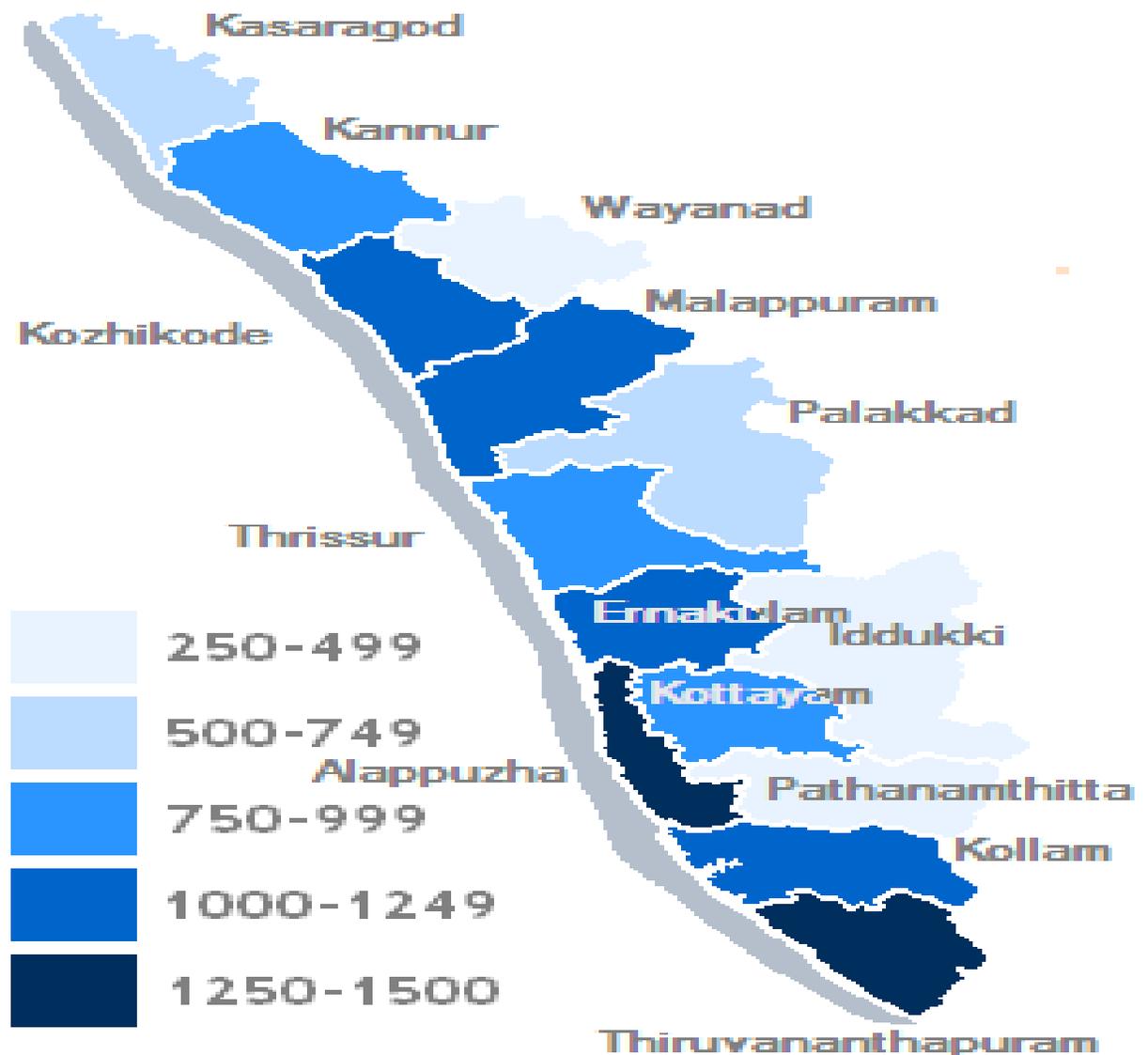
Appendix 5 a: Map of Madras Presidency at the turn of 20th Century¹⁰³ (Bartholomew 1909)



In this map of Southern India, the British administered Madras Presidency is indicated in pink and the district of Malabar is outlined in red on the southwestern end. The Princely States of Travancore and Cochin are marked in yellow underneath the southern boundary of Malabar.

¹⁰³ Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMdras_Prov_South_1909.jpg

Appendix 5 a: Map of present-day Kerala and its constituent districts¹⁰⁴



Malabar was reorganized to create 3 whole districts within the present-day Kerala, namely Kannur, Mallappuram, Wayanad, Kozhikode. In addition, some parts of Malabar district were included within the current day districts of Palakkad and Thrissur. Although the present day district of Kasaragod was not part of the British Malabar district, most members of the Cyber Thiyyars of Malabar tend to include this area when referring to Malabar.

¹⁰⁴The original map illustrates each district of Kerala along with its population density. Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/04/Kerala_density_map1.PNG

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