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Reflections from the
Ethnographic Narratives on
Princely Cochin**

Author: Rinu K. Louis

Assistant Professor

Department of History

Morning Star Home Science College

Angamaly South, Kerala

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Classical Ethnography: Reflections from the Ethnographic Narratives on Princely Cochin

The long sway of the British in Princely Cochin witnessed many socio-political as well as cultural and economic changes in the latter. Perumpadappu Swaroopam or Princely Cochin as it was known then received the blooms and thorns of the British rule like any other contemporary state under the latter's subjugation. The British policy of cooperation later shifted to a policy of subordination. The British also used this period to frame out their perceptions on the indigenous population. The policy of superiority of the European race was highlighted in most of their writings. The existing social groups of Cochin were ascribed new identities which suited the British interests. Though Cochin was under the indirect rule of the British, what was introduced in British provinces was introduced within a decade in Cochin, Travancore, Baroda and Mysore. Cochin was also a melting pot of heterogenous population.

Just like Malabar, princely Cochin was also an integral part of Madras presidency. Therefore, Cochin also became part of the pan – Indian ethnographic survey of the British. Princely Cochin has undergone the sway of the Portuguese and the Dutch as well. But none of them have made strategic accounts on the population of the land for administrative purpose. It is in this context that the pro-British narratives on the indigenous population of erstwhile Cochin holds much significance. No other foreign powers have made the attempt to brand the population of the country into distinct caste varieties according to their distinct features. All their plans had a well-defined administrative agenda.

From the contemporary census reports, it is inferred that people belonging to different castes and communities like Brahmins, Chettis, Ambalavassys, Muslims, Jews, various castes of smiths and carpenters, Christians of every description, Ezahavas, slave castes etc together constituted the social fabric of Princely Cochin¹.

A number of amateur as well as professional ethnographic writings have characterized the social groups of Princely Cochin. Here an attempt is made to analyze in depth two amateur ethnographic accounts on the people of Cochin. The first one by Charles Allen Lawson and the second one by Francis Day.

The British and the Native Cochin (1861) – Charles Allen Lawson

The British and Native Cochin gives a descriptive sketch of Cochin and her people. This work is of amateur ethnographic in nature. Lawson has elaborated his experiences during his stay in Cochin in this work. This work has in one form or the other illustrates the white supremacy. The British and the Native Cochin is an earlier amateur ethnographic account. Written prior to the official ethnographic accounts, this work is helpful in gathering the early colonial perceptions on the people of erstwhile Cochin.

An affirmation of the colonial supremacy and the inferior status of its subjugated people can be drawn from this work. The work traces the historical sketch of princely Cochin right from the advent of the Portuguese. Though this work is amateur in nature, it has all the sufficient contents of an ethnographic account. The language of the land, the physical features of its people, and the existing varieties of social groups are all mentioned in this account.

Lawson has remarked:

“We owe our wonderful supremacy here, most assuredly, to the mountain tribes, they for centuries quarreled with one another, to the lasting disaster of all around and eagerly accepted any terms for a white stranger’s assistance. We have played no new game in India, much as we are blamed for our mode acquisition; Alexander, Caesar and Hannibal, in ancient days and Napoleon the Great and his remarkable nephew in our own times, have all learnt in the same school with ourselves and has been propelled by that invisible necessity of self-preservation to undertake wars which have changed the fate of the world again and againⁱⁱ”.

Every feature of the natives of Cochin finds precise mention in this work. Lawson begins the fourth chapter titled Native Cochin in the following lines:

“The aborigines of the Malabar coast are singularly inferior to those natives of northern India whose fierce audacity has, from the earliest ages, deluged the interior with blood, brought famine and misery into the tropics, and paved the road for the stranger’s entranceⁱⁱⁱ”.

Here Lawson announces the inferiority of the people on the plain. The inhabitants on the entire Malabar coast are declared inferior to those in the northern part of the country. Again, Lawson has branded the natives as belonging to an inferior race, small, weak and debased^{iv}.

Proceeding through his description on the people of the land Lawson narrates the example of the colour of the coffee to explain the colour of the people.

“The colour of the Malabars differs greatly, and can be best imagined by taking , a cup of coffee undiluted as the standard of low life and pouring in drops of milk as higher rank is desired, until the white predominates in the liquid, which is the tint of the aristocratic classes.”^v

According to Lawson, the large portion of the British Cochin are Roman Catholics.^{vi}

Lawson has given the description of the physical features of the indigenous people in the following lines:

“It would be unfair, in attempting to describe the Malabars, not to say beforehand that many a one is as tall, handsome, and symmetrical as an artist could wish to sketch”^{vii}.

The above lines imply that the physical measurements of the indigenous people are imperfect. And Lawson points out this imperfection to the reason for their inferiority.

Lawson’s description of the physical standards of the people is quite interesting and at some point may feel awkward.

“The lowest and most numerous class of the men, working as coolies, sailors and agriculturists, are on an average, but five feet six inches high, and thin in proportion; with small heads, low frontal development, and large animal propensities, unmuscular in appearance, though anything but effeminate in reality; the hands thin but flexible; the legs narrow round the thighs, with protuberant knees, small calves, and wide-spreading feet, with the large toe stretched considerably away from the others. He weighs seven stone ten pounds, or about as much as the average of English women, one-third less than most Englishmen”.

Explaining the male inhabitants of Cochin Lawson remarks in the following lines:

“He does not possess any great strength in raising weights, but as far as traction and propulsion is concerned, he is not by any means incapable. From being carried astride on his mother’s hip in infancy, he is generally low-legged, which gives him a steady but inelegant gait; he either swings his arms very fast with straightened fingers, or clasps them behind his back when walking, and take steps very disproportionate to his height. His voice is harsh, guttural and when raised in anger, discordant; but with a few exceptions”^{viii}

Speaking about the women of Cochin Lawson remarks:

“The Malabar woman is mostly of a more robust build than to man. Her head is low and sometimes ill-shaped, but not generally so, the forehead broad if not high, boldly chiseled eyebrows, large lustrous jet-black eyes, wide mouth, thick lips, excellent teeth, small and retreating chin. She is about five feet one inch in height, and built in good proportion. Her weight is seldom over six stone three pounds, and not more than five stone seven pounds, or about one-half that of an Englishman. Her walk is quick and bustling, right ahead, with but one object in view, and (excepting when carrying a baby) she holds herself upright and swings her arms most actively. Her voice is sometimes harmonious, but not generally so; as age draws on it becomes so shrill that its sound is quite painful”^{ix}

Adding much to the amateur ethnographic nature of his account, Lawson narrates the male and female costumes. According to Lawson, the dressing differs largely according to the caste and creed. Mention has also been made regarding the major religious as well as occupational groups of Cochin.

Lawson also attempts to compare the physical measurements of the natives with that of the Europeans and ascribes an inferior status to the former. Calling every act of the natives as ‘*barbaric*’ in character, Lawson draws a truly inferior picture of the natives.

Lawson criticizes the mode of taking meals as ‘*selfish and animal*’^x:

“The mode of taking meals, general from the Rajah to the beggar is peculiarly selfish and animal. The eyes glisten, the hand is zealous, the mouth obedient, but nothing of what constitutes the feature of civilization, hospitality of manners, is yet to be seen in the polished Brahmin or the graceful Nair”.

Lawson also comments on the ‘*drunkenness and laziness*’. Lawson’s writings clearly justifies the civilizing mission of Europe and also makes the notion necessary that, the natives should be subjugated by the tool of colonialism.

The Land of Perumals or Cochin its Past and its Present- Francis Day

The Land of Perumals or Cochin its Past and Present by Francis Day is yet another work which throws ample light on the ethnography of the land. The Land of Perumals or Cochin, its Past and Present is a descriptive memoir on the erstwhile Cochin until 1863. Day has written this account during his short stay at Cochin. Francis Day served as the Civil

Surgeon of British Cochin and Medical Officer to the Government of His Highness the Rajah of Cochin. This work has more or less the character of an official chronicle. This work has received ample support from the British as well as the native governments during its compilation. This is very much evident from its preface.

This narrative is divided into eighteen descriptive chapters under different headings. Beginning from the general description of the land, the work proceeds through explaining the origin of the land, the early advent of the foreigners, the Mysorean interlude, the intervention of the British and the establishment of British rule in erstwhile Cochin. The flora and fauna of the land also finds adequate mention in this account. Separate chapters have been dedicated to explain the major religious groups and their customs and practices. Day gives ample importance to ethnology and has dedicated the tenth chapter of this work to explain the same.

Day makes use of anthropometric data to explain the physical features of the people. The measurement of the neck, head, nose, arms etc are detailed very precisely. Day has taken the specimens from people belonging to Christianity, Islam as well as the Nairs and Chogans. The average measurement was calculated and Day proceeds to detail about the society based on the anthropometric data. Day also uses this data to explain how people belonging to different castes look like. Day also placed the superiority of castes based on this data.

A tabular representation of the average physical measurements of the people of erstwhile Cochin by Francis Day is given in the following table^{xi}. Only the major socio-religious groups are taken into account:

Caste	Age	Height	Head	Neck	Chest	Arm	Thigh
Nairs	26.5	63.9	22.3	14.2	33.4	10.7	18.6
Chogans	34.6	64.1	21.4	13.2	32.7	10.1	18.8
N.Christians	28.0	62.4	21.6	13.2	31.4	10.1	17.6
Moplabs	35.7	63.5	20.4	13.9	32.3	10.4	18.0
Average	63.4	21.4	13.6	32.4	10.3	18.2

Day explains the personal appearance of the people in the following words:

“The personal appearance of the people of this coast is as varied as in Europe, or elsewhere. Their heads are well formed, and the animal development of the African, is rarely seen amongst them. Their shoulders are often broad, hands small, but joints rather large; feet mostly flattened, and legs a little bowed. They reach their prime, about their thirtieth year and generally weigh from seven stone five to seven stone ten”^{xii}.

Speaking about the complexion of the people Day explains:

“Their complexion is of a lighter brown, or rather of a more copper coloured tinge, than that of those on the eastern coast”^{xiii}.

Adding to the above phrase Day also put forth a notion –‘higher the rank and status lighter is the colour’.

The Larger the Head the Higher the Race?

Day in his account on the people and customs of Cochin remarks like this:

“The circumference of the head is largest amongst the Nairs and it must be conceded that, they are as a race very superior to the other classes. Even on the eastern coast, it is perceived that the circumference of the Brahman’s head is greater than in any of those belonging to Hindu caste”^{xiv}”

Why should the measurement or circumference of the head should be taken to fix the hierarchy of the classes or castes, Day describes the fellow people of the land as some species of animals. Day also describes the dressing style of the people according to their religion. Just like Charles Allen Lawson, Day has also commented on the indolence of the people . In the words of Day:

“The people of Malabar as a whole appear to enjoy a most passive state of existence of and are delighted to make any excuse for obtaining a holiday. No matter of what caste, or creed, they may be , indolence seems to constitute the acme of their happiness, and a quiet swing in the verandahs of their houses, or a lounge under a tree chewing betel, is much preferred by them to any active pleasure, which entails exertion.”^{xv}

As per Day’s observations, the people are passive and they are only concerned about the present than tomorrow.

Speaking about the clothing of the people in general Day remarks:

“In India, the Manchester merchant would find but a poor mart for his manufactures, in comparison with the number of the population: a piece of cloth, twisted around a man’s waist and descending to the knees,(about one yard two feet) is sufficient for his daily wants, and perhaps another piece of the same size as a turban. At night time, they serve as coverings, when he curls himself up in a corner, stretches himself on the floor, or lies down on his cot, or mat, in the verandah to sleep”^{xvi}.

According to Day the natives lack good health compared to those in other parts of the country. Day mentions about the drunkenness of the native in the following way:

“The Native of India, has been generally held up as a model of sobriety, and good health, from abstemious living: whatever he may be elsewhere, he is not this in Cochin. Drunkenness is a prevalent vice, amongst all excepting twice born classes: he is a martyr to dyspepsia, immoderate in his eating, gorging himself at his meals, and takes strong condiments to assist his appetite. He is also a habitual consumer of narcotics (Brahmins and slaves accepted) so it is not surprising, that he is a great sufferer from visceral affections and short lived”^{xvii}.

Being a colonial administrator, Day might have written about the indigenous population with the prejudiced perception of a European.

Day and Lawson: A Comparison

Day’s account is much in similar to Lawson’s ‘British and the Native Cochin’, written two years before. Both of them stayed here for administrative purposes and created descriptive account on the people of Cochin. Even the contents are similar. At a number of points, Day has written the similar viewpoint of Lawson. Both of them have written much before the official ethnographies. The customs and traditions of the people, the social and religious groups of the land, all have found its expression in their writings. Apart from that, it is to be also noted that, being hailed from the legacy of British colonialism, much of the contemporary cultural practices were found awkward to the former. Here, argument is being made not on the ground that, what had existed before were purely correct speaking from the indigenous point of view. Both of these authors have pointed out the evil social practices in the contemporary society as in other parts of the country. But the indigenous culture was dealt with as an alien thing and a clear demarcation has been made between what was modern or civilized and what was old or barbaric. Since both of these accounts were written before the official ethnographic accounts, these writings have served well to leave a trail for the colonial project of cultural control in erstwhile Cochin.

Apart from these writings, the ethnographic perception of the British can also be inferred from the missionary writings, census reports and official ethnographic narratives of the day. It is to be assumed that the British attempts to involve deep into the caste social fabric of the state was backed by the motive of institutionalizing their rule. And to a great extent they were successful in reinventing the caste and community structure of the state.

Endnotes

ⁱ Ward and Conner, Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States, p.207.

ⁱⁱ Charles Allen Lawson, British and The Native Cochin, p.56.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p.55.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p.57.

^v *Ibid.* p.59.

^{vi} *Ibid.* p.34.

^{vii} *Ibid.* p.57.

^{viii} *Ibid.* p.58.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Ibid.*, p.66.

^{xi} Francis Day, The Land of Perumals or Cochin, its Past and Present, p.375.

^{xii} *Ibid.* p.376.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} Francis Day, The Land of Perumals or Cochin its Past and Present, p.376.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p.377.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p.399.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p.411.

