

## **The Origins of Nairs**

**Rohith S.**

Ph.D. Research Scholar (Reg. No. 18113161081012)  
Department of History and Research Centre  
Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629 003.  
*Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012,  
Tamil Nadu, India.*

**Dr. N. Amutha Kumari**

Assistant Professor (Research Supervisor)  
Department of History and Research Centre  
Scott Christian College (Autonomous), Nagercoil – 629 003.  
*Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli – 627 012,  
Tamil Nadu, India.*

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### **Abstract**

*Nairs were one of the important castes in Kerala who were entirely different Namputhiris. Nayar Community was based on Tara which was popularly used in a sense of the basic or the lowest unit of the administration structure. Nairs lived in large family units called Taravads. The Brahmin dominance over the society also contributes to the dominance of the Nair community. Originally they were the Sudracals and the Warrior category. Their main objective was the protection of land and the wealth of temples. The Namputhiris were one of the small populations in Kerala who were treated high class and considered them in any official or unofficial matters. Their strategies were accepted by the rulers but they faced that they may be challenged by other castes because they were not the fighting class and didn't had any power to protect their own races due to the less population. So they had perforce to acknowledge Nairs are the protectors who were the aboriginal ruling class. Nairs become more influential among the masses. Even though the Brahmins had powers they found it difficult to manage the temple properly as the land grants to the temples became increasing they entrusted Nairs as Kanakkar, and appointed them to look after the Devaswom and Brahmasom lands. All these duties of Nairs transformed them into the real masters of land across the state.*

**Key words:** *Namputhiris, Taravads, Chavers, Balikallu, Yagasala, Sambandham*

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### **Introduction**

The Nair is a social group of Indian caste and an intact portion of Kerala culture; they have a long and illustrious history. Nair's can be found in all Walks of life. They are aware of their cultural traditions and history and form an integral and active part of Kerala society. Most of Nairs are treated the Savarna Hindus Who constituted the Warriors, landed gentry and yeoman of Kerala. Nair's are the largest

and the most important section of Kerala society, comprising Writer's, bureaucrats, artists and administrators. They are the one among the matrilineal community in the country. They were the lords of the country and guardian of the public weal and traditionally a martial group. Malabar is often called the land, of Nair, and there can be no doubt that in various respects they may be said to form the most distinguishing feature of the district. They were the most significant part of Malabar population and maintain a position in caste next to Brahmins and the Kshathriyas. The Vaisyas or the trading class finds no place in the socio-religious economy of Kerala.

### **Theories about the origin of Nairs**

There are different theories about the origin and migration of Nairs. According to K.M.Panikkar, the Nair's were not a caste, they were a race. But some historians will reject this argument because many customs and traditions distinguished the Nair's from the other peoples of Kerala. Their own art of warfare, their own war goddess called Bhadrakali, their own cult of ancestor worship, and their own art form, the Kathakali dance, drama, etc. In swordsmanship and suicide squads, Chavers, they are similar to the Samurai of Japan and as the warrior class they used to look down upon manual work and entrust their lands to tenants to till and plant. Though Nairs were once technically classified by the Brahmins under the name of the pure *Sudras* of Malayala, they were always an honoured caste.

The term Nair is believed to be derived from the Sanskrit word *Nayak* means leader and is there for allied to the Dravidian term *Naiker* or *Naidu*. The generally accepted theory is that the Nair's belonging to the same race and family as the bulk of the present inhabitants of Southern India and that they issued at a very early period, long before the Brahmin immigration from the eastern Tamil district.

One view is that Parasurama; the legendary hero reclaimed the land of Kerala from the sea. After the creation of the region he brought *Namputhiri Brahmin* and gave them ownership of all the lands. Along with the Namputhiri Brahmins he brought another group of people called Sudras to act as the servants and body guards of Namputhiris. This Sudras latter came to be known as Nairs.

A Scythian origin of Nairs has also been recently propounded. This is based more or less on the prevalence of serpent worship amongst them and a fancied resemblance between the terms Nair and *Nagar*. Nags settled in northern India and sent down colonies to the south. It is said that about the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC While the *Nagas* were yet ruling in the north, they have had frequent intercourse with the peninsula and it is most likely that the present day Nair's are the descendants of the original *Naga* settler. Another step in the argument is that the Nair which seems the most correct form is only a corruption of *Nagar*, the guttural 'g', being softened to the 'y' sound by a process well known to the philologist.

Linguistic evidence would tent to show that the Nair belongs to Dravidian race family. Speaking of the Malayalam language, the mother tongue of the Nairs. Dr. Caldwell observes that "It claims to be placed next to the Tamil in the list of Dravidian tongues, on account of the peculiarity close relationship it bears to Tamil, in which it abounds". He there for call it a very ancient and much altered offshoot of Tamil. On the other hand Dr. Hermen Gundert, the eminent Malayalam scholar holds that "the two languages (Malayalam and Tamil) of old differed rather as dialectics of

the same member of the Dravidian family than as separate languages". Both scholars however agree in giving it a Dravidian origin.

The Kerala Mahathmyam traditional sources of Kerala history in Sanskrit, the Nairs are referred to as the offspring of the junior member of Namputhiri family where the eldest son alone was permitted to marry in his own caste with Deva Gandharva and Rakshasa Women brought by Parasurama.

The Brahmin-inspired Keralolpathi Malayalam version of Kerala Mahathmyam regards them as the descendants of the Sudras who accompanied the Brahmin immigrants' from outside Kerala. The Nairs colonized in Malabar along with the Brahmins, and that they are of Brahmin descent. Their physical features, the colour of skin, their position in social scale, their being associated with Brahmins in all important Brahmanical ceremonies, the military order to which they belong, all these are pointed out proofs of their Brahmanical origin.

Some anthropologists are of the view that, the Nairs are not indigenous to Kerala. One theory is that Nairs are actually the descendants of the Newars of Nepal. The Kathakali is a Nair art form is closely related to Tibetan dances. Nair polyandry is very similar to Tibetan marriage customs and in the mode of inheritance the Newars are like Nairs. Like the Newars, the Nairs are distinguished by their lighter colour, Mongolian features, and smooth hair. The most remarkable thing about the Nairs is their Style of pagoda (Buddhist shrine) like temple architecture and house construction which are almost identical with the Newar style of temples and houses found all along the Kulu and Nepal Valleys. Serpent worship is another common custom between the Newars and Nairs.

One fact appears to be certain that the Nairs were in Kerala before the large scale Brahmins migration in the seventh century A.D. the Brahmins considered them as Sudras. However, the younger sons of Brahmin families could form morganatic relationships *Sambandham* with Nair women, the children remaining Nairs and thus introduced a new element in the race. This helped the junior members of the Brahmin family to be relieved of their life-long bachelorhood without the responsibility of supporting their wives and children from their family property. It does not mean that the Nairs had loose marriage morals; it only means that this type of relationship was tolerated as an exception for the advantages of the Brahmins and Nairs; the rule of real marriage was endogamous monogamy between Nairs especially between the daughter of a maternal uncle and his nephew. There exists another disputed view that the Nairs and Rajputs (A dominant Hindu military caste in northern India) were related. There is no real proof behind this claim, which may or may not be true.

Another theory is that the Nairs are indigenous to Kerala, but gained the sharper features and fairer complexion due to intermarriages with the Namputhiris. In short we can clear the fact – the Nairs are a large matrilineal warrior caste in Kerala. Traditional Nair families are headed by a woman, with who lives her siblings, sister's children and other matrilineal relatives. In Nair tradition, a man moves back to his mother's residence shortly after his wedding ceremony and his children belong to this mother's lineage.

Edgar Thurston observes that the original Nairs were undoubtedly a military body holding land and serving as a militia. They are described as the "Lords to the Land, the best soldiers in the world and courageous, extremely skilled in the use of

arm. The Nairs were the "Protectors" of the country and as such crystallized readily into the existing caste of Nairs with numerous branches." The Travancore Nairs are popularly known as Malayali Sudras – term which contrasts them sharply with the Pandi or foreign Sudras.

The Nairs were divided into several sub castes according to the occupation. Each sub division performed a separate function. In general the Nairs were agriculturalists and soldiers in the traditional society. Yet all Nairs were not soldiers and there were Nairs groups who concentrated on land owning. There is evidence that only certain sections of the Nair caste were allowed to bear arms.

There are numerous sub-divisions comprised under the general head Nair, of which the most important mentioned in vernacular books, are Kiriyam, Illam, Swaroopam, Itacheri or Idacheri, Pallichan, Ashtikkurichchi, Vattakatan, Otatu, Pulikkal, Vyapari, Vilakkitalavan and Veluthetan. Of these Ashtikkurichchi and Pulikkal are divisions of Maran, Vyapari is a division of Chettis, and Vilakkitalavan and Veluthetan are barbers and Washer men respectively. V.Nagam Aiya, states that although all the Malayala Sudras were classed under the general head of Nair, in reality there were only five 'genuine' Nair castes. The chief divisions of Nairs, as now recognized, are as follows:-

### **1. Kiryathil Nairs**

Kiriyam Nairs belonging more to Cochin and Malabar than Travancore. They form the highest of all the Nair subdivisions in the Cochin State as Well as in South Malabar. They said to be the descendants of the first of the three classes of female brought to Malabar by Parasurama. The name said to be a corruption of the Sanskrit Griha, meaning house. This represents the highest class, the members of which were, in former times, not obliged to serve Brahmans and Kshathriyas. The corresponding caste in Cochin was called Vellayma Nair. To this class belong to chieftains of Malabar known as Nambiyar, Karthavu, Kaimal, Paniker, Unni, Unnithan, Matampi, Thampi, etc. Their profession was the bearing of arms, direction of state affairs. They were statesman, accountants, general etc.

### **2. Illakkar or Illathu Nairs**

Illathu Nair are found large numbers in Travancore, they are the highest of all the Nair subdivisions. The word illam indicates a Namputhiri Brahman's house. They can be acted as the servants in Brahmin houses. The males of the Nair houses are servants of the illam and the female acted as maids to the Namputhiri women's. They hold properties of illam and receive perquisites for the service. The Nair women have to escort the Namputhiri ladies when they go out and have to warm off the low Cannile on the road from approaching the holy presence of their mistress. They have to attend them at their ceremonial baths after the monthly period and While confined after child birth.

But, in mediaeval times, any Nair could get himself recognized as belonging to the Illam division, provided that a certain sum of money, called Adiyara, was paid to the Government. The Illakkar are prohibited from the use of fish flesh, and liquor, but the prohibition is not at the present day universally respected. In some parts of Malabar, they have molded many of their habits in the truly, Brahmanical style. They are also known as Sudra Nayar in Cochin and South Malabar. These Nairs consider

their duties as honourable and pride themselves being the pariyappattavar of wealthy, influential and highly placed Namputhiris As they are attached to an illam, they are called Illakkar.

### **3. Swaroopakkar – Swaroopathil Nairs or Charna Nairs**

Swaroopakkar-Swaroopathil Nayars or Charna Nairs were one of the sub castes belonging to the Nair community in Kerala. They were warriors of Samantha Kshathriya Royal Households known as Swaroopams. This sub caste is found only in Travancore. They are the next in rank to the Illathu Nair and consist of various local denominations, such as Kaippizha, Pattazhi and Vernbanad. In Malabar, two related sub castes, Akathu Charna Nairs and Purathu Charna Nairs are treated as equivalent to Swaroopathil Nairs in caste hierarchy. Under this class comes literally those attached to inside and those attached outside, the one performs menial duties with in the house and are domestic body servants while the others are the retainers of Kshathriyas. Another explanation for the division is that the *Akathu Charthunnavar* have duties within the Yagasala or sacrificial shed of the Namputhiris while the duties of the *Purathu Charthunnavar* are confined to the outside of the shed the latter always take the social precedence of the former.

The members of the highest group, Parur Swaroopam, have their purificatory rites performed by Marans. It is stated that they were once the Illakkar servants of one karuttu y Namputhiri, who was the feudal lord of Parur, and afterwards became attached to the royal household which succeeded to that estate, thus becoming Parur Swaroopakkar. They are next in rank to Illakkars. Pindiyanmar, Patinaluvittukar and Chitiyans are the three minor subdivisions.

### **4. Padmangalam and Tamil Padam**

Padmangalam and Tamil Padani were not originally Nairs, but immigrants from the Tamil country. They are confined to a few localities in Travancore, and until recently there was a distinctive difference in regard to dress and ornaments between the Tamil Padam and the ordinary Nairs. The occupation of the Padmangalakkar is temple service, such as sweeping, carrying lamps during processions, etc. The Tamil Padakkar is believed to have taken to various kinds of occupation, and, for this reason, to have become merged with other sections. The Tamil Padam have no existence in Malabar and Cochin.

#### **Idacheri**

Idacheri or Idacheri also called Pantaris in South Travancore. They are herdsmen, and vendors of milk, butter and curds. The name suggests a relation of some kind to the Idaiyan caste of the Tamil country. It is the only one from which a man belonging to the Charna caste may take a wife, unless it be from his own caste, without social degradation to both parties.

#### **Maran - Chitikan or Kanayathu Nair**

They are the drummers and musicians in temple. A group of Maras called Athikurisi Nair; who officiate at funeral ceremonies of aristocratic Nairs, Brahmans and Kshathriyas. Members of the former class abstain from fish and meat and there for claim superiority over those of the latter class.

#### **Chempukotti Nair**

They are the sub caste among the Nairs. They are the workers in copper vessels for temples and Brahman houses.

## **Otattui Nair**

Otatu, also called Kusa. Their occupation is a tile or thatch temples and Brahman houses. They are the tile makers and thatch makers for temples and Brahman houses.

## **Pallichchan**

They were the bearers of palanquins of Brahmans and Malabar chieftains. They are also employed as their attendants, to carry their sword and shield before them.

## **Kalamkotti or Anduran Nair**

They are also known as Kusa Nair or Pulikka Nair in Travancore. They are the manufacturers of earthenware's for use in temples.

## **Matavar or Puliyaath**

They are also known as Puliyaattu, Veliyaattu and Kallur Nairs. These are said to be the servants of Brahmans and others down to Ambalavasis. But there is a class known as Pulikel Nairs for Matavars, to be found in the hilly parts, such as those of the Kurumbranad Taluk of Malabar and the Kottarakkarai and Mavelikkara Taluks of Travancore who are believed to have been good archers in former times.

## **Vattekkadan Nair**

Vattekkad Nair is better known in Travancore as Chakkala Nair. They form in many respect the lowest sub-division. They are obliged to stand outside the sacrificial stones balikallu of a sanctuary, and are not allowed to take the title Pillai. Pulva is a title 'of distinction among them. One section of them is engaged in the hereditary occupation of oil-pressing, and occupies a lower position in the social scale than the other.

## **Vathi or Vatti**

This name is not found in the Jatinirnaya, probably because it had not been differentiated from Maran. The word is a corruption of vazhti, meaning praying for happiness, and refers to their traditional occupation. They use a peculiar, drum, called nantuni. Some call themselves Daivampatis, or wards of God, and follow the Makkathayam system of inheritance.

## **Karuvelam**

Karuvelam known also by other names, such as Kappiyara and Tiruvattar. Their occupation is service in the palace of the Maharaja, and they are the custodians of his treasury and valuables. Fifty two families are believed to have been originally brought from Kolathanad, when a member thereof was adopted into the Travancore royal family.

## **Kuttina**

The only heiress of Swaroopam Tharavadu is said to have been a maid-servant in the Vadakkettam Brahman's house, and her daughter's talikettu ceremony to have been celebrated in her master's newly-built cowshed. The bride was called kuttalachchi, or bride in a cowshed, and her descendants were named Kuttina, Nairs. They intermarry among themselves, and, having no priests of their own, obtain purified Water from Brahmans to remove the effects of pollution.

## **Arikuravan**

At name, meaning, those who reduced the quantity of rice out of the paddy given to them to husk at the temple of Kazhakkuttam near Trivandrum, by which they were accosted by the local chieftain.

## **Vandikkaran**

The name, meaning cartmen, for those who supply fuel to temples, and cleans the vessels belonging the temple property.

## **Chettis or Vyaparis**

They are the merchants selling curry- stuffs and other goods. Durata Barbosa mentions the Vyaparies are a caste separated from the Chetties. Regarding them Barbosa says that in Calicut and Malabar they were the merchants' and deal in all sorts of goods, collect ginger and pepper from the Nairs and cultivators in the interior and frequently by them in advance in exchange for cotton stuff and other goods that come from beyond the sea. They enjoyed much freedom than the others crime among them being punished by their chief men and not by the king.

Of Chetties, he says they are considerable merchants they deal in precious stones of all sorts, and in pearls, coral and other very valuable merchandise; and in gold, silver, either bullion or corn which is a great article of trade amongst them, because they rise and fall many times.

## **Veluthedan**

They are the watermen among the Nair. They are called mannattanmar and their business is only Wash the cloths of the Brahmans, kings and the Nairs and they live by the business and they cannot adopt other employment ,nor can their decedents. The cloths Washed and handled by veluthedans are not prohibited as polluting though hi touch would be these cloths are received in pagodas for the use of idols and are worn by even the highest Namputhiris Brahmans.

## **Vilakkatalavan Nilakkedathu Nair**

They are the barbers of the Nair. Who Works for the higher classes of Brahmans and Nairs .The last four classes though classed as Nairs, are yet not allowed to touch them, and are 'considered to belong to the polluting class.

## **Chaliyam or Weaver**

The Weavers are called Chalians. They have no other business except to weave cloths of cotton and some silk, which are of little value and are used by the common people. Many of these are son of Nairs and so they are very fine men in their figures; and they bear arms like the Nairs and go to the wars and fight very well.

The distinctions among these subdivisions are nice and variable. Sometimes men and women of the one division do not partake of the meals prepared by the members of another caste.

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