



Cover Page



## UNDERSTANDING SOCIO-CULTURAL MOVEMENTS IN KERALA THROUGH EZHAVA PERSONAL NAMES

Midhun K.S<sup>1</sup>, Molly Varghese <sup>1</sup>, Sreelatha E<sup>1</sup>, Satheesh C<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Malayalam, Sree Krishna College, Guruvayoor (University of Calicut)

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Harish Gour Vishwavidyalaya (A Central University), Sagar, Madhya Pradesh

### Abstract

Onomastics, the branch of linguistics that focuses on the study of names and naming practices, plays a pivotal role in understanding the origin, etymology, and evolution of names. By analysing names, onomastics sheds light on the prehistory of societies, exploring cultural significance and the diffusion of cultural practices through time. This paper seeks to examine the cultural evolution of personal names within the Ezhava community, the largest social group in Kerala. By tracing the transformation of Ezhava names from Dravidian to Sanskrit-based forms, we aim to understand the cultural and religious influences that shaped this change. Specifically, the gradual shift from Dravidian to Sanskrit-based names reflects the diffusion of Hindu religious practices, propagated through Sanskrit, into Dravidian culture. The analysis of Ezhava names serves as a lens to explore the larger sociocultural transitions within the community, revealing the impact of Aryanization on naming conventions and the broader cultural landscape of Kerala. This study highlights how linguistic changes in personal names mirror deeper shifts in cultural identity and religious affiliation.

**Keywords:** Onomastics, Dravidian Onomastics, Aryanization, Sanskritization Ezhava Community.

### Introduction

Onomastics, the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of names and naming practices, delves into the origins, meanings, and uses of names. This field encompasses diverse categories, including personal names (anthroponyms), place names (toponyms), and the names of objects or phenomena. By investigating the formation, usage, and evolution of names, onomastics provides significant insights into language, culture, and history. It unveils patterns in human behaviour, social structures, and cultural identity. As literary scholar Richard Coates aptly notes, "The study of names opens a window into the complex relationships between language, society, and history, revealing layers of meaning often overlooked in ordinary linguistic analysis" (Coates 47).

Historical and cultural studies on South India have often relied on unconventional source materials for understanding the unexplored aspects of history. This includes folklores and autobiographies which reflect the way common people perceived historical events. Many studies including A.Ayyappan's study on the Ezhava community have attempted to understand the rate and extent of social transformations undergone by the Kerala society by looking at one community over a span of time. In this article, we make a similar attempt, taking personal names as the site of impact. By studying the changes in personal names over the past century, we get a glimpse into how the historically significant events affected the common people.

Kerala is particularly interesting for studying the nature of social changes and how they affect individual identities within a place. The multitude of cultural exchanges, religious conversions, and social reformations that the Kerala society has undergone is remarkable to say the least. In this study, we focus on the personal names of the Ezhava community (also known as Tiyya in Northern Kerala).

### The significance of the Ezhava community for this study

The Ezhavas (Central and Southern Kerala) and Tiyyas (Northern Kerala) are supposed to have come from Ceylon, Sri Lanka. Within the caste system they were one of the *avarna* or 'untouchable' castes but considered the highest among the *avarnas* (Ayyappan 116).



Cover Page



This caste community is particularly interesting for a socio-cultural perspective into Kerala for two reasons:

- 1) Ezhavas form the largest caste group in Kerala and are remarkably stratified among themselves in terms of their socio-economic status and their rates of development over time. A large proportion of the Ezhava community worked on leased lands for the upper caste communities with no land or assets in their names. However, a small section of the Ezhava community owned lands in proportions which were comparable to the Noyars (Jeffrey 50). This led to an imbalance within the socio-economic identity of the Ezhava caste proving possibly for the first time, that the caste hierarchy was not as much of an obstacle to economic growth among the lower castes as previously thought.
- 2) The Ezhavas have presented as the most capable of upward social mobility over the last century. One of the biggest obstacles to social mobility is a hegemonic system. The Ezhavas were the first to break out of it both mentally and socially. Although education was inaccessible to the lower castes for the larger part of history, when modern education became available during and after the colonial period, the Ezhavas were the best-educated among the avarnas. The Ezhava community was often the first to adopt practices of the socio-economically aspirational groups at each point. The sections of this community who were becoming more prosperous over time adopted matriliney supposedly imitating the Noyars, who were an aspirational group at the time. During the British rule, the Tiyyas in the North were open to concubinage with the British out of which were born several 'white Tiyyas' who were looked down upon by the rest of the Kerala society (Jeffrey 49-50). This association with British however helped to a huge extent when Kerala's economy became cash based, effectively facilitating upward social mobility of the Tiyya community. Jeffrey also notes that the prosperous Tiyyas often moved from their previous lands and made changes to their names to aid in dissociating from their caste identities. This destabilization of the Tiyyas/Ezhavas within the caste hierarchy as well as within the community itself fuelled the growing discontent with the state of affairs among the lower caste Hindus, which then went on to become the most defining social movement in Kerala.

### **The Ezhava Renaissance and Social Reformation**

Kerala was the first state to witness an uprising from the lower-caste Hindus claiming dignity and human rights. This movement was initiated among the Ezhavas who were quickly climbing the social ladder and destabilizing the overall hierarchy in doing so.

The Ezhava renaissance was a crucial phase in Kerala's social history, with the community taking active steps to uplift itself socially, economically, and politically. The movement began with a strong desire for education and equality, and it was spearheaded by visionary leaders like Sree Narayana Guru, Dr. Palpu, Kumaran Asan, and Sahodaran Ayyappan. Sree Narayana Guru, in particular, played a central role in reforming the Ezhava community. He championed the ideas of equality, spiritual upliftment, and self-respect, encouraging the Ezhavas to reject the discriminatory practices of the caste system. His famous motto, "One caste, one religion, one God for man," became the rallying cry for social transformation.

Narayan Guru established temples where the Ezhava community could worship, breaking caste-based barriers to temple entry. He also emphasized the importance of English education as a means to gain social mobility and economic empowerment. The Ezhavas were quick to embrace this idea, with many community members pursuing education and aiming to secure government jobs—a domain that had previously been dominated by the upper castes.

### **The Role of English Education and Missionary Influence**

The introduction of English education, largely through the efforts of Christian missionaries and reformers, opened new opportunities for the Ezhavas. Missionaries, while primarily focusing on religious conversion, also laid the groundwork for education by establishing schools. Many Ezhava families, especially those who had been denied access to traditional schools, took advantage of these new opportunities for education. English education gave the Ezhavas access to



Cover Page



government jobs and a chance to engage with modern political and economic structures, which had previously been closed to them.

Dr. Palpu, an Ezhava by birth, was instrumental in advancing the cause of English education for the community. Despite being highly educated, Dr. Palpu faced discrimination in government service due to his caste background, which led him to become a vocal advocate for Ezhava rights. His efforts, along with those of other reformers, made education a central pillar of the community's advancement.

The post-independence era saw the implementation of significant land reform measures in Kerala, which had a profound effect on the Ezhava community. The Kerala Land Reform Act redistributed land from the upper castes and large landowners to tenant farmers, including many Ezhavas. Most Ezhavas were allocated small plots of around 10 cents of land, which were originally intended for agriculture. However, instead of cultivating crops, many Ezhavas built homes on this land, thereby securing their livelihoods and improving their living conditions. Although this gave the community a degree of economic stability, the small landholding size limited their potential for substantial agricultural income. As a result, the Ezhavas continued to face financial instability.

The initial generation that benefited from these land reforms often prioritized their children's education despite their limited financial resources. However, many had to discontinue their education due to financial constraints. It was only in subsequent generations that more Ezhavas completed their education and moved into white-collar jobs and other professions.

Today, the Ezhavas have made significant strides in education, government employment, and political representation. Kerala's high literacy rates can be partially attributed to the Ezhava community's early embrace of education as a tool for social mobility. The later generations have been able to access higher education and move into professions that were previously inaccessible, such as teaching, medicine, engineering, and government administration.

### The Sanskritization of a Dravidian people

The primary indication of the social changes discussed above, is the infiltration of Sanskrit into the personal names of the Ezhava people. This is because Sanskritization and social reformations in Kerala have often converged albeit innocuously to some extent. The social reformation movements were not largely secular in their motivation, with an emphasis on modern education than anything else, but the Aryan culture had already been embedded in the Indian psyche as the object of social aspiration. Additionally, the temple entry movement incorporated the Vedic culture into the Ezhava homes more than ever and nationalist movements possibly added to the growing affinity for the pan-Indian identity which was largely Aryan in nature.

Ezhava family trees reflect this growth of Sanskritization over the several social changes in Kerala society. In this study, we looked at 40 family trees and analysed the names of people from about 5 generations ago to the current generation to trace the timeline of this development. The following family tree is a representative sample from the data analysed for this study, depicting the approximate time period for each generation:



Cover Page

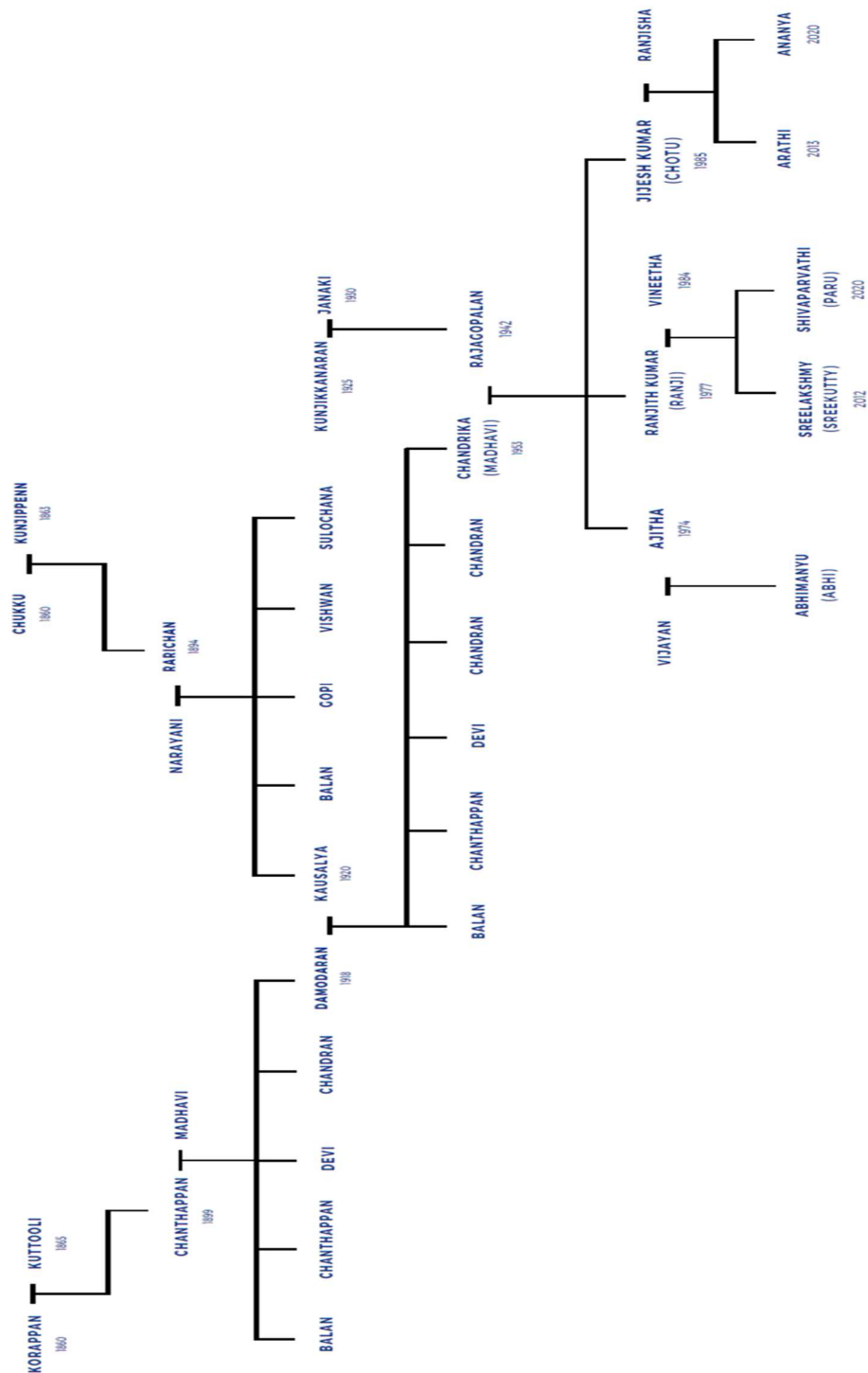


Fig. 1: Ezhava family tree



Cover Page



Based on the names analysed for this study, the increase and decrease in the popularity of Sanskrit and Dravidian names respectively is summarised in the following graph. Note: The values depicted in this graph are not intended as absolute values. They are only indicative of its change over time.

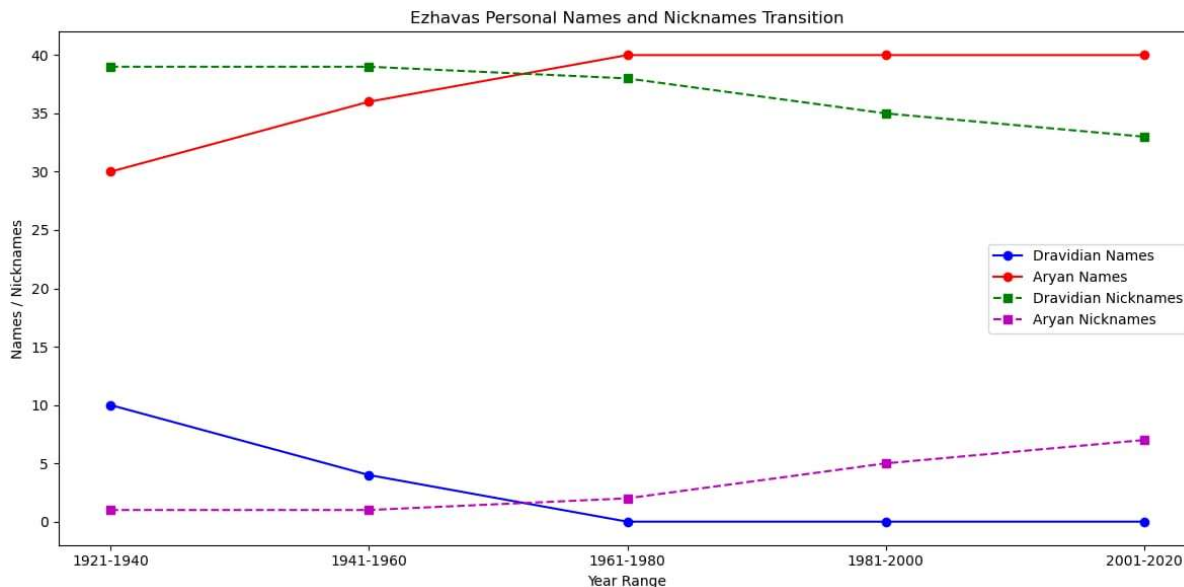


Fig 2: Ezhava personal names and nicknames transition

The graph presents a transition in the use of personal names and nicknames among the Ezhava community across five time periods (1921-1940, 1941-1960, 1961-1980, 1981-2000, and 2001-2020). It distinguishes between Dravidian Names, Aryan Names, Dravidian Nicknames, and Aryan Nicknames. These categories highlight shifts in cultural, linguistic, and naming conventions over time.

The most striking part of this graph is the shift observed in Dravidian names over the period. At the beginning of the study period (1921-1940), there were 10 instances, which then dropped to a minimal level in the early 21st century. In contrast, Aryan names exhibit an increasing presence from the 1921-1940 range to the 1961-1980 range, after which they plateau at around 40 instances. This suggests a linguistic and cultural shift toward the adoption of Aryan names, possibly due to social mobility, Sanskritization, or a greater influence of Aryan culture in the region.

Dravidian nicknames remain stable over time, starting high at around 37 instances in the earliest period and showing only a slight decline to approximately 35 by 2001-2020. This indicates that while formal names may have shifted towards Aryan influences, Dravidian nicknames remained resilient within the community's informal practices. Aryan nicknames, on the other hand, appear very low at first, emerging as a significant factor only by the 1961-1980 period, and show a gradual increase thereafter, possibly indicating an overall Aryanization of both formal and informal naming conventions over time.

From an Onomastic and linguistic perspective, the graph reflects the broader socio-linguistic trends of Kerala, where Sanskritization played a key role in influencing name selection, particularly in more recent generations. The decline in Dravidian names might also be linked to the social prestige associated with Aryanized names, which may have been seen as markers of higher social status. However, the persistence of Dravidian nicknames suggests that the community retained a sense of linguistic heritage and informal cultural identity, even as formal naming conventions changed. The parallel increase in Aryan nicknames alongside Aryan names suggests a cultural alignment across both official and personal identity markers, further signalling a significant transition in onomastic practices within the community.



Cover Page



## Conclusion

The evolution of personal names within the Ezhava community offers a window into the larger socio-cultural changes that have taken place in Kerala over the past century. The shift from Dravidian to Sanskrit-based names reflects the broader process of Sanskritization and the influence of Aryan culture, particularly as the Ezhava community sought upward social mobility and assimilation into the mainstream Hindu social structure. This transformation in naming conventions parallels the community's efforts to break free from the constraints of the caste system, embrace education, and attain economic stability and political representation.

Despite the adoption of Aryan names as markers of prestige and social aspiration, the persistence of Dravidian nicknames suggests that the Ezhavas maintained a connection to their linguistic and cultural heritage. This duality in naming practices reflects the community's ability to balance modern influences with traditional identity markers. Ultimately, the study of Onomastic trends among the Ezhavas highlights the complex interplay between language, identity, and socio-political change in Kerala's history.

## Acknowledgement

This article is part of project titled "Cultural Diversity and Linguistic Diffusion in the Inherent Nouns of the Political Tri-junction in Southern India: A Sociolinguistic Study" funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Ministry of Education, Govt. of India.

## References

- Aiyyappan, A. *Social Revolution in a Kerala Village*. Asia Publishing House, 1965.
- Bagby, Lewis, and Pavel Sigalov. "The Semiotics of Names and Naming in Tolstoj's" *The Cossacks*." *Slavic and East European Journal* (1987): 473-489.
- Coates, Richard. *A Companion to the History of the English Language*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.
- Dechamma CC, Sowmya. "Naming, nation, and negotiations: Kodavas and their 'illegible' identities." *Contemporary South Asia* 24.2 (2016): 197-209.
- Emeneau, Murray B. "Towards onomastics of South Asia." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98.2 (1978): 113-130.
- Guptan Nair S. editor. *Dr. Godavarmayude prabandhangal*. Kerala Bhasha Institute Thiruvananthapuram, 1990.
- Jeffrey, R. "The Social Origins of a Caste Association, 1875–1905: The Founding of the SNDP Yogam." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1974, pp. 39-59.
- Jeffrey, Robin. "A Note on the Malayali Origins of Anti-Brahminism in South India." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1977, pp. 255-68.
- Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, Women and Well Being: How Kerala Became "a Model"*. Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Jeffrey, Robin. *Politics, women and well-being: How Kerala became'a model'*. Springer, 2016.
- Joseph, Smita. *A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Indian Christian Names: The Case of Telugu Catholics and Syrian Christians*. Vernon Press, 2022.
- Menon, Dilip M. *Caste, Nationalism, and Communism in South India, Malabar, 1900-1948*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Meyerhoff, Miriam. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Routledge, 2018.
- Tarabout, Gilles. "On Chattan. Conflicting Statements about a South Indian Deity." *Clio and her Descendants. Essays for Kesavan Veluthat* (2018): 454-478.
- Thurston, Edgar. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India Vol 2, C-J*. Government Press, 1909.
- Vacek, Jaroslav. "Old Tamil Kings and Chieftains as Described in Sangam Literature". *Cracow Indological Studies* 15 (2013): 325-354.