The Izhavas of Kerala and their Historic Struggle* for Acceptance in the Hindu Society

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THERE ARE over six million Izhavas or Thiyas (as they are known in the northern parts) in the state of Kerala. They form nearly one-third of the population of the state and they are the single largest communal group there. They are still listed among the backward communities by the Government of India and the state government, which makes them eligible for some special privileges such as reserved seats and scholarships in colleges and professional schools. They are engaged in all sorts of professions, but large numbers of them are still involved in toddy-tapping or extracting sweet juices from coconut and palm trees which are fermented and sold in liquor shops, so much so that they are as a community still justifiably identified with the toddy and liquor business — their traditional caste occupation.

Since the 1920's at least they have been extremely active socially and politically. Their communal organization, Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, founded in 1903, has since become perhaps the largest and best organized of its kind in the state. Under its aegis the Izhavas operate twelve colleges, several dozen high schools and elementary schools, several hospitals,
and hundreds of village meeting halls. It also sponsors banks, credit unions, cooperatives, and small scale industries for the benefit of the community. At least one widely circulating daily newspaper and several monthly and weekly periodicals are published by Izhavas. None of them is an official organ of the community, yet they all have a special interest in its welfare. The Izhavas have their own temples and shrines which number in the hundreds. Monastic tradition is rather recent among them, yet they have several monasteries, the most important being the one at Sivagiri, the place of samadhi of Sri Narayana Guru, their most important saint and social reformer.

The Izhavas participated fully in the nationalist movement, and produced some of the foremost political leaders of the region who served in the state's ministries since independence. They have also a representation, proportionate to their number, in the judicial and legislative branches of the state government as well as a similar representation in the central legislature. They patronize all the political parties of the state and all shades of political philosophies are represented among them, but by far the largest number of them belong to one of two factions of the Communist party of Kerala; in fact, they can be considered the mainstay of the party in the state.

The present situation of the Izhava community, then, is quite bright, and they are a socially alive and politically powerful group, despite their backward class status and their persistent complaint of under-representation in government jobs. They are also on an equal footing with the caste Hindus, Christians, and Mohammedans, socially and politically, although they still are not accepted within the caste system of Hinduism. Their condition, however, has not been this good until recently. In fact, their history since Brahminic Hinduism strongly established itself in South India in the eighth century has been a constant struggle for equality with the caste Hindus – which is the central theme of this essay.

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As the Izhavas are, unlike any other outcaste Hindus, independent of high caste Hindus in their religious worship, with their own temples and priesthood, and because they form an autonomous social group by themselves, the question whether they were indigenous to Kerala was raised by historians. Until recently the prevalent theory was that they migrated from Ceylon.\(^1\) The very names, Izhavas and Thiyas, are brought to support this theory, as they probably derived from the roots of *Izham* and *Dweep* both of which signify island. The long standing legend that the king of Ceylon sent four bachelors to establish

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