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## OTTAPALAM: A TOWN IN MALABAR AND THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA

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Former National Security Advisors MK Narayanan and Shivshankar Menon used to share a joke: perhaps the waters of the mighty Bharathapuzha, which flows through the Western Ghats into the Arabian Sea, should be bottled up and sold outside the Union Public Service Commission in New Delhi.

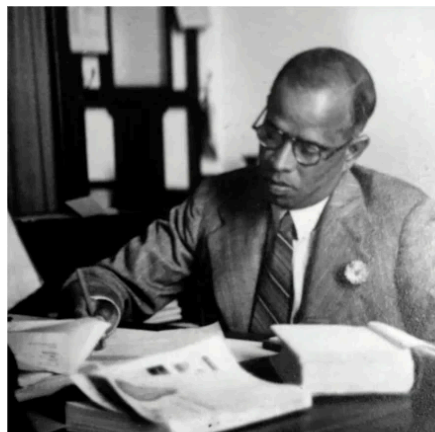
There might just be something about the river's waters because three out of four former national security advisors all have connections to a town on the banks of Bharathapuzha, an hour outside of Palakkad—Narayanan and Menon are both from Ottapalam, just like former NSA JN Dixit's mother. And it's not just NSAs. The otherwise nondescript town in central Kerala has an interesting legacy: a long line of diplomats, spies, and security officials have steadily emerged from its families, going on to occupy extremely important government positions.

It seems that in Ottapalam, blood runs as thick as its waters.

Unwittingly, the 30 square kilometres of Ottapalam seem to have produced at least thirteen successful people who have played a role in shaping India's foreign policy and internal security. Expand the radius further to Palakkad and Malabar at large, and the number multiplies across all services. It's no surprise that the running joke in Lutyens' Delhi was that the government of India had "Menon-gitis."



*C. Sankaran Nair*



*VP Menon*



*KPS Menon*

Three foreign secretaries, two Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) chiefs and one Intelligence Bureau (IB) head trace their roots to Ottapalam. So does C. Sankaran Nair, the lone Indian member at the time of the Viceroy's Council, and V.P. Menon, the man who helped stitch India together as a union of states. Even former president KR Narayanan represented Ottapalam for over two decades in Parliament. Several of Ottapalam's children have become diplomats and bureaucrats, going on to head bodies like the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR). One 'son' of Ottapalam, Lt. Gen. KP Candeth, went on to play a commanding role in the army's liberation of Goa. Former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao is also from Malabar, hailing from Malappuram, barely two hours from Ottapalam. These were all people who were involved in shaping India's foreign policy as it transitioned into a postcolonial country while also putting out internal fires to ensure its territorial integrity.

It's tempting to believe that Ottapalam's wild, idyllic, lush landscape was a breeding ground of secrets—the perfect laboratory to create the stereotypical spy or diplomat living an exciting life in the shadows. The moody Bharathapuzha, snaking its way through Kerala, is certainly fertile ground for subterfuge. But secrets tend to be hidden in the most obvious places, and perhaps there's a more straightforward explanation for this town's mysterious legacy.

## CASTE, COLONIALISM AND OPPORTUNITY

MK Narayanan remembers a comment then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made when a bureaucrat was being hired.

“Is this person also from that small part of Kerala, by that river?” he asked Narayanan mischievously. Even the Prime Minister hadn’t missed the Ottapalam connection.

The phenomenon is neither a coincidence nor a twist of fate. The story of Ottapalam’s success is actually the story of its families’ successes, a result of a constellation of several curious factors that, in turn, tells not only the story of caste consolidation and mobility in modern India—but also the ethos that produced the people who positioned her foreign policy.

Situated squarely in the region of Malabar, the village of Ottapalam found itself hosting a trifecta of modernity at the turn of the century: a railway station, a local court, and an English high school. As a result, many elite Nair families found themselves in a cluster around Ottapalam. It was one of the major stops on the Mangalore-Madras railway, a lifeline of the Madras Presidency. Shivshankar Menon, whose grandfather’s decision to retire in the emerging town brought a sharp spotlight on it, remembers the thrill of the train slowing down at a bend which signalled the stop, and him and his siblings being flung out of the train into the waiting arms of their summer holidays.

“Ottapalam is a ‘vintage town,’” explained a vintage member of this reporter’s family, who still lives in his beloved town. “A lot of Nair families settled down here, and in the 1920s that number grew with more educated lawyers and teachers moving to this part of Malabar.”

As the district headquarters of Valluvanad—an erstwhile kingdom that the British turned into a district within Malabar—Ottapalam had at least one courthouse. Malabar, unlike the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, was a part of the Madras Presidency—being under direct British control meant Ottapalam had its own English school, which was famously *burnt down* by a teenage VP Menon. He then left town to work in the goldmines of Kolar before eventually becoming the draughtsman of modern India.

Malabar was therefore well-placed to produce bureaucrats, says historian Manu Pillai, supplying lots of Malayalis to the British services. The access to Madras and the British administration created a pipeline of well-educated elite Nair men who lapped up English education and then set off to make their mark on the world.

It's also important to note that owing to the nature of caste and kinship, most of Ottapalam's diplomats and bureaucrats are all connected to the same families by marriage. It is slightly beyond the scope of this essay to plot exact family connections going back a few generations, but Ottapalam's trajectory provides a peek into the early sociology of the leadership of India's foreign office – and explains how elite Indian kinship was transferred into a postcolonial institution that was originally intended to be equalising. Eventually, a pattern emerged whereby certain communities from certain corners of India began to flourish. This was not a phenomenon distinct to just Ottapalam or Malabar—evidence from the bordering princely states of Travancore and Cochin also tell us the same story of government services functioning through nepotism, which inevitably breeds exposure, education and access. Several other small towns across India can also

claim the same fame, as can several other clans like the Tamil Brahmins in Madras, the Jhas in Bihar, and the Nehrus in Allahabad. Kashmiri Pandits and bhadralok Bengalis had similar trajectories too.

**The fact that this town in Malabar bred so many people who not only made it to the foreign office but also succeeded gives us a glimpse of how the road to South Block was paved by the chance of birth. Perhaps there really is something about the Bharathapuzha's waters, normally placid and calm, churning out generations of diplomats and spies through stormy times—an unintended**

## consequence of ambition, access and aptitude

The first and most famous of this long line of men from the region was C. Sankaran Nair, born not too far from Ottapalam. The son of a tehsildar, he married the daughter of a sub-judge of Mangalore. Nair would go on to become the first Malayali president of the Indian National Congress (INC) in 1897, a good 25 years before the first-ever all-Kerala conference of the INC was held in Ottapalam in 1921, leading to the establishment of the Kerala Provincial Congress Committee (KPCC). Nair is famous for resigning from the Viceroy's Council—in which he served as education minister—after Jallianwala Bagh.

Nair ensured that his daughter would marry another Nair from Ottapalam who topped the Indian Civil Services exam in 1922. KPS Menon would go on to become the first foreign secretary of India, while his son KPS Jr. would become the fifteenth and his grandson Shivshankar the twenty-seventh. The family tradition continued: KPS's daughters would marry diplomats too, and give birth to children who either became diplomats or married them.

### MATRILINEAL FAMILIES AND MOBILITY

In fact, the family legend goes that it was one of Sankaran Nair's policies to marry his daughters to men in the services. Nair families are matrilineal, and typically men would move to their wives' homes. Nair

women very rarely left their own homes, and if they did move to their husbands' houses, would return after their death. Only a handful of Nair families survived Tipu Sultan's invasion of Malabar in the 18th century, and these few families had begun to marry amongst themselves, creating a cluster of elite Nair households in the region who were all networked through marriage.

But because of the peculiarity of matrilineality and the tradition of women never leaving their homes or moving with their husbands, it took a certain type of ambitious and professional Nair family to be willing to marry their daughters to ambitious men who were leaving Malabar to make a name for themselves. And it worked vice versa too: certain educated, marriageable Nair women suddenly became very eligible, and something about their mobility possibly knitted these families together. Perhaps this explains Sankaran Nair's obsession with having his daughters marry professionals.

“There might be something about the Nair wives of these men who were willing to go and live outside Kerala—and through that, setting up a family that's distinct from others,” says Pillai. “It was really all about exposure.”

Over generations, both an exception and an example of Nair women's mobility was Nirupama Menon Rao — a Nair woman who herself rose through the ranks to become foreign secretary as well as serve as ambassador to China and the US. She traces her roots back to Malappuram in Malabar — also on the banks of the Bharathapuzha. She won the KPS Menon Award in 2012, travelling to Ottapalam to collect it.

A contemporary of KPS was VP Menon, who belonged to the same caste but a different family. VP’s milieu was extremely traditional, and not as outward-looking as Nair’s clan —but his story and his success, always punctuated by his strong Malayali accent, was impactful because it gave Ottapalam’s residents another example of mobility. MK Narayanan, in fact, credits VP Menon as inspiration for his own entry into the IPS. Menon’s success was different from KPS, as he didn’t come from the Indian Civil Service — which was looked down upon by his contemporaries, who “turned up their nose” at him. VP therefore mixed with those from outside the ICS, like Narayanan’s family.

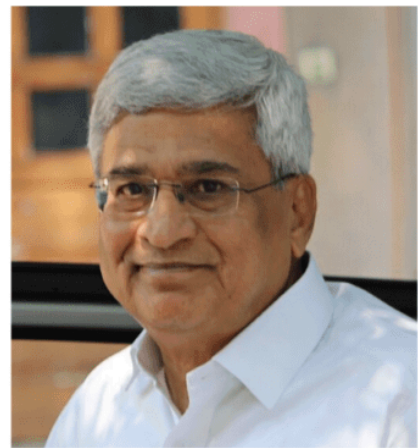
“Those from Malabar jostled with the best of the Tamil bureaucracy and brains, as it were,” said Narayanan, since Malabar was part of the Madras Presidency. “In all this there’s a tradition — many of us followed in the footsteps of our fathers, and those who could set examples for us. And of those from Ottapalam, VP Menon was certainly the epitome of what one born without privilege could achieve.”



*JN Dixit*



*Shivshankar Menon*



*Prakash Karat*

While KPS' family is ostensibly responsible for some of the most well-known diplomats from Ottapalam, a cursory survey of any Nair family tracing their roots to the town will throw up at least one bureaucrat. Two out of this reporter's grandfather's five brothers became bureaucrats, fulfilling that middle-class Indian dream of government service. Besides those already mentioned, others who belong to Ottapalam include RAW and IB chief K. Sankaran Nair, RAW's V Balakrishnan, IGCAR's C. Venkataraman Sundaram, and Lt. Gen KP Candeth.

## TWIN MOTIVATIONS

Historian Narayani Basu, who is also VP Menon's great-granddaughter and biographer, points to the motivation that shaped several of these men, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. The most prestigious professional move for elite, educated, English-speaking men was joining the Indian Civil Service, or becoming a lawyer and then making it into government—an impulse that middle-class India eventually inherited. But it was also a sign of great patriotism, especially with many men joining the service in the 1920s seeing it as a way to push for change from within the system.

Over generations, such presence within the system became almost codified—so much so that Ottapalam served, for instance, almost as an axis of opinion and policy during negotiations leading to the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008. On one side were Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon and NSA MK Narayanan, both from Ottapalam. On the other side was staunch opposition from the CPI(M)'s Prakash Karat, who

hails from Elappully, less than an hour from Menon's ancestral home. This line-up was triangulated by a third village, Elavancherry, to which Shashi Tharoor belongs. He had just resigned as Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and was a keen backer of the deal. Suddenly, the nuclear deal was, as it were, being drawn up and debated in Delhi by men from Malabar, with few degrees of separation between them.

Ottapalam had managed to get New Delhi's attention decades before that. This reporter's family member very proudly narrated a story from his childhood in the late 1940s, as told to him by one *Sivaramettan*, a young postboy. *Sivaramettan* claimed that the post office had a record of a phone call that came one rainy night all the way from Delhi: it was Lord Mountbatten, demanding to be put in touch with VP Menon, who was apparently visiting family in Ottapalam. A postboy (not *Sivaramettan*) was immediately and begrudgingly dispatched on a bicycle to fetch Menon, who then took the call from the post office. The anecdote has survived for seventy years as proof that Delhi had very much registered Ottapalam and its residents' looming presence.

## WEARING INFLUENCE LIGHTLY

Ottapalam, on the other hand, doesn't seem to set much store in the fact that it has produced such luminaries: local reactions seem unimpressed with these little cosmopolitanisms. An unverifiable family fable about VP Menon driving around in a blue Cadillac didn't inspire much of a reaction. This was the kind of town that had a thatched roof for its local movie theatre: when it rained, the audience—India's former

and future foreign secretaries and national security advisors among them—would simply open their umbrellas and continue watching the movie.

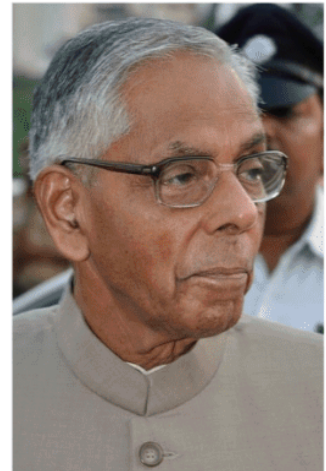
KPS Menon’s autobiography says as much too—KPS, in fact, was one of the only such professionals to return to Ottapalam and spend the rest of his life in his wife’s ancestral home, which did add a little renown and panache to the town’s airs. He refused to keep a telephone in his house, and was important enough for visitors to make the effort to come to meet him— he had swapped “cocktail parties” for the “calm and peace of this village-town.”



*KR Narayanan*



*Shashi Tharoor*



*MK Narayanan*

“Compared to Kottayam, Ottapalam, like Peter Pan, has hardly grown up,” writes KPS on his decision to retire in Ottapalam in his 1965 autobiography. “Here is a town where, even in this 20th century, electricity is a novelty and the telephone a rarity, where there are few motor cars and no motorcycles, where the rich landlords have come down from their pedestal and the poor bear no resentment against them, where the only industrialist, E. P. Brothers, is regarded as a

phenomenon even though he is more a philanthropist than an industrialist, where animals think that they have as much right to use the road as men, where the river meanders in and out of the town, and where houses are but dots on an expanse of fields. Here, in short, Nature has not been altogether ousted by man.”

## UNEQUAL OUTCOMES

Ottapalam’s nature had, however, ousted many non-Nair men. Land ownership patterns changed after the temple and Brahmin-owned lands, granted by rulers, were confiscated when Mysore invaded Malabar in the mid-18th century, and many families left. Landowning Nairs had to pay revenue, dictating who could afford to remain. When the British took over Malabar from Tipu Sultan after the Treaty of Srirangapatnam, the remaining Nair families gravitated towards the British. The British, in turn, preferred Nairs as their local administrative liaisons over other Brahmin and non-Brahmin communities.

“Access to the British administration gave educated professionalism an appeal over being linked to land and traditional vocations,” says Pillai. “Some people went out into the world, did well, and the others followed suit.”

By the turn of the century, therefore, this dispersion out of Malabar had begun. Those who left moved to cities like Madras and London to study and eventually work. Those who stayed behind remained elite landowners—but there was a widening chasm between the two. The

rupture within the elites was further sealed by land reforms: those who had stayed behind as landlords found themselves diminished, while those who had left Malabar in professional pursuit had less holding them back.

The fact that this town in Malabar bred so many people who not only made it to the foreign office but also succeeded gives us a glimpse of how the road to South Block was paved by the chance of birth. Perhaps there really is something about the Bharathapuzha's waters, normally placid and calm, churning out generations of diplomats and spies through stormy times—an unintended consequence of ambition, access and aptitude.

“Ottapalam was a place of wonder, fantasy, half-fable for me,” says Shivshankar Menon, who still visits his ancestral home. “It still is. The fact that there's this odd coincidence about the place only adds to its charm.”



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*Vandana Menon is a journalist reporting on politics and culture across South Asia. Currently based out of New Delhi, she has reported on a wide range of issues from the ground. She is the recipient of the Ramnath Goenka award for feature writing in 2021 and the Asian College of Journalism award for social impact in 2025, and previously worked at The Print.*