

# **AMBIVALENT ENGAGEMENT: THE DISCOURSES OF DALIT MOVEMENTS AND COLONIAL MODERNITY IN KERALA**

*A Thesis Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for  
the Award of the degree of*

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

HISTORY

BY

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### **DECLARATION**

I, **Hanu G. Das**, hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis entitled ***Ambivalent Engagement: The Discourses of Dalit Movements and Colonial Modernity in Kerala*** is submitted by me under the supervision of **Dr. V. J. Varghese** and **Prof. Bhangya Bhukya** is a bonafide research work for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy in History** from the **University of Hyderabad**. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or full to this University or any other University or Institution for the award of any degree or diploma. I hereby agree that my thesis can be deposited in Shodhganga/ INFLIBNET.

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This is to certify that the thesis entitled, ***Ambivalent Engagement: The Discourses of Dalit Movements and Colonial Modernity in Kerala*** submitted by **Hanu G Das** bearing Regd. No. **10SHPH02**, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History, is a bonafide work carried out by him under our supervision and guidance.

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**Hanu G. Das**

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

CMS - Church Missionary Society

KSAT - Kerala State Archives Thiruvananthapuram

LMS - London Missionary Society

SJPS - Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham

SMPA - Sri Mulam Popular Assembly

PRDS - Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha

SPCK - Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge

TCMS - Thiruvithamkoor Cheramar Maha Sangham

## INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on the problematic of how the discourses of dalit<sup>1</sup> movements in Kerala engaged with colonial modernity. It analyses the rise to prominence of ‘double consciousness’ among dalits as one could see in the contributions of Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan, Pampady John Joseph and their organisations such as *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham* (SJPS), *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) and *Tiruvitamkoor Cheramar Maha Sabha* (TCMS) respectively. These organisations led by the above mentioned dynamic figures produced critical dalit discourses in the context of colonial modernity in Kerala. Often an individual (intellectual) play a crucial role in shaping consciousness of the community in which he/she is an organic unit, theoretically called the ‘organic intellectual’.

Ayyankali (1863-1941), the iconic figure of dalit liberation in Kerala, captured public sphere for dalits by his forceful entry into public road through his historic *Villuvandi Yathra* - journey on a bullock cart. With arms and fighters, he fought for civil rights for dalits to enter public roads to assert their right for equal access. He established an organisation named

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<sup>1</sup> Dalits, who were considered untouchables in the past, are currently included in the Scheduled Castes category in the Indian Constitution. Earlier, Ambedkar used the term in his writings to refer to the scattered and broken condition of people considered untouchables and outcasts by Hindu society. The term ‘dalit’ was popularised by Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra during the 70s. Now the term ‘dalit’ is used as a politically assertive term that contains both social conditioning and liberative potential to deconstruct, reform and democratise the society towards an egalitarian one. Nevertheless, the term ‘dalit’ was not in use during the period covered by this study. Hence they were referred to as depressed classes, lower castes, slave castes etc. in official and other records. But I apply the term in that context also to denote the condition and consciousness of the ex-untouchables of that time. I use the term with small letter ‘d’ to emphasise the tendency of dalits to destabilize the power positions associated with the caste hierarchies.

*Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* (1907), and a magazine called *Sadhujanaparipaliny* (1913), for articulating ideas and organising activities for the upliftment and liberation of Dalits. He served as a member in the *Sreemoolam Popular Assembly* (a prototype legislative assembly of Travancore) for 22 years and was quite passionately arguing for dalits' rightful space in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

Poykayil Yohannan (1878-1939), popularly known as Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan, is an eminent spiritual leader of Dalits in Kerala. His family members were slaves of a Syrian Christian family, and they became Christian converts. Poykayil Yohannan studied Bible and became a pastor. His reflexive understanding made Yohannan eventually a critique of Christianity. He started organising dalits secretly which subsequently became a spiritual organisation called *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS). He used reformed Malayalam language, composed lyrics and songs, and prescribed cleanliness and moral well-being for dalits. He became a member of the *Sreemoolam Popular Assembly* and forcefully articulated dalits' rights to humanity and equality.<sup>3</sup>

*John Joseph Pampady* (1887-1941), was an English educated teacher and a Church preacher, who was born in a dalit Christian family. He served the British army, travelled extensively and worked in Christian Missions. Subsequently his experience and understanding made him to realise the predicament of dalits and consequently began to criticize both Christianity and Hindu social life. Like Jyotiba Phule, John Joseph engaged with history and

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<sup>2</sup>See, T. H. P. Chentharasseri, *Ayyankali*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House, 1983); C Abhimanyu, *Ayyankali*, Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, 1990

<sup>3</sup>See, Grandha Rachana Samithi, *Sree Kumara Gurudevan*, (Kottayam: Sree Kumara Dharma Samajam, 1983); ,P. Sanal Mohan, "Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, n.s.,Vol. XXVIII, no.1, April, 2005; Sanal Mohan, Narrativizing oppression and suffering: theorizing Slavery, *South Asia Research* , Vol. 26 (1),2006.

claimed with the support of *Sangham* literature that the Pulayas were the descendants of the erstwhile *Chera* dynasty. He established the *Thiruvithamkoor Cheramar Maha Sangham*, and propagated his ideas through the magazine called *Cheramar Doothan*. He even started a printing press in 1924. His book, *Savarna Christyanikalum Avarna Christyanikalum* (*Savarna* Christians and *Avarna* Christians) is an important work that provides a peep into his ideas. He was also a member of the *Sreemoolam Popular Assembly* and worked for Dalits' cause from within the structure of institutional politics.<sup>4</sup>

By studying the dalit discourses produced by these leaders and their organisations, I am trying to understand how dalit movements and their intellectual leadership engaged with both Indian tradition and colonial modernity. To explain this engagement, I am using the conceptual category of “ambivalence,” meaning mixed feelings of accepting as well as rejecting at the same time a set of given ideas and practices that have weighed heavily on the lives of Dalits. The play of this historically conditioned and futuristic mixed/dual orientation in their engagement with colonial modernity and its meaning to the Dalit intellectual discourse is the main terrain of my study.

Ayyankali had a close relationship with both Hindu social and religious reformers and Christian Missionaries and yet he maintained a near silence on religious matters and did not encourage his people to join either of these religions. Poykayil Yohannan and his movement emerged within the framework of colonial missionary Christianity but moved beyond its limits by offering a critique. Pampady John Joseph also emerged within the framework of missionary Christianity but moved beyond it to critically engage with it. These three leaders as the members of the *Sree Moolam Popular Assembly*, an erstwhile legislative assembly in Travancore, had

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<sup>4</sup> T.H.P. Chentharsserry, *Pampadi John Joseph*, (Thiruvalla: B.P.D.C.), 1989.

maintained distinctive standpoints and the study of these points of convergence and divergence is meaningful in understanding the dalits' engagement with the nascent public sphere in the colonial context of Kerala. They raised the caste question to the nationalist and national level discourse. Here I argue that the discourses of the above mentioned dalit leaders, are antinomian and subversive to their paternalistic modern authorities, with the help of the concept of 'double consciousness'. This concept was initially used by W.E.B. Dubois, the well-known Black American thinker and was later expanded by Paul Gilroy in relation to the study of modernity.<sup>5</sup> With the help of the concept of double consciousness, I unravel the autonomous positions taken by these leaders in relation to colonial modernity and the history and anxieties that conditioned such an attitude.

Modernity, an intellectual heritage of the West, is largely based on the ideas that emerged from European enlightenment, established rationality and scientific paradigms, and is considered to have given birth to all sorts of developments for the mankind. Nevertheless, it is seen as Eurocentric/racist/social Darwinist/capitalist/masculine towards the rest of the world 'for civilizing the savage' and hence have been relentlessly criticized by the colonial as well as post-colonial intellectual world. As a matter of fact, the circulation of themes of modernity with its colonial aspirations which spread outside the European world is referred to as 'colonial modernity', as modernity in the erstwhile colonies had been mediated by colonialism. It has been coined and widely accepted to understand the non-western experiences of modernity. Arjun Appadurai discusses this issue in his book *Modernity at Large*.<sup>6</sup> Dipesh Chakraborthy, critically calls this project of understanding modernity in its multiplicity and historical specificity

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<sup>5</sup>Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, (Delhi Oxford University Press, 1977).

‘provincializing Europe’.<sup>7</sup>

By examining the East Asian experiences of modernity, the colonial modernity thesis was articulated by Tani E Barlow and she believes that both colonialism and modernity are linked and argues that it is an essential feature of industrial capitalism.<sup>8</sup> For its wide range and sense of abstract characteristics the term ‘colonial modernity’ has been embraced as well as criticised for decades. Its discursive use made it difficult to limit it to explanatory definitions. It was swaying in between the frameworks of temporal or analytical categories.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note the versatility of the term ‘colonial modernity’ rather than confining it within a temporal or analytical category.<sup>10</sup> This will provide an opportunity to imbibe and explore much greater extensions of the topic. In this sense, I use colonial modernity to delineate the problems of dalit engagements with the experience of modernity in the specific context of southern Kerala.

Criticising the dynamics of colonial modernity in India, Partha Chatterjee says that “the same historical process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of modernity.”<sup>11</sup> This observation has a tremendous implication for the studies on dalits today. Nevertheless, Dalits have acknowledged the role of colonial modernity in changing their social status by ensuring some level of right to equality, freedom, dignity, self-respect and recognition. Colonial modernity, and later the constitutional provisions and various state welfare policies, did provide some kind of opportunity to dalits, enabling them to have a space in politics, culture, education and various professions. Dalits asserted their identity and organized themselves

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<sup>7</sup> Dipesh Chakraborthy, *Provincializing Europe: Post-Colonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> Tani E Barlow, “Introduction: on “Colonial Modernity”, in *Formation of Colonial Modernity in East Asia*, T. E. Barlow (Ed. ), (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). pp. 1-20.

<sup>9</sup> Hyunjung Lee and Younghun Cho, “Introduction: Colonial Modernity and Beyond in East Asian Contexts” *Cultural Studies*, 26:5 Routledge, London, 2012, p. 602.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Our Modernity”, *SEPHIS CODESRIA*, Rotterdam/ Dakar, 1997.

through various movements under their respective intelligentsia during this period. However, colonial modernity had serious limitations in radically changing the social structures and providing equality and right to humanism.

This study argues that dalits have not accepted the themes and aspects of modernity as such completely, instead kept a productive ambivalent mentality towards it. In order to theoretically substantiate this argument, this study evokes Paul Gilroy's concepts. In his extraordinarily influential book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy links abstract philosophical modernity to the very real, very brutal practice of African enslavement. In turn, he shows how black intellectuals, since (about) 1850, have taken up memories of slavery as a way into profound critiques of modernity in general. Gilroy highlights the fractured nature of life for blacks in the West who consistently find themselves "locked symbiotically in an antagonistic relationship" between two worlds, one black and the other white.<sup>12</sup> Expanding on Du Bois' crucial notion of 'double consciousness', Gilroy argues for a modernity, broad enough in scope not simply to include the marginal positions of slaves but also to put the "ungenteel" aspects of slavery and terror as crucial and systemic facts to understand them at the heart of modernity itself: a preoccupation with the striking doubleness that results from this unique position - in an expanded West but not completely of it - is a definitive characteristic intellectual history of the Black Atlantic.<sup>13</sup>

The present study observes that the slave experience of blacks and caste experiences of Dalits have many resemblances. It has been observed that the Black people in the west have been hounded with two different broken identity consciousness- one is the identity which is formed

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Gilroy, *op. Cit.* p. 1

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.* p. 58.

from the history of African enslavement experiences and the other is the identity of the subjects (though it was made to be secondary) of their nations where they were born. Gilroy observes that the Blacks in the West have used this double consciousness to critically engage with modernities of their nations and thus it helped to produce counter culture to modernity.<sup>14</sup> By borrowing this critical thought, this study primarily argues that, dalit people of Kerala, especially the sections of people led by Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan and Pampady John Joseph, began to think more or less similar to this. They thought that on the one side, dalits experienced an indigestible social experience in the form of slavery, social and caste ‘downtroddenness’ and on the other side, the status of downtrodden or secondary citizenship/subjecthood which had been given to the dalits of Kerala during the formation of colonial modern State in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Due to this reason, this study further argues that, on the social spaces, which have been given to the dalits of Kerala by the colonial modernity, they excreted a critical ambivalence, which was an outcome of caste experiences of them. While working with these arguments, this is also an attempt to make a preliminary enquiry to the problems of writing the intellectual history of Dalits in Kerala.

### **Scope of the Study**

Twentieth century was an era of large-scale reciprocal transformations and transmissions of ideas throughout the world. Histories of these discourses have been historicised under broad categories like ‘Global History’, ‘History of Ideas’, ‘Intellectual History’ and so on. Historicising these intellectual histories on the non-European side has been critically addressed in the collection of essays titled *Global Intellectual History* by Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Moyn & Andrew Sartori (Eds.), *Global Intellectual History*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2013.



These essays written by several historians opened new horizons and hope for scholars who are trying to unravel unexplored terrains. Scholars like Sruthy Kapila,<sup>16</sup> Kris Manjupara<sup>17</sup> and others are also notable voices in the field of Intellectual history of India. Their works laid foundation stones for unprecedented scholastic formations in the tradition of Indian historiography. But the systematically forgotten, under-privileged and unrecognised historical interventions of intellectuals from the marginalised sections are apparently absent in both these clusters of works, which aim to ‘authentically’ delineate ‘Global’ and ‘Indian’ intellectual histories. Coming to south west India, the story of the Ex-untouchable castes in India and Kerala, considered as lower castes (the present Dalit communities),<sup>18</sup> are not different either. The radical and interventionist aspirations of lower caste intellectuals for emancipation and equivalent social life in Kerala was notably absent in academic endeavours. Scholars like Sanal Mohan’s efforts are an exception in this case.<sup>19</sup> When we compare the volume of academic works on the histories of different communities and people with historical works on Dalits, they are rather far and few. In this context, I strongly believe that studies like the present one are relevant and important.

The coming of colonial modernity into the Indian subcontinent was through the region of present Kerala, with the anchoring of the Portuguese ship led by Vasco Da Gama. They developed their influence over the land followed by other colonial powers like the Dutch, French and the English. Through the colonial discourses, the idea of modernity, intellectual heritage of the West since the enlightenment, became popular in India as well as in its south-west tip, i.e., Kerala. Apart from its economic implications, European colonial presence largely influenced the

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<sup>16</sup>SruthyKapila (Ed.) *An Intellectual History for India*, (Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup>Kris Manjupara, *M. N. Roy ; Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>18</sup>They were known as “Depressed Class” by Colonial administration and Scheduled Castes by the Government of India.

<sup>19</sup> See, P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

socio-political and cultural scenario of Kerala, including that of the princely state of Travancore. Each and every aspects of life in Travancore was influenced by colonial modernity and its matrix. Almost all communities and social groups have been influenced by its developmental propensities and promises. But when colonial modernity redrew almost all the socio-political, cultural and economic contours of all other communities, why dalit communities were distanced from this?, what happened to dalits of Kerala during this time?, are serious and important questions to ask.

The fact that the presence of dalit discourses in the history of Kerala has been largely ignored by elitist/Marxist historians is now widely accepted as a result of critical readings of such histories by the dalit intelligentsia. As observed by K. K. Kochu, dalit historian and thinker, “the dalits were presented as the conceptual moulds like either they had the myth of a golden past or they had an inherited enslavement in most of the historical writings.”<sup>20</sup> This observation poses the need for a critical conceptual frame beyond the existing historiographies for studying the history of Dalit discourses.

As pointed out , social and political movements of dalits emerged during the time of colonial period in Kerala. Sanal Mohan observed that it was colonial modernity that provided the matrix for the transformation that led to the creation of new social selves through political mobilisation.<sup>21</sup> This period witnessed the emergence of leaders and movements like Ayyankali, and his Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham, Poykayil Yohannan and his Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, John Joseph Pambady and his Akhila Thiruvathamkoor Cheramar Sangham, K P Vallon and his Kochi Pulaya Mahasabha, etc., and others. These personalities and organisations

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<sup>20</sup> K. K. Kochu, “Kerala Charithra Rachana Dalitharude Edamthedumbol”, *DalitPadanangal* (ed) Dr. M B Manoj, (Kottayam: Dalit Center for Social and Cultural Initiatives, 2009), p.11.

<sup>21</sup> Sanal Mohan (2005), *op. cit.* pp. 61-62.

represented dalit social and political aspirations and discourses. These leaders, either nominally educated and literate or illiterate, were politically enlightened with the ideas of modernity, and took up independent positions in relation to colonial modernity. Their antinomian stands and subversive discourses against their paternalistic modern authorities are notable to study. This critical tendency can be attributed as an outcome of a sort of double consciousness, which I have already stated. Sanal Mohan observes that “this [doubleness] is one of the dominant features of the dalit liberation endeavors in the context of colonial modernity.”<sup>22</sup> Their discourses, through oral and sometimes literal media, percolated among the politically dormant people of dalit communities and made them politically conscious. They began to think and imagine about their history, unity, spirituality and so on. At this historical juncture, Dalits began to establish their subjectivity by using different names like Sadhu Jana, Cheramar, Sambavar, etc, by denying and throwing up the pejorative names, which were imposed on them. The process of ‘communitisation’, forming of a modern form of community, an anti-caste, anti-essentialist forming of new subjectivity was also outcome of this encounter.

## **Hypotheses**

Even though the Dalits were influenced by and made use of colonial modernity, they also developed a consciousness to defy modernity in different ways. Actions of dalit leaders and organisations were not merely activism oriented, but it also had some ‘theoretical’ edge to it. Thus, they have formulated an ambivalent nature of critique, which was an outcome of a kind of double consciousness, towards colonial modernity.

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<sup>22</sup> Sanal Mohan (2006), *op. cit.* p.35.

## **Objectives of Study**

The present study attempts:-

- To provide a critique of colonial modernity in India by studying three specific dalit reforms and their political activities in the erstwhile Travancore.
- To elucidate the double consciousness of dalits towards modernity in colonial Kerala.
- To frame a conceptual ground for studying the intellectual history of dalits in Kerala.

## **Research Questions**

- What are the forms of dissent to the modernity of India in general and Kerala in particular by the dalit discourses?
- What are the critical alternatives within the dalit discourses put forward by the dalit intelligentsia?
- How did dalit intelligentsia form new forms of identity consciousness and disseminated the same among the ordinary members of the dalit community?
- How did the dalit discourses formulate a kind of double consciousness in the colonial modernity and what were its diverse expressions?

## **Methodology**

The methodology of the study is both empirical and theoretical. It follows a historical-analytical method drawing insights from theories of postcolonial literature, cultural studies and intellectual history. The data are collected from archival materials like colonial records and manuals as well as through oral history techniques and personal interactions. The writings, speeches and other materials produced by the dalit leaders and their organisations are also used for this study.

## Literature Review:

This section gives a brief description of the secondary literature that informs the present study.

*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, by Paul Gilroy,<sup>23</sup> is the first book that triggered the idea in me to write a research proposal on this topic. As I have already narrated earlier, this book argues that the Blacks in the West (Gilroy heuristically calls it ‘The Black Atlantic World’) produced a “Double Consciousness” which provided a critique of modernity, the intellectual heritage of the West. Gilroy argues that the Black intellectual discourses and cultural products thus constructed a “counter culture” to modernity. The present research mainly draws insights from this work and attempts to redraw the dalit history in Kerala and offers a dalit critique of modernity from that vantage point. I found some consensus in the direction of my thinking on this topic by reading *Our Modernity* by Partha Chatterjee,<sup>24</sup> in which he discusses modernity in India and puts forward a critique of modernity by emphasising the occidental point of view. Similarly, Aditya Nigam,<sup>25</sup> also discusses the epistemology of dalit critique in relation to different concepts like secularism, modernity, and nation. He states that the emergence of the new dalit assertion can be read as a critique of modernity, which gave an insightful support to me. M. S. S. Pandian’s *One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere*<sup>26</sup> makes clear how dalit-subaltern become an outsider and insider of modernity simultaneously. Analysing R. K. Narayan’s autobiography, Pandian argues that lower castes’ contradictory relationship with modernity has an important message; being one step

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Gilroy, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Aditya Nigam, “Secularism, Modernity, Nation: Epistemology of the Dalit Critique”, *Economic and political Weekly* Vol. 35, No. 48(Nov.25- Dec.1, 2002.), pp. 4256-4268.

<sup>26</sup> M. S. S. Pandian, “One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 18, (May 4-10, 2002), pp. 1735-1741.

outside modernity alone can guarantee them a public where the politics of difference can articulate itself, and caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics. He says that being one step outside modernity in that sense is indeed being one step ahead of modernity.

*The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin,<sup>27</sup> is an excellent introductory book on post-colonial studies and thought. It discusses a wide range of areas under the titles like 'Issues and Debates', 'Universality and Difference', 'Representation and Resistance', 'Postmodernism and Post-Colonialism', 'Nationalism', 'Hybridity', 'Ethnicity and Indigeneity', 'Feminism and Post-Colonialism', 'Language', 'The Body and Performance', 'History', 'Place', 'Education', and 'Production and Consumption'. This work provided me some preliminary understanding on post-colonial theories and criticisms on modernity from a post-colonial perspective.

Apart from studying the history of dalits in Kerala, the background of this study is located on the terrain of modernity or more specifically on colonial modernity. The celebrated works on the much-debated area in social science like modernity and colonial modernity have been used widely to understand the context of this study. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*<sup>28</sup> is one of the important books which refers to modernity and its Indian critique. In this book, he discusses how the modernity as 'post enlightenment rationality' is being criticised and defended alike in India. He contributes his critique over modernity as an Indian post-colonial thinker. The discussions over the 'small history of *Subaltern Studies*' and the arguments of the scholars towards decolonising the

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<sup>27</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (Eds.) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, (London and New York: Routledge, , 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, , 2002)

discipline of History, its critiques, and a critical tribute to Ashis Nandy's 'critical traditionalist' standpoint are the major highlights of this book. Saurabh Dube's work<sup>29</sup> which is an outcome of a symposium on *Critical Conjunctions of Colony and Formation of Modernity* also gave some insights to understand the problematic of modernity. Along similar lines, Saurabh Dube introduces the theoretical problems of modernity, colonialism and 'colonial modernities' in different parts of the world, especially from southern hemisphere. He gives an introduction of different scholars who have contributed to this issue and a brief account of their arguments under some broad areas like 'Critical Questions', 'Divergent Conjunctions', and 'Crisscrossing Concerns'.

Two important articles by Sanal Mohan influenced the initial stages of framing this study. These works are directly connected to Poykayil Yohannan, one of historical figure being analysed in my study and the organization called *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) established by him. The first one talks about how Yohannan and his organisation created a social space and identity for Dalits through a new religion with the help of the matrix provided by colonial modernity.<sup>30</sup> He states that the organisation (PRDS) originated within the frame work of missionary Christianity, but moved beyond the limits of the missionary project and eventually offered a critique of it. The second article of Sanal Mohan<sup>31</sup> provides an interesting aspect of PRDS and its founder and depicts the social experiences of Dalits, especially their slave experiences, oppression and suffering, and through evoking this memory of the past, how the PRDS created a collective consciousness and identity of a new community feeling. His observation draws a parallel to Paul Gilroy's observation that 'slave ship' and 'terror of slave

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<sup>29</sup> Saurabh Dube, "Introduction: Colonialism, Modernity, Colonial Modernities", *Nepantla: Views from South*, Volume 3, issue 2, 2002, pp. 197- 219

<sup>30</sup> P. Sanal Mohan (2005), *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> P. Sanal Mohan (2006), *op. cit.*

memory' created an identity consciousness among Blacks in the diasporas. Here, the PRDS' discourses on slave memory, oppression and suffering create an analogy of dalits.<sup>32</sup>

In order to understand the dalit question in India, the works of Gopal Guru and Gail Omvedt helped me enormously. Gail Omvedt's *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*,<sup>33</sup> is a unique and one of the foundational academic endeavours on dalit history in India. This study, an outgrowth of an ICSSR project on 'History of Dalit Movements in Maharashtra, Andhra and Karnataka, 1850-1975', focuses on the dalit movement in the colonial period. Gail Omvedt analyses the emergence, growth and evolution of dalit movements in these states and argues that the dalit movement is in fact a core movement in the democratisation of Indian society, which she calls 'democratic revolution' and considers an unfinished revolution in Marxist perspective. She states that Ambedkar and his movement have the potential of social revolution and the Left in India did not understand this. Moreover, they neglected and undermined its importance because of their prejudices and dogmas over 'caste question', which is an outcome of their orthodox classical Marxist position.

D. R. Nagaraj's *Flaming Feet and Other Essays*,<sup>34</sup> is also an important work in this connection, which influenced me in developing and re-framing some of my socio-political and academic understandings. Gopal Guru's article *How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?*<sup>35</sup> provided an analytical framework to critically engage with social science research. In this article, Gopal Guru argues that social sciences practice in India has harboured a cultural

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<sup>32</sup> P Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>33</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, , 1996.

<sup>34</sup> D. R. Nagaraj, *Flaming Feet and Other Essays: The Dalit Movement in India*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Gopal Guru, "How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 37, No. 50 (Dec- 14-20, 2002), pp.5003- 5009.



hierarchy dividing it into a vast, inferior mass of academics that pursue empirical social science and a privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. In other words, Indian social sciences represent a pernicious divide between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras. And he argues for the need for an egalitarian social sciences practice in India.

An edited work on Ambedkar, Ambedkarism and politics of dalit movement by K. C. Yadav<sup>36</sup> also brought in new and different dimensions of dalit politics and culture. This book is a collection of articles written by a wide range of scholars and popular writers like Ambedkar, Beverly Nicholas, Upendra Baxi, Raosaheb Kasbe, Gopal Guru, S. K. Gupta, Gail Omvedt, K. C. Yadav, Eleanor Zelliot, Yogendra Yadav, and Anand Teltumbde, who discuss Ambedkar, Ambedkarism and Dalit future in different perspectives.

Some important theoretical and historical works on colonial Kerala were influential in contextualizing my study. *Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity* by Dilip M. Menon,<sup>37</sup> is one of them. This article argues that the religious imaginary which preceded modernity in the South created a fashioning of the caste self and a new collectivity within this, and the colonial structures of governance often ignored the alternative realms that emerged, opposed and even were antagonistic to the idea of a national identity. He says that in the South, the attraction of the lower castes towards Christianity was partly prompted by the need to move away from the cycle of oppression and inequality and also because the religion allowed

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<sup>36</sup> K. C. Yadav(Ed.), *From Periphery to Centre Stage: Ambedkar, Ambedkarism & Dalit Future*, (New Delhi: Manohar, , 2000).

<sup>37</sup> Dilip M. Menon, “Religion and Colonial Modernity: Rethinking Belief and Identity”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 27, 2002, pp. 1662-1667.

for their entry in to a wider public sphere as individuals. Another article by Rajan Gurukkal<sup>38</sup> is also notable in this direction. Rajan Gurukkal analyses the mechanisms of the production and circulation of the discourses of colonial modernity, through a set of sites like evangelicalism, schooling, printing press, economy and administration. He says that these sites reveal how the people were trained to seek the truth about themselves in the colonial representations and constitute their self-image exactly as construed by the colonisers.

There are some other important works helped me to understand the history of Kerala in general and its socio-political and economic-cultural backgrounds. Bhaskaranunni's work,<sup>39</sup> provided with a lot of information regarding the society and politics in colonial Kerala. This study gives a detailed account of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala society by discussing a wide range of social subjects like food, dress, houses, customs, castes, marriage and heir, Hindu rajas, crime and punishment, temple, land, land tax, agriculture, commerce, trade, coins, education and sports, reform movements etc. and the changing face of Kerala with the support of a rich and extensive archival materials. This is an indispensable work on the social history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala.

Another important work on the history of Kerala history that provided some foundational information to my study is K. P. Padmanabha Menon's *Kochirajya Charitram*.<sup>40</sup> It was originally published in English as History of Cochin in two volumes in 1912. It is considered as one of the unique works on the history of Kerala by a historian from the native land. Even though the book title suggests only the history of Cochin, it trespasses that frontier and is an excellent piece of

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<sup>38</sup> Rajan Gurukkal, "Devolepment Experience of Colonial Keralam", *Rethinking Devolepment: Kerala's Devolepment Experience Volume I*, M.A. Oommen (Ed.), (New Delhi: Institute of Social Sciences, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathompatham Noottantile Keralam* (Malayalam), (Trissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy (1988), 2000).

<sup>40</sup> K.P. Padmanabhamenon, *Kochirajya Charitram* (Malayalam) [The History of Cochin State], (Calicut: Mathrubhoomi Books, 1996).

writing on the history of Kerala, from the ancient times to the colonial period. *Logante Malabar Mannual*, by William Logan,<sup>41</sup> is also an important work, in this regard. This book, originally published in 1887 as *Malabar Manual* in two Volumes in English by William Logan, the then collector of British Malabar, contains an extra-ordinary account of the history of Kerala along with a rich data of original records. This unique work gives rich information about Kerala society from ancient times to colonial period.

Robin Jeffry's book on the society and politics of Kerala, especially Travancore, gives a detailed account of Travancore during the late nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> It is an example of well-researched work on the social history of Kerala. It is not just about the history of Nairs of Kerala but rather it extensively delineates the society and politics of that time. Likewise, Sreedhara Menon's book *A Survey of Kerala History*<sup>43</sup> also helped me to understand the course of history of Kerala in general. This book gives a survey of the history of Kerala from the pre-historic period onwards. This can always be kept as a textbook to check the historical evolution of Kerala.

Some biographies of historically important personalities also helped me to understand the society and politics of colonial Kerala. *Doctor Palpoo (a Life History)*<sup>44</sup> is the biography of Dr. Palpu, a major anti-caste intellectual and social reformer of Kerala who founded the SNDP Yogam. Also, Palpu discovered Sri Narayana Guru and dynamically intervened in Kerala society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This book contains valuable and untold

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<sup>41</sup> William Logan, *Logante Malabar Mannual* (Malayalam tran.), (Kozhikode: *Mathruboomi Books*, 1987).

<sup>42</sup> Robin Jeffry, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore- 1847-1908*; (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt Ltd. 1976).

<sup>43</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*; (Thiruvananthapuram: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society Ltd., 1967).

<sup>44</sup> Pallipatt Kunjukrishanan, *Doctor Palpoo (A Life History)* (Originally written by Swadeshabhimani T. K. Madhavan,); Published by the author.

information about these centuries. *SNDP Yoga Charitram* (History of SNDP Yogam),<sup>45</sup> gives an elaborate account of the history of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) which was one of the dynamic organisations among the lower-castes of Kerala founded by Sree Narayana Guru and Dr. Palpu.

## **Data Collection**

I visited Kerala State Archives, Thiruvananthapuram and consulted the documents related to my theme of research. From there I understood that the data related to my research are hardly available over there. I collected a few rare books which deals with colonial South India. It helped me to construct the historical background of my study. I had an opportunity to meet a few important resource persons, both academic and non-academic scholars/intellectuals/activists, who helped and supported me in my research endeavor. The said resource persons have immense experience/knowledge over the history of dalit and lower caste movements in Kerala. From these meetings, I was able to get acquainted with new ideas, insights, and information about the above mentioned areas. Many of these resource persons also permitted me to access their private libraries and their archival collections. Apart from these, I visited Department of History library and University library of University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, and School of Social Sciences Library, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. These libraries also provided me an opportunity to refer to some PhD theses and other dissertations useful for the present research.

## **Unpublished Dissertations**

I have referred to two important PhD theses which gave me insights for studying colonial

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<sup>45</sup> P. S. Velayudhan, . *S. N. D. P. Yoga Charitram*; (Quilon: S. N. D. P. Yogam, 1978).

period of Kerala. The first one is Sanal Mohan's work on the lower castes of Kerala.<sup>46</sup> This study looks at how the protestant missionaries and, subsequently lower caste movements imagined and articulated notions of equality in the nineteenth and the twentieth century Kerala. This study gives an elaborate detail of history of lower caste movements, especially Poyikayil Yohannan and his PRDS movement. The second thesis which I referred to is a thesis by P.K. Michael Tharakan on the development experiences of Kerala.<sup>47</sup> This is a detailed study of the history of development experience of Kerala. Also, this work gives an analysis of socio-religious movements and its impact on the society of Kerala during nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It gives a picture of the history of political movements also of that time.

Muhammed Maheen's thesis provides a history of the lineage of dalit movement of Kerala<sup>48</sup>. K. R. Ushakumary's work on Changanassery Parameswara Pillai<sup>49</sup> analyses the role of Changanassery Parameswara Pillai in the socio-political evolution of Travancore during 1920-1938. A thesis on one of the important historical figures, C. Kesavan by M. S. Jayaprakash was also useful in understanding caste in Kerala<sup>50</sup>. Another work by M. Chinnamma<sup>51</sup>, which depicts the role of Ayyankali in the social change of colonial Kerala in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is also important to note here. I also referred to some M.A. Dissertations from University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram and Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. Raina

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<sup>46</sup> P. Sanal Mohan, *Imagining Equality: Modernity and social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala*, unpublished PhD Dissertation submitted to the Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> P. K. Michael Tharakan, *History as Development Experience: Desegregated and Deconstructed Analysis of Kerala*, unpublished PhD Dissertation submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Muhammed Maheen A, *Dalit Movement in Kerala Since 1805*, unpublished PhD Thesis Submitted to, University Library, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2002.

<sup>49</sup> K. R. Ushakumari, *Role of Changanassery Parameswara Pillai in the Socio- Political Evolution of Travancore 1920-1938*, unpublished PhD Thesis Submitted to University Library, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> M. S. Jayaprakash, *Social Protest in Travancore With Special Reference to C. Kesavan*, unpublished PhD Thesis Submitted to Department of History by, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1991.

<sup>51</sup> M. Chinnamma *Ayyankali and Social Revolution Among the Backward Classes of Travancore*, PhD Thesis Submitted to Department of History, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005.

D's M. A. dissertation<sup>52</sup> on Ayyankali gives the picture of Ayaankali's contribution to the cause of depressed classes. Jayasree L's M. A. dissertation<sup>53</sup> is a history Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha. M. A. dissertation by Rajesh B. S. on Changanassery Parameswara Pillai,<sup>54</sup> who is a contemporary of Ayyankali, gives the details regarding the activities of Ayaankali. Lijy O. R. in her M. A dissertation<sup>55</sup> gives the details of the life Sree Kumara Gurudevan and Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha.

I also referred to relevant files from *Endangered Archival Project*, an archival project conducted by School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. This project, jointly organised by London University Library and School of Social Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, aims to create an archival collection related dalits and other marginalised sections of the society. I collected materials on lower caste movements including PRDS, Poykayil Yohannan etc, from this collection. This collection includes pamphlets, memorandums, letters etc pertinent to lower caste movements. I also got an opportunity to visit Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Teen Murti Bhavan, New Delhi. There I referred to old vernacular newspapers from the micro-film section. I went through all the issues of *Malayala Manorama*, a regional newspaper in Malayalam, in 1925. I gathered several reports regarding the lower castes of Kerala from this newspaper.

I also referred to *Vivekodayam*, a Malayalam magazine and the official organ of SNDP Yogam. I went through all issues of it from 1904 to 1916. *Vivekodayam* gives a different picture

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<sup>52</sup> Raina D, *Ayyankali's Contributions to the Depressed Classes in Kerala*, un published M.A. Dissertation submitted to Department of History, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Jayasree L, *A History of Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha*, unpublished M.A. Dissertation submitted to Department of History, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1998.

<sup>54</sup> Rajesh B. S, *Changanacherry Parameswara Pillai; A Study*, unpublished M.A. Dissertation submitted to Department of History, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1992.

<sup>55</sup> Lijy O. R, *Sree Kumara Gurudevan and the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*, unpublished M.A. Dissertation submitted to Department of History, University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2000.

on how the lower castes, especially Ezhava community, engaged in social, cultural, political and religious realms of Kerala. It also gives a detailed picture of the social condition of that period. Another important magazine which I used is *Mithavadi* (1914-1917), from the Tiyyas of Malabar, which also gave valuable account of Travancore. *Mithavadi* contains radical anti-caste themes and gives a brief picture of the anti-caste mobilisation of that period. The novels like *Indulekha* (1889) by O. Chandu Menon, *Marthanda Varma* (1891) and *Dharmaraja* (1913) by C. V. Raman Pillai provided information regarding the social life of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala.

### **Personal Interactions**

Apart from all these textual data, I got an opportunity to interact with some important personalities. They include people who are part of both academic and non-academic intelligentsia. They shared many ideas and information that are helpful to my study. The most crucial part of these meetings was their willingness to open their private library and collections to me.

Interactions with P Sanal Mohan is worth mentioning here. His ideas in relation to my research will be discussed in the subsequent chapters. Sanal Mohan was formerly Professor in School of Social Sciences, M. G. University, Kottayam, Kerala, and taught me during my MPhil. He gave me consent to access the data from *Endangered Archival project*, an archival project led by him.

Interactions with Sri K. K. Kochu on several occasions in his home at Kaduthuruthi, Kottayam, Kerala, is worth mentioning here. K. K. Kochu is an ex-Naxalite and later he became a fulltime dalit activist and intellectual. Currently he focuses on history of dalits in Kerala. He

has authored three books which include history of dalits in Kerala, and a number of articles in many periodicals. He opened his personal library for me, which has rare collections on the history of Kerala. His knowledge and observations on history in general and dalit Movement in particular as a dalit activist and an intellectual provided me an opportunity to get firsthand information on dalit movements in Kerala during his time and his subsequent explorations into them. Interactions with K. K. Baburaj several times, in his house at Kaduthuruthi, Kottayam, Kerala, was also helpful to my research. K. K. Baburaj has been a Dalit activist, publisher and an influential writer/intellectual since his youth. He has an in-depth knowledge in philosophy, structural and post-structural theories and post-colonial studies. His experience and knowledge as a dalit activist, writer and intellectual gave me an opportunity to understand contemporary dalit discourses in Kerala in detail.

Interaction with Sri Sunny M. Kapikkad in his house at Pullarikkunnu, Kottayam, Kerala, is also another point to mention here. Sunny M. Kapikkad is a dalit activist/writer/orator, since his youth. My interaction with him also helped me to understand the contemporary dalit discourses in Kerala and its intricate meanings. Interaction with M. B. Manoj in his home at Athirampuzha, Kottayam, was also helpful to my research effort. M. B. Manoj, a leading dalit poet and activist/writer, teaches at the Department of Malayalam, University of Calicut. During our interactions on many occasions we had discussions on the poems of Poykayil Yohannan and its affective function. It helped me to understand the literary, religious and political aspects of Yohannan's songs and the PRDS movement. Interaction with A. V. Murukaraj in his house at Pattom, Thiruvananthapuram, is also worth noting here. Murukaraj, a Junior Lecturer in Political Science from Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Pattom, Thiruvananthapuram, pursue doctoral research on political developments in Kerala in the context of dalits from University of



Kerala. He is a dalit activist and has an in-depth knowledge about dalit movements and discourses they generated.

Interaction with Thulassidharan Assary in his home at Vellayambalam, Thiruvananthapuram, helped me a lot in conducting archival explorations for my study. He is a retired Lecturer in History from the University College, Thiruvananthapuram. He is an Archival expert worked on the Colonial State of Travancore. I got suggestions and guidance from him in locating data for my research from archives.

## **Chapterisation**

This study is divided into five chapters apart from an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter titled *Dilemmas of Writing Dalit History* is a historiographical account, problematising the issues in researching or writing the history of dalits. It critically engages with historiography and the process of historical writing as well as interrogates the problems of writing history of dalits in particular. Moreover, this chapter seeks to develop some historical perspectives on how to write dalit history. The second chapter a general discussion of the political, social and cultural evolution of Kerala in general and Travancore in particular. In other words, this chapter tries to study how colonial modernity in its political social and cultural realms evolved through analysing its history in Kerala. The role, peculiarities and influence of caste, untouchability and missionary activities in Travancore society in the making of colonial modernity is also an important concern of this chapter.

Chapter Three, titled *Politics of Ambivalence: Ayyankali and Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham*, analyses the life, activities and the primary discourses of one of the three protagonists of this study, Ayyankali and his movement. The chapter explores his political intervention on

colonial public sphere and investigates how he critically engages with the parameters of colonial modernity.

The first section of this chapter analyses the political charge which proposed a new assertion of subaltern counter power in the activities of Ayyankali and his pursuit of freedom for civil rights. It also looks at how the riots or subversive activities in the field of civic rights for dalits, played crucial role in building Ayyankali as a figure of countering caste power in public sphere. The chapter then looks at how Ayyankali intervened in the field of education which was denied for dalits for centuries and how he seized the right to education for dalits. The following section discusses how the organisation *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham*, emerged and created an organisational consciousness among dalits, engendering a counter discourse in the public sphere. Ayyankali was the first person from a dalit community to become a representative in the legislative assembly of Travancore; and the last part of the chapter discusses the activities of Ayyankali in the Legislative Assembly of Travancore and how he managed to represent the dalit question on the floor of the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly as an anti-caste crusader.

The fourth Chapter, titled *Religion as an Emancipatory Project: Poykayil Yohannan and Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*, explores the life and activities of Poykayil Yohannan and his movement, PRDS. The chapter is divided into four sub sections. The first section makes an attempt to understand the socio political circumstances that led to the emergence of Poyyakayil Yohannan as a church preacher in the beginning and what led him to become a discontented pastor within the new Christianity. It also critically looks at Yohannan's relationship with missionary movements of that time and foregrounds the importance of this crucial moment. The subsequent section discusses the formation and activities of *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* and its activities as a 'counter religion' for dalits. It analyses and argues the elements of double

consciousness in his religious discourses. The chapter then describes the performance of Poykayil Yohannan in the Travancore Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, as a legislature member from dalits, by particularly looking at his enigmatic speeches and powerful songs of Yohannan both inside and outside the Assembly. The last section of this chapter discusses the teachings of Poykayil Yohannan and the egalitarian utopia implicated in it apart from its theological nuances and aspirations for the future.

The last chapter of this study, titled *Claiming a History in Present: Pampady John Joseph and Cheramar Sangham*, discusses the life and mission of Pampady John Joseph by looking at his interventions with an aim of creating an alternative history for dalits. It discusses the activities of John Joseph as a member of legislature and his activities as an organiser of dalits of Travancore. This Chapter is also divided into four sub themes and the first section discusses the emergence of Pampady John Joseph as an English educated teacher and a church preacher. The second part of this chapter gives an account of John Joseph's encounter with modernity through his travels and missionary experiences. It describes the military and missionary experiences which created a universal man in him and how this encounter with modernity provided him weapons to fight back against caste hegemony. The next section of the chapter discusses the historiographical interventions of Joseph claiming of a Chera past for Pulayas and coining of the term Cheramar for them as a dignified new name in his endeavor to claim a new subjectivity and agency for the dalits.

The last part of this chapter looks at the interventions of John Joseph in the legislative assembly and the ambivalent critical consciousness implicated in his discourses. It has a detailed analysis of his speeches and tries to find the different, distinctive and autonomous standpoints of John Joseph regarding different issues, apart from a discussion of the memorandum that he

submitted to the British Parliament.

In the concluding part of the study, I sum up the arguments, and the findings of the study.

## CHAPTER 1

### DILEMMAS IN WRITING DALIT HISTORY

This chapter tries to understand the problems and challenges of writing ‘dalit’ history in general, and endeavoring to pose some questions about the discipline of history itself. It discusses historiography and the philosophy of history, in which I try to find some solutions or at least to have a contingent methodological position to write history of the dalits. I want to explore how a history of the dalits could be written by confronting the epistemological lack, and methodological lacunae in the discipline History, when it comes to the subjectivity and agency of the marginalized.

#### **History: Stories of the Dominant?**

Thomas Carlyle once said: “History is nothing, but the biography of great men.”<sup>56</sup> It is obvious that he stated this to emphasize the importance of great personalities, who influenced or turned the course of time. It would be interesting to see what happens if we change the context and turn this sentence on its head to problematize the subject of History. What if the sentence were to read, ‘History only tells us about the biographies of dominant people/discourses’?. This may be appeared as a polemical argument by which it is not considering the contribution of

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History: Six letters*, (London: Chapman and Hall, Stand, 1841)

history in the progress of human world. But for the sake of including new subjectivities of entities, which has no space in the subject matter of History so far, would it be worth for thinking?. As we could see that the most of classical historical works, most of the time dealt with chronicles of Kings, Emperors, dynasties and so on, which would legitimize this great men theory. The “speculative philosophers of history” like W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Oswald Spengler and Arnold J. Toynbee and their projects of ‘metahistory’ which was emphasized in interpretations as said by Hayden White,<sup>57</sup> and the opponents of speculative histories and advocates of “proper history” and the positivist school of thought in history inaugurated by Ranke and his followers who professed “scientific history”, were knowingly or unknowingly subscribes to this tendency, in their works.

The emergence of ‘Social History’ professed by English historians inaugurated a turn from this tendency.<sup>58</sup> The British historian E. P. Thompson’s works chiefly advocate the ‘social history’, and who had an intimate, though contestatory relationship with the rival school of historiography, the French *Annales*, which advocated to have proper scientific and non-ideological methods to study histories of societies.<sup>59</sup> Though the ‘social history; has put a tendency to redraw the contours of historical discourse in an interesting manner, but the marginalized subjectivities such as women, dalits, minorities, and the groups who were subjected under ‘othering’, still hardly found a place in History. If that is the case, posing some questions about this tendency of History, would be an interesting.

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<sup>57</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), P. 52.

<sup>58</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Introduction’ *History and the Present*, Anjan Gohsh, Partha Chatterjee (eds.) (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2006). p. 2.

## The Construction of History

History as a dominant discourse in the realm of knowledge got its full-fledged strength along with the triumph of modernity since European enlightenment. Even though the discipline History or the notion of History can be traced from ancient Greece, as an instrument of ‘progress’, it articulates the world with claims of authenticity and objectivity by using the well-established presuppositions or conditions of modernity. It caused to coercively believe in the loftiness and profoundness of History. Like Foucault observes:

It is true that History existed long before the constitution of the human sciences; from the beginnings of the Ancient Greek civilization, it has performed a certain number of major functions in Western culture: memory, myth, transmission of the Word and of Example, vehicle of tradition, critical awareness of the present, decipherment of humanity's destiny, anticipation of the future, or promise of a return. What characterized this History - or at least what may be used to define it in its general features, as opposed to our own - was that by ordering the time of human beings upon the world's development (in a sort of great cosmic chronology such as we find in the works of the Stoics), or inversely by extending the principle and movement of a human destiny to even the smallest particles of nature (rather in the same way as Christian Providence), it was conceived of as a vast historical stream, uniform in each of its points, drawing with it in one and the same current, in one and the same fall or ascension, or cycle, all men, and with them things and animals, every living or inert being, even the most unmoved aspects of the earth.<sup>60</sup>

This long paragraph certainly asserts how the knowledge of history or even the construction of History is far more important for human civilization so far. The knowledge about history provides the requirements to tell about who we are. And how we should behave. This notion about the past gives in a sense, the fuel for progress or development for humans.

The “objectivity” of history has been questioned by Roland Barthes in 1967. In the claim of ‘objective’ in historical discourse, he observes that, the historian is expected to nullify his

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<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, *The order of things: The Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1970) p. 367.

persona and substitute for it another persona that is an objective persona while writing History. He states that “[t]he subject persist in its plentitude, but as an objective subject. This is what Fustel de Coulanges referred to as the ‘chastity of history’”, and he observes that this ‘objectivity’ as deficiency of signs of the utterer-the historian- and call it as ‘imaginary projection’ or ‘referential illusion’.<sup>61</sup> He limits history and discourse of history as a craft of language and links that “the historical facts is linguistically associated with a privileged ontological status.<sup>62</sup> So he puts that the “historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an *imaginary* elaboration...”<sup>63</sup> and in historical discourse narrative structure is being considered as proof of reality. Thus Barthes asserts the inextricable relation of language, ‘reality’, and discourse of history, through which he questions the infallibility of History.

Hayden White exposed the rhetorical strategies, which is extensively used in the classical works on historiography and history in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. He argued that they used rhetorical tropes of literary writings instead of facts from the past in order to produce the impression of reality.<sup>64</sup> The authenticity of history was questioned through these critical academic endeavors. Interestingly, the pivotal role of time and space in the construction of historical meaning and ‘making of history’, was pointed by Reinhart Koselleck. Koselleck refashioned the discipline of history in to a new and fascinating discourse of ‘conceptual history’. He brought in to the realm of history writing the themes of the phenomenological and

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<sup>61</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Discourse of History”, Stephen Bann (Tran.), *Comparative Criticism*, 3, 1981. Pp. 7-20.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973). ; Hayden White, *Tropic of Discourse*, *op. cit.*



hermeneutic legacy of modern philosophy.<sup>65</sup> All these critical works questioned, compelled to reframe and suggested new openings of free thinking against the epistemological constraints and truth claims of history.

Both for philosophical reflections or scholarly practice, history was an essential key to understand the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself. Its Eurocentric valor, provide its expeditions across the globe. It is said that “[t]his century was the great age of the museum, which sought to preserve and classify the physical remains of the past in order to instruct and inspire the present. It was also the age of archaeology, which sought to discover hidden traces of vanished civilizations and ship their teases back to Europe for study and display.”<sup>66</sup> The above statement also clearly expresses the view that history and its auxiliary disciplines allied with the ideas of knowledge of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and tacitly says that history as a foundation of philosophical thought and scholastic actions continues to played and continues to play a pivotal role in establishing new modern world order.

Through reconstruction of past based on the facts which is interpreted and assumes as objectively neutral, historian would consider that this is the pure history and that narrative of historians becomes history forever. In *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Foucault says: “Nietzsche's criticism, beginning with the second of the *Un timely Meditations*, always questioned the form of history that reintroduces (and always assumes) a suprahistorical perspective : a history whose function is to compose the finally reduced diversity of time into a totality fully closed upon itself; a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past; a history whose

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<sup>65</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Futurs Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Keith Tribe (Tran.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>66</sup> James J. Sheehan, “Foreword”, *German essays on history*, Rolf Saltzer (Ed.,) (New York: Continuum, 1991).

perspective on all that precedes it implies the end of time, a completed development. The historian's history finds its support outside of time and pretends to base its judgments on an apocalyptic objectivity.”<sup>67</sup>

This arrogation of profoundness and totality of history as normativity, a normativity which is repressive of difference, minor and the other, pervasively governs the society as well as academy. This way of thinking is part and parcel of not only modernity but in many ways of colonial modernity too. The triumph of western modernity through colonialism used several ‘knowledge forms’ as tools of invasion over ‘other’ civilizations. Especially, History's authenticating power, used as a powerful weapon for legitimizing the present interventions as necessary corrective steps. Thus the ‘powerful’ always used History as their dearest discipline for ordering their objects through its profoundness. In other words, the profound and lofty gaze of ‘History’ as a practice of historicizing the events that happened in the temporal past determines what should be the past. It seems that, in certain sense, the authority over past sanctions an infallibility and authentication power over past is the main characteristic of History. Thus the dominance of History as a discourse over the past is a powerful presence in the minds of people. In other words, its presence and pervasiveness is also very strongly visible in the present. This may be the reason why ideological dominations could easily operate through History.

When we start re-thinking history with such an understanding, help us to raise some serious questions related to History as a discipline, says Keith Jenkins. It is interesting to note his argument about the incommensurable and different nature of past and history. He says: “[t]he

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<sup>67</sup>Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, *The Foucault Reader*, Edited by Paul Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 86-87.

past and history [sic] float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart. ...history [sic] is a discourse about, but categorically different from, the past.”<sup>68</sup> Further, he argues elsewhere that history is a discursive practice about the phenomenal past. What would be this discursiveness suggest for? Is this discursiveness of the content of history might have influenced by the political ideologies of the present? So if this is the case, this discursiveness in a certain sense clearly indicates that history has its own selections. If there are selections then there would be omissions. Whether these questions and arguments could be used to point out the lacunas of historical representations of deprived subjects in History? Here I would argue that these cleavages are unfolding the epistemological fissures of the conceptual presuppositions of History, which constituted the ostentatious wholeness of History.

There are thinkers who vehemently criticized History as a brainchild of European enlightenment and its discourses over past events on the ground of its inclination towards Europe. By criticizing History as a Eurocentric coercive instrument of European imperialism, Robert Young calls it as White Mythology.<sup>69</sup> He leveled a series of charges against its ‘pseudo authenticity’ which became an instrument for its dominance over the non-western world. Ajay Skaria in his book *Hybrid Histories* also point out the interconnection of History and Western thought. He says that: “[i]n saying that history is a myth of modernity I refer to the naturalization of an association between history and western modernity.”<sup>70</sup> Emphasizing its political connection with European modernity he further says that: “history in the mainstream western tradition is not simply a prerequisite of modernity or western civilization: it is modernity or western

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<sup>68</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) p.7.

<sup>69</sup> Passim, Robert Young, *White Mythologies*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>70</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.6.

civilization.”<sup>71</sup> All these critical articulations against History suggest the lacks of this discipline itself. When it comes to our context, again the things would go far more complex. Because the dominant Indian historiographical practices, which is a mimicry of hyperreal Europe as called by Dipesh Chakrabarty,<sup>72</sup> would naturally negate the presence of its ‘other’. Thus, for dalits and the other deprived sections of the society in India also, because of their ontological absence in it and its epistemic inadequateness of their representation in it, ‘History’ in a certain sense, would remain a sophisticated ‘Mythology’ accompanied by the rhetoric of ‘rationality’, myopic ‘objectivity’ and repressive ‘homogeneity’.

As we have seen, all the critical works, which I have mentioned so far, critically stand against the discipline History and in fact are arguing for a deeper deconstruction of the discipline itself rather than its total destruction. All these criticisms in a certain sense point out the ‘spacelessness’ of ‘other’ subjectivities in it. And it is a demand for widening its horizons for new subjectivities, which is absent so far. Likewise, when we think to start to write history about dalits in India, by default these dilemmas would appear and I would call this as epistemological and ontological dilemmas of writing dalit history is very much part of the problem of History itself.

In the methodological side, again there are certain dilemmas. In other words, as I have pointed out the dilemmas in History as a discipline, when we began to think to write history about the marginalized, especially dalits, spill over to the realm of historical method also. Now let’s turn our attention to that.

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p.9.

<sup>72</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: Who speaks for the “Indian” pasts”, *Representations*, 37, Winter, 1992, p. 1.

## Possibilities and impossibilities of writing dalit history

Writing dalit history itself is a disharmonious venture to the conventional history and historiography. Seeking in the past for a history of dalits by using conventional historical methodology and the conceptual presuppositions of the entrenched philosophy of history seems to be an impossible endeavor in its strict theoretical as well as epistemological sense. Hayden White rightly observes: “[e]very discipline, I suppose, is, as Nietzsche saw most clearly, constituted by what it forbids its practitioners to do. Every discipline is made up of a set of restrictions, and none is more hedged about with taboos than professional historiography – so much so that the so called ‘historical method’ consists of little more than the injunction to ‘get the story straight’ (without any notion of what the relation of ‘story’ to ‘fact’ might be) and to avoid both conceptual over determination and imaginative excess (i.e., enthusiasm) at any price.”<sup>73</sup> It is a widely accepted fact that the critical paradigms in the West like Post-Structuralism, theories of Post-Modernity, Post-Marxism and so on and the Post-Colonial Studies in the ex-colonized countries, Feminist Philosophy and Black Atlantic<sup>74</sup> thought, etc., opened up new horizons and vantage points to re-constitute, re-structure, deconstruct and de-learn the epistemes of different kinds of knowledge, which were repressive, violent and coercive towards the minor and the other, and also gave new assertive forms of articulation, voice, and vocabulary to resist and counter-produce new forms of epistemologies of knowledge against existing dominant power relations and forms of knowledge. These new movements in the trajectories of thought and knowledge interestingly produced certain dialogical possibilities to commence new types of spouting of subjectivities in systems of knowledge/thought.

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<sup>73</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*, *op. cit.* p. 126.

<sup>74</sup>Black Atlantic is a conceptual and cultural-political space used by Paul Gilroy to denote the transnational and intercultural Black people across Atlantic. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, *op.cit*, p. 15.

It is interesting to see that these stirs and shifts in the realm of knowledge/thought have also made some influences on the field of history and historiography. Several groups of historians and thinkers began to dehistoricise history, which paved the way for production of several histories against coercive totalitarian metanarrative History. In this context, it is hopefully interesting to seek and argue for the possibilities of writing dalit history. Nevertheless, in collecting and analysing some of the data and readings on my research topic, I have faced some dilemmas related to the intricacies of history, in general and dalit history, in particular. What are the methodological dilemmas in writing dalit history? Let us have a look at some of them.

### **The Absence in History**

When I came across the readings on Poyikayil Yohannan (1878-1939),<sup>75</sup> one of the historical figures being discussed in this thesis, I found an interesting statement in the form of a query which was posed by him in one of his songs. It states that: “*kanunnilloraksharavum ente vamsathe patti Kanunundaneka vamsathin charitrangal. Ente vamsathe patti cholluvan urviyil arumilla.*”<sup>76</sup> It could be translated as; there is no alphabet in sight about my race, but I can see many histories of many other races. There is no one in the world, who speaks about my race. It is indicative of Yohannan’s worry and concern about the history of dalits in Kerala, which was totally absent in histories. In other words it can be read as this is a worry about the absence of a valid history of dalits which was very much absent. We can see few references to the then untouchable castes in many of the works dealing with the history of Kerala. The objectified references about these castes, though it was very little, without having agency and subjectivity

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<sup>75</sup> The forth chapter of this thesis solely discuss about Poykayil Yohannan.

<sup>76</sup>Sree Kumara Gurudeva *Geethangal*, (Eraviperoor: PRDS Publications, 1996), p. 41.

could be read from Yohannan's poetic statement. Apart from that, as pointed out by Sanal Mohan, Yohannan's one of the major concerns was the absence of any valid history of the exploited and oppressed lower castes in Kerala in building a present and future for them. He states that: "[a]ccordingly, Yohannan set out to 'retrieve' the history of the Travancore dalits. But this was no idle nostalgic quest on the PRDS leader's part, but rather a way in his eyes of bringing them back to the active field of the present. A people who lacked a valid knowledge of their past, he believed, could not imagine a better future. In order to have a programme for the present, one needed both to have recourse to a conceptualized past, and be oriented toward the future."<sup>77</sup>

Apart from that, a demand for a valid history for dalits of Kerala by Poykayil Yohannan was, I would argue that, was a crucial step towards an attempt to assert a new subjectivity. Because, for Yohannan, the notion of history (as an imaginary parameter of modernity), was an outcome of his critical engagement with colonial modernity. So he might have understood the importance of history for asserting his people's new subjectivity in the public sphere of Kerala. In a certain sense, this was also a clarion call for making history.<sup>78</sup> Through this he gave the idea of history and its significance to his people and thus the notion of the necessity of making history spread insidiously among his people and followers. Moreover, Yohannan's poetic statement may seem to be a lamentation about the lack or absence at first, though it can also be read as a call for constructing history of dalits in Kerala, and thus become itself as an assertion of the 'presence of the absence' and claiming for subjecthood and agency for dalits.

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<sup>77</sup>P. Sanal Mohan, "Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala", *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, n.s., Vol. XXVIII, no.1, April, 2005, p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> For more details on the concept of 'making history', see Reinhart Koselleck, *op. cit.*

Similarly, Pampadi John Joseph (1887-1941)<sup>79</sup> came up with a different form of articulation and content, during the early phase of twentieth century Travancore, regarding the history of his community. Pampadi John Joseph's claim about a prosperous past to the dalits of Kerala is also equally important in this context. Rather than being driven by a 'golden past syndrome', I would like to underline his initiative as a point of 'making history' for the hitherto invisible. Here an assertion of new subjectivity could be seen. Moreover, pronouncements of both Yohannan and John Joseph for 'making history' could be marked as the initial moment of the 'Adi-Dravida' historical consciousness among at least the dalits in Kerala. While, Yohannan was speaking about the 'absence' and the need for the presence, John Joseph was talking about a prosperous past and its loss, which inaugurated a 'political-historical' consciousness among dalits.

Regarding the subjecthood of colonized people, Ajay Skaria put forwarded some important observations. While narrating the importance of history for colonized people, Ajay Skaria states that: "... the reclaiming of a history was almost everywhere a crucial component of the struggle of colonized peoples for liberation. To claim history is to claim speech and authority and to assert the right to independence, subjecthood, and agency."<sup>80</sup> Thus, denying the presence of subjectivity of dalits in the past is also a question of agency. In other words, this imposed absence of a dalit subjecthood is indicative of the fact that there is no accorded agency for dalits in the history of Kerala, instead they appeared rarely though, in an objectified form, in history. This is acting as a type of dilemma while making an attempt for writing dalit history.

Apart from that, the professional/conventional history's obstinate fetishism for the

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<sup>79</sup> Chapter Five is completely discuss the discourses of Pampady John Joseph.

<sup>80</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.2.



document, obsession with ‘the facts’, and its accompanying methodology of naïve realism are in fact creating great obstacles for doing dalit history. We can see that dalit history is often uncongenial with these conventional pre-requisites of history. How could we expect availability of ‘documents’ and ‘facts’ to be retrieved from the past in the case of an invisible subjecthood like dalits? Because, most of the time the construction of ‘historical data’ and the very production of documents/facts are a matter of power. The visibility and presence of a subject which has ‘power to perform’ in the social sphere and its endurance of subjectivity determines the formation of historical data. In other words, the political and ideological production and selections are playing crucial role in the formation of historical data. Here the dalit subject, due to the structural selections, slip away from its presence in the historical data. Thus the process of formation of historical data ontologically omits the invisible subjects like dalits and ‘other’ subjectivities. This is also another form of dilemma for writing history about dalits.

While discussing about the construction of archives and archiving, Gyanendra Pandey observed that “the very process of archiving is accompanied by a process of ‘un-archiving’,” “rendering many aspects of social, cultural, political relations in the past and the present as incidental, chaotic, trivial, inconsequential, and therefore unhistorical. In a word, the archive, as a site of remembrance, doing the work of remembering, is also at the same time a project of forgetting.”<sup>81</sup> Here also the process of archiving has its own selections and omissions. The documentations in archives often occurs as a result of interests, which determines its direction. Historically invisible subjects never attain any chance to be included in these dominant interests. This is also another kind of lack or absence of ‘documents’ and ‘facts’ on dalit subjecthood happened in the past or still happening in the construction of ‘archiving’, and this in fact is an

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<sup>81</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, “Un-archived Histories: The ‘Mad’ and the ‘Trifling’”, *Economic & Political Weekly*, January 7, 2012 vol 47, no 1, p. 38.

ontological omission or ignorance and convenience of forgetting. Nevertheless, we can see the new awakening of the minor, the other, and the oppressed in the field of the construction of new histories and this is welcome change in the writing of history. To cite Gyanendra Pandey: “[t]he insurgent political moment – the anticolonial uprising, the women’s movement, “minority” struggles of Native Americans, African-Americans, dalits, and other marginalised, borderland and indigenous peoples – provides a challenge to these inherited grids of legibility and illegibility, knowledge and not-knowledge. The translation of non-histories into history, of the unarchived into an archive, the search for new histories and new archives in other words, will always be part of such insurgency.”<sup>82</sup> Why history is not accommodative of these insurgencies is an important ethico-political question needs to be asked.

However, now new possibilities have been opened up by new research techniques such as ethnography, ethnomethodology and oral history and so on in to the field of history as well. By critically evaluating the limitations of ethnographical writings and calling it as ‘partial truths’ James Clifford foregrounds the importance of ethnography. He says: “[e]thnography is an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where “culture” is newly problematic object of description and critique.”<sup>83</sup> He further says that it is a hybrid textual activity. It has a capacity to traverse genres and disciplines.<sup>84</sup> The critical use of ethnography would be an intelligible approach, which might support to retrieve the dalit discourses in the past. But here again the limitation of ethnographic fieldwork emerges as a blockade in doing dalit history. Ethnographic fieldwork could only possible in the current generations, and it can only limitedly draw a little of the collective memory of their ancestors.

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>83</sup> James Clifford, “Introduction” *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990) P. 3.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*. p. 26.

Thus it suggest only its operations in the field of the present.

Moreover, a people who don't have 'proper documents' or 'historical data' and a valid notion of history, but survive through their collective and social memories, poses problems to the field of history. History is often showing its reluctance to count the face value of memory in its protocols. It is interesting to invoke observations of Pierre Nora regarding the difference between memory and history here:

Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulations and appropriation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the external present; history is a representation of the past. Memory insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic – responsive each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection. History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again. Memory is blind to all but the group it binds – which is to say...that there are as many memories as there are groups, that memory is by multiple and yet specific; collective plural and yet individual. History on the other hand, belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority. Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute while history can only conceive the relative.

At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it. At the horizon of historical societies, at the limits of the historicized world, there would occur a permanent secularization. History's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place. A generalized critical history would no doubt preserve some museums, some medallions and monuments- that is to say, the materials necessary for its work – but it would empty them of what, to us, would make them *lieux de memoir*. In the end, a society living wholly under the signe of history could not, any more than could a

traditional society, conceive such sights for anchoring its memory...<sup>85</sup>

This long paragraph also points out to the serious limitation of history and asserts the fundamental importance of memory in the rereading of culture, history and society. It suggests that sometimes, the shared memories of the 'other' would be used as a cultural repertoire for reconstructing their invisible past. But unfortunately the enthusiasms for conducting extensive ethnographical operations for collecting the shared memories of dalits and other marginalized subjects in the society is seldom take place in the Departments of Indian Universities and 'academic projects'. There is no such collective attempts to accumulate, consolidate and theoretically refine these social memories of past of such silenced and invisibilised subjectivities.

Instead of securing a space in the profound, lofty, uncontaminated castle of history, which is categorically incommensurable, it is an ethico-politically upright stand to argue for different histories of subjugated and dispossessed sections of the society. By doing so different subjugated histories are claiming subjecthood and agency and thus, striving to construct a justifiable present. As Immanuel Levinas has proposed, "[t]he possibility that the much lamented 'subject' be brought back not as the ontological subject which seeks to reduce everything to itself but as an ethical subject defined in relation to the other: 'ethics redefines subjectivity as this heteronomous responsibility in contrast to autonomous freedom'."<sup>86</sup> By offering critiques of History, these different histories unfolding a new horizon in the realm of knowledge, and writing dalit history by doing this same, is also joining to this trajectory. By borrowing Ajay Skaria's words "it is a politics of hope."<sup>87</sup> The point here is, without addressing the conceptual issues and epistemological inadequateness of History and historicism, the narrative of the past about dalits

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<sup>85</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History" *Representations*, University of California, spring 1989. pp. 8-9.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in *White Mythology*, Robert Young, *op. cit.* p.16.

<sup>87</sup> See "Notes for a Politics of hope", Ajay Skaria, *op. cit.* pp.1-18.

may fall in the pitfalls of History. In other words, in arguing for a dalit history, these dilemmas of History has to be addressed and resolved for widening of its subject matter. As a result of the anti-caste struggles in India dalit history emerged during the nineteenth century. Jyotiba Phule and Iyothethassa Pandithar might be pioneers who attempted to write or thought about writing dalit history in modern India. The epoch making intellectual and scholastic endeavors of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's laid the philosophical foundations for dalit history and foreign scholars like Elinor Zeliot, Gail Omveth and others, and many other Indian scholars are developing it through their ongoing rigorous researches with the help new theories and paradigms. Apart from this, there are numerous non-academic scholars and activists who are working seriously on this field. In 'dalit history' the term 'dalit' is used as a critical category to critically look at the totalitarian and ostentatious attitudes of 'History'. By doing so 'dalit history' is taking a stand point for the agency of the subjugated and dispossessed subjects in the past. By claiming their subjecthood in the past, 'dalit history' aims to bring social justice into the present. The present research hope to join this nascent field of retelling History by centering the Dalit encounter with colonial modernity.

## CHAPTER 2

### **ENCOUNTERING MODERNITY: TRAVANCORE DURING THE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES**

This chapter makes an attempt to provide a historical account of Kerala, especially Travancore, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The chapter aims to set the background or situate the core explorations of this thesis through the life and activities of the said three dalit leaders. The chapter will provide an account of how the traditional caste society of Kerala transformed into a colonial modern society under the weight of colonialism and modernity and how this colonial modern society preserved and deployed caste values in novel forms in modern life. The focus will be on the history of dalits in Kerala more generally and particularly in Travancore. Let's, first however, have a look at the political history of Kerala in general and of Travancore in particular, in a broader sketch.

#### **Political History of Kerala**

In times of antiquity, Kerala was part of the cultural geography known as Tamilakam and references to this region can be found in the ancient Sangham Tamil literature. The land of Kerala was divided into three major kingdoms in those times and the southern part was ruled by the Ays. Their political territory stretched from Nagercoil in the south to Tiruvalla in the north, including the Sahyadri mountain range. The Ays ruled from their capital at Aykudi

in the Podiyil Mountain.<sup>88</sup> The northern part of Kerala, which stretched from Badakara (Vadakara) to Mangalore, was under the political control of the Ezhimala Kingdom. The Ezhimala sovereigns ruled this land with Ezhimala (Mount Eli) as their capital, and their control had even extended over Wayanad and Guddalore and also the northern parts of Coimbatore.<sup>89</sup> The land in between the kingdoms of Ays and Ezhimala was ruled by the Cheras. The kingdom of Cheras had three capitals, Vanchi, Tondi and Karur respectively.<sup>90</sup> In the course of time, the disintegration of these three kingdoms resulted the emergence of many petty kings and local chieftains who exerted political control over segmented regions.

After the fall of the Ay, Ezhimala and Chera dynasties, the land of Kerala witnessed the emergence of the empire of Kulashekharas of Mahodayapuram. This was also known as the Second Chera Empire and lasted over the time span of 800 A. C. E. to 1102 A. C. E. This empire enjoyed political control over most of Kerala. The breaking up of the Kulashekharas Empire led to the formation of three major kingdoms. The first one, known as Trippapur Swaroopam or *Venad*, later became the kingdom of Travancore. The second kingdom known as *Perumpadppu Swaroopam* later came to be known as the kingdom of Kochi. The third one called *Nediyiruppu Swaroopam*, later popularly known as Calicut, which was ruled by the Zamurins. Apart from these kingdoms, a number of small independent principalities known as Nadus or Desams (which were once the administrative units of the Kulashekharas Empire), were also came into existence under many local chieftains and petty kings.<sup>91</sup>

This was the political scenario of medieval Kerala, towards the end of which the first contact was made with the Europeans, with the arrival of Vasco da Gama in May 1498 at

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<sup>88</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon. *A Survey of Kerala History*, (revised edition), (Chennai: S. Viswanathan (Printers and Publishers) PVT., LTD., 2005). p.70.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.* p.72.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.* p. 73

<sup>91</sup> See Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier, *History of Kerala: Prehistoric to the Present*, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2018).; Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier, *Keralacharitram Onnam Bhagam* (Mal.), (Malappuram: Vallathol Vidyapeetham, 1991}.

Calicut. The Portuguese were followed by Master Ralph Fitch of the English East India Company in 1583 at Cochin and the Dutch East India Company with the landing of the Dutch Admiral Steven Van Der Hagen in 1604 at Calicut. Along with these three foreign powers, a French presence was also evident in Kerala during the eighteenth century. These foreign powers initially came and stayed to keep an eye on their profits from trade and commerce, but eventually they started to intervene in the internal matters of the petty kingdoms. These tendencies resulted in several wars and skirmishes between the foreign powers themselves as well as among native rulers and vice versa. The British emerged successful at the end of this epoch of conflicts and competition.<sup>92</sup>

In this way, on the one hand, the domination of the British power began to sweep into the political, economic, social and cultural life of Kerala. On the other hand, a major threat to British power against their political interests in South India came from the Muslim rulers of Mysore, Navab Haider Ali and his son and successor Sultan Tippu. Haider Ali's invasions of north Kerala were followed by the invasions by his son Tippu, which resulted the complete conquest of Malabar, the popular name for North Kerala. Tippu's territorial expansion faced challenges from the combined forces of the British and native rulers and his victorious journey in Kerala was cut short by the siege of his capital city Sreerangapattanam by the combined troops of the Carnatic Navab and the British while he was away from his capital. Later with the treaty of Sreerangapattanam in 1792, Tippu formally handed over Malabar to the British authorities. Thus, Malabar was annexed to the Madras Presidency and Cochi and Travancore remained as independent princely states, although the British maintained indirect control over these states through their British Residents and through different treaties signed with them.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> A Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.*

<sup>93</sup> Rajan Gurukkal and Raghava Varier, *History of Kerala, op. cit.*



## Political and Administrative History of Travancore

*Venad*, the erstwhile name of Travancore was a small feudatory kingdom of the second *Chera* empire until the twelfth century A. C. E. After the disintegration of the Second *Chera* Empire of the *Kulshekaras* of Mahodayapuram, the last ruler Rama Varma Kulashekharan moved towards Kollam (Quilon) as part of to his defence against the Chola invasion to set up his throne and subsequently founded the independent Kingdom of Venad in the beginning of the twelfth century. The most illustrious and important ruler of Venad was Anizham Thirunal<sup>94</sup> Marthanda Varma (1729-1758), under whom Venad became a powerful military state, by supressing all internal conflicts and political treats against the sovereign. Marthanda Varma expanded Venad's territory to its maximum through several annexations of neighbouring petty kingdoms. His military campaigns against the Dutch finally ended with the complete defeat of Dutch power at the battle of Colachel in 1741. The Dutch captain D'Lannoy, who was captured as a prisoner of war, later became the 'Valia Kappithan',<sup>95</sup> the chief commander of Marthanda Varma's Army. D'Lannoy trained Venad's army along the European lines. One of the most important and decisive steps taken by Marthanda Varma was his dedication of the Kingdom to the tutelary deity Sri Padmanabha (Lord Vishnu) of Travancore. Through this multidimensional act, which known as *Trippatidanam*, he proclaimed that the kingdom would be ruled hereafter by Sri Padmanabha himself through the king's hand, and that the Kings of Travancore would be known thereafter as *Sri Padmanabha Dasas* and Queens as *Sri Padmanabha Sevinis*, servants of Sri Padmanabha. Thus all rebellions, skirmishes and wars against the Kingdom and questions against the King were considered as against Sri Padmanabha, and therefore blasphemous.<sup>96</sup> This regulation

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<sup>94</sup> "Anizham" is name of a constellation according to the Malayalam horoscope and "Thirunal" means auspicious day.

<sup>95</sup> See A. Sreedharamenon, *op. cit.* p. 287

<sup>96</sup> See V. Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual Vol-I*, (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), pp. 333-368.

resulted in enormous power of the Brahmins over the King. And moreover, through this action, the rulers of Travancore enjoyed absolute sovereignty until the establishment of the British Residents in Travancore. In 1757 a treaty of alliance was signed between Travancore and Cochin against the Zamurin of Calicut through which Marthanda Varma gained a peaceful neighbour at the northern border of his State. He efficiently restructured the administrative and revenue systems and improved and introduced several modern infrastructural facilities in the kingdom. As observed by the authors of *History of South India* in three volumes, “[i]gnoring the traditional ideal of Kingship long existing in Kerala, Marthanda Varma of Venad, conquered and annexed the principalities as far as Cochin. Thus by 1763 the Kerala coast had three main political-cum-territorial divisions, namely Travancore, Cochin and Calicut. This redrawn the map of Kerala in to three political divisions had far-reaching effects on the polity and society. It crushed the power of Nayar (Nair) nobility for ever. The change led to the establishment of the modern type of centralised bureaucratic governments under the monarch.”<sup>97</sup> Moreover historians considered him as the “maker of modern Travancore.” for the political unification he had achieved and for the efficient administration he inaugurated.

Marthanda Varma was succeeded by his nephew Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma (1758-1798), who is popularly known as ‘Dharma Raja’. He followed the policies of his uncle and ably managed and reinforced the country. It was under his reign that the Mysore invasion was successfully prevented by the combined forces of Travancore and the British, which facilitated an enduring retrospective and qualitative friendship between both the parties. Prior to this, in 1762, an alliance with Cochin, and another alliance with Calicut concluded in 1763, put an end to the long-lasting hostilities between these three kings of Kerala under the exigencies of the threat created by Mysore invasion. With the services of

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<sup>97</sup> P. N. Chopra, T. K. Ravindran and N. Subrahmanian, *History of South India Vol-III*, (New Delhi: S. Chand & Company Ltd, 1979). p. 73.

distinguished statesmen like Ayyappan Marthanda Pillai and Raja Kesava Das, who became the first Divan of Travancore, the kingdom moved into a phase of y making progress in all aspects of administration and infrastructure. It was in the closing years of the reign of Dharma Raja that the capital of Travancore was shifted from Padmanabhapuram to Trivandrum, however, the Secretariat continued to function at Quilon for some times. .<sup>98</sup>

The immediate successor of Dharma Raja was his nephew Balarama Varma (1798-1810) who assumed the throne at the age of seventeen years,<sup>99</sup> under whom the administration experienced several weaknesses and incompetencies initially due to his unpopular clique of statesmen who were ignorant, profligate and rapacious<sup>100</sup> in nature. During this period, Velu Tampi rose from the position of a petty officer to the post of Dalavah (Prime Minister) and restored the administration to its previous state and even developed it further. His strict control and principled ways of administrative dispensations was notorious and draconian.<sup>101</sup> Initially Velu Tampi maintained good rapport with the British officials but later became an eyesore to them, and subsequently led a rebellion against British supremacy over the land. After his famous Kundara Proclamation on 11 January 1809, which was a clarion call to the natives to come together against the foreign power, he waged war against the combined forces of the British and Travancore. Once he was surrounded by the advisories, he committed suicide before the enemies could capture him alive. After Velu Tampi, Ummini Tampi became the Dalawa of Travancore. He established four courts known as *Insuafl Cutcheries* and appointed Nair judges in each of them. Jails

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<sup>98</sup> Sreedharamenon, *op. cit.* p. 298.

<sup>99</sup> P. Shungoonny Menon, *A History of Travancore from the earliest times*, (Madras: Higginbotham and Co., 1878), p. 288.

<sup>100</sup> See *ibid* p. 293.

<sup>101</sup> "His favourite modes of punishment were: imprisonment, confiscation of property, public flogging, cutting off the hand, the ears or the nose, implement or crucifying people by driving nails into their chests against trees, and such like,... V. Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual Vol-I*, (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), p. 420. See also, *ibid*. pp. 421-422. And, P. Shungoonny Menon, *op. cit.* pp. 302-303.

were built in each district of the state.<sup>102</sup>

After the sudden demise of Balarama Varma at the age of twenty-eight,<sup>103</sup> his niece Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bai (1810-1815) became the ruler of Travancore. In 1810, Rani Gauri Lakshmi Bai dismissed Ummini Tampi and appointed Colonel Munro as Dewan.<sup>104</sup> As the then British Resident of Travancore Col. Munro ran the office of Resident and Diwan together. Through this arrangement, the British gained direct access to the everyday administration of Travancore. Previously this was indirect in nature (enabled by the treaty of subsidiary alliance), before Col. Munro introduced the Five Courts in Padmanabhapuram, Trivandrum, Mavelikara, Vaikam and Alwaye and appointed judges from the Brahmin, Nair and Syrian Christian communities. For the guidance of the judicial function, a set of ordinances based on a combination of *Manudharma Sastra* of the Hindu Law and the criminal procedures of British India, named *Sattavariolas*<sup>105</sup> were introduced by him. Another court called the Huzur Court was formed for the trial of Sircar servants.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, he abolished the posts of *Valia Sarvadhikariakars* and *Sarvadhikariakars* and changed the designation of *Kariakar* into *Thahsildar* and removed his judicial and military powers and placed him as the head of the District revenue office called *Mantapathumvathukkal*. A police system, independent from military, judicial and revenue departments, was introduced in each district under the control of Diwan. Devaswams, which were managed the temples administration run by the Brahmins so far, was put under the direct control of Sircar. Importantly, “[b]y a Royal Proclamation of 1812 A. D. (twenty-first Vischigam 987 M. E.), the purchase and sale of all slaves other than those attached to the soil for purpose of agriculture e. g., the Koravas, Pulayas, Pallas, Malayars and Vedars, were strictly prohibited,

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<sup>102</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* 421-447.

<sup>103</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual Vol-I*, (Trivandrum: Travancore Government Press, 1906), p. 450.

<sup>104</sup> A Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 338.

<sup>105</sup> *Sattavariyola* was a criminal procedure code consisting of of 34 articles. For details, see P. Shungoonny Menon, *op. cit.* pp. 372-377.

<sup>106</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 462.

and all transgressors were declared liable to confiscation of their property and banishment from the country. The Sirkar also relinquished the tax on slaves.”<sup>107</sup> Though the complete abolition of slavery took place only in 1885, it was a decisive step taken by a colonial princely state in many ways. It is acknowledged that “[t]he reforms of Munro *modernised* the administration of Travancore to a very great extent.”<sup>108</sup> When Col. Munro resigned from the post of Diwan in 1814, he appointed Padmanabhan as the next Diwan of Travancore, but after five months the latter died of small pox. Then Bappu Row, who was the Diwan Peshkar was given in charge of Diwanship. In the meantime, Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai passed away and was survived by her husband Raja Raja Varma, and their elder daughter and an infant son.

Rani Parvathi Bai, the sister of the late Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai (1815-1829), ascended the throne in 1814 at the age of thirteen, as a regent Rani on behalf of the latter’s eldest son. Her learned brother-in-law Raja Raja Varma continued to provide his counsel, as he had done for his spouse, to the new Rani. Col. Munro, the Resident, although relieved from the post of Diwan, continued as her chief adviser, until his retirement from the post of British Resident in 1818.<sup>109</sup> Following his retirement, Colonel Munro proceeded to England in the middle of the year 994 M. E. (1819), and was succeeded by Colonel McDowall in the same year.<sup>110</sup> After a year in office, Colonel McDowall died and Colonel Newall was appointed as the new Diwan of Travancore. In the meantime Reddy Row the then Dewan, was forced to resign from the post of Diwan, due to the charge of illegitimate property acquisition, and the then Diwan Peshkar, Vencata Row, a Maratha Brahmin who was a protégé of Colonel McDowell, accompanied him when he came to Travancore as Resident, and became the Diwan of Travancore in 1822. The new Diwan established his headquarters, known as *Huzur Cutchery*,

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<sup>107</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 465.

<sup>108</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 339. (*emphasis added*)

<sup>109</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 472.

<sup>110</sup> P. Shungoonny Menon, *op. cit.* p. 386.

at Quilon. The liberal nature of the Rani is evident through her tolerant behaviour towards Christian Missionaries, though there was an influence of the British Resident Colonel Munro behind this. Thus, “the London Mission Society (L. M. S.) at Nagarcoil established itself on a firm footing in 1816 under the Rani’s patronage. The Church Mission Society (C. M. S.) was given all help to carry on its activities at Alleppey and Kottayam.”<sup>111</sup> We return to the activities of Christian Missionaries later in this chapter.

“In the Malabar year [*sic*] 1004 (1829 A. D.), His Highness Rama Varma closed his sixteenth year of age thus attained his majority, when that most worthy and illustrious princess the Rani made over the kingdom, with pleasure and cordiality to her sister’s son.”<sup>112</sup> Historians consider that the reign of Rama Varma, popularly known as Swathi Tirunal (1829-1847) was a “Golden Age” in the history of modern Travancore. He was a distinctive king , “a good scholar in Sanskrit and English and had mastered the Vernaculars such as Persian, Hindustani, Marathi and Telugu, in most of which he had composed several poems and songs.”<sup>113</sup> He also wrote many Sanskrit poetical works and penned several *Keerthanams* for musical compositions.

Maha Raja appointed his tutor Subba Row as Diwan in 1830 against the opposition of the Resident Colonel Morrison, who was later recalled. The Huzur Cutchery and other related public offices were moved from Quilon to Trivandrum and relocated in the vicinity of the Palace. According to the recommendations of the new British Resident Mr. Casamajor, Cunden Menon, a *Tahsildar* of Malabar, was appointed as Huzur Diwan Peshkar, and under whom the police and judiciary were extensively reformed. A Census was taken in 1836 in Travancore through the instructions of the British Resident, apart from opening an English

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<sup>111</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 340.

<sup>112</sup> P. Shungoonny Menon, *op. cit.* pp. 400-401.

<sup>113</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 483.

School at Trivandrum in 1834 which was named as the Raja's Free School in 1836.<sup>114</sup> Because of his great interest in the science of Astronomy, which further increased on seeing some astronomical instruments of Mr. Caldecott, the Commercial Agent at Alleppey, the Maha Raja Swathi Tirunal opened an Observatory at Trivandrum in 1836. In addition to this, a small printing press was set up for printing lithographs and subsequently it developed into the Government Department of Printing. Maha Raja extended the service of his physician, who was appointed for the Royal Family, to his subjects and thus a Charity Hospital was set up in Trivandrum soon after, An Engineering Department and an Irrigation Maramut Department (Public Works) were also established.<sup>115</sup>

Dewan Subba Row was asked to resign from his post on the grounds of certain allegations against him and the ex- Diwan Vencata Row was called back to the office. But due to his fall-out with the acting Resident Captain Douglas, he resigned, and again Subba Row was given another term as Diwan of Travancore. Meanwhile, Lieutenant General W. Cullen was appointed as British Resident in 1840. The relationship between Resident and Maha Raja deteriorated day by day due to growing misunderstandings between them. Though Reddy Row once again became the Diwan, he resigned due to this unpleasant situation. The difficult relationship with the Resident and the extremely humiliating treatment meted by the British Government made the Maha Raja indifferent towards State affairs, and he began to devote all his time to religious observances and music. He stopped seeing the Resident and his hatred towards him extended to even other Europeans.<sup>116</sup>

Utram Tirunal Marthanda Varma (1847-1860) was crowned as the Maha Raja of Travancore after the premature death of his elder brother Maha Raja Swathi Tirunal, at the age of thirty-two in 1847. Krishna Row was appointed as the acting Diwan and he replaced

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<sup>114</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 341.

<sup>115</sup> Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* pp. 487-489.

<sup>116</sup> See V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* pp. 497-498

Seenivasa Row. In Marthanda Varma's reign, the most important step taken by him was the prohibition of slavery, and it was in "September 1853 that a Royal Proclamation was issued declaring that all future children of Government slaves should be free, and making provision for the improvement of the other slaves".<sup>117</sup> This policy went further resulting in abolition of slavery in Travancore by a Royal Proclamation on 24 June 1855.<sup>118</sup> Another Proclamation issued in 1859 abolished all restrictions in regard to the covering of the upper part of their bodies by Shannar women in South Travancore, after a long history of resistance and struggle for self-respect, called as Shannar riots. The first Post Office in Travancore was opened at Alleppey in 1857 and a school for girls was also opened in 1859 at Trivandrum. Similarly, the first modern factory for the manufacture of coir was established at Alleppey in 1859 by an American named James Darragh.<sup>119</sup> T. Madava Row was appointed as Diwan of Travancore in 1858 after Divan Krishna Row passed away.

Ayillyam Thirunal Rama Varma (1860-1880) came to the throne as ruler of Travancore at the age of twenty nine, after the sudden demise of his uncle, Raja Utram Tirunal Marthanda Varma. As part of judicial reforms, the British Civil and Criminal Procedure Code had been introduced in Travancore in 1861. Another important milestone in administrative reform was the opening of Sircar Anchal (Postal Service) for the public. In the meantime, General Cullen died in 1862 at Alleppey, after twenty years of service as British Resident of Travancore, and was succeeded by Mr. Maltby. In the year 1866, "A full-fledged Arts College was established at Trivandrum."<sup>120</sup> A special Department of Vernacular Education with a director as its head and a textbook committee for drafting curricula and textbooks was established. As a result of this, several English, Malayalam and Tamil schools opened all over the State. Medical dispensation also progressed and hospitals were established in select

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<sup>117</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 509.

<sup>118</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.*

<sup>119</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 342.

<sup>120</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 342.



centres. The vaccination department worked with zeal. In Trivandrum itself, a large Civil Hospital and a mental health institute were opened.<sup>121</sup> Apart from these, several office buildings, roads, bridges, tunnels, canals and other irrigation projects were completed by the public works department during this time. As a token of appreciation from the British government, the Viceroy conferred on Ayillam Thirunal Rama Varma, the title of “Maharaja” in recognition of his excellent administration of Travancore in 1866.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the Maharaja of Travancore was honoured by Queen Victoria through her presentation of the title “Knight Grand Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India” (G. C. S. I.) in 1866. On the same day, Rama Varma’s Diwan T. Madava Row also was presented with the “Insignia of the Order of Knighthood of the Star of India” (K. C. S. I.).<sup>123</sup> However, later on, Diwan T. Madava Row retired from service and left Travancore as the Raja developed an aversion towards him, and Sashiah Sastri became the Diwan of Travancore in 1872. Sashiah Sastri continued what Madava Row followed and he introduced paper for the purpose of writing in the place of Palmyra leaves in all departments. The first systematic Census of Travancore was conducted on 16 May 1875 and the total population of Travancore was estimated as 2,311,370.<sup>124</sup> The Great Indian Famine of 1876-1877 also affected Travancore and several preparations were made by the state to overcome this.<sup>125</sup> Sashiah Sastri retired after his tenure of five years and Nanoo Pillai succeeded him as the Diwan of Travancore.

Visakam Tirunal Rama Varma (1880-1885) succeeded his brother Ayillam Tirunal when the latter passed away due to ill health in 1880. He was very fond of botanical studies along with other sciences, and as a practising botanist; it was he who introduced and extended tapioca cultivation in Travancore. This work achieved popularity and the tuber crop began to

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<sup>121</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 549.

<sup>122</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 553.

<sup>123</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 555.

<sup>124</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* pp. 516.

<sup>125</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* pp. 516-517.

be known as the “meal of the poor.” During his reign, Mr. Ramiengar succeeded Diwan Nanoo Pillai when the latter retired. The Indian Penal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code were introduced into the Criminal Courts.<sup>126</sup> This resulted in the re-organization of the police force, with separation of the functions of the Police and the Magistracy.<sup>127</sup> In 1883, the Maharaja was conferred the title of “Knight Grand Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India” (G. C. S. I.).<sup>128</sup>

After the sudden demise of Ayillam Tirunal Rama Varma, his nephew, Sree Mulam Tirunal Rama Varma (1885-1924), ascended the throne of Travancore Princely State in 1885. His reign was marked with multidimensional achievements and progress. After Diwan Mr. Ramiengar retired, T. Rama Row succeeded him in 1887. As a token of respect to Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee of her reign, the Victoria Jubilee Town Hall was built at Trivandrum, where the meetings of the legislative councils and Sree Mulam Popular assemblies were held later. The Maharaja received the title “Knight Grand Commander of the Most Exalted Order of the Star of India” (G. C. S. I.) in 1888 for his good administration. Prince Albert Victor of Wales visited Travancore in 1889. One of the most important milestones in Travancore history is the establishment of a legislative council in 1888, which initially consist of eight members. In the meantime, T. Rama Row was succeeded by S. Shungarasoobhyar as Diwan of Travancore. V. Nagam Aiya, who was several times appointed as acting Divan in Travancore, says in his Travancore State Manual, regarding the development of administration in the initial years of Maharaja Sree Mulam Thirunal as follows: “in 1893-94, the offices of the Superintendent of District Schools and Director of Vernacular Education were abolished. Three inspectors of Schools were appointed... An Educational Secretary to Government was appointed to check the work of the Inspectors. ...A

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<sup>126</sup> V Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 595.

<sup>127</sup> A Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 343.

<sup>128</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 595.

new Grant-in-aid Code with Educational rules was passed ... An English Normal School was opened at the capital to train teachers. A Reformatory School was established for the benefit of juvenile offenders. ... Law College was established with the European Judge of the High Court as its Principal. The Sirkar High School for Girls was raised to a second grade College and a Lady Graduate from England was appointed as its Principal. An Agricultural Demonstration Farm and School were also opened and a scheme for the development of Agricultural education among the cultivating and land-owning classes set on foot. The Industrial School of Arts was reorganised and an Archaeological Department was established to collect inscriptions and conduct historical researches.”<sup>129</sup> He further said regarding sanitation and town planning, “A new sanitary department was inaugurated and Town Improvement Committees were organised for the better sanitation of towns and registration of births and deaths.”<sup>130</sup> Apart from that, Registration department and the Public Works Department were reorganised. Medical services were expanded and a system of medical grants for hospitals, dispensaries and *Vydiasalas* (indigenous ayurvedic medical centres) was instituted for private agencies. Also, “Medical Scholarships were sanctioned for the study of medicine in European universities,” apart from opening a Women and Children’s Hospital in Trivandrum in the year 1896.<sup>131</sup>

Meanwhile, the Madras Government awarded Diwan Shungrasoobhar the title of “Companion of the Indian Empire” (C. I. E.) for his excellent services, and he retired in 1898. Then K. Krishnaswamy Rao, the Chief Justice of Travancore, became the Diwan of Travancore. During his time, a revised curriculum of studies was introduced into all the schools of the state in 1902 and the schools were classified into four levels, viz. high, middle, upper primary and lower primary. Several technical scholarships for studies in European

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<sup>129</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.*, p. 631.

<sup>130</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.*, p. 631.

<sup>131</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 632.

universities were introduced and technical education was greatly encouraged. A ‘Survey School’ was inaugurated and attached to the Survey Department with an intention of giving training to the officers of the Revenue Department in ‘Survey and Management’.<sup>132</sup> Diwan, Krishnaswamy Rao presided over the Travancore Legislative Council, and a number of bills passed including regulations on Wills, Negotiable Instruments, Guardians and Wards, Lepers, Dynamite, Printing Press, Hindu Religious Endowments, and Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, & Cattle.<sup>133</sup> After Krishnaswamy Rao retired, V. P. Madava Rao became the Diwan of Travancore in 1904. The same year one of the most important milestones in administrative reform occurred in the form of the establishment of Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, which consisted of members chosen by the Government to represent the Taluks and certain special interests. The aim of the Assembly was to ascertain the wishes of the people with regard to the administration of the State. Subsequently, the principle of election was recognised by the State and the Members of the Popular Assembly were “given the power of electing a good proportion of the members of the Legislative Council.”<sup>134</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon describes the electoral system existed in that period as follows: “By an Act passed in 1095 K. E. (1919-20) the maximum number of members of the Legislative Council was fixed at 25 and the minimum at 15. Of these two-fifth was to be non-officials. The act of 1097 K. E. (1921-22) further raised the strength of the Council to 50 members of whom 35 were non-officials, 28 of the latter being elected by electoral constituencies, general and special. The qualification for vote was the payment of an annual tax of Rs. 5. It is worth mentioning that women also enjoyed the right to vote. However, the total number of votes under the Act came to only less than a lakh, i.e., about 2.5% of the total population/”<sup>135</sup> Thus Sri Mulam Thirunal’s reign in Travancore represented the peak of Colonial Modernity, where the colonial power and a

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<sup>132</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 641.

<sup>133</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op. cit.* p. 641.

<sup>134</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p.345.

<sup>135</sup> A. Sreedharamenon, *op. cit.* p. 345.

native state joined together for the modernisation of its administration and polity.

When Sri Mulam Tirunal passed away due to septicaemia, his nephew Sri Chithira Tirunal was a minor prince. Thus, the prince's aunt, *i.e.*, Sri Chithira Tirunal's mother, Junior Maharani, Sethu Parvathi Bai's elder sister Senior Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bai (1924-1931) became the Regent of Travancore. The first full time non-Hindu Diwan, M. E. Watts, had been appointed as the Diwan of Travancore during Maharani's reign. Village Panchayats were established under a rule passed in 1925, which enabled the development of self-government in rural areas. The historical Vaikom Sathyagraha<sup>136</sup> happened during her reign, and Mahatma Gandhi's visit to the Rani resulted in the opening of public roads to all castes in Travancore. The Maharani abolished the *devadasi* system and animal sacrifices in temples. The Nair Regulation of 1925, which sought to substitute the principle of *Makkathayam*, the patrilineal system, for the *Marumakkathayam*, a matrilineal system in the law of inheritance was another important measure undertaken during this period.<sup>137</sup> In 1931, Sri Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma became the Maharaja when he gained maturity. Under his regime, Thiruvithamkoor University was established in the year 1937. The "Temple Entry Proclamation", which was a remarkable event from several different dimensions, happened during his rule. The Thiruvithamkoor Bhoopanaya Bank was also established during this time. The Raja gave importance to industrialisation, and thus the Thiruvananthapuram Rubber Factory, the Clay Factory at Kundara, Plywood Factory at Punaloor, and the FACT<sup>138</sup> at Alway were established. The Pallivasal Hydroelectric Project and the State Transport Service commenced and these reshaped Travancore. Sir C. P. Ramaswami Ayyer was the Diwan

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<sup>136</sup> Vaikom Sathyagraha (1924-25) was a struggle to open the approach road of Vaikom Temple to the Avarnas. Many progressive leaders of that time participated in this struggle and even Mahatma Gandhi visited this place. By 1928, as a result of this historical struggle, the approach roads of all temples were thrown open to all castes.

<sup>137</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 346.

<sup>138</sup> Fertilizers and Chemicals Travancore Limited

(1936-1947) who oversaw the day-to-day affairs of Travancore during that period.<sup>139</sup>

The waves of Freedom Movement were very visible during these years and the struggle for independence was also gaining strength in Travancore. When the news spread that India would get independence in 1947, Travancore decided to not join the Indian Union and that it would stay as a free country. But due to the tremendous opposition and political pressure, the decision was called off. Thus, on 24 March 1948, with Pattom C. Thanu Pillai as Chief Minister, the first people's cabinet ministry came into existence. Subsequently, on 1 July 1949, the states of Thiruvithamcore and Kochi merged and the Tiru-Cochi State was established. Sri Chithirathirunal continued as Raja Pramukhan and he became the last king of Travancore. When the Indian states were reorganised on a linguistic basis, the Malabar region was merged with Thiru-Cochi State and thus on 1 November 1956, the present Kerala State came into existence.

### **Society during the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries**

Unlike the other parts of the Indian subcontinent, Travancore society underwent certain significant and major changes during the late nineteenth century and early decades of twentieth centuries. This period of transformation marked enormous cultural upheavals and social tensions in the everyday life world of Travancore.

#### ***Caste, Untouchability and Slavery in Travancore***

The observation that “these Malabaries are all lunatics and their houses so many lunatic asylums” made by Swami Vivekananda when he visited South India in 1892 holds true.<sup>140</sup> His statement was a result of the prevailing social stigmas and the particularly extreme ways

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<sup>139</sup> A. Sreedhara Menon, *op. cit.* p. 346.

<sup>140</sup> Swami Vivekananda, “The Future of India”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, Calcutta 1960, Quoted in James Lazar Chiriankandath, *Social Change and the Development of “Modern” Politics in Travancore: From the Late Nineteenth Century to 1938*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, SOAS, London, 1985. p.27.

in which caste customs were observed in Kerala. In the day-to-day affairs, caste determined everything and caste was everything. It pointed out that “[c]aste ranking is more elaborate in Kerala...than in any other region of the sub-continent.... The caste ranking hierarchy of Kerala most closely resembles sociological ideal type conceptions of the Hindu caste hierarchy in that almost every caste group is said to occupy a unique and practically unquestioned rank, either higher or lower than the rank of each local caste group.”<sup>141</sup> P. Bhaskaranunni says, “if we examine social history (of Kerala), we know that caste system determines each caste’s modes of obligatory observances, customs regarding the occasions of marriage, death, mandatory practices related to food habits, obvious hierarchies in language and dress code, and occupation etc.”<sup>142</sup> People lived, of the caste, from the caste and for the caste. He also observes that “by lodgings, by the house, by the surroundings, by the distance of dwellings, by the names of dwelling places, by the name of a person, by the dress and by the dress code, by conversation, by family relations, by the words which denotes those relationships, like these many and more, each caste has been heard and seen to know other castes.”<sup>143</sup> It can be seen that the culture of caste emerged and percolated throughout the region from the Brahminical supremacy that originated in the second Chera Empire. M. G. S. Narayanan points out that, “The Perumal’s authority was nominal and he reigned rather than ruled. The Naduvalikal [sic] acknowledged his authority and ruled in the respective *nadu* territories. They had a feudal nobility in the great Nayar landlords with private militia and the Brahmin lords of the temple estates. The actual authority of the Perumal was restricted to the capital and the four adjacent settlements, the supervision of temples and defence when the country

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<sup>141</sup> McKim Marriott, *Caste Ranking and Community Structure in Five Regions of India and Pakistan*, p. 32. Quoted in K. C. Alexander, *Social Mobility in Kerala*, (Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1968), p.38.

<sup>142</sup> P. Bhaskaranunni, *Pathonpatham Nootandile Keralam*, (Thrissur: Kerala Sahithya Academy, 2000), p. 259.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 260.

was attacked by an external force.”<sup>144</sup> This time witnessed the “subjection of Royal power to Brahman Power.”<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, the well-organized Brahmin community called Uralar controlled the Chera Perumal, the kings of Kerala.<sup>146</sup> Thus several caste rigidities were introduced and strictly observed. K. K. N. Kurup observes that instead of Brahmins, the ‘Namboothiri’ (Namboothiri Brahmins) enjoyed the topmost position of caste hierarchy, and their matrimonial relationship with non-Brahmins (the *shudras*, especially Nairs), the obligatory measures of distances pertaining to the untouchability of each caste, are some peculiarities of the land.<sup>147</sup> Thus the supremacy accorded to the Brahmins by the servitude caste of Shudras according to the *Manudharma Shastra*, resulted a system of graded inequality and which underpinned the social structure of Kerala. P Chandramohan observes that “[t]he upper caste Hindus, especially, the Brahmins exercised an overwhelming and decisive influence over the lower castes. They possessed the right of consecrations and interpretations of rituals. The Brahmins also had the exclusive right to preach religious doctrines, to officiate as priests, and to functions as teachers.”<sup>148</sup> Thus along with untouchability, unapproachability (do not approach) and unseeability (do not see) were strictly observed in Kerala. Robin Jeffrey quoted Awksworth, wife of a missionary of C.M.S., regarding the system of distance that keeps pollution away. She wrote in 1860:

A Nair may approach but not touch a Nambuthiri Brahmin; a Chogan [Ezhava] must remain thirty-six paces off, and a Poolayen slave ninety-six steps distant. A Chogan must remain twelve steps away from a Nair, and a Poolayen sixty-six steps off, and Pariar some distance farther still. A Syrian Christian may touch a Nair (though this is not allowed in some parts of the country) but the latter may not with each other. Poolayens and Pariars, who are the lowest of all, may

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<sup>144</sup> M. G. S. Narayanan, “Consolidation of Agrarian Society-Political Processes”, *Perspectives on Kerala History: The Second Millennium; Kerala State Gazetteer*, Vol II, Part II, Kerala Gazetteers, P. J. Cheriyan (Ed.) (Thiruvananthapuram: Government of Kerala, 1999), p. 43.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>147</sup> K. K. N. Kurup, ‘Janminaduvazhitha Vyavasthithi Keralathil’, *Vijnana Kairali* (Mal), Calicut: 1986. p.207. (Emphasis added).

<sup>148</sup> P. Chandramohan, “Growth of Social Reform Movements in Kerala”, *Perspectives on Kerala History, The Second Millennium, Kerala State Gazetteer, Vol II, Part II*, Kerala Gazetteers, P. J. Cheriyan (Ed), (Thiruvananthapuram: Government of Kerala, 1999). p.457.



approach but not touch, much less may they eat with each other.<sup>149</sup>

Under this system of graded inequality with peculiar customs and observances the condition of lower caste communities was worse than any other social group in the world. They have gone through severe oppression and exfoliation, and a life worse than that of cattle. When a Pulayan wanted to go through even the outer ways he has to make the sound *Injavo! Injavo!*, in order to alert others regarding movement, not to be polluted through his presence and proximity. Whereas when Brahmin or a Namboothiri moves, the accompanying Nairs shout *Hoi! Hoi!* as a warning to the lower castes to run away from the path that this procession is taking. If someone resists these caste norms they would be subjected to severe capital punishment such as *Chitravadham*, a form of lynching, and so on.

All castes and sub-caste peoples participated in vigilance and showed a willingness to observe their caste practices strictly because of the fear of becoming outcastes and facing expulsion from society. If, an upper caste man touches a man of lower caste, or violated the existing distance of caste, he became polluted. If he ate any food before taking a bath to rid him of that pollution, it would lead to him becoming an outcaste. If anyone broke the customs and caste rules embedded in food habits consciously, they were forced to become outcastes. Usually, the whole family of the violator became outcastes. It was complete social exclusion. Delineating the outcasting customs, P.Bhaskaranunni explains that:

This punishment is actually more brutal than the royal punishment. The forbidden people will not get anything for leading a good life. All others abandon them and keep distance from them with disgust. They will not tolerate them and not include them in to any occasions like birth, death, marriage etc....

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<sup>149</sup> A. H. [awksworth], *Day Dawn in Travancore*, Kottayam: CMS Press, 1860. pp. 8-9, Quoted in Robin Jeffery, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1994), p. 9.

The ‘Cheethiyan’, Veluthedan’ (the funeral priest and washerman castes) etc. were not do their works for them, the *Mattu*, a cloth for purification on the occasions of puberty bath, delivery bath, and pulakuli (a cleansing bath for purity) etc... will not be given to them by the ‘Velan’ (washerman caste). The ‘Cheethiyan’ will not co-operate for the funeral or conduct the funeral rites. The ‘Elayathu’(a caste) will not perform *shradha* (rite) for them. The Veluthedan, the washermen community, will not wash their clothes. Those who are mentioned above will also not do any work at a marriage function that is reserved for them, for the outcastes. They cannot go to the ‘Velakkathalavan’, the barber, for a shave. They were not allowed to touch the temple pond. Their relatives would not co-operate with them because of the fear that they would also become polluted and become outcastes if they engaged with them. If they try to leave to go anywhere else for escaping this outcaste status, the stain will follow them, wherever they go. Whichever place they go to, the customs of outcaste status will forcefully be implemented on them. Finally surrendering or suicide will be the only remedy for them, and they might surrender.<sup>150</sup> ...The convict would then be sold to lower castes. Many of them converted to Islam or Christianity. Otherwise they would became a vagabond or monk. This offence is the same whenever an upper caste and a lower caste ate food together.<sup>151</sup>

*Vidhyavinodhini*, a Malayalam journal, in 1902, reported a caste experience relating to food, which happened to Mr. Cofferdan an Englishman who was a government official in Alappuzha, as told by Divan Govinda Menon to Palliyil Gopala Menon, and it went like this: “Once a Nair was going home with cooked rice from a temple and an Ezhavan who was a servant of an Englishman, touched that rice and it became polluted as per the caste norms. As a response, the Ezhavan was severely beaten by that Nair. Then the Ezhavan told this matter to the Englishman and eventually the Nair was informed that he is going to be prosecuted for this matter. The Nair tactically brought this cooked rice carried by a Pulayan and went in front of the Englishman. The Englishman asked to the Nair some questions like, why don’t the Nair eat the cooked rice while the Ezhavan passed nearer to him? What is the difference between the two and what is the difference in the blood of both of you? The frightened Nair replied that, there is no difference and said that if the Ezhavan could eat the cooked rice which he brought here, then he would be ready to eat that rice too. The Englishman suggested to that Ezhavan man to eat the cooked rice. When the Ezhavan saw that the cooked rice was

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<sup>150</sup> P. Bhaskaranunni, *op. cit.*, p.30.

<sup>151</sup> K. P. Padmanabhamenon, *Cochirajya Charithram* (Mal), (Calicut: Mathrubhumi Books, 1989) pp.251-252.

carried by a Cheruman, a low caste untouchable man, he replied that he cannot eat the cooked rice because of the untouchability among them. Hearing that, the Englishman said nothing and asked the price of the rice and gave it to the Nair; and told the Ezhavan, who was his servant, that if he had told the whole thing about this earlier, he wouldn't have become a fool".<sup>152</sup>

This incident reveals how the graded pollution and inequalities were deployed and the extent of its deplorable characteristics. In addition to this, this narrative also indicates that, as a social institution, how deeply rooted was the custom of outcasting in society, and which constantly produced the fear of being expelled from society.

*The Travancore State Manual*, and *Cochin Census Report of 1901* provide some information regarding the caste structure and sub-caste divisions in Kerala during that period. The State Manual states that there were 1050 sub-divisions of castes in Travancore.<sup>153</sup> The social divisions based on caste can be summarised as: (1) Caste Hindus/Upper-caste Hindus/Savarna Hindus, (2) Out-caste Hindus/Lower-caste Hindus/Avarna Hindus, (3) Syrian Christians, (4) non-Syrian Christians, and (5) Muslims. Within the caste Hindus, Brahmins and their sub-divisions secured a high rank position. The sub-castes of Kshatriya caste occupied the positions after the Brahmin community. The next position had been occupied by different sub castes of Antarala Jatis. The Sudras consisted of high-caste Nairs and different sub-castes of lower-ranked Nairs. The Kammalas or artisanal communities were ranked next to the Sudras, but even they had to maintain a 24-feet distance from the Nair Hindus. Within the lower castes there were two major divisions: the Patita Jatis, consisting of Ezhavas, Tiyyas, and numerous other castes, and the Nicha Jatis consist of Pulayas, Parayas

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<sup>152</sup> Palliyil Gopalamenon, 'Jathyacharam', *Vidyavinodhini* (Mal), 1902, pp.71-72.

<sup>153</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op.cit.* p. 245.

and several other communities.<sup>154</sup> Syrian Christians, non-Syrian Christians and Mappila Muslims were other communities who were also part of the caste-based social fabric of Kerala.

The Namboothiri Brahmins (Malayalam Brahmins) enjoyed the top-most position in the social hierarchy of Kerala. As William Logan said, “[h]is body is sacred, suggestions are orders, movements are procession, and food is *Amrudethu* (necture eating). Among human beings he is the most worshipful person. He is the representative of God on Earth.”<sup>155</sup> Parasurama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu of Hindu mythology, is said to have gifted the land of Kerala to Brahmins and this mythological claim was a justification for Brahmin Janmis for their absolute authoritative proprietorship of land and ritual supremacy over Kerala.<sup>156</sup> The temple centred administrative system governed by members of Namboothiri Illams (households) known as Sankethams, made it possible for Brahmins to dominate the management of the local administration, and enabled them to undertake their Vedic studies, etc. They also enjoyed tremendous grip over the roles of diplomats and advisers to Kings. “Intermarriage with Kshatriyas and Nairs was the consequence of a custom by which only the eldest son in a Namboothiri household could marry from within the caste, while younger sons had to take non-brahmin consorts in an arrangement known as ‘Sambandham’. As a result, the larger Namboothiri estates were never subjected to partition.”<sup>157</sup>

However, the political domination of Namboothiri Brahmins was undermined through the introduction of non-Malayali Brahmins in the state administration and the strengthening of the powers of the Kings of Travancore during the eighteenth century, beginning with

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<sup>154</sup> See *Census of India, 1901, Cochin, Vol XX*, p. 182.

<sup>155</sup> William Logan, *Logante Malabar Manual* (Mal. Tran), (Kozhikodu: Mathrubhumi Books, 1987), p.130.

<sup>156</sup> V. Nagam Aiya, *op.cit.* p 248.

<sup>157</sup> J. P. Menchar, ‘Namboothiri Brahmins: An Analysis of a Traditional Elite in Kerala’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, I (1966) quoted in James Lazar Chiriankandath, *Social Change and the Development of “Modern” Politics in Travancore: From the Late Nineteenth Century to 1938*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, SOAS, London, p. 30. [Use same font for the footnote and the main text]

Marthanda Varma. The colonial political interventions in state affairs also resulted in the decline of the powers of Namboothiri Brahmins in administrative spheres. For example, Colonel Munro's abolition of Sankethams and the assumption of temple management by the Government in 1811 significantly reduced the Namboothiri power and prestige. But the religiously sanctioned ritualistic supremacy of Namboothiri Brahmins remained more or less unquestionable.

Below the Brahmins were the Kshatriyas and a few sub-castes of Ambalavasi (temple servants) in the social hierarchy, but their population is very low in numbers. So Nair is the most dominant caste after the Brahmins. Duarte Barbosa wrote that, "[w]hen they walk along a street or road, they shout to the low caste folk to get out of their way, this they do, and if one will not, the Nair may kill him without punishment...".<sup>158</sup> Likewise, in 1834 an English traveller recorded that "if a Nair accidentally meets a Pooleh [Pulaya], on the high way, he cuts him down with as little ceremony as he should a noxious animal."<sup>159</sup> These two different accounts depict the power and influence of Nairs in the society of Kerala. Demographically, in the mid-nineteenth century, about one fifth of the population were Nairs in Travancore,<sup>160</sup> though within them there were number of sub-castes. Robbin Jeffrey observed that "[t]hese Nairs held most of the land in most of the *desams*, as well as most of the appointments under government; that they had a fairly high ritual status which gave them great advantages over low-caste people and non-Hindus in a traditional Hindu kingdom; that they enjoyed close relationships through their women with the small portion of the population who were their ritual superiors",<sup>161</sup> the Brahmins.

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<sup>158</sup> Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, quoted in Robin Jeffry, *The Decline of Nair Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore 1847-1908*, (Delhi: Manohar, 1994), p.3.

<sup>159</sup> J. Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs*, Vol 1, London: 1837, p. 254, quoted in James Lazar Chiriyankandath, *op. cit.* p.28.

<sup>160</sup> Robin Jeffry, *op. cit.*, p.xix.

<sup>161</sup> Robin Jeffry, *op. cit.* p. xix.

The Syrian Christians enjoyed an almost similar position to the Nairs in the social status of Kerala. They claimed to be the descendants of high caste people who were converted by St. Thomas the Apostle in the first century A. D. Another version says they their Origins were from Thomas of Cana, a west Asian merchant.<sup>162</sup> Regardless of their sectarian differences, Syrians had a strong and respected position in the Malayali society.<sup>163</sup> The Muslims of Kerala were mostly concentrated in Malabar district of British India and had a little presence in Travancore. They were mainly concentrated in the area of commercial interests.

Among the Avarna castes, the Ezhavas were the most populated caste. They were comparatively superior among the lower castes. The Ezhavas are known by different caste names in Kerala. In central Travancore they are known as Ilavas (Ezhavas), from Qoilon to Paravoor they are known as Chogans (Chovans), and in Malabar they are known as Teers (Tiyar).<sup>164</sup> They were the tappers and tenders of the coconut palm. They were said to be polluting a Namboothiri from thirty-six paces and a Nair from twelve. Public offices and roads close to temples or houses of high castes were closed to them.<sup>165</sup> Their women were not allowed to cover their breasts and wear certain types of jewellery. The Shannars or Channars or Nadars were the other caste who cultivated and climbed up the Palmyra palm, and were similar in social position to the Ezhavas.

The major proportion of the slave castes consisted of the Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas. The term 'Pulaya' is derived from 'pula' which means 'ceremonial pollution',<sup>166</sup> defilement or taint. Another version or interpretation is that as 'pulam' means rice field, therefore

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<sup>162</sup> L. W. Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas*, quoted in Robin Jeffry, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>163</sup> Robin Jeffry, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>164</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, (London: W. H Allen & Co, 1883), p.83.

<sup>165</sup> Robin Jeffry, *op. cit.* p.19.

<sup>166</sup> Samuel Mateer, *op.cit.*, p. 33.

‘Pulayan’ could mean the one who is associated with rice fields.<sup>167</sup> But whatever may have been the etymological origin of the words, Pulaya, Paraya and Kurava, were the castes represent pollution, low status and untouchability. These three castes formed the major proportion of slaves in Travancore. The situation was such that “[t]he social System that existed in Kerala provided no opportunity for the emancipation of slaves. If a man was born into this caste he was destined to live and die as a slave. If the owner of slaves happened to die without heirs, the slaves would become government slaves.”<sup>168</sup>

## Slavery

According to vernacular and colonial sources, the lower castes, particularly the Pulayas and Parayas, were transacted either for agricultural or non-agricultural purposes from the fifth century onwards.<sup>169</sup> Sanal Mohan calls these transactions in Kerala as ‘caste slavery’ and argues that it is different from the human bondage which existed in the plantation sector of the Caribbean and both Americas. He argues that “caste slavery is a unique form of social oppression and exploitation that existed in Kerala since the early medieval period, which included the transaction of untouchable men, women, and children.”<sup>170</sup> The slave castes were found as an integral part of the upper caste landlord’s landed property. In Travancore, these slave transactions were directly connected with the caste system and it was usually confirmed by a Malayalam title-deed. Slave deeds constantly mention the word *Adima/Adimatham*, means slave/slavery. The owners of the lower caste slaves were chiefly the Travancore Sarkar (government), upper caste Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords, and temples. Usually, these

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<sup>167</sup> K. C. Alexander, *Social mobility in Kerala*, (Poona: Deccan College, Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1968), p.46.

<sup>168</sup> J. W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and People’s Movements in Kerala*, (Trivandrum: Seminary Publications, 1984), p. 34.

<sup>169</sup> Noboru Karashima, The Untouchables in Tamil Inscriptions and other Historical Sources in Tamil Nadu in Caste System, in (Ed) H. Kotani, *Untouchability and The Depressed*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1997), pp.21-26; K.S. Madhavan, “Primary Producing Groups in Early and Early Medieval Kerala: Production Process and Historical Roots of Transition to Castes (300-1300CE)”, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University Of Calicut, 2012.

<sup>170</sup> P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), p.xi.

transactions led to the separation of members of the lower castes from their own family. The initial explorations of Portuguese (1498), the Dutch (1603) and the French companies (1674) were intended to strengthen the slave trading networks in the East. European demand for both slaves and south Indian commodities resulted in the intensification of the slave trade throughout the Indian Ocean world.<sup>171</sup> Thus plenty of lower caste slaves were annually exported from the Kerala coast.

From the early nineteenth century onwards, East India Company (EIC) officers became more interested to be involved in the activities of slave caste transaction.<sup>172</sup> The British citizens who worked here produced much information about the life of Kerala's slaves. There are plenty of indigenous documents that shed light on the transactions of slave caste people as mere commodities. Epigraphic sources like inscriptions, Kolezhthu records, bamboo plates, *Granthavaries*, Temple records, *Neetu* (official order) etc. give details about the practice of slavery in Kerala. The epigraphical documents found from various parts of Kerala also throw light on the conditions of the slave castes and transactions of slaves. They were employed in all kinds of agricultural labour, rice tillage and the sugar cane cultivation. The work in the fields that slave castes were deployed to do was not only confined to clearing ground for cultivation, ploughing, uprooting the weeds, transplanting the seedlings, and harrowing, hoeing etc, but also extended to fencing, tending cattle, and even to physically carrying agricultural produce to the market, due to the fact that it was not customary for them to use carts or cattle for transportation. They not only worked the whole day, but also needed to

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<sup>171</sup> Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum, *Private Slave Trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean World: A Study into the Networks and Backgrounds of the Slavers and the Enslaved in South Asia and South Africa*, *Slavery & Abolition*, 2017, Vol. 38, No. 1, p.97.

<sup>172</sup> Thomas Hervey Baber, *An Account of the Slave Population in the Western Peninsula of India: Especially on the Coast of Malabar / as Contained in the Replies of T.H. Baber to the Questions Referred to him by the Right Hon. the Commissioners of the Affairs of India*. (London: Parbury, Allen and Co., 1833); Henry Bevan, *Thirty Years in India: or, A Soldier's Reminiscences of Native and European Life in the Presidencies, From 1808 to 1838 Vol 2*, (London: Pelham Richardson, Cornhill, 1839); John Scoble, *Slavery and the Slave Trade in British India: With Notices of the Existence of these Evils in the Islands of Ceylon, Malacca, and Penang, Drawn from Official Documents*, (London: Thomas Ward and Co., 1841).



watch the fields at night against destruction of the crops. They sometimes make baskets, mats, etc., and when they needed to sell their products, they approached the villages, and having called out to the peasants to tell them of their needs, they would leave the barter products on the ground, and retire to the allocated distance, trusting in the honesty of the villagers to place a measure of corn equal in value to the barter.<sup>173</sup> Their dwellings, the best indication of the standard of living of a people, were small, miserable huts, formed of sticks with walls of mud and thatched with straw, situated by the side of the rice-swamps or on mounds in their centre.<sup>174</sup> They were little better than large baskets.<sup>175</sup> But some lived in temporary huts on their masters' lands. The home of the slaves was called a *chala* or hut. They were discouraged from having comfortable huts, as they should be willing to move about as required for the work of cultivation.<sup>176</sup> After the arrival of EIC, the writings of their officers linked the condition of caste slaves to the global antislavery movement. The Protestant missionary groups, London Mission Society (1806) and Church Mission Society (1816) also joined the campaign against the slave sale in Kerala. As a result of this, slave transaction was abolished in British Malabar in 1843 and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin in 1855.

### **Missionary Movements against Slave Sale**

The modern missionary movement was one of the most popular offshoots of the evangelical revival that transformed religious practice in eighteenth-century England.<sup>177</sup> Travancore was the first and foremost among the Princely States of India to receive the Gospel<sup>178</sup> from protestant missions and the London Missionary Society was the first

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<sup>173</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*. p.41; Govindan Nambiar, *Serfdom in Malabar*. p.487

<sup>174</sup> Govindan Nambiar, *Serfdom in Malabar*. p.487

<sup>175</sup> F Buchanan. *A Journey From Madras Through the Countries*. p.67

<sup>176</sup> Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*. p.41

<sup>177</sup> Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in 19th Century England*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.5.

<sup>178</sup> P. G. Edwin, The First Protestant Mission in Travancore, *Journal of Indian History*, Volume 52, 1974. p.189

Protestant missionary society in Kerala. This society was formerly known as ‘the Missionary Society’. It was formed in England on 21 September 1795 as a non-denominational missionary society.<sup>179</sup> William Tobias Ringeltaube was the founder of the Travancore LMS mission and he started his work on 13 April 1806.<sup>180</sup> At the same time, the Malayalam Mission of the London Missionary Society was established at Quilon in March 1821 by Rev. John Smith, although the capital city of Travancore was not at that time open to missionary efforts on account of the strong prejudices of the native Travancore government and of the upper castes, and their fear of pollution by Europeans and native Christians.<sup>181</sup>

The beginning of the activities of LMS in Travancore was connected with the conversion of a man who belonged to the Paraya caste from South Travancore. His former name was Maharasan. His conversion happened under the leadership of SPCK missionaries in Tranquebar in 1801.<sup>182</sup> After the conversion, he adopted the name Vethamanikam. He was the first native convert, first slave caste convert and also the first native priest in the LMS mission.<sup>183</sup> In south Travancore, several Pariahs mixed quite freely with members of intermediate castes, and some of them even enjoyed property and land ownership. Vethamanikam must have belonged to this exceptional category. His forefathers came from Tanjor, which they had left to escape from caste oppression. He was reasonably educated and

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<sup>179</sup> C. Silvester Horne, *The Story of the LMS 1795-1895*, (London: London Missionary Society, 1895), pp.1-22.

<sup>180</sup> William Tobias Ringeltaube was born in 1770, at Scheidelwitz, near Brieg, in the south of Prussia. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) then sent Ringeltaube as a missionary to India (Calcutta), but somehow, he soon tired of the work there, and returned to England in 1799. In 1803, however, he accepted the invitation of the London Missionary Society to form a part of the proposed mission to India. (See also, C. M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore*, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, [1903] 1990); S. A. Asariya, *Ringel Taube. The Apostle of S. Travancore*, (Quilon: Malayalam Christian Literature Committee, 1929).

<sup>181</sup> S. Mateer, London Missionary Society, North Travancore, *The Missionary Conference: South India and Ceylon, 1879*. Vol. 2, Historical Sketches, Obituary Notices and Appendix, (Madras: Addison and Co., 1880), p.149

<sup>182</sup> John A. Jacob, *A History of The London Missionary Society in South Travancore 1806-1959*, Nagarcoil: Diocesan Press, 1990. pp.20-22

<sup>183</sup> Vethamanikam the Seeker, *The Chronicle of the London Missionary Society*, October 1926. pp.219-220; C. M. Agur, *Church History of Travancore*; J. Yesudasan, *Maharasan Vethamanikam*, (Trivandrum: Dalith Vikasana Parupadi Dhakshina Maha Idavaka, 1993)

he became a Christian under the influence of family members in Tanjore.<sup>184</sup> In the first two decades of the LMS mission, they were not interested in working among the slave caste people. They focused only the upliftment and conversion of the Shannar caste. In 1845, the jubilee of the LMS was celebrated at Nagercoil, and a significant event in that jubilee celebration was the establishment of a native society for work among the slave caste in Travancore. Gradually the LMS began to intervene in the slaves' lives.<sup>185</sup> After the 1845 jubilee event, a number of slave caste people joined the LMS mission, and gradually it grew into a 'mass movement'. A number of slave chapels were established by the London Mission workers. The Church Mission Society was another movement which actively worked in native states.

The first CMS missionary was Thomas Norton, who landed at Cochin on 8 May 1816. An important task assigned to CMS missionaries was to help the Syrians – in the words of Col. Munro to bring the Syrians back to the pure principles of faith and practice which prevailed among them before the arrival of the Portuguese.<sup>186</sup> But later the cordial relationship between the Syrian Christians and missionaries changed into a number of conflicts. In 1836, the Europeans called a synod for solving this kind of issues. But as a result of the schisms, the missionaries severed all connections with the Syrians. The Mission start a new phase, as they began entering into the lives of the slave caste people. The CMS missionaries commenced their work among the slave castes during the early 1850s. At the same time, a few slave caste conversions had already happened under the CMS missionaries in the field. Around 1850, the Rev. T. G. Ragland, secretary of CMS Madras, who was on a visit to Mallapally, urged Rev. G. Matthan to teach the Pulayans [slaves], and left a sum of money for the purpose. With this Mr. Matthan began the work. Rev. J. Hawksworth was the

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<sup>184</sup> Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India*. p.53.

<sup>185</sup> I. H. Hacker, *A Hundred Years in Travancore 1806-1906*. p.42.

<sup>186</sup> J. W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and People's Movements in Kerala*. p.64

missionary in charge and supported him in this endeavour. On 8 September 1854, a slave named Theyvatthan who had come under the tutelage of the Church Missionary Society was baptized as Abel at a place called Kaippatta near the mission station of Mallappally in central Travancore. He convinced his wife, his brother-in-law and other relations to join the new faith. The work was greatly opposed by many of the Syrians as well as by the Nairs. They burned down the first school that was put up.<sup>187</sup> Very soon, the baptism of Abel grew into a 'mass movement'.

On 19 March 1847, a memorandum was signed by 12 missionaries (4 CMS, 8 LMS), which pleaded for the abolition of all slavery or, at the very least, the emancipation of Sirkar slaves,<sup>188</sup> which the government could carry out without antagonizing landholders. Both missionary groups opened school for the slaves, and these brought the missions into increasing conflict with slave owners and Sirkar officials. The owners of the slaves were much opposed to education of slaves. The missionaries and their supporters faced many problems on this issue. Opposition and oppression, however, were the most likely things to bind the missionaries to the slaves, for most missionaries had a stubborn streak and a background of the Christian martyrs.<sup>189</sup> The missionary propaganda forced the Madras Government to pressurize the native states to undertake anti-slavery measures. Subsequently, the joint endeavours on the part of some English officials and Christian missionaries forced the native ruling groups to initiate policies aimed at the socio-economic amelioration of the lower castes. The slavery issue thus became part of a wider confrontation with the government, and for the first time the Madras Government examined the missionaries'

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<sup>187</sup> *The Missionary Register*, 1852, October, p. 444; *The Missionary Register*, 1854, November, p.477; *Madras Church Missionary Record*, February 1854, pp.52-53; *The Church Missionary Intelligencer*, 1855, January pp.22-24; J. Caley, C. M. S. Mission Work Among the Arrians and Pulayans, *Report of the Second Decennial Missionary Conference Held At Calcutta 1883-83*, (Calcutta: J. W. Thomas, Baptist Mission Press, 1883), p.296.

<sup>188</sup> Slaves owned by Travancore Government.

<sup>189</sup> Robin Jeffery, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance*, p.46

arguments. The missionary's attitude towards slavery, on the other hand, had provoked Sirkar officers and caste-Hindu non-officials into making a stand in support of custom and caste law. The proclamation was finally issued on 24 June 1855 by the government of Travancore, although not widely circulated. It emancipated all Sirkar slaves and withdrew legal recognition of all aspects of slavery. After the abolition of slavery, the Protestant missionaries established a number of churches and schools in different parts of Travancore. In short, abolition of slavery was a cornerstone in the history of lower castes, and it provided a fillip to the journey of lower castes and dalits from humiliation to humanisation. But then again, we can see slavery continued in different forms in the society of Kerala for long time.

As we have seen, under the influence colonial modernity, colonial Kerala underwent a drastic change from its traditional modes of an undignified life for many people to preliminary forms of social democracy and possibilities of mobility. Hence this period could be called as a period of making socio-political and cultural modernity, which provided the slave caste dreams of egalitarianism, mobility and humanism, producing conditions for the socio-political activities of the dalit historical figures being discussed in the subsequent chapters.

### CHAPTER 3

## **POLITICS OF AMBIVALENCE: DISCOURSES OF AYYANKALI AND SADHUJANA PARIPALANA SANGHAM**

*Riding the bow- cart<sup>190</sup>*

*On the streets*

*Through which passage was banned for the commons*

*You lit the first lamp*

*With a body dynamo*

*That turned against the wheel.<sup>191</sup>*

Ayyamkali's bullock cart protest (*villuvandi samaram*) in 1893 has assumed an iconic status in the anti-caste struggle of Kerala, as a pioneering moment of defiance against the established rule of accessing public and riding bullock carts and wearing proscribed cloths determined by the caste order of things. This bullock cart ride, which was something forbidden

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<sup>190</sup>A kind of cart called *Villuvandi* in Malayalam, pulled by oxen, bullock or horses which were used by upper caste rich people till then in Kerala. This is most often a bullock cart.

<sup>191</sup> From a Malayalam poem "Adyathechuvadukal" (first steps) by Binoy P. J. Sancharam *Akalangal* (travel and distances) (Mavelikkara: Fabian Books, 2008).

for a Pulaya like Ayyankali, not only marked an act of claiming public space for the lower castes but also marked the emergence of a dalit political subject in the historical conjuncture of colonial modernity and its promises of equality and common humanity. The political significance of this moment of defiance became apparent only much later as much the importance and political agency of Ayyankali as a political figure and reformer. Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, one of the pioneering historians of Kerala, in an interview said that, “Kerala has seen many revolutionaries. They had brought changes in the social and political scenarios. The current yardstick cannot be used to determine whether they are true revolutionaries. One can only truly assess these people only by understanding the peculiarities of the time in which they lived. In such a sense, no one could hesitate to say that Ayyankali was the greatest revolutionary of Kerala till that time. I am not saying it for the sake of it. He lived in a situation where the shackles of unfreedom prevailed everywhere”.<sup>192</sup>

This chapter tries to discuss the life and activities of Ayyankali, a pioneer social reformer and a progenitor of civil-political rights in Kerala. He was also a member of Praja Sabha, legislative council of the princely state of Travancore, a brilliant orator, and an iconic figure of dalit liberation in Kerala. In this chapter I try to understand his political intervention with regard to caste subjugation and to investigate how he critically engages with the parameters of colonial modernity championing the cause of slave castes.

Ayyankali died on Tuesday, June 18, 1941 at the age of 77. He was so weak physically and was passive in his socio-political activities due to ill health during the last days of his life. He died almost unnoticed and lived only through memories of his followers despite certain

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<sup>192</sup> Quoted in T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Ayyankali*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhath Book House 1985), p. 156.

attempts to bring his political memories back.<sup>193</sup> He remained in such an oblivion for several decades in both inside and outside the dalit world. Ayyankali's political subjectivity was retrieved as part of the crucial intellectual interventions to recover the history of dalit struggles in Kerala for human life and equality. The hard-winning efforts of T. H. P. Chentharasserry, an amateur historian in the eyes of academic nomenclature, reconstructed the life and history of Ayyankali and placed it in the centre stage of dalit political formations in modern Kerala. Chentharasserry brought out a biography of Ayyankali (1863-1941) in Malayalam in 1979. Apart from bringing the life and struggles of Ayyankali into the forefront, the biography invited the attention of Kerala public to see how the conventional histories of Kerala overlooked the dalit question and their political struggle for respect and equality. The effort was also considered part of an effort to form a distinctive dalit political consciousness in Kerala. Ayyankali was recovered from his historical oblivion and re-established as a cornerstone and icon of dalit movement in modern Kerala. Mahatma<sup>194</sup> Ayyankali is being recognized today as a revolutionary of extraordinary courage and far-sight whose life and political maneuvers have shaken the entrenched social order and ignited a democratisation process in modern Kerala that is still underway. What made Ayyankali, an illiterate man, so popular and important in the history of dalit emancipation in Kerala, though he was by and large absent in the cloistered domains of academic history, but endured popular in historical memories of the marginalized, is the question that this chapter is seeking an answer for.

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<sup>193</sup> Cherai Ramadas discusses Ayyankali's appearance in print form in his article "Ayyankali Achadiyil" in *Matrubhoomi Weekly*, 2005 August 2005, 14, 21. This article is included in his book *Ayyankaliku Adarathode*, (Ernakulam: Dooth Books, 2006).

<sup>194</sup> Mahatma means great soul, the title attributed to him by his followers after his social resurrection from his forgotten history. In the Gazette Notification of Travancore in December 1911 regarding Ayyankali's nomination in SMPA, this honorific is used as a salutation, prefixed with his name and that of others. The usage, which celebrates his greatness in the history of Dalit struggles in Kerala, might have been derived from there.



## ***Villuvandi Samaram: Ayyankali and the Struggle for Access and Agency***

Ayyankali's father Ayyan was a slave of a landlord namely Panangottu Oottirathu Govinda Pillai and the former's main job was to clear the forest and develop land for cultivation for his landlord. Overtime, out of such reclaimed land he earned five acres<sup>195</sup> and thus acquired the status of a subtenant, enabling him to cultivate 'his own' land, which was unusual in those days for someone from the Pulaya caste. As a tenant farmer having a relatively better life than his fellow-beings in the same caste, he and his spouse Mala got a male child on Chingam 14<sup>th</sup> of 1039 M. E. (28.08.1863).<sup>196</sup> They give him the name Kali, the name of a Dravidian goddess and latter prefixed his father's name to Kali and thus he was called, Ayyankali. He was the eldest son, as Ayyan and Mala got six more children subsequently. Ayyankali and his siblings did not get education, as per the practice in those days which was determined by the moral and economic order of caste. He experienced caste and its inhumanness and exhibited signs of an organic resistance against it even from the childhood. Once, while playing, a ball was kicked by Ayyankali and it fell in the courtyard of an upper caste house, for which he was severely abused. He was also reprimanded within his home, as his parents thought that it was inappropriate for the little Ayyankali to play with upper caste boys, which will unnecessarily take all of them into trouble for violating the caste norms. This was his first experience of caste and its exclusion and humiliation, making him to think deeply about how serious it is in the social life of the people.<sup>197</sup> Deeply touched and denigrated by such instances, as he grew old, he began to organise his fellow youth against caste atrocities in a more or less confrontational way, which invited 'troubles' and

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<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2. Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan gives slightly another version of this. In their text the landlords name is written as Puthalathu Parameswaran Pillai and they says that Ayyan and his wife got 8 ½ acres of land. See Kunnukuzhi S Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *Mahathma Ayyankali: Ayyankaliyude Ariyapedatha Charitram*, (Kottayam: D. C. Books, 2013), pp. 31-32.

<sup>196</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p.3.

<sup>197</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, pp. 4-5.

antipathies from upper castes. As time passed, people belonging to the lower castes began to recognize his endeavors and they started calling him respectfully *urpillai*, the young leader of the village and *muthapillai*, the elder leader of the youth.<sup>198</sup>

His confrontational disposition was evident right from the beginning. Being a self-respecting man and having a tall and well-developed masculine body, he invited some traditional masters and got training in martial arts for himself and for the group he mobilized. This was done with an intention of fighting caste atrocities that they were witnessing on an everyday basis. Apparently, he got acquainted with Melekali and Moolekali, two senior masters from his own community, who were well versed in the local form of martial arts. They gave training and advices in martial arts to Ayyankali and his friends. For further training in *Thekkan Kalari*, the martial art technique of the southern region of Kerala, they brought masters from Nagarcoil and learned *Adithada* (wrestling) and *Valpayattu* (fight with swords). Later for learning the *Vadakkan Kalari*, the Northern technique of Martial arts, they also invited masters from the North (the then Malabar region). The untouchables who were denied literacy used to learn martial arts,<sup>199</sup> though it was not permitted by the caste rules as any form of formal education was proscribed to the untouchables. But there were instances of counter knowledge systems prevailed and percolated, sometimes secretly and in disguised manners. The untouchable communities were taught some kind of martial arts very secretly along with the cultural forms like *Kakkarasi Natakam*, a native style of drama or a kind folk drama, and *Parissamuttukali*, a dance form which is thematically related to war and fighting.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 6.

<sup>199</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 34.

<sup>200</sup> This information was drawn through some participatory observations conducted among the masters of martial arts who belong to dalit community in central Travancore since 2005 and afterwards by the researcher. Similarly my own grandfather's elder brother was an *Asan*, a teacher of *Parissamuttukali*, and the four brothers of them were well

The existence of secret knowledge tradition of martial arts in Travancore is corroborated by folk songs and oral traditions of the untouchable castes. *Chengannoorathi Pattu*, the song of Chennganoor Adi, a folk song which consists of more than ten thousand lines, depicts the triumph and eventful journey of a hero who was born as an untouchable, reveal the rich tradition of martial arts of untouchables of Kerala region.<sup>201</sup> *Edanadan Pattu*, the songs of Edanadan, is also a folk song recently discovered from the oral tradition, which consists of more than four thousand lines delineating a hero who avenge his father's murder. Edanadan is an inter-caste person by birth, whose mother is an untouchable and his father is a Kaimal, an upper caste. This song also illustrates the tradition of a martial art being practised among the untouchables of Kerala.<sup>202</sup> Kavarikulam Kandan Kumaran (1863-1934), a Paraya leader who was a member of *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* and a friend and a contemporary to Ayyankali has taken similar efforts in his community. As a young man, he organised the Paraya youths with the aim of protecting his community from the atrocities and attacks of the upper castes and brought a guru named Ittiathy,<sup>203</sup> who was skilled in martial arts, to teach them lessons in martial arts. Such efforts provided courage, self-confidence and inspiration to the youngsters of Paraya Community.<sup>204</sup> Poykayil Yohannan, another leader and social reformer from dalit community who was a contemporary of Ayyankali, was protected by number of body guards who were excellent masters in martial arts.<sup>205</sup> Kaviyoor Murali confirms that even some dalit women were

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versed in a secret form of martial arts. Interestingly my own conversations with older generations of dalit community affirmed that most of them and their older generations were familiar with peculiar form of martial arts of regional variations which was practiced secretly.

<sup>201</sup> Kaviyoor Murali, *Dalit Sahithyam* (mal), (Trivandrum: Mythri Books, 2021), p. 207. Also see V V Swami, *Chengannooradi*. (Kottayam: D C Books, 2011).

<sup>202</sup> K. R Sajitha (Ed.) *Edanadan Pattu* (The Song of Edanadan) (Mal), (Kottayam: Association for Comparative Studies, 1997). See also Kaviyoor Murali, *op. cit.*

<sup>203</sup> Baby Prasad, *Kavarikkulam Kandan Kumaran: Ezhuthapedathe Poya Navodhana Nayakan*, (Kottayam: Published by the Author, 2019), p. 28.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> Poykayil Yohannan and his reforms are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

trained in martial arts, by drawing evidences from folk cultural tradition of Kerala.<sup>206</sup> Such secret tradition of martial arts among the untouchable communities proved to be handy at a time thoughts of collective resistance were making some appeal to a few youngsters under the weight of colonial modernity and the hopes it unleashed. Ayyankali was very much aware of that tradition and like other leaders of the dalits at that time he learned it, used it, and considered it as a resource of counter power/knowledge in his ensuing struggle against caste system and its modern embodiments.

Ayyankali called frequent meetings of dalit youths and shared their experiences of caste atrocities in search of means to tackle it. They had intervened in several local problems taking the side of the lower castes who were at the receiving end, inviting fury from the upper castes.<sup>207</sup> They also found time for performing art forms and giving training in martial arts in such gatherings, under the leadership of Ayyankali. The followers of Ayyankali were called as *Ayyankalipada*,<sup>208</sup> the army of Ayyankali. They not only intervened in issues of caste discrimination but also led awareness campaigns against the inhuman practices of caste inflicted by the savarnas upon untouchables in places like Neyyattinkara, Venganoor, Kottukal, Chowara, Mulloor, Vellar, Balaramapuram, Pachelloor etc.<sup>209</sup>

His full-time involvement in socio-political activities made his parents worried and they wanted to see him married and settled in life. Thus Ayyankali married Chellamma of Manchamkuzhi family in the month of March 1888 at the age of 25. They shifted to Thekkevila

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<sup>206</sup> Kaviyoor Murali, *op. cit.* p. 208.

<sup>207</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Ayyankali: Adhasthitharude Padathalavan*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2007), p. 22.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> Ayyankali and his militant followers grouped as Ayyankalipada opposed caste assaults from upper caste men in these places which resulted physical confrontations between them. These skirmishes during this period may be the first social experiences of organised militant reaction from dalits in Kerala. For more details on these incidents based on oral tradition see Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 35.

soon after their marriage. They had a joyous married life and had six boys and one girl as children.<sup>210</sup> Nevertheless his inner self was always ignited against the brutal and inhuman caste system. During this time he happened to meet Thycadu Ayya Swami or otherwise known as Thycadu Ayyaguru, a spiritual personality and a British Servant, hence referred to as ‘Superintendent Swami’. It is said that, Swami was a Tamil Paraya by caste and a well-versed scholar in Tamil and Sanskrit classics, apart from being educated in English. He earned a high social position in Travancore due to his spiritual distinction and position in the British service; he got several friends and disciples from every stratum of the society. He was guru for Sree Narayanaguru, the founder of SNDP Yogam, Chattambi Swamikal, the spiritual leader for Nairs of Kerala, and had close friendship with Rajas of Travancore. Actually, Ayya Swami was an untouchable by birth, so he had a special affection for Ayyankali. He supported Ayyankali’s campaign against caste system and Ayyankali also held Ayya Swami very high and cherished the friendship with him. At the same time, Ayyankali never followed Ayya Swami’s spiritual teachings.<sup>211</sup> And right from the beginning Ayyankali never had any attraction towards any religion. His entire life shows that, he believed in self-respect and self-making. His urge for autonomy and agency was very much visible throughout his life, though he was an illiterate. At the same time, he was not hesitant to meet any religious personalities who were ready to talk to him and never hated any religion. In addition to that he never encouraged his people to join any of the religions he came across. He retained such a productive ambivalence on the question of religion throughout his political engagement, a point that I will return to later in this chapter.

More than 6 feet tall, sturdy physic, horseshoe moustache, white banyan and clean dhoti

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<sup>210</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 7.

<sup>211</sup> E. K. Sugathan, *Thycadu Ayyaguru*, (Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages, Kerala, 2013), pp. 87-90.

and the nature of aggressive reaction were the narrative picture of Ayyankali by several contemporaries. Thus it indicates that Ayyankali soon emerged as an icon of dalit masculinity, courageously resisting caste atrocities against lower castes. What one could see is the emergence of a ‘subaltern masculinity’<sup>212</sup> against caste atrocities and he made a strong counter to the entrenched upper caste power. We can see many instances in his life wherein he gets into confrontational mode animating a subaltern masculinity for building up a communitarian consciousness within Dalit community to counter the hegemony of caste system. In a context of helplessness dictated by the caste order, resorting to a masculinity, defined by valour, confrontation and defiance, might have appealed to his fighting spirits.<sup>213</sup> Though it is not an instance without parallels in history in the contexts of Dalit submissiveness, such responses of confrontation and defiance has been seen as by and large implausible given the precarity of dalit lives. The accounts of dalit lives as represented in literary and academic endeavors mostly depict them as helpless, submissive and subjugated poor objects at the turn of modernity.<sup>214</sup>

The *Villuvandi Samaram* of Ayyankali in 1893, as indicated already, is such an iconic

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<sup>212</sup> It is often observed that an untouchable/dalit/subaltern man is dispossessed of masculinity and rendered a social eunuch by upper-caste patriarchy (Rajeswar). Dalit feminist thinkers, critically pointed out the dalit patriarchal elements in the social order of dalit life. Deviating from these two perspectives, here it could be seen that Ayyankali used the potentialities of masculinity against caste oppression as a marker of radical reactionism, which I would venture to call as dalit/subaltern masculinity. To see more diverse discussions on dalit/subaltern masculinity S Anandhi, *at all*. “Work. Caste and Competing Masculinities: Notes from a Tamil Village”. *EPW*, Vol 37. No. 43, Oct 26-Nov 1- 2002., C. Lakshmanan, “Dalit Masculinities in Social Science Research: Revisiting a Tamil Village” *EPW*, Vol 39. No. 10, Mart 6- 2004, Mittapalli Rajeswar, “Caste and Outcaste: Dalit Masculinity in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” *IUP Journal of English Studies*, Vol 12, Issue 2, 2017.

<sup>213</sup> A similar kind of observation can be seen as observed by Paul Gilroy on Martin Dilany (1812-1885), an Afro American Black intellectual. Dilany appeared as a Black patriarch, and used and thought that black masculinity as a counter power of Blacks to resist white supremacy, See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (London: Verso, 1993), p.p. 25-26.

<sup>214</sup> I came to this conclusion by reading the debates on dalit literature by scholars like Sarankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, (Tran. From Marathi by Alok Mukherjee), (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004); Kaviyoor Murali, *Dalit Sahityam*, (Mal), (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2021). Writings of K. K. Kochu, K. K. Baburaj, Sunny M. Kapikkadu, Pradeepan Pambirikkunnu etc. in Malayalam periodicals have also pointed out the lack of subjectivity in Malayalam literature. There were various early Malayalam Novels like O. Chandu Menon, *Indulekha* (1889), (Mal.) (Calicut: University of Calicut, 2003); C. V. Ramanpillai, *Marthandavarma* (1891), (Mal), (Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1973); *Dharmaraja* (1913), (Kottayam DC Books, 2020); *Ramaraja Bahadoor* (1919), (Kottayam: DC Books, 2019).

moment of defiance,<sup>215</sup> in which Ayyankali resorted to an ‘illegal act’ against caste protocols by riding a bullock cart along the ‘public road’ which is forbidden to the untouchables, and wearing a dhoti, a white half sleeve shirt, and a turban, which were all completely forbidden to untouchables in those days.<sup>216</sup> Ayyankali and his colleagues faced a lot of physical threats from the militant upper castes,<sup>217</sup> but countered the latter in the same fashion. This *Villuvandiyatra*, the journey on the bow cart, led by Ayyankali, is a mile stone in the struggle for freedom and civil rights in Kerala. This might be the first and foremost example of a well-planned, predetermined and subversive act against the caste order and its exclusive spatiality by an untouchable leader in India during that time. Undoubtedly, this was a high-grade subversive repudiation of caste hegemony, which was unthinkable in a deeply entrenched social order scripted by caste with its own protocols of space, language and things.<sup>218</sup>

Interestingly, Ayyankali brought this carved and decorated *Villuvandi* from Tamil Nadu as probably no one would make one for him in Kerala for the caste proscriptions.<sup>219</sup> *Villuvandi* was usually used by high class Nairs and Namboothiri Brahmins and landlords only. Through his act Ayyankali proved that an untouchable also can buy and ride a *Villuvandi*. The Nair landlords, local chieftains and other aristocrats of the locality were shocked by seeing this caste disobedience. More important, Ayyankali rode the *Villuvandi* on the public road by shouting that “stop if you can stop.”<sup>220</sup> The bow-cart of dalit self-respect hit hard the false pride of savarna caste aristocracy. The *Villuvandi* was challenged by the savarna goons in several places like Kalliyoor Junction, Vellayani Mukaloor Moovar, and Punnamoodu Junction on the course of its

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<sup>215</sup> Chentharasseri, *op.cit.* 1985, p. 10.

<sup>216</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985.

<sup>217</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985.

<sup>218</sup> Vivek V. Narayan, “Caste as Performance: Ayyankali and the Caste Scripts of Colonial Kerala,” *Theatre Survey*, 2021, pp. 1-23.

<sup>219</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 37.

<sup>220</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 38.

historic ride. Ayyankali and his group called Ayyankalipada fought back. Many savarnas tested the heat of the whip which was used to lead the bulls by Ayyankali. Through this journey ayyankali assertively stated to savarna public that: “allow my people to walk through the roads in the day light. If you deny this, we will strongly oppose it whoever may be.”<sup>221</sup> This act of defiance and the idea of counter voice resonated like a lion’s roar and the savarnas withdrew from the places.

The ‘Villuvandi incident’ elevated Ayyankali’s fame among the Pulayas and other untouchable communities who rallied round him for advice and direction. He portrayed his purchase of *Villuvandi* as a “symbol of the advance of the Pulayas from slavery to freedom.”<sup>222</sup> He continued his rides through the principalities of Venganoor to proclaim the freedom of movement of the dalit communities. For his continuous rides he was looking for a person to drive his *Villuvandi*, and finally Ayyankali found a person, Mr. Venganoor Chavadinada Puthuval Vilakathuveetil Kochappi, who used to drive bullock carts. Kochappi was a brave, athletic sturdy man of having a big mustache and people called him Chandi Kochappi. He was enough rough and tuff and only obeyed the words of Ayyankali. Along with Kochappi, Payarumoodu Kochappi, Indri Assan, Charlie, and Keydee Bhanu were the body guards of Ayyankali who were always with him in the *Villuvandi*.<sup>223</sup>

Balakrishnan, the son of Chudukandamvila Velutha Manager, the brother-in-law of Ayyankali recalls the vivid picture of the *Villuvandi* of Ayyankali: “when the *Villuvandi* came, the bells of it could be heard from one Kilometer far. The tips of the yoke were covered with

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<sup>221</sup> These incidents recollected from the memories of S. P. Vijayan by Kunnukuzhi Mani and anirudhan. See Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* pp. 38-39.

<sup>222</sup> M. Chinnamma, *Ayyankali and Social Revolution Among the Backward Classes of Travancore*, unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 2005, p. 70.

<sup>223</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 39.



carved golden coloured tin. There were three bells hanging in the centre of it. Three bells were also fixed in the both brown lynch-pins of two wheels. Moreover, two sides were decorated with carved pictures. The canopy of the *Villuvandi* was coloured with mixed golden and orange colours. The horns of the two white bulls were beautifully painted. Three smaller bells attached to two large bells on either side, each of which was tied around the neck of each bull. As the *Villuvandi* ran, it generated exotic sounds of several bells. A Paris hanging lantern was also attached to the *Villuvandi* for night travel.”<sup>224</sup> The sound the *villuvandi* generated epitomised the public defiance of the caste order of space and movement, and proclaimed the arrival of untouchables to the public. This was a sound of societal democratisation against the savarna shouting of Hoi! Hoi! caste sound. As pointed out already, to keep the special distancing of caste order, upper castes used to shout “Hoi! Hoi!” as a caste alarm warning in the movements of savarnas to avoid “inauspicious” untouchable encounters. This normativity was disrupted by the sound of Ayyankali’s *Villuvandi*.

*Villuvandi*, as clear from the above description, was a luxurious vehicle, of a kind used earlier only by savarna landlords and aristocrats for travelling. Motor cars were rarest of the rare in those days. Then why Ayyankali brought a luxurious vehicle *villuvandi*, which was an unnecessary device for dalit life world at that time because even in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social life of the common people, including dalits, were primarily depended on pedestal movements. Bullock cart was used as a goods carrier and rarely used to travel by common passengers if the distance were too far or in an emergency situation. Dalits were not allowed to walk through public roads in day-time and the very sight of them was considered as polluting. Gopal Guru observes by taking a cue from Vittal Ramji Shinde, one of the leading

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<sup>224</sup> Quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* pp. 39-40.

non-Brahmin social thinkers from Maharashtra, who says untouchability is a kind of repulsive feeling, a sort of nausea.<sup>225</sup> He further argues that untouchables were considered as ‘walking carrion’, a concentrated expression of untouchability. Since untouchability was a walking danger, there was a need to quarantine this danger into an isolated place.<sup>226</sup> Thus the movement of untouchables was restricted and contained into certain places like *Cherry*, *Chala*, and other caste reserved regions. Here Ayyankali decided to violate these caste restrictions forcefully, for which he decided not to walk on the roads but moved beyond that and ride a vehicle. Here *Villuvandi* is a metaphor of mobility, speed and modernity, which was earlier available only to those held caste power, something that the colonial modernity’s discriminatory distribution of power was reinforcing. Ayyankali wanted to upset the reinforcement of caste under colonial modernity and thereby capture the power to be mobile, with a colonial modern device of mobility, i.e., the *Villuvandi*. We could infer from this that he was quite aware of the duality of colonial modernity - its potential to accentuate oppression as well as its promise of liberation - and hence the need to engage with it critically. He was aware of the doubleness of colonial modernity, which, while promising equality, ‘othered’ the oppressed caste through its practices.

In those days untouchables were served coffee in coconut shell outside the premises of native coffee shops. Ayyankali destroyed those caste ridden coconut shells and advised them to have coffee in their own homes.<sup>227</sup> Serving in coconut shell was a common practice of caste in all over India for protecting the upper caste interest of not to be polluted. Ayyankali destroyed this custom of inhumanness with his body politics of force. Ayyankali and his followers’ act of defiance with counter physical attacks, against upper caste assaults to maintain caste order, in

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<sup>225</sup> Gopal Guru and Sundar sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, (New delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 203.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.* p. 212.

<sup>227</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985 p. 11.

several areas of Travancore indicate this politics of dalit bodies. The use of politics of dalit bodies in an organised manner to destroy social hegemony might be witnessed by Kerala society for the first time. These types of defenses, counter attacks and defiance provided a feeling of confidence to the dalit masses of Travancore. Moreover, he always advised his people to be self-sufficient. Similarly, in order to gain freedom of movement on 'public roads', Ayyankali organised a group and decided to enter into the markets which was also not allowed for untouchables. Ayyankali's militant group against caste atrocities came to be known as *Ayyankalipada*, the army of Ayyankali, in all over Travancore.<sup>228</sup>

The *Villuvandi* of Ayyankali became a hot topic of conversation all across the princely state. Interestingly, a new situation emerged in which if a dalit fall prey to any caste based attack Ayyankali will reach there without considering the sub-caste of the victimised dalit. One of his firmest advocacies was securing the basic right of freedom of movement. In 1898 Ayyankali and his followers forcefully walked through a public road towards Aralummood market and fought with an aggressive mob of upper-castes on the way at Chaliyatheruvu and that street-fight eventually developed into a riot. The Savarnas gathered with weapons, aiming to kill dalits passing through the area. But fearlessly, Ayyankali and his men also equipped with arms fought back resulting in injuries and bloodshed in both sides.<sup>229</sup> *Chaliyar*, the weaving community and some Muslim merchants also participated in this riot against Ayyankali and his group. Due to heavy opposition and severe fight Ayyankali and his group were forced to return sooner or later.<sup>230</sup> Nevertheless, this may be the first armed struggle from dalits against the upper castes in Travancore.

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<sup>228</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 30.

<sup>229</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *Ayyankali*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, 1990), p. 60.

<sup>230</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 40.

The news about Chaliyatheruvu riot suddenly spread all over Travancore like a wild fire. Confusions, chaos and fear spread among the upper caste people while a notion of self-respect and valour for fighting against caste domination was the feelings among the dalits as the news of the riot spread. Dalits from Manakkadu, Kazhakootam, Kaniyapuram and many other places revolted following the Chaliatheruvu riot, but the police and the princely government authorities supported Savarnas to repress this as soon as possible. However, the Chaliyatheruvu riot resulted in forming and disseminating a consciousness of civil rights among dalits and consequently many such incidents broke out in several places.<sup>231</sup> The riot was in fact a movement for safeguarding civil rights for dalits and moreover it was a proclamation of the new subjectivity of dalits in their own land, where they were outcastes. By this way Ayyankali inaugurated a civil rights movement in Kerala and thus it signalled an autonomous political discourse of dalits. Dalits of Travancore began to ask and argued for more and more civil rights after this incident which made far-reaching impact. Though a Pulaya, Ayyankali was also trying to build a unified dalit front by intervening in the problems of other dalits like Parayas, Kuravas and others.

### **Organising the Scattered: *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham* and its Activities**

Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the dynamic presence of Protestant Christian missionary groups like CMS, LMS, Salvation Army and so on in Kerala.<sup>232</sup> Conversion to Christianity became a possibility for the lower castes to attain the civil rights accorded to the Christian subjects of colonial Kerala, freedom from inhuman treatment in the Hindu caste society and a quest for spiritual emancipation. In parallel, there were several progressive Hindu upper caste people who wanted to stop these conversions and worked for reforming Hindu society and

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<sup>231</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, op. cit. 1985 p.12.

<sup>232</sup> I have discussed these themes in detail in the previous chapter 2.

untouchables as remedial measures for this. Sadananda Swami and his *Brahmanishta Mattam Sangham* was one of such initiatives.<sup>233</sup>

Ayyankali maintained a harmonious relationship with both these strands of religious reform movements with an aim of uplifting his own people from their pathetic social condition. Once he and some of his followers attended one prayer meeting conducted by Salvation Army under its ‘Territorial Commander’ of Travancore, Colonel Clara Case at Kowdiar<sup>234</sup> and had gone through an unusual ‘spiritual experience’, which did not sustain for long though. Ayyankali later carried a memorandum against religious conversion of dalits into Christianity and submitted it to the then Maharaja of Travancore.<sup>235</sup> He did this for ensuring the unity of his people and against the discrimination that converted dalit folks were subjected to in Christianity.<sup>236</sup> This is yet another point of ambivalence in Ayyankali – he wanted to use the liberative potential of missionary Christianity, but at the same time did not want conversion to happen. Some of Ayyankali’s relatives were already converted to Christianity and Thomas Wadyar was one among them. He continued his fraternity with his Christian converted folks, but maintained a distance from Christianity.

Sadananda Swami conducted Hindu missionary works and he organised a meeting during this period and Thomas Wadhyar attended this. Sadananda Swami explained the pathetic

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<sup>233</sup> Activities of Hindu Missionary organizations like *Sree Ramakrishna Mission*, *Hindu Maha Sabah*, and other individuals like Sadananda Swami, etc were active in Travancore during this period. Sadananda Swami was a native of Palakkad, Chittur taluk, Thathamangalam. His early name was puthanveetil Ramanatha Menon. He established Sadanandapuram and *Sadanandasramam*, in Kottarakkara. He was well versed in Sanskrit and Tamil Languages and conducted several *Hindumatha Sammelangal*, Hindu religious meetings in many places in Travancore. Ramakrishnapillai, the editor of *Keralan* magazine and *Deshabhimani* news paper, vehemently opposed Sadananda Swami. See, Swami Chidananda Bharathi, *Srimad Sadananda Swamikal*, (Sadanandapuram: Sadananda Press, 2005); Mannathu Padmanabhan, *Ente Jeevitha Samarangal*, (Thiruvananthapuram: N. S. S. Press, 1965), p. 24, Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan *op. cit.* p. 52.; the controversy between Parameswarapillai and Swami see Appendix III of C. Abhimanyu, *op. cit.* pp. 221-225.

<sup>234</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op.cit.* p.73.

<sup>235</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery (1985), *op.cit.* p. 21.

<sup>236</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op. cit.*

conditions of dalits in detail and emphasized the need for reform within Hindu religion enabling dalits to have a respectable place in its fold, failure of which will lead to religious conversions, he warned. When Ayyankali heard about Sadanantha Swami and his empathy towards untouchables, he was invited to Venganoor. Swami in his meeting with Ayyankali called him to form an organisation of their own to fight for the rights of the Dalits. Meanwhile, Sadananda Swami's Hindu missionary works were carried out from 1905 through an organisation named *Brahmanishta Matom* at Manakkad.<sup>237</sup> Eventually a branch of *Brahmanishta Mutt* was planned to be established at Venganoor and due to the internal egoistic contests Ayyankali was not elected as their leader in the beginning. But later Swami realised the leadership quality of Ayyankali and he ascended him as the leader.

Ayyankali's critical engagements with colonial Christianity was appreciated by Sadananda Swami and he used this opportunity and finally convened a branch of *Brahmanishta Matham Sangham* at Pachalloor, under the leadership of Ayyankali and his people.<sup>238</sup> Seemingly, Sadananda Swami acted with Ayyankali with the aim of preventing the conversions of dalits into Christianity and obviously had an intention to the 'upliftment' of dalits in the Hindu fold. With the help of Sadananda Swami they conducted a procession from Venganoor to Trivandrum city for establishing right to freedom of movement and enter into public spaces like 'public roads' and public places.<sup>239</sup> This procession was held on the day of *Pooja* or *Vijayadasami* with the aim of having darshan of *Ezhunallathu*, the procession of Maharaja of Travancore moving towards Poojapura.<sup>240</sup> As per the advice of Sadananda Swami a person in the front row of the procession of Ayyankali, held an image of Sri Mulam Thirunal Maharaja of Travancore. This was a

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<sup>237</sup> Mannathu Padmanabhan, *op. cit.*

<sup>238</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery (1985), *op.cit.* p. 22.

<sup>239</sup> See T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Ayyankali: Adhasthitharude Padathalavan*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2007, p.26.

<sup>240</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 53.

strategic move to prevent upper caste attacks as anyone attacking the Maharaja's image would be considered committing treason. Though the strategy succeeded to a certain extent, the procession did not fully avoid the attack of upper caste men. But the brave and enthusiastic Ayyankali and his colleagues successfully defended themselves. The people of Sadananda Swami were also attending this procession and finally they saw Maharaja's procession at Putharikkandam.<sup>241</sup> In putharikkandam, which was a paddy field, the people of Ayyankali stood tall in hundreds. The very sight of this wondered the Maharaja and this made him to realize that there are people like this living among his subjects.<sup>242</sup>

While returning after this meeting Ayyankali met Thycad Ayyaswami and received his blessings. This friendship too lasted long and Ayyankali frequently visited Swami and attended his programmes of inter-dining in his home at Tycad.<sup>243</sup> Ayyankali was also aware of the activities of *SNDP Yogam* and Sree Narayana Guru. Though he was not allowed to meet Guru by Ezhavas at first as he was a Pulaya by caste, he met him and had a long conversation at Kunnumpara Ashram near Vazhmuttom.<sup>244</sup> He also had a warm acquaintance with leaders like C. V. Kunjhiraman, Kumaran Asan, Dr. Palpoo, Govindan *Judji* (Judge Govinda) and others in the SNDP.<sup>245</sup> The activities of SNDP Yogam had arguably influenced his thoughts for starting an organisation for the depressed castes. He also had constant meetings in this regard with his companions, who had a fortunate opportunity to have education, like Thomas Wadhyar, Haris Wadhyar and Taivilakathu Kali.<sup>246</sup> They were convinced about the inevitability of a common organisation for the upliftment of dalits irrespective of their divisions into sub castes and diverse

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<sup>241</sup> Kunukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 53.

<sup>242</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, 1985, *op. cit.* p. 23.

<sup>243</sup> Kunukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 54.

<sup>244</sup> Kunukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 55.

<sup>245</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op. cit.* p. 79.

<sup>246</sup> Kunukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 56.

religious beliefs. This was a period of communitisation, in which people of different sub-castes found their new common identity along community lines.<sup>247</sup> Ayyankali's compassionate attitude towards fellow beings from his childhood onwards might have made him to understand a 'we' feeling that existed among the untouchable castes.

During the returning journey from Putharikandam, after seeing the Maharaja, Ayyankali and his groups met a serious ambush against them at Mankkad junction. But the well-equipped and trained *Ayyankalippada* fought back and severely injured the savarna goons and chased them away. Avoiding further fights they decided to turn away from the normal route and went towards the sea shore of Valiyathura. With the help of *Mukkuvas*, fisher folk community, they reached Vizhinjam by *Chalathadi*, traditional water craft or boats, and from there they proceeded to Venganoor.<sup>248</sup> This incident also proves that the high-caste civil society was not ready to change and they always place their caste prejudices upfront even when it had a potential of involving treason. On the other side, it proves the quality of Ayyankali as a leader who uses inherent and subversive tactics to destroy the false pride of savarnas, through which he debunked the asymmetrical values of caste. Moreover, he fell back on the fisher communities who shared similar social standing like his community, in his conviction to build a wider fraternity in the struggle for social justice.

Subsequent to the Manakkad incident, due to the discontentment from the *Brahmanishta Matham Sangham*, which was not moving beyond spirituality and having not intervening

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<sup>247</sup> Many Community/Caste Organizations emerged during this phase, by throwing out their rigid sub-castes. In 1903 SNDP Yogam (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) was found by Dr. Palpu under the auspicious spiritual leadership of Sree Narayanaguru, which consolidated Ezhavas who were scattered under different sub-castes. Similarly NSS (Nair Service Society) founded by Mannathu Padmanabha Pillai in 1914, gathered Nairs from different sub-caste rigidities. These kinds of several organizations were an outcome of a community consciousness evolved under the period colonial modernity.

<sup>248</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 24.



actively on the matters of social and economic problems faced by the dalits, Ayyankali's association with the *Matha Sangham* came to an end. He came out of it and founded an independent broadminded organisation called *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* (SJPS - the organisation for the service of poor) in 1907 at Venganoor. This organisation included all untouchable castes who were victims of caste-determined social inequality and untouchability.<sup>249</sup> Ayyankali was unanimously selected as the General Secretary of this organisation and he continued in this post till the end of his life. This was the first and foremost organisation founded by a dalit leader in Kerala. Thus, the establishment of SJPS represents a critical moment of dissent overcoming the persuasions of conversion to Christianity and promises of incorporating dalits into a reformed Hindu religion. He eschewed religious and caste identity from the name of the new organisation, and instead used the terms *Sadhu Janam* to underscore the identity of the untouchables as the poor or underprivileged people. Coinage of a new term for dalits by giving up the caste nomenclature was an attempt to build a larger political alliance of the untouchable castes. Similarly, it was seeking political attention from the colonial state and governmental forms by using a compassionate secular name for denoting themselves as deprived subjects.

The aim of this organisation was to fight untouchability and other forms of social oppressions and unite the victims under one banner. As said already, though born a Pulaya, Ayyankali envisaged uniting, reforming and redeeming all sub-castes of dalits as one community. This is the reason why he chose the word *Sadhujana*, helpless/poor/downtrodden, to denote 'subalternness', opening its door to every dalit and subaltern. It was a typical modern organisation, with a written constitution, consisting of 24 articles. These articles were prepared

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<sup>249</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op.cit.* 1985, p. 25.

by Govindan *Judji*, a prominent leader of SNDP Yogam, as per the suggestions of Ayyankali.<sup>250</sup>

The *Sangham* convened its meetings on every Sunday at Venganoor. Sunday was proclaimed by them as a holyday against the prevailing norms of depressed castes working all the time.<sup>251</sup> Interestingly, women were active participants in the meetings of SJPS. The Sangham collected levy from its members and fixed half a *chakram* for men and quarter a *chakram* for women. Men and women actively participated in the meetings of *Sangham* and the deliberations focused on cleanliness, discipline, freedom of movement, freedom of education and so on.<sup>252</sup> Within three years the *Sangham* acquired some land in Venganoor and was registered as a society under the name *Thiruvithamkoor Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* in 1910.<sup>253</sup> Ayyankali contributed the land and with the money they have collected within the Sangham, an office was built at Puthuvalvilakam in Venganoor.<sup>254</sup>

The *Sangham* flourished soon as hundreds of branches mushroomed across the princely state. Each of the branches has its Manager, *Kanakkan* (secretary), and *Khajanji* (treasurer).<sup>255</sup> Hundreds of these managers played crucial role in all his activities leading to their success. In 1912 Ayyankali extended his activities in central Travancore by associating with Vellikkara Chothy.<sup>256</sup> Thus SJPS soon had three divisions, centred in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam and Kottayam.

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<sup>250</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and Ayyankali, *op. cit.* p. 56.

<sup>251</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and Ayyankali, *op. cit.*

<sup>252</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and Ayyankali, *op. cit.*

<sup>253</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 27.

<sup>254</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 57.

<sup>255</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 57.

<sup>256</sup> Vellikkara Chothy (1878-1927) is a social reformer and an activist from Tiruvalla. He was contemporary to Ayyankali and Poykayil Yohannan. Vellikkara Mathai Asan was his first name when he was a converted Christian in the beginning, later he changed his name as Vellikkara Chothy and became a member in Sreemoolam Popular Assembly. He was a leader of SJPS in kottayam division and led several struggles like Pulladu School entry struggle. See T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Keralathile Avaganikkappetta Navodhana Nayakar*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2018), pp. 53-70.

There was an *Unnathadhikara Samudaya Kodathy* (high power community court) and *Shakha* Kodathies (branch courts).<sup>257</sup> The headquarters of this court was situated in Venganoor within the Head Office of SJPS. The Chief Judge was Ayyankali and there were advocates, writers, clerks and warrant *sipoy*s worked for that court.<sup>258</sup> This court might have dealt with the internal/family matters within the community of dalits. It is interesting to note that during those days the dalits were not allowed inside the court and people from untouchable community used to face the court proceedings from outside the court for maintaining the custom of untouchability.<sup>259</sup> Hence, these courts under SJPS could be seen as a counter establishment with the aim of creating a judicial sensibility among dalits apart from finding solutions to problems within the community.

European missionary Rev. W. S. Hunt wrote about certain peculiarities of SJPS meetings in those days. The meetings were summoned mostly in *Pulaya and Paraya* centers and gatherings were held on hill-sides or *maidans* (plains). A large number of people attended the meetings and they were also fed. The speakers taught them the ideas of cleanliness, temperance, self-control, and the necessity of sending their children to school. He stated further that:

The Poor People's Self Help Society (SJPS) has been in existence for three or four years. It originated in Trivandrum, either in the minds of a coterie of influential Nayar gentlemen, or in that of a remarkable depressed-class man, who sought their help in organising it. This Man is its Secretary; his name, Aiyyan Kali, is already a familiar one. The primary purpose of the society is, as its name implies, to help the depressed to help themselves- to stimulate them to raise themselves out of their age-long depression and degradation, to make them realize that they are men, and not

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<sup>257</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 57. T. H. P. Chentarassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 121.

<sup>258</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 58.

<sup>259</sup> The discrimination in the Courts are evident in the speech done by P. K. Govindapillai, who was the editor of *Subhashini*, News paper and the representative of Pulayas at first in the *Sreemoolam Popular Assembly*, point out that "the pulayas were not getting the real Justice. Their grievances are settling without proper hearing. In some courts they were not allowed to enter into the courts so that they have to keep away from the court. A third party assigned to take the hearing outside the court and it cased to throw away their petitions. Changanassery Magistrate courts also doing this" SMPA Proceedings, 18 February 1911.

chattels and clods. But it goes farther; it teaches them that they have rights, and that, if they boldly claim them, those rights must be granted. Its claims do not stop short of absolute “equality of opportunity” with other castes, plus certain privileges to make up for past and present disadvantages. The success of the Tiyyas in raising their community by means of a society no doubt stimulated the organisers of the society, who has also shown themselves *acquainted with western methods of agitation*<sup>260</sup> (emphasis added).

In 1914 Ayyankali founded a magazine called *Sadhujana Paripalini* as their mouth piece. Trikkodithanam Chempumthara Chothikkaruppan was its editor and it was published from Sudarshan Press at Changanassery, under the patronage of Changanassery Parmeswarapillai, a well-known progressive Nair social reformer and social activist of that time.<sup>261</sup> Ayyankali started this magazine during one of his halts in Changanassery for the activities of SJPS. It is said that the magazine continued to publish for around 18 years. Chembumthara Pappan and Planthara Pappan, were the regular writers of this magazine.<sup>262</sup> Unfortunately no copies of *Sadhujana Paripalini* are available to us.

The annual meetings of SJPS were conducted in VJT Hall,<sup>263</sup> and several Government officials and Dewans attended those meetings. The meetings were known as *Jubilee Hall Koottam* (congregation in Jubilee Hall) and it was also a clever move from Ayyankali as it was another opportunity to convince the pathetic conditions of the untouchables and their compelling needs to the society at large.<sup>264</sup> Most of the annual meetings were celebrated with elegance and presided over by the then Dewans of Travancore. In 1917 February *Malayala Manorama*, a

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<sup>260</sup> W. S. Hunt, “the Uplifting of the depressed”, The Church Missionary Review, Vol. 65, February, 1914, p. 113.

<sup>261</sup> See, C. Abhimanyu, *op.cit.* p.p. 155-156. But in this book Abhimanyu recorded the year of the publication as 1913. But the face page of the first issue of *Sadhujanaparipalini* shows the Malayalam Era 1089 (1914), *Sadhujanaparipalini*, Book 1, issue1, 1089(1914) *Medam* (Malayalam Month).

<sup>262</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 96.

<sup>263</sup> Victoria Jubilee Town Hall, in where the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly, the legislative body of erstwhile Travancore, usually summoned during those days. Ayyankali became a Member of Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in 1911, later that he attained consent for summoning SJPS annual meetings in VJT Hall from government, see Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 61.

<sup>264</sup> See T. H. P Chentharassery, *Ayyankali: Adhasthitharude Padathalavan*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2018).

leading newspaper at that time in Malayalam, reported the meeting of SJPS and published the congratulatory speech of Mr. Subrahmanya Sastri, the Range Inspector in two issues of the newspaper.<sup>265</sup> Similarly, a detailed report of the 33<sup>rd</sup><sup>266</sup> annual Conference of *Samastha Thiruvithamkoor Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham*<sup>267</sup> appeared in the same newspaper in 1937. It was titled as “Azhvancheri Thambrakkalkkulla Swathantryam Ayyankalikkum” (the freedom of Azhvanchery Thambrakkal [Namboothiri Brahmin feudal lords of Azvanchery in Malappuram] should be available to Ayyankali too). The report reveals a high profile participation in the meeting, with guests like Dewan C. P. Ramaswami Ayyar, who presided over that meeting at VJT Hall, and Justice K. P. Gopala Menon, Justice N Kumaran, Devaswom Commissioner C. N. Sreeranganatha Sasthri, Excise commissioner C. O. Madhavan, Mr. M. Govinda Pillai (District Magistrate), Mr. N. S Raman Pillai (Sreemulam Assembly Deputy President), T. K. Velupillai, Professor Dr. H Subrahmanya Ayyar, C. O. Damodaran (Depressed Class Protector), E. I. Chako and several other distinguished persons.<sup>268</sup> Moreover a number of memorandums were also submitted to the government by SJPS under the leadership of Ayyankali seeking solution to their depressed condition.

In response to the activities and success of SJPS, CMS Church started an organisation of Pulaya converts in 1913, namely *Christian Sadhu Jana Vidhyabhivardhini Sangham* (Christian Poor People’s Educational Development Society). This organisation was established after a meeting presided over by Anglican Bishop at Kottayam and was attended by 300 to 400 people.<sup>269</sup> But this organisation of Pulaya Christians was not very strong and not as popular as

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<sup>265</sup> *Malayala Manorama*, February 24 and 28, 1917.

<sup>266</sup> This might be 30<sup>th</sup> Annual conference! SJPS founded in 1907.

<sup>267</sup> All Travancore Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham, the name of the organization slightly changed.

<sup>268</sup> *Malayala Manorama*, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1937.

<sup>269</sup> W. S. Hunt, “the Uplifting of the depressed”, *op. cit.* p. 114.

the movement led by Ayyankali<sup>270</sup>. Subsequently, this organisation sent Pradi Abraham Isaac as its SMPA representative.<sup>271</sup> This organisation was founded to prevent the reverse-conversions of people from Christian faith and to overcome the “losses, depressions and discouragements happened to the poor Christian converts.”<sup>272</sup> But the organisation could not attract much people like what Ayyankali have managed to do. This shows how Ayyankali was influential among his people and how did he succeed in taking distinctive standpoints on religious matter, which threatened the missionary interests.

When Ayyankali began to organise his people, a missionary wrote: “Now there has arisen a strong movement among them (The Pulayas) which is antagonistic to us, and for the present we have, I fear, lost our opportunity. The leader of this movement is one of themselves, a man named Ayyankali, who seems to be a born leader.”<sup>273</sup> According to the missionaries Ayyankali was “very hostile of Christianity.”<sup>274</sup> J. W. Gladstone says that Ayyankali also tried to give a little religious ‘flavor’ in his movement. In many places he conducted regular meetings under the *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham* on Sundays and taught the people “simple religion and prayer.”<sup>275</sup> The essentials of the religion which he taught were “prayer to Rama” “intermingled with the ethical teaching of the Bible and warning against idolatry.”<sup>276</sup> W. S. Hunt point out that SJPS “has started schools, distinctively ‘Hindu’, though Christian ethics, we are informed, are included in them.”<sup>277</sup> Initially Christian pastors attended SJPS meetings as speakers and

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<sup>270</sup> J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 297.

<sup>271</sup> *Njananikshepam*, Vol XIX, No. 2, February 1916, p. 28.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, Saradan Solomon and Vellikkara Chothy were among the reverse-converts.

<sup>273</sup> Annual Report of the LMS, 1914, pp. 180-181, J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 294.

<sup>274</sup> H. T. Wills, Trivandrum City-1914, MS, TR-R, Box 9, CWMA, Quoted in J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 294.

<sup>275</sup> Edmonds, Annual Report of the Quilon and Attingal Districts for the year 1917, TR-, Box 9, CWMA. Quoted in J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 297.

<sup>276</sup> “Alleppey and Tiruwella Districts”, CMS, Travancore, HF, Vol. 36, No. 10, October 1916, p. 377, Quoted in J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 297.

<sup>277</sup> W. S. Hunt, “the Uplifting of the depressed” *op. cit.* p. 114.

“Christians mingled fraternally with their heathen in the gatherings.”<sup>278</sup> Further it is said that, in the meetings of SJPS, especially in the Venganoor Head office and other branch offices, the Managers of *Sangham* used to sing the favorite devotional songs of Ayyankali. The managers like Gopalan and Kittu Mestiri used to sing such songs.<sup>279</sup> One of the songs says that “You [Ayyankali] are both Sreeramakrishna and Jesus”.<sup>280</sup>

Earlier in 1916, in SMPA, he argued that it is the society that forces the dalits to convert to other religions, especially to Christianity, where they get freedom of education without being discriminated. In a warning tone he said, “[t]o exclude them (Pulayas) on the ground of their lower stage of civilisation was to induce them to *change their religion*, because from the moment that was done, admission became free and easy”.<sup>281</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1923 Ayyankali pointed out the predicament of Pulaya community in the princely state and argued for immediate intervention of the government as remedial actions. He states that:

[T]he strength of the Pulaya community in the princely state was only 4 lakhs as per the last Census, and that about 30% of them had embraced other religions, the cause being poverty and untouchability. He complained that the Pulayas were not getting any help worth mentioning from caste Hindus, and when the Christian missionaries gave the much-needed help, many Pulayas were attracted to that religion. The treatment accorded to Pulayas was worse than that was given to cattle, and the disability was removed as soon as when they converted to Christianity and Mahomedanism. He reasoned that the existing untouchability was not based on spiritual grounds, and the help of Government and the caste Hindus was essential for the advancement of the community...they had neither houses nor places of worship and neither wells nor tanks for their use. ...Government is called upon to give a few wells and temples for their use.<sup>282</sup>

Ayyankali’s unusual spiritual experience from Salvation Army and his initial semi-spiritual relationship with Sadananda Swami, influential friendships with Thakkad Ayya Guru Swami

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<sup>278</sup> W. S. Hunt, “the Uplifting of the depressed” *op. cit.* p. 113.

<sup>279</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op.cit.* p. 159.

<sup>280</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 59.

<sup>281</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 29<sup>th</sup> February 1916, p. 105. (emphasis added).

<sup>282</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 21<sup>st</sup> March, 1923, p.178.

and Sri Narayana Guru were responsible for his considered position in this regard. Moreover, the urge for equal status for the ill treated dalits was his major concern. He wanted to make use of the matrix of the discourse of equality promised by the missionaries of both Christian and Hindu religions and colonial government. The unquenchable thirst to make a dignified identity for dalits is also visible in Ayyankali. Therefore, the religious inclination of Ayyankali was very distinctive, exhibiting a kind of 'floating' character of him. In a strict sense, he was neither Hindu nor Christian, but placed himself carefully somewhere in between. He extended a brotherly treatment to converted Christians from dalit communities. He maintained a cordial association with Poykayil Yohannan, Pampady John Joseph, Paradi Abraham Isaac, Vellikkara Mathai Assan (later known as Vellikkara Chothy), Kurumban Daivathan<sup>283</sup> etc. Ayyankali made Saradan Solomon, a Christian pastor, the assistant secretary of SJPS and along with him the member of SMPA.<sup>284</sup>

Moreover, he never personally visited the temples or demanded temple entry, but asked land for separate temples for them due to different political reasons. In 1926, Ayyankali asked the government to give land to Pulayas to build temples. In the proceedings of SMPA it is found that: "Registry should be ordered of one acre of land in every taluk for the Hindu Pulayas to erect temples."<sup>285</sup> This can be read as a strategic move to secure land to the landless, which may never be obtained through civil negotiations with the government. He was well aware of the pro-Hinduism of the Travancore government. Similarly, during the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924 and the temple entry proclamation in 1936, he kept a studied silence and did not encourage anyone to

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<sup>283</sup> But later Srathan Solomon separated from Ayyankali and started independently working in the Kottayam Division and this separation is referred by Ayyankali in his speech in the Assembly, SMPA Proceedings, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1914, p. 24. Similarly, Vellikkara Chothy and Chako Kurumban Daivathan also started a separate movement called *Keraleeya Pulaya Maha Sabha*. A statement of Vellikkara Chothi regarding this appeared in *Malayala Manorama*, 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1917, p. 3.

<sup>284</sup> W. S. Hunt, "the Uplifting of the depressed", *op. cit.* p. 113.

<sup>285</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1926, p. 22.



go to the temples, though his son-in law T. T. Kesavan Sastri was a major propagator of the temple entry movement. However, when the Temple Entry Memorial Committee was formed Ayyankali was made a member of it in 1936.<sup>286</sup> But he applauded the temple entry proclamation by stating that “the Maharaja has done the monster of untouchability away with a single step”<sup>287</sup> when Mahatma Gandhi visited Ayyankali at Venganoor. Interestingly this meeting was not much crowded compared to the ordinary SJPS programmes.<sup>288</sup> In that meeting Mahatma Gandhi described him as Pulaya Raja:<sup>289</sup> “[I]n Ayyankali, whom you half in jest and half in endearment call the Pulaya Rajah, you have an indefatigable worker.”

Gandhiji advised the Pulayas of Travancore to make use of temple entry as an opportunity to secure deliverance of the soul likewise what the physical deliverance they have achieved.<sup>290</sup> But interestingly as a reply to Gandhiji on the matter of temple entry, Ayyankali expressed his desire to die after seeing at least ten B. A. holders from his community.<sup>291</sup> This was an intentional divergence of Ayyankali from Gandhiji’s standpoint and for him temple entry was not at all a serious matter for the upliftment of dalits but access to the modern resources like education and employment has been pivotal. This answer implicitly outweighed whole spiritual and political charisma of Gandhiji on the occasion of temple entry. The question was answered on a completely different topic and indicated the importance of education, through which they could potentially reconfigure the dalit self from the dehumanizing effect of caste. It shows that Ayyankali was ambivalent in matters of religion due to his critical political engagements with it.

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<sup>286</sup> Kesavan Sastri was member of Enquiry Committee for temple entry and he toured all over the places for hearings and propagating its idea. see Sathish Kidarakkuzhi, *op. cit.*

<sup>287</sup> *Malayala Manorama*, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1937, p. 5.

<sup>288</sup> *Malayala Manorama*, 15<sup>th</sup> January 1937, p. 5.

<sup>289</sup> Mahadev Desai, *The Epic of Travancore*, (Ahmadabad: Navajivan Karyalaya, 1937), p. 157.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.* p. 158.

<sup>291</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op.cit.* 1985, p. 146.

Dalits establishing an organisation for them and running it successfully was an unbelievable and even unthinkable endeavor at that time. Here he resorts to the modern idea of organisation and its opportunities to resist the oppressive caste system. He was well aware of the fact that an organisation will be effective than individual efforts against caste hegemony. He never hesitated to take advises from learned people and even appointed them in key positions to run his organisation smoothly. But he always kept the organisation within the hold of his own people, which shows his autonomous political entrepreneurship. To put differently, the agency of the organisation was actively in the hands of the untouchables. The publication of the magazine *Sadhujana Paripalini* was the first attempt by dalits to engage in the public sphere through the fields of writing and printing, an important manifestation of mobility under the parameters of colonial modernity. Ayyankali's transformation from a person of defiance against caste dominance into an organised, therefore, effective discourses by making uses of the spaces and potentialities of colonial modernity, is important to note. Strikingly all these activities and intellectual endeavor came from an illiterate and uneducated man, called Ayyankali.

### **Lighting the Lamp of Wisdom through Rampage and Havoc: Education, Social Status and Riots**

The situation of the education of the dalits in late nineteenth century and early decades of twentieth century was so pathetic. Nagam Aiya state that:

They were most of them workers on fields; they lived away from the dwellings of higher classes and were poor. So far as educational facilities were concerned, they were decidedly at a great disadvantage. This was the case only with the Hindu portion of these classes, for the missionary schools afforded ample facilities for the education of the converts. On account of the prejudices and exclusiveness of caste the Government and private schools were shut against them, while religious scruples prevented their joining the Mission schools. Thus, for long years they remained

without receiving the rudiments of education<sup>292</sup>.

The demand for education was one of the important slogans of the lower caste movements. Each and every community was equally active in demanding modern education in Travancore. The Travancore government made efforts to provide education to the lower castes.<sup>293</sup> For instance, “[i]n 1895-96, 15 schools were established for the ‘backward classes’ by the government: 4 for Muslims, 7 for Izhavas, 2 for Pulayas, 1 for Marakkans and 1 for Kanis. In the next year 15 more Schools were opened.”

Even though these figures were left in the government reports, it was still very difficult for Pulayas, Parayars and other lower castes to enter the field of education. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, no student from dalits was admitted to government schools. Kawashima points out<sup>294</sup> that “the government still almost completely denied admission to the children of the Pulayas and Parayas, who were much lower than the Izhavas in the caste hierarchy in Travancore, at least until about 1909.”

Ayyankali was well aware of the power of knowledge and education and its potential for liberating dalits from their social plights, predicaments and backwardness, though he was an illiterate. When dalits did not get education, Ayyankali’s first attempt was to start an elementary school for them. Thus, in 1905, he founded a *Kudippallikoodam*, an elementary school for educating dalits at Venganoor. The land for this school was purchased from Chandi Kochappi, the driver of his *Villuvandi*.<sup>295</sup> Initially two men who were literate from dalits taught the alphabets to the pupils. The very next day, upper caste men set fire to the school. But Ayyankali

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<sup>292</sup> V Nagam Aiya, *Travancore State Manual Vol. II*, (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1906), P. 481.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.* P. 482,

<sup>294</sup> Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 108.

<sup>295</sup> Kunnu Kuzi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 45.

and his followers rebuilt the school in no time. From time to time the school was destroyed by the upper castes and every now and then he and his men rebuilt it.<sup>296</sup> Later this school was upgraded to a primary school in 1914 by an order of the Director of Education, thanks to the relentless efforts by Ayyankali. Parameswara Pillai of Kaithamukku in Thiruvananthapuram, a Nair Teacher, agreed to teach in the school. He was employed on a higher pay; his remuneration was fixed as Rupees 9, at a time when the normal pay of a government teacher was Rupees 6.<sup>297</sup> Ayyankali and his SJPS's continuous efforts through memorandums to the Dewan of Travancore led to entry of untouchables to the public schools. As a result, in 1907, a situation was created to admit lower castes in the then 20 government schools, but it could not be implemented due to strong opposition from upper castes.<sup>298</sup> Ayyankali and his followers tried to get their children admitted to government schools but their efforts were in vain when upper caste authorities denied them admission.

It was difficult to open government schools for the 'polluted castes', as it would result in serious opposition from the higher castes.<sup>299</sup> Although there were some nominal special schools for Pulayars and other dalits, he wanted the dalit children to be admitted to government schools which were considered 'public schools'. Ayyankali raised this issue in the *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* in 1912. The SMPA Proceedings in this regard say that "[o]n behalf of his community, he thanked the Government for the kind help rendered to his people in the matter of admitting Pulaya boys in the Venganoor Elementary School. He then pointed out that only in 7 schools in South Travancore was admission now granted to the Pulayas and *he urged the desirability of*

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<sup>296</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op.cit.* p. 62.

<sup>297</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 72.

<sup>298</sup> Koji Kawashima, *op. cit.* p. 109.

<sup>299</sup> Koji Kavawashima, *op. cit.* p. 109.

*throwing open all the Sircar schools in the state to his people.”*<sup>300</sup>

Clearly Ayyankali was not ready to give up on the face of oppositions from the upper castes in this regard. He devised unprecedented and innovative strategies against the upper castes to ensure the admission of untouchables to public schools. He called for a general agricultural strike, wherein the untouchable labourers were called upon to refuse to work in the paddy fields owned by upper caste landlords.<sup>301</sup> This was a move in response to social discrimination against dalits by denying them the right to education and it was part of his resolve to forcefully grab admission in public schools. Against this socio-cultural apartheid, Ayyankali called for the strike by exhorting dalits not to do any manual labour for the upper castes until their children were enrolled in public schools.<sup>302</sup> This resulted in a situation in which agricultural operations came to a standstill and upper caste landlords were forced to leave their agricultural land barren. Ayyankali warned that “[i]f you [upper castes] don’t allow our children to study, I will make muttipul [a kind of grass weed] sprout in all your paddy fields.”<sup>303</sup>

The landlords tried to sabotage this struggle in many ways. They even tried to import labourers from neighboring native states to replace the untouchables, but did not succeed. They also tried to work in the field by using their own people. Mithavadi, a Malayalam news magazine, has reported that Ayyankali spoke about this incident in a speech delivered at Perinad in Kollam in 1915.

He (Ayyankali) described an incident occurred in Venganoor of Southern Travancore. When the Nairs opposed the admission of the Pulayas in schools he prohibited the Pulayas from working for the Nairs in their agricultural fields. Because of that it took the whole day’s labour of six Nair men to compensate the

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<sup>300</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912, p. 82. (Emphasis added).

<sup>301</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 32.

<sup>302</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op.cit.* p. 87.

<sup>303</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 28.

labour of a single Pulaya woman. They fell ill as they were exposed to the alien working conditions involving mud and water.<sup>304</sup>

Due to the stubbornness of the landlords and the determination of the labourers, the strike lasted long and the reserve stock of food grains for the survival of labourers was fastly running out. In this crucial crisis moment, Ayyankali asked help from the fisher folk community. They agreed to take one person from each dalit family in the fishing boats and gave a share of the catch to them. Ayyankali became a real headache for landlords and many of them even offered cash rewards for catching Ayyakali dead or alive.<sup>305</sup>

Government appointed Kandala Nagam Pillai, a First-Class Magistrate, for settling the strike and finally he worked out a solution favourable to the labourers.<sup>306</sup> Although it was a struggle for educational rights, it was also a struggle by manual and agricultural workers who were considered untouchables. They demanded wage hikes along with some other demands.<sup>307</sup> Chentharassery reports that the strike continued for one year, while some others say that it lasted for three years.<sup>308</sup> The strike ended with a decision to increase wages and with a promise of admitting untouchable students in the public schools without restrictions. While Chentharassery's 1985 book Ayyankali says that the strike took place in 1907-1908, his other book gives 1913 as the year.<sup>309</sup> Dalit Bandhu N. K. Jose disagreed with this date and says it happened in 1914.<sup>310</sup> It seems that the strike of the agricultural labourers happened in Travancore over a long period of time, in different times in region wise, because a series of riots were taking place in different

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<sup>304</sup> *Mithavadi*, January 1916, quoted in T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 33.

<sup>305</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery (1985), *op.cit.* p. 33.

<sup>306</sup> C. Abhimanyu. *op. cit.* p. 90.

<sup>307</sup> Freedom of movement, entrance to the education and rise in wages were the demands of that strike. C. Abhimanyu, *op. cit.* p. 90.

<sup>308</sup> Kunnukuzhi S Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *Op. cit.* p. 51.

<sup>309</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op.cit.* 2007, p. 31.

<sup>310</sup> See Dalit Bandhu N. K. Jose, *Mahanaya Ayyankali: Jeevithavum Darshanavum*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Bahujan Vartha), pp. 164-178.

places in Travancore region between 1904-1915 years. Corresponding to this Ayyankali raised the issue of admission to educational institutions in Travancore in the SriMulam Popular Assembly on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1914, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1915 and 29<sup>th</sup> February 1916.<sup>311</sup> Hence it is reasonable to assume that agricultural labourers' strike was held in a series of strikes in different regions of Travancore for education and labour issues. Ayyankali took a leading role in successfully channeling these struggles for winning educational rights for the untouchables.

Interestingly, the Travancore Education Code was introduced in the year 1909-10, suspending all then existing rules regarding education. It introduced modern curriculum and recognized the importance of throwing open its schools to all classes 'without distinction of caste and creed'.<sup>312</sup> But the caste ridden society of Travancore was not ready to accept this move. Even the so-called progressive minds have shown their real conservative mindset. The revolutionary rebel journalist *Swadesabhimani* Ramakrishna pillai, who wrote the first biography of Karl Marx in Malayalam, observed like this:

...[W]e don't see any good reason for supporting the people who demands that the children should sit together without considering their caste distinctions as same as the demand for complete equality in manners and customs. Bringing together those caste groups who have been cultivating intelligence for many generations and those caste groups who have been cultivating the land for many more generations is like tying a horse and a buffalo together.<sup>313</sup>

This shows the general attitude of the Kerala Caste society not only towards dalit education but also towards their emancipation. If a celebrated progressive thinker like Ramakrishnapillai could say so, the magnitude of influence of caste in Kerala society during this period could be discerned from this.

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<sup>311</sup> See the SMPA Proceedings of these dates. There Ayyankali strongly raise the issue of school entrance. I will give more details in the next session of this chapter.

<sup>312</sup> Rajagopalachari, Note. pp. 54-5, quoted in Koji Kawashima, *op. cit.* p.110.

<sup>313</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 36.

As demanded by Ayyankali Dewan P. Rajagopalachari promised to throw open all schools that are open to Ezhavas to Pulayas as well in 1912.<sup>314</sup> But at the practical level it remained only a promise as admission of dalit children in schools were vehemently opposed by higher castes across Travancore. Riots broke out in many places like Balaramapuram, Venganoor, Kaniyapuram, Kazhakoottam, Kavalam, Pullad, etc.<sup>315</sup> Pullad riot was an important one among these. Vellikkara Mathai Aasan (Vellikkara Chothy) with the help of Kurumban Daivathan initiated activities to gain admission of lower caste children in the Lower Primary School, Pullad near Thiruvalla. Kunjuthevan (who became T. T. Kesavan Sastri, and son in law of Ayyankali), Azhakan (T. T. Azhakan), Painkan (P. T. Velayudhan), Mailan (P. T. Mailan) and Auseph were the children chosen to get admission in the school and they came with a large group of people including trained masters of martial arts for the protection of the children.<sup>316</sup> To defeat this endeavor, the upper caste organised themselves under Uoonnupara Panikar, a savarna landlord, who believed that untouchability and caste hierarchy were the result of divine will and that if anyone touched an untouchable he/she would suffer leprosy and his/her generation would perish with mental illness.<sup>317</sup> A fierce clash occurred between two parties and the upper caste students were forced to run away from the scene. The school was burnt down. Vellikkara Chothi and his followers built another shed for the school by the next week, which was again burnt down. Vellikkara Chothi went to Thiruvananthapuram and met Ayyankali. They together met the Dewan Rajagopalachari and sought his help, following which the government intervened in this matter. As a result, some progressive upper caste men like Varikkannamala Narayana Pillai, who was a *Kottaram Vaidyan* (court physician) and the nephew of Uoonnupara Panikar (who led the

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<sup>314</sup> Reply to Ayyankali by the Dewan, see SMPA Proceedings, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1912, p. 82.

<sup>315</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 71.

<sup>316</sup> Sathish Kidarakkuzhy, *T. T. Kesavan Sastri: Charitram thamaskaricha Karmayogi*, (Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society Ltd, 2018), pp. 22-23.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* p. 23.



savarna camp against dalits), with the help of the police came in support of the untouchables leading to the entry of dalits into the school.<sup>318</sup> This school came to be known as *theevacha school*, the burnt down school, thereafter.<sup>319</sup>

Due to the continuous efforts of Ayyankali and his organisations, other dalits and backward class representatives of SMPA, another circular was issued by the government in 1914 to encourage the admission of untouchables in ‘public’ schools. Following this, Ayyankali brought a girl child named Panchami to get her admitted in Uruttambalam School. Panchami was a Pulaya girl, daughter of Ayyankali’s disciple Poojari Ayyan. There was tension between the two groups before she was forcibly admitted to the school. But two days later the school was set on fire by upper castes in retaliation for this historic entry admission.<sup>320</sup> Panchami is seen as an icon of dalit mobility and resilience, a Pulaya girl entering into the realm of modern educational system, though it was short lived. But the incident is celebrated as a symbol of dalit resistance in the history of modern Kerala. This is another example of a performative egalitarianism, a concept used by Vivek Narayanan.<sup>321</sup> The Panchami incident led to serious conflict between the dalits and upper caste Nairs, which escalated into a serious communal riot that lasted for seven days. The Nairs led by Kochappi Pillai shouted that “no Pulayars are allowed to study in our school. If that happens, we don’t want that school.”<sup>322</sup> The riot spread into adjacent areas and came to be known as Uruttambalam riot or *Pulaya Lahala*. It was also known as

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<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 20-21.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

<sup>320</sup> Christian Missionaries were the first torchbearers of modern education in Kerala. They began to give education to dalits from the early decades of the nineteenth century. There are several references of dalits who got education in Kerala. See Koji Kawashima, *Op. cit.* pp. 107-113. Vinil Paul pointed out that the untouchable girls who got modern education prior to Panchami’s entrance to the school with Ayyankali see, Vinil Paul “Colonial Keralathile Dalit Vidyabhasathinte Rashtreeya Charitram” (Political history of education of Dalits in Colonial Kerala), *Mathrubhoomi Weekly*, May 24-30, 2020. But here Ayyankali’s politically assertive entry with Panchami in to the modern education system is significant.

<sup>321</sup> Vivek Narayanan, *op. cit.*

<sup>322</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 38.

*Thonnooramandu Lahala*, the riot that took place in the Malayalam Year 1090 (C. E. 1915).<sup>323</sup>

Swami Pavitrananda, a retired Head Master from Ayyanavar community, another dalit community from Travancore, who was an eye witness of this riot recalled the incident in a book written by M. L. Choleyil as follows:<sup>324</sup>

Ayyankali tried to enroll the Pulaya children in the Uruttambalam Government School. This act was not tolerated by Savarna castes.... As a result there was a conflict between Pulayas and Nairs. At that time there was a rumor that the Nayers were beaten to death by the Pulayas and it soon spread. This wounded the pride of Nairs and other Savarna castes in general.... The upper castes came together to beat the Pulayas and it turned into a riot.... This riot, popularly known as *Pulaya Lahala*, was not actually carried out by the Pulayas. It was the creation of upper castes to oppress the Pulayas. It was a horrible, brutal and heinous attack to keep the slave castes always at the bottom. The riots were led by anti-social rowdies and spread to dacoits, heist, looting and burning at many places.... But the kind landlords in some places hid their Pulaya labourers inside their granaries and protected them.... Ayyankali and his followers fought bravely. Later it spread to people other than Pulayas. Among the Ayyanavar community there were famous masters who were well versed in martial arts. Brave men like Kapyar Assan, Joshua Bhaktar etc. were organised at the American Mission Church at Chulliyoor [for defence].... The riotors were led by Ponnai Pillai *Chattambi*<sup>325</sup> (Nair), Govindan *Chattambi* (Ezhava), Kaduva Panikkan (Assary<sup>326</sup>) etc.... Sree Narayanaguru opposed the Ezhava involvement in the riot against dalits.<sup>327</sup>

It is noteworthy that under Ayyankali's leadership the dalits defeated the upper caste onslaught and dealt a heavy blow to their false pride. On December 9, 1914, the *Madras Mail* reported the riot under the headline "A serious disturbance". The report states that:

A serious and widespread disturbance, unfortunately attended with violence and considerable lawlessness, has occurred in the Neyyatinkarai Taluq (Travancore State) and the people are much perturbed the trouble began at Orruttambalam a village about eight miles from Trivandrum, over a Sircar Girls School, were the

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<sup>323</sup> See C. Abhimanyu, *op.cit.* pp. 127-133.

<sup>324</sup> M. L. Choleyil, *Ayyanavar: Oru Lakhu Jeevacharithram*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Published by M. Lopez, 1984), pp. 59-66.

<sup>325</sup> Rowdy

<sup>326</sup> Carpenter caste in Viswakarma community

<sup>327</sup> M. L. Choleyil. *op. cit.* p. 59-60.

Pulaya (untouchable) girls were not given admission until a few months ago.<sup>328</sup>

The newspaper report speaks about Ayyankali's efforts in getting education for Pulayas and the right of the Pulaya girls to schooling and how it was disallowed by the upper caste Nairs. It is reported that Parameswaran Pillai, the Sectional Magistrate, arrested five Pulayas, charging them for obstructing Nair girls' education; and this led to serious disturbances in that area, in which other communities were also affected. The workers of the church of Salvation Army were also attacked by the Nairs. Several houses were looted and burnt.<sup>329</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> December *The Times of India* reported the news with a title "A Question of Caste: Travancore Disturbance" almost in the same lines.<sup>330</sup> On 21 December 1914, again the *Madras Mail* reported about the government intervention to mitigate the riot. It says that Dewan accompanied by the Commissioner of Police and Sub Division First class Magistrate visited the affected areas and the disturbances have been completely repressed.<sup>331</sup> *Nasrani Deepika*, a Malayalam newspaper reports that the Madras Government had asked for a detailed report on this riot broke out between Pulayas and Nairs through British Resident to Travancore Government.<sup>332</sup> All these reports amply make it clear the riot was serious disrupted peace in the affected areas.

J. W. Gladstone quotes a missionary report that reads:<sup>333</sup> "[S]oon the disorder spread all over the district and to other places. The Pulayas were beaten and plundered. Near Trivandrum, Nairs were helped by men of the Imperial Service Troops whose barracks are near." But the Pulayas retaliated in a few places. The organised Pulayas are said to have beaten the Nairs, who were the members of the state troop came to participate in the riot in the darkness of nights, with

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<sup>328</sup> *The Madras Mail*, 9<sup>th</sup> December 1914, p. 6.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>330</sup> *The Times of India*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1914, p. 6.

<sup>331</sup> *The Madras Mail*, 21<sup>th</sup> December 1914, p. 3.

<sup>332</sup> *Nasrani Deepika*, 12<sup>th</sup> February 1915. P. 2.

<sup>333</sup> H. T. Wills to Rev. F. Lenwood (Foreign Secretary LMS) Letter, M. S, dated Trivandrum, November 21, 1914, Box 25, F 2, TR-IL, CWMA, Quoted in J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 286.

*kavalamadal* (the stem of coconut leaf). Later Ayyankali made a complaint to the commander of Pangode Military Camp regarding the involvement of people belonging to the troops and found out the bruises on their bodies, as evidence of these incidents.<sup>334</sup>

Ayyankali was directly involved in several riots in different places in Travancore where he clashed with the attacking upper caste goons. Chentharassery reveals many of such incidents. In 1912, he entered the Nedumangad market and fought to establish the right to enter the market. This time he fought with Muslim men who prevented dalits from entering the market. There were clashes in some places in Kaniyapuram and Manakkad. During this period, after a meeting in Kazhakkootam, there was another clash.<sup>335</sup> This time Kazhakkootam Police Inspector Daniel, who was C. V. Kunhiraman's<sup>336</sup> brother-in-law, intervened in the matter and avoided the possibility of a riot.<sup>337</sup> Other riots in which Ayyankali was involved either directly or through his influence were Thattatheruvu riot of Venganoor, Nedumangadu riot, Chettippilla Theruvu riot in Pallichal village, Ammankovil Theruvu riot of Balaramapuram, Olathanni market riot (in which clashes happened with the Nair 21<sup>st</sup> Company of Neyyattinkara), etc.<sup>338</sup> Another notable incident is that Yacoob *Chattambi* of Danuvachapuram, the body guard of Ayyankali, was arrested in 1915 on the charges of chopping off the hand of Captain Velu Pillai of 21<sup>st</sup> Company troop during the riot. Ayyankali came to the scene and got him released from the Balaramapuram police station through a day and night *Sathyagraha* by using his influence as a Member of SMPA.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 95.

<sup>335</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985' p. 68.

<sup>336</sup> C. V. Kunjhiraman (1871-1949) was a well-known social reformer, journalist and a follower of Sree Narayana Guru.

<sup>337</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, pp. 67-68.

<sup>338</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 115.

<sup>339</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 95.

The final victory of all these riots for upholding the right to education was with Ayyankali. To put differently, through these riots and openly and physically challenging the upper castes, Ayyankali won the right to education for the untouchables in Travancore. In 1915, *Mithavadi* published a table in an article titled “Education of Travancore” showing the number of people from various castes attending schools in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The table is reproduced as follows:<sup>340</sup>

| <b>Enrolment of students of various castes in schools in various years</b> |                                                                             |                        |                        |                                   |                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>Caste</b>                                                               | <b>Enrolment of students in various years (in M. E.) (C. E. in bracket)</b> |                        |                        |                                   |                                   |
|                                                                            | <b>1087<br/>(1912)</b>                                                      | <b>1088<br/>(1913)</b> | <b>1089<br/>(1914)</b> | <b>1081 (1906)<br/>more/ less</b> | <b>1089 (1914)<br/>more/ less</b> |
| Nair                                                                       | 55425                                                                       | 64724                  | 70752                  | +9299                             | +6023                             |
| Ezhava                                                                     | 17017                                                                       | 20724                  | 23895                  | +3707                             | +3171                             |
| Christians                                                                 | 67204                                                                       | 77161                  | 54161                  | +9957                             | +700                              |
| Muslims                                                                    | 4394                                                                        | 4957                   | 4853                   | +562                              | -104                              |
| Pulaya                                                                     | 1475                                                                        | 1191                   | 2017                   | -282                              | +826                              |
| Source: <i>Mithavadi</i> , 1915                                            |                                                                             |                        |                        |                                   |                                   |

This table shows a slow but gradual progress of Pulays in education in Travancore, as compared to other communities like Nairs, Ezhavas and Christians, during 1906-1914. All communities, except Muslims, registered progress in terms of numerical growth in educational attainment. The growth of Muslims in this regard was negative. Koji Kawashima prepared a table, compiling data from various Travancore Administrative Reports, showing the steady educational progress of Pulaya and Paraya communities between 1910-11 and 1920-21. The table is reproduced as follows:

| <b>Number of Pulaya and Paraya pupils in schools in various years</b> |                |                |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>Year</b>                                                           | <b>Pulayas</b> | <b>Parayas</b> |
| 1910-11                                                               | 1589           | 1122           |
| 1912-13                                                               | 1191           | 1290           |
| 1914-15                                                               | 4256           | 1816           |
| 1916-17                                                               | 10913          | 4955           |
| 1918-19                                                               | 13204          | 4971           |
| 1920-21                                                               | 12381          | 5135           |

<sup>340</sup> *Mithavadi*, 1915, Book 3, Issue 1, p. 17.

This table<sup>341</sup> shows a remarkable improvement in the number of dalit children attending schools during the second decade of the 20th century. The highest annual growth occurred in Travancore in 1916-17 in the wake of the Ayyankali-led rebellion to secure the right to education for dalits. The period also witnessed continuous campaign for the cause with a number of memorandums and interventions in the SMPA by several members, including Ayyankali. The significant progress of dalit children in education as shown in the table was certainly an outcome of such a multipronged struggle spearheaded by Ayyankali.

The *Perinadu Lahala*, the riot in Perinadu, occupies a special position in the history of Ayyankali's struggles against caste oppression. On this occasion, Ayyankali, as part of instilling self-respect among the untouchables, exhorted them to discard *Kallayum Malayum*, stone ornaments worn by untouchable women, which symbolized slavery and degradation. Perinadu at Kollam, was a place where Gopaladasan, the branch leader of *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham*, was working. Under the influence of Ayyankali, Gopaladasan held several meetings at places like Prakkulam, Thazhava, Anchalumood, Thrikkaruva, Perinad, Cherumood, Panayam etc. as part of the campaign against wearing *Kallayum Malayum*, a social marker of caste. Gopaladasan called a meeting at Perinadu, in Cherumoodu on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1915 with the same intention. The upper castes organised against this meeting hired Nallerikuri Nair, a goon, and offered, 10 *para* paddy fields, 2 acres of land and 1,000 *panam* (local currency) to him with the aim of killing Gopaladasan.<sup>342</sup> When the meeting was in progress upper-caste hirelings attacked the participants. Visakhan Thevan, who was the leader of Chennithala riot for school entry, was badly attacked. But the dalits countered the attack vigorously for their defense. The Pulaya women presented there actively participated in the counter-strike with their reaping sickle,

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<sup>341</sup> Table 4: Number of Pulaya and Paraya Pupils, Koji Kavashima, *op. cit.* p. 111.

<sup>342</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 107.

seriously injuring the caste pride of the upper-castes. In retaliation the upper castes unleashed a series of cruel assaults on the untouchables all over Perinadu and adjacent areas in Kollam. Around 600 houses of dalits were burnt down.<sup>343</sup> This incident is known as *Perinadu Lahala* (the riot of Perinadu). *Mithavadi*, reports this incident as follows:

In Cherumood of Perinad, a meeting of Pulayas started around 10 am on a Sunday in the Malayalam month of *Thulam*. Around 2000 Pulayas, including women and children, attended the meeting. As the meeting began, two armed rowdies approached Gopaladasa fearlessly to attack him. By knowing the motive of these rowdies Pulayas surrounded them and beat them up severely. The Pulayas sent their leader, Mr. Gopaladasan, to Kollam with the help of around hundred men. Later they returned and ransacked, looted and burnt the house of one of the rowdies. The armed Pulayas destroyed the second man's home also. But they could not burn it as it was a tiled house. So they broke it and destroyed the door. After this incident, the returning Pulayas were moving towards the west when they were intercepted by a group of Nairs. After a fierce fight the Nairs scattered the Pulayas away. Later Nairs burnt the huts of Pulayas around there. More than 300 houses of Pulayas were burnt and destroyed till this date. Pulayas ran away from there and most of them are absconding.<sup>344</sup>

*The Times of India* reported the incident under the headline "Riot near Quilon" as follows:

A riot occurred at Perinad village, six miles from Quilon in central Travancore on Sunday last. The reports received state that the Pulayas used to hold a communal meeting every Sunday. At their last meeting, under the presidentship of Gopal Das, their leader and reformer, two Nairs went in and suggested holding the meetings only on alternate Sundays, so that the services of the Pulayas could be availed of more largely by the land holders. They also insisted on Pulaya women wearing a *pasimali*, or necklace of glass beads, an ornament hitherto used by them as a distinguishing mark but now being discarded. The Pulayas disagreeing became enraged and began committing excesses. In a body they went and burnt some Nair houses, looted and destroyed property and threw stones at the Nairs, wounding them. Some Pulaya huts were also burnt, of which two versions are current. One is that the Pulayas themselves committed the incendiarism, and the other that the Nairs were the aggressors. On receiving information of the disturbance, the District Superintendent of Police, Divisional Assistant and District Magistrate hurried to the spot with a posse of police men and quelled the disturbances. Police are posted there to preserve peace. Most of the Pulaya men in the neighborhood who left the place are in hiding and

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<sup>343</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 83.

<sup>344</sup> *Mithavadi*, November 1915, Book 3 issue 11, p. 8.

Gopal Das, the leader is still missing.<sup>345</sup>

*Vivekodayam*, a Malayalam news magazine condemned this incident in a strong language and supported Pulayas. It also pointed out that many of the Pulayas approached the Christian Missionaries after this incident.<sup>346</sup> J. W. Gladstone, quoting a missionary, also describes the violence involved in this riot: “Edmunds, the LMS Missionary at Quilon (Kollam), wrote in his annual report that, ‘in this riot two houses of the high castes were said to have been damaged, or burnt down, by the Pulayars. In revenge the high-castes damaged, or burnt down, several hundred houses of the Pulayars’.”<sup>347</sup>

C. Abhimanyu writes that a 21 member team led by Gopaladasan went to Thiruvananthapuram and met Ayyankali *Yasman*<sup>348</sup> to seek a solution to the issues.<sup>349</sup> Ayyankali mortgaged some of his land for Rs. 500 and went to Perinad with that money and other necessary preparations.<sup>350</sup> Chentharassery narrates the further developments. Ayyankali met the then Dewan (Krishnan Nair) of Travancore who was camping in Kollam and the Dewan assured him that he will intervene to ease the situation. He asked for the list of dalits who were arrested by the police in connection with the riots as culprits and requested the authorities to withdraw the police from the scene. Ayyankali visited the affected areas and tried hard to calm the situation. He requested the Dewan to convene a peace-keeping meeting and managed to get his consent in this regard with the help of Kollam Circle Inspector (in charge of Law and Order) Gopaldaswamy Pillai, also a dalit from Tamil Nadu. Tharabhai, a circus company owner, who was camping in

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<sup>345</sup> *The Times of India*, Oct 29, 1915, p. 8.

<sup>346</sup> *Vivekodayam*, 1915, Book 13, No. 1 & 2, pp. 214-215.

<sup>347</sup> Edmunds, Annual Report of the Quilon and Attingal Mission Districts for the year 1915, MS, TR-R, Box 9, CWMA. Quoted in J. W. Gladstone, *op. cit.* p. 288.

<sup>348</sup> *Yassaman*- colloquial pronounsation of Malayalam word *Yajamanan* meaning the Master. Ayyankali was called by his followers.

<sup>349</sup> C. Abhimanyu, *op. cit.* p. 138.

<sup>350</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 90.



Kollam at that time, lent her circus pavilion to the peace meeting. She was a Cheruma, a dalit sect from Malabar region, and a native of Thalassery.<sup>351</sup>

Ayyankali, with the help of Dewan and other progressive upper-caste leaders summoned a peace meeting at Kollam on Sunday on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1915,<sup>352</sup> which was presided over by Changanassery Parmeswarapillai. More than four thousand people were assembled there and Vellikkara Chothy, Vishakhan Thevan, Gopaladasan etc. controlled the crowd. This incident was reported by the Malayalam newspaper *Malayali* under the headline *Kallayum Malayum* and reprinted by another Malayalam newspaper *Mithavadi* as follows:

... [A] public meeting was conducted on *Dhanu* 4<sup>th</sup> (1915 December 19, Sunday) at Kollam.... along with other chief members of all castes, around four thousand Pulayas attended this meeting.... After Raman Thambi's speech, Ayyankali delivered a long speech.... As requested by Ayyankali the people who were attending this meeting agreed to make the Pulaya women to abandon their *Kallayum malayum*. When Changanassery Parmeswarapillai, the president of the meeting asked for it, they did it unanimously. At this stage, the Chief Secretary, Mr. Vieyra B. A. reached the spot in a motor car from Thiruvananthapuram.... All the Pulaya women who reached for that meeting broke their necklaces, and placed it as a heap near the stage. Chief Secretary Mr. Vieyra and President Mr. Parameswarapillai took one each from that heap of necklaces as memoir. Such a large meeting has never taken place here in recent times.<sup>353</sup>

Rajaramarao (Kollam Peshkar), Govinda Pillai (first class magistrate), two circle inspectors, many advocates, bureaucrats, traders, important figures from the citizenry, more than four thousand untouchables and people of various castes and religions participated in this meeting. *Mithavadi* report suggests that Ayyankali diplomatically secured the consent to give up *Kallayum Malayum* and attained the right to wear modern clothing and made them to do so. Thus the meeting was a grand success and it was a great strategic victory of Ayyankali. The cases

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<sup>351</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 90.

<sup>352</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 93.

<sup>353</sup> *Mithavadi*, January 1916, quoted in T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, pp. 93-96.

against the Pulaya accused in the riot were successfully defended through the advocacy of Ilanjikkal John.<sup>354</sup> Kumaran Assan wrote an editorial titled “Hey riot, you are the greatest social reformer”, showing the significance of these ‘riots’ in bringing social change.<sup>355</sup> All these riots broke out as reaction of caste society against the dalit/subaltern groups, who tried to make changes in the social norms by challenging it in the space conceded by colonial modernity. It is interesting to note that these struggles were castigated as riots/lahala by the government and the so called civil society. And for the untouchables they were struggles to gain self-respect and equality. But all these struggles were known as ‘Pulaya Lahalas’. In a way Ayyankali’s life was filled with ‘riots’ as the struggle he undertook involved open conflicts with the prevailing social norms and its upper caste beneficiaries. In that sense, we can say that Ayyankali organised and encouraged ‘riots’ and these ‘riots’ made Ayyankali resisting the hegemonic power of caste. From his adulthood to the middle-ages he fought relentlessly in the struggle for equality and dignity for *Sadujanam*, a heuristically coined identity for the poor, downtrodden and dispossessed. In the beginning stages, his involvement in riots and skirmishes which he fought bravely with the caste aristocratic pride which bolstered the self-respect of dalits. Right from the beginning, Ayyankali was convinced by the fact that indulging in physical resistance against caste oppression, referred to as riot according to the prevailing legal and governmental vocabulary, is a political act. That is why he recruited and trained martial experts and physically strong people into his group. He was also bolstered by a growing sense of the numerical strength of his community as ever since the practice of census came into being, a consciousness about the demographic power of the dalit masses. Hence in his speeches in the SMPA in 1921, Ayyankali

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<sup>354</sup> Ilanjikkal John was a well-known advocate from Kollam. He was the advocate for dalits, who were participated in the riot. The clints were give their toil to dig a pond named Kummankulam, which is situated near the present District Panchayat Office, Kollam. For details see Kunnukuzhi S. Mani and P. S. Anirudhan, *op. cit.* p. 113.

<sup>355</sup> P. Bhaskaranunni, *Kollathinte Charitram*, (Kollam: Kollam Public Library and Research Centre, 1994), p. 145.

used to remind that he was speaking on behalf of a group consisting of 4 lakhs Pulayas.<sup>356</sup>

The concept of ‘caste radicalism’<sup>357</sup> developed by Anupama Rao to refer to the defiance and resistance of Dalits against caste Hindu hegemony in Maharashtra can be used to understand Ayyankali’s radicalism. Ayyankali involved in the riots to attain and secure the freedom of movement, which was denied to the untouchables for centuries. His initial activities among the dalits focused on freedom of movement. This was an act of defiance to demystify the notions of caste hegemony. In this case he decided to use their physical force and valor of masculinity, and through these riots he made the dalits aware of their own strength. This was a refashioning of dalit self and reconfiguration of the social subjectivity. Secondly through his involvement in riots Ayyankali aimed to secure freedom as a right to educate untouchable castes and give them political visibility. Thirdly through the riots Ayyankali made his people aware of the right to freedom of wearing dress, i.e., the freedom to choose modern clothing and other basic rights as humanbeings. A remarkable fact is that Ayyankali, through several revolts in open defiance against caste hegemony, brought human dignity to the untouchables for the first time in modern Kerala.

### **Voice of the Voiceless: Ayyankali in Sri Mulam Popular Assembly**

Maharaja Sri Mulam Thirunal set up a Legislative Council in Travancore in 1888. He reformed the Council thrice in his life time - in 1898, 1919 and 1921. The Raja also made a unique experiment in 1904 by creating an additional body, larger in size but with no law-making

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<sup>356</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 21 March 2023, p. 178.

<sup>357</sup> Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India*, (London: University of Californiya Press, 2009). pp. 39-80.

powers,<sup>358</sup> known as the *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* (or *Praja Sabha*) of Travancore. It was an assembly of the representatives of the landlords and merchants in the princely state in addition to the Legislative Council.<sup>359</sup> The objective of constituting this assembly, according to the government, was “solely to give the people an opportunity of bringing to the notice of Government, their requirements, wishes or grievances on the one hand, and on the other to make the policy and measures of Government better known to the people so that all possible grounds of misconception in regard to the action of Government may be removed.”<sup>360</sup> Three kinds of members were part of this Assembly. The first category was those who were selected by Division Peshkar (the district heads); the second was the representatives deputed by the Municipalities, other public bodies and associations; and the final category was the members nominated by the government.<sup>361</sup>

In 1907 Travancore government began to nominate lower caste representatives to the SMPA. N. Kumaran Assan was one of the first persons who represented SNDP under that category.<sup>362</sup> During the time of Dewan P. Rajagopalachari, unrepresented lower castes submitted a representation to the government to avail representation in the Assembly.<sup>363</sup> It is reported that in 1908 “the Dewan with the consent of the Maharaja has given permission to the much-despised Pariah class to send one representative to the Popular Assembly”<sup>364</sup> as a nominee of the government. Further, in 1910 Karamana P. K. Govindapillai, the editor of *Subhashini*, a Malayalam news magazine and a Nair by birth, was nominated to represent the

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<sup>358</sup> R. Ramakrishnan Nair, *Constitutional Experiments in Kerala*, (Trivandrum: The Kerala Academy of Political Science, 1964). P. 3.

<sup>359</sup> The Travancore Govt. Gazette dated 4 October, 1904, quoted in R. Ramakrishnan Nair, *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> Chentharasseri, 1985, op. cit. p. 40.

<sup>363</sup> “Editorial Notes”, Vivekodayam, Vol XI (Thulam), 1915, p. 233, Quoted in J. W. Gladstone op. cit. P. 275.

<sup>364</sup> *The West Coast Spectator*, Calicut, October 21, 1908, quoted in J. W. Gladstone op. cit.

*Sadhujanaparipalana Sangham*, in the *SriMulam Popular Assembly*.<sup>365</sup> Gopalapillai advocated for the case of Pulayas and other depressed classes very strongly in the SMPA. Two years later, Ayyankali as secretary of the *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham*, himself became a member of the assembly in 1912.

An interesting story precedes Ayyankali's nomination to the SMPA. It is said that Ayyankali went to see the Dewan of Travancore one day for demanding his entry into the *Popular Assembly*, but the upper-caste security guards did not allow him inside knowing that he is a Pulaya untouchable. Upon this, Ayyankali along with Thomas *Wadhyar* went directly to the nearby telegraph office and sent a telegram to Dewan regarding this. After reading this Divan promptly sent some of his assistants to receive and bring him to the residence of the Dewan.<sup>366</sup> It is interesting to note how Ayyankali used telegraph, a colonial modern apparatus, to bypass the caste barriers to reach the Dewan. Ayyankali continued as a member of the *Popular Assembly* for the next 22 years and he worked hard for gaining and safeguarding the civil rights of untouchables.

Ayyankali made his maiden speech in the SMPA on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1912.<sup>367</sup> He came to the *Praja Sabha* by wearing a black coat, which was gifted to him by a European tourist named John Henry as a token of respect for Ayyankali's struggle for freedom of movement through *Villuvandi*.<sup>368</sup> Ayyankali started his speech by expressing his gratitude and it is recorded in the SMPA proceedings as follows: "First of all thanked the government for nominating him as a Member of the Assembly to represent the Pulaya community, and also thanked the Members of

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<sup>365</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, p. 40.

<sup>366</sup> See T. H. P. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 1985, pp. 50-51.

<sup>367</sup> Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, *Ayyankaliyude Prasangangal*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books, 2016), p. 22.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

the last session for having unanimously acceded to the request made by their representative that a man from the Pulaya community itself should be allowed this time.”<sup>369</sup>

In all his interventions in the SMPA during the time between 26<sup>th</sup> February 1912 to 18<sup>th</sup> March 1932, Ayyankali fought for the dalits in general and Pulayas in particular, as a representative of Pulayas as per the precedents of the SMPA.<sup>370</sup> He raised a wide variety of issues, particularly pertaining to land, education, employment, apart from the questions of civil rights, and social and political equality in general.

## LAND

The entire structure of land relationship was determined and governed by upper-caste hierarchy in Kerala since the medieval period. As a resource, the dalit communities in Kerala were completely denied with land and the lower caste communities were landless agricultural labourers or agrestic slaves.<sup>371</sup> The *Janmis*, landlords, were Namboothiri Brahmins or chieftains of the *nadu*, who possessed the lion share of the land. The Pandarappattom proclamation of 1865 enabled the tenants, which consist of Nairs and other intermediate castes such Christians, Mohemmedens and to some extent Ezhavas, to possess and transact the land.<sup>372</sup> But dalits were excluded from land ownership. When the dalit-self was refashioned in the colonial period land became a central theme of political subjectivity. Access to resources was its political intention, which was understood as a political necessity for emancipation. Moreover, the demand represented a critique of the structured socio-political and economic inequalities of caste

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<sup>369</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1912, p. 18.

<sup>370</sup> In SMPA, nominated members are supposed to represent the caste/community to which he belongs. Though Ayyankali envisaged and represented *Sadhu Janam*, poor and deprived people, the technicality of SMPA permitted him to speak only on the behalf of Pulayas.

<sup>371</sup> For more details of the land tenure system in Kerala, see T. C. Varghese, *Agrarian Change and Economic Consequences: Land tenures in Kerala 1850-1960*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1970).

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

hegemony.

From the very beginning itself Ayyankali was aware of the importance of land as a socio-political and economic tool for the progress of dalits. From the very first speech in SMPA itself he raised the question of land denied to dalits for centuries. Though Ayyankali and other leaders from dalits were aware of the fact that they were excluded from the fertile and cultivatable land, or even unable to purchase those lands, acquiring any form of land became their political agenda. *Puduval*, waste land was the only option for them. He complained that the applications to get *puduval* land,<sup>373</sup> as per the government advisory, in places like Neyyattinkara, Vilavancode, Trivandrum and Nedumangadu taluks did not generate any positive results. Moreover, he pointed out that the main obstacle to the untouchables getting land was the support of the subordinate revenue officials to the landlords to get *puduval* land which was in fact cleared and reclaimed by the Pulayas. He also added that the Pulayas were forced to run away from their habitations. Ayyankali brought it to the attention of the SMPA that in Valiyakavungal in Ranni in Chengannur Thaluk, Alapra in Changanacherry Taluk and Perumbathumuri in Thiruvalla Taluk, the forestland reclaimed by the Pulays for living and cultivation were encroached by the landlords by beating and chasing away them with the support of the forest officials on the false charge of occupying forest reserves.<sup>374</sup>

The landlessness of Pulayas and their continuing dispossession were brought to the public attention through these speeches. To this, Dewan replied him that the Pulayas can apply for the

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<sup>373</sup> In the year 1887, Travancore decided to give away waste land (*puduval* land) to the ryots and later to the public. An average value at Re. 1 per acre imposed on waste lands. In 1903 the value of the reserved trees was allowed to be recovered from the registry holders in convenient instalments in cases of poverty. Ulloor. S. Parameswara Aiyer, *Progress of Travancore under H. H. Sreemoolam Thirunal*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publications, Government of Kerala, 1998), p. 252.

<sup>374</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1912, p. 19.

500 acres of land in Vilappil Pakuthi,<sup>375</sup> in the present Vilappil village. In February 1913, Ayyankali again raised the issue of landlessness of Pulayas in different parts of Travancore and asked for dwelling places to them. He also called upon the government to nominate another Pulaya member from Kottayam Division to SMPA.<sup>376</sup> The idea of proportionate representation was immanent in this intervention.

In 1914, Ayyankali raised a complaint that the 500 acres of land which was promised to the Pulayas was not given to them yet, and requested the government to take necessary corrective actions. The Dewan accepted the grievance and agreed to give instructions to the officials to distribute the land promised.<sup>377</sup> But it remained unfulfilled. Again, in the next year Ayyankali raised the issue of landlessness and homelessness of Pulayas and requested the government to fulfill the offer of 500 acres in Vilappil pakuthi, a promise made 4 years back.<sup>378</sup> On 29<sup>th</sup> February 1916 Ayyankali again reminded the Dewan to fulfil the same offer which was delayed by the Forest Department who were assigned to clear the papers. The institutional practices of colonial governmentality were inextricably enmeshed with caste prejudices and discrimination which were exposed in the incidents like this. As a crusader against these kinds of institutional modern hegemonies of caste, he invited serious attention of government on these matters.

Similarly, he raised the complaint that registration of *Puduvai* lands to Pulayas in Pallippuram, Thonnakkal and Kadinamkulam beach were denied by the officials. Again, the *puduvai* lands in Thiruvalla and Chenganur earmarked for allocation to the Pulayas were now proposed to be brought under reserved forest to deny it to the untouchable community, he

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<sup>375</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1912, p. 19.

<sup>376</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 13<sup>th</sup> February 1913, p. 20.

<sup>377</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 20<sup>th</sup> February 1914, p. 24.

<sup>378</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1915, p. 118.



reported.<sup>379</sup> As a man of solutions, by raising a number of such issues, Ayyankali requested the government to appoint a special officer to identify the *puduvai* land to be allocated to the Pulayas.<sup>380</sup> The consciously biased act of diversion of the grants and land grants were also usual from the upper-caste officials during this period. Ayyankali vehemently opposed this.

On 13<sup>th</sup> February 1917 Ayyankali sought remedial measures to stop the loss of land of Pulayas in the state through many treacherous ways. Similarly, he brought it to the attention of the Assembly that the land distributed to other communities in Kottarakkara of Kollam division and other taluks and Kazhakkootam in Thiruvananthapuram were in fact the land sanctioned to be distributed to the Pulayas.<sup>381</sup>

In 1918, Ayyankali again reminded the government that the land allotted to Pulayars in Valapil Pakuti had not yet been distributed.<sup>382</sup> He complained that among 3,000 applications of his community from Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam and Kottayam divisions, not even a single application was positively considered.<sup>383</sup> Similarly, the government orders in this regard were not being implemented by the subordinate officers and hence he requested the government to take appropriate action on this matter.<sup>384</sup> Again in 1919 Ayyankali informed the Assembly that there was still 242.8 acres of land in the offered 500 acres of land in Vilappil pakuthi remaining to be registered in the name of Pulaya beneficiaries.<sup>385</sup>

As per the technicalities of SMPA Ayyankali could speak only for the Pulayas but he showed his brotherly empathy towards other dalit communities. In 1919, he suggested that for

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<sup>379</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 29<sup>th</sup> February 1916, p. 116.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 13<sup>th</sup> February 1917, p. 23.

<sup>382</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1918, p. 20.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1919, p. 20.

the remaining Pulaya families, land could be allocated in the Uzhamalakal and Aryanad pakuthies of Nedumangad taluks and other pakuties in Neyyattinkara taluk, and suggested that similar kind of *puduvai* land can be issued to other members of the dalit community.<sup>386</sup> In 1920 again Ayyankali reminded the government that only few areas of land in Vilappil pakuthi were distributed to Pulayas against the offered area of 500 acres.

He thus held the government accountable for the sorry state of affairs in this regard and appealed that the Pulayas of Travancore should be granted dwelling sites as early as possible.<sup>387</sup> At the same time, Ayyankali did not forget to congratulate the government for distributing some land to the Pulayas by eliminating *Tharavila*. But he condemned the activities of the officials who acted contradictory to the government policies.<sup>388</sup> He pointed out that the applications of thousands of Pulayas were outrightly rejected in Kalyil pakuthi in Vilavancode taluk.<sup>389</sup> In Ranni about 300 acres of land cleared by Pulayas and expected to be handed over to them with legal documents were encroached by an influential Christian Company, and the Pulayas of that place were forced to runaway from there.<sup>390</sup> The forceful encroachment of land which was reclaimed and developed by Pulayas by the influential castes was becoming a regular business, he blamed.<sup>391</sup>

In 1923 Ayyankali sought the Dewan's intervention to recover the land encroached by other communities in Vilappil pakuthi and give it back to the Pulayas, apart from appealing the government to grant some land in Thiruvallam of Neyyattinkara taluk and other places to the

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<sup>386</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 18<sup>th</sup> February, 1919, p. 20.

<sup>387</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1920, p. 22.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1921, p. 29.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>391</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1921, Quoted in Kunnukuzhi s mani, *op. cit.* p. 79.

untouchables.<sup>392</sup> In the next year, Ayyankali put forward a series of suggestions to the government on the land redistribution question in the Assembly. It is interesting to note that he used the term peasant for denoting Pulayas as if to show the importance of dalits as agriculturalist of the state. Some of these suggestions were: 1) when the land is given to the peasant *tharavila* (base price) should be fixed as 4 *ana* per 1 acre for five years; 2) the *tharavila* should only be levied from the sixth year from the peasant and it should be fixed as maximum of Rs. 5/- per acre with a provision to pay in installments; 3) tanks and canals should be constructed for supporting agriculture; 4) the fees for rearing cattle should be discontinued and people should be allowed to collect timber from forest for house making; 5) allow the peasants to keep guns and explosive for self-defence from wild animals and opening of the Devikulam-Kumaly road without further delay.<sup>393</sup>

He was tacitly making his point that the dalit toil for agricultural produce is also important to be noticed and they were required to be protected by the state. On 26<sup>th</sup> February of 1924 he again raised the issue of Vilappil pakuthi, where the land offered to the Pulayas were encroached by others.<sup>394</sup> He also pointed out that the Pulayas were paying the tax without actually possessing the land as the matter has been still pending in the Munsiff Court, and requested the government to exempt the Pulayas from affixing of the court fee stamps in their submissions. He had also suggested that the land in areas where there was no access to water should be dropped from the land distribution schemes.<sup>395</sup>

In 1926 Ayyankali pointed out in SMPA that the 75% of land earmarked for the depressed

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<sup>392</sup> SMPA, Proceedings, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1923, p. 178.

<sup>393</sup> SMPA, Proceedings, 24<sup>th</sup> February 1924, quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, *op. cit.* p. 90.

<sup>394</sup> SMPA, Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1924, p. 38.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

classes were unfit for either cultivation or habitation.<sup>396</sup> He demanded that only cultivable and habitable land should be allocated to the depressed classes, and continues to identify appropriate land for distribution in different parts of the state. A government Advocate or exemption in fees of court should be allowed to the depressed classes in the cases of land encroachments. The trespassers should be evicted from the lands allotted to depressed classes. He also demanded that a burial ground for Pulayas should be provided in Thiruvananthapuram town as they did not possess land in town even for the burial of dead bodies.<sup>397</sup> This was also an indicator of dalits' entry into the colonial urbanity as the urban life world of dalits also coincides with colonial modernity. Similarly, he demanded in this same occasion that since the work of the Protector of Depressed Classes is hectic an officer should be appointed to assist him.<sup>398</sup> As a permanent solution to Vilappil pakuthi land issue, he suggested that a law should be enacted to prevent the upper castes from appropriating the land.<sup>399</sup> In 1927, he asked the government to give the 179 acres of land in Vellayini kayal *puramboke* to the Pulayas.<sup>400</sup> He also demanded for a dedicated burial ground of Pulayas, appointment of a fulltime Protector of Depressed Classes, fair treatment from subordinate officers and allocation of land to his community in different taluks of the state.<sup>401</sup>

Again in 1928 Ayyankali raised the 'not solved yet' issue of Vilappil pakuthi and asked for strong intervention of the state. He then asked land for establishing a *satram* (Inn) for dalits in Thiruvanthapuram and Kollam, and asked 178 acres of barren land in vellayini *kayal*, land in

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<sup>396</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1926, p. 22.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>399</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>400</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 22 February 1927, p. 25.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.

Karichal *kayal*, land in Kollam pakuthi, land in Ambalapuzha, etc.<sup>402</sup> He also requested the government to exclude the Pulayas from paying survey fees.<sup>403</sup> In 1929 too he raised the issue of Vilappil pakuthi land and *satram* for Pulayas,<sup>404</sup> apart from demanding allocation of land for the homeless depressed classes in the Thiruvananthapuram town and agricultural loans to the Pulayas who got land for free of cost.<sup>405</sup> In 1930 Ayyakali asked in the SMPA that one acre of land near Chenkalchoola in Thrivandrum be allotted to Pulayas.<sup>406</sup> On 3<sup>rd</sup> March, 1931, in the Assembly, Ayyankali thanked the government for approving 3 acres of land each to Pulayas in concessional terms. Also, he demanded for the land for a cemetery in Thiruvananthapuram town, concessions like free land survey, agricultural loans, 50 acres of free land for building a *satram* for Pulayas, legislation for preventing land encroachment, legislation for preventing atrocities towards the dalits etc.<sup>407</sup>

All these interpositions of Ayyankali for achieving access to resources and places in colonial urbanity provides his penchant for struggle as a true dalit leader who envisaged to produce new spaces for dalits in the changing colonial modern life world.

## EDUCATION

In principle, it was in 1888 the attention of government turned towards depressed classes on the matter of their education for the first time, and special funds for this were allotted.<sup>408</sup> In the same year members of the depressed classes, which included Mohommedans, Ezhavas, Vedars, Kuravars, Pulayas, Parayas etc. got admission in the vernacular schools. The table below

<sup>402</sup> SMPA, Proceedings, 28 February 1928, Quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, *Op. cit.* pp. 112-113.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>404</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1929, p. 151.

<sup>405</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1929. P. 29.

<sup>406</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1930, p. 364.

<sup>407</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1931, p. 29.

<sup>408</sup> Ulloor S Parameswara Aiyer, *op. cit.* p. 566.

shows the statistics of vernacular schooling of various castes:

| <b>No. of depressed class students secured instruction in the Vernacular school in 1888<br/>against population of each caste</b> |       |       |       |                   |                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Number of pupils</b>                                                                                                          |       |       |       | <b>Population</b> | <b>Proportionate<br/>population per pupil</b> |
|                                                                                                                                  | Boys  | Girls | Total |                   |                                               |
| Mohemmodans                                                                                                                      | 763   | 9     | 772   | 1,46,909          | 183                                           |
| Ezhavas                                                                                                                          | 1,575 | 158   | 1,733 | 3,83,017          | 221                                           |
| Vedars                                                                                                                           | 30    | 8     | 38    | 7,293             | 192                                           |
| Kuravars                                                                                                                         | 58    | 1     | 59    | 56,274            | 953                                           |
| Pulayas                                                                                                                          | 398   | 26    | 424   | 1,88,916          | 443                                           |
| Parayas                                                                                                                          | 161   | 17    | 178   | 63,688            | 357                                           |
| <i>Source: Ulloor S Parameswara Aiyer, p. 566</i>                                                                                |       |       |       |                   |                                               |

This table shows the disparity of dalit students as compared to other communities like Muslims and Ezhavas. Moreover, the entry of dalits into the modern education system was relentlessly opposed by the caste society and it was continued as a forbidden fruit to dalits.

I have already discussed the struggles of Ayyankali for dalits' education earlier in this chapter. Though he was an illiterate self-made man, Ayyankali was highly aware of the fact that education is important to pave the path to the progress for his people. So he fought firmly and courageously to achieve that for his community. In second speech in SMPA on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912, Ayyankali raised the issue of education of dalits by thanking the initiative of the government to admit the children of his community to Venganoor Elementary School. He requested to open all government school to Pulayas, and asked for special fee concessions for them.<sup>409</sup> Ayyankali said in February 1914 that:

Ayyankali expressed the gratitude of the community for the orders already issued by the government for admitting the Pulaya children in to the Sirckar schools; but he regretted that the authorities in some of the schools would not admit them in spite of the orders, for some frivolous reason or other. In places where admission was once given to the Pulaya boys, there was no trouble whatsoever for the future. The present condition of affairs in Neyyattinkara, Venganoor, Pullad would bear out his statement. He understood that some of the teachers of certain schools were at the

<sup>409</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912, p. 82.

bottom of the mischief, and not the people. He therefore requested that stringent instructions might be given to the Director of Public Instruction and the Inspectors of Schools to enforce the order already issued.<sup>410</sup>

In his speech on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1915, Ayyangali pointed out the disadvantages faced by Pulayas in the field of education. He said that the government has given permission to admit Pulaya students to the school, but they were facing a lot of difficulty in getting admission. Some teachers collude with their friends to create such obstacles and the government should inform them to obey the orders of the government, he said. He requested that a responsible officer of education should investigate the matters and punishment should be given to such persons who created these obstacles.<sup>411</sup> Ayyanklali pointed out on 29<sup>th</sup> February 1916 that the number representatives of Pulayas was reduced to one from three in the SMPA session. He stated that Pulayas need more care and help from the government to achieve development in education. He pointed out that only 25 schools were opened to Pulayas and no other schools were opened to them. He expressed the hope that if the educated men and government pay more attention to this matter the obstruction of education of Pulayas will vanish. “When attending school, a Pulaya boy is never dirty and it would not therefore be right to allege their dirty habits as a cause for exclude them from schools,”<sup>412</sup> he said. As a mode of warning, he pointed out that: “To exclude them on the ground of their lower stage of civilization may force them was to induce them to change their religion, because from the moment that was done, admission became free and easy.”<sup>413</sup> He discarded the argument that if these children get education, there should be a shortage in the supply of agriculture labourers, by pointing out the development in industrial and agricultural spheres immediately following abolition of slavery. He opposed the commencement of special

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<sup>410</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1914, p. 98.

<sup>411</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 1915, p. 99.

<sup>412</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 29<sup>th</sup> February, 1916, p. 105.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

schools for depressed classes on the ground that it would neither possible nor expedient all over the state. Moreover it would result in the complete denial of them into the public schools. He also asked for fees concessions to the children of his community. He pleaded to remove the obstacle to the girls' education in the state and for giving training in trade or crafts for the boys of his community.<sup>414</sup> Though colonial modernity beckoned the ideas of equality, Anupama Rao highlights its two contradictory processes, the secularisation of caste and the association with novel Hindu religion.<sup>415</sup> The political vocabulary of Ayyankali, which he gained through his engagement with colonial modernity as used in the SMPA, firmly opposed the government stance of being sympathetic towards the upper caste sentiments and that of majority feelings in the case of education.

By understanding the economic and political potentials of technical education Ayyankali raised a series of demands in this regard in the SMPA. In 1917 Ayyankali said in the Assembly that though the government has done many good deeds to the wake of the education of Pulayas, they are not getting full advantage of the concession granted to them. He said that if head masters and school inspectors had a sympathetic approach towards Pulayas, his community would have made better educational progress. He asked the government to give them training in agriculture and other cottage industries and grant sufficient number of scholarships to the Pulaya boys in the state.<sup>416</sup> In 1918, Ayyankali suggested some proposals for the benefit of his community in matters of education - entry should be given to Pulayas in every school till 7<sup>th</sup> class. Full fees concessions and 10% of scholarships should be granted to them. A training centre for industries and agriculture should be established. The government order to open school for the Pulayas

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<sup>414</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>415</sup> Anupama Rao, *op. cit.* p. 41.

<sup>416</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 1917, p. 168.



should be enforced rigorously. A line of huts including a primary school with mid-day meal and a centre of vocational training should be made in Venganoor or another place. A separate fund for the education of Pulayas should be ear-marked in the state budget.<sup>417</sup> In 1919 Ayyankali made a few requests to the government: One of the requests reads:-

1) That Pulaya children be wholly exempted from the payment of fees, 2) That agriculture and handicrafts be taught to Pulaya pupils. 3) That pulaya children in schools be fed at State cost. 4) That a separate allotment be ear-marked in the annual Budgets for the education of Pulaya Children and special attention paid to see that the whole of such allotment was spent for the purpose during the year. 5) that special institutions be started solely for the teaching of handicrafts to the Pulaya children and provision made for free quarters for them. 6) That all State schools be thrown open to them. 7) The scholarships be awarded to a large number of Pulaya pupils every year.<sup>418</sup>

In 1920 he expressed his gratitude to the government for giving its support to the upliftment of Pulayas alongside, requesting again fees concessions to Pulayas by considering their poverty and helplessness. He suggested that the education of Pulayas should include some vocational trainings which provide them some earnings to live. He thanked the Dewan for the scholarship for Pulaya students. Then he made a request to implement compulsory vernacular education for Pulayas till 4<sup>th</sup> class thinking that only then his community will be elevated to progress.<sup>419</sup> In 1921 Ayyankali stated that the Pulayas' aspirations for higher education were not adequately aided and that is why they could not get education up to English School Living Certificate (E. S. L. C.). Only 136 reached above 5<sup>th</sup> class. Noon-meal and fees concession should be granted to them as utter poverty is the main cause for their educational backwardness. He also submitted a memorandum in this regard.<sup>420</sup> He suggested that special care should be given in matters of Pulayas' education as there was a fall of 295 students in the year of M. E.

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<sup>417</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1918, p. 90.

<sup>418</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 24<sup>th</sup> February, 1919, pp 73-74.

<sup>419</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 2 March 1920, p. 85.

<sup>420</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 9<sup>th</sup> March 1921, Quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, *op. cit.* p. 84.

1095 (C. E. 1920).<sup>421</sup>

In 1924, Ayyankali pointed out that the number Pulaya children decreased in English schools but increased in vernacular schools. He also pointed that one of the difficulties faced by the pupils of his community was that they had no noon-day meal. Pulaya and Paraya boys were being sent to schools without morning meal and it was hard for them to be compelled to study without mid-day meal. So he prayed that these depressed class children should be provided with a meal in the school. One *chakra* or half a *nazhi* of rice for each pupil per day would be sufficient, he reasoned. Without this, the benefit of fee concession will not bear fruit in their case. And there should be free primary education provided to Pualayas.<sup>422</sup> Again in 1926 Ayyankali reminded the noon-meal system in school for depressed classes children and stated that these kinds of support should be provided for at least 15 years as they were competing with the children of well to do communities.<sup>423</sup> In 1927 Ayyankali again raised the issue of mid-day meal and asked to grant one *chakra* for rice and one *ana* for salt for each pupil.<sup>424</sup> He thought that it was important for dalits to be hunger free in order to gain education and this was based on the ground reality that dalits are coming from utter poverty-stricken backgrounds. In 1928 he again raised the issue of the pending decision of noon-day meal to depressed class pupils. Students who wanted to join the college were unable to join because they did not have money to pay the fees. He asked for fee concessions for students in such cases. With great farsight, he also suggested that some of the Pulayas should be sent abroad for higher studies in the subjects of agriculture and industry.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1921, p. 127.

<sup>422</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1924, p. 176.

<sup>423</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1926, p. 94.

<sup>424</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1927, p. 114.

<sup>425</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1928, Quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, op. cit. p. 116.

Ayyankali frequently reminded the assembly that the issue of dalits' education should be taken as serious reform project of the government. Similarly, he was aware of the importance of gender equality in education to the cause of dalit emancipation. When SMPA summoned in 1929, Ayyankali requested fee waiver for depressed classes students of classes 6 and 7 and extension of tenure to 10 years. He demanded that Pulaya girls should be given admission to Vernacular Girls School in Neyyattinkara and fee concession should be given to the students of survey school. He also asked that 3 students from Pulayas should be given scholarship in each class.<sup>426</sup> He demanded that the examination fee waiver for Pulayars be extended for 10 years.<sup>427</sup> In 1931 Ayyankali again pleaded for the fees and other concessions for ten years because he pointed out that his community is not yet developed economically. He again reminded about fee waiver in survey school, free noon-day meal in all schools and compulsory primary education for depressed classes.<sup>428</sup> Ayyankali pointed out that there is not even a single degree holder from his community and he called for more attention on this issue. He also requested that five scholarships be awarded each year to Pulaya youths who do not receive any financial aid but deserve a college education. He brought to the attention of the Assembly the case of Rosa Henry, a converted Christian girl from Pulaya, whose parents were poor and had no money to complete her studies. A special grant should be sanctioned for the weaving school run by the community, he said. Scholarships should be given to boys and girls of the community who were being trained in weaving and other handicrafts, again he demanded.<sup>429</sup>

Dalits in colonial modernity tirelessly tried to get education at any cost as education being a powerful means to accomplish self-respect, egalitarian status and political subjectivity. In the

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<sup>426</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1929. pp.250-251.

<sup>427</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1930, p. 364.

<sup>428</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 11 March 1931, p. 280-81.

<sup>429</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1932, p. 232.

beginning Ayyankali used defiance as a powerful tool to achieve emancipatory goals like education and other forms of social upliftment. But when he became the member of SMPS he used the means of diplomacy and other conjunctural parameters of colonial modernity to secure the dalit rights. This interplay between defiance and diplomacy, which Ayyankali followed, in educating dalits of Travancore constitutes one of the sites of his ambivalence.

### *EMPLOYMENT*

Ayyankali always worried about the pathetic economic condition of his community. In a society which was rapidly changing he was looking forward to getting every opportunity to uplift his community economically. Therefore, Ayyankali did as much as he could for his community in matters related to employment. Colonial modern spaces like schools, colleges, hospitals, courts and other governmental institutions were never accessible to dalits. Achieving equal opportunity in these caste-ridden institutional spaces was another conundrum for dalit leaders like Ayyankali. Ayyankali asked in a speech in SMPA on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912 that Pulayas should be appointed in departments like education, engineering and medical for employment.<sup>430</sup> On February 22, 1913, Aiyankali strongly appealed for the appointment of Pulayas to government service, which had not been the practice till date. He demanded permanent employment of Pulaya piece workers and those who knew composing in the government presses. He added that Pulayas could be appointed in Public Work Department as coolies and maistries. He argued for appointing Pualayas in Hospitals as warders. Pulayas could also be appointed as watchers and guards in Forest Department. Pulayas could also be appointed as profitably as workers in the School of Arts and any other departments. He also mentioned that Pulayas should be appointed where no special technical qualification or higher educational qualification is required. The

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<sup>430</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912, p. 83.

Dewan replied to Ayyankali that the matter will be enquired into.<sup>431</sup> In 1918, Ayyankali demanded in the Assembly the establishment of a co-operative society for the Pulayas.<sup>432</sup> In 1921, Ayyankali made a suggestion before the government to open industrial schools for his community and issue orders to the heads of departments such as Education, Medical, Forest, Police, Registration, Judicial and Engineering to appoint people from the Pulaya community in various posts.<sup>433</sup>

Ayyankali requested in the Assembly in 1923 to appoint his people as peons in the courts.<sup>434</sup> Again in 1924 he demanded that members of his community be employed as peons and other employees in minor posts.<sup>435</sup> In 1926, Ayyankali appealed to the Dewan in the SMPA about the employment problems of the dalits. The SMPA proceedings in this regard say that:

Young men belonging to the Pulaya and similar other communities who did not possess examination qualification should be required as peons. Orders should be issued for the appointment as teachers of the few qualified Vernacular School Learning Certificate holders who were still without employment. At least one peon from these communities should be appointed in all departments, particularly in Taluk Cutcherries. Subordinate appointments, especially in the Forest Department, should be more freely conferred upon them.<sup>436</sup>

In 1927, Ayyankali again raised the issue regarding the appointment of Pulayas as peons in Devaswom Department, taluk offices, and munsiff courts.<sup>437</sup> He also pointed out that 15 Pulayas, both men and women, have passed E. S. L. C. but have not been appointed in any service yet. They will become over-age on completion of 25 years, so they should be appointed in the

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<sup>431</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 1913, p. 164.

<sup>432</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1918, p. 90.

<sup>433</sup> SMPA, Proceedings, 10 March, 1921, p. 127.

<sup>434</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 21<sup>st</sup> March 1923, Quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, *op. cit.* p. 88.

<sup>435</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1924, p. 176.

<sup>436</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 27<sup>th</sup> February 1926, p. 94.

<sup>437</sup> SMPA Proceedings 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1927. p. 114.

Department of Education.<sup>438</sup> The same issue was reminded by him once again in the next year. He also demanded that all Pulaya youth who were literate should be appointed as peons and no other people should be appointed in the department like Police and Excise if no Pulaya is appointed.<sup>439</sup> In 1929 also, he demanded that Pulayas be appointed as peons in various departments. He proposed that educated Pulayas who passed 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> class should be appointed as peons in the munsiff courts and those belonging to the depressed classes should be appointed as subordinate officers under the Depressed Class Protector.<sup>440</sup> In 1930, Ayyankali complained that various heads of departments unfairly discouraged Pulaya applicants from applying for vacant posts and demanded that four Pulayas be appointed in the Co-operative Department. He demanded the reinstatement of Thomson, a convert from the Pulaya community, who lost his temporary job in the registration department.<sup>441</sup> In 1931, Ayyankali reminded the government of the long pending application of qualified Pulayas for appointment as teachers and peons in various departments and urged the government to take prompt action in this regard.<sup>442</sup> In 1932 also Ayyankali reiterated the previous demands mentioned above in various sessions of the Assembly. He demanded that the upper age limit should be extended by 15 years for the appointment of qualified candidates from the depressed classes.<sup>443</sup>

Accessing the employment opportunities opened up by colonial modernity was an act of transcending caste, which was a great opportunity but difficult to achieve for the dalit/subaltern communities in Kerala. As far as dalit or subaltern groups are concerned, going beyond their hereditary, exploitative and despised occupations, which were socio-ritually stigmatised by caste

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<sup>438</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 26<sup>th</sup> February 1927, p. 114.

<sup>439</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1928, Quoted in Kunnukuzhi S. Mani, *op. cit.* p. 116.

<sup>440</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1929, p. 251.

<sup>441</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1930, p. 364.

<sup>442</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1931, p. 281.

<sup>443</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1932, p. 232.

hegemony, was a possibility opened up by colonial modernity, but something had to be achieved due to the entrenched caste opposition. Ayyankali used his tooth and nail to secure these opportunities for his people. Though he used to demand for Pulayas, the fruits were being shared by all untouchable communities.

### *CIVIL RIGHTS*

Ayyankali did everything that he could to ensure equality in the society. Much of his struggle for the civil rights of dalit communities were done outside the SMPA. He used the strategy of defiance to attain civil rights with its implicated 'performative egalitarianism'.<sup>444</sup> He even intervened within the SMPA to draw the government's attention to the matter with his oratory and diplomatic skills. As recorded in the SMPA Proceedings, he said in his speech on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1912:<sup>445</sup> "[T]he Member in conclusion, pointed out the disabilities of the Pulayas in the matter of using the public roads and entering the public offices, in spite of the Royal Proclamation, and he urged that steps might be taken to remedy these grievances". In his speech on February 29, 1916 also he raised the same issue, but in a stronger way, and pointed out the difficulties that his people faced in entering the public sphere. He complained that there were hardships for the depressed classes and they were not allowed in markets and other places of public resort and invited the attention of the government to the speedy removal of those grievances.<sup>446</sup>

It might be a surprising fact that an illiterate man like Ayyankali truly represented the real needs of the dalits of Travancore. He not only raised and asked questions in SMPA but also

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<sup>444</sup> Vivek Narayanan, *op. cit.*

<sup>445</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1912, p. 83.

<sup>446</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 29<sup>th</sup> February, 1916, p. 116.

achieved most of the demands and thus enabled the dalits to survive and gain some mobility. The structure of the Assembly and its representation system in which Ayyankali was made to represent only Pulayas was a systemic trap that made impossible the ‘communitization’<sup>447</sup> of dalits. In fact, as a true representative of the untouchables, he advocated and tactically won many rights of social justice which became the cornerstone of social democracy in Kerala.

By concluding this chapter, undoubtedly, we could say that Ayyankali was a soldier for social justice in Kerala. The paths he paved in the jungles of injustice later became the great avenues of democracy in Kerala. By discarding the existing caste nomenclature and forming a novel and democratic term *sadhujana*, he thought that a wider solidarity of diverse groups of people who were suffering from the then existing socio-economic system was politically more significant and impactful. In his active lifetime he travelled all over southern Kerala and connected with people, shared his anti-caste message and self-pride, led struggles for social justice and shaped his people from untouchables to modern men and women. He rode the political vehicle of ‘untouchables’ through the banned passages of injustice. He asserted the retaliating dalit body of power and grabbed the notions of social justice. He brought social reforms through riots and thus riots becoming reforms. Interestingly his political understanding of the multidimensional potential of land, education and employment revealed his organic intellect which made him an iconic figure in Travancore’s socio-political life of his time. All he had made through his power of resistance emerged from his political ambivalence; the political ambivalence which blinking within him, from his double consciousness mentality of anti-caste struggle. Though he was repeatedly referred to as a Raja of Pulayas, politically he webbed a

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<sup>447</sup> Organizations like SNDP, NSS and others were formulated through a process of giving up there several numbers of sub-castes and united in a single identity like Ezhava and Nair. But this was prevented due to several reasons to dalit communities. They were just formed as number of sub-caste *Mahasabhas* and sub divisions.



nexus of an invisible pre-condition of dalit consciousness in Kerala, irrespective of sub-caste differences.

Moreover, the idea of ‘caste radicalism’<sup>448</sup> as used by Anupama Rao has a tremendous implication in understanding Ayyankali’s politics of defiance in the form of ‘riots’ and physically challenging the caste power by organising the community. The performative value of grabbing egalitarianism<sup>449</sup> through defiance is the notable peculiarity of this radicalism. For Ayyankali, this defiance was a central theme through which his imaginations of liberation of dalits gained political visibility. Thus the radicalism of Ayyankali, which featured anti-caste dalit criticism, can be rightly called anti-caste radicalism. Through his radicalism he tried to envisage a new universe/modern universe where untouchables have a place. At the same time, Ayyankali was not dismissive of the conduits opened up by modernity. His open defiance was not dismissive of modernity but negative of the reiteration of caste attached with it. Like missionary Christianity, Hindu reformism and modern legal and administrative institutions came along with colonial modernity. So, he combined the lawful and the unlawful in his politics carefully and imaginatively – unlawful to make the abjectly deaf heard and lawful to advance the interest of the community by making use of the possibilities of modernity. All these reflections were produced under the influence of double consciousness, the conceptual category that I have used throughout the study. This was evident in the ambivalent nature of Ayyankali through his middle path between Christianity and Hinduism; confrontational and conciliatory politics; representing Pulayas but thinking in terms of a larger humanism and solidarity of the poor and so on.

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<sup>448</sup> Anupama Rao, *op. cit.* pp. 39-80.

<sup>449</sup> Vivek Narayanan, *op. cit.*

## CHAPTER-4

### **RELIGION AS AN EMANCIPATORY PROJECT: POYKAYIL YOHANNAN AND THE PRATHYAKSHA RAKSHA DAIVA SABHA (PRDS)**

This chapter explores how Poykayil Yohannan and his religious and socio-political movement *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) emerged as a critical organization and intervened into the public sphere of Kerala by producing an ambivalent discourse, which came out of from a double consciousness of the kind Paul Gilroy suggests in another context.<sup>450</sup> In order to investigate this, quite contrary to the contemporary concerns of Social Science, what is need is a ‘reverse gaze’ from the point of view of the ‘oppressed’. This, I believe, helps to show how religion and ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ plays a major role in resisting oppression and makes survival possible. By saying this, at least as far as the Dalits are concerned, what I precisely mean is that we need to look from the people’s point of view to understand the role of ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ that helps to formulate their own life-world in their life-struggles. This is an attempt to look at the role of religion as an emancipatory project and its foundational element’s i.e., ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ function in anti-caste mobilization in early twentieth-century Kerala, especially Travancore.

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<sup>450</sup> W. E. B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 2. And also see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double consciousness*, (London: verso, 1993)

The intervention of *Soochakam*, a magazine brought out by a group of Dalit intellectuals within the *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS), established by ‘Poykayil Appachan’ at the forefront of the Dalit movement in Kerala as a socio-political and spiritual figure alongside Ayyankali<sup>451</sup>. The painstaking efforts of P. Sanal Mohan has opened up new vistas in the studies on the history of dalits in Kerala and brought Poykayil Yohannan and the lower caste struggle for equality<sup>452</sup> to serious academic attention. Vernacular scholars like V. V. Swami, E. V. Anil and others along with the group within the PRDS also contributed a lot to the re-drawing and re-mapping of Poykayil Yohannan in the public sphere of Kerala. Poykayil Yohannan is also known by other two names, i.e., Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan and Poykayil Appachan, among people of Kerala. The existence of multiple names itself is indicative of the changing times and his uncertain identity being in flux, and consequently being marked differently in different cultural arenas. It is important to understand Dalit identity formation as overflowing the normative contours of normative definitions of ‘identity’.<sup>453</sup>

### **From Kumaran to Yohannan: Early life and Education**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> *Kumbham* of 1054 (17 February 1879), the Malayalam Era, Poykayil Yohannan

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<sup>451</sup>*Soochakam* published a spiritual issue in 2002, consisting of various studies and articles about Poykayil Kumara Gurudevan (Poykayil Yohannan) and it carried widespread discussions about him almost all over Kerala’s public sphere.

<sup>452</sup>See P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity Imagining Equality and social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala*, Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam: 2005. “Religion Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala”, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, n.s., Vol. XXVIII, no. 1 April, 2005. “Narrativizing Oppression and Suffering: Theorizing Slavery” *South Asia Research*, Vol. 26 (1), 2006., *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>453</sup> Interestingly, it is pointed out that there are more than twelve names by which peoples used to call him. They are ‘Komaran’, ‘Kumaran’, ‘Yohannan’, ‘Poykayil Upadesi’, ‘Poykayil Pithavu’, ‘Poyka’, ‘Poykayil Yohannan’, ‘Poykayil Yohanna Upadesi’, ‘Poykayil Appachan’, ‘Yohannan Pithavu’, ‘Kumaraguru’, ‘Kumaragurudevan’, ‘Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan’, etc., V. V. Swami, (eds.) *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Charitrathil Prathyakshapetta Vidham*, (Kottayam: Society of PRDS Studies, 2009), p. 18.

was born in Eraviperoor of today's Pathanamthitta district<sup>454</sup>, to Lechi and Kandan, who were Paraya slaves of the Syrian Christian landlord family of 'Sankarmangalam' belonging to the Mar Thoma Church. His parents named him as 'Komaran', the colloquial pronunciation of 'Kumaran'<sup>455</sup>, but he was baptized later under the Christian name 'Yohannan'. There is an interesting account told by Yohannan himself to Puthiya Veetil Sathyanathan, one of his disciples, from a Mar Thoma Syriyan Christian family:

Once Appachan told me: In my early days my parents had given me the name 'Kumaran'. After reaching some age, I was forced. I agreed. For inducting me to the Church, Ayyiroor Vallyiyachan, (Senior Father) had come. The father asked me, which name you want? 'Name me as Lohannan' I replied (satirically). Thus, I named myself. They believed that I am an uneducated person. For this reason, I replied like this. 'Do you understand the meaning of Yohannan?' Appachan asked me. 'I don't know,' I replied. 'The one who annihilated sin through the Jehovah,' he answered. 'Do you understand?' he asked again. 'Yes, I understood,' I replied.<sup>456</sup>

This memory reveals an unexpected turn of Poykayil Yohannan towards his possession of a double consciousness. Here, he pretended to Ayyiroor Vallyiyachan (senior missionary of that time) that he was uneducated and unaware of nomenclature by which he expressed irreverence subtly. He was not a man who follows but rather a man with an autonomous position and thinking.

Yohannan's childhood and adulthood were miserable and poverty-stricken, as usual with dalits in the country. However, Kumaran was outrageously opposed to sub-caste and caste practices since his childhood. Though he was a *paraya* by caste, he used to play and inter-dine with *Pulaya* boys (also aalit caste, but above the Paraya in the caste hierarchy) against the

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<sup>454</sup> V. V. Swami (Eds.) *Prathyaksha Raksha Daivasabha: Orma Pattu, Charitra Rekhakal*, (Eraviperoor: Adiyardeepam publications, 2010), p. 27.

<sup>455</sup> Grandha Rachana Samithy, *Sree Kumaradevan*, (Kottayam: Sree Kumara Dharma Samajam, 1983), p. 27.

<sup>456</sup> Puthiyaveetil Sathyanathan, "Njan PRDS ileekku", *Adiyar Deepam*, 1967, republished in V. V. Swami (Eds.), *Prathyaksha Raksha Daivasabha: Orma , Pattu, Charitrarekhakal*, (Eraviperoor: Adiyardeepam Publications, 2010), p. 96.

prevailing caste law. Moreover, he opposed those practices and encouraged those around him to break caste rules. K. M. Annamma writes, in *Kuttikalude Gurudevan* (The Children's Gurudevan), "[o]nce Kumaran's mother poured water in his ears to 'purify' him, He asked his mother that whether untouchability will wither away through the other ear if we pour water in this side of the ear? The mother was speechless. On another occasion, Kumaran and his friends destroyed a scene of witchcraft intended to exorcise an evil spirit from a boy who was sick. He explained the futility of such kind of acts to his friends and parents. He asked to them that if these kinds of witchcraft had any power, would we have to face atrocities and hardships all these centuries.<sup>457</sup> These two incidents provide insights to the fact that from childhood onwards, Kumaran showed the ability of a critical thinker who possessed an unusual sense of reasoning which was a rare and unexpected thing from a slave boy.

On another occasion, he showed unusual courage to challenge and oppose caste norms. During those days, slave labourers were paid very meagre wages in the form of paddy. Apart from that, at lunch time, they got meals in the form of rice porridge called *kanji*, poured in a pit on the bare ground wrapped in an areca nut leaf, colloquially called *pala* or plantain leaves. This was a caste marker of slave castes and untouchables of Kerala<sup>458</sup>. Kumaran questioned this. One day he and his co-workers had their rice porridge from the pit as usual and washed the *pala* and put it up to dry up to use again. Kumaran slowly walked with his areca nut *pala* which he used to eat his meal from the pit. His co-workers thought that he was going to wash the *pala* and dry it somewhere else. Surprisingly, Kumaran hit the *pala* on a rock and threw the broken *pala* away.

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<sup>457</sup> K. M. Annamma, *Kuttikalude Gurudevan*, (Trissur: Upavasam Publications, 2001), Quoted In V. V. Swami (Eds.) *op. cit.* 2010, pp. 29-30.

<sup>458</sup> Even in 1950s in many places of Travancore, *kanji*, rice porridge, was served to the dalits after they finished their work, in the pits which made up on the ground and wrapped in plantain leaves. Due to untouchability, the rice was served from high into the pit. See P. Sanal Mohan and Vinil Baby Paul, *Viswasavum Vimochanavum: Kaipatta Habel*, (Thiruvalla: Christava Sahithya Samithy, 2015) P. 29.

The rest of the people were astonished and frightened. But at last, the landlord came to understand the meaning inherent in that act of Kumaran. He stopped serving food to his slave workers on the areca nut leaf in the pit.<sup>459</sup> Violating a caste norm was considered a serious offence in those days. Capital punishment could be evoked for this offence. But Kumaran was a man of courage and a crusader against caste in the making from those early days of his life.

K. M. Annamma narrates two other remarkable incidents from the early life of Kumaran. One day, Kumaran and his co-workers were ploughing the land using oxen. Kumaran untied one of the oxen and shouldered himself to the yoke with the other ox. He asked one of the co-workers to plough the land with him and the bull under the yoke. The co-workers initially refused to do so but they followed his strong will and did it. He struggled to move and fell down. After doing this, Kumaran destroyed that yoke on the rock, to the shock of his fellow workers. On another occasion, he dug out some remnants of skeletons from the field, held them close to his chest and cried. His friends asked about it and he replied that these skeletons might be of one of our forefathers who were pushed down by landlords into the mud when they fainted in exhaustion while ploughing the field.<sup>460</sup> Through these incidents, Kumaran was trying to evoke slave memories to rouse the consciousness of the people around him, something that became a central theme of his religious congregation later. These are instances of his critical thinking against caste and the social and economic exploitations it entailed.

Along with his slave duties in the paddy fields, Kumaran worked as a shepherd boy for his landlord and supported his mother and other family members. In the meanwhile, he learned to

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<sup>459</sup> K. M. Annamma, *Kuttikalude Guruidevan*, (Trissur: Upavasam Publications, 2001), Quoted In V. V. Swami (Eds.) *op. cit.* 2010, p. 30.

<sup>460</sup> K. M. Annamma, *Kuttikalude Guruidevan*, Upavasam Publications, Trissur 2001, Quoted in V. V. Swami (Eds.), *op. cit.* 2010, p. 31.

write and read from a *kudipallikoodam*, a form of elementary school at Thevarkattu, near Thiruvalla, run by Muthootu Kochukunju Upadesi.<sup>461</sup> Since 1886, Kumaran studied Malayalam spending four years at Thevarkattu Slave School.<sup>462</sup> Soon he learned to write and read in Malayalam, which was the only allowed education for Dalits, even though it was a rare fruit for them. The family's landlord was a Christian, which might be why Kumaran got a chance to learn to read and write. He voraciously read the Bible and related literature during the off-time of his work, herding cattle. Even in his adolescence, Kumaran exhibited his great talent in oratory and had enchanting poetical skills, which amazed his friends and neighbours. At the age of eighteen, Kumaran and his family were baptized as Christians in their landlord's church, i.e., Marthoma Church<sup>463</sup> and adopted a new Christian name, Yohannan. Kumaran imitated speeches of missionary workers. As stated by P. K. Chothi, son of Chothan Kunjolu, a childhood friend of Poykayil Yohannan:

During free time, Kumaran and his friends used to learn the Malayalam alphabet by writing on the soil beneath the tree.....Our intelligent and brilliant hero (Yohannan) was able to read the New Testament as well as he could and make his friends understand the meaning within a short span of time. That wise boy did not forget to bring the Bible, hiding it inside the hat, made of areca nut leaf. The boy also had a hobby of preaching the gospel based on the Bible.<sup>464</sup>

These skills delighted his landlords and this was the reason that they advised him to join their Marthoma Church.

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<sup>461</sup> T. H. P. Chentharassery, *Poykayil Appachan*, (Trivandrum: Mythri Books, 2009), p. 10. There are many mysterious accounts regarding the education of Poykayil Yohannan. One is saying that Poykayil yohannan asked kochukunju upadesi to teach him to write the word '*Daivam*', the God, at first, see Grandha Rachana Samithi, Sree Kumaradevan, (Kottayam: Sreekumara Dharma Samajam, 1983) p. 27.

<sup>462</sup> Dr. O. K. Santhosh, *Poykayil Sreekumara Guru: Navodhana Charitra Padangal*, (Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages, Kerala, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>463</sup> Mar Thoma Church was largely an outcome of CMS work in Travancore, and showed greater evangelical commitment, attracting many to Christian faith.

<sup>464</sup> P. K. Chothy, "Vipavacharyan Poykayil Appachan", *Adiyar Deepam*, 1967, republished in V. V. Swami (Eds.), *Prathyaksha Raksha Daivasabha: Orma , Pattu, Charitrarekhakal*, (Eraviperor: Adiyardeepam Publications, 2010), p. 78.

## A Pastor of Discontent: Poykayil Yohannan as *Upadesi*

His intrinsic skills of oratory and unfailing enthusiasm in Biblical and religious knowledge made him an *upadesi*, a pastor in the church. Soon, he became a full-time missionary worker. His attractive voice, poetical skills and powerful songs fascinated hundreds of people and drew them to his prayer meetings. Chentharasserry says: “[t]o hear the songs and prayers of Poykayil Upadesi, people even came from distant places with their meals packed. In a short span of time, the twenty-year-old Yohannan attained the position of best Church preacher. Yohannan’s voice reverberated in the junctions and markets. He showed more interest in doing travelling speeches in places near Eraviperoor, like Othara, Kuttoor, Kumbanad, Pullad, Kallooppaara, Pariyaram and Vallamkulam. Those days he was dwelling in Kumbanad.”<sup>465</sup>

His later activities showed that he was a ‘critical missionary worker’. The critical edge on the religious as well as social aspects of Christianity in his discourses steadily unveiled. Despite their conversion to Christianity, with expectations of better treatment and equality, Dalits faced very bad treatment within the Church and Yohannan’s experiences were not different. Many Dalits became followers of Yohannan. His speeches attracted them. The European missionary Noel and others like K. V. Simon, Mothoot Kochukunju Upadesi, Chathan Puthoor, Yohannan Assan, Vellikara Mathai Assan, (later he became Vellikara Choathy) etc. were colleagues of Poykayil Yohannan<sup>466</sup>. Chentharasserry depicts the attire of Poykayil Yohannan *upadesi* like this: white *mundu*, long sleeved and one-stitched Juba which covered his knees, the bordered *nereiyatu*, a kind of shawl, both sides of which twisted and covered across his neck and hung down his chest, a Bible with a black cover binding with red color on the three sides. This was

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<sup>465</sup> THP Chentharasserry, *op. cit.* 2009, P. 13.

<sup>466</sup> THP Chentharasserry, *op. cit.* 2009, P. 14.



Poykayil *upadesi*'s attire. M. O. Ipe, a contemporary and another eye witness of Yohanna's attire, depicts a different version: "A short but well-built man also wore a black coat and a hat. If someone is an *upadesi* then he needs a coat and hat. Yohannan had a husky voice."<sup>467</sup>

Yohannan's marriage with Mariya, a Pulaya woman, was another notable incident during this period. Inter-sub caste marriage was very rare in those days and this marriage was an extraordinary exception. This marriage was proposed by the church and Yohannan followed that suggestion without any hesitation at the age of 22. Mariya was the daughter of Kunjathy of Poovathoor Melethil in Vellangoor. The marriage took place in 1901 despite caste opposition and physical attacks. Yohannan was severely beaten up and narrowly escaped death through the timely intervention of Bernabas, his disciple and bodyguard, who carried him away, taking him on his shoulders and running away from the brawl spot.<sup>468</sup>

This marriage did not last long due to some unknown personal matters but it reveals Yohannan's ability to challenge entrenched caste norms at a very young age. Interestingly, when his second marriage took place, after a long gap, he did the same thing again. He married Janamma, a Kurava lady, another sub caste community among dalit castes but whom *parayas* are prohibited from marrying. He supported inter-caste marriages and especially inter-sub caste marriages all his life as a remedy to overcome the cruel rigidity of caste and its futility.

It is interesting to note that Ambedkar, at 21, presented a paper titled "Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development" in New York, in 1916, pointing out that 'inter-

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<sup>467</sup> M. O. Ipe, "Ente Smaranakal" Adiyardeepam Varshika Pathippu, PRDS head office, Eraviperoor, 1967, reprinted in V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.), *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha: Orma, Pattu, Charitrarekhakal*, (Eraviperoor: Adiyardeepam Publication, 2010), P. 88.

<sup>468</sup> Chentarasery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 14.

caste marriages’ and ‘inter-dinning’ are the only two practical ways to overcome caste.<sup>469</sup> Here, 15 years ahead of this, Poykayil Yohannan understood its importance and even moved one step ahead by participating himself in inter sub--caste marriages. While comparing him with other contemporary anti-caste crusaders both inside and outside the Kerala region, Yohannan is an important figure as he might be the only person who personally fought sub-caste barriers, enabling many of his followers to do so.

In Marthoma Church, the converted Christians from depressed classes faced many caste atrocities which deeply wounded Yohannan’s mind. This inclined him towards their problems and he gave more emphasis to these issues. The themes of unifying and liberating the downtrodden were powerfully used in his speeches and people from lower castes and those with similar social experiences were deeply attracted to him. On the other hand, the upper caste Christians of the Marthoma Church became suspicious about his activities. Many rumours spread against Yohannan and finally the Metropolitan of the Marthoma Church issued an order against him. Based on this, an investigation was conducted against Poykayil Yohannan. Fr. Thengumannil Kochu Varkey was assigned to investigate and report the facts on the allegations against Poykayil Yohannan. They met at Kunanmthanam and discussed many controversial issues. The *upadesi* was not willing to compromise on anything that would bring disrepute to the depressed classes. This angered the investigator. He submitted a report against the *upadesi*.<sup>470</sup> M. O. Ipe, a contemporary of Poykayil Yohannan and the son of Fr. Varkey’s brother, recollects this.<sup>471</sup> He says that the local Church leadership informed its diocesan leadership about the

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<sup>469</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *Babasaheb Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol-I*, (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), pp. 3-22.

<sup>470</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 15.

<sup>471</sup> M. O. Ipe, “Ente Smaranakal” Adiyardeepam Varshika Pathippu, PRDS head office, Eraviperoor, 1967, reprinted in V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.), *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha: Orma, Pattu, Charitrarekhakal*,

teachings and ideas of Poykayil Yohannan. Poykayil Yohannan tried to critically analyse Bible in the context of dalits in the Travancore. This was not acceptable for the Church leadership as the Church was following the teachings of the Bible in its scriptural sense. Eventually the Church stopped considering Poykayil Yohannan as an *upadeshi* or preacher.

Yohannan's reply to Fr. Varkey is important. It offers a glimpse of his ambition to achieve freedom and a powerful subjectivity on social and religious matters. Moreover, it shows how he was simultaneously part of the Christian missionary work and ambivalent about those discourses. His assertive statement of "I am the redeemer and God" provoked the Marthoma Church and missionary workers.

Similarly, another horrible caste incident happened during this period. In Pullarikkattu near Pullad, the burying of the body of a Dalit Christian in the cemetery of the parish provoked strong protests and opposition from upper caste Christians. As a result, the body was buried outside the cemetery somewhere in the *purampoke* land. This act of discrimination even to the dead hurt the Dalit Christians and provoked Yohannan and his followers to leave the Marthoma Church.

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(Eraviperoor: Adiyardeepam Publication, 2010), pp. 88-89. Ipe recalls the developments led to the expulsion of Yohannan from Mar Thoma Church as follows:-

I think I was in my High School days. There were some doubts about allowing Poykayil upadesi to continue as an upadesi in the Marthoma Church and allow him to preach freely in the Church. My father's brother, Thengummannil Honorable Fr. Kochu Varkey, was one of the foremost activists of the Marthoma Church and a recognized Biblical Scholar. My father's brother went to Kunnammathanam near Pullad as per the order of His Eminence Marthoma Metropolitan to meet Poykayil Yohannan, talk about his faith and submit a report regarding this to Metropolitan. That day, Poykayil upadesi was conducting a grand convention at Kunnammathanam. Usually, the places my uncle used to go were not too far from home and I used to go with him whenever I was comfortable. This time, too, I accompanied him. There was a weaving shed not far from the venue of the convention. When they met the upadesi, they thought that I should not be with them, so they suggested that I wait in the weaving shed and my uncle and some other people went. I felt disappointed. There is no way!

Around one hour later, they came back. I still remember my uncle was very angry. We returned. I overheard my uncle speaking to others. "No that's not possible, he is saying that he is more than that of Jesus Christ! Jesus Christ is Lord of the Jews. But I am the revealed redeemer and God! This is his status. It is not possible to recognize that person as a member of our church or to allow him to preach in the church.

We came back home. I remember the next morning, my uncle went to see the Metropolitan. Anyway, after that Poykayil Yohannan upadesi was never recognized as a upadesi or a worker in the Marthoma church community.

Yohannan and his followers joined the Brother Mission.<sup>472</sup> Yohannan's talent as an *upadesi* attracted hundreds of people to the conventions of Brother Mission. But here too Yohannan was excluded from all the matters of the Mission and Church other than his speeches. The discrimination was seen even in the feast of the Church after the prayers. At convention meetings and prayers, Yohannan sat on the forefront of the dais but during the dinners afterwards, he was made to sit on the bare ground. Apart from this, he had to carry the luggage of foreign missionaries and other leaders of the Church.<sup>473</sup>

Another incident provoked Yohannan to leave the Brother Mission. A Syrian Christian lady from Brother Mission named Mariya, and Daniel, a *paraya* convert from Vellangoor, had fallen in love. Yohannan tried to join them together in marriage. The Syrian Christians of the Brother Mission did not allow this and the opposing group even tried to assault Yohannan. He narrowly escaped the assault and soon Yohannan and his followers abandoned Brother Mission.

Subsequently, Yohannan joined the Brethren Church.<sup>474</sup> The famous European missionary, Noel, was there. He was known as 'Noel *Sayyip*' to the natives and Noel was very fond of Yohannan. The church members were once enthralled by the scene where Noel *Sayyip* wiped the face of Yohannan *upadesi*, who was bathed in sweat and preached passionately, with his handkerchief.<sup>475</sup> But the native followers of Brethren Church did not share this attitude of the European missionary. One day, Noel offered Rs 50/- as remuneration to Yohannan for the missionary activities and speeches and he refused it with rage. "I came here to search for my people. Not to speak by receiving *Sayyip*'s salary. Did Jesus or his disciples delivered their

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<sup>472</sup> A Protestant Christian Missionary group.

<sup>473</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 16.

<sup>474</sup> This church colloquially known as *Verpadusabha*, the separated church.

<sup>475</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 17

speeches by receiving any salary?” he asked.<sup>476</sup> Noel realized that Yohannan’s goal in religious activity was self-realisation, not material gain<sup>477</sup> which was a new experience for him in his missionary life. One of Poykayil Yohannan’s songs reflects this theme clearly and ridicules waged work for God:

What is your salary for work, O friends?

What is your salary for work?

Have you ever talked about the truth of God?

Have you ever read the Holy Text?

Have you ever worked for six and sixty rupees?

Have you ever worked for a hundred or two?<sup>478</sup>

This was Yohannan’s honesty and attitude towards life. This can be seen as an example of Yohannan’s rejection of colonial missionary allegiance and the outpouring of a unique and autonomous thought which reflects his commitment to his people and religious faith without any personal gain. Yohannan’s speeches were in line with his own ideas, which made the *savarna* Christians think that he was speaking against them. Yohannan’s speeches were full of anti-caste content and it attracted thousands of oppressed peoples (*avarna* Christians) to listen to him. He could not stay in that Church for long and soon he and some of his followers left the Brethren Church. All his experiences in different churches in different Christian denominations was

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<sup>476</sup> M. S. Thankappan, *Sathyam*, (Thiruvananthapuram: Ravisree Publications, 2015), p. 113.

<sup>477</sup> Chentharassery *op. cit.* 2009, p. 18.

<sup>478</sup> V. V Swami & E. V. Anil, (Eds.) *Songs of Prathyksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*, (Eravipeeroor: Adiyardeepam, 2010), p. 45.

unpleasant due to his caste and his anti-caste speeches. In one of his songs, he expressed his strong discontent in the following way:

Once I am baptized in the blood of Christ

My lasting pollution has ended forever

Still, you call me pulaya

And I won't ever come to that church.

Since I am baptized in the blood of Christ

My unending curse has gone forever

Still, you call me paraya

And I won't ever come to that church.

Since I am baptized in the blood of Christ

My lasting lack has ceased forever

Still, you call me kurava

And I won't ever come to that church.<sup>479</sup>

### **Prophet of the Downtrodden: From Secret Prophecies to Revealed Salvation**

There are several occasions from childhood onwards in which Yohannan showed

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<sup>479</sup> V. V Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds), *Songs... op. cit.* 2010, pp. 14-15

distinctive standpoints in matters that were crucial to him and his followers. While he was a shepherd boy, he led his fellow beings in the right way towards self-respect and self-reliability and when he was an *upadesi*, he led his people on a different path of religious autonomy. After leaving the colonial missionary congregations, he lived an independent way of life and with a religious perspective capable of providing agency to lower caste Christians. He entered into a new world of gospel conventions and speeches based on his own interpretations of the Bible and related themes. Wherever he preached the gospel, he used the themes of slavery, liberation and so on. The Syrian Christians, with their claim to be the native Christians of the land were offended by this and they levelled several malicious charges against him, including blasphemy. Moreover, the provoked Syrian Christians tried to assault Yohannan on many occasions when he was holding gospel conventions, from which he escaped narrowly, often from death.

In 1908, at Vakathanam, near Changanacherry, an independent convention of Poykayil Yohannan was taking place in the courtyard of the house of Mukkalil Adichan Abraham, a Dalit chieftain. A big tent was built for this meeting and it continued uninterruptedly for 14 days and nights. Several Dalits, irrespective of their sub-castes, were attending those sessions.<sup>480</sup> The theme of his speeches in these meeting was directly related to the spirituality of the downtrodden. Interestingly, many people from *savarna* communities also attended that meeting. Yohannan used his skills of oratory and cleverly delivered his speeches tailored to his audiences. He tactically changed the themes and rhetoric of his speeches, taking the presence of *savarnas* in his audience into consideration, and continued with the subject matter of his choice related to the spirituality of the subjugated in the absence of the former.<sup>481</sup> Rev. W. S. Hunt, a colonial

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<sup>480</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.), *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha: Orma, Pattu, Charitrarekhakal*, (Eraviperoor: Adiyardeepam Publication, 2010), p. 45.

<sup>481</sup> See Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 21.

missionary, testifies to this. He writes:

His teaching however, was reported to be unorthodox, if fantastic; and it was orthodox when it was known that anyone was present who was likely to report upon it, for the preacher's henchmen instantly informed him if any stranger was among his hearers and he framed his discourse accordingly. But it gradually came to be known that his preaching was not the same that it had been, and especially that the way of salvation which he revealed was not what he had formerly proclaimed. This new way was a secret one, only revealed to those deemed fit to believe it and imparted at the dead of night with dread accompaniments in a lonely jungle. Those to whom it was thus imparted were 'the saved'.<sup>482</sup>

The western missionary mind did not allow any deviation from the set religious discourse, any "uncivilized" rupture in their religious movement. This account shows their wonder and excitement at the religious discourse being manipulated. At the Vakathanam meeting, Yohannan signaled his arrival as a new but distinctive prophet with spirituality and charisma. He assertively stated the new emergence of a religious sect, when he sung:

Within me, there is a new power

Within me, there is a new life

I saw a new sky

I saw a new earth

I see a holy church

Nothing on earth is equal to that.<sup>483</sup>

It indicates a unique and autonomous religious path, the harbinger of which was Poykayil Yohannan. But the reaction was very cruel. The Syrian Christians of the locality and neighboring

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<sup>482</sup> Rev, W. S. Hunt, "Mass Movement Phenomina", *The Harvest field*. Vol. XXXIX, June, 1919, p. 213

<sup>483</sup> V. V. Swami & Anil (Eds.), *Songs... op. cit.* 2010. P.4.



areas grouped up and came to attack Yohannan and his followers. Heresy was one charge against him. The workers belonging to the dalit community approached Yohannan shirking work, which was another reason that provoked the elite Christians. Vetteekkar, a landlord, sent goons to kill Yohannan.<sup>484</sup> It is reported that Yohannan's followers were effective in resisting that assault with sickles and boiling water, while Yohannan was holed up in a nearby granary. That same night, the *upadesi*, disguised as a woman, was taken to Muthalapra with the women and rescued.<sup>485</sup>

During a secret meeting in the night in Mukkalil in Vakathanam, near Kottayam in 1908, Yohannan asked his followers: "What is the relationship of the descendants of slaves with the Bible? Did you find any reference about your slave experience in the Bible? Do you believe that the Bible will help you to liberate yourself from your pathetic experiences? If not, then why do you need this? Throw it in to the fire." Yohannan and his followers burnt the Bible.<sup>486</sup> Sanal Mohan says that there is no record of this incident in the colonial missionary records, except in K. V. Simon's account.<sup>487</sup> In 1939, K. V. Simon wrote about this incident:

From the depressed classes a man named Yohannan emerged. He was a convert from the Paraya caste and a slave of Sankaramangalam in Eraviperoor. Though he was just a literate, it could be understood that he amassed a large number of depressed classes and many Syrian Christians due to his grand oratory [...] Since these slaves did not need anything other than the advice of Mr. Yohannan, they began to burn the Bible by tearing it into several pieces.<sup>488</sup>

The news of this incident spread all over Travancore and is still in the social memory of Yohannan's followers. It shows that though Yohannan emerged and grew up within the

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<sup>484</sup> M. S. Thankappan, *op. cit.* p. 116.

<sup>485</sup> M. S. Thankappan, *op. cit.* p. 116.

<sup>486</sup> Grandharachana Smithy, *Sreekumaradevan*, (Ettumanoor: Sreekumara Dharma Samajam, 1983), p. 47.

<sup>487</sup> P. Sanal Mohan, "Imagining Equality: Modernity and Social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala" Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2005, p. 141.

<sup>488</sup> K. V Simon, *Verpadu Sabhakalude Charitram*, (Thiruvalla: Sathyam Publications, 1999), p. 116, reproduced in V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil, *Orma, Pattu...op. cit.* 2010 pp. 148-149.

framework of a Bible-centric theology, he was critical of the Bible from his life experiences, even while he was a missionary worker. Subsequently, he evolved as a heuristically independent theologian and a kind of prophet. This phenomenal evolution is significant in the history of radical lower caste/anti-caste movements in Kerala.

Though Yohannan burned the Bible and proclaimed detachment from it, he did not throw off the veil as a preacher of the Christian gospel. Later, many conventions took place in several places, like Kadapra, Kuttoor, Oottupara, Kunnam, Kumarakam, Karyamplavu, and many people, including Syrian Christians, attended these meetings enthusiastically.<sup>489</sup> At the beginning of the conventions, Yohannan concentrated on people who converted to Christianity and criticised caste within Christianity. In one of his poems, Yohannan expressed his criticism of Christian missionary activities, which resulted in the mushrooming of different churches on the basis of caste denomination, and expressed his desperation as he sung:

A church for the Paraya, another for the Pulaya

Yet another Church for fishing Marakkan

A church for the father, a church for the son

A church for each one in the household

A church for the sovereign and for the subaltern

This sect and that sect having separate churches

Though numerous churches have emerged in a row

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<sup>489</sup> V. V. Swami & Anil (Eds.) *Orma, Pattu... op. cit.* 2010, p. 46.

I don't see any change in caste differences.<sup>490</sup>

On another occasion, he asked his audience about the meaningless practices prevalent in society, among staunch believers of the Holy Bible. He sang:

Have you ever read the Holy Text?

Have you seen how many castes are mentioned in it?

Have you seen, have you seen

My dear respected friend,

While preaching in the church,

You will be treated as siblings

You will be spoken to as sisters born to the same mother,

My dear respected friend,

But once the Church is dispersed

Outside you will be called names

Like Paraya bitch and Pulaya bitch?

My dear respected friend,

Didn't the blood of Christ

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<sup>490</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of...op. cit.* 2010, p. 14.

Purify us all?

No, it has never.<sup>491</sup>

During this period, the followers of Poykayil Yohannan and his congregation were known as *Poykakoottar*,<sup>492</sup>i.e., the group of Poyka. A huge convention of Yohannan in Mundakkayam ended in a small clash between his followers and adversaries. Slightly later, a severe clash between Yohannan's followers and *savarnas* occurred in Vellanadi estate.<sup>493</sup> The bodyguards of Yohannan like Bernabas, Vazhel Ouseph, Vellangoor Daniyel, Aryaliyil Mathai, Vallyapurackal Chacko, Koottickal Kurian, Vattakkavil Mathai, Olackal Mathai, Mambara Yohannan etc. surrounded Poykayil Yohannan and protected him in this clash. They were trained in martial arts and they drove the opponents away. The estate owner filed a case against Yohannan and his disciples but the Court acquitted them.<sup>494</sup> Later, in Vettiyadu, a convention turned into a riot and Muthalapra Kunjeli, a woman who attended the meeting, was killed.<sup>495</sup>

What made people follow Yohannan and why was his speech was so attractive are phenomena that even now are not adequately explained. Hundreds of people waited to hear his speeches. Apart from the day time conventions, people crowded the night time conventions to listen to him. They followed him for spiritual experiences entwined in the thread of an intimacy, something they had never heard before. What he talked about no one had told them before. He narrated their history. He told the history of slaves ploughing fields with their ancestral fathers tied to oxen and buffaloes, the history of being beaten, killed and dragged like dogs to the river,

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<sup>491</sup> Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>492</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu... *op. cit.* p. 35.

<sup>493</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 22.

<sup>494</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 36.

<sup>495</sup> K. M. Annamma, *Kuttikalude Guruidevan*, (Trissur: Upavasam Publications, 2001), Quated In V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu... *op. cit.* p. 107.

stream or creek, the history of digging a hole in the middle of the gorge (*chira*) and being buried alive inside it in the name of protecting the paddy field, the history of slaves who were paralysed, unable to pull the yoke with the bull and trampled to death in the muddy water, history of the offence for not going to work in the field due to illness being put in a pit and covered with mud up to the neck, having ghee poured on the head and being set on fire, the history of being tied up in the bush for a trivial crime and being bitten and eaten by wild animals and the history of the orphaned children who cried when their fathers and mothers were sold and taken away. When they heard it, they wept all night.<sup>496</sup> These narratives connected easily with the continuing misery of their real lives and that explains the huge crowds, particularly from the lower caste groups that Yohannan attracted to his conventions despite violence against them.

Another important convention was the one in Kulathhoorkunnu, in 1909, which had a greater significance in the history of Poykayil Yohannan. The convention was called ‘Rakshanirnaya Yogam’ and held in Kulathhoorkunnu, near Mallappally, in present day Pathanamthitta district, a remote hilly area, not thickly populated. The place had been chosen to avoid attacks from *savarnas* and the convention lasted 41 days and nights.<sup>497</sup> Thousands of dalits attended this meeting. According to Chentharassery, a huge shed was built there. Special meetings were held on the subject of the Trinity and slavery. Followers remember that at one point in the meeting, a halo of light miraculously enveloped the founder. That amazing sight shocked the people. That atmosphere was filled with tears, cries and screams. He reassured them with a message of consolation. He gave them a new light. Based on that, they addressed him as *Appachan*, the father, together, in a sore voice, with stuttering throats. He delivered a speech on

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<sup>496</sup> M. S. Thankappan, *op. cit.* pp. 117-118.

<sup>497</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu... *op. cit.* p. 47.

the subject of *Rakshanirnayam*<sup>498</sup> (determination of salvation). “Through this meeting, Yohannan presented the spirituality of freedom of an enslaved people in India. This meeting is considered a manifestation (revelation) of salvation. It was at this meeting that the people publicly proclaimed *Appachan* (Poykayil Yohannan) as their Saviour and God.”<sup>499</sup> Twenty-one people were present for re-rendering this meeting. This system was adopted to make what *Appachan* said heard even at the far end of the pandal. There were long songs between speeches.<sup>500</sup> The meeting was well-organized. Singers, executives, copyists, advisors, counsellors, cooks and bodyguards were assigned for this meeting. The speech explained how the aboriginal people lost their spiritual dignity and became slaves, alongside what salvation and spirituality meant for them.<sup>501</sup> On the matter of the history of the Dalits Poykayil Yohannan sung:

No, not a single letter is seen

On my race

So many histories are seen

Of so many races

Scrutinize each one of them

The whole histories of the world

Not a single letter is seen

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<sup>498</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 23.

<sup>499</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu... *op. cit.* p. 47.

<sup>500</sup> Memory of Kuttipoovthunkal Somanathan, “Daivam Nilamirangiya Mannu” V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu... *op. cit.* p. 120

<sup>501</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu,... *op. cit.* p.48.

On my race

There was no one on this earth

To write the history

Of my race in the olden days

What a pity!<sup>502</sup>

Through his songs and speeches on Dalit history, Yohannan was invoking a notion of history absent for centuries within the minds of this people. This sowed the seeds of self-realisation, enabling them to think of self-respect.

Sanal Mohan discusses missionary documents which depict Yohannan's secret night time meetings like the one in Kulathoor Kunnu. One of the documents Mohan cites says:

As might be expected, the teaching is fitted with gross extravagances and the midnight meetings are marked by various extravagances - swoons, fit, contortions, wild laughter, dancing and the like - the characteristics in fact, of that primitive animism, which Yohannan's followers quitted at their convention. Yohannan seems himself to have degenerated into a megalomaniac, giving himself out to be some great one. He has bewitched the poor people who regarded him as the power of God, who is called great.<sup>503</sup>

This document shows how much Yohannan and his movement challenged and upset the missionary movement. Apart from this Rev. Hunt, a CMS missionary, wrote about the activities of Yohannan as heresy and blasphemy. He states:

One symptom of unrest has been the appearance of what have been (perhaps rather

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<sup>502</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of... op. cit.* 2010, p. 11.

<sup>503</sup> TCDR. Vol. XXIV. Feb. 1914, p. 15 Quoted in P. Sanal Mohan, "Imagining Equality: Modernity and Social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala." Unpublished PhD Thesis submitted to Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2005, p. 141.

loosely) called heresies... The leader is a Paraya convert, whose forebears were slaves, of a Syrian family... His hearers were naturally, chiefly fellow-outcaste converts, but others, even including Syrians, were attracted... with his dramatic power and gift of song, he alternately terrified and soothed them; he worked them up almost to a frenzy of terror over the consequences of their sins and produced a corresponding intensity of relief when, at the close of the series, he revealed to them the way of salvation. It was the same preaching that had been so successful before, but intensified, unrestrained, lasting for whole nights, with drumming and tunes and other accompaniments that appealed to the centuries-old animism in his hearers. The thrills of terror and relief, the rhythmic throbbing under the midnight stars, the lilt of song, and the sense of uncanny power in the preacher as he waxed hoarser and hoarser and more wild and bloodshot, gave his hearers an intensity of emotional ecstasy never experienced in the ordinary ways of Christianity and firmly attached them to him. He became a kind of intoxication.<sup>504</sup>

The portrayal of Yohannan's frenzy and the centuries-old 'animism' that he generated in the missionary account is reflective of the potential threat that missionaries, especially those working among lower castes, were facing from Yohannan and his Christianity. The *savarna* civil society of Travancore was also not ready to accept the new assertive and autonomous move of the Dalits under Yohannan's leadership. This large potential threat that Yohannan posed is reflected in some of the reports of the missionaries:

In reading about Rasputin the Russian monk who was an indirect cause of the recent revolution, one can't help thinking of another prophet, in this diocese. His religious and philosophical themes based on his alleged authority from High, and on the 'cleansing' of the world from its sins through him, attracted a throng of disciples, especially female disciples, and opened a wide arena for the gratification of his propensities.<sup>505</sup>

It is interesting to note that W. S. Hunt referred to Poykayil Yohannan in his book: "Teachers have arisen among them from their own people too and have disturbed them in their faith. It is impossible to mention all such teachers, but one called Poykayil Yohannan has *had a powerful influence amongst his fellows*, and some account of him must be given."

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<sup>504</sup> Rev, W. S. Hunt, 1919, *op. cit.* pp. 212-213.

<sup>505</sup> TCDR. Vol. XXVII, no. 8 (May 1917), p. 35, quoted in Sanal Mohan, "Religion Space Identity... *op. cit.* 2005, p. 47.



The following comes from the pen of the Rev, W. S. Hunt:

Poykayil Yohannan is a Pariah convert, who left the C. M. S. to join the Marthoma Syrians and left that Church for the Brethren, from who seceded a year or two ago and became an independent preacher. *He has attracted a number of followers.* He is a fine-looking man, and many have found power in his preaching. At one time, he contented himself with producing in his hearers an intense conviction of sin, and after that, assurance of salvation. But *he has now developed an esoteric system, which is unfolded at midnight gatherings in lonely jungles.* There those who accept his teaching as a divine revelation make certain vows. This, it should be said, comes as the culmination of a series of meetings and preachings extending over a good many days and nights (several weeks sometimes ), and not all are found fit to become adepts. These regard *Yohannan not only as the recipient of a Divine revelation, but as himself a Devine revelation.* One of his teachings is this. “In the New Testament are certain Epistles by St. Paul and others. To whom did St. Paul write his Epistles? To the Romans, Corinthians, etc. There was not one written to the Pulayas of Travancore. Therefore, there is no revelation in those Epistles for you, but only for the Romans, Corinthians, etc. The revelation to you Pulayas of Travancore is through me.”<sup>506</sup>

Here it seems that Hunt is referring to the Yohannan phenomenon as most influential among slave castes. He openly reveals that Yohannan is a ‘disturbance’ to the European evangelical missionary interests. He calls his an ‘esoteric system’, and refers to Yohannan’s activities and meeting with terms like ‘midnight gatherings’, ‘in lonely jungles’, ‘swoons’, ‘contortions’, ‘wild laughter’ and so on. Moreover, he has been called a megalomaniac. Though this account was originally intended to defile and demonise Yohannan, it reveals the extent to which Yohannan was a threat to colonial missionary work and the damage it did to their discourses by way of his deviations.

This was coupled with the opposition of some Syrian Christians to Yohannan’s teaching and activities and they planted criminal cases against him. They spread rumours to the effect that Yohannan was against the government and the Travancore State. During this time, he conducted

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<sup>506</sup> W. S. Hunt, *The Anglican Church in Travancore & Cochin 1816-1916: Operations of the Church Missionary Society in South-West India Vol-II*, (Kottayam: Church Missionary Society, 1968), p. 235-236. (emphasis added)

a procession for peace with his followers in thousands, who dressed in pure white clothes with a slogan 'Peace for the world'. This was misinterpreted as his support to Germany and it was alleged that it was in favour of Germany the march was conducted. As cases were registered Yohannan, he received an arrest warrant and appeared before the court at Changanacherry, where he declared the name of the Church, a church for the children of slaves, as *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS), Church of God of Revealed Salvation, in 1910. The magistrate could not find any fault in him. He was calm, peaceful and logical in his answers and got absolved with all the charges.<sup>507</sup>

The hatred towards Yohannan by the native upper caste Christians is evident in another document. This is a magazine named *Njananikshepam*, 'The Treasury of Knowledge: A magazine for Christian Workers', published by CMS press, Kottayam. In one of its issues, in 1916, it referred to Yohannan as a false teacher. It says under the title "Face to face with a false Teacher":

Poykayil Yohannan attended a meeting at Kuttoor near Thiruvalla as per the decision to conduct a convention for five days continuously from March 11 onwards. A fine tent was built, with a platform, tables etc. were set up early in the courtyard of a man of Jacoba Syrian, who was not aware about his *doctrines that are immoral and blasphemous*. When he properly understood Yohannan and his doctrines, he regretted allowing him to preach in the tent. He allowed us to preach in the same pavilion, refuting the bad advice from witnesses to the truth. A few zealous and enthusiastic people came together and *did the most effective work there* with all their heart [...] Yohannan left the place on the third day early in the morning, leaving the conventions scheduled for five days. ... *Does anyone still see the Bible or a copy of the Gospels in the hands of those who go to Yohannan's meetings?* [...] it should also be noted that a *policeman was assigned by the government to attend these meetings*

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<sup>507</sup> Grandharachana Samithy, *op. cit.*, p. 63. It is said that the police came to arrest Yohannan while he was delivering a speech in Muthalapra. Police waited there and listened his speech. They were so moved by his speech, they did not arrest him. They asked him to appear before the court at Changanacherry next morning. He did so and the magistrate asked him: 'Do you know who are the *Sayyippanmar* (Europeans)?' 'They are westerners,' he replied. 'What is the name of your sect?' the magistrate again asked? After thinking for a while he replied 'Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha!', see V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (Eds.) Orma, Pattu,... *op. cit.* p.50.

of Yohannan.<sup>508</sup>

Here also Yohannan is depicted as a character whose teachings were immoral and blasphemous, without using the Bible and literature of Gospel. They also noted that Yohannan was under the surveillance of the government, being a person who may cause turmoil. All these characterisations of Yohannan reveal his subversive potential. Again, we can see another reference of Yohannan elsewhere in the same magazine.

We have often spoken of Poykayil Yohannan and his teachings in the *Njananikshepam*. By teaching and learning of salvation and secrets of salvation, *all these groups are inclined towards the Hindu path*. It is heard that an attempt is being made by the Ramakrishna Mission to *convert Yohannan and his group to the Hindu religion after leaving Christian faith in public*. This question was supposed to be true because it is learned that a meeting was held on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> September at Muthalapara. In this meeting, many noble Hindus, including government servants, and others, attended. Two Brahmin *Sanyasis*, peers, attended. A Hindu presided over this meeting of the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha. The speakers were also Hindus. It is clear from this that many Hindus today are interested in the upliftment and prosperity of the lower castes, which they have long trampled on, in order to exclude those who have joined the Christian path and to prevent those who have not. Readers are *requested to pray especially for those in this category who are wrongly wandering in spiritual blindness*.<sup>509</sup>

Interestingly, forgetting their previous stand on Yohannan and his group being blasphemous, they now allege that Yohannan and his followers are leaving Christianity and joining Hinduism. They accused Yohannan and his followers as wanderers in spiritual blindness, in denial of religious agency of Yohannan and PRDS. But the intervention of Ramakrishna Mission is to be noted here. There are other sources that reveal Yohannan's connection to different faiths and religious movements. For instance, in the year 1921, C. F. Andrews, the secretary of Rabindranath Tagore, visited Poykayil Yohannan several times. This was recorded by M. O. Ipe, who had acted as a translator at one of these meetings, as follows:

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<sup>508</sup> *Njananikshepam*, Vol-XIX, No. 5, May 1916, p. p. 70-71.(emphasis added)

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.* No. 11, November, p.p. 162-163. (emphasis added)

By his own effort, the *upadesi*, had acquired the ability to understand English. It may be considered that if my help would be good for speaking with the *sayyip* (foreigner), they thought of my presence there. Sri. Andrews assured many offers to *Upadesi*. A first-class school, one Press, and much else. But the *upadesi* decided not to sacrifice his freedom for these confections. After this meeting, there were some more meetings between *Upadesi* and Sri Andrews. But two months later, coincidentally, we met and I asked him ‘What happened after the *sayyip* came?’ ‘The *sayyip* wanted to buy my Church. I am not ready to sell it’. This was his reply.<sup>510</sup>

Yohannan’s irresistible desire to be free and autonomous, overcoming the temptations of offerings, is clear. Both narratives, in *Njananikshepam* and the account by M. O. Ipe, make it clear that he was open to any discussions with any religious denominations and discourses but he kept a safe distance from every discourse and group with which he engaged with. He had an ambivalence, which derived from his double consciousness.

In January 1920, C. M. S. Gleaner reported about Poykayil Yohannan and the trouble he represented in an article titled, ‘A Waning Heresy’ :

The *Church Missionary Review* for March, 1919, gave an account of Poykayil Johanan, [sic.] *the leader of a heresy which has spread widely in Travancore*. His adherents have been computed as numbering between 5000 and 15000. Hitherto his method seems to have been to *reduce the outcastes to hopelessness* by pointing out that, in the Old Testament, God the Father is seen at work in the world; in the Gospels, God the Son; in the Acts, God the Holy Ghost. But who, he asks, is working in the world today? When the people have thus been brought to an unbearable pitch of despair over the absence of any divine leader, the message is given that God has not left Himself without a witness, and *Johannan is indicated not only as a medium of revelation, but as himself the revelation*. An outcaste himself, he makes a *strong appeal both to the emotions and the racial pride of the outcastes*. Mr. Hunt writes as follows:

A considerable number of our poor people have been followers of Poykayil Johanan and are now returning, some because they are convinced that he is a *deceiver*, many because litigation connected with his land is compelling him to increase his demand for money. *His movement is more openly social and racial and less religious than it used to be, the worldly advancement of the Paraya community being the acknowledged aim.*<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> M. O. Ipe, *op. cit.* p. 90.

<sup>511</sup> The C. M. S. GLEANER, January 1920, p. 15. (Emphasis added), (Private Collection).

Here also Yohannan is depicted and convicted as a heretic preacher and driven by non-Christian intentions, at the same time registering their astonishment on his growing influence. They were worried that Yohannan was leading the outcastes into rebellion. By quoting Rev. Hunt here again, they wanted to demolish Yohannan's claim of revelation as racial pride and portray it as actually aimed at worldly advancement. Another reference to Poykayil Yohannan in the native literature of Syrian Christians can be seen in book entitled *Maha Edavakayude Bhavi*, published in 1938:

In this way, CMS is slowly paving the way for the prosperity of the poor, Mr. Yohannan jumped in between with the *Prathyaksh Raksha Daiva Sabha*.

The people till this time who read the Gospel of God, and hear it, and worshiped him, hear that God has come down and they are scared and run there. I think that there will be leaders among them today who are able to realise that what Poyyakayil did was to hold the poor by the legs and *throw them back from as far as they advanced*. The poor from all our parishes flowed towards it. They throw away the things till they read, learned and understood. Those who had property sold it and submitted the money to his feet for the construction of a 'heavenly Jerusalem'. *He drained the warm blood from the people, who are in thousands appointed as workers in the plantations*. Like the Hindus go to *Sabarimala*, the poor started to go to Eraviperoor with tied luggage for salvation [...] The poor who started to learn Christian advice and moral conduct *again fell down into the outcaste*. The fear spread that many of *our Churches will cease to exist*. A huge number of people left the Church and joined him. Some other groups by only observing the surroundings moved externally in the Church and internally with Yohannan.<sup>512</sup>

Rev. Sathyanathan also portrays Yohannan as blasphemous and a person leading the poor backwards. At the same time, all these critiques accept the fact that Yohannan was influencing a large number of people and even threatening the existence of their churches with his popularity.

All these representations of demonising, 'othering' and objectification are done from their own privileged subjective position as in the formulation of Toni Morrison on White

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<sup>512</sup> Rev. M. Satyanathan, *Maha Edavakayude Bhavi*(Future of the Diocese), (Kottayam: published by the Author, 1938), pp. 91-92. (Emphasis added)

representation of the Blacks, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Morrison points out that, Blacks are represented through the lens of white perception, and from Shakespeare to the recent works of literature, Blacks were depicted as ‘absence’, demonised, and alienated. They were depicted as characters who don’t have faces, bodies and agency. It is also worth remembering the European modern preconceived notion that blacks are soulless.<sup>513</sup>

Likewise, in both the European missionary records and native masters’ accounts, Dalits were depicted as without subjectivity and authorship and this is not merely coincidental. It could be read also as Poykayil Yohannan’s independent stand worrying missionaries and Syrian Christians because till that time a slave had not assumed this kind of independence. This was countered by attributing to his work insanity, blasphemy and turmoil. The dalit declaration of autonomy was being confronted with diverse forms of power, including physical power and social power to crush it.

### **A Prophet in Social Legislation: Religious and Socio-Political intervention of Poykayil Yohannan and PRDS**

Soon after the proclamation of the new religion PRDS galloped as an established modern religious movement. Relentless and continuous conventions in all possible places where lower caste people were a significant number were conducted by PRDS and subsequently several branches of PRDS were established. Chentharassery mentions that wherever *Appachan* (Yohannan) went, there would be a convention, an experience based on which the mothers of that time had made a lullaby for their children:

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<sup>513</sup> To read the whole discussions see Tony Morison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

*Appachan* has come, dear girl, Martha!

Today there is a convention in Maniyar<sup>514</sup>

As a part of his resolve to build a modern socio-cultural religious society from a socially marginalised community, Poykayil *Appachan* at first focused to reform on his followers through a drive for cleanliness. The centuries-long history of slavery and caste discriminations made the downtrodden communities dirty in their appearance and vulnerable in their physical disposition. Yohannan and his followers began to use clean and neat white clothes, though they were not allowed to do so.<sup>515</sup> In all his meetings, his followers were strictly directed to be neat and clean and asked to wear neat white clothes. He advised his followers that even if they had only one pair of dress, it should be washed properly and used cleanly. He also advised his followers to take bath regularly, to clean their teeth well and follow good housekeeping habits.<sup>516</sup>

There is an interesting incident which reveals the communitarian perspective of Poykayil Yohannan, whose powerful interventions changed the mindset of a downtrodden society. The story might be summarised as follows: Once Yohannan and two of his disciples entered the hut of a dalit family. The house and the children in that hut were too untidy and the house in a mess. Yohannan bathed and cleaned the children and kept the house clean and tidy. He cooked some food and neatly served it to the children and left the place. When the parents came back and saw this they got astonished. In the evening, *Appachan* came back to that house and revealed that he was the person who came and did this. He advised that family and the neighborhood about the

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<sup>514</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 25.

<sup>515</sup> During this period, dalits were not allowed to wear new, neat and clean clothes. They had to smear charcoal and mud on their new clothes before using them. Even till 1950s, in some places when converted Christians from dalit community used to go to churches for worship, they were used to bring their neat and white clothes hidden in a basket or other materials and wore untidy and dirty clothes in church.. See the notes in P Sanal Mohan & Vinil Baby Paul, *Viswasavum Vimochanavum: Kaipatta Habel*, (Thiruvalla: Christhava Sahitya Samithy, 2015), p. 29

<sup>516</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* 2009, p. 26.

need for cleanliness. Soon that family and their neighbors became staunch followers of Yohannan.<sup>517</sup>

Yohannan's *modus operandi* of spreading his message was through travelling sermons. V. V. Swami and others say that *sanchara prasangangal* (travelling sermons) was one of the most important activities of Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan. *Sanchara prasangangal*, are meetings that moved from place to place.<sup>518</sup> It is important to note that these itinerant meetings and conventions occurred in spaces inaccessible to untouchable castes. It is pointed out that "most of these meetings were conducted in the streets, markets and on the road sides."<sup>519</sup> Through these meetings Yohannan and his followers occupied spaces which they were not allowed to enter otherwise. This was possible by making use of the space created by missionary activities; gospel of Bible and the missionary motives came as handy masquerades. There is a notice dated in this connection in the private collection of the present researcher. It is dated 1935 and informs about a convention of Poykayil Yohannan at Thrikkannamangal in Kottarakkara where his name suffixed as ex-SMPA member. But interestingly this meeting is announced as meant for Gospel speeches. The subject matter of the notice contained a mixture of Biblical terms and Yohannan's teachings. PRDS is not mentioned anywhere and it invites peoples belonging to all castes and religions.<sup>520</sup> As rightly pointed by Swami et. al, "[t]he *sanchara prasangangal*, conducted in the different places of central Travancore like Kumbanadu, Kozhancherry, Othara, Kuttoor, Thiruvalla, Muthalapra, Vakathanam, Kulathoor, Parumala, Mannar, etc,<sup>521</sup> were declarations of

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<sup>517</sup> O. K. Santhosh, *op. cit.* p. 43.

<sup>518</sup> V. V. Swami, E. V. Anil and P. P. Raveendran, *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Charitrathil Pratyakshapetta Vidham*, (Kottayam: Society of PRDS Studies, 2009), p. 29.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>520</sup> A notice dated 19-06-110 M. E (1935) Private collection.

<sup>521</sup> These were also the nerve centers of missionary activities, particularly CMS, the seat of many reform activities.



the freedom of movement.”<sup>522</sup>

PRDS, under the leadership of Poykayil Yohannan, organised several activities to develop the education of Dalits in Travancore. It is pointed out that, “PRDS had established five schools in Kerala, in regions like Vengalathukunnu, Marankulam, Amarapuram, Peermed and Mundakkayam. One English medium residential school was established in Vengalathukunnu. Apart from these, three weaving schools and two matchbox companies were also established by the Sabha.”<sup>523</sup> Moreover, Yohannan advised his followers to teach at least five languages to their children.<sup>524</sup> These were solid socio-cultural interventions through which Yohannan aimed at creating a competent and well-equipped future generation of Dalits.

Poykayil Yohannan was well aware of the fact that it was only through economic development that his followers, chiefly from slave castes, could move forward. He firmly believed that the survival and forward mobility of downtrodden communities could be possible only through acquiring power, wealth and status. But the entrenched caste system and its socio-cultural values did not allow them to move up easily to acquire these things, though Yohannan and his followers strove hard to acquire these material prerequisites to run their lives happily.

Yohannan adopted a technique of *oru nullariyum oruchilli kasum*, ‘a pinch of rice and a penny’ to develop self-sufficiency and to build community assets.<sup>525</sup> Through this, he meant that women of his Sabha should put aside a handful of rice while they commence their cooking rice and men should put aside a single penny from their daily wage. Each month this accumulated little amount of money and rice should be brought to the PRDS churches or main branch.

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<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

<sup>524</sup> E. V. Anil, *Jathiyum Samoohavum: Prathyksha Raksha Daiva Sabhayude Navodhana Edapedalukal*, (Eraviperor: Adiyardeepam publications, 2013), p. 24.

<sup>525</sup> M. S. Thankappan, *op. cit.* p. 157.

PRDS formulated three types of activities for slave castes with regard to the issue of land during that time: 1). Form as a group and accumulate land by their own efforts. 2). Earn land for slave castes through democratic means by pressurising the government and 3). Raise the discriminations experienced by dalits in every sphere, including raising the issues related to land in the public sphere.<sup>526</sup> The followers of PRDS sold their toil to purchase land in several places in Travancore. They submitted many memoranda to solve the land issue of the slave castes. PRDS purchased around 200 acres of land in different parts of Travancore.

| Sl. No.                            | Places/Areas                      | Quantity of Land     | Year of purchasing |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1                                  | Amarapuram                        | 55 acres and 35 cent | 1917               |
| 2                                  | Eraviperoor                       | 12 acres             | 1921               |
| 3                                  | Kokkayar                          | 3 ½ cent             |                    |
| 4                                  | Puthuppally                       | 2 acres              |                    |
| 5                                  | Thottakkad                        | 10 cent              |                    |
| 6                                  | Vakathanam                        | 1 acre and 52 cent   |                    |
| 7                                  | Muthalapra                        | 1 acre               |                    |
| 8                                  | Payippad                          | 25 cent              |                    |
| 9                                  | Neyyattinkara and Dhanuvachapuram | 13 acres             |                    |
| 10                                 | Oottupara, Ranni                  | 1 acre 25 cent       |                    |
| 11                                 | Opposite, Kowdiar Palce           | 2 acres              |                    |
| 12                                 | Kanakappalam                      | 1 ¼ acre             |                    |
| 13                                 | Pothanmala, Mundakkayam           | 75 cent              |                    |
| 14                                 | Maramkulam                        | 1 ½ acre etc.        |                    |
| Source: E. V. Anil, 2013, p. 20-21 |                                   |                      |                    |

This was a historical move for the dispossessed and deprived slave castes of Kerala.

The reception ceremony organised at Chenganoor for Sree Moolam Thirunal, the then Maharaja of Travancore, was politically an important step taken by PRDS. It happened in M. E. 1090 (C. E. 1915) while the Maharaja was travelling to his summer palace at Peermed. At a time when the entry to public place was socially forbidden to the slave castes, Yohannan took a

<sup>526</sup> E. V. Anil, *op. cit.* 2013, p. 20.

decisive step and set up a *Panthal*, turning marshy land into a wonderful place, using the sand from river Pampa, through the hard work of thousands of his followers. The downtrodden lined up on both sides of road in clean, white clothes.<sup>527</sup> The Maharaja was so pleased to see this that he blessed Yohannan and his followers. He asked Yohannan what he was longing for, but, surprisingly, Yohannan did not demand anything. Instead, he expressed his wish through a song:<sup>528</sup>

Do rule the harmonic Travancore in peace

Redress all the grievances

Let us live in joyful harmony

Let God give our lord life and energy.<sup>529</sup>

Through the wish to ‘rule in peace’ Yohannan was tacitly saying that there was no peace and in the verse ‘redress all the grievances’ implies that there were grievances. This was his intelligent way of critiquing the Maharaja and demanding peace and redressal of grievances. Moreover, he did not use the opportunity to ask for any specific gift or concession from the Maharaja to the disappointment of even his followers. He later reasoned to his followers that it is not suitable for them to beg from anyone, compromising on their dignity. He was not ready to compromise with the self-pride of his community. At the same time, he wanted to announce the arrival of his community to modernity, ready to exercise social agency for their self-sufficiency and autonomy.

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<sup>527</sup> Vijayan Kangazha, *Sree Kumaragurudevan*, (Thrissur: by the author, 2019), p. 159.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid*, p. 160.

<sup>529</sup> V. V. Swamy & E. V. Anil (Eds.) *Songs of ...op. cit.* 2010 p. 36.

In 1921, Yohannan got nominated into the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly (*Praja Sabha*), where he relentlessly pleaded for policy measures to uplift the condition of the untouchables. He met people in power and with authority from both native and foreign locations, including the Maharaja and Viceroys and submitted a series of memoranda to them in this regard. Poykayil Yohannan was nominated as member of *Sree Moolam Popular Assembly*, twice. On 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1921, Yohannan got his first opportunity to speak in the SMPA. In the first speech of Poykayil Yohannan titled “Registry of puduval lands in the names of the depressed classes like Parayas, Pulayas, &c. without tharavila” under item number 12 in the *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* he thanks the government on behalf of the community. Yohannan’s name is referred to as Yohannan Yohannan in the proceedings. In this speech he points out the caste discrimination within the Church against the dalit Christians. Also, he makes number of demands for the upliftment of the dalits.<sup>530</sup>

Yohannan clearly highlights the deprived conditions of depressed classes though they were converted into Christianity in search of better treatment and mobility. In the speech he clearly said that dalit Christians should not be treated like higher caste Christians since socio-economic conditions of the former are worse. The SMPA proceedings in this regard reads that “Mr. Yohannan Yohannan (Member, Nominated) *represented that Parayas, Pulayans,*

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<sup>530</sup> Proceedings of SMPA, 1<sup>st</sup> march 1921, pp. 31-32. (emphasis added). The speech reads as follows:-

Mr. Yohannan Yohannan (Member, Nominated) thanked the Government on the behalf of himself and his community for nominating him to the Assembly. The depressed classes like Parayas, Pulayas, &c. had embraced the Christian religion with a view of getting spiritual salvation. It was, however, a mistake to suppose that all Christian are one community. It was sub-divided, according to the caste from which they converted, into sects without inter-dining and inter-marriage. All of them are not same, therefore, be treated on a like footing in the grant of concessions allowed by government [sic].

*Those who were in the lower ranks of the community require special help and encouragement. His community was in a very backward state from an educational and economic point of view, as compared with other Christians and deserved and stood in need of special help from Government. They were the original inhabitants of the land who brought it under cultivation. At one time, they were slaves and did not realize the value of land. Now in their efforts to secure land of their own, they were thwarted by the rich and influential communities, who disposed them on some ground or other or bid land in auction.*

*Maravas, Kuravas, etc.*, who had become converts to Christianity should not be treated like other more fortunate Christian brethren. The former classes of people were very backward in point of education, and the Member prayed for the grant of the following concessions to them.”<sup>531</sup> He proudly presents his community as the original inhabitants who became depressed and dispossessed subsequently. It is not surprising that like other dalit leaders of time, Yohannan was also demanding land ownership for dalits, as all of them realised that it was a crucial ingredient for the development of dalit communities. On the ninth day of the same session, on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1921, he brought the attention of the house to another important issue concerning the dalits of Kerala, that is, education. It reads as follows under item number 117 titled “Improvement of the education of the members of the Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, by giving grants to schools appointing qualified men of the Sabha as teachers.”

Yohannan was quick in understanding that education is a weapon for his community and cultivating the same would result in the progress of his community. It is also clear here that he was representing pulayas, parayas kuravas and other dalit communities together and for their educational needs. He asked for representation in government jobs for the members of his community, as a conduit for mobility and acquiring power. He was also well aware that the entry into English education is the most appropriate way of development and progress and he encouraged it for dalits during his entire life. The efforts taken by Poykayil Yohannan and PRDS in promoting and dispensing education are discussed already and his speech exemplifies his sustained interest and efforts directed towards providing education to dalits. His third speech in the *SMPA*, was on March 3, 1931. It reads as follows under item number 12 titled, “Assignment of land to depressed classes.”

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<sup>531</sup> Proceedings of *SMPA*, 1<sup>st</sup> march 1921, p. 123. (emphasis added)

MR. POIKAYIL YOHANNAN (Nominated) who made his representation in Malayalam, said that the fertile lands in the States were owned by the higher classes and *what was left to the depressed classes was the barren and inaccessible lands. An experienced Revenue officer should be appointed for each Division to look after land assignments to the depressed classes.* Expenditure on such appointments could be met from the tax collected from the lands assigned to them. *The G.O. sanctioning three acres of land for every family should be fully carried out in the regime of the Travancorean Dewan.*

Marshy lands inside the reserved forests should be set apart for cultivation by the depressed classes and ten chains of dry land on the fringes of such marshes should be marked off for house sites.<sup>532</sup>

This time, interestingly, the proceedings record his name as Poykayil Yohannan. The speech is a reflection of Yohannan's continuing efforts to raise the issue of land in every possible forum to the government. He points out the systemic deprivation and attempt on the part of officials to cheat by giving inaccessible and barren land to the depressed classes. His demand for an experienced official can be read as his faith in remedial action, making use of the platforms available for depressed communities. In his fourth speech in the *SMPA*, on the ninth day of the Assembly on 11 March 11, 1931, under item number 154, titled "Disabilities of the depressed classes in the matter of getting scholarships for educational purposes and in the matter of Government appointments" gives the details of his demands for the upliftment of the dalit children.<sup>533</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Proceedings of *SMPA*, 3<sup>rd</sup> march 1931, p.33. (emphasis added)

<sup>533</sup> Proceedings of *SMPA*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1931, p.291. (emphasis added). The speech is reported in the Proceedings as follows:-

MR. POIKAYIL YOHANNAN (Nominated), who made his representation in Malayalam, said that *his community could not afford to give higher education to their children.* Their poverty stood in the way. They were highly thankful to the Government for the full fee concession allowed in the English and the Vernacular schools. But that was not sufficient to advance education among the members of the community.

It would appear that scholarships were given for educational purposes to pupils belonging to his community. But it was not known what amount was given for the purpose, how many of the pupils who were in receipt of it were benefited by it, etc. There should be a rule that scholarships should be awarded only through the representative of the community in the Assembly.

The Government were spending large sums of money on such departments as Education, Medical, Sanitary and the P.W.D., from which there was no income, but which were meant for the welfare of the people. Similarly, the Government should spend a small amount for the educational advancement of the depressed classes. *If the*

This time too his emphasis was on the matter of education. Moreover, he demanded more opportunities for his community in higher education. Interestingly he argues that like many other welfare measures of the government, the education of depressed classes should be given a priority. Moreover, he demanded 10 acres of land for each family towards funding the education of their wards. To sum up, all these political interventions clearly depict Poykayil Yohannan's critical engagements with colonial modern government with an aim of helping the untouchable castes to progress.

### **Towards an Egalitarian Utopia: Slavery, Plan *Kettidam*<sup>534</sup> and other Doctrines**

Yohannan was convinced that to attain a dignified social status in the public space in comparison to other members of the civil society, cleanliness of the community is important. He strictly instructed his followers to observe the following.<sup>535</sup>

1. Use washed, clean and neat white clothes
2. Do not eat unhealthy food

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*Government could not render monetary help for the purpose, it would be sufficient if each family was given 10 acres of land for the education of the children of the family.*

The Government should select from among the students belonging to the community one or two hundred pupils and should meet all expenditure in connection with their education in the collegiate classes and in classes VIII and IX. After the completion of their education, other batches of students should be similarly selected and educated.

*The members of the community are proposing to start a private English school. The Government should grant gratis the timber required for putting up a building for the conversion of the school into a High School.*

The percentage of marks prescribed for securing a pass in the examinations should be reduced from 35 to 30 in the case of the pupils belonging to the community. The want of two or three marks should not be a bar for giving promotion to such pupils. There were many pupils belonging to the community who had failed twice or thrice in the Vernacular School Leaving Examination. Such men should be entertained in the lowest ranks in all the departments. Students who had studied up to the fifth and sixth classes should be admitted to the School of Arts. At least two men each from the community should be appointed in all the hospitals under the Medical Department. Similarly, the subordinate appointments in the *pakuthi* cutcherries should be given to the young men of the community.

The members of the community should be exempted from the rule regarding age bar for entertainment in public service.

<sup>534</sup> The Malayalam term *kettidam* means building. Here plan *kettidam* means 'envisaging a new Sabha'. *Kettidam* or building is supposed to be a centre for the functioning of Sabha.

<sup>535</sup> These new customs of social reform were introduced by Poykayil Yohannan and later compiled and published by the PRDS in 1950s. See V. V. Swami (et. al.) *Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Charitrathil Pratyakshapetta Vidham*, (Kottayam: Society of PRDS studies, 2009) p. 38.

3. Do not eat the cooked intestine of any animal<sup>536</sup>
4. Do not eat the meat of buffaloes and oxen<sup>537</sup>
5. Keep the house and its surroundings clean
6. Utensils should be washed and turned upside down to drain after use
7. The stone grinder should be covered after use.
8. Clean the posterior with enough water with a leaf after using the toilet.
9. Water should be kept in a covered pot
10. A person should marry only after arranging a house and land/property
11. A house should have at least two rooms. If it is a hut and is made of coconut leaves, it should be separated with a screen made of coconut leaves
12. Men and women contain the same spirit of God, hence they have equal importance
13. Food should be cooked only after having a bath
14. When persons meet together and depart, say *Vandanam* (salutation) by folding hands.

These suggestions were observed by the followers and resulted in a great and powerful change in the inner selves of the followers of PRDS. These made them think of themselves as modern for the first time in their lives. Apart from that, Yohannan vehemently opposed the caste and sub-caste discriminations and practices. He supported inter-caste and inter sub-caste marriages and alliances. Kumarakom Chellamma, a follower of PRDS and daughter of Chinna, a contemporary of Poykayil Yohannan, recalls an experience:

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<sup>536</sup> The untouchable communities had stigma of having to eat the carcasses of dead cattle. But interestingly at a pan-India level, Ambedkar connected this peculiar characteristic of the untouchables to the non-violent lifestyle of the Buddhist past. For more details, see Dr. Br. Ambedkar, *Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches Vol. VII*, (Bombay: Department of Education, Government of Maharashtra, 1979)

<sup>537</sup> Yohannan advised his followers not to use the meat of buffaloes and oxen. It is believed that at the time of slavery these animals were used to plough by sharing the yoke with the ancestors of slave communities. When the slaves fell down and died in the mud because of the difficulty in pulling the yoke, it was believed that these animals showed sympathy towards those slaves and shed tears for them. This is why PRDS considered these animals as siblings. See, M. S. Thankappan, *op. cit.* pp. 151-152.



Once, before starting a convention, Appachan installed three stones for a stove and fixed a big vessel. He called some parayas and asked them to pour some water. Parayas poured the water. He asked some pulayas to pour some water in it. They also poured water. Likewise, he asked each caste to pour water in it and they did that. Again, he called each caste and asked them to take back the same water which they poured in the vessel. They all became confused. *Appachan* made fun of every one of them by calling them 'pumpkin-headed'. That night, a grand meeting took place, and after that meeting, he took a big vessel again and called each caste. No one came. He asked each caste to pour water in the vessel. No one came. He sung a line: 'This is the seat which will destroy all caste differences and parties.' All of them sung it.<sup>538</sup>

Yohannan's logical way of demonstrating the meaninglessness of upholding caste differences was unparalleled. His dreams for social equality were compelling. Use of sarcasm and reason are powerful, heart-touching and appealing to the hearts of the ex-slave communities. One could argue that the use of logic and reason is a gift of modernity. His extensive use of logic and reasoning always accompanied the anti-caste discourses which shaped Yohannan's critique. This logic and reasoning, generated from anti-caste discourse, is a product of dalits' heuristic engagement through their double consciousness mind. For a discussion of this, we need to analyse one more aspect of Yohannan.

Discourses on slavery and slave people were the basic themes of Poykayil Yohannan's doctrine. Yohannan used the slave past as a central theme. Yohannan's slave experience, from his childhood onwards, played a major role in shaping him and he used it as a powerful motif in his discourses in an attempt to invoke and inculcate slave memories in to the minds of his followers. Yohannan firmly believed that the caste system was a device introduced to mentally control the Adi Dravidas, who were subjugated and enslaved.<sup>539</sup> In his sermons, he always depicts the inhumane cruelties of slavery. "The horror of physical slavery was cruel and satanic. Those who worked like cattle did not even get enough food. Those unable to work due to hunger were

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<sup>538</sup> Memory of Kumarakom Chellamma, V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil, *Orma Pattu...*, *op. cit.* p. 127.

<sup>539</sup> Grantha Rachana Samithy, *op. cit.* p. 17. Moreover, Yohannan propagated the idea that the people who were enslaved were Adi Dravidas. This Adi Dravida past was used by the PRDS.

brutally beaten. The employer has even the right to sell them out if necessary,” he said.<sup>540</sup> During that time, slaves were brought and sold along with the land and the owners could even kill the slave if he wished to. ‘Kill who you may kill and sell whom you may sell’ was apparently the dictum.<sup>541</sup> The sufferings of slaves, as narrated by Yohannan, continued: “If they fall while ploughing with the yoke on their necks with the cattle, they were often tread down to the muddy field. When they were submerged in the mud and took a deep breath, they would look up in the sky and moan. Beaten and chopped with whips and thorn, oil poured on their bodies, their hands and legs were tied and, in the scorching sun, they were thrown into the burning fire, put in abandoned wells and buried alive, covered in mud up to their necks, garbage put on their heads and they were set on fire. These were the punishments for every small crime. The runaway slaves who could not bear the torture and tried to escape were hunted down and mutilated in front of others.”<sup>542</sup>

The tragic and pathetic condition of women in the slave communities is remembered and narrated as follows: “[t]hey did not even allow the women to rest during postpartum. The mother had to go to the field with the new born baby, wrap it in a rag and hang it on a tree branch. When they went to work, they were not allowed to take a break without finishing the assigned work. As a result, when the baby cries for milk, the mother was unable to go back and look after the baby due to fear. When the mother went back after work, sometimes she could only find the bones of the dead baby and ants. Then, holding that piece of cloth in their hands, they looked up with a broken heart and could only lament, ‘Almighty God, why have you done this

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<sup>540</sup> Grantha Rachana Samithy, *op. cit.* p. 17.

<sup>541</sup> Sanal Mohan, *op. cit.* 2005 p.40.

<sup>542</sup> Grantha Rachana Samithy, *op. cit.* pp. 17-18.

harsh thing to our children?’’<sup>543</sup>

One of the central themes of Yohannan’s religious discourse was illustrated through a story of the orphaned children of slaves. The story is narrated as follows:

Usually when the slave father and mother had been sold, the lord chased away the orphaned children. The children became wanderers. Sometimes, without anyone’s support, they often starved to death somewhere in the wilderness. Otherwise, they fell as prey to wild beasts. One day, three children, once orphaned because their father and mother were sold, were wandering through the forest. The older child tried to soothe the younger children who were crying of hunger and thirst. At last they found shelter beneath a tree. The younger children lay down there exhausted. The elder child cried and prayed, narrating their sorrows to the forest goddesses and wild animals. At that moment, they also expressed their grief to a pariah kite hovering around. After some time, the kite landed near them. God, in the form of the kite, soothed them with words of consolation. He disappeared after promising that he would come as their father and mother when the time came.<sup>544</sup>

PRDS followers believed that the God was incarnated as Poykayil *Appachan* among slave castes to fulfill this promise. This story is still being used by PRDS followers as one of its prime articles of faith. A song sung by Yohnnan at his meetings, telling this story, is given below:

When grief grows in my mind

There is no one to console me

When we lived in joy and peace

As the early inhabitants of Kerala

Our peace-loving ancestors were

Imprisoned and enslaved

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<sup>543</sup> Grantha Rachana Samithy, *op. cit.* pp. 18-19.

<sup>544</sup> Grantha Rachana Samithy, *op. cit.* pp. 19-20.

When the Brahman lords  
Who crossed the Indus colonized this country  
As oxen are exchanged in street markets  
They sold and brought us for money  
Not even the Syrian Christians from Antioch  
And once brought by Knanai Thomman  
And those who embraced Christ who died on the cross  
And the Suriyanis in common never felt sorry for us  
Sold if they so wished, killed if they so desired  
Brahmans who considered killing of animals as taboo  
Had no trace of mercy while torturing us helpless  
Our bodies were broken with unbroken beatings  
Hard labour was inflicted on us day and night  
In bleaching sunlight and roaring rain  
We wept a lot and sighed  
When father is sold, young ones cried out  
When mother is sold, children cried out

No one for justice, no king no question

To save from sorrow, there is no one for me.<sup>545</sup>

The Adi Dravida past and brutal slave experience and a consciousness of past are revealed in this song. Brahmanical hegemony and caste Christian atrocities are also reflected in this song. Poykayil Yohannan in all his discourses tried to foreground caste slavery as the major problem of his times and wanted resolutions. He used slave experience and caste experience together and considered it as two sides of the same coin.

Though the social sciences consider caste and slavery as two different social phenomena, Yohannan, on the basis of the peculiar experience of Kerala during the nineteenth century, highlights the intersection between the two and calls it caste slavery.<sup>546</sup> Moreover, Yohannan placed slavery as a central subject (*Adimavishayam*) in his teachings. According to the theological critique developed and introduced by Yohannan, as he stated in his meeting at Kulathoor in 1909, there are seven types of slavery and three types of separation.<sup>547</sup> Those who have undergone slavery for a long time were described by Yohannan as *Adima Santhathikal* or children of slaves.<sup>548</sup> The seven types of slavery as imposed in different situations are described by him as follows:

The first is a slave in the name of God: A slave in the name of God is a fundamental characteristic of finding justification for slavery. Yohannan criticized that different theological

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<sup>545</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of...op. cit.* p. 28.

<sup>546</sup> In many of his songs and discourses, Yohannan uses *adima jati*, slave caste, and PRDS also uses it widely.

<sup>547</sup> Memory of Kuttipoovathunkal Somanathan, V.V Swamy & E. V. Anil, *op. cit.* p. 120.

<sup>548</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil, *Adimavishayam*, (Kottayam: Unseen letters, Slate Publications and Society of PRDS Studies, 2020), p. 39.

projects till date have excluded subalterns, blacks, and others.<sup>549</sup> This exclusion led to slavery.

The second is a slave in the name of religion. *Appachan* considered religious exclusion as a form of slavery. The conditions of being expelled from organised religion and its projects also lead to slavery. Exclusion from the contact and care of the religion are viewed as the peculiar nature of it.<sup>550</sup>

The third is a slave in the name of caste. Slavery is caused by caste. It brings extensive and systemic differentiation through the intervention in the fields of education, wealth, knowledge, language, dress, and so on.<sup>551</sup>

The fourth is a slave in the name of the country. This form of slavery is related to those alienated from their own land, place, and country. There is a history of poor, reproached and black people who, wandering around the world, are without any land, town or home.<sup>552</sup>

The fifth is one is in the name of *marga* (means). This type of slavery is related to different means of spirituality. People have historically been fragmented and sent along different paths of spirituality.<sup>553</sup>

The sixth is a slave in the name of animism. This type of slavery relates to the tribal forms of worship which chiefly focused on trees, stones, mountains, and ancestors who are treated as Gods. Yohannan considered these ‘non-spiritual’ activities as slavery in the name of fairy and

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<sup>549</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>550</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.* p. 59.

supernatural powers.<sup>554</sup>

The seventh slave is a slave in the name of life and body. This form of slavery is the denial of one's individuality as a human being. Under this, the slave did not have any right over his/her own body and his/her own life.<sup>555</sup> In the case of slaves in Travancore, 'kill who you may kill and sell who you may sell' was the dictum.<sup>556</sup>

Yohannan's three types of separation are related to the intense form of orphanhood resulting from the dissection from the relationships with God, Country and Father-Mother-children.<sup>557</sup>

Another important event in Poykayil Yohannan's fight against the slavery was the *Swathantrya Jatha*, a freedom march conducted by him and the PRDS in 1921. "Liberty was the main idea of the procession of thousands of black coloured men clad in white proceeding under the leadership of Poykayil Sreekumara Gurudevan, from Kozhanchery to Eraviperor." The march proceeded singing the following song:<sup>558</sup>

The yoke of slavery has gone out of use

The chains of slavery have been broken

Music and joy for us music and joy for us

Miracle of God it is

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<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

<sup>556</sup> Sanal Mohan, *op. cit.* 2005 p.40

<sup>557</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil, *op. cit.* 2020, p. 67.

<sup>558</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil, *Orma Pattu...*, *op. cit.* p. 68.

Music and joy for us

Remembering the heavenly bliss

Curses and sins are over

Death and doom are over

The wrath of God is over

Slave children return

Miracle of God it is.<sup>559</sup>

In this song, Yohannan assertively states that the freedom of slave children is due to the miraculous and inevitable bliss of God. He debunks the Biblical notions of the wrath of God, curse, sin, death and doom and speaks of establishing the freedom of slave children autonomously.

Poykayil Yohannan thus placed slavery as a central point of reference in formulating his critique of caste and colonial modernity. He used it to critically analyze the Bible, and as a touchstone to critique missionary and caste discourses. Based on the recalled memories of slave experience, he united his followers and formulated his socio-political and cultural critique through such discourses. The growth of PRDS as a well-organized religious movement of the oppressed, eschewing sub-caste feelings within, significantly relied on the re-invocation of ‘slave

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<sup>559</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of Prathyaksha...op. cit.* p. 41.



memory’ and its extraordinary organic capacity to bring the slave castes together.<sup>560</sup>

Sanal Mohan points out that through narrativizing oppression and the suffering in slave experiences and the recalling of slave memory, PRDS made its organizational development possible in the social space of Kerala and held it together even after the death of its founder Poykayil Yohannan.<sup>561</sup> What I suggest here is that Poykayil Yohannan himself used these foundational categorical aspects as powerful weapons to attract and consolidate people who have a collective memory of caste slavery. This notion of oppression and suffering of slavery and the anti-caste mentality constructed under the problematic of colonial modernity provided a critical sense of double consciousness in the mind of Poykayil Yohannan and his followers. This made Yohannan a restless, dissatisfactory and a critical thinker.

To establish a new religion and social life for slave castes and similar communities who have same experience of social expulsion and oppression, Yohannan consolidated his followers from these communities by invoking their pathetic social conditions and offering a remedy for it. It is evident that on one occasion Yohannan expressed his agony at his own people’s deprivation of spiritual well-being and an indication of his departure from lofty religions. He sang:

We travelled like an orphan through the off roads-

Of the Hindu religion

We travelled like an orphan through the off roads-

Of the Christian religion

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<sup>560</sup> For more details on how the PRDS used ‘slave memory’ as an artifact or a basic theme of unity, see Sanal Mohan, *op. cit.* (2006).

<sup>561</sup> See Sanal Mohan, *op. cit.* 2006.

We won't get admission in the Hindu religion

We won't get admission in the Christian religion.<sup>562</sup>

This song powerfully indicates the critical politics of Yohannan. He critically evaluates the pathetic, orphan-like social condition that the slave castes have been suffering in the two major religions. He was unequivocal in his criticism that these two religions never accepted the slave castes as dignified members. He pointed out the reality of the liminal status of slave communities in these religions as outsiders. This was a powerful statement of the situation and the condition of slave communities, which was never articulated as powerful as this before.

Poykayil Yohannan was really an iconoclast but he was a creator too. He expressed his full hope and optimism in the oppressed constructing lives of peace and joy. He meticulously tried to make a new socio-religious institution to build such a future. He motivated his people and set up of PRDS which was central to this plan of building a future where the slave community could get their grievances redressed and live in peace and joy. This is reflected in Yohannan's song:

Let us make a mansion

With utmost, enduring efforts

Let us live in peace and joy

Redressing the grievances.<sup>563</sup>

As this verse reflects, Yohannan's aim was to make a Sabha or a religious society of peace

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<sup>562</sup> Poykayil Appachan, *Prathyaksha Raksha Daivasabha Pattukal*, Compiled by V. V. Swami and E. V. Anil, (Thrissur: Kerala Sahitya Academy, 2011), p. 45.

<sup>563</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of...op. cit.* p. 26.

and joyful content. The idea of an egalitarian spiritual society in the future was certainly the product of a utopian imagination. He instructed that the children of slaves should have a plan for building their ultimate salvation.<sup>564</sup> The mansion in this imagination was not a building of brick and mortar alone but a spiritual one too based on the foundation of Adi-Dravida culture. The futuristic imagination here was one of both spiritual and material growth.<sup>565</sup> Regarding this building, Yohannan further sung:

Length till the South, length till the North

Now the silent cock has to crow long and loud

Then will see that the sight of flooding (people) from all sides.<sup>566</sup>

Through this, Yohannan was also envisaging his inevitable victory of the community and that of the Sabha in the future. He assertively proclaimed the spiritual wellness which was not possible, using the metaphor of the muted rooster who must crow in the near future after constructing the said building, which emits his lasting enthusiastic will power and hope. Yohannan continues to describe the image of his building, which is a kind of spiritual and socio-political utopia, through a set of directions to his followers. “You should construct a building which has four sided faces in it. There should be three floors in it. On the third floor, you should install me in a glass chamber. On the ground floor, there should be a throne surrounded by a fence of barbed wires.<sup>567</sup> It will be a sanctuary for the descendants of the enslaved who were sold to the South, the North, the East and the West.<sup>568</sup> Through these statements, he indicates the

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<sup>564</sup> Vijayan Kangazha, *op. cit.* p. 239.

<sup>565</sup> Vijayan Kangazha, *op. cit.* p. 240.

<sup>566</sup> Vijayan Kangazha *op. cit.* p. 240.

<sup>567</sup> Vijayan Kangazha *op. cit.* p. 241.

<sup>568</sup> M. S Thankappan, *op. cit.* p. 132.

establishment of a modern but critical religion which has autonomous socio-political and cultural aspirations and actions. He predicted that there will be a commencement of *Vazhcha Yugam*, age of reign, where Yohannan and the children of slaves will play a decisive role.<sup>569</sup> Further, he says through a song that in this building:

O what a wonder O what a wonder

Trains run around the Kottayam town

Cars run around the Thiruvalla town

Boats move around the Alapuzha town

Planes fly around the Thiruvalla town

O what a wonder O what a wonder

Where are you off my dear travelers?

Where are you off, my dear ones?

A place for the ones who come from south

A place to keep their umbrellas (and luggage) too

Another in the north for the northern ones

A place to keep their umbrellas (and luggage) too

Another place in the east for the eastern ones

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<sup>569</sup> Vijayan Kangazha *op. cit.* p. 241

And a place for keep their umbrellas (and luggage) too

Yet another to the western ones

And another for their umbrellas (and luggage)

In the midst of it all is the jewel spot

That is the place for Poyka.<sup>570</sup>

It is envisioned as a sanctuary where slave children can take shelter from their sorrows and enjoy all the modern amenities, secure their care and unload their burdens. It welcomes all the social divisions of people at one centre, the place of Poyka. Moreover, “Appachan speculated about the union of all slave children from all continents. He also envisioned a memorial for slavery. This song celebrates this re union.”<sup>571</sup> Thus, Poykayil Yohannan as a redeemer of slave castes provided an egalitarian utopia for future generations of all people who have undergone a slave experience.

Having become a God-like figure, Poykayil Yohannan emerged as a leader capable of saving his people from their hardships and the people began to believe him, submitted their full faith in him. He prescribed cleanliness, a healthy life, self-reliance and self-respect and cultivated a sense of owning their own land among the untouchable castes, which were totally new experiences for them.

The PRDS, under the leadership of Poykayil Yohannan, as a result, became a flourishing spiritual as well as a socio-political movement of untouchables in Travancore. They bought their

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<sup>570</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of...op. cit.* p. 37.

<sup>571</sup> V. V. Swami & E. V. Anil (eds.), *Songs of...op. cit.* p. 37.

own lands, built their own churches and dwellings, established schools including English medium schools, developed cottage industrial workplaces and so on and so forth.

With his ceaseless efforts and spiritual leadership, leading untouchables to a dignified life, people affectionately called him *Appachan*, the father and thus he came to be called as Poykayil Appachan. He passed away due to ill health in 1939, and his second wife, Jnanamma, became the leader of the movement. Under her leadership, the PRDS underwent drastic changes and Poykayil Yohannan was renamed as Poykayil Kumara Gurudevan. PRDS is still a very dynamic and influential movement in Southern Kerala and it has around 2.5 lakhs members as its followers.

### ***Religion as an Emancipatory Project***

Having referred to the attempts of subordinated peoples to emerge into history, G. Aloysius says that the multifarious and scattered emancipatory efforts of the lower and excluded castes, tribes and other marginalised sections of the society in the modern period, in varying degrees were autonomous, implying thereby inspirations and trajectories of their own.<sup>572</sup> Poykayil Kumara Gurudevan emerged from the lowest untouchable caste and carried his mission to emancipate the entire untouchable community through his own heuristically invented religious ideas and found his own autonomous religious organizations as a critique of the existed lofty religions in the context of colonial modernity. Though he was influenced by the promises of modernity, Christianity and missionary modernity, he then found a path of his own.

He confronted lofty religions, survived the frictions of colonial civil society and dealt with

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<sup>572</sup> G. Aloysius, *Religion as emancipatory Identity: A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils Under Colonialism*, (New Delhi: New Age International, 1998), P. VII.

the colonial princely state strategically. He and his organization, PRDS, built a social space, which relentlessly engaged in dialogue with the opposing societal forces and compelled them to make amendments to the entrenched social apathy towards the slave castes. Though this small religious sect emerged and flourished in the matrix of colonial modernity, it was neither traditional nor western. It was something different. By this, what I mean is that they came from traditional contexts with reactionary values and norms but offered a critique of them and flourished in the context of colonial modernity by imbibing and utilizing its possibilities yet stepping out of it by making a different discourse of its own and a new entity. This indicates his ambivalent nature.

This ambivalent nature or the ‘doubleness’ of this religious sect neither fully subscribed to the traditional nor the modern fully because of the inherent problems in both. It retained an ambivalent relation with both, in fact suggesting a new vantage point for looking at anti-caste intellectual labour in colonial India.

Through this formulation, if we take the case of Ambedkar, as suggested by post-colonial scholars from India as an ‘unalloyed modernist’, his three-piece suit as a complete symbol of modernity, one could read it as a gesture of dissent. Importantly, Poykayil Kumara Gurudevan directed his followers to wear clean, white clothes, as a symbol of purity of mind and human dignity against a historical context in which the untouchables were not allowed to wear even proper dress. In a similar vein, Ambedkar also suggested “proper, clean and decent clothes, which is an “object of respect” and “enhances one’s personality.”<sup>573</sup> He used to wear his English suits when he appeared before English officials as well as native upper-caste political as well as social elites. At the same time, he wore ordinary clothes when he appeared before his fellow

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<sup>573</sup> Devi Dayal, *Daily Routine of Dr. Ambedkar*, (New Delhi: Samyak Prakashan, 2011), pp. 44-45.

folks and for Viceroy's Parties.<sup>574</sup>

What I am suggesting here is that when we compare these two figures in the matter of attire, there is a commonality. They were not merely adopting the symbols and attire of modernity, but it came out their awareness of the 'politics of appearance' or 'politics in appearance', which was formulated in fact in response to their social context and political possibilities of the time. This attitude also can be read as a result of their double consciousness.

Similarly, Poykayil Kumara Gurudevan's *PRDS*, and Ambedker's *Navayana* Buddhism were in fact are heuristically invented religions and through these they offered a critique of both traditional and contemporary society and lofty religions. Here, again we could see that through their attempts, they used the colonial modern/modern apparatuses to form their own 'new kind of religions'. They stepped out of their religions by using belief or faith as foundational forms of making a collective consciousness among themselves for liberating themselves from the internal and external prejudices of the social life world. Any attempt to read these phenomena simply as 'modern', though they actually come from an astute negotiation of and critique of modernity, would fail to capture the intricacies of these strategies.

To put it in other words, the critical edge of these new religious formulations with its simultaneous critique to the traditional as well as colonial modernity/modern society and religions, and attempting to create a 'new critical religions' through innovative and discreet discourses is possible because of a double consciousness. The socio-political and spiritual emancipation for Dalits as implicated in this ambivalence was modern and beyond modern at the same time.

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<sup>574</sup> *Ibid*, p. 46.



## CHAPTER 5

### **CLAIMING THE HISTORY IN THE PRESENT: PAMPADY JOHN JOSEPH AND CHERAMAR SANGHAM**

This chapter explores the life and work of Pampady John Joseph, arguing that he always kept a double consciousness towards colonial modernity and traditional values. To make this argument, this chapter examines the following questions: How did Pampady John Joseph enter the ‘language of modernity’, and what did he imbibe from it? How did he traverse the ‘spaces of modernity’? How did he arrive at the moment of claiming a history that was absent? How did he manage to retain his notion of Chera dynasty within the modern legislative apparatus and its protocols? Through these questions, this chapter attempts to argue that Pampady John Joseph, like Ayyankali and Poyykayil Yohannan, maintained a double consciousness towards colonial modernity as well as the traditional values.

Born in a Pulaya family of Christian converts, Pampady John Joseph was an English educated teacher and a Church preacher in his youth. He joined the British army in 1914, and travelled extensively in different places. Apart from this, he worked in Fly City Mission and earned a considerable amount of money. Later he experienced and understood the conditions of the dalits and began to criticize Christianity and Hindu social life. Claiming, with the support of

*Sangham* literature, that Pulayas are the descendants of the Chera dynasty, he established an organisation called *Thiruvithamkoor Cheramar Maha Sabha*, and a magazine called *Cheramar Doothan* (the messenger of *Cheramar*), both in 1924. Also, he wrote a book named *Savarna Christyanikalum Avarna Christianikalum* (High caste Christians and lower caste Christians), and established a printing press, *Cheramar Doothan Press*, both in 1924. He also was a member of Sri Mulam Popular Assembly where also he worked for the progress of dalits.

A series of articles written by Dr. K. C. Joseph, Lt. Col. of the Salvation Army, in 1979 in a magazine called *Kerala Christians* offer glimpses into the life story of Pampady John Joseph. These articles could also be considered as the maiden attempt to discuss John Joseph's life in the history of print in Kerala. Later in 1987, T. H. P. Chentharassery, the pioneering popular dalit historian of Kerala, wrote the life history of Pampady John Joseph. This work is highly important, — as important as his work on Ayyankali — given the “non availability of the history” of dalits in Kerala. During 1951-52, Chentharassery got an opportunity to stay in the house of John Joseph at Kuravan Konam in Thiruvananthapuram and used his office room as his room for staying while doing his Masters. This provided him an opportunity to closely interact with his wife, younger son Samuel, everyday companion and private secretary K. S. Chacko, and Mrs. Chacko and many other disciples. These interactions gave him valuable information to write about John Joseph. He also got a chance to see the diary of John Joseph, in which he had written the events since 1929.<sup>575</sup> All these things happened as a historical coincidence, helping in the recovery of Pampady John Joseph as someone who strived to claim respectable a history for Dalits in Kerala in the wake of colonial modernity. He claimed assertively a historical

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<sup>575</sup> THP Chentharassery, *Pampady John Joseph*, (Thiruvalla: BPDC, 1989), p. 11.

connection between dalits and ancient Tamil Sangham literature, which shocked and provoked even the Travancore dynasty.

### **Learning and teaching the language of Modernity: John Joseph as a Teacher**

Ousep (the colloquial pronunciation of Joseph in Kerala) was born in 1887. Chentharassery notes that by caste he was born a Pulaya. His father, John Naduparambil from Kanakkari of Kottayam District, and grandparents had converted to Christianity.<sup>576</sup> Another version says that John Joseph was born in 1887 on February 15, to Joseph and Maryiam<sup>577</sup>. Dr. K. C. Joseph writes that “nearly a hundred years back in Maroor Desam in Kottayam District a Thalapulayan (a Pulaya who supervise the other Pulaya labourers as the group head) was doing his works in a Punchappadam (a seasonal type of paddy field). Then a man came and informed him that a boy child was born to him. His landlord, who was well versed in *jyothisham* (horoscope) and forms of *mantravadam* (black magic), advised the Thalapulaya to look after the child well, saying that the birth is a ‘rajapiravi’ (noble birth). Sensing some danger when the landlord asked him to apply *bhasma* (sacred powder) on the boy’s tongue, the family ran away to a relative’s home in Pampady. Later they converted to Christianity and became part of the Anglican Church.<sup>578</sup> This unusual act can be seen as protecting his son from a potential danger or as part of his resistance against the landlord. This version of the story — part of oral tradition reproduced in K C Joseph — is reflective of the prevailing caste situation in Travancore at that point of time, though slavery was abolished in Travancore under British colonial Law in 1885. There are ample examples of the persistence of slavery in many places and resistance in the form of colonial

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<sup>576</sup> Theyyan or Daivathan is recorded as the first dalit who converted in to Christianity in 1854 at Mallappally. He received the new name as Habel and joined in the congregation of Anglican Church.

<sup>577</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *Mahatma John Joseph: Jeevithavum Darsanangalum*, (Kottayam: Agamam Books, Manarkad, , Distribution Vin Wave Books, Pampady. 2015), p. 36.

<sup>578</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph, Kerala Kristhyanikalude Swathantrya Samaram: Pampady N. John Joseph (part 5) *Kerala Kristians; Samoohika Samskarika Masika* (Mal) Issue 18, Book 2 October 1979, p. 1.

missionary adherence to Christianity. Joseph was nicknamed Pappan, referring to the traditional caste nomenclature, and later baptised as Joseph by the Brother Mission, a Protestant congregation. He received a good missionary education and learned English and Malayalam languages. He studied till 7<sup>th</sup> standard — mmmaximum higher education available to lower castes through the mercy of Christian missionaries. However, it was a sufficient qualification for Joseph to become a teacher in schools. The presence of colonial missionary Christianity enabled him to study at least up to the 7<sup>th</sup> standard, which was denied to many untouchable castes at that time. We can see many similar incidents in many other contexts in colonial modern Kerala. The gift of education was rarely available to the untouchable communities and those who could afford it were the great exception at that time.

O. J. John, another commentator on John Joseph's life history, brings to light a different story regarding the education of John Joseph. He says that, in Pambady "Karippamattom Varkey who was a converted Christian, sent his brother to a Yacoba (Jacobite Syrian Christian) school for admission, which was however denied to him. Kaithamattom Illam, probably a Brahmin house, owned the school. Annoyed by this incident, Varkey gave away his land to build a school. Thus, in 1881 the CMS School was established at Pampady. John Joseph's father Joseph came from Kottayam to Pampady to study in this school and was later appointed as the headmaster of the same school. John and his sisters Eli, Mariam and Anna attended this school. Thus, John's primary education was completed at Pampady."<sup>579</sup> The story of Kaippattom Varkey, who was instrumental in establishing the CMS school at Pampady, may be part of an oral tradition. This story can be understood as an example of resistance from the downtrodden and subjugated individuals in the social context of caste-hierarchical power, and in the era of colonial modern

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<sup>579</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *op. cit.* p. 40.

society. Such resistances can be seen in the life world of lower castes who devoted their lives to function as catalysts in their own ways and capacities in anti-caste struggles. The story adds that Joseph sent his son John Joseph subsequently to the Grammar school at Kottayam.<sup>580</sup>

More recent research about the history of education among dalits in Kerala by Vinil Paul says that Pampady John Joseph studied at Thukalassery School at Thiruvalla.<sup>581</sup> Vinil bases his argument on the observation that at that time dalits were not allowed in schools, especially after the second standard, even in missionary schools. Dalit students were able to study up to 7<sup>th</sup> standard only after the Thiruvalla Boarding School was started. Thiruvalla School was the first school in central Travancore where dalits got English education.<sup>582</sup> Regarding the Thukalasseri School W. S. Hunt says, “Boarding school for boys and girls were started at Thiruvalla in 1882. Archdeacon and Mrs. Cleay took great interest in developing this side of the work... The education of the boys went on quickly. There boarding school gave them some training for life and in the school classes many of them have passed through Class vii and hold the Vernacular School Leaving Certificate.”<sup>583</sup>

So, this would be the only possibility for Pampady John Joseph to get English and Malayalam Education. And the basic qualification to secure a school teacher job was 7<sup>th</sup> standard. After completing his education, John Joseph had to find a job to lookafter his family. His knowledge of English and Malayalam languages as well as his skills as an orator secured him a job at the Mission School (CMS School) at Pampady. He was appointed as a teacher and

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<sup>580</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *op. cit.* p. 41.

<sup>581</sup> Vinil Paul, “Madhyakeralathil Akatti nirthappetta Dalithar”*Mathrubhoomi Weekly*, 2021, May,31-June, 6, p. 83.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>583</sup> W. S. Hunt, *The Aglican Church in Travancore & Cochin 1816-1916 Vol II*, (Kottayam: Church Mission Society Press, 1968, p. 231.

was offered Rs.2/-as the monthly remuneration.<sup>584</sup> He impressed the school management and became a popular teacher among students and their parents. According to Chentharasserry, he stayed at Pampady for several years, earning him the nickname ‘Pampady Sir’. It was his teaching career at Pampady Mission School that resulted in Pampady being prefixed to his name.<sup>585</sup>

His mastery over Malayalam and English languages and the systems of traditional and colonial modern pedagogy, which were forbidden fruits for the untouchables, was unprecedented and was instrumental in constructing a new social space. Moreover, acquiring the social status of a school teacher was unthinkable for a dalit in a traditional society organised along caste norms. But education was facilitated by the changes unleashed by the forces of colonial modernity. Though there are several evidences to show that colonial modernity’s interventions were the results of the missionaries’ evangelical motives, dalits used the education that missionaries offered as a weapon against caste values of both pre-colonial and colonial social traditions. The later life of Pampady John Joseph as a missionary school teacher and as a preacher also depicts the brilliant use of education against both colonial and traditional values intertwined in the social fabric of Travancore. The ambivalence towards colonial modernity in John Joseph was evident during his career as a teacher. In short John Joseph used his training in English and Malayalam systems of education — though it was provided by the colonial modernity — as a weapon to critique the hegemonic colonial as well as traditional social powers. Caste experience was the pivotal factor that shaped this ambivalence.

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<sup>584</sup> THP Chentharasserry, *op. cit.* P. 14.

<sup>585</sup> THP Chentharasserry, *op. cit.* P. 14.

After several years of teaching in Pampady, he was transferred to the CMS School at Perumpetty of Alapra in Changanassery. His salary was increased to Rs. 5/- per month. The new place was situated in the forest area which might have given him an atmosphere of spiritual tranquility. He was a voracious reader of Holy Bible. At the same time, he had started looking at things around him critically. He also had thoughts of resigning from his teaching job. Perumpetty was also a place of plantations. John Joseph familiarised himself with plantation labourers and officials. Seeing that the demand for labourers in the plantations were very high, John Joseph decided to use this opportunity as a means of subsistence for him. He resigned his school-teacher job in the Mission School and became a ‘Kangani’ — someone who supplies labourers to the British planters and supervises them. His knowledge of English language and influence among native labourers must have helped him to do well in this field. He earned lot of money from it.<sup>586</sup>

### **Travelling through Modernity: War and Missionary Experiences of John Joseph**

The First World War, despite the deaths and miseries, opened up opportunities for employment and better salary to the youths in the form of military services to the empire. John Joseph used this opportunity and joined the British army in 1914.<sup>587</sup> Joining the military services then was a rare and prestigious opportunity for dalits. This might in fact have encouraged John Joseph to achieve a position of power by joining the military. As a servant of the British Army, he travelled extensively to many places and countries, and this travel provided him with great insights. At a time when it was impossible for a person from lower caste to access public spaces, John Joseph managed to travel extensively and fearlessly as a British Indian soldier. The mobility that the restricted social body gained beyond its caste limits has its own significance.

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<sup>586</sup> THP Chentharasserry, *op. cit.* P. 16.

<sup>587</sup> THP Chentharasserry, *op. cit.* P. 17.

War as a byproduct of colonialism gave John Joseph an opportunity to move beyond restricted social values of caste. On the one hand he enjoyed freedom of travelling which enabled him to breathe fresh air of fragmented forms of equality, which colonial modernity provided. Military experiences might have taught several lessons to John Joseph. He may have felt a kind of conformity with others in the military uniform and began to imagine equality<sup>588</sup> for the first time but in a fragmented form. On the other hand, these long journeys and the deplorable conditions of human life as well as the severe outcomes of war he witnessed moved his heart greatly. His bitter caste experiences also compelled him to think deeply. He was longing for a spiritual destination based on the Bible he had in his hand.

During this period there was a missionary congruency named Fly City Mission which was run by some American emigrants based in Germany. The mission worked in different parts of India and they got in touch with John Joseph when he was on the war front. The knowledge in English and the skills as an orator made John Joseph an attractive candidate for the missionaries of Fly City, who invited him to the mission. He also found it attractive to work with the Mission and became a fulltime worker in this congruency soon after completing his service in the British Army. John Joseph actively participated in the activities of Fly City mission and its medical service too. It is said that he had been given a monthly allowance of Rs. 100/- and that was quite a huge amount of money at that time, particularly for a lower caste person. The missionaries advised him to invest his income into a bank as saving for future purposes. Thus, he came into contact with modern banking system and kept this modern form of economic transactions during his life later. This method gave him economic freedom, which was reflected throughout his

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<sup>588</sup> See, P Sanal Mohan, 'Immaginning Equality: Modernity and Social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala', unpublished PhD Thesis, submitted in Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, 2005. The concept of performative egalitarianism is also suitable for this context. See Vivek V Narayanan, "Caste as performance: Ayyankali and the Caste Scripts Colonial Kerala", *Theatre Survey* 2021, Cambridge University Press.



social activities. He was imbibing a modern sense of accumulation and individualised management of resources, which was not available for, or opted by, even the elites at that time.<sup>589</sup>

This life met with a crisis when the war-affected emergency forced the German missionaries to move outside British territories. The order of departure arrived all of a sudden, causing extreme difficulties for the serving German Missionaries. Pampady John Joseph helped the German missionaries in return by giving his money to them without any hesitation for funding their return journey home. This incident is said to have taken the missionaries by surprise, but they sent the money back to him as soon as they arrived in Germany. They wrote to him, “Mr. Joseph, Bharataputra, you are a great man. Your help will never be in vain. We will refund this money. We will credit your account with a good amount as soon as we return home. You will continue to receive interest from it every month. Thank the Lord for this great help and may God be with you. Praise the Lord.”<sup>590</sup> They have fulfilled this promise and interestingly they continued to send a monthly allowance to John Joseph till 1930 as a token of love and respect for his faithfulness.<sup>591</sup>

John Joseph shifted his dwelling to Quilon, now known as Kollam, and came in contact with Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham of Ayyankali. It was during this time he met P. J. Joseph, another educated dalit Christian leader — an association that proved to be significant in the later life of John Joseph. P. J. Joseph received his education from a Mission School at Eranakulam till 6<sup>th</sup> class and became a *Karyasthan*, the secretary of Church, in Varappuzha at Kottayam. He also

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<sup>589</sup> See M. A. Oommen, ‘The Rise and Growth of Banking in Kerala’, *Social Scientist*, Oct, 1976, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 24-46.

<sup>590</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 19.

<sup>591</sup> Chentharassery says that these were taken from the notes from Pampady John Joseph’s diary. See chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 19.

had enough knowledge in English. And he later became an *Upadesi*, a preacher, of Punnathra Church in Vettumukal in Kottayam. He was a staunch supporter of Ayyankali, and he invited Ayyankali to Velloor in Kottayam. In 1918 Ayyankali received a warm welcome at Velloor under the leadership of Thiruvappu T. C. Kuttan, P. J. Joseph, and Parady Issac Assan. *Sadhu Jana Paripalini*, a magazine of *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham*, under the editorship of Thrikkodithanam Kali Chothi Kuruppan had almost stopped printing by then. Under these circumstances P. J. Joseph restarted the magazine under his editorship and renamed it *Sadhujana Doothan*, meaning, “the messenger of the poor.” Pampady John Joseph and P. J. Joseph became strong allies and friends since they met during 1920s. They supported each other in their activities.<sup>592</sup>

Pampady John Joseph’s life as an English educated man, his military experience, and his activities as a teacher and as a social activist at this stage helped him to evolve into an influential figure using the avenues that colonial modernity offered. He earned to attain a space for himself as well as his people in modern society.

### **Reclaiming History in Present: John Joseph and the *Cheramar* Claim**

The most important contribution of Pampady John Joseph was his endeavor to give a prideful history for dalits. Though he had largely disappeared from the public memories, memories of him remain alive in popular history and among dalits. Through his interventionist claim dalit movement got a new life of self-respect in their consciousness, which indirectly provided a new antinomian and subversive discourse towards the prominent

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<sup>592</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 19.

authoritarian political discourse of history. Let's take a look at how John Joseph produced this claim of a prideful past for dalits and what were the effects of this claim.

The historical meeting of John Joseph with Njana Joshua,<sup>593</sup> a higher official at the Finance Department of Travancore State Government, turned the course of the history of dalits in Kerala. He exerted much influence on Pampady John Joseph that entirely changed his perspective on the history of dalits in the then Kerala. Njana Joshua was also a scholar in Tamil literature. He was well-versed in classical Tamil *Sangham* literature. He had deep knowledge of the *Pancha Maha Kavya Muthukkal*, or “five epic pearls of Tamil literature”, namely *Purananooru*, *Akananooru*, *Pathuttipattu*, *Chilappathikaram* and *Manimekalai*. This knowledge enabled him to analyse Kerala History in a new light. Moreover the works like William Logan's Malabar Manual, C. A. Innes' Malabar Gazetteer, Achutha Menon's Cochin State Manual, texts on caste and tribes in India by Anantha Krishna Iyer and Krishna Iyer respectively shed new light on history for him. He went through numerous manuscripts in the Government Archives. These sources helped Njana Joshua to approach history from a new perspective, which he shared with John Joseph when they grew closer.<sup>594</sup>

Njana Joshua explained his new understanding of Kerala history to John Joseph in the following manner. The old name of Kerala was *Cheranadu*. The natives of *Cheranadu* were *Cherar* or *Cheramar* who also ruled the land, for example, Nedum Cheran Athan. They were farmers and landowners and well educated. There were many poets among them. The real heirs

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<sup>593</sup> Jnana Joshua, a native of Nagarcoil, was a Chief Accounts Officer at the Finance Department of Travancore State Government during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He received education with the help of the Whites, and was a member of Sambava caste (parayah caste) who entered the government service which was an impossible task for the untouchables. He was unknown to the locals, and so he could do his work easily without any opposition. As a Christian he stayed at near the Church in the east of Chavalakkaran Mukku (junction) in Kunnukuzhy. He and John Joseph used to go to LMS Church, and became friends. This friendship led to their analysis of some of the entangled issues of the history of Kerala. Chentharassery, *op. cit.* pp. 28-29 (Mal-trans.).

<sup>594</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 29.

of this land are the *Cheras*. They were defeated and enslaved when the country was taken over by foreigners. Those who were made slaves then are now known as Pulayas. The caste system and untouchability are the devices used by the foreigners to subjugate the people as well as seize their lands and centres of worship. Pulayar was the name given to native *Cheras* following this subjugation.<sup>595</sup> Such a new perspective about history that John Joseph gained from Njana Joshua opened new horizons for the former and ignited the political spirit in him, and through him among the dalit society in general. The idea that his ancestors were the children and rulers of this land kindled a new fire in the political life of John Joseph.<sup>596</sup>

This insight both disturbed and re-invigourated John Joseph. He decided to propagate this new understanding of history which was seen capable of instilling self-respect and dignity among his people. He wanted to form a medium for inculcating this novel idea of a bygone noble past which could be used for enabling the resurrection of the subjugated people, who have no knowledge of a recognized history of their own until then. Like many other social reformers of the time, he decided to make a modern organization and named it as *Thiruvithamkoor Cheramar Maha Sangham* (TCMS), which means the Great Organization of Travancore *Cheramars*. TCMS came in to existence in 1921 with Parady Issac, P. J. Joseph, Saradan Solomon, M. I. Kunjappi, M. T. Assirvadam, P. O. Mathew, T. C. Kuttan, Joshua Mesthiri, among others, as the executive members, and Pampady John Joseph as General Secretary.<sup>597</sup> This organisation started its work at each nook and corner of Travancore, especially in places where dalits were present in significant numbers. On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1921, its first public meeting was held at Podippara near

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<sup>595</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* pp 29-30.

<sup>596</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *op. cit.* P. 77.

<sup>597</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *op. cit.*

Eraviperoor in Thiruvalla. Vellikara Chothi and many members of *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* attended this meeting.<sup>598</sup>

John Joseph was a brilliant interpreter, popular orator, and tireless organiser and the qualities he acquired from his exposure to colonial modernity and from his own heuristic efforts. The new insights he gained allowed him to embark on a new voyage of historicism for himself and his people and he preached this new understanding of history. As K. C. Joseph pointed out<sup>599</sup> John Joseph's new historical discourse was appealing. K C Joseph says:-

Pulayas, who were numerically a big population among slave castes, were the descendants of Cheraman Perumakkanmar, the official name of *Chera* Kings. The last ruler Mahabali was expelled from here to Malabar by the Aryan invasion and the Aryans stigmatised them as Pulayas which means the polluted ones. Further, he states that, when they were kings, their ministers were *Sambavas*. The Aryan intruders named them as Parayas. Their women were called without supporting the Grammar rules of the language as 'Pulakkalli' and 'Parakkalli'.... He (John Joseph) suggested that Cheramar and Sambavar women should be called, instead, as 'Cherammal' and Sambammal' respectively.

Vehemently criticizing the then existed prominent general belief (more or less even today's), John Joseph exposed two false stories fabricated by Aryans after invading this land. The first one was the myth of Parasurama retrieving Kerala from the sea by throwing his axe.<sup>600</sup> This story says that when Kerala became land from sea, he brought Brahmins and settled them there. The second story he exposed was the 'mini *Vamanavathara Kadha*'.<sup>601</sup> About this John Joseph raised this question: if this story belongs to *Dasavatara*<sup>602</sup> then why it is related to Kerala

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<sup>598</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *op. cit.*

<sup>599</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph, *op. cit.* Issue 19, Book 2, November 1979, p.1.

<sup>600</sup> There is a legend that Parasurama created Kerala and gifted it to Brahmins. According to legend, Parasurama threw his axe southwards from Gokarna and it reached Kanyakumari, and the sea in that area became land and the Kerala was retrieved from that land.

<sup>601</sup> The story of incarnation of *Vamana* of Lord Vishnu for the execution of *Mahabali*, an *Asura* king in Hindu Mythology.

<sup>602</sup> One of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, according to the Hindu Mythology.

only. Then *Tiruvonam*<sup>603</sup> must be celebrated all over India, he reasoned. He further argued that, the three parts of Chera rajya, i.e., Thiruvithamkoor, Kochi and Malabar are presumed as swarga (heaven), naraka (hell) and pathala (hades) as per the mini *Vamana kadha*.<sup>604</sup>

Narrating the history of *Chera* kings and their importance in the lives of untouchables of Travancore, he said that the capital of Chera Rajya was Thiruvananthapuram. Pulayanar Kotta was part of the Rajadhani, the royal place, hence the name. Though Mahabali was eliminated they could not completely eliminate Cheras from the Rajadhani. The Cheramars of Nedumangad and Neyyatinkara areas near Thiruvananthapuram were highly in martial arts then and even today. They protected the Rajadhani and the people of the land and so, they called it Pulayanar Kottai.<sup>605</sup> It is interesting to note that Rev. M. Satyanadhan in 1938 made remarks on the activities of John Joseph. One of such observations is as follows:

Mr. John Joseph proclaimed that they were the descendants of the famous King Cheraman Perumal. Hence the name Cheramar came from it and whether Hindu or Christian, the Pulayas should think and work together for the emancipation of the poor. This movement created a commotion of lure among the poor. The poor believed that John Joseph is their savior. He reminded them that their present destiny is the result of the injustice and iniquity done to them by the other castes (Savarnas) in the past and they should be enlightened for correcting.<sup>606</sup>

Satyanathan wrote this for criticizing the ‘heretical’ tendencies that emerged under the initiative of dalits in missionary movements and the Catholic Church. However these have become the testimonials to John Joseph’s importance and the reach of his activities and thoughts among dalits.

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<sup>603</sup> The Malayalam new year as well as harvest festival also connected to the myth of the execution of King *Mahabali* by *Vamana*.

<sup>604</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph, *op. cit.* Issue 19, Book 2, November 1979, p.1.

<sup>605</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph, *op. cit.* Issue 19, Book 2, November 1979, p.1.

<sup>606</sup> Rev. M. Sathyanathan, *Maha Idavakayude Bhavi* (future of the Diocese-Mal), (Kottayam: Published by the Author, 1939), p. 93.

After the first meeting of *Cheramar Maha Sabha* at Podippara near Eraviperoor in Thiruvalla there were many other *Maha Sammelanams* (mega meetings) conducted in many places like Thattakkadu in Koyipram Village, Meenamkunnu, Kaniyampara in Kaviyoor, Perumthuruthy in Thiruvalla and Thippani and several other places.<sup>607</sup> In all these meetings John Joseph delivered his heart blowing speeches which were simple, elegant and to the point, raising the self-esteem of dalits. The people who listened to these speeches received them with excitement and their minds got filled with a new sense of self confidence.

Along with these kinds of new transformations many disagreements too emerged within dalit movements. While on the one hand efforts were being made to unify all dalit groups into one platform, on the other hand efforts are being made to organize them on the basis of caste identity. “Poikail Yohannan, the founder of PRDS, also attended a meeting of the *Cheramar Sangham* held at its head office premises in Eraviperoor.”<sup>608</sup> He was critical of the attempts to organize Cheramars separately.<sup>609</sup> Yohannan expressed his worries in a poem which he composed and sung it in this meeting and used to repeat in other meetings:

What if when all the Pulayas  
Become Cherama,  
Will the pollution of the Pulaya go,  
Will it be alright on this earth?

What if when all the Parayas  
Become Sambava

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<sup>607</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph, *op. cit.* Issue 20. Book 2, December, 1979, p. 1.

<sup>608</sup> O. J. John Kottayam, *op. cit.* p. 78.

<sup>609</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 31.

Will the curse of the Paraya go  
Will it be alright on this earth?  
What if when all the Kuravas  
Become Sidhanar  
Will the lack of the Kurava go  
Will it be alright on this earth?<sup>610</sup>

The criticism against the separatism mentioned above affected the activities of John Joseph to some extent, but he continued his activities fearlessly. The important aspect of John Joseph's argument was that he never discarded the presence of Parayas, Kuravas, and other dalit sub castes. In many ways he tried to relate these sub castes into this *Cheramar* claim in the light of dalit fraternity. Initially he argued *Cheramar* includes all the sub castes of dalits but later he etymologically stuck to the Pulayas. It can be understood from the future developments, especially with the legislative activities of the Travancore state.

The Travancore Government came to know about the activities of the Cheramar Sangham and their claims and demands through a meeting of *Cheramar Mahasabha* held at Putharikandam Maidanam in Thiruvananthapuram on Kumbham 26 in Malayalam Era (M. E.) 1098 (C. E. 1923) under the Presidentship of Uloor S. Parameswarayyar, M. A., B. L., M. R. A. S., who was the then Government Secretary. Through this meeting at the heart of Thiruvananthapuram the Cheramar *Maha Sabha* got some public recognition.<sup>611</sup> John Joseph introduced Aikkara Yajamanan in this meeting held at Putharikkandam Maidanam. John Joseph tried to find a lineage of Chera kings in Aikkara Yajamanan's family and he was declared as the

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<sup>610</sup> V. V. Swami and E. V. Anil (Eds.) *Songs of Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*, translated by Ajay Shekhar, (Eraviperor: Adiyardeepam Publications, 2010), P. 24.

<sup>611</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph *op. cit.* Issue 20, Book 2, December, 1979, p. 1.



king of Cheramas. According to John Joseph Aikkara Yajamanan's family was the last generation of Chera lineage. O. J. John Kottayam also says about Putharikkandam meeting and Aikkara Yajamanan.<sup>612</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph opines that John Joseph brought Sri Krishnadi Asan, whom he knew then as a contractor, to the Putharikkandam meeting and introduced as Aikkara Yajamanan. This demonstrates the brilliance of John Joseph as an organiser. After the Putharikkandam meeting, John Joseph was nominated to *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly*.<sup>613</sup>

Ripples of this mega meeting hit the entire Travancore, generating a lot of interest and astonishment among the common people. The Travancore Palace also got enthusiastic but at the same time annoyed. Sri Mulam Thirunal Maharaja summoned John Joseph and asked his explanation about the said Cheramar claim. He has given a detailed account of what he knows about the Cheramar history and sought Raja's attention into it. However he never revealed the source (Njana Joshua) of information. "Whatever Mr. Joseph told is right, but the time had not yet come for the Cheramas to acquire royal power. You will get it when the time comes", Maharaja replied and he discussed it with his Chief Secretary, Dr. Kunjan Pillai. The King of Travancore gave a *Panakkizhi*, price money, to John Joseph.<sup>614</sup> In short, the Putharikkandam meeting and other developments subsequent to the meeting aimed at forging a new subjectivity in the dalit cause caught the attention of the government and John Joseph emerged as the

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<sup>612</sup> O. J. John states that "Aikkara Yajamanan, the last link of *Chera Rajavamsa* (the lineage of *Chera* Kingdom), also participated in this mega meeting held by John Joseph at Putharikkandam Maidani in Thiruvananthapuram. This huge meeting was held on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1923, and Mahakavi Ulloor was presiding over it. Thousands were gathered in this meeting and Aikkara Yajamanan sat in an auspicious chair and John Joseph delivered a wonderful and attractive speech on Cheramar history. Later in this meeting Aikkara Yajamanan was declared as their king."<sup>612</sup>

<sup>613</sup> Dr. K. C. Joseph *op. cit.* Issue 20, Book 2, December, 1979 p. 1.

<sup>614</sup> There was a story that after this meeting with the King, while he was walking towards his home near Vellayambalam, the men of Travancore King beat him up severely and he managed save his life narrowly. Though he never revealed the source of his knowledge, the Palace men investigated and found that Njana Joshua is behind this. Later Njana Joshua died in a mysterious situation at the Veli Back Waters. His Paraya identity also might have caused his mysterious death. Because so far Joshua was misconceived that he was an upper caste Christian. Soon his wife and their three daughters flee to Nagarcoil after which there were no traces of his family. See Chentharassery, *op. cit.* pp. 35-37.

undisputed leader of the Cheramas. The name *Cheramar*, the newly constituted prideful name, was in fact an act of abandoning pejorative nomenclature like Pulaya, which means those who are polluted, and embracing a historically powerful and esteemed name instead.

In 1923 *Sadhujana Doothan*, a magazine run by P. J. Joseph, was renamed *Cheramar Doothan* (the messenger of *Cheramas*). It became the mouthpiece of *Cheramar Maha Sabha* and began to be published as a fortnightly. There were many other *Cheramar Sabhas* started in many parts of Travancore. Some of them originated and existed separately for Christians and Hindus. In 1923 Cheramar Christian Sabha was formed with the blessing of Pampady John Joseph under the leadership of Asirvadam Assan. Many similar sabhas also emerged during this time in Travancore. Cheramar Daiva Sabha was formed by Solomon Markose, an erstwhile worker of the Church Missionary Society, at Othara in Thiruvalla. Sooner branches of this church were formed in places like Kumbanad, Adoor, Kollakkadavu, Mepral, Prayar, etc. This made Cheramar Hindus and Cheramar Christians distinct groups of people.<sup>615</sup> John Joseph justified this development from a point of view that belief in God is an individual choice and this should not be an obstacle to engaging in concerted socio-political activities.<sup>616</sup> As the identity he envisioned was social and political and not religious, it can be understood that John Joseph envisioned a Charamar identity regardless of religious differences. He imbibed the values of religious tolerance from his long term exposure to modernity and his own intellectual and reform enterprises. Missionary discourses taught the converts the infallibility of the Christian faith and the ‘illegitimacy’ of other faiths. Although a product of missionary modernity, John Joseph transcended this narrow missionary view. This could be used as an example to understand how he transgressed the religious for the socio-political goals. He imagined his people as those who

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<sup>615</sup> Chentharasseri, *op. cit.* p. 38.

<sup>616</sup> O. J. John, Kottayam, *op. cit.* p. 84.

are free to choose their religion based on their spirituality and faith. This means that he critically engaged with the discourses of Christianity and modernity in the context of dalits while still being part of it. This ambivalence has its own significance.

Chentharassery vividly describes the physical appearance of Pampady John Joseph which could be summarized as follows:<sup>617</sup> After Ayyankali, John Joseph emerged as the dearest leader. The meeting at Thippani was conducted to give a warm welcome to a leader like him. Large number of people irrespective of their sub-castes gathered there to see and hear the words of John Joseph. Some Syrian Christians, who wanted to oppose him, also attended the meeting. They all waited patiently to see him. After a short while Pampady John Joseph reached the venue. He was new to them. He was dressed in European style. When he and P. J. Joseph, the editor of *Cheramar Doothan*, entered in to the *panthal*, all the people gathered there, including the Syrian Christians who came to attack him, got up in respect and greeted him. They did not know that John Joseph was the person who just arrived. They were expecting a black Pulaya man. But the person who arrived there was 6 feet tall, and he had enough size and Tipu's model big mustache. He was not much dark coloured. He held his head high and walked with a gorgeous charming face in elegant attire. Those who came to oppose him were mesmerised with his presence and kept silence.

His appearance in European style and his elegant figure has its own political meaning and significance. Like Ayyankali and Poyyayil Yohannan, John Joseph was also well aware of the politics of appearance and used it accordingly. He realised that it was very important to reclaim the elegance and nobility of the *Cherama*/dalit body, which had historically been 'filthyfied' by

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<sup>617</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* pp. 42-43.

the caste system. Moreover, the European attire can empower the lower caste body to overcome the power of native elite dress code.

Another important point about John Joseph's activism was that he went into book writing with the intention of publishing. This may be the first time in the history of print culture in Kerala that a person from a dalit community attempted to independently publish a book.<sup>618</sup> He wrote a book titled *Savarna Christianikalum Avarna Christianikalum* (*Savarna Christians and Avarana Christians*) in 1924. When the manuscript was ready no printing press was ready to publish it. In order to overcome this he bought a printing press with the help of P. J. Joseph. They renamed the press as *Cheramar Doothan Press* and this was the first book printed there. They also sent two copies of them to the Government Secretariat<sup>619</sup> (at that time it was the norm of censorship). His fortnightly *Cheramar Doothan*, began to be printed and published through this press afterwards. Later in a meeting at Thiruvalla in 1932 Pampady John Joseph was warmly welcomed as member of legislature. This meeting commenced with a huge procession and in that meeting he released his second Book *Oru Cheramar Balante Kadha* (*The Story of a Cheramar Boy*).<sup>620</sup> One of the most challenging factors for a historian to write the history of dalits is the unavailability of data or source. Apart from that the preservation of sources is also a big issue for the dalits. Even

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<sup>618</sup> According to Vinil Paul, in *Malayalamitram*, a publication of CMS Mission, Kottayam, a biography of Cornelius Hutton, the first dalit priest of a Church of Basel Mission of North Kerala, published in 1892 is the first published autobiographical work done by a dalit. He was the first person from a Pulaya community who came to study in CMS College in 1859 but ran away from there due to brutal Caste discrimination. Later he studied in north Kerala and became a priest. Israel Arjavam, a pulaya Christian of LMS, wrote a biographical sketch titled as *Ente Kadha*, my story, in Malayala Manorama, Kottayam, in February 11<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> 1893 in two parts. After that in 28<sup>th</sup> of July, 25<sup>th</sup> of August and 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 1894, he wrote a series of articles titled *Pulayar* in this same publication. In 1904 the book *Church History of Travancor*, wrote by C. A. Agur, was a converted christian from Paraya Community. See Vinil Paul, "Colonial Keralathinte Dalit Vidhyabhasathinte Rashtreeya Charitram"(political History of dalit Education in Colonial Kerala)-Mal), *Mathrubhoomi Weekly*, 2020 May-24-30., <https://navamalayali.com/2020/06/02/article-vinil-paul/>

<sup>619</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 50.

<sup>620</sup> Chentharassery *op. cit.* p. 60.

after the book is written, copies unfortunately are not available. However, there are many oral historical testimonials available regarding the fragments of these books.

### **Pampady John Joseph in *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly***

There is a controversy regarding the entrance of John Joseph to SMPA. According to Chentharassery, John Joseph wanted to recommend T. T. Kesavan Sastri,<sup>621</sup> the first Sanskrit scholar who got formal higher education from Colonial State of Travancore, as a member of *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* from the Pulaya community. He approached Ayyankali asking for this. But Ayyankali, who has an influence over Travancore Dewan, recommended John Joseph's name to the Dewan instead. Thus, Pampady John Joseph became the member of *Sri Mulam Popular Assembly* in 1929. However, this argument is questioned by Sathish Kidarakkuzhy, a biographer of T. T. Kesavan Sastri. According to him, Kesavan Shastri was at that time a student of Advaita Ashram in Alwaye.<sup>622</sup> Supporting this view, we have evidence in the form of a speech by Pampady John Joseph in SMPA on 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1922. It clearly establishes that since 1922 Pampady John Joseph was the member of SMPA. Nedumparambil John Joseph was the official name of Pampady John Joseph. So, his name is seen as N. M. Joseph in the SMPA proceedings.

His interest in the socio-economic development of dalits and their prosperity is evident from his speech at SMPA on March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1922.<sup>623</sup> In his speech at SMPA on the next day, i.e.,

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<sup>621</sup> Later he married the daughter of Ayyankali and became the deputy speaker of Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly.

<sup>622</sup> Sathesh Kidarakkuzhy, *T. T. Kesavansastri: Charitram Thamaskaricha Karmmayogi*, (Kottayam: Sahithya Prasavhaka Sahakarana Sangham, 2018). pp. 40-41.

<sup>623</sup> The details under the title "Need for two Central Boarding institutions for the boys and girls of the Cheramar community" with item number 126, dated 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1922 (p. 163), seen in the SMPA proceedings read as: "Mr. N. J. Joseph (Member, Nominated) referred to the Cheramar Sangham established for promoting the educational, social and economic advancement of the community irrespective of the religious faith of its members. He then dwelt upon the historical importance of the community and deplored its educationally backward condition. It was, he said, necessary- that Government should take up the work of educating the Cheramars, and, as a preliminary step to this, the Member prayed that two boarding institutions, one for boys and other for girls, each providing free

March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1922, he made a few important suggestions to be considered by the government for the advancement of the Cheramar community in Travancore.<sup>624</sup> He was particularly interested in the educational upliftment of the Cheramar boys and girls. Apart from this, through his speeches he advocated for a separate identity and existence for Cheramar.

One of his conversations with the Dewan in SMPA reveals that he wanted to be secular and his longing for unifying Cheramars are very strong in his political endeavors, though he was represented as Cheramar Christian.<sup>625</sup> His interventions in the SMPA were concerned with the

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accommodation and boarding for 250 students, be established in Trivandrum for the exclusive use of the community with provision for instruction in practical agriculture to the boys and domestic science to the girls. Lastly, the Member prayed that, besides the establishment of the two boarding houses mentioned above, arrangements might be made for giving free secondary and collegiate education to such of the boys and girls of those institutions as possessed special aptitude and intelligence for higher studies.”

<sup>624</sup> The details of the suggestions under the title “Some suggestions for the advancement of the Cheramar community in Travancore” with item number 139, dated 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1922 (p. 173), seen the SMPA proceedings read as:

- (1) The name of the community should be changed from ‘Pulaya’ to ‘Cheramar’, as the community had lost much in public estimation owing to the use of the former term which was a by-word of reproach.
- (2) Government should appoint a committee with certain Cheramar members to investigate the ancient history and status of the community.
- (3) Orders should be issued for the periodical inspection of the dwellings of the Cheramar and the other backward classes by the Darbar Physician and the Sanitary Commissioner.
- (4) The grievances experienced by Cheramars in the matters of the puduval registry at the hands of subordinate revenue officers should be removed.
- (5) Wet lands within forests should be registered in the names of members of the depressed classes.
- (6) Lands in the vicinity of towns should be acquired by Government and granted to the depressed classes as dwelling sites.
- (7) The children of the community should be taught free in all Government schools.
- (8) Special scholarships should be instituted for the benefit of the members of the Cheramar community as an incentive to English education among them.
- (9) The members of his community should be exempted from the payment of admission fees and be supplied with books and slates gratis.
- (10) Special Cheramar schools should be opened in localities where the members of the community lived in large numbers.
- (11) Government should render the necessary help for the formation of a Permanent Endowment Fund for the Cheramar Sangham. This fund would be invested with Government as a fixed deposit carrying interest at 10 percent.
- (12) Members to represent the community on the popular Assembly and the Legislative Council should be dominated by Government after consulting the Executive Committee of the Cheramar Sangham.
- (13) Government should recognize the claims of Cheramar Hindus and Cheramar Christians separately in the matter of appointments in the public service.
- (14) The Pallar community found in the Taluks of Tovala, Agastisvaram, Shencottah and Devicolam should be accepted as one of the depressed classes and given all the concessions usually granted to those classes.
- (15) A Special Officer with the power of a Dewan Peishkar should be appointed to look after the interests of the depressed classes.”

<sup>625</sup> The conversation between John Joseph and Dewan is in SMPA Proceedings dated 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1922 (p. 163) reads as follows:

dalit interests in the then prevailing enumeration policies, and his assertive stances was aimed at forging a distinct social identity and a new sense of autonomy for the Cheramas. He stood for a common ‘Cheramar identity’ beyond religious differences. The above mentioned conversation makes all these things clear.

John Joseph wanted to revoke the name ‘Pulaya’ which denotes something that causes pollution and hence pejorative, and instead he invoked a name (Cheramar) from history. To establish this claim, he wanted the government to investigate the ancient history and status of the community. He demanded regular health checkups for his people, which was an assertion as citizens in that context. Moreover, his arguments for English education and educational aids for his people and their presence in the legislature as representatives and the representation in public service of both Hindu and Christian Cheramars without any discrimination reveals his ability and vision as a social reformer. Interestingly, he has argued in favour of Pallar<sup>626</sup> community in Travancore, which shows his compassion and solidarity towards fellow beings who suffered like him and his people.

On 26<sup>th</sup> February 1929, John Joseph raised some questions in the SMPA and brought the issue of 16026 acres of land allotted to the dalits in various taluks to the attention of the government. These lands were uncultivable. Few lands which were cultivable were not accessible to them as they were illegally occupied by the dominant castes and communities.

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Dewans’ reply– You say that the strength of your community is 4,00,000, while the figure as per the recent census is 26.

Member- The figure is wrong. Our secretary will give the correct figure. We are classed as Indian Christians at the census.

Dewan- If you had called yourselves Cheramars, I do not see why the Census Officers should class you as Indian Christians.

Member- The name ‘Cheramar’ was adopted only after the census. I request that my representation may be considered.

Dewan- I shall consider it”.

<sup>626</sup> Pallar is also a marginalized community like Pulayas and Parayas. However, their numerical strength in Kerala was low and their voices unrepresented.

Although the dalits complained against such problems, such complaints were ignored by the *proverthicars* (revenue officials) who belong to upper caste communities. This was one of the most difficult obstacles for the dalits to get access of land.<sup>627</sup>

He also expressed concerns over the misbehaviour of the revenue officials in relation to the land registry for the dalits. In most cases the revenue officers misinterpreted the rules for concession while registering land to the dalits and many often forcefully evicted them from the land which they occupied. He demanded that the government should stop these pernicious practices. Again he spoke on matters related to land, “special consideration had to be shown in the matter of registry of lands to the depressed classes inhabiting the taluks of Ambalappuzha and Sherthala and the western parts of the Kottayam, Vaikom, Changanacherry, Thiruvalla, Karthikapalli and Karunagapalli”.<sup>628</sup>

John Joseph suggested that a committee comprising the Commissioner of Land Revenue, Dewan Peshkar, Conservator of Forests, Protector of the Depressed Classes and representatives of the depressed classes should be formed to select suitable land for distributing among the Depressed Classes. The land should be selected from the areas like fuel reserves (from which wood had been cleared), swampy areas lying in forest regions, and some of the broader reserves.<sup>629</sup> Another demand of John Joseph was that, with a view to helping the depressed classes living in towns, government should acquire lands, if necessary, under the Land Acquisition Regulation, the compensation paid being recovered in six or seven annual installments from the persons to whom the lands were assigned.<sup>630</sup>

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<sup>627</sup> SMPA Proceedings, Tuesday, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1929 (the second day) pp. 27-28.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>630</sup> *Ibid.* p.p. 27-28



Apart from the above mentioned demand he made an interesting argument regarding ownership and alienation of land.

The proposal which the Government had under consideration to assign *puthuval* lands on lease instead of on permanent registry to the depressed classes with a view to preventing the alienation of these lands was unwise and uncalled for. In the first place, as had already been pointed out, these lands were never intentionally alienated. Secondly the proposal, if given effect to, will forever operate to the disadvantage of the depressed classes, denying to them the privilege of ownership of lands and all the attendant civic rights such as franchise for the Legislative council and the Sri Moolam Popular Assembly, which at least for the present depended on property qualifications. What was required for therefore to enforce with grater rigor the order already issued prohibiting alienation of registered lands. The member proposed to submit to government a full memorandum containing all the facts bearing on these questions and it would be very proper, he said, if Government waited at least till then to take any steps in the matter.<sup>631</sup>

In order to ensure good governance for the depressed classes John Joseph interestingly demanded a strange but politically sound intervention from the state - “[i]n so far as the Protector of the Depressed Classes was concerned, the appointment of a European officer would meet the wishes of the people. If that was not feasible, the appointment of a Brahmin Officer well-acquainted with revenue work would be desirable.”<sup>632</sup>

Dewan’s reply to the demands of John Joseph was reassuring. Although the state was aware of these problems, there were no convincing ways to solve them promptly. In such a context, the recommendations made by John Joseph paved the way for proper resolutions to those issues. Recognising John Joseph as a social reformer was also reflected in the Dewan’s response. The following is Dewan’s reply found in the proceedings of SMPA:

Mr. Joseph, there is a good deal in what you say, that the utmost is not as yet being done in establishing the landless and the depressed classes on the land. The intention on the part of Government is with you; and the Heads of the Departments concerned are doing their level best also to help to settle these poor people on the land. But

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<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.* p.p. 27-28

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*

there are practical difficulties. Great caution is necessary. I hope that these defects will to a large extent be minimized by appointing a whole time Protector of Depressed Classes. I trust that by next year, or year after the next, when you come before this assembly, you will see that there has been a very marked, a very striking improvement in this direction.<sup>633</sup>

The quest for land ownership is very much visible in these appeals. Land was a central issue in the social and political mobilization of the depressed classes and John Joseph was well aware of this fact. His sharp criticism of bureaucratic or systematic neglect of the issue of *Puduvai* land distribution stems from the indifference of upper caste officials to the cause. As the protector of the lower classes he asked a European official or, if that was not possible, a Brahmin official to look after their affairs. This demand shows that local officials from the Nairs and other high caste groups were practicing caste and John Joseph wanted to see that the native caste antagonism was not working against the dalits. In this case, John Joseph chose the colonial masters first (i.e., a European) and a Brahmin second without any hesitation over others. It could be argued that John Joseph was using a strategy for mitigating different forms of hegemonies. Due to this, the government responded positively through the Dewan that the issues raised by John Joseph could be considered sympathetically. All these conversations exemplify the diplomatic success of a dalit legislator.

As a representative of *Cheramar* Christians, John Joseph's questions and the Dewan's reply on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1929 were recorded in the SMPA proceedings which read as "MR. N. JOHN JOSEPH (Member, Nominated) the people of the depressed classes were usually living in very insanitary surroundings. It was highly necessary that these people who formed the back-bone of the country should have healthy conditions of life. The Inspecting Medical Officer and the

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<sup>633</sup> SMPA Proceedings, Tuesday, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1929 (the second day) p.p. 27-28.

Sanitary Commissioner should be instructed to inspect their quarters from time to time.”<sup>634</sup> This shows John Joseph’s concern over the health conditions of his people. During this period the life expectancy of the dalits was lower than other communities.

In another case related to education empowerment, he asked the government to ensure fee waiver for the pupils from the depressed classes in colleges and technical schools. John Joseph also asked for the financial assistance to the dalit students. He demanded that “Five scholarships of the value of Rs. 7 each should be instituted in each taluk and three scholarships of the value of Rs. 15 each in each Divisions exclusively for the benefit of the Cheramars, the former for the sake of the pupils undergoing instructions in high school classes and latter for the sake of those in college classes.”<sup>635</sup> He added that the government should provide special concessions to students to ensure material and infrastructural support.<sup>636</sup> All these show John Joseph’s foresight on the need for education for social empowerment. As dalits did not have access to educational institutions at that time, his views were highly relevant at the practical level.

Apart from the above mentioned activities, John Joseph was actively involved in the co-operative movement at that time. He took the initiatives to establish a number of co-operative societies among dalits. Also, he raised some potential demands in the SMPA<sup>637</sup> to strengthen the cooperative movement among the dalits. He demanded that “permanent co-operative inspectors and supervisors should be appointed from among the depressed classes in order to organize co-

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<sup>634</sup> TSMPPA Proceedings, 8th March 1929, pp. 249-250.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.* Arrangement should be made for the free supply of books, slates, cloths and mid-day meals to the pupils of the depressed classes. They should also be exempted from the payment of admission fees. Two boarding schools of the middle school grade should be established at Trivandrum, one for boys and other for girls, where board and lodging should be provided for 250 boys and 250 girls. Special instructions should be imparted to the boys in agriculture and to the girls in domestic science, including cooking, house hold accountancy, sewing, laundry, etc.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*

operative societies among them. Twelve more group secretaries should be appointed from among the depressed classes.”<sup>638</sup>

John Joseph demanded that dalits should be adequately represented in public affairs. He also demanded that issues related to census enumeration of his people should be resolved on a top priority. This is very important because it was very necessary to ensure social justice for the oppressed sections of the society in the future. His demands in SMPA read, “[t]he Cheramar population of the State should, for the sake of representation in the public service, be treated separately either as Cheramar Christians or as Cheramar Hindus, but not collectively as part of the vast and heterogeneous Christian population. The age limit of appointments in the public service should also be fixed at 30 years instead of 25 in the case of the Chermars and other depressed classes. Chermars should be given representation in the Legislative Council and the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly.”<sup>639</sup>

After presenting these crucial demands, serious arguments took place between the Dewan and John Joseph.<sup>640</sup> It is interesting to note that he advocated for the mid-day meals and fee

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<sup>638</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>640</sup> SMPA Proceedings, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1929, pp. 249-250.

The conversation between Dewan and John Joseph found in SMPA proceedings in this regard read as follows:-

DEWAN’S REPLY: Mr. John Joseph, the question of public health arrangements for the State is now under consideration and suggestions- the difficulties you have stated- will possibly solution when these changes are affected.

It is not possible to give fee concessions or to remit fees in the case of students in colleges and technical schools, nor to provide scholarships to poor and depressed classes communities alone. So far as English high schools and colleges are concerned there are large number of open and close scholarships which are open to students of the depressed classes. I do not know what do you mean by exemption of pupils of the depressed classes from payment of admission fees. There are no admission fees for schools. It is not possible to supply books, slates etc. free because it will mean inordinate cost. In the matter of midday meals, the depressed classes children are not the only poor ones who have to be given meals, but there are many poor people who undergo hardship for want of midday meals. The whole question of midday meals was considered carefully and I found on examination that if midday meals costing one chakram per head be given to each child in school, it will cost government about 37 lakhs of rupees a year. That works out to about 18,500 Rupees a day.

MEMBER : Such concessions need to be given only to very depressed classes.

DEWAN : Even that will work out to between one and two lakhs of rupees.

concession for the children from oppressed backgrounds. Also, he repeatedly called for the establishment of boarding schools for boys and girls from the same category. He advocated for the appointment of Co-operative Inspectors from among his own people to expand their capacity and capability in co-operative business. This shows that education and business are two important parameters for the development of a community, which he knew very well and wanted to promote them as much as he could. He was well aware that the economic and educational condition of the dalits was very pitiful, and that is why he raised these issues in the assembly hoping to get help from the government. Later developments proved that his demands towards that end were met.

On 24.04.1935 Pampady John Joseph submitted a Memorial to the British Parliament through the Travancore State.<sup>641</sup> The memorandum was submitted against atrocities related to caste practices existed among Christians in Travancore. The upper caste Syrian Christians of Travancore discriminated the depressed dalit Christians on the basis of caste. Although his criticism was mainly against the attitudes of the upper caste Christians, the memorial was also intended to attract the attention of the British Parliament to act against caste practices in general, that is, caste practices by both upper caste Hindus and Christians. As he was a subject of Colonial Princely state of Travancore which was considered then as a Hindu State, he could not

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MEMBER : That expenditure will pay in the long run.

DEWAN : It is outside the bounds of our financial possibilities at present. Equally impracticable is the establishment of two boarding schools for the depressed classes of 250 children in each school. There are ample facilities for primary education at present in the existing schools, and for secondary education too.

In the matter of representation in public service, when the depressed classes are duly qualified, I have no doubt they will take their place. As it is, everything possible is being done to provide suitable posts for suitable members of the depressed classes.

I have no doubt the question of representation of the Chermars in the Legislative Council will come up for reconsideration when the community is ripe for representation and when the constitution of the Council comes up for reconsideration at a future date.

In the matter of Assembly, your very presence shows that Government is careful to study the requirements of unrepresented communities as opportunity offers and occasions demands.

<sup>641</sup> Memorial of John Joseph Republished in Saindhava Mozhi, 1912, June 8, p.3 and also see Chentharasserry, op. cit. pp. 62-68.

openly talk against the State. But by this act of submitting the memorandum, he tacitly sent his message to the British Parliament asking for possible intervention in reforming the age-old caste practices of his native state.

John Joseph's memorandum tried to present some critical issues of caste practices existed among Christians in Travancore. According to him, there were 1.6 million Christians in Travancore, including all denominations such as Catholics, Mar Thoma, Jacobites and Anglicans. Eight lakh of them were Syrian Christians and the dalit Christians constitute 6.5 lakh of the total population. According to the Memorandum, Syrian Christians were converted from upper caste Hindus and considered themselves superior to the dalits. There was no qualitative difference between Syrian Christians and caste Hindus in terms of caste observance in social life. Dalits were restricted by the Christians from inter-caste marriage, inter-dining etc. The Memorandum also spoke about the existence of different Churches for Savarna Christians and Avarna Christians. Avarna Christians, who constituted about 6.5 lakh, were forbidden to even approach the churches of upper caste Christians.

Through the Memorial John Joseph also exposed the hollowness of the promise of equality and brotherhood within Christianity. As Christians, everyone is obligated to follow the Lord's commandments based on equality and brotherhood. However, the upper class Christians used their wealth, influence and status to push the dalit Christians to the bottom of society and kept them always oppressed. Dalit Christians are not adequately represented in the legislative bodies of the state, whereas the upper caste Christians always tried to gain more from the Maharaja's government.<sup>642</sup>

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<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Modern Politics of Representation, New Sense of Pride, Colonial Numerology in Cadastral Politics**

In order to address the above mentioned issues, John Joseph argued for proportional representation of his community in public services and legislatures. These demands paved the way for modern representative politics in Kerala. Two important claims contained in his memorandum regarding the proportional representation of each community (i.e., representation in the public service and in the legislature) need to be examined with special attention.<sup>643</sup> In the Memorandum he made it clear that how dalit Christians were discriminated against their rights by the Syrian Christians and how the latter monopolised the government jobs in the name of minority rights for Christians. It is for these reasons that John Joseph called for a division among Christians based on caste. As a background to this claim, John Joseph portrayed the stigmatised status of depressed class Christians and the denial of benefits to them. The Syrian Christians did not allow even the basic rights of the depressed class Christians. He stated that:

Savarna Christians is practicing untouchability towards us. We do not have entry to their houses. In some places they practice untouchability by maintaining physical

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<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.* In the Memorandum he states that “Only eight lakhs upper caste Christians are encroaching the rights of Avarna Christians by enumerating them within their list. To ask regarding these rights the Avarna Christians are too below in education, wealth, and in Organization. The Maharaja’s government is doing all it can to uplift the depressed classes Christians as it is doing to the depressed classes Hindus. On the contrary, Savarna Christians makes concerted efforts to keep us be depressed. The former Dewan Mr. T. Rakhavaiyya due to the influence of his Christian friends, divided Christians in to four Divisions like Catholics, Jacobites, Mar Thomas, and Anglicans for appointing Public Services. Based on this criterion only Syrians are being appointed. But ignoring the fact that a good percentage of these Christians are depressed classes Christians, these four sections alone share all the rights of Christians on the basis of the population of the community as a whole. Let me explain an example of this visible tendency of the Syrian Christians. Syrian Christians argued for more seats when the Maharaja of Travancore reformed the legislature two years earlier. Mr. T. Austin ICS was the then Dewan (Prime Minister) of Travacore. He summoned a conference in his official residence, *Bhakthivilasam*. In between the discussions, Mr. Austin asked a question among the leaders of Savarna Christians presented there. The question was whether they would be willing to give some seats to Avarna Christians if the Christian community were allowed a lot of seats. But the Savarna Christians unanimously opposed that suggestion. Even today the high posts in Travancore Government getting as if monopolized to the Syrian Christians. They are enjoying all the rights without involving anyone in these matters. But these days depressed Classes Christians began to ask about their rights. If they were not treated as a special community, these converted section of people from the lower caste Hindus of Paryar (Sambavar), Kuravar, Pulayar(Cheramar) etc. are not going get any benefit.”

distance. They keep us in distance in public roads to avoid pollution and maintain untouchability. This attitude shown towards us by our co-religionists, the upper caste Christians fertilizes the caste Hindus to maintain untouchability towards us. By establishing separate churches for depressed class Christians, Syrian Christians and other upper caste Christians are reinforcing inequalities based on birth and caste. The dead body of depressed class Christians is not buried in their Cemetery. There is an incident in which the dead body buried in one place removed out and exhibited in front of the Church.

In order to point out the discriminatory practices with in the ritual domain of Christian religion he further states that, “Although some churches allow us to participate in the Lord’s holy Supper, we are given seats in the last rows. We are not allowed to take the bread from the plate directly or drink the wine directly as the Savarna Christians do. Instead, the pieces of bread are thrown into our hands. After serving all, the wine is poured into our hands with a spoon.”<sup>644</sup>

In order to justify his demands, he highlighted the laws made by the then Dewan of Travancore Mr. V. P. Madhava Rao 30 years back for the betterment of the depressed classes. Under the aforesaid legal support, depressed class Christians received benefits for school fees, land for cultivation and house construction, etc., regardless of their religious background. In fact, under this law, while lower castes were exempted from paying money to acquire property, other communities had to pay for it. In the case of lower classes there were no Hindu-Christian differences in applying the said laws. Based on such experiences John Joseph demanded special concessions for the depressed class Christians in Travancore. He conceived of them as a separate community distinct from other Christians and made special demands for them. The demand for adequate representation of the depressed class Christians in Travancore was aimed at their upliftment. Without this division all the benefits would have gone to the upper caste Christians and none to the lower caste Christians.<sup>645</sup> That is why John Joseph saw in the conversion an upper-class Christian ploy.

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<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*



In order to substantiate his arguments, John Joseph quoted the Bishop of Travancore-Cochin, Rev. E. L. A. Moor in a letter to Travancore-government dated 17-6-1933.<sup>646</sup> It reads that “[a]n ideal plan is to treat this group as depressed Christians who cannot integrate into the Christian community as full-fledged Christians even after accepting Christianity. They are still entitled to get benefits and protections from government for many years to come.”

John Joseph sought the attention of the South India Joint Church on the issues of depressed class Christian and thus on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1933 the Church passed a resolution and submitted it to the Travancore Government. The resolution stated that many depressed classes like Cheramas and Sambavas are members of various churches. Further, the Church recognized that the backward classes remained backward despite its constant efforts. This being a fact, the committee agreed that without the protection of the government the depressed class Christians could not enter the institutional mechanisms of the government.

John Joseph concluded the memorandum by stressing the need for enumerating the population of the depressed class Christians separately and extending governmental support to them. John Joseph pointed out in the memorandum that the plan of the upper caste Christians was to count the depressed class Christians with them during the census and thus to take advantage of it by inflating the Christian population. Although the numerical strength of total Christians could be increased by adding the number of depressed class Christians, Syrian Christians were not willing to share with the depressed class Christians the benefits available to all Christians.<sup>647</sup>

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<sup>646</sup> As quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>647</sup> The memorandum, submitted by John Joseph as a member of Sreemoolam Legislative Assembly, dated 24-04-1935, concludes as follows:

“The plan of the Savarna Christians is to enumerate the Avarna Christians with them while taking the Census and thus take advantage out of them. They began to reciting the new verses of equality and justice for getting benefits out of it. I am sending this statement as a representative of a huge section of depressed classes Christians in the

This historical document becomes more significant in understanding how dalit intellectuals used their intelligence to hide their political intention which they could not say openly and firmly because of the prevailing dire political situation. The said memorandum addressed to the British Parliament drew its attention to caste problems. But John Joseph did not want to provoke the native ruler, the Maharaja of Travancore. At the same time, he wanted the sufferings of the depressed class Christians to be redressed. Also, the Travancore government had a sore eye on the activities of Christian missionary movements and their mass conversion programmes. But they were helpless in this regard due to their political subordination. Pampady John Joseph's memorandum submitted to the Assembly was handed over to the British Parliament by the Travancore Government and the Maharaja without any hesitation.<sup>648</sup> But John Joseph used this opportunity to seek all possible means to strike down the prevailing caste practices in Travancore with his multifaceted and subversive politics of representation.

As a response to the memorandum, the government initiated certain actions in the form of enquiries. According to Kaviyoor K. C. Raj, "[a]ccordingly, the government enacted a draft of law to treat Anglican Christians and Latin Christians as depressed classes. But for the Syrian Christians, if such a law were made at this stage, it would be a shame to the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury to come to Travancore. Syrian Christians argued that here anyone belonging to any caste is free to accept Christianity, and those who accept Christianity are only considered Christians, and that there is no caste difference among Christians. Showing such a turn would go against the Christian ideal. To overcome this crisis Christian delegates and church leaders gave a counter-memorandum to counter the arguments made by the dalit Christian

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Church. Christianity expanded our perspectives. But the Syrians and other Savarna Christians are knock our rights off for getting benefit to them. I believe that these major issues would be comprehended in its real sense."

<sup>648</sup> It is said that the minor yuvaraja Balaramavarma asked to John Joseph that whether this memorandum will oppose by Hindu Chermars. He firmly replied that his people will not oppose him. See Chentaraserry, *op. cit.* P. 62.

leaders.<sup>649</sup> The Church leaders sent written statements which were collected from Catholics and some Cheramar Christians and other leaders along with photographs of certain religious rituals and ceremonies and common dining, to the British Parliament, stating that all allegations were untrue.<sup>650</sup> Thus, the Memorandum met its tragic end without bearing any fruits. Though John Joseph became very sad due to the deception from his own people, he continued his efforts.

## JOHN JOSEPH ON LABOUR ISSUES

When Travancore Factories Bill was introduced in the Travancore Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, John Joseph made a speech by supporting it and he wanted a similar law to protect agricultural labourers, who comes mainly from depressed classes.<sup>651</sup> His political inclination towards labourers was visible when the law regarding the factories and labourers came in the legislature. He supported the bill but expressed skepticism about its benefits for the working class. His political concerns for the working class stemmed from his preference for the depressed class to which he belonged. His political ‘doubleness’ was evident in this matter too. In addition, he desired and argued for a bill that would be potentially radical legislation and beneficial to agricultural workers. On another occasion John Joseph was responding to a demand for a

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<sup>649</sup> Pamphlet of Kaviyoor K. C. Raj titled *Awasha Christhavar Evide?* (Where is the depressed classes Christians?) 1955, p. 1.

<sup>650</sup> Chentharassery, *op. cit.* p. 73.

<sup>651</sup> The Travancore Sree Moolam Assembly proceedings (heare after TSMA), 9<sup>th</sup> July 1935, p.p. 63-64. His speech in SMPA on this issue is reported as the following in the SMPA proceedings:-

“Mr. N JOHN JOSEPH (Nominated): It is imperative that there is a law concerning workers and employers. Everyone agrees that it is necessary to fix the wages and working hours of workers, based on their health. Government should protect the health and other matters of the workers and law and order when different factories run in the country. Though it is very difficult do so at this condition but it is so important to do such things. It may not correct to copy the same laws prevailing in British India in here. My view is that the government should pass this law separately by amending it to suit the situation of this country and accepting the views of people who are knowledgeable about it. I welcome the attention of the government to this matter. Legislation should be enacted with provisions to prevent any revolution, quarrel or strike between the workers and the employers. There should be remedies for it. Beyond this factories act there should be an act for the workers of agriculture in this land which is also important. If a suitable provision could be made to this matter it will be very beneficiary to all the depressed classes and other hungry wage laborers. I approved the Bill by stating that it should be properly considered and passed by a select Committee consisting of competent persons on the Bill now being introduced.”

supplementary grant. He continued his arguments against the poor functioning of the Depressed Class Department.<sup>652</sup> John Joseph criticized the functioning of Department of Depressed Class Protection and he appealed to appoint ‘someone who has status, broad vision and foresight to make it more effective.’<sup>653</sup> In order to strengthen the co-operative movement among the depressed classes, he requested to appoint inspectors from among them. It seems that John Joseph’s role as a co-operative worker is not known to the biographers and commentators of him. N. J. Joshua, a nominated member from the Cheramar community, said in a statement that as a result of the efforts of John Joseph, the then General Secretary of Cheramar Mahajan Sangham, around 120 cooperative societies were started among the Cheramas. There were many other societies in the experimental stages as well.<sup>654</sup>

This shows that he was an active leader of the co-operative movement during that period. Apart from that, John Joseph’s entry in the list of members nominated by the government under Rule-VII of the SMPA is recorded as ‘Cooperative Worker’ in the occupation column.<sup>655</sup> His reference to 191 co-operative societies functioning among the depressed classes in this speech and demand for the appointment of co-operative inspectors from the depressed classes clearly demonstrate his strong connection with and concern for the co-operative movement. Here too he continued to criticise the Protector of Depressed Classes and the department concerned. He also

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<sup>652</sup> TSMAP, 20th July 1935, pp. 143-144. He said: CHECK THE ORIGINAL “I support this request. I register my gratitude here to the committee for preparing a very good report based on the interest of depressed classes though they are not represented in that committee. It cannot be possible to state here that, though the government and the department show interest in the upliftment of the Depressed Classes, it is not beneficial to them in its right way. Government had approved only five group secretaries to help the societies of the depressed classes. The report has stated that to remove them from the department. It seems that when these five persons removed from the department, they think that it would be clean. There are 191 societies from the depressed classes. It cannot be called as co-operation unless to work for these societies to rise up it to the level of other co-operative societies. For that purpose, try to move these societies forward by appoint secretaries only those who have passed School Leaving examination.”

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>654</sup> TSMAP, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1931, p. 298.

<sup>655</sup> See appendix C of the SMPA Proceedings, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1929.

opposed the proposal to make B. A. the basic qualification for working in the co-operative sector, saying that this new and unexpected proposal would eliminate the weaker sections from the sector. B. A. holders were rare among the dalits at that time. It is clear from his words that he had high hopes for the future of the co-operative movement. For him, the cooperative movement was a site of political hope associated with colonial modernity and a space the depressed classes could use for enabling their mobility.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1935, John Joseph got an opportunity to speak in detail in the session of General Discussions on the Budget and he engaged in a eloquent debate on the topic. These long debates revealed John Joseph's distinctive political stance, logical skills and eloquence as a legislator.<sup>656</sup> He spoke in the session as follows:-

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (Nominated): In the Budget presented here by the financial secretary, I am pleased to see the provisions made for the implementation of many innovative projects for the benefit of the people. But it is unfortunate to see that the government has not focused enough on helping the depressed classes, who are the best asset of this country. In this year only Rupees10000/-are indented to expend for depressed classes. My honorable friend<sup>657</sup> has already stated here that there is nothing spends even a single percentage of money from the fund which is allocated to the depressed classes for the last two years. This fact is also known to the government. It is found that, this friend informed this Assembly that the reason for the non-expenditure was due to the lack of permission from the government and that if the necessary orders had been given to spend the money properly, all the money would have been spend for the benefit of the depressed classes. If the Protector of Depressed Classes had submitted plans properly to the government to spend on things that would benefit the depressed classes, the government would have allocated the money. There is no doubt in the fact that why the government approval did not get in this matter because the Protector of the Depressed Classes, do not have the proper knowledge, smartness and skill for attaining it. The government should not be stingy in this non-profit matter and should appoint a special committee to ensure that the money allocated to the depressed classes in the budget is fully spent. I have a request to the government that a committee should be constituted to spend the money which allocated to the depressed classes for this year, consist of the Co-Operative

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<sup>656</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, p.p. 275-280.

<sup>657</sup> T. T. Keasavan Sastri, a well-known Sanskrit scholar and a leader from depressed classes who delivered a detailed speech in this session earlier regarding the Budget and the depressed classes. See TSMA Proceeding 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1935, pp. 20-21.

Registrar, Sri Ayyankali, Secretary, Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham, T. T. Kesavan Sastri M. L. A., P. Denial, Secretary, Sambavarr Sangham, Mrr M. T. Asirvadam, Vice President, Cheramar Maha Jana Sangham, N. John Joseph, M. L. A.

This shows John Joseph's sense of brotherhood towards the dalit community as a whole despite their sub-caste differences. His concern in protecting the rights guaranteed by the colonial governmentality and using these opportunities for the upliftment of the dalit community is noteworthy. It indicates his double consciousness that transgress the Cheramar identity by embracing a new dalit self.

Dalit Christian representation in the Sri Mulam Assembly became a reality from 1913 through Saradan Solomon's membership, but Dalit Christian issues remained unresolved. Parady Abraham Issac and Poyikayil Yohannan also represented dalit Christians later on and raised dalit Christian issues in the Assembly. John Joseph used to raise Dalit Christian issues in the public sphere whenever he got an opportunity to speak about it. The same speech, which I have mentioned above, shows John Joseph's effort to find solution to the deprivation of dalit Christians. He said:

Then I have to say about the commission of public service recruitment. There is nothing found in the order issued by the government regarding the public service recruitment, related to the provisions supporting the depressed classes are concerned. It has been stated sadly that a big portion of the depressed classes are being avoided in this circular issued by the government. it is so pity that when a section of people is ineligible due to somewhat religious difference, from the freebies of the Maharaja. The provision done by the committee regarding Depressed Classes Christians are quiet unsatisfactory. The story the Depressed classes Christians was completely forgotten when it was stipulated that the lower castes in other communities should be given jobs according to rotation. In this condition no depressed classes Christians will not get any government job so that I request to the government that some employment should reserve for the depressed classes Christians by giving priority to their rights.<sup>658</sup>

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<sup>658</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, p. 276.

After listening to his logically sounded arguments on the issues of dalit Christians, there was an intense discussion among the members of the Assembly. Most of them were even unaware of the caste divisions among Christianity in Travancore and it astonished them. As I have mentioned earlier in this study, the colonial government had a soft corner towards the majoritarian sentiments of caste Hindus. Adding to this, a structural negligence was visible in the case of dalit Christian issues since the government had a subtle inclination towards Savarna Christians. John Joseph implicitly hinted at these trends in his speeches. He also did not hide his dismay at the unemployment of educated dalits due to the casteism of the savarna structured machinery in the government. The breach of promise of Christianity towards dalit Christians was also critiqued by John Joseph in his powerful speeches. The plight of Dalit Christians due to their state of being ‘neither there nor here’ and John Joseph’s own identity crisis were visible in his reply to a response made by a fellow member of the Assembly. His sarcasm and political sharpness of arguments are notable here. The long but interesting debate in this regard are reproduced here.<sup>659</sup>

Mr. A THANU PILLAI (*Trivandrum-Rural*): “Are there depressed classes among Christians?”

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): “Yes there are. How the high caste Hindus treating the Depressed Classes similarly the Savarna Christians treating the depressed classes who converted into Christianity.

Mr. EDAVANATT S PADMANABHA MENON (*Sherthala I*): “Is the government treating like this?”

Mr. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): government was treated like this but now with an order by the Government the policy can be seen as changed.

Until the appointments continued by considering the rights of the acting employees, it not seems that in fact anyone can possibly enter into the services within 25 years from the people who have already passed the examination and stayed outside. If the government should give the appointment based on the rights of the acting employees, the Government need not have to appoint a Public Service Commissioner by paying a huge salary.

Mr. A THANU PILLAI (*Trivandrum Rural*): “Is it not hostile to the majority of Christians, by saying that the depressed classes are there among them?”

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<sup>659</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, p.p. 276-277.

Mr. John Joseph (*Nominated*): If a Hindu feels hatred when someone says that there are depressed classes in *Sanathan* Hindu religion, then only a the followers of Christianity would feel unbearable.

PRESIDENT: "The member has asked about Christians. You have to talk only about it If you have any answer to that"

Mr. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): The chieftains of the Christian Religion which established here have not any hatred for saying that there are Depressed Classes.

Mr. N. E. VARUGHESE (*Thiruvalla I*): Member, are you in principle belong to Christian Religion?

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): I have not been able to join a Church that works and lives in principles because the churches here do not work or try to put into practice the true principles of Christianity.

RAO SAHIB S PARAMESVARA AIYAR: (*Nominated*) Suppose the government may consider some Christians as depressed classes and give some concession to them, do you know that whether the other Christians would raise sounds to oppose it?

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): Yes, there are. Though the Chieftains of the Christian Religions are already said that the depressed classes should be specially separated and give them concessions but the some of the representatives from Christianity had disagreement to that. Except the people like this there are no disagreements.

Mr. A THANU PILLAI (*Trivandrum Rural*): Whether the noble men from the Christians in the country side are opponents or supporters in this division?

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): Majority are supporters.

DEPUTY PRESIDENT: "The member is saying that whatever may be the opinion of the noble Christians the rights of the rights of the depressed classes Christians deserves should be given".

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): "So that in the case of appointment in public service the priority should be given to the depressed classes Christians by specially classifying them for getting them enough seats which they deserves.

Mr. M. SIVATHANU PILLAI (*Thovali*): Whether there are separate spaces for depressed classes Christians in the Church?

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): Yes there are.

DEPUTY PRESIDENT: That does not arise because Mr. Joseph is asking for recognition of depressed class Christian claims in the public service; and what relates to separate churches is irrelevant.

Mr. M. SIVATHANU PILLAI (*Thovali*): A word of explanation, Sir I heard Mr. Joseph say that, in Churches, the depressed class Christians are set apart for purpose of worship differently from non-depressed class Christians.

DEPUTY PRESIDENT: All Right.

Meanwhile, John Joseph diverted the discussion to the issues related to land. He emphasized the importance of land as a major factor in determining the agency of a citizen. Like Ayyankali and Poykayil Yohannan, he knew that the subjugated and fractured citizenship of



dalits gave them a double consciousness, and their continuing landlessness was upsetting at a time land had become the most important site of investment and channel of mobility. He rightly felt that what kept dalits in slavery was their landlessness. He felt that colonial facilities paved the way for their emancipation in many ways, but the plight of dalits continues to be deplorable, something that he mentioned in one of his speeches. He said:

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): Land is the standard of citizenship. There is the only possibility that the landless communities are to be worked as slaves to the land owned communities for all times. So, by appointing a special officer if it demands, the necessary actions should be taken to give away the land which allocated to the depressed classes for free of cost.

Mr. A THANU PILLAI (*Trivandrum Rural*): If a depressed class person became a Depressed Class Christian, how long his generations have to continue as a depressed class Christian?

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): Today, the depressed class Christians of Travancore can only remain in this state, until the end of the world. Our experiences clearly state that we cannot move even one feet forward.<sup>660</sup>

On the same day a member from Kalkulam asked John Joseph a tricky question to know his attitude towards other Christians. John Joseph's response was filled with tolerance and free from hatred. At the same time he did not hesitate to respond in a strong and persuasive language to the structural negations and manipulations of the authorities prejudiced by caste. He proposed an official and structured solution to overcome this as he believed in remedial measures and government intervention. The interesting conversation between John Joseph and his fellow member in the Assembly reads as follows:

Mr. K. R. ELANGATHU (*Kalkulam I*): If the depressed classes Christians were separately counted and stipulated that they should given employment in proportion to their population, and found that there are no one has enough eligibility to get that job, are you agree to give that seat to the other Christians?

Mr. N. JOHN JOSEPH (*Nominated*): we do not mind giving it to anyone as per the will of the government.

All the good places that had been left vacant for the depressed classes were handed over to other communities. Therefore, the government should pay special attention to

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<sup>660</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, p. 278.

the issue of allocating good lands to the depressed classes instead. Revenue officials are showing a lot of manipulation on the issue of land allotment to the depressed classes. So, I remind the government that to constitute a committee to handle this issue.<sup>661</sup>

Health care was the most precious gift from colonial modernity. The introduction of modern/western medicine to the state of Travancore began with missionary activities. Christian missionaries wanted to reach out to the upper castes through medical missions aimed at proselytization.<sup>662</sup> Initially, in British India, medical activities envisaged the welfare of the Europeans, not the colonized.<sup>663</sup> But, as a 'Charitable State', Travancore initiated medical missions. It was the best state compared to Madras Presidency in terms of healthcare of the people.<sup>664</sup> Although the European system of medical care had been in place in Travancore since 1811, even in the 1870s dalits did not receive much of this charitable service and were literally discriminated against.<sup>665</sup> This situation was not better even in 1935. John Joseph in his speech depicts the situation of dalits and asked for remedial measures as follows:

Now I want to talk about the health care of the depressed classes. The Travancore government did not do anything special provision for this yet. Though there are Health Units and Medical Department, these are not useful for the depressed classes for their health care. They are being treated in hospitals in specially built sheds which is away from the hospital. There also they do not have enough space. Most of the patients from depressed classes were not admitted to the hospital; instead, they have been sending away by giving some medicine by the doctors. The Medical Department does not pay attention to compassionate care for the depressed classes those who are having more difficulties than others and who live in sicker places than others. I request to the Government to pay more attention to health care, which is the basis of welfare of the country, especially to the health protection of the depressed classes of the country.<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>661</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, p. 279.

<sup>662</sup> Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and A Hindu State: Travancore 1858-1936*, Delhi Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 114.

<sup>663</sup> David Arnold, "Touching the Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague, 1896-1900", Ranajith Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern Studies V : Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.58.

<sup>664</sup> Koji Kawashima, *op. cit.* p. 114.

<sup>665</sup> Koji Kawashima, *op. cit.* p. 121.

<sup>666</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, pp. 279-280.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, John Joseph's involvement in the cooperative movement and other areas of entrepreneurship made him well to do in his personal financial matters. He envisaged a great future for dalits in co-operative movement. John Joseph emphasised the importance of the cooperative movement and the protection that dalits should get in that sector. He said:

Another institution which has the capacity to enhance the social and economic condition of the depressed classes is the co-operative societies. But as a result of this, the division among the depressed classes has increased and no help has been given to them. Therefore, the societies of depressed classes should be specially divided and brought them under the Registrar and secretaries and inspectors should be appointed from among them as per the report. By doing like this, I remind the government that with the others, enhance them in the co-operative movement.<sup>667</sup>

In almost every speech at the SMPA, John Joseph critically discussed the systemic neglect of the government and officials towards fund lapses. Throughout his legislative career, he was highly critical of the activities of the Protector of Depressed Classes, who was in charge of protecting the interests of the depressed classes. He elevated the dalits to a dignified position by stating in his speech that they are the best wealth of this country. His demand for an autonomous committee from the depressed classes to deal with economic matters was part of his attempt to lead them to autonomy. Although the problems of the dalits Christians, which he strongly raised in the Assembly, gave rise to heated discussions, some of his questions in this regard did not receive proper answers. His advocacy of reservation for dalit Christians in employment was still hotly debated. His concerns about the functioning of the Public Service Commission were pertinent as there was mismanagement in creating vacancies and appointing qualified people to the posts.<sup>668</sup> His answers to questions comparing the condition of Dalit Hindus and Dalit Christians were remarkable. Answers to such questions were witty and filled with argumentative

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<sup>667</sup> TSMAP, 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1935, p. 280.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*

logic. He dealt with these questions sarcastically and dealt critically with political consciousness. The sharpness of the critical edge of his arguments was evident when he answers the question whether he belonged to the Christian religion in principle.<sup>669</sup> Although he was a strong critic of the Church, it is clear that he remained steadfast in Christianity throughout his life.

John Joseph expressed one of his crucial political positions in one of his speeches. It was about the matter of citizenship. He stated that land ownership was the basic standard of citizenship. In those days land ownership was the basic criteria for the voting right. It determined a person's recognition as citizen and right to vote. Therefore, John Joseph argued that land should be distributed to the dalits so that they could become true legitimate citizens of this land. This was a crucial argument as far as the dalits are concerned. He advocated for the dalits and claimed that they had a legitimate past as Cheramas, the ancient ruling class of the land. They have been denied political recognition as legitimate citizens of the country for centuries through the denial of land ownership, a colonial modern political criterion.

It is also the socio-political location of 'double consciousness', where John Joseph made a strong intervention. He has a sharp criticism against caste discrimination within Christianity. At the same time, he has sarcastically responded when asked about the longevity of caste discrimination within Christianity.<sup>670</sup>

In one of his interventions in the Assembly he moved a resolution demanding appointment of the dalits in the office of the Land Revenue Commission.<sup>671</sup> On another occasion, he reminded the government about the appointment of candidates from dalits to the Office of Chief Engineer. In this speech, he again asked the Public Service Commissioner to take necessary steps to

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<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>671</sup> TSMAP, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1935, p. 441.

appoint eligible candidates from dalits.<sup>672</sup> As a member of Legislative Assembly John Joseph has done whatever he could within the limited political powers he possessed to invite the attention of the government to the needs of dalits and making the former accountable for supporting the subjugated. Apart from that, he did not hesitate to use his power as an M. L. A. whenever possible. He used his designation as M. L. A. or ex-M. L. A. in pamphlets, which can be seen as a political gesture to evolve into a counter-force in the context of caste hegemony.

In short, Pampady John Joseph was a man of extraordinary political maneuverability. He was one of the most radical organic intellectuals like Ayyankali and Poyyayil Yohannan. On several occasions he critically engaged with different types of hegemonic systems using a political 'double consciousness' developed from his anti-caste insights. His interventions in the historical consciousness by claiming a Cheramar past for dalits and propagating it successfully among the dalits had a revolutionary charge. Through this, he envisaged a changed social status for the dalits, took them out of their subservient slave present and instilled pride of having once been rulers in the past. His involvement in organisational activities and in the legislature was notable for his unwavering commitment for dalit mobility and holding colonial modernity and its governance accountable for its espousals.

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<sup>672</sup> TSMAP, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1995, p. 550.

## CONCLUSION

The main concern of this study is to unravel the engagement of three dalit reformers, namely Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan and Pampady John Joseph, with the colonial modernity of Kerala, specifically in Travancore. This engagement, which I argue that, has been significantly ambivalent in nature. In one hand, it conditionally accepted the ideas of colonial modernity and made use of the possibilities and promises of mobility offered by modernity. But on the other hand, it has its own critical edges towards both traditional as well as colonial modern forms of powers. This critical notion of ambivalence emerged within the discourses of these organic dalit intellectuals as a result of their ‘double consciousness’, more or less a similar to what Paul Gilroy suggested in his critical studies on Black Atlantic political discourse.<sup>673</sup> While the ‘double consciousness’ emerged in Black Atlantic was a result of their slave memory and African Black descendants life locked symbiotically in the modern West, for Dalits this was an outcome of brutal experiences of untouchability and caste slavery. The problematic of colonial modernity allowed them reinvent these memories for political action for a livable future. This politics

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<sup>673</sup> Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University press, 2002).

has to simultaneously use the space and prospects of colonial modernity while resisting the new power formation within it with a potential of reaffirming caste oppression in new forms. This crucial notion of ambivalence assisted them to offer a critique of caste hierarchy and the forms of power that governed and subjugated them. These ‘dalit organic intellectuals’ and their discourses took distinctive, antinomian and subversive standpoints against paternalistic authorities and asserted a new subjectivity and agency for them, during the initial decades of twentieth century in Travancore.

Writing history of dalits often confronts a great deal of difficulties in theory and practice. Most of the Departments of History in Indian academy do not show much interests in researching the dalit histories. Moreover, the epistemological and ontological foundations of modern History is also a conundrum to do research in this field. When I embarked on my research for this work, I faced several ‘systemic’ and ‘structural’ violence of the academia on the one hand and absence of theories over for writing dalit history on the other hand. This made me to explore and think more about the philosophy of dalit history. This first chapter of this thesis have made an attempt to map the dilemmas of writing dalit history and explore the possibilities of writing a grounded dalit history. The issue of scarcity of historical documents, the necessity of changing the notions what constitutes reliable historical source and the ‘politics of archiving’ also need to be addressed in this connection. Extensive ethnographical field works should be conducted for retrieving and documenting social memories of the subjugated people, silenced and invisible, calling for many projects for archiving dalit politics and lives.

It is a well-established historical fact that the last decades of nineteenth century and the first decades of twentieth century marked drastic changes in the society of Kerala. This

epoch witnessed the unfolding of colonial modernity over the society of Kerala, resulting the structural changes in the order of life and conditions of dalit people also. We could see that the sight of transformation of the condition of slave castes, who were treated equivalent to animals, into the status of more or less somewhat as a 'native' and 'human', is a drastic change in this period. These transformations was not automatic, but was a gradual process with full of conflicts and struggles and had different trajectories of influences.

The missionary movements provided a good deal of catalysts in this regard, abolition of slavery being one of the landmark achievements. Their decision of working among the slave castes turned the course of the social history of Kerala, with thousands of slave caste embracing Christianity, even though caste disparities continued within spaces of the churches. The missionaries introduced modern forms of education, health consciousness, cleanliness, and the idea of organized religion, which not only influenced the newly converted people but it percolated outside the folds of them. Thus in certain sense, the ideas and themes of colonial modernity largely spread through the hands of missionaries, and the gospel of equality before God opened a new world view and hope of common humanity. But on the other side, there was a significant number of people who were not ready to associate with missionary movements, or someone had dissenting views even while associating with them. They had taken distinctive standpoints and propelled new trajectories of social action, influenced by their critical understanding of the present and an oppressive past. Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan and Pampady John Joseph were the prominent personalities among them.

Ayyankali, one among the three dalit historical figures discussed in this thesis, and



his appearance with the *Villuvandi* is symbolic of the new politics of appearance and assertion in the making. Through this act of ‘performative egalitarianism’ as argued by Vivek Narayanan Ayyankali was forcefully demanding access, equality, common humanity and mobility.<sup>674</sup> Moreover, it involved a politics of transfiguration as well. His political aggressiveness in his interventions in the riots which occurred during the initial stage of his career as a *Yasaman*, the master or leader, injured the caste pride of savarna men and it had influenced the public sphere to change significantly. This was also an act of capturing civil rights through counter power of body politic. It is interesting to ask being a member of slave caste, from where he got this courage and strength to oppose the dominant caste norms? Does colonial modernity was solely responsible? Colonial modernity might have provided the background for thinking of an aggressive opposition to savarna castes, but the opposition comes from the critical consciousness of the inner self. And that, I argue that, is coming from the ‘double consciousness’ of Ayyankali – a quest for resolving the past and present for a new future. *Villuvandi* was thus a ‘moving signifier’ of dalit assertion and was driven by the counter power of a newly formed political subjectivity. This was not solely an outcome of colonial modern phenomenon, but derived from a critical political ambivalence towards colonial modern on the issue of caste. Ayyankali’s political ambivalence was visible on the question of religion as well – he associated rather closely with Christian and Hindu missions, but never became part of them. Colonial modernity in many ways provided a boom for religious missions and new spiritualities, but he had serious doubts about the role that religions and spirituality could play in the real emancipation of the untouchables. This went to extent of him downplaying temple entry

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<sup>674</sup> Vivek V. Narayan, “Caste as Performance: Ayyankali and the Caste Scripts of Colonial Kerala,” *Theatre Survey*, 2021.

proclamation even while being part of the ‘Temple Entry Committee’, he wanted more graduates in his community instead.

Ayyankali changed his politics of defiance when he became a member of Sree Mulam Popular Assembly. He used this opportunity to enhance his people’s social and economical positions through his deliberations in the Assembly. The aspirations of egalitarian fulfillment can be seen in these interventions. His productive use of power and diplomacy and the implicated change of strategy – from physical defiance to deliberations in the public sphere - also in a sense reflects his ambivalence and willingness to change method of political action, driven by his double consciousness against caste subordination.

Poykayil Yohannan, too had similar types of attitudes of ambivalence. As a person from slave caste who emerged within the religiosity of colonial missionary Christian tradition, Yohannan touched the realm of spirituality of dalits and created a new trajectory of emancipatory politics. Flouting through different identities of assertions Yohannan’s journey from ‘Kumaran’ to ‘Sreekumaragurudevan’ exerts the critical ambivalence of double consciousness, which distinctively overlaps the areas of spiritual, social and political spheres. Passing through the different sects and congruencies of missionary Christianity, Yohannan’s double consciousness pulled away him from these religious sects and compelled him to discover a new ‘spiritual space’ for dalits. Interestingly different from other dalit leaders, his auto-critical self reflexivity made him to understand the importance of spirituality in the emancipatory politics of dalits. He critically understood the then vulnerability of the fractured and divided subjectivity of dalit religious assertion. So, he strategically hid his intentions within the common discourses of Christian gospels and used a mode of secret prophecies for this. This mystification strategy is an outcome

and is a clear example of double consciousness, which not only saved his endeavors from the direct attacks of upper caste oppositions but also simultaneously provided an opportunity to consolidate his people.

The group of Poykayil Yohannan, known in different names, latter asserted their original name, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, PRDS, and autonomously moved further. His movement became potential threat to missionary efforts, as a 'mass movement' among the lower castes. This little religion, though epistemologically used the biblical notions with greater reflexivity, flourished as a heuristically created new religion for dalit emancipation. Its form was possibly contained the themes of Christianity, but the content was mixture of something else. This was a little religion for emancipatory purposes but subversively stood against lofty religions, and moved forward in its distinct way.

His engagement with Sree Moolam Popular Assembly as a member was also significant to be noticed. Though Yohannan was a spiritual and religious person, he was well aware of the fact that material development is also equally important for the way to emancipation. He argued for getting land, property, education, job opportunities, for dalits. His urge was for securing equality which was denied for ages to the lower castes. Yohannan gave more importance to cleanliness, self reliance and a dignified life for reforming his people who were forced to continue their muddy and pathetic lifestyle. The politics of transfiguration in both spiritual and material sense defined his discourses. His futuristic will was to establish an egalitarian utopia, which he allegorically imagined as a form of 'modern multi stored building'- a concrete living micro-cultural, micro-political, and moreover a micro-spiritual system - where the downtrodden should elevate their self and status and the higher ones give up their excess and thereby both should come in to the

equal space of oneness. This imaginary project of spiritual/material embodiment of equality also acts as a unique form of cultural critique in his thinking.

Pampady John Joseph, the third figure in this thesis, also suites to the central argument of this study. Different from the other two personalities, John Joseph was an English educated person and a teacher by profession in the initial days of his youth. His English education, career as a teacher, service in the British Army, his travelling through different places outside the country, working experiences in Christian Missionary movements, made him a man of modernity. But after his exile, he encountered the nuanced experiences of brutalities of caste and gradually inculcated the thoughts against caste subordination. His association with Njana Joshua, a high ranked British official who imparted the archival knowledge of historical *Sangham* literature and its interpretations which reveals the connection of dalits with the ancient past. This critical reading of past boosted the persona of John Joseph and he attempted to raise the stature of Pulayas through history, wherein Pulayas became the original descendents of *Chera* dynasty. Apart from its ‘facticity’, it shocked the Palace and society of Travancore during that period. As a brilliant orator and organizer, he spread this notion among dalits which worked as a catalyst to their self-esteem to form a community consciousness. It tacitly provided a notion of illegitimate intrusion over dalit culture by others in the course of history. This discourse pleaded to the social consciousness of dalits for a transition from an illegitimate submissive slave culture to an authentic ruling class consciousness.

His intervention in the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly also deserves attention. Interestingly, he argued for conducting a historical enquiry of the past of his community. This was quite a new demand and it aimed at to establish the subjectivity of dalits through

legislative action. His discussions regarding citizenship of dalits and plea for equality in opportunities could be counted as milestones on the road to dalit assertion and establishment of new subjectivity. Though he was a staunch believer of Christian faith, he had taken secular stand in the issue of religion and spirituality. We could see that the criticality of John Joseph emerged from the double consciousness of his attitude which ambivalently reflected in his critical actions.

To sum up, Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan and John Joseph and their discourses carried a politics of transfiguration as far as dalits are concerned. But on the other hand it was a strong appeal and critical discontent for deconstructing the configurations of the emergent colonial modern society. Their dissidents came from their understanding of the unfulfillment of the promises and aspirations which was obliged by modernity through its universalist visions of equality and humanism, with its specific appeal to transcend the caste. For them, comprehensive reforms in both inside and outside and overcoming the caste subordination and achieving equal human status and autonomy were the central agenda. This was the factual juncture from where they began to use the potentialities of double consciousness and became ambivalent. It is evident in their subversive discourses and antinomian stances. Their silence and inactiveness in the ‘cultural insiderism’ of temple entry, as a state sponsored mass conversion, could be read in this direction. Their attempts to retrieve dalit history would be read as an attempt to overcome the narratives of a cursed past and use it as a political weapon instead against the illegitimate intrusion over their culture. Similarly, their discourses as critical interventions over the formation of citizenship and the homogenization of ‘Malayali identity’ paused serious questions of cultural differences. Surprisingly, these types of organic intellectuals and their discourses

which also contributed at par in the social formations of the society have been systematically obscured in the discourses of history. This is the main concern and appeal that this study is trying to flag for future research.

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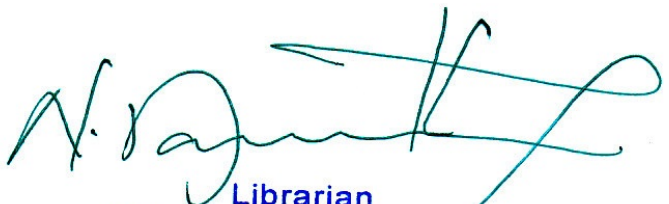
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