Brandeis | LIBRARY
brandeis.edu/j-caste

CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 7 No. 1 pp. 105-120
April 2026
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v7i1.2688

From Agrestic Slaves to Untouchable Gods: Remembering the Repressed History of Caste Slavery and the Resistance of Pulayas in Kerala through Ritualistic Folk Art, India

Bincy Mariya Nirichan[1]

Abstract

The empirical ordering of the upper castes through scriptural doctrines delegitimized the subaltern epistemology and impeded the possibility of any form of resistance. The article finds relevance in delving deep into the subversive acts of the most marginalized against Brahmanised hegemonic discourse and examines how they developed it as an epistemology of resistance. It particularly makes an in-depth inquiry into the past of Pulaya, a Dalit community in North Malabar, Kerala, and their history of resistance through a ritualistic folk art, Mari Theyyam. By closely examining the performance, paraphernalia and rituals associated with Mari Theyyam, this article emphasises that Mari Theyyam functions as a living archive and a counter-hegemonic epistemology sustained by the most marginalised community to challenge the erased or repressed history of caste slavery. The spatial mapping of Mari Theyyam also holds significance as it provides critical insight into the deeply entrenched caste system and the prevailing caste dynamics in Kerala. The article argues that, in a dark epoch that made Dalits voiceless and prevented them from raising their voice and writing culture, Pulayas of North Malabar made use of their folklore to collate their shared memories and oral testimonies of caste slavery. By conceptualizing Mari Theyyam as an alternative epistemology, the article contributes to Dalit studies and aesthetics, subaltern studies, religious studies, inequality studies and performance studies of South Asia.

Keywords

Caste, Kerala, Theyyam, Resistance, Epistemology

[1]PhD from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IISER Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India
Email: bincymariyaa@gmail.com

Introduction: Pulaya and their History of Caste Slavery

Pulaya is a Dalit community in Kerala, India, historically regarded as a slave caste.[1] They endured blatant human rights violations due to their birth-based identity in an unequally stratified caste society. The deeply entrenched caste system caused irrevocable damage to the social ensemble of Kerala. The caste modalities that functioned through slavery, land tenure, hereditary occupation, bonded labor, ritual pollution, and endogamy brought a broad bifurcation of the privileged and the oppressed. The privileged consisted of Brahmins and other upper castes of comparatively lower rank, who exercised power over Dalits and impeded their upward social mobility. The perception of subservient positioning and inferior identity imposed on them through scriptural indoctrination and practical approaches prevented Dalits from fighting back. This section of the article delves further into the impact of the complex configuration of caste and contributes to the later part that critically examines how caste has endured even after the saga of progressive social movements and the much-acclaimed Kerala Model Development.[2]

The social ensemble of Kerala was defined and demarcated based on castes, and it divided people into unequally stratified groups and assigned specific duties based on their birth-based identities. For instance, the previous untouchable caste groups, such as Pulaya and Paraya, were ranked at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. They were also known as slave castes and were categorized as the most denigrated category. P. Sanal Mohan (2015) used the term 'caste slavery' to denote a distinct kind of oppressive social structure that existed in Kerala since the early medieval period that made people of the untouchable castes agrestic slaves. It was believed that their presence caused atmospheric pollution. Such caste groups were extensively exploited for unpaid agricultural labor and other degraded works such as manual scavenging, skinning dead animals, rag-picking, and several other laborious tasks.

At the same time, caste, being a birth-based discriminatory system, conferred certain prerogatives to Brahmins, such as autonomy in knowledge production, access to material resources, and several other socio-cultural capitals. Brahmins, who claimed providential authority to control and configure society, designated themselves in the highest order and assigned abject positioning to the Dalits. They were made

[1]I use the terms 'slave castes' and 'untouchables' in this article as 'Dalit' and "organized Dalit assertion" had not yet taken on a concrete form during the period that the article focused.

[2]The Kerala Model, or Kerala Model Development, is a developmental strategy employed by the government of Kerala to ensure the overall development of the state. By focusing more on social indicators such as literacy, health care, life expectancy rate, low infant mortality, and so on, Kerala sets an example among other Indian states.

to believe that their birth into a specific caste determined the kind of work they needed to undertake. K.S. Madhavan (2001) observed that the Brahmins became a reference group in defining the hierarchical formation and their self-seclusion, and the mechanism of making the rest, especially the lower caste group, into an 'other' was mediated by structural inequalities such as untouchability, unapproachability, endogamy, spatial distancing, agrestic slavery, racial purity, land tenure, and so on. The religious sanction that caste and its abhorrent practices attained resulted in the concretization of its ubiquitous presence in Kerala. Eventually, the preordained structure of caste became the nucleus of social relations and began functioning in virulent forms.

In the nineteenth century, Kerala was notoriously known for the prevalence of caste slavery. The pervasiveness of the Brahmanical ideology paved the way for the legitimization and validation of slavery in Kerala. It was mainly through *Jenmum* that the Brahmins asserted their power over the Dalits.[3] It provided them with an absolute right over the land as well as the people. According to Saradamoni (1973), those who belonged to the lowest castes were considered slaves. They were treated as untouchables and unapproachables. It was believed that their presence would cause ritual pollution. So they were forced to maintain a specific distance from the upper castes, which was often determined by a kind of arithmetical precision (Saradamoni 1973, p. 380). People from untouchable castes such as Pulaya, Paraya, and Kurava were sold and mortgaged extensively for exploitative, unpaid labor. In addition to the caste- Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords, temples and the Travancore government also owned slaves (Balakrishnan 2018, p. 68). As per the report of the Temple Entry Committee, which was published in 1934, there were around 1,65,000 slaves or bonded labourers in Travancore in 1647.

The advocates of ritual hierarchy and birth-based labor ignored the perilous positioning of Dalits and their multiple turmoil. Through the unjust and injudicious allocation of resources, the Brahmins and other upper castes sustained as a dominant social class, whereas the slave castes continued on the margin. They were not considered human beings; rather, upper-caste Hindu and Christian feudal landlords treated them like animals. Tying them along with the ox and cows to plow the paddy

[3] *Jenmum* was a type of hereditary proprietary right prevalent in Kerala. The right to huge acres of land was vested in the rich, upper-caste landlords. They managed to get undisputed supremacy through the *Jenmum.* In Kerala, the land was distributed among three main categories. They were the kings, the Brahmins, and the temples. *Brahmaswom* and *Devaswom* were the two systems of governance developed by the upper castes to validate their power over land. *Brahmaswom* suggests the ownership of Brahmins, whereas *Devaswom* denotes the land or property of temples.

fields was a common sight in the nineteenth century (Mohan 2015, p. 243). Samuel Mateer explains egregious caste atrocities that the slave castes endured:

> For faults or crimes they were cruelly confined in stocks or cages, and beaten. For not attending work very early in the morning, they were tied up and flogged severely. Awful cruelties were sometimes perpetrated. Cases are known in which slaves have been blinded by lime cast into their eyes. The teeth of one were extracted by his master as a punishment for eating his sugar cane (Mateer 1883, p. 58)

As Balakrishnan (2018) observed, caste became a 'capital' achieved only by birth. Such a conceptualization helped the upper castes retain a hegemonic position. The feudal landlords had the ultimate power to transact their agrestic slaves like commodities. Their labor power was extensively exploited, and they were severely punished even for minor mistakes. Moreover, the superstitious landlords also used them for human sacrifice to get maximum yield and to prevent natural calamities such as torrential downpours and floods. Affluent landlords bought the slaves in bulk and retained the chain of these transactions. Moreover, they used to buy slaves with any ailments for a meagre amount. After providing better treatment, landlords from the upper castes would sell them again for a higher market price (Chentharassery 2017, p. 10). Most often, they were ruthlessly taken away from their family and forced to serve the landlord till the end of their lives. Amidst the heinous practices of serfdom and servility, the slave castes were liable to pay different types of taxes, such as *Talayara* (poll tax), *Valayara* (net tax), *Kuppakazhcha* (tax for the houses), *Thalakkaram* (head tax paid by men), *Mulakkaram* (breast tax), and so on, which revealed both the casteist and patriarchal nature of Brahmanism. They were forced to pay tax even for their dead family members. Though the British abolished slavery in the nineteenth century, their degraded social positioning and servility did not change much even after the abolition of slavery.

Silencing the Subaltern and Structures of Violence

The adverse impact of caste slavery did not only entail physical enslavement; rather, the sequelae of slavery resulted in low self-esteem. Shaima Ahammed (2019) writes, "The atrocities perpetrated by higher castes were rarely met with resistance or intolerance by lower castes as they were conditioned to believe in the hegemony of upper castes as deeply rooted in a sacred ideology" (p. 91). The collective victimhood and the intergenerational trauma of the slave castes were often undermined, and they were forced to abide by the concocted scriptural ideologies of Brahmanical Hinduism. Moreover, the official historiography often invalidated the voice of the oppressed. The

Dalits were prevented from linguistic modernity for a very long time due to their lower caste identity.[4] They were systematically silenced, and their multiform discrepancies were left unattended. It was a strategy the upper-caste ideologues and feudal landlords adopted to retain socio-cultural, economic, and political supremacy. The 'silence imposed from above' was primarily aimed at preventing the lower castes from remonstrating the caste hierarchy and transcending their oppressive status (Heering 2013, p. 40). Kristie Dotson used the term 'epistemic oppression' to elaborate on the strategic exclusion of the oppressed from knowledge production, dissemination of their shared epistemic resources, and invalidation of their epistemic agency (2014, p. 115).

The oppressive hegemonic paradigm that prevailed in social relations undermined the cultural articulation of Dalits and indigenous communities. It silenced their voices and perpetuated their marginalization. Their experiences were systematically suppressed, and they were prevented from expressing their discontent. Dalit lives, culture, and system of beliefs have never been the center of elitist writings. Those who have access to knowledge production, whether it is a Purohit or a rationalist writer, postulate everything in the Sanskrit line, as they are rooted in a Sanskritized culture (Ilaiah 2002, p. 14). Such deliberate attempts to validate dominant history and practices would result in the intended consequence of the erasure of indigenous culture and knowledge systems. Ilaiah termed it 'silent violence', highlighting the damaging impact of such epistemic erasure and epistemic violence (2002, p. 14). Eventually, it turns out to be the branding of Dalits as incapable of either constructing, conferring, or conceiving knowledge. The phenomenon of monopolizing the epistemological domain, or the operation of epistemic violence, is silent and invisible. Brahmanization, or Sanskritization, often operates silently, and the exclusionary imperativeness it perpetuates makes the Dalits repudiate their own cultural legacy and value system. Dalits started emulating Brahmanic ideologies and adhered to the Sanskritic theologies to level themselves up and fit into the caste hierarchy. It is observed that epistemic violence, which operates imperceptibly and gradually, has an irrevocable impact on the socio-cultural, political, and intellectual lives of Dalit Bahujans. It resulted in the erasure of their unique cultural identity and the internalisation of the dominant culture. Moreover, Dalits bear an ontological wound of self-negation and self-esteem due to their intergenerational caste oppression (Jangam 2017, p. 6).

[4]The word linguistic modernity suggests exposure to modern language and the consequential changes it makes in an individual or a given group. In the context of Dalit assertion in Kerala, missionary intervention and modern education played a significant role in inaugurating linguistic modernity. It opened a new paradigm for Dalits to revisit their history and reconstruct new meanings.

Being deprived of any agency to fight back against the deeply entrenched caste oppressions and the Brahmanical discourse, Dalits employed their oral traditions and folk culture to raise their dissenting voice. The oppositional aesthetics that the Dalit cultural articulations brought forward demanded a critical interrogation and inquiry into the dominant history enmeshed in Brahmanical ideology. By taking cues from this, the next section of the article addresses the question of Pulaya's means and modes of protest against the interlocking identities and intersectional disempowerment through their folk rituals. It is observed that most of the research on the history of slavery in Kerala centres on the turmoil of the Pulayas in Travancore. So, this study finds the relevance of including the servile past of the Pulayas of North Malabar, as it is important for ensuring inclusivity in the Dalit discourse in Kerala. It seeks to bridge the existing gaps in the textual and digital archiving of this tradition.

Methodology

The article employs qualitative research methodology to bring a nuanced understanding of the alternative epistemologies of Pulaya. It underlines the productive potential of folk traditions in fostering an inclusive epistemological standpoint by employing critical discourse analysis. Through the close examination of oral narratives, shared experiences, popular tracts and Mari Theyyam performance, this study intends to emphasize that the Pulayas of North Malabar employed their folk tradition as a medium to transcend the inflicted slave identity. The article also relied on interdisciplinary theoretical analysis, especially selected theoretical frameworks of sociology, folklore and performance studies are used to conceptualize Mari Theyyam as a repertoire of subaltern resistance. To broaden the scope of a new epistemology that the Dalits formulate through their folk rituals and cultural representations, I employ Nancy Fraser's (1990) subaltern counterpublics. By situating Dalit cultural articulations in the framework of the subaltern counterpublics, this article initiates further discussion on the new epistemological domain they constructed and the rhetoric of resistance they launched. To conceptualize Mari Theyyam as a performative knowledge, Diana Taylor's (2003) theoretical postulations of performance as an embodiment of knowledge, an epistemic tool and repertoire are used. I have also used archival research and performance analysis. Detailed discourse analysis of the performance, especially oral narratives and *Thottam Pattu* associated with the Theyyam, contributes to the future research on the alternative epistemologies of the oppressed.[5]

Critiquing Marginality and Towards a New Epistemology

Theyyam is a unique ritualistic performance in Kerala that resonates with interfaith dynamics, intertwined ecologies and cultural synthesis. Theyyam is derived from the

[5]*Thottam Pattu* is an invocatory song performed as a part of Theyyam.

word *Daivam*, which means god. It is a cultural arbiter, functioning as a repertoire of syncretic culture and a site for sustainable social practices, especially in the contemporary landscape of religious tensions. Theyyam underlines how subaltern identity is constructed in the cultural tapestry of North Malabar, and the performance of Theyyam stands in contrast to conventional structures and societal norms. It can be considered a subaltern epistemology in practice, as it is performed by people from marginalized communities such as Malaya, Pulaya and Vannan. Among the broad pantheon of Theyyam in Kerala, Mari Theyyam stands out, as the ritual inversion reveals the hidden history of caste slavery and the memories of caste practices such as untouchability, endogamy, spatial discrimination, unequal access to resources, hereditary servitude and so on. The article acknowledges the creative construction of an alternative lifeworld through Mari Theyyam and further explores how it evolves into a counter-hegemonic cultural practice and an alternative epistemology.

The Myth of Mari Theyyam

Mari Theyyam usually performs at Madayippara, a barren hillock near the Thiruvarkkadu Bhagavati temple. It annually performs to banish evil spirits, epidemics, fear of floods and other natural calamities. The myth of Mari Theyyam is associated with Thekkancheri Polla, a legendary figure from the Pulaya community. Polla was instructed by the local ruler to exorcise the evil gods, Maari and Mamaaya, as they caused ruptures in the village in the form of disease and calamities (Patrick 2014, p. 87). On the Malayalam month Karkkidakam 16th, which has been marked as the day of the ritual performed by Polla, Mari Theyyams visit each home and exorcise evil spirits and bad omens. There are six Mari Theyyams involved in the ritual, they are Marikaliyan, Mamayakaliyan, Maarikalachi, Mamayakalachi, Maarikuliyan and Maamayakuliyan. The performance of Mari Theyyam starts from the hilly terrain of Madayippara and ends near the sea. In the end, all six Mari Theyyams discard evil spirits and bad omens, which they collect from each house on their way to the sea. The ritualistic performance of Mari Theyyam involves *Mariyattom* and *Mari pattu. Mariyattom* implies the dance of the Theyyam performers or *Koladharis. Marippattu,* an invocatory song accompanied by the Theyyam, is an act of collective remembrance, largely drawn from the memories of the slaves. Mari Theyyam embodies individual and collective memories of Dalits, which bear deep wounds and scars of a slavish past. Throughout the performances, Pulayas are re-enacting and remembering the horrifying caste practices they endured, including untouchability, slavery, spatial isolation, and unapproachability. The performativity provided them with an alternative space for their agential expressions. The article elaborates two major aspects in the following sections to broaden the understanding of the collective victimhood of Dalits and their acts of

resistance. First, it details how caste functioned as a fulcrum of structural inequalities and injustice. The second section highlights the importance of conceptualizing the performativity and the oral narratives of Mari Theyyam as embodied knowledge and an inclusive epistemological standpoint of the most oppressed.

Still an Untouchable God

Theyyam usually performs inside *Kavu* or sacred groves, and the deities are given fixed sacred positions known as *Aroodam.* In Madayi Kavu or Madayi Thiruvarkadu Bhagavati temple, the major Theyyam forms such as Thiruvarkadu Bhagavati Theyyam, Thai Paradevatha Theyyam, Chuzhali Bhagavati Theyyam, Kalariyil Bhagavati Theyyam, Someswari Theyyam, Veera Chamundi Theyyam and Padikuttiyamma Theyyam are performed inside the temple and are given sanctums of their own. On the contrary, even after the abolition of caste slavery in 1855, proclamation of temple entry by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma on November 12, 1936, colonial modernity, constitutional safeguard, Kerala Model Development, and an array of progressive social movements heralded by the leaders of the slave castes like Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan and so on, Mari Theyyam is still performed outside the premises of the temple since it is performed by a former untouchable caste. By taking cues from this, the article problematizes this prevailing untouchability and argues that despite its significance as an important Theyyam form that is inextricably associated with the social and cultural history of both Madayi Kavu and Madayi *desam* or village, it is still performed outside the temple precinct due to the unaddressed norms of untouchability. It is hardly addressed and often normalized as an unquestionable tradition that has been observed for ages. It is in this regard, I use the term 'Untouchable god' in the article. By examining the existing lacunae in rephrasing the ritual and cultural practices of the Pulayas in terms of caste slavery, the article further argues that if one such ritual or cultural expression of the previously slave caste performs outside the temple, without having a fixed sanctum, even after an array of socio-cultural and political movements, Kerala modernity and the implementation of the Kerala model of development, it is because of nothing but deeply entrenched caste.

It is important to understand how Mari Theyyam unravels the intricate interstices within the cultural tapestry of Kerala through the performativity. It is not just a cultural expression of an oppressed caste, but rather, an embodiment of knowledge and a potential site developed by a historically marginalized community to make the caste society understand the structural inequalities that the Dalit endured. The following section explains how Mari Theyyam exposes the structural injustices which made Pulayas invisible, untouchable, and unapproachable in the social ensemble. The article closely examines the five different stages of Mari Theyyam performance and discusses and seeks to explore how the inclemency of agrestic slavery unfolded at each stage.

The Ousted 'Other': Enacting the Memories of Untouchability

Untouchability was an inherent part of the incongruous caste society in Kerala. In his speech at the public meeting of Trivandrum, Mahatma Gandhi testified to the existence of extreme forms of untouchability in Kerala and called Malabar the blackest spot in the untouchability map of India (Gandhi 2001, p. 14). The upper caste used caste as a structural solution to assert their "sacredness", and they imposed "impurity" on the Untouchable (Mine 2009, p. 22). Pulayas bore the brunt of double marginalization, being branded as an untouchable community and systematically ousted from the socio-cultural and political ensemble since birth. Though the ritual inversion enabled them to transform their 'defiled caste bodies' to sacred bodies through Theyyam, Mari Theyyam remained as an 'Untouchable god' or an 'ousted other' due to the retention of ritual pollution.

Unlike the other major deities in Madayikavu which are given permanent sacred position or *Aroodam* inside the temple*,* Mari Theyyam takes place in a hillock, near to the road to Madayikavu. It directly connotes the persistent presence of untouchability and spatial segregation. It is observed that, in the premises of *Kavu* while the performer or *Koladhari* invokes the deity through *Thottam Pattu* or when the offering is being served, most of the Theyyam are usually given a wooden stool named *Peedam,* and they sit in front of their sacred position. However, it is not followed in the rituals of Mari Theyyam. After the *Mariyattom,* the priest of Madayikavu comes with *Payasam,* an offering from the temple to Madayippara where the Mari Theyyam performs. As a part of the ritual, the Theyyam will be seated cross-legged on the same ground where they perform and eat the offering, which is being served in the leaf of any locally available leaf. It directly links to a dark epoch in the history of the Pulayas where they were not allowed to dine with the upper castes. Interdining was strictly prohibited. The agrestic slaves were given water in coconut shells, known as *pela chiratta,* and they were also given a leaf and asked to dig a small pit in the ground to get served the meal. It implies that even after transforming themselves into Theyyam, the invisible caste boundaries remain unchallenged.

Spatiality of Caste: Remembering Spatial Segregation

The upsurge of temple-centered settlements made a clear boundary between the upper castes and the lower castes. It affirms the concept of purity. The closely knit communities of Brahmins strictly observe the spatial and social discrepancies with the lower castes. They constructed Brahmin villages and exercised sovereignty over socio-cultural and political life. The dwelling places of the Dalits and other marginalized social groups were kept away from the upper castes, and later, such divisions led to the formation of caste colonies in Kerala. Ambedkar's (2014) observations on the ghettoization and

materialization of caste through spatial discrimination is commendable. Ambedkar conceptualized untouchability as spatially codified and discussed how the spatial regulations of caste enforce graded inequalities and structural oppressions. The upper castes had the belief that the Dalit and other lower castes could pollute them simply by being present or even casting their shadow over them. They strictly maintained spatial discrepancy from the Dalits. Even after several decades of the formation of the state, the spatial discrimination of Dalits is a persisting issue in Kerala. In North Malabar, the higher castes used to erect walls to locate their houses away from the Dalit communities (Patrick 2014, p. 45).

As per the myth, it was Cheraman Perumal and Chirakkal Thamburan who decided to invite Thekkan Cheri Polla, the headman of Pulayas, to banish the evil spirits named *Shani,* as the daily worship in the temples was interrupted due to these evil spirits. They decided to perform the Theyyam on the temple's east-north side. It was eventually relocated to the temple's surrounding areas rather than within the premises (Patrick 2014, p. 88). The reason behind this displacement/ forced eviction of the 'untouchable god' is scantily recorded. A small building is constructed near the road to the temple by the community members for the 'displaced Dalit god'. The Pulayas come together at Madayippara on the 16th of the Malayalam month *Karkkidakam* and diligently perform their rites. The shift from the temple grounds to Madayaipara's desolate, steep terrain remains underexplored and unchallenged.

Scattered Lives: Remembering Slave Trade

The space or geographical location that the Pulaya chose to perform Mari Theyyam is significant as it is directly linked to their history of caste slavery. Madayippara is hailed as a historically and ecologically important location on the tourism map of Kerala, and it attracts people with its scenic beauty. But its association with the history of caste slavery has been hidden in the intricate layers of official historiography. It is recorded that the agrestic slaves were freely sold and transacted in this hillock during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Adima Kallu, a* stone slab installed near the southern side of the hillock was the centre of the ceremonial slave trade.[6] It is interesting to note that along with the forced human transaction of the local slaves, untouchables who migrated from Thulu Nadu and Andhra Pradesh would surrender themselves before the landlords as slaves. Gradually, it became ritualized and began to be referred to as *Adima Vekkal.* It implies the inherent inferiority that the caste system inflicted on Dalits and other marginalized communities. The caste made them internalize their subservient status, and they were destined to serve the upper castes till the end of their life. On the day of Pooram, a temple festival during the Malayalam

[6]The word *Adima* denotes slave and *Kallu* means stone.

month of Meenam, they flocked near the *Adima Kallu* along with the then Polla and submitted themselves as the slaves of respective landlords. *Adima Panam,* as well as a handful of pepper, were also given as offerings to Madayi Kavilamma (Patrick 2014, p. 63).[7] The observance of Mari Theyyam needs to be rephrased based on the history of *Adima Vekkal* in Madayipara as well. The performance of Mari Theyyam in the same geographical location, which reverberates the hues and cries of the slaves, is highly political. It emphasises the need to find the performance not merely as a cultural and ritual expression but as a socio-political statement. By enacting the unmediated experiences of caste slavery from the same place where the slave trade happened, the performativity creates a space, which can be conceptualized as an anti- caste scape to disseminate knowledge about their untold history and unacknowledged resistance.

'Caste Bearing' Bodies: Remembering the Violated Labouring Bodies of Pulayas

In the context of the servitude of Dalits, the recurrent imposition of power resulted in intellectual as well as physical submission to the dominant power structure. Michel Foucault (1977) used the term 'docile body' to indicate the construction of the body as an amenable object through disciplinary force. The Pulayas in North Malabar were uprooted from their livelihood and indigenous life world and forcefully dispersed to undertake caste-specific labour. They were traditionally agricultural labourers who had the right to land. The word 'Pulaya' is derived from the word *Pulam,* which means agricultural land, and the term 'Pulayan' designates a person who owns cultivable land (Patrick 2014, p. 41). Being stigmatized as the ostracized caste group, Dalits were forced to undertake many unclean jobs, such as manual scavenging, cleaning latrines, removing dead animals, and so on. Since caste was ascribed a divine origin status, the slave castes were made to believe that they should diligently undertake their hereditary occupation. They were relegated to nothing but a 'caste bearing labour bodies'. It aligns with Butler's conceptualization of 'abject beings'. Butler (1998) explains 'abject bodies' as '…bodies whose lives are not considered to be "lives" and whose materiality is understood not to "matter"' (p. 281). The exclusionary matrices of the caste society made them 'abject beings'. Being agrestic slaves, Pulayas were deployed to undertake labourious tasks and treated inhumanely. But their indispensable role in the socio-economic mobility was seldom acknowledged. Untouchables were surrendered before the unquestionable authority of the upper castes and believed that it was their responsibility to obey the orders of the upper castes. They were even forced to accept sin-laden objects as customary offerings from the Hindu households. Mine (2009) observes, "Sometimes Hindus dispose of sins and other kinds of faults

[7] *Adima Panam* refers to the money that the slave castes were given as offering to the deity during the ceremony. Madayi Kavilamma indicates the deity of Madayi Kavu

such as the evil eye through a two-stage spatio-temporal process. First the evil or fault is removed from the person and transferred to some object (often a foodstuff). Second, the object is removed from the person's environment and in this way discarded" (p. 20).

Similarly, on the day of the performance, Mari Theyyam visit each home and collect *Shani* or evil spirits on their body. It is important to note that their 'untouchable bodies', which are considered as the sites of systemic violence and oppression, become touchable and approachable for the duration of the performance. The slave castes were denied entry to the upper caste household in the temple-centred agrarian settlement. On the contrary, Mari Theyyams are allowed to visit the upper castes' households to exorcise all the evil spirits from their home. The upper castes were not only to make use of the indigenous epistemologies of the Dalits but also materialise their bodies as vessels or channels to collect evil spirits and discard the same far away from their households.

Unlike other Theyyam performances, which begin and end at the temple premises, the Mari Theyyam begins at a barren hillock and ends near the sea. After an arduous stroll through the village, they finally discard all the evil spirits that collect at the sea. This act in the Theyyam performance directly connotes the birth-based job ascription of Chathurvarnya under which the Dalits were forced to handle sin-laden objects, wastes and other polluting substances. As mentioned, the performers have to stroll with their bare feet from dawn until dusk. Finally, the exhausted bodies of all six Theyyams will be dipped in the sea, which symbolically indicates discarding the evil spirits. All these acts symbolize the rigorous and onerous work they were forced to undertake in a social ensemble where job ascription was based on birth. Though it is observed as a traditional practice, it implies the strong undercurrents of casteism.

Theyyam in general accommodates several changes in its external appearances as well as movements to retain the visual appeal in accordance with the changing times, despite its status as an ancient, ceremonial art form. But Mari Theyyam does not have remarkable changes in its attire, headgear and face painting or *Mukathezhuth*. Mari Theyyam resembles the laboring bodies of the oppressed. It is important to note that the Dalit body is the site of multifarious oppression. They were not allowed to use clean clothes. Both the Pulaya men and women were prevented from covering the upper part of their bodies. Their poverty-stricken, dark-skinned bodies were never considered beautiful but filthy and unclean by the upper castes. It is evident in the costumes and facial make-up of the Mari Theyyam. They use fresh coconut fronds for the skirt and the upper part of the body. Instead of the finely detailed patterns on their face, Mari Theyyam performers wear face masks. There will be smearings on the faces of Kaliyan and Kalichi. It also implies that their caste-bearing body is depicted in their art form in its most natural state.

Can the 'Voiceless' be Heard?: Remembering their Silenced Cries and Resistance

Unlike the Brahmanical grand narratives of the upper caste intellectuals and ideologues that followed a predetermined formula to maintain their superior culture, Dalit cultural representations evolved from their lived experience. In an unequally stratified society, the division of labor made them agrestic slaves and led to their intellectual and physical bondage. It stunted their ability to speak for themselves for a long period. Eventually, Dalits made use of their oral and folk traditions to communicate with the world about the blatant injustice they endured. Placid (2021) writes, "The oral tradition of the subaltern simultaneously interrogates the un-representation and misrepresentations of the caste subaltern in the mainstream and offers an exemption to the notion that the caste subaltern is incapable of musings beyond mundane existence" (p. 31). *Mari Pattu,* or the invocatory song of Mari Theyyam, exemplifies this. Mari Pattu is sung by the community members who accompany the Theyyam. Interestingly, Mari Theyyam do not sing but make shrieking sounds during the performance. It is directly associated with their lived experience as 'submissive and silent' servants of the upper castes. Dalits were asked to emit sounds to signify their presence in the immediate vicinity. So that proximity between the upper caste and the Dalit can be avoided. Additionally, they were instructed to cover their mouths with their hands whenever they encountered the upper caste. At the same time, the palanquin bearers of Brahmin priests, kings, and prominent landlords also used to make a *hoi-hoi-hoi* sound as a sign to keep the untouchable castes away from their roads.

Language is one of the major instruments through which the upper castes silenced the Dalits. Discrediting the language of the marginalized accelerated structural inequalities, fueled exclusionary policies, and erased their epistemology. Mari Theyyam uses the same 'unscripted and unsophisticated' language of their community to challenge the cultural superiority of the upper castes. Through *Thottam Pattu,* they narrate the history of the Theyyam and the instrumental intervention of their headman, Polla, as the guardian of the upper castes in crisis. It is important to note that through similar oral renderings and folklore, Dalits subverted the established canon and transcended the unchallenged caste codes. By critically inquiring such 'resistance narratives', a term used by Ajay Sekher (2018) to denote the counter-current initiated by the Dalits to question the cultural elitism and hegemonic discourse, the article emphasizes the need to acknowledge the rhetoric of resistance that the oral renderings launched in Kerala's socio-cultural and political history, and it encourages further discussion on counter-hegemonic culture and new epistemology.

Mari Theyyam: Subaltern Counterpublic and Embodied Knowledge

Mari Theyyam is an unacknowledged act of assertion, which helped the most oppressed community to revisit their history of caste slavery. It provided them with a renewed consciousness to create an inclusive space. The syncretic culture it promotes invites people to engage in the performativity and rethink their positionality. It does not only entail the creation of counter-hegemonic creation; rather, it facilitates an alternative mode of power that brings the paradigm of social justice to fruition (Krishna 2022). The reversal of roles, even though it extends only till the end of the performance, helped the Pulaya challenge the outsider's version of their history. The epistemological inquiries of this kind are inevitable for the internal revival of marginalized social groups. It also helps them to transgress the elitist cultural fabric. The realization or a renewed consciousness about their sense of self, not as an 'untouchable slave' but as a political subject, would encourage them to construct a counterpublic of the oppressed. Subaltern counterpublics are, "…parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourse to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Frazer 1990, p. 67). According to Fraser, the subaltern counterpublic, which emerged in response to exclusionary mechanisms, helped to expand discursive spaces. The proliferation of the same means the widening of discursive contestation (p. 67).

Mari Theyyam is an embodied knowledge, as the performativity, oral narratives, including the *Thottam Pattu* exemplify how the collective memory of Dalits turned into Dalit epistemology. Taylor's (2003) critical lens of embodied knowledge and repertoire is well-suited to bring a theoretical foundation of Mari Theyyam. It needs to be highlighted that Mari Theyyam serves as a living repertoire that connects the past with the present and addresses the contemporaneity of caste. Most importantly, it serves the purpose of providing an alternative medium to transcend caste slavery and also directly addresses the intellectual imperialism and epistemicide that have made Dalits silent over the years. According to Jangam (2018), memory functions as a protective layer which carefully retains the individual as well as the social memory of the Dalits since they have been historically prevented from writing culture. So they make use of their folklore to voice their individual as well as collective memories.

In the context of Dalit history in Kerala, it is evident that Dalits were subjected to the authority of multiple sovereign powers and were compelled to conform to their norms. Dalits either succumbed to the oppressive structure or emulated an elitist tradition. In this process, their indigenous epistemologies will be either completely erased or discredited. Such deliberate erasure and invalidation would result in epistemicide. Boaventura De Sousa Santos (2015) observed the predominance of

'institutionalized harmful lies' that laid the epistemological foundations. To counter this, Santos puts forward an epistemological proposal based on a radical inquiry into the knowledge construction of the oppressed social groups and finds that such marginalized social groups develop epistemologies from their experiences of violence, inequalities, and resistance. Similarly, Mari Theyyam serves the purpose of developing a new scholarship or counter-history to challenge the enforced marginality. It became an alternative way of knowing the situatedness of Dalits and making them as well as the other caste groups aware of their positionality and standpoint.

Conclusion

Being an epistemic tool, Mari Theyyam shows how Dalit cultural assertion became a collective contestation against socio-cultural and political authority, intellectual imperialism, sub-caste politics, and related disputes and textualized stigmatization. It provides a cathartic experience for Dalits and makes them realize the transformative potential of their ritualistic and cultural expressions. Undoubtedly, it serves a dual purpose of becoming a rhetoric of resistance while also providing a kaleidoscopic view of Dalit life. This article emphasizes that Dalits used their oral tradition and ritualistic performances to challenge hegemonic history even before Dalit political assertion attained a concrete shape. It emphasizes the idea of debrahmanizing religion, society, and state apparatus to actualize a liberative praxis of Dalits. They questioned the outsiders' version of their history and projected them not as victimized objects but as agents of social change. The counter-hegemonic epistemology they developed is rooted in their experiential realities, and Dalits demanded a practical approach to their historical marginality and persisting oppression. Dalit's cultural articulations provide an alternate way of delving deep into social realities. Such spaces foster transformative, transitional and liberative epistemologies of the most oppressed. Most importantly, through their oppositional aesthetic acts, they invite everyone, irrespective of their religious and sub-caste identities, under the same purview of the solidarity of the oppressed. In such spaces where the inclusive, intersectional epistemologies practiced, the 'invisibilized' become visible, and the 'inferiorized' become celebrated.

References

Ahammed, Shaima. (2019). Caste-based oppression, trauma and collective victimhood in erstwhile South India: The collective therapeutic potential of Theyyam. *Psychology and Developing Societies, 31*(1), 88–105.

Ambedkar, B.R. (2014). *The essential writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (ed. V. Rodrigues). India: Oxford University Press.

Balakrishnan, A. (2018). Social stratification and bonded labour in Travancore. *International Journal of Research in Engineering, IT and Social Sciences*, *8*(11), Nov., 65–70.

Chentharassery, T.HP. (2017). *Ayyankali.* Thiruvananthapuram: Prabhatham Printing & Publishing Co. (P) Ltd.

Dotson, Kristie. (2014). Conceptualizing epistemic oppression. *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, *28*(2), 115–138.

Fraser, Nancy. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, 56–80.

Gandhi, M. (2001). *Collected works of Mahathma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

Heering, A. de. (2013). Oral history and Dalit testimonies: From the ordeal to speak to the necessity to testify. *South Asia Research*, *3*(1), 39–55.

Ilaiah, K. (2002). *Why I am not a Hindu: A sudra critique of Hindutva philosophy, culture and political economy*. Kolkata: Samya.

Jangam, Chinnaiah. (2017). *Dalits and the making of modern India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Krishna, Sangeeta. (2022). Dalit symbolism: A journey towards renewed aspirations and democratic public space. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 1–19.

Madhavan, K.S. (2001). Internalist perception of Jati—a study of Brahmanical canonical literature in Kerala. *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 62, 84–97.

Meijer, I., & Prins, B. (1998). How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *23*(2), 275–286.

Mines, D.P. (2009). *Caste in India*. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies.

Mohan, P. Sanal. (2015). *Modernity of slavery: Struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Placid, Anne. (2021). Dissenting Dalit voices: An analysis of select oral songs of Dalit women in Kerala. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, *22*(10), 31–44.

De Sousa Santos, Boaventura (2015). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. London &New York: Routledge.

Saradamoni, Kunjulekshmi. (1973). Agrestic slavery in Kerala in the nineteenth century. *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, *10*(4), 371–385.

Sekher, Ajay S. (2018). Resisting the cultural national: Dalit literatures as resistance narratives. *Singularities, 5*(1), 17–26.

Stanley Patrick. (2014). *Malabarile Dalith Christava Charithravum Varthamanavum*. Thrissur: Viani Printings.