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CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion
Vol. 4 No. 2 pp. 253-266
October 2023
ISSN 2639-4928

DOI: 10.26812/caste.v4i2.491

Towards an Alternative Epistemology of Resistance: A Reading of *Pulayathara* by Paul Chirakkarode Against the Backdrop of Dalit Christian Liberation Movements in Kerala, India

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Abstract

Religious conversion in Kerala was an immediate solution for the lower caste people who sought to break free from the slavery and structural inequalities of caste. Though proselytization was accelerated by egalitarian and emancipatory ideologies, it became a shift from one oppressive, exploitative social fabric to another hegemonic structure composed of institutionalized religion underlined by casteist ideologies. Christianity in Kerala turned out to be Brahminical and catered to the interest of upper-caste Christians. Despite its egalitarian claims, discrimination unabashedly pervaded the churches of Kerala. Dalit liberation movements in the twentieth century heralded by both the Dalit and Dalit Christian leaders profoundly influenced the public life of Kerala and brought a new paradigm to the slave castes. Such changes were reflected in the literary articulations of the period also. This article examines how the Dalit Christian discourse is inaugurated in Malayalam novels as the result of the Dalit Christian liberation movements in the twentieth century. By employing textual analysis as the research methodology and intersectionality as a theoretical lens, this article analyses Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* (1962) and examines how the Dalit Christian liberation movement in the twentieth century is instrumental in shaping an alternative epistemology and Dalit Christian identity.

Keywords

Dalit Christian, Kerala, caste, epistemology, novels, Dalit liberation movements, Dalit identity

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Introduction

The early twentieth century witnessed many progressive, political, and intellectual movements in Kerala, among which the Dalit liberation movements were considered counter-hegemonic movements that made deep inroads into the caste-ridden social fabric of Kerala. Most remarkably, the transformative social movements heralded by leaders from slave castes such as Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, Pambady John Joseph, Kallara Sukumaran and so on brought unprecedented changes in the socio-cultural and political life of the oppressed castes (Madhavan 2008). Dalit mobilization in the twentieth-century led to the formation of modern civil society (Mohan 2016) and the Dalits started reclaiming their space not as 'abject beings' (Butler 2011) but as subjects with distinct identity politics. Their collective resistance turned into fearless declarations of Dalit identity and agency. The Dalit identity politics stemmed from the realization that they have been an oppressed social group for centuries. The Dalits started analyzing the factors that hindered them from social inclusion and challenged all the 'givenness,' constructedness, and a priori. By emphasizing their oppressed status and understanding their distinctiveness as a community with the shared experience of exploitation and subjugation, the Dalits tried to emerge from Brahmanical hierarchy and related oppressive structures.

Nineteenth-century Kerala witnessed the mass conversion of Dalits seeking emancipation from the multilayered oppressive structure of the caste system. Though Dalit and Dalit Christians shared the same history of caste discrimination, their journey to integrate themselves into Christianity brought Dalit Christians to a different trajectory (Michael 2010). Most remarkably, the Dalit Christians had to deal with two internalized forms of power, one is from institutionalized religion and the other is a casteist society. Caste is a common factor in both systems. The former is double-edged as it is an assemblage of religious dogmas and caste practices (Gladstone 1988). Since Dalit Christians were denied any form of capital accumulation, including epistemic access, they turned into 'Christian untouchables' in the initial phases of conversion. Caste-appellations were also common even after religious conversion (Koshy 1968). Moreover, the upper caste converts rigorously practised the structural hierarchies of caste inside the church (Fuller 1976). Dalit Christians were subjected to a trail of multiple discriminations that often overlapped and contributed to aggravating their marginality. They realized that their multiple identities as Dalits, a Christian minority, and a socially and politically oppressed community had only exacerbated their predicament. When they understood the need to emerge as a collective to address their multilayered marginalities that have not been adequately addressed in the reformist agendas of popular progressive movements, Christian theology, and elitist historiography, Dalit Christian assertion emerged.

It is imperative to note that the presence of the Dalit Christian leaders at the forefront of Dalit liberation movements of the twentieth century opened a new epoch for the Dalit Christians in Kerala (Mohan 2015). They enunciated an alternative history of resistance, bringing new vigour and vitality to the resistance of the

marginalized.[1] The Dalit Christian liberation movements resuscitated them from the state of 'abject agrestic slaves' to assertive Dalits. Their resistance took diverse shapes, and Dalit Christians started using their epistemic agency to question caste privileges and prerogatives of the upper castes. This article seeks to understand how the Dalit Christian liberation movements in Kerala launched an alternative Dalit Christian epistemology and identity.

The alternative epistemology of Dalit Christians in Kerala can be theorized as an evolving discourse of resistance that envisages emancipatory and liberatory epistemic interventions to find a space in the church as well as in society. It is initiated through Dalit theology, Dalit liberation movements, and Dalit Christian literature. The quest for a distinct identity, that equally approves and acknowledges their Dalitness, as well as Christian identity, led Dalit Christians to develop Dalit Christian theology. It emerged as a counter-hegemonic theology in the 1980s and questioned the very core of Indian Christian theology and Christian historiography that excluded the Dalits and their intersectional inequalities (Prabhakar 1989; Mandal 2020).[2] Dalit theology focuses on the differently situated position of Dalits and their unacknowledged historic realities inside the church. In "Dalit Christians and Identity Politics in India," Wyatt considers Dalit theology as a political theory with the potential to reinterpret the faith in terms of Dalit experiences (Wyatt 1998: 18). Through their theological expositions, the theologians and the leaders of the liberation movements tried to connect the gospels with the everyday experiences of the Dalits in church and society. The contributions of Poykayil Appachan should be highlighted here. Appachan questioned the unabated Brahminic monopoly in the Christian evangelical discourse through his songs. He also emphasized the need for an alternative history for Dalit Christians since their history is enmeshed with the history of dominant Christianity (Sekher 2019; Mathew 2020). In Kerala, Dalit Christian liberation movements and Dalit theology disseminated the idea that religious conversion and spiritual upliftment alone could not help them escape the oppressive structure of caste.

Soon, Dalit Christians realized the transformative potential of Dalit literature and the possibility of using it to voice their dissent. In "Crafting Words and Creating Dalit Histories" Shailaja Menon observes how their life writings facilitate Dalits in their political act of building identity and revisiting their history. Menon writes, "These dalit life narratives based on experiential epistemology situate them as historical agents by relocating, reforming and reconstructing the Dalit identity as a challenge to the Brahminical oppressive social order" (Menon 2022: 153). Dalit literature chronicles

[1]The Pulaya, Paraya and Kurava castes were the most oppressed caste groups in Kerala. They were considered untouchables and used as slaves by the upper caste Hindu and Syrian Christian landlords. Though they were converted to Christianity, they faced most atrocious experiences from the casteist patriarchal society and Brahmanical Christianity.

[2]It was Aravind P. Nirmal, during his speech titled, "Towards a Shudra Theology" at the Carey Society of the United Theological College, Banglore in 1981 who articulated Dalit theology as a protest or counter theology against the dominant Indian Christian theology which is immensely indebted to Advaita Vedanta or Vishishtadvaida in its codification and exposition.

the unmediated lived experience and everyday histories of struggle. For Dalit Christian writers of the twentieth century, literature became a major instrument to address their 'being nowhere' situation. Their writings often mirrored the stark realities and glaring disparities of their lives, as they were placed at the intersection of caste and religion. They unearthed the interstice between what the church preached and what occurred inside the church in real life through their writings. Most importantly, the single-axis framework of foregrounding Dalits as a homogenized category has been questioned with the emergence of Dalit Christian writers in the literary scenario. Though Dalit Christian literature did not flourish as a distinct genre in Kerala, Dalit Christian writers in the twentieth century succeeded in shaping an alternative Dalit epistemology.

The renaissance spirit evoked by the liberation movements and Dalit theological discourse in the twentieth century brought a new paradigm to Malayalam novels as well. Though Brahmanism was deeply ingrained in Christianity in Kerala, it was neither highlighted nor questioned in nineteenth-century literature. Missionary literature also got popularized during this age. However, most of the writings emphasized the progressive aspects of conversion and the material benefits it brought, under which the innumerable plights of Dalit Christians got erased (Paul 2021). In the early writings of the nineteenth century, Dalit Christians were either ignored or they were clubbed within the homogenous Dalit discourse. For instance, in *Saraswatheevijayam* (1892), Potheri Kunhambu problematizes the casteist ideologies in society and he considers conversion as a solution to defy the inequalities. In the novel, most of the converted Christians are represented as happy and content (Mathew 2020). Kunhambu depicts Marathan, the protagonist as a reformed individual who got his education from the mission school and experienced Christianity as an egalitarian fold. However, the underlying realities of the Dalit Christian's life remained unaddressed (Menon 1997). The absence of Dalit Christian writers is one of the major reasons behind the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of Dalit Christians in nineteenth-century Malayalam novels. Since the slave castes were denied basic rights to have access to land, education, and human dignity, it was difficult for Dalit Christians to assert themselves through literature or any other socially sanctioned medium in their early phases. So, their intersectional identities and innumerable exploitations from a caste-ridden society, church, and state were left unattended in the literature of the nineteenth century.

Dalit Christian liberation movements of the twentieth century brought tremendous change in the literary scenario by inaugurating Dalit Christian discourse in Malayalam literature (Mathew 2020). Both Dalit and non-Dalit writers began to consider Dalit Christians as a distinct category in their writings. As Mathew rightly pointed out, "…the Dalit conversion and Dalit Christian literature from the twentieth century can be considered the 'insider's version' of conversion and post-conversion experiences" (Mathew 2020: 56). By textualising their life and shared experiences, Dalit Christian writers carved out the complexities of Dalit Christian lives which were scantily recorded in nineteenth-century Malayalam literature. At this vantage point, this article finds the relevance of configuring the impact of Dalit Christian liberation

movements in twentieth-century Malayalam novels by analyzing Paul Chirakkarode's *Pulayathara* (1962). This article primarily focuses on *Pulayathara* for some specific reasons. The rationale behind the selection of *Pulayathara* is its significance as the first novel in Malayalam by a Dalit Christian writer. Moreover, this article intends to show how a novel written by a Dalit Christian writer became a site to disseminate the Dalit Christian discourse. In the beginning, the article delves deep into the history of reformist movements heralded by Dalit Christian leaders to emphasize their instrumental role in shaping Dalit Christian identity and epistemology. Later, with the theoretical lens of Intersectionality, it elaborates on how Chirakkarode inaugurated a movement of Dalit Christian assertion through novels in Kerala by writing this novel.

Methodology

The primary methodological framework selected for this study is Intersectionality, a theory propounded by Kimberly Crenshaw to understand how different axioms of inequalities operate together and how it leads to the multiple oppression of people, especially Black women. Crenshaw criticizes the single-axis framework employed by the feminist and antiracist discourse to address the issues of Black women and advocates for an alternative analytical framework to bring forth the nuances and different shades of discrimination which have been completely undermined in mainstream feminism and antiracist politics (Crenshaw 2013). This article uses intersectionality to initiate an in-depth inquiry into Dalit Christian subjectivity, which is often overlooked in Dalit discourse's overarching framework. By employing intersectionality, we find that though the Brahmanic interpolations in the church made a clear boundary between the upper-caste Christians and the Dalit Christians, Christian historiography and theology were less concerned about the differences and discriminations that the Dalit Christians have been confronting inside the church. Through the textual analysis and close reading of *Pulayathara,* this article aims to find how Dalit Christians are differently situated in the church and society and examine how the overlapping oppressive structures aggravate the marginality of people in the lowest rung. It also discusses the role of Dalit Christian liberation movements in understanding the intersecting inequalities and the way it leads to the formation of Dalit Christian discourse in the church and society.

Revolution and Representation: Transformative Social Movements and Leaders of the Slave Castes

The Dalit liberation movements in Kerala were a backlash against the abhorrent and repugnant caste practices that existed in society and the church. It was the Channar rebellion (1853–1859) heralded by Channar women that opened an era of resistance of the marginalized social groups in Kerala. The Channar rebellion is hailed as one of the first recorded resistances against the oppressive hegemonic structure in Kerala (Gurukal & Varier 2018). It is observed that other women from the oppressed communities

were also inspired by the Channar rebellion and thus also started agitations for their right to cover their breasts. Their agitation extended till 1859. The Channar rebellion was followed by the *Mukuti* agitation, *Kallumala* and *Irumpuvala* agitation. All these agitations were primarily aimed at revoking age-old systems and beliefs perpetuated by the Brahmin preceptors (Valsa 2018). Thereafter Kerala society witnessed an array of progressive movements. Ayyankali (1863–1941) played an irreplaceable role in inspiring Dalits for their collective resistance. Ayyankali did not consider religious conversion as an immediate solution for caste oppression, and he paid attention to the revival of the oppressed castes in general (1878–1939). Poykayil Sree Kumara Guru or Poykayil Appachan's entry made Dalit Christian discourse an epicentre of discussion. He formed a separate sect called Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) and embarked on the spirit of liberation through songs and spiritual practices (Sekhar 2010). Appachan burned the Bible as form of protest against institutionalized religion.

Pambadi John Joseph is another prominent figure who staunchly stood for the emancipation of Dalit Christians. Converted Dalits under the leadership of Pambadi John Joseph organised Cheramar Mahasabha in 1921 and submitted a memorandum before the British government about several inequalities and untouchability they faced from upper-caste Christians (John 2018). The contributions of Kallara Sukumar in the Dalit and Dalit Christian assertion also cannot be ignored. Sukumaran delineated the unmediated experiences of his community and challenged the Brahmanical bureaucracy that denies basic rights to the oppressed caste through his writings.[3] Sukumaran opposed the pervasiveness of institutionalized religion and the presence of an incongruous caste system that prevented Dalit liberation and emancipation. He realized that unless the Dalits liberate themselves from the shackles of the slavish past and the bonds of religion, they would not be able to find a distinct space in society. At the age of seventeen, he started an organization, Peerumedu Taluk Harijan Federation, which emerged as a clarion call for the revival of Dalits of all the oppressed castes. The Harijan and Awkward Christian Federation were also merged with his organization. In 1972, they changed the name of the organization to All Kerala Harijan Federation. With the farsightedness of Sukumaran, it soon flourished as an assemblage of Schedule Caste, Scheduled Tribes and backward Christians and emphasized the integral development of Dalit and other backward communities through economic, educational, and political empowerment. The array of leaders from the previous slave castes did not end there. Kerala witnessed minor and major Dalit and Dalit Christian assertions after the glorious epoch heralded by these leaders. Since they were exposed to the world of words through missionary modernity (Mohan 2015), major leaders of the Dalit Christian assertion realized the possibilities of using their writings to initiate organized protests. They made use of this linguistic modernity to envisage new hope, aspiration, and political action among the slave castes (Paul 2019). Paul Chirakkarode was not an exception. With the publication of *Pulayathara*, Chirakkarode heralds a

[3]His parents converted to Christianity to get rid of caste oppression. They christened him Marcose. But later they denounced Christianity as they realized the persisting caste practices in the church.

shift in the literary representation of Dalit Christians in Malayalam novels. Until then, the Dalit Christians were either embedded under the category of Dalits or completely ignored in the literary imagination. Chirakkarode's novel departs from such erasures (Thankamma 2019). *Pulayathara* marked a significant moment in Dalit writing in Kerala through Dalit Christian assertion thereby creating scope for an alternative discourse. It is a discourse of discontent and dissent against Brahmanical Christianity and casteist Kerala society.

Imagining an Anti-caste Utopia in *Pulayathara*

Chirakkarode is drawn into an anti-caste Utopia in *Pulayathara* and anticipates socio-cultural and political upheavals in a Dalit Christian's journey towards an egalitarian social structure. Like the other leaders of the progressive movements, Chirakkarode also did not envisage religious conversion as a sole panacea for the multiple marginalities of the Dalits. Instead he highlighted the intersecting inequalities and post-conversion dilemmas that Dalit Christians confronted inside the church. By drawing on incidents and situations from the past and present as well as visualizing an egalitarian social order for Dalits in the future, the novel serves its purpose of providing a comprehensive analysis of the Dalit Christian life and identity formation in a casteist society and Brahmanical Christianity. This section of the article discusses how Chirakkarode envisioned an alternative public and the construction of an alternative epistemology.

In "Social Space, Civil Society, and Dalit Agency in Twentieth-Century Kerala," Sanal Mohan discusses how the influence of missionary modernity led to the creation of an alternative public from the slave castes (Mohan 2016: 75). In their journey towards social transformation, they eventually understood that the definition of "public" itself varies, depending on one's social location (Raj 2013). It was a moment of departure for Dalits, and they started thinking about independent political mobilization. According to Raj, despite their decisive role in progressive social movements of the period to form an alternative "civil society", the Dalits could not ensure their upward social mobility. Raj writes, "Whether in political or new social movements, we find that the Dalit participants failed to gain mobility precisely because they lacked the economic, social, and symbolic capital to survive the different kinds of repression or backlashes that each of these movements came to face (Raj 2013: 56). However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, the radical movements of Dalits in Kerala took new forms, and they began to reclaim what had been denied to them for centuries. Assertion through writing and literature is a major example. The individual articulation of collective memories that emanated through shared experiences marked the formation of an alternative epistemology of the Dalits.

In *Pulayathara,* Chirakkarode critically engages in the question of Dalit Christian identity instead of offering a mere aesthetic experience of novel reading. The novel is woven around an important question—is the Dalit Christian any better off than he was before conversion? It was the same question that resonated in the Dalit Christian liberation movements of the twentieth century. Though the process of transgressing

the boundaries of caste itself was considered a progressive act on the part of the Dalits (Mohan 2017; Singh 2023), conversion did not make a marked difference in their birth-based identity as slave castes, instead, it made them 'Christian Untouchables'. Though the Dalit conversion was a mass movement, integration into Christianity was not easy because of the presence and persistence of a caste inside the Christian churches. Brahmanical Hinduism has been supplanted by Brahmanical Christianity. As a result, the initial threshold that the religious conversion created did not last for long.

A comprehensive analysis of *Pulayathara* reveals how unique Dalit Christian issues are and how differently they have been positioned in casteist society and Brahmanical Christianity. The novel emphasizes the need to consider Dalit Christians as a separate category of analysis and it reveals the problems of employing a single-axis framework to deal with the issues of Dalit Christians. An intercategorical intersectional lens would examine such groups that are situated at neglected points of intersection and expose the intricacies of the lived experience of the members of those oppressed social groups. (McCall 2005). It is observed that at the intersecting point of religion and caste, Dalit Christians were severely tormented. In the novel, Chirakkarode exposes the atrocious experiences that the Dalit Christians confronted from such intersecting points. The upper caste Christians in the novel profusely exercised caste practices and retained untouchability, endogamy, and spatial segregation. Moreover, they constructed separate churches and cemeteries to avoid close contact with Dalit Christians. Even though the church did not promote birth-based categorization, it leaned towards the interests of the Syrian Christians. They claimed Brahmanical lineage and apostolic foundation and found a stronghold in the church. At the same time the fivefold discrepancies—from the state, caste Hindus, fellow Hindu Dalits, Upper caste Christian communities, and the subgroups of Dalit Christians—made Dalit Christians silent and subservient in the initial phase of conversion (Michael 2010). According to Crenshaw, accepting multiple identities is a politicization process (Crenshaw 1989). But the progressive social movements of the period made Dalit Christians rethink their different positioning due to their multiple identities. It brings a perspectival shift in people regarding the atrocities and indignities heaped upon vulnerable groups. Crenshaw writes, "For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community and intellectual development" (Crenshaw 1989: 1242). In the second part of the novel, the Dalit Christians realized their intersecting identities as Dalits, Christians, and politically disadvantaged groups and used the same to initiate a Dalit Christian collective and Dalit identity politics.

In the first part of the novel, Chirakkarode draws his characters from two different generations to highlight the transformation to their identity. The novel begins with the life of Thevan Pulayan and his son Kandankoran who worked as bonded labourers of Narayanan Nair, a prominent upper-caste landlord of Anjilithara. Thevan represented a generation that completely subsumed their identity and lived like passive subjects. The landlord never considered them as humans with distinct selves and desires. Instead, their identity is defined only in terms of their labour. Chirakkarode writes,

"A labourer was not supposed to think for himself. Even if he did, he could not say it aloud. It was forbidden. When Thampuran decided, the worker murmured his assent. That was how it had been for generations" (Chirakkarode 1963: 8). Sadly, the generation represented by Thevan Pulayan internalised their marginality and it prevented them from defying the caste codes. Though they suffered more, they were despondent before the oppressive structure. Thevan's imposed identity prevented him from recognizing his worth. But his son, Kandankoran stood for the Dalit collective who aspired to liberate themselves from bondage and their slavish past. The renewed Dalit consciousness and rejuvenated self that the Dalit liberation movements brought made him fight back against the oppressive structures. Kandankoran, who represented the young generation of Pulayas, was reluctant to conform to the image of the agrestic slave. His reluctance to fit the characteristics that conformed to the agrestic slaves indicates the structural changes that occurred in society through Dalit assertion and progressive social movements in the twentieth century.

The first part exposes the life of Dalits in Brahmanical Hinduism whereas the second part of the novel vividly portrays how Brahmanical Christianity functions to re-assert the marginal identity of Dalits. It delineates the life of Dalit Christians in a Mission land. Though Dalits converted to Christianity with the hope that they would be treated humanely, Christianity failed to dismantle the hegemony of caste echelons. For instance, Pathrose and other Dalit Christians in the novel were tenants of the Hilltop Church. Like the upper caste feudal landlords of the nineteenth century who strictly observed caste hierarchy, the Church also exercised its power over Dalit Christians. Being ignorant about their rights, the first-generation Dalit Christians in the novel blindly followed the Church. Chirakkarode writes about the clear division in the church and the incapability of first-generation Dalit Christians to understand their submissiveness. He writes, "Their fate was to sit on the floor. But they had no complaints about it. That was because they had never considered this a grievance at all. For them, even to sit cross-legged on the floor in front of those upper castes was a privilege." (Chirakkarode 1963: 55) Structural inequalities operated diversely inside the church. It leads to their blind submission before the caste and Brahmanical Christianity. The "new Christians" were constantly reminded that the church was generous enough to accommodate them in the mission land. For instance, custodian Thomas threatens the converted Christians by saying, "You must lead the life of a God-fearing obedient Christian. You are living on Mission land, aren't you? Remember that and respect the upper caste" (Chirakkarode 1963: 152). By interpreting their life and homogenizing their experiences with other Christians, the church ignores their slave identity, years of servility and the brunt of exploitation. It can also be considered as a strategy employed by the church to silence the Dalit Christians and divert them from the organized protest against the unjust ecclesiastical order. Unlike their forefathers, the young generation of Dalit Christians in the novel represented by Paulose, Thoma, and several other nameless Dalit Christian characters began to assert their identity and initiated a collective protest when they realized the intersecting inequalities in the church. It signifies the influence of the progressive movements in the twentieth

century. Paulose asks, "When low caste folk became Christians, they still experienced exclusion. They were kept at a distance. Why was all this done if caste superiority existed within the church? Was it not better that the Pulayar and Parayar did not join the Church?" (Chirakkarode 1963: 101). His lashing criticism against the Syrian Christian landlords and the double standards of the church indicates the emergence of the discourse of discontent among the second-generation Dalit Christians.

Gradually, the first-generation Dalit Christians also began to think about the futility of relying completely on Brahmanical Christianity. They started raising questions. It implies that the politicized Dalit identity they imbibed from the Dalit Christian liberation movements provoked both the first and second-generation Dalit Christians to introspect about their marginal status. Chirakkarode describes the inner turmoils of Thoma to validate this. He writes, "He was a new Christian! But what change did it create? A few drops of Baptismal water had fallen on his head and Custodian Thomas gained one more slave. That was all…" (Chirakkarode 1963: 151). This section of the narrative is inextricably linked to Poykayil Appachan's ideals, which demanded a courageous break from the constricting religious fold.

The identity of the writer must be highlighted here. Being a Dalit Christian writer and activist, Chirakkarode employed a different writing style. Most significantly, he understands the need for a language of resistance to broaden the scope of their assertion. Through Paulos in the novel, who wants to protest against the indelible injustice inside the church Chirakkarode emphasises this. He writes, "There were many things he wanted to say. There were many things against which he wanted to object. But he had not yet acquired a clear language. That would take time. Perhaps he might die and dissolve in the mud without saying anything" (Chirakkarode 1963: 154). It implies that Chirakkarode envisions the emergence of a language through which Dalit Christians can question the structural hierarchy of caste and Brahmanism. The novel ends with this sentence, "The meeting was about to begin. The new generation has decided to speak" (Chirakkarode 1963: 197). It implicates their urge to be heard and the realization that progressive changes would happen only through people with a politicized Dalit identity.

Most of the chapters of the novel end with valid questions. By raising such questions, Chirakkarode invites his readers to engage in the Dalit Christian discourse and identity politics. Raising questions and asking questions to each other are major strategies to redefine the Dalit identity. Through his characters, whether they are major or minor, Chirakkarod raises valid questions about the pervasiveness of caste inside the church and society. Most importantly, his questions leave a sliver of hope in Dalits, and it ignites a spirit to assert their identity rather than deny it. He writes, "It was possible that the next-generation worker would rise against the landlord. Would that be the beginning of a struggle?" (8). The optimism in these lines is directly connected to the anti-caste Utopia he imagines through Dalit Christian liberation movements.

Towards the end of the novel, Dalit Christian characters realized the need for a revolution within and in their community. They rejected religion and elitist historiography which made them untouchables forever (Singh 2023). They never

considered conversion as Utopian rather they continued to question the structural hierarchy of caste that existed in the church. A renewed consciousness made the Dalit Christians redefine their status from defenceless agrestic slaves to determinant Dalits. The young generation of Dalit Christians developed a language of resistance to challenge the pre-ordained structures of caste. They were aware of their political rights and vigilant about the structural changes that occurred in society. Once they realized the worthlessness of institutionalized religion, the second-generation Dalit Christians directed themselves towards collective political action, which is closely aligned with the ideology advocated by Pambady John Joseph and Kallara Sukumaran. The Dalit Christians in the novel understand that their idealized anti-caste Utopia would not soon be realized. It demands relentless struggles and collective assertions. They were aware of how crucial it was to provide their children with sufficient capital to combat systemic injustices. One such resource with emancipatory potential is education.

Major figures of the progressive social movements of the twentieth century, including Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, Pambady John Joseph, and Kallara Sukumaran, equally agreed that education has an instrumental role in Dalit emancipation. Similarly, in *Pulayathara*, Chirakkarode also exposes the incapability of conversion in transforming the birth-based identity of the Dalits and emphasises education as a tool that enables Dalits to break their centuries of silence. They acknowledged the emancipatory potentials of education and envisioned an egalitarian social structure through the young generation of Dalits. Thoma's response to his son's baptism proved that they idealized a Utopia of Dalits by educating the coming generation. Thoma did not want another Dalit to be offered to the church as a slave. Thoma says, "*Edi*, I am a Pulayan. I will live in the field. I will work for daily wages. I will stay where I can, but… But I will send my son to school, educate him. I will not let him become some landlord's slave. You wait and see." (Chirakkarode 1963: 197). Education plays a vital role in the construction of Dalit identity. It enhances their understanding of the situations and circumstances that make them an oppressed category. Moreover, education helps Dalits learn about their rights in society. Thereby, they will be able to speak for themselves rather than waiting for someone else to represent them.

Pulayathara calls for a nuanced examination of the various modalities and ways in which twentieth-century Dalit Christian liberation movements developed alternative epistemology. The novel shows the attempt towards an epistemological assertion through the insertion of an alternate history from the perspective of the Dalit Christians. Their epistemology constitutes a distinct Dalit Christian discourse which does not conform to the caste formula of Hindu Brahmanism and Brahmanical Christianity. It questions the hegemony rather than being accustomed to their marginality. Most importantly, it makes them the makers of their own history and challenges the elitist historiography that silenced them for centuries (Menon 2022). The Dalit Christians realize their historical marginalization and the factors that have caused them to be positioned differently in the church and society. The kind of epistemology that *Pulayathara* proposes encourages the radical reshaping of the Dalit identity and steers towards a just society. It promotes an idea of selfhood untouched by any form of

oppression, discrimination, and exclusion. They realized the multiple structures that perpetuate exclusionary practices and started addressing the same systematically through collective protest and literary and cultural endeavours. In *Pulayathara*, Chirakkarode established a "world of words" for the Dalit Christians. The language that his characters employed outraged the upper caste because it was unusual for a slave caste to speak a resistance language. For instance, in the beginning, none of the Dalit characters in the novel dared to utter even their names. In fact, they never used 'I.' Instead, they addressed themselves as 'lowly ones', *adiyan, Pelen* and so on.[4] But being part of a Dalit collective, they started developing a sense of self and transformed their slave identity into a distinct Dalit identity. By proudly saying "I am a Pulayan", Thoma and other Dalit Christians in the novel declared that they are no longer slaves of either religion or caste. Such recognition itself is a catalyst that accelerates their emancipation proclamation through political assertions, education, and writings. The novel advocates the need for standing together for the cause of Dalits and it repels the agents of any institutionalized religion from acting as custodians of Dalits. All these progressive ideas are extensively drawn from the Dalit Christian liberation movements and theological interventions that occurred during Chirakkarode's lifetime and he employed literature to navigate and protest against caste-driven society and religion.

Conclusion

Dalit articulation has veered towards two purposes which are complementary and overlapping in nature: assertion and resistance. For Dalits, asserting their identity is a political agenda and Dalit identity-based mobilizations continue to question the hegemonic social norms. Chirakkarode used his epistemic agency to record their unwritten history of resistance amid a sociocultural and political milieu in Kerala that entirely erased the intersectional identity of Dalit Christians and the compounding inequities it brought them. Thereby, he launched a Dalit Christian discourse in Malayalam literature. He focuses on the potential of literature to delve more into the political dimension, through which Dalits could revisit their history and reinvent their subjectivity (Zecchini 2018). Chirakkarode's interventions to highlight the issues of Dalit Christians in the literary imagination are commendable because he situates them as a distinct political subject. Instead of merely mapping all the aspects of Dalit Christian life, Chirakkarode interrogates specific problems and highlights the intersecting inequalities that existed in Brahmanical Christianity. An intercategorical intersectional inquiry shows Dalit Christians are distinctively placed at the intersection of multiple overlapping, oppressive structures. As Crenshaw points out, the issues of exclusion cannot be adequately addressed by placing them into the already established analytical framework. Rather an intersectional analysis is essential to show how differences in identities create specific kinds of oppressive situations (Crenshaw

[4]Both the Dalits and Dalit Christians had to use such terms to indicate their lowest status. The upper caste Christians as well as Hindus used terms such as 'Pulaya Christian', 'paraya Christians', 'avasa Christians, 'poocha Christians', etc., to refer to the Dalit Christians. They used such terms to differentiate the upper castes from the lower castes.

2013). Here, Crenshaw emphasizes the transformative potentials of intersectionality as an analytical framework as well as practice. Similarly, in *Pulayathara* Chirakkarode demands an alternate analytical paradigm to specifically address the issues of Dalit Christians. In the novel, the search for their roots unpacks several unheard stories of oppression and Dalit Christians began to assert their identity by extracting impetus from their shared experiences of inequality and injustice. It leads to the formation of their identity and alternative epistemology. Here, the Dalit identity they bring forth does not entail shame, but it marks the moment of assertion towards an anti-caste Utopia. *Pulayathara* transcends the conventional contours of elitist historiography by constantly questioning and challenging them through a language of resistance. It finds a distinct place in the larger sphere of Dalit literature by transforming the 'abject subjects' into political subjects with distinct voices and agency. Most importantly, it contributes to the larger objective of the production and dissemination of knowledge about the history of Dalit Christians. Moreover, *Pulayathara* invites the readers and the larger public to engage in the Dalit Christian discourse and it encourages everyone to be actively involved for the cause of the most marginalized.

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