

When Fists Write (of) the Past: Conceptualising Dalit Historiography through the Cultural Productions of *Dravida Varga Aikya Munnani*

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Abstract

Dalit historiography is the narrativization of the past from a Dalit perspective purposive of critiquing existing traditions of Indian historiographies and/or producing alternate histories. It is the discourse through which historiographical erasures and misrepresentations are challenged through narratives that recover and reinterpret the past from anti-caste standpoints. This counter-discourse reorients historiography and transforms historical understandings by recognising caste as a structuring principle of history. This article attempts to theorise Dalit historiography as a resistance epistemology by outlining its methodological and thematic aspects through a study of DCUF cultural productions. DCUF (Depressed Class United Front) is an Adi-Dravida community named *Dravida Varga Aikya Munnani* that emerged as an anti-caste politico-religious group in 1950s Kerala under the leadership of PJ SabharajThirumeni.

To understand the politics of the alternate history articulated by DCUF, the article first maps the field of mainstream Kerala historiography to which DCUF cultural productions may be seen as a historiographical response. DCUF cultural productions, as an articulation of Dalit historiography, intervene in the epistemology of this mode of history writing by placing caste as the fulcrum of history by giving an alternate picture of the past vis-à-vis the origins of caste, its manifestations and anti-caste resistance. This study foregrounds the political valence of history in Dalit struggle and the ongoing negotiations between Dalit communities with the mainstream vis-à-vis history and history writing.

Keywords

Anti-caste, Dalit historiography, Kerala historiography, DCUF, counter-epistemology, caste-enslavement, Adi-Dravida

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Introduction

As an epistemic discourse about the past, historiography has inextricable connections with power structures, making it a tool of domination and resistance. Therefore, historiography, or the narrativization of history, is a dynamic realm constantly in flux despite the general assumption of history as an unchanging fixity. This shift from understanding History as a chronicle of events to that of narrativization of the past, as Priya Satia observes, crumbles assumptions of a universal past of progress (“Decolonising Indian History” 32.13), which has been ingrained as part of the cultural common sense. Such a redefinition enables critiquing History for its embeddedness in the dominant epistemological structures and values. As David Arnold argues, this redefinition of history as narrativization also enables history for the “restitution of the lives, experiences, worldviews, and mindsets of people who are systematically excluded from history or given only a marginal role” (“Decolonising History: Method or Fact” 56:43) and helps to repair the systemic failures of history to understand, interpret and theorize historical positions that are set outside the dominant domain (55:39). Historiography, thus, becomes a medium for resistance and political redress.

Dalit historiography is the narrativization of the past from a Dalit perspective purposive of critiquing existing traditions of Indian historiographies and/or producing counter histories. It is the discourse through which historiographical erasures and misrepresentations are challenged through narratives that recover and reinterpret the past from anti-caste standpoints. This counter-discourse reorients historiography and transforms historical understandings by recognizing caste as a structuring principle of history.

Central to Dalit historiographic discourse, critique and counter-creation have been articulated vis-à-vis content and methodology in history writing. Indian Dalit historiography critiques the dominant colonial and nationalist historiographies as well as the counter-hegemonic history writing attempted by Marxist and Subaltern historians, all of which are seen to enact erasure and misrepresentation of caste and Dalit agency in history. The counter-narratives articulated by Dalit historiography use caste as the structuring principle in history to recover erased histories/ caste-relevant themes and re-interpret the flawed/inadequate dominant historiographic representations. The shift in the evidential paradigm followed in mainstream historiography also marks an epistemic intervention from an anti-caste standpoint and therefore deserves analytical attention.

This paper attempts to exemplify and theorize Dalit historiography as a resistance epistemology by outlining its methodological and thematic aspects through a study of DCUF cultural productions. DCUF (Depressed Class United Front) is an Adi-Dravida² community named *Dravida Varga Aikya Munnani* that emerged as an anti-

²The Adi movement claims that the indigenous native people were dispossessed from their native land by the Aryan usurpers and denigrated as untouchables under Aryan socio-religious hegemony. While the movement spread under various names such as Adi-Dharm, Adi-Hindu, etc., in the Northern part of the country, it was called the Adi-Dravida movement in South

caste political-religious group in 1950s Kerala under the leadership of PJ Sabharaj Thirumeni, himself a Dalit. Despite staging powerful anti-caste activism, which extends to the social, economic, and ideological realms, DCUF's contributions are absent in the narratives of Kerala history, even in Kerala Dalit historiographic discourse. Considering the geo-cultural location of DCUF and the specificity of Kerala's history, an understanding of mainstream Kerala historiography becomes essential to decipher the historiographical interventions of DCUF. Attention to the regional specificity of the movement's history is important not only because caste is an endemic reality but, more importantly, because Indian historiography is effectively the history of the Indian heartland constituted by the Northern regions.

Mainstream Kerala historiography shows the agrarian expansion as a much later historical event as compared to the rest of India. The trade-based society in Kerala moved to agriculture in the eighth century AD after the Brahmin incursions from the regions of Karnataka. This picture of Brahmin incursion is starkly different from mainstream Nationalist and Dalit Indian historiographies, which present Aryan arrival through the lens of *desi/videsi* and North/South, respectively. Unlike in other parts of the country, when caste developed in Kerala, it did not branch out neatly based on the Varna principle. The considerable demographic proportion of the foreign traders constituted by Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Kerala, who engaged in occupations related to the transportation and exchange of goods, altered the way caste developed in Kerala (Shankaran Nambootiripad 22). Unlike mainstream Indian historiography which documents the Aryan invasion of the Indus valley and the Gangetic plain, mainstream Kerala historiography presents the arrival of brahmins in Kerala as incursive, characterised by ideological manipulation and establishment of hegemony (Menon 162). Although the land relations, as they appear in mainstream Indian historiography were caste-based, manifested as landlordism/Janmi system, slavery as an economic institution of exploitation and transaction of Dalit/slave castes does not appear in Indian historiography. Kerala also has a distinct history of colonial rule. In Indian historiography, the pre-colonial era is valorised as the golden age of Vedic civilisation, disrupted by Muslim invasions in the medieval period and imperialism. Unlike many other Indian states, Kerala, before its birth in 1956, was divided into three princely states, viz. Malabar, Kochin and Travancore. While the colonial rulers directly ruled Malabar through British residents since the late eighteenth century, Kochin and Travancore remained as princely states under monarchical rule till 1949. Mainstream Kerala historiography exemplifies the requirement to look at the 'regional' as the former is not a subset of mainstream Indian historiography.

Kinds of Mainstream Kerala Historiography

Recognition of the specificity of Kerala history demands attention to the historiographic trends in Kerala. The mainstream discourse of Kerala history principally manifests

India, premised on the reclamation of Dravida indigeneity through the recovery of its social, cultural and material aspects.

two trends, the political and the economic, emphasizing the structures of rule and systems of production, respectively.

The Political History of Kerala

The political histories of Kerala focus on structures of power defined by the ruling classes/authorities/the state. It adopts a top-down perspective from locations of power, inevitably chronicling rule systems, rulers, and social classes which are part of the administrative systems. Consequently, it presents history as driven by individuals in power and the ruling classes, systems as designed and regulated by those in power, while 'the people', when mentioned, appear primarily as subjects that are acted upon. As the definitional and representational criteria of 'community' become political role and social status, those who do not wield power in the political machinery get ignored and / or sidelined. This state-centric historiographic paradigm does not talk about the role played by the Dalits, tribals and fisherfolk as political agents.

This mainstream historiography presents the medieval/post-Aryan era as the golden age characterized by remarkable growth in political power, economy, art and literature. Brahmin incursions which culminated in the arrival of ritually superior priestly Brahmins called Namboothiris are shown to have resulted in Aryanisation—a process of effecting socio-political and economic changes as well as the establishment of Brahmanical Hindu hegemony. Mainstream Kerala historiography presents Aryanization as a non-violent process attained primarily through Brahmin intelligence (Menon 46, Shreedhara Menon 162). Though caste is stated to be the determinant of social relations of power, socio-political formations like caste and class appear in this historiographic framework only as depoliticized socio-cultural categories. Therefore, caste is normalized and sanctioned as a cultural norm beneficial for socio-political stability and economic welfare. However, practices like agrestic slavery and untouchability are mentioned as social evils to be reformed/abolished. Caste-based practices like untouchability, seen as part of superstitious beliefs, are mentioned as social evils which are not under the purview of politics and, therefore, ought to be reformed through social movements.

The periodization adopted in such political historiography of Kerala also aligns with the state-centric framework that chronicles the reigns of various structures of the state. The dominant pattern of periodization divides the long timespan broadly into five periods; the Pre-Perumal rule/ Sangham era, Perumal rule, the monarchical rule of the princely states, Colonial rule, Nationalist movement and the formation of united Kerala. In other words, Aryanization, the development of kingdoms, the growth of colonial powers, and the nationalist call for an independent nation-state are the epochal moments in this historiography, reaffirming the metanarrative of the state.

The Economic History of Kerala

The other historiographic framework in mainstream Kerala history foregrounds the economic relations of production. This historiographic strand understands historical realities as rooted in the economy constituted by the material conditions of production

and land relations at a particular historical moment. The state becomes secondary in this paradigm while the power-holding authorities are defined in terms of class. In this framework, state power structures become reflections of the economy and its shifts. Economic history identifies society in terms of classes, depending on their relationship with land and production. The difference of economic history vis-à-vis its historiographic emphasis on economy rather than the state/political structures translates into a reversal of the historical view and sees historical changes welling up from the ground (the material relations of production) to the top (the State defined as structures of control of production). Economic histories add caste in the narrative as an influential factor in class formation, exemplified in the nature of property ownership, methods of resource allocation, and forms of surplus extraction. It acknowledges caste-based land ownership in Kerala, which translates into diminishing economic and social power down the caste ladder.

This historiographic tradition traces history in terms of the shift from tribal economy to agriculture and the later shift to trade and cash cropping in the colonial capitalist economy. Caste is seen to originate in the agrarian phase, marked by new rigid land relations and particular labor systems to maximize production, leading to the emergence of groups called *jatis*. The economic shift from the tribal economy to the agricultural economy also becomes the basis for the formation of the state to extract the surplus. Such economic histories project the relationship with land as the determining criterion of the socio-economic identity of individuals and groups. Though *jati* is added in the narrative wherever it is seen to be relevant, the narrative revolves around the relationship between social classes determined by their position in the production process. Therefore, caste becomes the invisible organizational logic for the formation of concrete classes/occupational categories which are emphasized.

The representation of slavery is a significant aspect in mainstream historiography vis-à-vis caste. Caste-based slavery is repeatedly recognized as an exploitative order from which land-owning classes benefitted. But the focus on the deprivation of the slaves reduced the history of slave upheavals to the history of Dalit conversions to Christianity as in EMS's narrative, or an absolute denial of slave resistance as in the history written by Rajan Gurukkal and RaghavaVarier. Gurukkal and Varier use the term 'slavery' interchangeably with bonded labor and servitude (8, 111, 117, 202), blurring not just the transactional aspect of slavery but also its caste determinacy exemplified in the (mis)interpretation of the anti-slavery movement called PRDS as an emancipatory movement against serfdom. Unlike these two historians, PK Balakrishnan, illuminates the transactional nature of agrestic slavery, but presents it merely as an economic institution to extract labor (178). Similar historiographic foregrounding of class can be seen in the historicization of the nationalist movement, anti-caste movements, etc., in the economic histories of Kerala.

The periodization in this historiographic tradition aligns with its goal to articulate the decisiveness of economic changes in history. The historical junctures that mark different economic configurations are identified as pre-feudal, feudal, colonial, and nationalist. The pre-feudal tribal economy was followed by agricultural expansion

in the post-Aryan period, during which feudal land relations based on *jati* emerged. The history of the feudal period shows the hierarchized social organization of classes decided by specific roles in the production. The shift to the colonial period is marked by the integration of feudal-capitalist systems and the resultant shifts in production. The nationalist period is historicized as a period of anti-feudal anti-imperial resistance driven by the imagination of an independent nation-state. In this periodization paradigm, history is understood in terms of class relations, where caste is merely an additive factor.

The Evidential Paradigm in Mainstream Kerala Historiography

Historiography, having been defined as a political project with a specific agenda and strategies, makes the evidential paradigm followed in historiography significant. As a mode of knowledge generation, the historiographic methodology is embedded within dominant epistemic values. Mainstream Kerala historiography resorts exclusively to official artifacts and written documents as sources. Written documents like administrative reports and trade records, census and economic surveys of the state, verified archaeological artifacts, and literary classics and epics and travel narratives are taken as historical sources and validated.

Analysis of DCUF Cultural Productions

History is a significant category with which DCUF engages as part of its anti-caste politics. Analysis of the cultural productions of DCUF, including songs, memoirs, customs, cultural symbols, architectural patterns, prayers, and speeches/sermons illuminates both critique and counter-creation as forms of such engagement with mainstream historiography. This section delineates the major historiographic critiques and counters in the cultural productions of DCUF and analyses their complex conversations with various mainstream historiographic traditions.

Critique of Historiographic Erasure

DCUF's critique of historiographic erasure is majorly constituted by two aspects. They criticize the Brahmanical erasure of their indigenous identity as the Adi-Dravida tribe and their casteless cultural legacy. The critique against the mainstream historiographic erasure of Dravidian history is compounded by their reclamation of the royal legacy as the descendants of benevolent and just Dravidian kings of Chera, Chola, and Pandya dynasties. As Anuraj Thirumeni, the former chairman of DCUF says, "Poykayil Appachan³ said that no alphabet is in sight about the history of his tribe/race. Sabharaj said that we have our history. But we are alienated from history." (Personal interview 3 Jan. 2021).⁴ DCUF sees this historiographic erasure as a deliberate tactic to alienate

³Poykail Appachan is a Dalit leader who founded the anti-caste movement Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in the early twentieth-century, Kerala. DCUF worships him with reverence, as he is believed to be a divine incarnation for the liberation of the slave castes.

⁴All quotations from personal interviews are translated from Malayalam, by the author.

them from discourses of power and to perpetuate forms of caste servitude. One of the DCUF songs says,

“The Vamana leaders have thwarted the Dravida voice
The Vamana leaders have wiped out the Dravidian history” (Personal Interview
7 Jan. 2021)

In addition to erasing casteless cultural legacy, DCUF argues that mainstream historiography omits their resistance struggles against caste. They critique the mainstream historiography for its infrequent mentions of anti-caste leaders and movements. Furthermore, they underline that DCUF movement and Sabharaj are absent not only in mainstream history but even in the Dalit historiography of Kerala. Anuraj Thirumeni writes, “Sabharaj Thirumeni was one of the bravest leaders of the depressed class movements after the formation of Kerala. He pioneered his social activism by forming the organization named DCUF in 1958. Mainstream historians, Dalit intelligentsia, and writers pretended not to have seen this movement and ignored it from historiography” (*Dravida Prasthanam Keralathil* 3).

The Creation of Alternate History

Recovery of ignored sources, perspectives, and experiences, along with reinterpretation of historiographic archives and existing representations, constitute the alternate historiography attempted by DCUF. The historiography of DCUF shows the creation and employment of unconventional sources. The memories and stories about Sabharaj’s speeches in the streets about the liberation of the Dalits abound in the narratives of the members of DCUF. Sabharaj Thirumeni engaged with the Dalits through his evening meetings and study classes about slavery and their liberation. As Satheeshan, one of the early followers of DCUF recalls,

Thirumeni, after his work in the quarry, would come to Manchadikkari (an island primarily inhabited by a Dalit population). His disciples and some of us would also accompany him. Thirumeni would wear his *Angavasthram*. After wearing that, whatever he says is motivated by a divine spirit. He would sing about the slave sufferings, about our ancestors who were sold off in the markets, those who were beaten to death, those who were yoked to the plow with bulls. Everyone will repeat the songs after him. Often people end up crying aloud. These memories will never fade. His voice was thunderous. (Personal interview, 17 Jan. 2021)

Another member of DCUF recalls,

When Thirumeni comes in the evening, I would also go with him. In those times, we used to do theatrical performances like plays, *kadhaprasangam*, etc. When Thirumeni comes, we perform short *kadhaprasangam* (a performance art in which a story is narrated by mixing prose and poetry) and other things like

that. Nothing else, he used to talk about our own problems, our experiences, our history. Once when Madhuchettan performed a *kadhaprasangam*, people were crying... So many times, *villadichanpattu* was also performed here; and people would come out of their houses to watch this, and they would return home only late. (Personal interview 29 Jan. 2021)

These narratives indicate that the construction of history and its transmission in DCUF was a collective affair. History originates in people's narratives and primarily survives through their memory. History appears here as a moving narrative characterized by fluidity and adaptability.

DCUF employs unconventional sources such as memory, mythology, legends, cultural symbols, practices, oral literature, etc., alongside official-written sources as historiographic sources. The use of such texts is pertinent to the historiography of Dalits, whose epistemic worldview and patterns of knowledge production are distinct owing to their position in the caste system. For instance, Anuraj Thirumeni, the ex-chairman of DCUF, remarks, "We haven't printed more copies of those books. Everyone knew the songs well, you know, so there was no need to print the copies." (6 Jan. 2020)

The adoption of a caste lens also transforms the periodization followed in historiography. In DCUF's archive, history is divided into periods, viz. the rule of the Dravidian kings, Aryan regime and centuries of enslavement, colonial modernity and renaissance, and the anti-caste activism of DCUF. In contrast to the mainstream historiography, DCUF historiography shows the historical junctures as driven by caste. However, the linear progression of history evident in their historiography resembles the mainstream historiographical projection of history as linear and teleological.

Recovery in Historiography

DCUF's historiography based on an alternate evidential paradigm capacitates the recovery of ignored perspectives and experiences in historiography. Recovery of Dalit experiences and agency in the historiography of DCUF challenges the mainstream historiographic presentation of Dalits merely as marginal laborers. DCUF's recovery of experience is important not only because they employ experience as a category but also because of the specific way in which experiences are invoked. The historicization of experiences of enslavement and feudal servitude in the oeuvre of DCUF highlights the physical and emotional aspects of slave experiences from the perspective of the enslaved. This contrasts with the mainstream representation of slavery as an economic institution and highlights it as an anti-social and dehumanizing system. Moreover, they invoke and link caste violence in contemporary times with the system of slavery and feudal oppression.

Experiences of caste slavery recovered in the historiography of DCUF enable an understanding of slavery as a social institution, different from its mainstream presentation as an economic institution defined by the exploitation of bonded laborers. In the DCUF narrative, the beginning of the enslavement is traced to the

Aryan invasion/Aryan settlement, and the processes of establishing domination are detailed to show the scattering, oppression, and dehumanization of the slave castes. Their narrativization of slave experiences and the historicization of slavery in terms of enslavement animate a shift of focus from the 'slave' to the 'enslaved'. For example,

Haven't you taken money by selling us in the markets?

Haven't you put chains on our legs and hands?

We are the descendants whose blood boils in anger

You, monsters, never allowed us, the enslaved, to be free. (Personal interview 26 Dec. 2020)

The enslavement of the Adi-Dravida in the Aryan regime, the imposition of indignities like untouchability and caste names on them, and their denigration as slave castes are the major points in the narrative of enslavement. The architectural structures called *Mathrubhavanam* and *Pithrubhavanam*⁵ in the DCUF headquarters preserve the memory of their forefathers and foremothers who were sold off to faraway lands. The slaves do not appear as bonded laborers in these cultural texts but as dehumanized people who were denied their humanity. Images of the separation of families, brutal punishments like burning and whipping, violent actions like rape, murder, transaction of humans, exploitative practices like tying men to the plow along with bulls, etc., that appear in their texts present the history of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved. The narratives are nuanced in detailing the social, material, and emotional, experiences of slavery, such as ostracization, oppression, exploitation, deprivation, dehumanization, and grief. The brutality of the physical punishments, sexual harassment, rapes, caste murders, etc., indicate the violent nature of the system. A member of DCUF recalls the horrors of slavery:

During the time of slavery, the slaves were killed for anything. I remember my grandfather telling me he had seen men being forced to plow the land along with bulls. Imagine what kind of cruelty it is! Almost 80 years ago, a man lived here. As my father told me, there was a big callus on his shoulder due to the plow's weight. During those times, my father used to go to Thiruvalla. He had been a member of PRDS. And this *vallyachan* (the older man) was also in PRDS. The atrocities done to them were terrible. There were even slave markets in Vechoor. There was a place called 'Chuzhalikkuzhy' in Manjadikkari where the masters drowned many slaves. It is a whirlpool where four canals meet. And if/when a slave gets old or dares to disobey his master, he would be pushed into the 'Chuzhalikuzhy' as punishment. In those times, most of the land in Manjadikkari was owned by a family called 'Thuruthimaliyil'. There were Panickars appointed by that family to kill the dissenting slaves. (Personal communication 29 Jan. 2021)

⁵*Mathrubhavanam* and *Pithrubhavanam* mean the house of the mother and the house of the father, respectively. DCUF headquarters have these temple-like structures in memory of their enslaved ancestors. They light the lamp in these regularly to pay respect to their foremothers and forefathers.

The objectification of the enslaved castes and their being exchanged as gifts and commodities, exemplify the extent of dehumanisation in caste-slavery. Images of Dalits working alongside bulls in the field, enslaved people being pushed down in the mud to bind the ridges, thrown into a whirlpool when they age and become incapable of working, recur in the cultural archive, unfolding the dehumanization in caste slavery that prevailed in Kerala till the late nineteenth century. The coercion and control of labor in caste slavery are also articulated in the texts. Another song in the cultural oeuvre of DCUF talks of the exploitation of the enslaved castes by control through coercion and fear. The narratives reveal that extreme poverty and deprivation of the enslaved communities strengthen the exploitative regime of caste slavery.

Ayyo (alas)! My hands and legs are falling weak
 I need to get some *thal* and *thakara* to eat.
 I shall drink the muddy water.
 But how can I stand this storm and cold
 Don't even have a place to rest my head! (13)

The depiction of destitution in these lines when understood in the context of caste slavery is more complex in showing that material deprivation is a sign of social inequality and indignity. The enslaved are dehumanized to the extent that they do not even wish for clean water or good food. The social ostracization of the enslaved castes disallows them access to public space and basic amenities of life.

The texts poignantly disclose a world of emotions highlighting the enslaved people's grief, emotional connections, and familial bonds. This is particularly radical in the historicization of slave experiences as it unfolds the social and emotional life worlds of the enslaved. This powerful depiction of a world of the affected highlights the humanity and social subjectivities of the enslaved, both as individuals and as part of society. It draws attention to the social relations of the enslaved that have been discounted from mainstream historiographies. Poignant images like that of a woman and her husband being sold off to distant places, slave families being separated, children who experience the horrors of orphanhood, etc., shift from the mainstream representation of slavery as a material institution to a depiction of slavery as a social institution determined by caste. This recovery of slave suffering expands both the mainstream and Dalit Kerala historiographic discourses by unfolding slavery as a social institution and pioneering documentation of slave experiences in historiography.

DCUF recovers the history of anti-caste resistance primarily in terms of the major events and political leaders who led those events. In this recovery project, DCUF identifies the Adi-Dravida people as the original inhabitants of Bharat and the Blacks as belonging to the same race as the Adi-Dravida. This historiographic mission is also manifested in the renaming of places after the names of social revolutionaries like Martin Luther King, Ambedkar, Ayyankali, Pandit Karuppan, KP Vallon, Paradi Abraham Issac, etc. Additionally, DCUF songs document the names of forgotten

anti-caste leaders who worked with Sabharaj Thirumeni. As ND Kumarji, Sabharaj's associate and disciple, writes,

Our misfortunes haven't ended despite the emancipatory struggles of Sri NM Joseph, Kandan Kumaran, Vellikara Chothi, Paradi Abraham, Chathan Puthoor Ashan, KP Vallon, ND Ashirvadam, and Krishnankutti. Dravida children should wake up thinking and remembering the miseries suffered by Simon Yohannan, Ayyankali, and Poykayil Thiru Sabharaj Thirumeni (8).

An excerpt from *Thiru: PJ Sabharaj: Orma, Rashtreeyam, Atayalam* further exemplifies this pattern in DCUF historiography. "DCUF was rich with a line of great leaders like Sabharaj. ND Kumarji, S Arumanayakam, KC Ramankunj, PM Nanappan, Issac Mathew, PJ Easho, PI Andrews, PD Simon Chelakomb...Kuttoo Thankachan, CM Baby Charamkulam were some of those leaders" (34–35). Furthermore, the book also recovers the history of women's political engagement in the movement by recovering their names. To quote from the same book, "An important factor in the history of DCUF is the presence of women leadership and women-led movements. Dr. Mary K John, C A Chellama, PP Leelamma, C V Mariamma Stephen, KJ Annamma, MA Sarojini...were strong women leaders of DCUF" (32).

The invocation of the history of anti-caste resistance through the recovery of individual leaders conforms with mainstream Nationalist and Kerala historiographic paradigm that posits individual/event-centred history. While the historiographic framework follows the structure of the mainstream Kerala historiography and Indian nationalist historiography, in terms of content, it expands Dalit Kerala historiography by introducing many forgotten anti-caste leaders to Dalit historiography.

DCUF engages through history with the question of identity, primarily emphasizing aspects of indigeneity and lineage, aiming to foster self-respect and pride that emerge from historical awareness. Recovery of the Adi-Dravida glory in terms of epistemic, material, and ethical superiority and contrasting this with the Aryan regime as evinced in the historiography of DCUF is linked to the reclamation of a dignified indigenous identity. The idea of Adi-Dravida as the indigenous race composed of various royal gotras counters the indignities, impurity, and brokenness imposed on their being seen as enslaved castes or untouchables. DCUF presents the Aryan invasion as a historical conquest through violence and treachery. They highlight the indigenous identity by foregrounding Adi-Dravida glory vis-à-vis knowledge/philosophical wisdom, social harmony, and material prosperity. Dravidian rule is celebrated for maintaining the ideal or desired conditions of living with respect to social, ideological, and material aspects. The glory of the kingdom, as shown by their cultural texts, emanates from the egalitarian and corruption-free political climate created by the rule of just and benevolent kings. The image of a utopian time of truth, fraternity, and equality recurs in these texts. The people of DCUF often recite the popular Malayalam song about 'mavelinad' (the ideal reign of Mahabali) to reckon the Adi-Dravida reign.

Under the rule of Maveli
 People were treated as equals.
 In those times of harmony
 No harm or havoc touched any.
 No falsehood, no deceit
 Not even a trace of dishonesty.
 No false measures, no lies.
 No anxieties, no diseases
 Infant deaths were not even heard of.

To quote from a speech delivered at the annual convention of DCUF,

This (Bharat/India) is our land. We are the descendants of a tribe that ruled this land. We are the Adi-Dravidas. Our ancestors have authored Vedas in this land; they have written epics in this land. Our ancestors have written literature. So, we are the descendants of a group of great men who were writers, rulers, and philosophers. Aryans are the aliens who came from Antioch, Rome, Hungary, Tibet, Belgium, Philippines, Portuguese, British, Arabia and other countries to rear cattle in our land. They came to our land and destroyed the rule of our land, which was based on truth, justice, and dharma. They killed our kings, they butchered our gurus, and they destroyed our leaders. They conquered India and called it a Hindu nation. When the power was shifted to the Aryans, the original people of the land, the Adi-Dravidas, became Pulaya, Pariah, and untouchable polluting creatures. (Speech at the DCUF Annual function 26 Dec. 2020)

These narratives contrast the social justice followed in Dravidian times with the unjust and violent Aryan regime. Phrases like '*Aadiyardeepam*' (The light of the Aadiyar),⁶ '*Aadiyamakkal*' (Children of Aadiyar), '*Rajakeeya-purohithakulam*' (Royal-priestly), etc., which appear in the cultural archive of DCUF indicate Adi-dravida as a harmonious tribe which has a royal heritage. This depiction, in spite of fostering an alternate dignified identity, reproduces the Brahmanical value system that defines the community in terms of its religious and political stature. In other words, reinforcing priestly and royal legacy as the premise of reclaiming dignity resonates with the Brahmanical understanding of glory, and therefore, its anti-caste politics is about inverting the Brahmanical hierarchy in terms of racial contradiction between the Dravidians and the Aryans.

The ideological aspect of the indigeneity argument illuminates the epistemic superiority and philosophical richness of Adi-Dravida. As shown in the quotations earlier, DCUF claims a rich knowledge tradition that belongs to the tribe evinced in the existence of many philosophical texts authored and read by Dravidian *rishis* and learned men and women:

⁶Aadiyar in Malayalam means the original people.

Hey Dravidas, we are the native inhabitants
 You would fail to hold back tears if our story were told
 If the truth is said, the heart will break
 But we have a lot of historical truths to tell.
 The history of Bharat, is not the story of the *Bhagavad Gita*;
 It is not the *Quran* that is safely preserved.
 It is neither the *Ramayana*, which extends to seven *kaandhas*⁷.
 Nor the laborious huge work, *Bible*.
 Vyasa, the great sage, discovered the great text
 And found that it is composed by Thiruvalluvar
 Vyasa gained wisdom and had
 Rewritten the text into sections⁸. (DCUF song, Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021)

DCUF claims that Thiruvalluvar was a wise man who belonged to the Adi-Dravida tribe. He authored the text *Thirukkural*, a great treatise on multiple topics that pertain to human life. This work is claimed to have been taken over by the Aryans.

The text *Thirukkural* contains the history of the land. But the Savarnas did not approve it. Vyasa⁹ had known about it in his vision and rewritten it into several sections like history, law, medicine, art, culture, education, information technology, etc. So, what Thiruvalluvar had written, was the history of Bharat. It is not the history of the fight between Krishna and Karna; it is not the history of Ram and Lakshman. (Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021)

As these texts unfold, Dravidian rule was based on their superior knowledges contained in the Vedas and Shastras. This is further exemplified in the artifact, the sword and the buckler placed in the DCUF headquarters, which symbolizes their royal legacy. It is designed with four dots at the center indicating four Vedas and six dots in a circle indicating six shastras. The sword and the buckler represent the rule of the Adi-Dravida based on the Vedas and Shastras. Despite indicating an epistemic domain comprising alternate moral and philosophical ethics, the use of the words ‘Vedas’ and ‘Shastras’ denotes that DCUF’s discourse on Dravidian knowledge resonates with the vocabulary of Brahmanism that privileges the Vedas and Shastras as ultimate sources of wisdom.

DCUF historiography also highlights that the Adi-Dravida were a prosperous and wealthy tribe. The material riches of the Adi-Dravida kingdom are highlighted by referring to their prosperous harvests, full granaries, golden throne, *rishikulam* (residence of the great gurus), etc. They claim ownership of numerous temples

⁷The *Ramayana* is composed in seven sections.

⁸Reference to *The Mahabharata*, considered to be one of the most important texts in Hindu mythology believed to be written by Veda Vyasa.

⁹Vedavyasa is a Hindu sage who is believed to have written the classic epic *Mahabharata*.

and shrines/*kavus*, which were Brahmanised in the post-Aryan period. Prabhuraj Thirumeni says,

[I]n this country, the scheduled castes built 186277 temples, 15000 *kavus*, 66667 *kallambalam*, and consecrated gods in these temples. If you check the history of *Vaikathappan*, *Ettumanoorappan*, *Kaduthuruthiyappan*, *Thirunakkarayappan*, or *Sabarimalayappan*,¹⁰ you will find them to be the ancestors of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. If they (Brahmins) put a *poonol* (sacred thread) on these gods we will not accept. (Prabhuraj Thirumeni 26 Dec. 2020).

The regional location where DCUF traces its royal racial past is also significant in its historiographic politics. DCUF argues that they are the natives of Bharat or INDIA, which they expand as Inter-National Dravidian's Independent Area. Dravida appears as the linguistic identity of the Adi-Dravida tribe, who are shown to have originally inhabited India. DCUF equates the Adi-Dravida with the Nagas and the Asuras to claim that Dravida is a pan-Indian identity. "The 'naga' and the 'Dravida' are two names of the same people. Many will not accept that the Dravidas and Nagas were not only inhabitants of South India but were inhabitants of the whole of India, both North India and South India. But these are historical truths." (*Thiru P J Sabharaj: Orma Rashtreeyam Atayalam* 28). As one of the members of DCUF says, "the name 'Bharatham' came not because Bharata ruled here. Sabharaj Thirumeni had taught us that India is the land of Dravidians. INDIA means -International Dravidians' Independent Association." (Personal communication 6 Jan. 2021). This approach marks an intervention in mainstream Indian historiography through a creative appropriation of the mainstream Nationalist historiographic framework. Nationalist historiography which alleges the colonial and Muslim conquests as the cause for the decline of glorious Indian culture is changed by shifting the culpability of the nation's fall onto the Aryan invasion. But simultaneously, the idea of a glorious nation, premised on the idea of common roots vis-à-vis culture, history, and descent, is maintained. In other words, they subscribe to the modern idea of nation and call for the banishment of foreign Aryan settlers by valorising the former. Their reinterpretation of the word 'INDIA' as International Dravidians Independent Association, and demythologisation of 'Bharat' as not ruled by Bharata, indicate how it follows the framework of nationalism by infusing it with an anti-caste perspective defined as Anti-Aryan/Anti-Brahmin(ical).

The identity reclamation in the narratives of DCUF also foregrounds lineage as a pertinent concern. They contrast their oppressed conditions in the Aryan regime with the ideal rule of their Dravidian forefathers. Equating Dravidians and Asuras and keeping them in opposition to the Aryan Brahmins, DCUF highlights this contrast exemplified through the repeated reference to the legend of Maha Bali, who was betrayed and manipulated by the Brahmin Vamana. As narrated by one of the early associates of Sabharaj Thirumeni, "Mahabali was the last Dravidian king. Since he

¹⁰Deities consecrated in various Hindu temples in Kerala

was great and invincible, they sought the help of Brahma-Vishnu-Maheswara to defeat Mahabali” (Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021).

DCUF’s reclamation of their royal lineage is most evident in their naming pattern. Sabharaj urged his followers to name their children after the great Dravidian kings. All the members of Deva Jana Samajam (the spiritual wing of DCUF) have names referring to kings such as *Thampuran* (lord), *Thirumeni* (revered), *Yajamanan* (lord/master), *Raj* (king), etc. AnurajThirumeni and MB Manoj write, “The enslaved in India were once a community with self-pride and glory. Understanding that history is the only path to their liberation. That is why Appachi formed positions in the community such as Rajarishis, Devarishis, Rajamathas, Devamathas and Rajakanyas”(Thiru PJ Sabharaj: Orma Rashtreeyam Atayalam 102). These names denote Adi-Dravida as the royal-priestly tribe. Another member of DCUF recalls the naming ceremony of his daughter as follows,

Thirumeni had named my children. My eldest daughter is Rani Sumitra Devi. My sons are Niyathiraj Chakravarthy and Nayanaraj Chakravarthy. And my youngest daughter is Nrupa mol. When our last daughter was born, we sent him (Thirumeni) a letter informing him about it and inviting him to the naming ceremony. I requested him to find a name for her. After three days, we got a letter. Only this much was written on it; my address, Appachi’s signature, and three names. When he came here the night before the ceremony, he asked my wife and me to choose one among those names. We both liked the name ‘Anuraja’. So, we told him to name her as ‘Anuraja’. Appachi also said it is a good name. The next morning, after all the prayers, the ceremony began. Appachi held her in his hands and was praying. While praying, he heard a humming voice in his ears, and then he said, “she is Nrupamol.” We were surprised. (Personal communication 29 Jan. 2021)

Kaipuzha Jayaraj, one among Sabharaj’s early associates writes,

We are coming singing the song of blood
The song of blood, the song of struggle
We are the worshippers of the Satya-dharma
We are the children of the rishi-Bharata (n.p.)

DCUF narratives trace their lineage to the Dravidian kings who established kingdoms of Chera, Chola, and Pandya kings, who are shown to have ruled *Dravidanadu*, of which Kerala was a part. According to the speech by one of the *rajarshis* at the annual function at Mukkada,

Bharatam was ruled by the Dravidas. The Aryans, who were intelligent, mighty, and physically attractive, mingled with the Dravida women and, through deceit, extracted the country’s secrets, financial sources, and ruling strategies. Thus, the Dravidians lost their country. Many Dravidian kings ruled even Kerala. Cheran, Cholan, Pandhyan, Chenkuttaman, and Chethara Prathapan were powerful Dravidian kings. (26 Dec. 2020)

The depiction of the Adi-Dravida as the descendants of the Dravidian kings is further exemplified in the words of Satheeshan, a member of DCUF. He says,

We were dominant in this land. We were the owners. But everything had been robbed from us, and we got enslaved. That means Dravidians lost their glory after the reign of rulers like Chera, Chola, Pandya, Chenkuttaman, Chethara Prathapan and Kotharani. Mahabali was the last Dravidian king. (Personal interview 17 Jan. 2021)

The historiographic representation of royal legacy in DCUF conforms with the mainstream Kerala historiography in its equation of the Cheras to the native rulers of the regions of erstwhile Kerala. It is significantly different from Kerala Dalit historiography, which shows the Cheras as a royal dynasty in ancient Tamilakam which plundered regions of Kerala to amass wealth. As evinced in these narratives, DCUF privileges the political realm, similar to the political historiography of Kerala. In contrast to Dalit Kerala historiography, which highlights the social realm, DCUF's historiography defines the community in political terms, emphasizing on material prosperity and social harmony thanks to good governance.

Reinterpretation of History

Understanding history through the alternate framework of caste compels relooking and reinterpreting existing historiographic representations. Identification of historiographic archives as historical validates the reinterpretation of archives and the narratives based on them. DCUF texts attempt such reinterpretation of historiographic sources and narratives to construct their alternate history.

In contrast to the mainstream representation of Aryan hegemony as effected through Brahmin brilliance and possession of agricultural technologies, DCUF represents the establishment of Aryan hegemony through violence and manipulation. This narrativization challenges the equation between Brahmins and innate superior qualities by accentuating that Aryan/brahmin superiority is a sheer matter of domination and not inherent prowess. The reinterpretation of the Aryan invasion by DCUF highlights Aryan treachery as the cause of the decline of the Dravidian kingdom. DCUF texts emphasize the ideological control attained through the appropriation of Dravidian knowledge traditions. The Brahmanical appropriation of Dravidian epics such as *Thirukkural* and their Vedas and Shastras is a recurring argument in the historiography of DCUF, as discussed in the previous section. Along with reclaiming their dignity through the reclamation of epistemic superiority, DCUF also underscore that the Aryan invasion was violent and gory. As MJ Pandit writes,

Hey, crores Dravida young people,
Go on and save our land.
Aryans the betrayers
Have invaded our land, Bharat. (n.p)

The violence and treachery of the Aryans is further reiterated,

The Aryans, the most heinous tribe, Aryans, the most wicked tribe, Aryans who even lust after their mothers, a tribe with the most despicable culture, came to our land and destroyed the rule on our land, which was based on truth, justice, and dharma. They killed our kings; they butchered our *gurus*, and destroyed our leaders. They conquered India and called it a Hindu nation. When the power was shifted to the Aryans, the original people of the land, the Adi Dravida, we became *Pulaya*, *Paraya*, and polluting untouchable creatures. Thus, *Pulayan*, *Parayan*, *Vedan*, *Vettuvan*, *Velan*, *Ulladan*, and *Adivasis* became powerless. (Speech at DCUF annual celebration 26 Dec. 2020)

The representation of Kerala renaissance is another crucial concern in DCUF historiography which demands critical attention. While agreeing to the mainstream historiographic idea that the renaissance was pioneered by Sree Narayana Guru in the nineteenth century attempting the reformation of individual caste groups, DCUF marks a rupture from this renaissance tradition and posits their movement as anti-caste defined in terms of the unification of caste groups to form a community. In one DCUF song, Sabharaj Thirumeni writes:

Nanu guru¹¹ has come to console his caste
He ignored the Harijans
Don't ever think that he came for our liberation. (*DCUF Viplava Ganangal* 10)

Although he critiques the renaissance movement for its inability to unify people across castes, these lines show adherence to the same approach that it critiques. This narrative also suggests an exclusionary identity politics premised on the Harijan identity. Furthermore, while claiming to be anti-caste, their self-identification as the Harijan reinforces the Gandhian reformist paradigm.

Kaipuzha Jayaraj, one of Sabharaj's disciples, writes,

Hadn't they tortured our fathers and mothers
For the past thousand and eight hundred years!
Do you know anyone who has done anything for them?
Has Budha, Krishna, Muhammed, or Christ done something for them?
Has Narayanan done anything for them?
Do you know the reason, dear brother? (*DCUF sViplava Ganangal* n.p.)

Jayaraj's poem critiques not only the renaissance movement but various religions in India for failing to resolve the caste problem. The lines indicate that all these religions are equally culpable in perpetuating caste. Placing these religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, on the same line of critique, however, overlooks their historical differences in the engagement with caste via religion. The rejection of Buddha and worship of Ambedkar, who believed in the philosophy of Buddha, is

¹¹Sree Narayana Guru was the pioneer of the Ezhava movement in Kerala.

another contradiction in their anti-caste discourse. As evinced in Deva Jana Samajam's (Spiritual wing of DCUF) pantheon, DCUF forges a Dalit identity premised on the history of indigeneity and enslavement, and worships anti-caste leaders from Dalit/slave castes such as Dr. B R Ambedkar, Ayyankali, KP Vallon, Pambadi John Joseph, Poykayil Appachan, and Sabharaj Thirumeni as the gurus and gods of the community. Talking about Sabharaj Thirumeni, Rajmohan Thamburan, the chairman of DCUF, says, "Appachi used to intervene in the problems of everyone. He never looked at the caste of anyone. He asked us to unite irrespective of sub-caste differences. Adi-Dravida is our identity. We had been enslaved. Appachi used to say that history should unite us." (Personal interview 6 Jan. 2021)

As Anuraj Thirumeni writes,

After the death of Poykayil Appachan in 1939 and the death of Mahatma Ayyankali in 1941, in post-Independent India, the Dalit discourse degenerated based on subcaste/religious identities. The same predicament continued even after the formation of the Kerala state in 1956. Though the democratic discourses and the community reforms tried to open up public spaces, Kerala society continued to be divided based on caste and political parties which sided with specific castes. DCUF intervened in this context by stressing the need to unite beyond the sense of inferior consciousness, irrespective of these differences.(22)

DCUF's thrust on Dalit identity as the enslaved is reinforced by MB Manoj and Anuraj Thirumeni,

[I]n some sense, DCUF is an organisation that expands the idea of PRDS (Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha/The Divine Church of Visible Salvation). Simultaneously, it retains certain characteristics of Ayyankali movement's socio-political activism. Also, it included the visions of the Cheramar sanghams, which were focused on the issues of Dalit Christians. Thus, clearly, DCUF shows a pattern of adopting the multiple strands of the Dalit movement in the renaissance. (23)

DCUF underscores that it needs to be marked in the discourse of renaissance for its revolutionary anti-caste stance. They highlight the unification of the subcastes as the distinguishing aspect of DCUF. They do this by focusing on the Dalit participation in the renaissance movement and by aligning only with the movements of/by the Dalit castes during the renaissance and later Nationalist period.

Conclusion

As exemplified in Indian and Kerala Dalit historiographies, social formation is informed by caste, and looking at history from the perspective of the anti-caste

communities necessitates recognition of history as the sum total of patterns of domination and resistance. Putting the historiography of anti-caste communities like DCUF in conversation with the mainstream and Dalit historiographies, this study reveals that Dalit historiography is not an identity-based counter-project but an analytical one that narrativizes the past from a Dalit standpoint. This interventionist standpoint, defined as anti-caste, is not necessarily oppositional to the mainstream traditions of historiography. The relationship between mainstream and Dalit traditions of historiographies is a complex one that includes diverse kinds of negotiations vis-à-vis historiographic content and framework.

Analysis of the cultural texts of DCUF exemplifies that their historiography primarily chronicles domination and resistance vis-à-vis the question of caste slavery. Caste-based enslavement and antislavery/anti-caste movements occupy the heart of their historiography. DCUF presents enslavement as a political issue of invasion and dethronement, resulting in enslavement. In DCUF cultural texts, emphasis is on the ideological realm, highlighting their dignified identity as the royal descendants, and attempts its restoration through the reclamation of glorious history, knowledge and kingdom. The restoration of the Dravidian kingdom is articulated by adopting the mainstream political historiographic framework of Kerala.

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