

Poothapattu: Sobs of a Broken People, Fragmented Ethos, and the Lost Land

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Abstract

Keeping three radical ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, which have not been seriously dealt with by mainstream Indian/Kerala historiography, at the backdrop, namely, the Nagas and Dravidians are the same people, the untouchables were Buddhists, and India's history as the history of mortal conflicts between Buddhism and Brahminism, the article attempts to study a Malayalam poem that has attained a classical status in the language, *Poothapattu*, to unravel the concealed layers of Kerala's past. Drawing on the distinction the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein establishes between the image and representation and on the insights provided by the Sangham Thinaï conceptualizations, the article argues that in the Pootham image created by the Savarnna Malayalees, one could see sedimentation of history, where representations of the untouchable population of different historical moments are fused into a complex image, attesting to the veracity of Ambedkar's radical ideas enumerated above.

Keywords

Dalit-bahujan history, *Poothapattu*, Pariah, Buddhist philosophy, Brahminism, Sangham Thinaï, Savarnna representation, image of the other, sacrificial myth, violence and non-violence

Mythically, two journeys, undertaken in two different directions, inform the demography and topography of Kerala: Kannaki's and Parasurama's. While the Kannaki of *Chilapathikaram* journeyed from the east to the west, from Madurai to Kodungalloor, from Tamil Nadu to Kerala, through the imposing mountains on the eastern border to the rocking waves of Arabian Sea on the western border, traversing the highland, midland, and lowland of Kerala, the Parasurama of *Keralolpathi* traveled from the north to the south, from Karnataka to Kerala, traversing only the midland

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and avoiding the highland and lowland. The Brahminic text *Keralolpathi* gives a cautionary sermon as regards the highland and lowland: “He (Parasurama) then tells them to stop the evil goddesses from the mountains by chanting evil mantras and avoid bad times by worshipping Lord Rudra...He further tells them to stop the water goddesses coming from the seashore by appeasing the Satkarmamurti and ward off dangers during bad times by worshipping Goddess Durga” (*Keralolpathi* 03-04). The two journeys roughly document the migratory movements of two different people: the people of the Sangham age, who had, as attested by the recent Pattanam excavation and also by the Old Testament and ancient historians like Gibbon and Pliny, engaged in trade relations with West Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, and China 2500 years ago and were later fragmented into various caste and religious groups (whose religious ethos in principle are opposed to Hinduism), and the Brahminic population which is believed to have migrated to Kerala from CE sixth to ninth centuries, and was quite conscious of its distinct caste identity after having grabbed the land from the ancient layers of the population. What is most striking is the gendered nature of the journey: the ancient population had a woman as their mythical figure; the Brahminic population a man. The Indian philosopher Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, in his work on the Lokayata tradition, has touched upon this binary as the difference between the matriarchal tradition of the indigenous population that was based on agriculture and the patriarchal tradition of the Vedic people. In Chattopadhyaya’s formulation:

The Social importance of the sexes is correlated to the development of the economic life. The original pre-hunting stage was characterized by mother-right. With the development of hunting, however, the social supremacy was shifted to male. In the post-hunting stage, among those people that developed pastoral economy this male-supremacy came to exercise even greater hold; among those, however, that discovered the agriculture, the situation was reversed. There was a revival of mother-right among them. With the further development of agriculture,-more specifically, with the introduction of the cattle-drawn plough to the field-this agricultural mother-right was finally overthrown.

Gods and goddesses are after all created in human image; these shifts in the social importance of the sexes were naturally reflected in the form of parallel shifts in the celestial sphere. Deities representing the hunting and the pastoral stages are predominantly male whereas those representing the earlier stages of agriculture were predominantly female. (Chattopadhyaya 241)

What is to be borne in mind here is that this transformation of Indian society from a predominantly matriarchal culture, where the primacy of the female principle over the male principle, of prakriti over purusa, of the matter over the ideal, is the built-in assumption, to a Brahminic patriarchal culture in which “the entire cosmic order was conceived in terms of the original male” (245), was not a smooth one but was achieved in and through systematic violence, the misogyny of which could be plainly seen “in

the ‘three typically Indian institutions,’ namely, hypergamy, child-marriage and *sati* (burning of widows)”. The Brahminic world order needed such “extravagant means” to break “the resistance of matriarchy” (254) because “the largest proportion of the Indian population remained predominantly agricultural”, which is “the material basis of the female principle” (258).

The systematic violence of Brahminic patriarchy has an additional element to it when it comes to subduing the non-Brahminic earlier population of Kerala. They created a system of marriage and concubinage, which is not to be seen anywhere in the world. As per the system, only the eldest son in the Brahminic household is allowed to marry; other brothers are allowed to engage in a non-marital sexual alliance with the women from the ancient population. Since the body of these women were seeable and touchable, they could not be treated like the rest of the population but had to be given the Varna status; they had to be incorporated into the Brahminic Varna system as the fourth Varna, as the Sudra, the menial class whose duty is to serve the other three classes. This was the birth of the caste known as Nair from a stock of people whom B.R. Ambedkar has identified as Nagas or in today’s more popular parlance known as Dravidians (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. *Who Were Shudras*. 296). In other words, Nairs are the Nagas with a difference; unlike other Nagas, they are the Nagas who have been assimilated into the Brahminic order as seeable, servile, and touchable; they are the Nagas who have put up the least resistance to patriarchal Brahminism. Barring the Brahminized population of the Nairs, the rest of the Naga population were treated as panchamas, the fifth class, the absolute other of the Varna system, by the Brahminic order and had been given the status of the untouchable and unseeable. It was two religions from without, beyond the shores of the Arabian Sea, Christianity and Islam, that finally gave some of the unseeable and untouchable people, the Brahminized Nairs and even some Brahmins an idea of a life outside the fold of Hinduism once they embraced it through marriage or conversion.

The Nagas who refused to be coopted to the Varna order had, as Ambedkar had shrewdly understood and made explicit, a philosophical reason for doing so: their ethos was conditioned by Buddhism. They had already imbibed the value of non-violence (*karuna* and *maitri*) and the collective ownership of land and resources as a superior mode of being in the world, a sense which is most vividly articulated in the Onam song written by Sahodaran Ayyappan recalling the golden period of pre-Brahminic Kerala of Maha Bali as a time “when people were all alike and joyous in a world where there were no lies, deceits, diseases; where everybody happily worked together; where women were equal to men” (Shekher, *Puthan Keralam: Kerala Samskarathinte Bauddha Adithara*). The emphatic reminder in the song that it was a time when women enjoyed equality clearly underscores that the time in question was not that of Brahminical patriarchy! Into this world of joyous camaraderie did enter the Brahminic god Vishnu, in the incarnate forms of two Brahmin carpetbaggers from the north: Parasurama with his axe and Vamana with his deceitful feet which measured away all the land and life Maha Bali possessed, including his own life.

The Onam myth, in other words, and the birth of the caste system and the untouchable population in Kerala is a striking case, which attests to the veracity of Ambedkar's thesis that the untouchables were once Buddhists (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. *The Untouchables*. 315). It was the moral and political resistance they put up against Brahminism that caused their fall. But this aspect of Kerala history, the Buddhist past and the conflict between Buddhism and Brahminism, has never been a concern of the mainstream historiographers of Kerala. There is a built-in tendency not to engage the period in question. This period has been relegated as a dark period because of the non-availability of textual evidence. This is, in fact, a result of a particular kind of imagination that structures mainstream historiography. How do we account for that imagination?

In mainstream historiography, Kerala is imagined as a space lying from the north to the south, which is clearly a reproduction, in the imagination, of the migratory movement of Brahmins. The myth of Parasurama, documented in the Sanskrit text *Kerala Mahatmyam* and the Malayalam text *Keralolpathi* attests to this point. The myth forced into the popular psyche, officially and unofficially, celebrates the story that "Kerala was formed by Parashurama, one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu, by throwing his bloodstained axe into the sea from Gokarna. The axe landed at Kanyakumari and the land between Gokarna and Kanyakumari was raised up as Kerala" (Naha). In short, the axe, on which imprinted a past of violence and murder, narrates, like in the Western movies of Hollywood, a bloodstained event that spread from the north to the south. To a great extent, the historiography of Kerala has been built on this spatial configuration of Kerala and the mythical events narrated in *Keralolpathi*, minus the ideological content embedded in the bloodstained axe.

As we mentioned earlier via the Kannaki myth, in contrast to the mainstream cartographic imagination, another imagination already existed. But, unfortunately, this way of imagining Kerala was totally obfuscated by mainstream historiography. This imagination follows the movement of the sun and the many rivers that abound in Kerala: from the east to the west. Here Kerala is perceived as a landscape that stretches from the east to the west, from the mountains on the east to the Arabian Sea on the west, with the sea envisaged as the natural terminus of the journeys that both the sun and the rivers undertake. This journey that a civilization has undertaken along this direction, in parallel with the course of the sun and rivers; this journey of a people who were outside the fold of Hinduism, was brutally erased or ignored by the mainstream historiography of Kerala, the refusal resulting in a distorted understanding of the material and historical conditions and forces that had acted behind the creation of modern Kerala.

The erasure, on the one hand, has a historical continuity: it smoothly repeats and enacts the doctrine of exclusion that has historically been the built-in feature of the Hindu world order. In other words, the mainstream historiography of Kerala systematically erases the Dalit and other lower caste populations from the purview of history. They are rendered invisible and untouchable by modern historiography, continuing the historical and political project of the Hindu Dharma of making some people untouchable or unseeable! On the other, the mainstream historiography enacts

another form of erasure: not only has it erased a people and rendered them invisible but it also has ensured that certain topographies in Kerala remained invisible as well, namely, the mountains and sea.

Though much of the mainstream historiography casts doubt upon the historical exactness of the details given in *Keralolpathi*, they all have something in common with the latter, which is, as pointed out earlier, nothing but methodological flirting with the doctrine of exclusion. What was later identified as the trademark feature of the Kerala historiography, the over-representation of and the obsession with the Hindu varna order passing as the history of Kerala and the omission of the life-world of the adivasis, untouchables, backward communities, Muslims and Christians, had its beginning in *Keralolpathi*. We see in *Keralolpathi* a straightforward narrative aligning itself, thematically, with the hierarchical organization of life established by the varna system. A Brahmin carves out a geographical space from the sea; brings a group of Arya Brahmins from the north, settles them there ensuring their separate identity from other Brahmins, and teaches them the necessary martial skills needed for survival; brings from elsewhere another group of people to rule the place by being subservient to the Brahmins and calls them the Kshatriyas; and finally brings the Sudras, again from elsewhere, to ensure that there are people to serve the Brahmins.

But at the same time, we must, by evoking the distinction the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein makes between representation and image (Eisenstein 12-17), be sensitive to a missing representation in the *Keralolpathi*, which is crucial and makes the varna image present in the text a bit interesting. In the varna image, the Vaishya representation is missing! Though the text, as just mentioned, follows the logic of the varna system, it is surprisingly silent about the third varna, the Vaishyas, the merchant class. The absence of the Vaishyas has a strategic role to play. In fact, one could even say that it is precisely to erase the contributions of the Vaishyas in the creation of this land that *Keralolpathi* omitted the mountains and the sea from its discursive domain. Even before the advent of the Brahmins to Kerala from the north, this geographic location, under various names, was known all over the world as one of the main centers of international trade.

Apropos of the structural role that *Keralolpathi* played in setting the methodological terrain for later-day historiography, we must also pay attention to a point raised by Abbas Panakkal, namely, the fact that the name Kerala is Sanskritic in origin and that before the advent of Brahmins to Kerala this land had been known all over as Malayalam. He writes, “The name for the place that is seen in *Keralolpathi* before Brahmins were created (by Parashurama) is ‘Malayalam’. In other words, at the time of the drafting of *Keralolpathi* the name ‘Malayalam’ was well-known. It was after Brahminical ascendancy that for the first time the name Kerala is used in *Keralolpathi*” (Panakkal). Noting the name ‘Malai Nadu’ that is inscribed on a stone in the temple of Tanjavoor and dating back to CE 6th century, the Urdu scholar Shamsullah Qadiri reminds us that it stands for erstwhile Malabar, literally meaning the land of the mountains (21).

Further,

The language of Malabar is very different from Tamil. Yet it is a branch of the Dravidian language. Because it is the language of a land where mountains (mala) abound that it got the name Malayalam. Because of the same reason the country also got the name Malayalam and the people who speak the language became Malayalee.

When the word mala is compounded with bar, you get the word Malabar. Bar is a Persian word. It means both country and excess. So, when the word bar is added to mala, it either means a mountain country or a place where mountains are seen in excess. (Qadiri 21)

When the Dalit-bahujan population is expunged from historiography; when the name of their land is altered so shrewdly to ensure that they won't claim their rightful share in it; when their cooperative mother-rights world is fragmented to make them zombies in a patriarchally ordained Brahminical world as caste entities, where do the Dalit-bahujans attempt a reconstruction of their Buddhist past that has been fragmented beyond recognition? Despite all the strategies of concealment, fragmentation, and distortion of historical memory and evidence by the Brahminic system, luckily, there survive many traces, which a highly trained mind alert to the iconography and ritualistic embodiment of Dalit-bahujan population and the Brahminic systemic strategies of erasure, can work through, much like a Keats imagines a history from the pictures on an urn. The only trouble is that unlike Keats we are not dealing with an urn that is fully *present*, but with a few pieces of an urn that is broken, with most of the pieces lost, an urn that evokes absence rather than presence! From the unclear images and broken lines on the surviving urn pieces, we have to first work toward the complete picture, the picture that was and is not. From there to the full weight and presence of history. From the broken to the impossibly complete, engaging in a process Ambedkar always engaged: of endlessly attempting the unattainable, of creating a complete man from the broken men!

One instance for that painful exercise is the poem *Poothapattu*, by Idasseri Govindan Nair. He wrote the poem based on the folk art of the poothan prevalent in the Valluvanadan region of Kerala and its myth. The poem, though very complex and paradoxical as befits poetry of the highest class, has nonetheless achieved a surpassing simplicity in its signification in the popular psyche of Malayalam readers. The popular explication of the poem unequivocally states that the poem is the victory of motherhood and truth over the evil force that resorts to lies and treachery. What is celebrated here is the struggle, steadfastness, and perseverance a mother has shown in her attempt to find and save her boy who was abducted by the Pootham with deceitful tactics.

Naturally, there would arise a question: why engage a poetic image of the Pootham created by the Savarnnas? Why not simply dismiss it as "the exaggerated creations of a morbid and hostile imagination"? (Oppert 88) No! This is, on the contrary, the perfect artifact formed by the sedimentation of history. Or, in other words, in the Pootham image of the Savarnna fantasy one can, if you pay close attention, decipher

the sedimentation of a host of histories. It is also an artifact that must be understood in the sense in which Fanon placed 'black soul' as an artefact ("What is called the black soul is white man's artefact.") (Fanon XV), where blackness is "overdetermined from without" (Fanon 116). That is to say, in the Pootham image created by the Savarnnas and circulated among themselves, a vivid picture of the mind that is engaged in the process of overdetermining the other is discernable.

What is thrilling is that the condensation of history and the projection of self-legitimizing fantasies onto the other is achieved through the creation of one of the finest poems written in the Malayalam language, a poem that is on par with the best in world literature. In the *Poothapattu* we have a poet fully immersed in the Sangham poetic devices and techniques, totally avoiding the favorite forte of most Malayalee poets, the Sanskritized Malayalam. The events in the poem take place in the three Thinais, the Kuringi Thinai (mountain), the Marutham Thinai (the cultivable land), and the Palai Thinai (which is conceptually more like a desert, an arid place, but in the geographic context of South India it could be both the Kuringi Thinai and Marutham Thinai during the summer when everything dries up (Anjumoorathi 42), with the rhythm and music of the poem, undergoes immediate change as the setting changes from one Thinai to the other. The poet encapsulates a journey quite akin to the one Kannaki had undertaken, from the east to the west, much like Illanko Adikal did when he wrote *Chilappathikaram*. There is also a remarkable similarity between the poetic vision of both Idasseri Govindan Nair and the poet of *Chilappathikaram*. Both of them wrote their work from the Neithal Thinai (the low land full of water bodies), looking up eastwards from the shores of the Arabian Sea: while Illanko Adikal did it from a few miles north of Kodungalloor, Idasseri Govindan Nair did it from Ponnani, both places, surprisingly, share another similarity as the foci of Muslim enlightenment in Kerala!

The simplicity we mentioned becomes very problematic the moment we pay closer attention to the structure of the poem. The poem unfolds in the form of a conversation between an elderly woman and the young kids in a Savarnna family, the latter having just finished their evening prayer and is awaiting dinner, where in the very beginning itself, it is stated that the narrator is going to tell them a folk tale about the Pootham. In other words, for the narrator, it is a myth about the Pootham; the contemporary popular explication of the poem as the victory of motherhood is absent in the narrator's scheme of things. The narrator's story evolves through distinct stages. First, a description of the Pootham, a scene quite familiar to the audience in question, is given. The body presented in the description is not an ordinary body, it is an embellished body, a larger-than-life image of a body that demands a look from its audience, a look verging on awe and fear. Alas! Before the over-embellished body makes its presence visible to the audience, they have already envisaged it through the sound its walking creates: the cacophony ("kalambalukal") of the drum (thudi) and the brass anklets has already made it clear to the Savarnna audience that the body approaching them is not an ordinary body but a body to be worshipped, or a body that has become a deity. The people immersed in the history of the caste praxis in Kerala, at this point, can discern two things already: (1) the bare body hiding under the spectacle

of bright red and white, of garland, and of the decorated crown, is the body of an untouchable and unseeable. The drum-beat has already announced his caste status: he is a Pariah. But even though he is a Pariah, his body whose movement is accompanied by the sound of drums cannot be treated merely as the body of an unseeable thing as they are wont of doing because the moment the drum-beat is mixed with the cacophony of the anklets, it heralds divinity: he must be worshipped, through the cacophony of the drum and anklets and the spectacle of an embellished body, the unseeable body of the Pariah has transformed into a seeable divine, the polluted become the sacred, the temporal the infinite. (2) The sound of the anklet heralding female divinity does not need much explication. It takes us to the heart of the Kottavai-Kannaki myth, the journey of the Goddess of chastity from Madurai to Kodungallur with an anklet, and her merging with Kottavai, the already worshipped Goddess of war, the Goddess representing the Palai Thina, carrying the weapon, is a metaphoric capture of the emergence of a society, which had struck a balance between the differing pulls of expansion and domesticity. But, in the Pootham, the sickle is remarkably missing! In other words, in the Pootham there is something of Kottavai-Kannaki that remains but at the same time, something of the same Kottavai-Kannaki is missing! How do we account for this curious presence/absence? This is the moment at which one is forced to engage the question: Is the word Pootham a colloquial variant of the Brahminic word Baudham, by which the Brahminic logic has essentialized the philosophy of Buddhism in some eternal truth statements? Or in other words, in the Pootham do we encounter a philosophic/historic moment in the non-Brahminic indigenous population of Kerala, who under the influence of Buddhist non-violence decided to lay down their arms, just as the emperor Asoka did after he turned to Buddhism? After all, the sickle is not just a tool of the anthropologist to reap insights from our agricultural past but a metaphor for bloodletting, which it is plainly in Kottavai. I don't want to dwell on the answer to the rhetorical question just asked. Instead, I will just point out a remarkable interjection that appears between the auditory and the ocular aspects of the Pootham. Immediately after the sounds of the approaching Pootham are heard and just before the narrator describes the visual aspects of the Pootham, the narrator exclaims: *ayyayya!* The interjection *Ayya* is repeated twice!

Who is this *Ayyan*, *Ayyo*?... *Ayyan* is none other than the Avalokiteswara Bodhisattva, who comes to your aid in all your great troubles. In an article titled "Thiyyar" written in Mithavadi in 1916, CV Kunjiraman pointed out that in Tamil the word *ayyan* means Buddha or Putharu. For more than thousand and six hundred years or, as the recent Pattanam excavation indicates, ever since the Buddhist missionaries of Asoka had reached South India, Kerala, and Sri Lanka in BC 3rd century and up to a period of AD 13th century, *ayya* was the *abhayapadam* and *saranamantram* that had got imprinted in the conscious/unconscious sensorium and in the collective memory of the Bahujans. That is why it has become the natural interjection of kids, who have no formal training in the language. Not only in extreme danger but also in situations involving

excitement and happiness, we scream ‘ayyo’. It is a relic of the language, which has got solidified in the unconscious through thousands of years. (Shekher, Puthan Keralam: Kerala Samskarathinte Bauddha Adithara 07)

The second stage, as an answer to the question asked by the kids regarding the whereabouts of the Pootham, recounts in detail the locus of the Pootham’s caste and the history of its transformations. The kids are told that “it spends its daytime in the rocks (*para-kettu*) on the other slope of the hillock of the Pariah, sending wide-open eyes outside through the tiny door.” The strategy of demonization effected through the lines is so perfect that the kids would invariably get the image of a treacherous creature, waiting to pounce on its prey the moment the latter lands within the Pootham’s field of vision. But the obverse is the historical truth. In the wide-open eyes of the Pootham is imprinted the unbearable anxiety of an unseeable life, whose movement during the course of daytime was terribly restricted, forcing the Pariah to wander through the fringes and wastelands of Savarnna society. Every violation of the caste embargo, of the traveling restriction, would involve severe punishment, which could even culminate in death. The demonization, which begins to terrorize the minds of the kids, effectively hides another powerful historical insight bed rocked on the *para* and mountain on which the Pariah resides. In his remarkably original work on Indian history titled *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India*, the German philologist Gustav Oppert wrote more than a century ago about the Pariah community

That their name, in spite of its usual derivation from *para* or *parai*, should rather be connected with the original Dravidian population, seems to me to admit of no question. The supposition that the Pariahs are the drummer-caste and have obtained their name from that instrument appears to rest on a weaker foundation. It is most probably an afterthought, the more easily explicable since the lower classes delighted in the noise of the drum, and the name of the drum-beating class was transferred to the instrument by which the Pariah made his presence known. The lute of the Candala (the *candela-vallaki*, *candalika*, *candalika*, *kandoli*, *kandoli-vina*) is similarly named after the Candala, and not the Candala after the lute. Moreover, the word *para* or *parai* is, except in Malayalam and Tamil, not found in the other Dravidian languages in the sense of drum and at the same time as the name of the Pariahs; for the Pariah is called *Holeya* in Kanarese in spite of *para* signifying a drum, and in Telugu he is known as *Malavadu*, which word originally signifies mountaineer. If the Pariahs were the caste of drummers, they would most probably be called so, wherever they are found in India.

I regard the Pariah as the representative of the ancient Dravidian population, and as having been condemned to supply his name to the lowest layers of the society, as the ancient Sudras after their subjugation gave their name to the Sudra caste. It will be subsequently shown that the Candalas are among the

Gaudians, what the Pariahs are among the Dravidians. This connection is even indicated by the name of the Candalas, which resembles those of the Kandaloi, Khands and Gounds.

I think the word Pariah, the Paravari of the Maratha country, is intimately connected with the names of Paratas, Paradas, Paravar, Pardhis, Parheyas, Paharias, or Maler, Bars (Bhars), Brahuis, Mars (Mhars), &c, &c, and that it designates originally a mountaineer, from the Dravidian root para, preserved in the Malayalam para, in the Tamil par and parai, and the Telugu paru. (Oppert, Gustav. *On the Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India.*) (Oppert 32-33)

Only when things are understood from the vantage point provided by Gustav Oppert can we make explicit the logic behind another accusation leveled against the Pootham: namely, it milks the cows and drinks it while the shepherds who accompany the cows take a siesta under the shades of leaves. At first, this seems to be an exact replica of the contemporary battle between the beef-eating Dalits-bahujans and the Brahminized savarnnas who worship the cow as a holy animal. Before jumping into such easy generalizations, we must understand that the refusal to eat the meat of the cow was a practice that had existed among Dalit communities themselves. This accusation, thus, could be understood, as Marvin Harris does, by locating its potential emergence in the pre-Brahminic history of the indigenous populations, when the mountaineers came down from the rocks and settled down on the banks of the river, or, in other words, when Pariahs became Pulayas (owners of the land, where pula means, as opposed to jala (water), the land), both names indicating the geographic locations of the dwellers in the Sangham Thina fashion rather than carrying any Brahminical caste associations. For the settled-down people, the cow became an economic necessity for agricultural production. When the Brahmins appropriated this agricultural wisdom and made it a holy principle in absolute terms, the Pariah's beef-eating habit was posited as the root of their absolute otherness, thus hiding the very principle by which we can trace the influence of Buddhist thinking in the food habit of Pariah community. The meat of a dead cow is edible as far as Buddhist teaching is concerned, provided it is not intentionally killed for human consumption. What is denied in Buddhism is not the meat of the cow, but rather the meat of any animal killed specifically for human consumption. If the death of the animal is natural, that is, unintentional, unmediated by human agency, then the meat is consumable.

From here onwards the demonization gets intensified. Now the treacherous and violent past of the Pootham is readily recalled. She was once a seductress and a goddess who accepted the sacrificial offering, including human sacrifice. Initially, we see her as a girl who has just attained puberty, whose presence in fertility rites has been very well recorded by anthropologists. This is adduced as a logical explanation for an event that had already taken place: her role as the killer of the sacrificial victim and as the Goddess who consumed the offering. The killer and the Goddess merged into one. Making an uncanny observation, Rene Girard, the French philosopher, writes:

In fact, there is nothing incomprehensible about the viewpoint that sees menstrual blood as a physical representation of sexual violence. We ought, however, to go further: to inquire whether this process of symbolization does not respond to some half-suppressed desire to place the blame for all forms of violence on women. By means of this taboo a transfer of violence has been effected and a monopoly established that is clearly detrimental to the female sex. (Girard 39)

In other words, she bleeds, and the shedding of blood is always already associated with death. The blood, the letting of which causes death, is, thus, impure, and the blood she lets every month is impure. Hence, she is the primordial blood letter, the primordial cause of death. The mother Goddess Kottaiva, the earliest of the Dravidian goddesses, mingles the sexual and the sacrificial in its most violent aspect.

In the context of Kerala, the transfer of violence onto the female body had an additional role to play. It was not just a transfer of violence to a female body of violence, as it happened elsewhere, but also a transfer of violence from one set of people to the other, from Brahminized people to the indigenous population of the Pariahs and Pulayas and other untouchable castes, which very subtly hid the extreme form of violence typical of patriarchal Brahminism. What got transferred (and disfigured) onto the female Dalit body is the violence of the great sacrifice, the Maha Bali, enacted by Vishnu's incarnation, the Vamana, the short-statured Brahmin. In other words, in the Onam myth, we see the violent manipulation of the Brahmin class who grabbed the entire land belonging to the toiling mass and made them unseeable in their own land. As compensation for pushing him down to the nether world, of making him invisible in a world made and cultivated by his people, he is given a blessing by Vishnu/Vamana that Bali will be allowed to visit his land once a year. Unlike the Pootham, whose past human sacrifice evokes fear, the Maha Bali, the great sacrifice by the Brahmin male evokes no fear at all! No one even registers the fact that it was a sacrifice, a *bali*! This is the myth, which has culminated in the celebratory ritual purification of Onam, the tricking of violence "into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no response."

We must also mention another Brahminical human sacrifice that transfers the impurity of blood onto the woman and Dalit body at one stroke. The myth of Mari Amma (the transformed mother) is equivocal about how Parasurama, the patriarchal son par excellence, has achieved these dual aspects of the transfer of violence. When demanded by his father, Parasurama killed his mother with clinical perfection, in great style: he axed her head. But in the process, he killed an untouchable woman as well!

According to a version of the tale, Renuka fled to the locale of a lower-caste community, hoping that her Brahmin son would not consent to follow her and execute her due to his high caste. However, the obedient Parashurama cast aside his discomfort and swung his axe, beheading both his mother and a lower-caste woman who had risen to obstruct his matricide. When Parashurama asked his

boon of restoring his mother, Jamadagni offered him a magical pot of water that had to be sprinkled upon the head attached to the body of his mother. In his excitement, Parashurama accidentally fused the head of the lower-caste woman he had slain with the body of his mother, which both his father and he had to accept. The head of the high-caste Renuka was left behind in the community, retained as a shrine for the veneration of Renuka-Yellamma. (Wikipedia. "Renuka")

Both these instances of patriarchal violence born out of an encounter between the original Dravidian population and the migrant people are subtly hidden. Instead, the myth of the impure woman/lower caste blood is projected as the absolute vice, a vice that existed before Brahminic violence, an impurity, unless trapped in the holy structure of a ritual, will generate unending cycles of retributive violence. Thus, she becomes the seductress, who snatches away those youngsters who travel through her way having lost their way (more literally, people who do not care about time and social status) and kills them atop the palm tree that resembles a high scraper with seven stories. Even though it is the upper caste men, defying the caste interdictions, who venture into the way of the Pootham and are thus made outcastes and proclaimed dead by their own people, she is blamed for having sucked out the last drop of blood from their vital bodies. She is the one who does the offering and receives it.

The subtle evoking of the figure of the betel-chewing Yakshi (the Thamboola Yakshi) in the image of Pootham unravels the Jaina interim period of Kerala that occupies between Buddhism and Brahminism. It is an accepted fact that all the Buddhist centers of learning in Kerala were not directly snatched from the ancient Dalit population and immediately, at a stroke as it were, converted to Brahminic temples. Rather, the process was slow and structural, stretching over centuries and leaving a traceable pattern. Before the full takeover of the learning centers and their conversion to Brahminic temples, there was an interim Jaina transformation period in the history of most of the present-day temples, by which the iconography and belief system of the erstwhile Dalit-bahujans were slowly distorted, fragmented, and erased beyond recognition. The many myths and stories of the nocturnal Yakshis doing rounds even now capture the fundamental conflicts: the Yakshi invariably tries to lure away a Brahmin (mostly a Brahmin youth), to whose assistance come Brahminic texts/hymns. When the troubles created by the Yakshi reach an unbearable proportion, she is nailed, like the crucified Christ, on a Pala tree, putting an end to all her seductive charms and moves (Haridas 191-99). At first, this would seem very symbolic of a human sacrifice, where, as Rene Girard observes, "the function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting" (Girard 15), the conflict being the incommensurability between the surviving Buddhism and emerging Brahminism. Thus, Yakshi being "either outside or on the fringes of society" (13) becomes the proper material for resolving the conflict. But why would she be invariably nailed onto a Pala tree? Why not other trees? Why not other methods of torture and killing? With

the question, we arrive at the root of the Pala tree problem: Pala is not just a tree, it is, in Sangham literature, the tree representing the Palai Thina, the arid, uninhabitable land far away from the cultivable land! In the arrest of Yakshi on a Pala tree, in other reads, one reads painfully the history of the driving away of an entire population from their cultivable land to an arid, uninhabitable space on the fringes of civilization, forcing brutally on them, sickness, malnutrition, and worst of all illiteracy.

Like the Greek tragedies of the classical past, the poem *Poothapattu* is also structured on the sacrificial myth, which is not yet perceivable at the narrative level. The moment the frightened kids ask the ethical question “Why do we give such an ‘asat’ Pootham rice and mundu?”, we begin to perceive the reason behind the ritualistic appearance of the Pootham in the Savarnna world. Grandmother immediately tells them that not giving rice and mundu is an act of papam, because the evil things narrated by her were done by the Pootham in the past. These days the Pootham is always sad.

At this moment, all of a sudden, we are immediately at a heightened awareness of the philosophy of Buddhism. We already know that in opposition to the sat-chit-ananda triad of the Upanishadic essentialism, Buddhism was concerned with a life-world centered around anicca (impermanence), anatta (non-soul), and dukkha (sorrow), a world around nothing, sunya. The Pootham could never be the ever constant sat, the atman, of the Brahminic thought. No wonder, the kids identified the Pootham as such, as asat, in its blank immediacy, as nothing, as lacking an essential mode of being (Omvedt 59).

In other words, the Pootham’s discarding of its violent past of bloody sacrifice could be attributed to the message of non-violence spread by Buddhist monks. Rather, the poem appears to engage in a philosophical operation that aims at the sat, the essence of the Pootham. The next stage of the poem is precisely that. In the next stage, we temporarily leave the para, the rocks, and enter the fertile Valluvanadan region around the aaru (river), probably Bharatha puzha. We are in a different Thinai. A child is born in the bungalow situated on the bank of the river. The intensity of the mother-child relationship, its infinite joy, is captured in poetry that is captivating. But once the child turns seven, there appears a separation: the reality principle, as in Freud, takes over the pleasure principle. The child desires to go to pallikkoodam (learning centre), the child wants to become a man and take over his father’s duty. From here we gather that the child wears kuduma (knitted hair worn by Brahmins). On his way to pallikkoodam (learning centre), the child first traverses the long stretch of paddy field, carrying the ezhuthani (stylus) and ola (papyrus). Once he leaves behind the field, his travel up to that point anxiously watched by his mother, he enters a new landscape, the two lands separated by the presence of a huge arrayal tree, the peepal tree under which the Buddha is said to have attained the Enlightenment. Here the mother completely loses sight of her child. Suddenly we realize that the land just entered by the child is the same land that is surveyed by the Pootham from its rocky abode all through the day.

On seeing the child commuting, the journey of which is depicted through the sheer musicality of the non-Sanskritized Malayalam, the Pootham is enthralled.

Something inside the Pootham is awakened. But the next line gives us a hint that it is the mother inside her that is awakened! The breasts are alive (like, probably, the breast of a lactating mother when she sees her kid). She turns into a girl-child and stands before the child with the kuduma, enticing him not to go to the pallikkoodam with the ezhuthani and ola. Rather, she offers, she will teach him the scripts, by teaching him to write letters on tender mango leaves using the bud of jasmine as the pen. Initially, he refuses her offer, citing the potential angry reaction of his male teacher who is awaiting him but then succumbs to her lovely enticements. He throws away the ezhuthani (stylus), which is iron, along with the ola (papyrus). Immediately after he loses his grip over the iron, she takes him away.

At the awaited hour, the child does not turn up at home. Mother gets panicky and goes in search of the child, her anxiety partaken by the fish in the river (who become standstill), the newly-plowed soil, in the totally desolate field, sending a heave of sigh, and the owls who have just come out of their diurnal furrows in tree trunks, asking the reason for her fright. While making floral garlands with the kid under a poomaram (Gul Mohar tree), the Pootham overheard the desperate sighs of the mother but did not give a damn about it. But the troubles would not end there! Now the Pootham tries to frighten her away by taking different forms varying from a whirlwind, rain, and forest fire, to tiger and leopard. The mother would still not yield. Now the strategy changes to temptation: the Pootham opens the rock which acts as the lid on the crest of the mountain, showing the richness of uncountable gold and diamonds lying underground. Not even glancing once at the treasure, she plucks her eyes out, and like the red lotus of dawn (the sun), she places them before the Pootham, saying that her child is for her more important than her eye-sight. Unmoved still, the Pootham finds a new opportunity. The mother is blind! Making the jungle flame its magic wand, the Pootham chants a mantra, forms an exact replica of the child and gives it to the blind mother. As the mother, infinitely joyous, touches the crown and hugs the replica, the mother, even with her blindness, realizes that she has been duped by the Pootham. Reaching the limit of her patience, she raises her hand to curse the Pootham! The Pootham is down on the ground, frightened, giving back the mother her child and sight. The mother has traveled, as in the Upanishadic wisdom, from darkness to light:

Before the eyes that the mother opens

There shines forth the bright moon from Being. (Nair)

Thus, the mother has her child! But what about the Pootham? Poor creature. Infinite sorrow engulfs it, and as the mother and child are about to return, the Pootham kisses the forehead of the child, weeping loudly and uncontrollably. On seeing this, smiling and with a tender heart, the mother allows the Pootham to visit their household and see the kid once a year, just after the harvest in the month of Makara is over, like the blessing Maha Bali got. The Pootham agrees. But wait! It is a tragedy: the Pootham has forgotten to ask where their house is located. The mother did not reveal it either. Maybe she just forgot it. Or she was afraid that if the Pootham saw her kid again, it

would take away her child once more. Who knows! Exclaims the poet. Now, every year after harvest, the poor creature visits every house asking the refrain: which is that household where the little one was born? Laughing at its desperate gesture and inviting it to their house on the pretext that it is the little one's house, they make it dance. In the loud beat of its drum, its heartbeat goes unheard.

For the trained eye, the conflict between the mother and the Pootham encapsulates Ambedkar's famous enunciation about Indian history: "The history of India is a history of mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism" (Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India*. 267) The Pootham's insistence to throw away the stylus made of iron and the papyrus, and her enticements to use tender leaves and the bud of jasmine give us the first clue about the conflict between a philosophy oriented towards producing sanatana truths (Hinduism) and the Buddhist philosophy oriented towards the dependent co-origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Unlike the marks on the papyrus, which could be, surpassing the immediate, the here and now, potential lies unto infinity, the scripts on the tender leaves would not outlast the day on which it is written. In other words, to use Marshal McLuhan in a reductionist way, the medium is the message: the tender mango leaves, by its very appearance and tenderness and in contrast to the papyrus, inscribes a philosophy that proclaims that there is no permanence, fixity, or stability to the things around. The metaphor of the stylus does not stop at this epistemological level. The assertion by the poet that the stylus is iron emphatically proclaims its metamorphosis in situations of "mortal conflicts" mentioned by Ambedkar as the defining feature of Indian history: as weapon. The stylus can not only mark history but, as iron, also can remove people from history, by chopping their head off. Or phrased differently, what is at stake is the conflict between violence and non-violence. To the young kid, to the to-be-initiated into the philosophy of violence, the Pootham's advice is categorical: throw away your weapon; that is not the way!

But it is not the iron that posits the greatest difficulty to the reader but gold. The gold concealed by the Pootham can, as we did a moment ago, easily be explained away as the material richness and diversity of the earth, for which the mother turns a blind eye. But if we ask: 'is that all, does the metaphor explain everything, does the concealed gold, with its brightness, conceal something, like the letter in Alan Poe's *Purloined Letter* did, concealing its own existence in the open?' In other words, can we maintain that apart from being a metaphor for the material richness of nature, gold stands for itself as plain gold, as the most cherished object of international trade? This is an important question. The moment we ask if the forerunners of the Dalit-bahujan population of Kerala had engaged in international trade since the 10th century BC, even the most celebrated official historians of Kerala will turn a blind eye to the question, just as the mother did! Their answer would be: yes, Kerala had robust trade relations with West Asia, the Mediterranean, Africa, and China, but they would never say who they were! The strategy is similar to the one by which the narrator introduced the Pootham to the kids. The narrator would not directly state that the Pootham is a

Pariah, rather she would convolutedly put it that the Pootham comes from the hillock of Pariah, creating an image that Pootham is a deadly creature concealed among rocks.

Ever since the details of the Pattanam excavation emerged, Dalit Bandu N.K. Jose, the unorthodox and one of the most insightful of historians, has finetuned and repeatedly hammered home the hard-hitting question he had been asking right from the 1990s onwards:

In old Tamil pepper is known as curry, and plantation as padappai. In many places in Sangham poetry, there are references to curry-padappai; pepper plantations. Scholars who have studied Sangham literature maintain that Sangham poetry was written during the first few centuries of AD. From foreign sources, it is evident that even before that period pepper had been exported from here. Hence one can conjecture that even before the Sangham period, the people here had started agriculture of various spices like pepper. Who were those people who did it?... At that point in history, there were people in Kerala who had the power and courage to bargain with foreign traders and sell the spices that had been reaped from the mountains and brought to distant ports in the Arabian sea. As for the price of the spices, they collected gold coins from them. Pliny complained that though the Romans tried to pay the price in silver or other coins, Malayalees did not accept it. (Bandu 14)

Official historians may keep a safe distance from the question asked by Dalit Bandu N.K. Jose, but the experience of the Pulaya chieftain Ayyan Chirukandan in the 13th century, perhaps that original blood-shedding event that left a strong impression on the mind of the Dalit population as to produce the myth of Maha Bali, is quite clear about the story of gold. There may be many accounts as to how Ayyan Chirukandan was killed: but the motive was always the same, jealousy, and it had to do with gold that Ayyan possessed (Meloth).

In her search for the most intimate of her being, the mother of the Brahminic world (but also could be the erstwhile mother of the Pariah world, as the Renuka-Yellamma myth or the Pariahi-Vararuchi myth, or the evidence of the mitochondrial DNA studies suggest), encounters the full force of a destructive nature all around her, from the whirlwind to the tiger, from the natural to the animal, which is a typical experience of a society expanding through difficult terrains and forests, during summer and rainy seasons. But the terrifying phenomenon of nature has no longer the power to stupefy her as to produce what the German philosopher Hermann Usener has famously called “the momentary deities”, which as the philosopher Ernest Cassirer has observed, “do not personify any force of nature, nor do they represent some special aspect of human life; no recurrent trait or value is retained in them and transformed into a mythico-religious image; it is something purely instantaneous, a fleeting, emerging, and vanishing mental content” (Cassirer 17-18). She has left behind that stage to engage in a *neti, neti, neti* (not this) kind of logical operation, to pierce into something beyond

the immediate, into the unity behind all the diversity. It is precisely at this point the material richness of matter, of the here and now, of prakriti, of the unconscious, concealing behind every conscious metaphysical swerving away typical of Vedanta philosophy is made bare by the Pootham, by showing the material wealth it possesses.

To the unconvinced mother, the Pootham, repeating what the Pottan Theyyam did in the North Malabar, made a mocking gesture that directly pierces through the hypocrisy of the simultaneous worship of the ideal and idol! Pottan Pulayan (the idiotic male Pulaya) asked Adi Sankara the question: Is it not the same blood that rushes through your vein and mine? Then why engage in discrimination? The Potti Pariahi (the idiotic female Pariah) goes a step further and shows the *Isavasyopanishad*: “That is Whole, this is Whole” (Purnamadah Purnamidam). Why bother? And laughs at the mother. Like a teacher whose ignorance is caught red-handed by the students, unable to answer the question, the mother plunges into that final tactic most reverent saints were fond of: cursing the other! Saying, “This is different.” And then run away with what you have got! No more encounters!

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Endnote

Note: All translations from Malayalam are by the author of this article.