

Dalits and Discourses of Anti-caste Movements in Kerala, India

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Abstract

This article locates various historical discourses of anti-caste imaginaries and articulations that are imprinted in the historical past of Kerala society. Unravelling historical and social theoretical trends, it examines broadly an anti-caste imaginary articulating notions of equality and addressing various events, personnel interventions, policies and ideologies made discursive politics in Kerala. As ideologies and its consequent effects upon society are political, the article substantially makes comments and interprets the Dalit-Bahujan world grounded on the lived experiences of Dalits in Kerala. The article brings forth discourses of social movements, production of Dalit icons, critical narratives on untouchability and communist positions about caste. But, a new imagination, academic and aesthetical engagements of Dalit-Bahujans in the form of the production of Dalit art and literature informs new articulation of Dalit politics in Kerala.

Keywords

Social movements, discourses and Dalit politics

Introduction

A particular socio-economic and cultural system in sub-continental India has developed a systemic social world of distinctive lives based on life activities and social division of labourers. These everyday social divisions in the historical past have been caste-based structural inequalities that led to the complex social formation process and emergence of multiple forms of political structure. This explicates that forms of power relations were conditioned by ranking social groups in a hierarchical order. The top of the ladder is always endowed with reverence and all the layers below have been placed according

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to the volume of contempt attributed to them. Consequently, it has resulted in those at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy to be endowed with the accumulation of differential forms of capitals—social, cultural, economic and symbolic²—to establish a hegemonic power over lower castes. This status of dominance leads them to extend systemic violence and contempt for the people who are deployed at the lower strata as castes of perpetual debasement.³ It provides aesthetically pleasing affluent and ascribed values to privileged castes. These distinctions between castes and communities have been a defining dimension of systemic humiliation and discrimination of caste as an institutional mechanism of structured dispositions and instituted process of dominance and subordination. Subsequently, it produces a society and people with embodied experiences of deprivation and disadvantages. This has resulted in the alienation of people in the historical margins structured by socio-spatial hierarchies. In these processes, it is not just material conditions that limit the people of the margins, but it also works as a block to their intellectual advancement.

This system of historical process of social exclusion in specific ways mostly in terms of hereditary and endogamous relations of material and mental existence reproduce the system of domination.⁴ This has been a social system of power and order of everyday lives that construct an identity of the people of social margins as people of broken historical experiences having ghettoized spatial segregations. The cultural systems of Brahmanical order and its *thrivarnika* dispositions, hegemonically appropriated material and mental resources of the people of wrecked lineages.⁵ The people of wretched and broken-down cultural existence in the historical past have been represented in the Brahmanical order of domination and literary narratives of Vedic –*sanskritic* - *itihasa-purana* tradition as the inferiorised cultural ‘Other’, i.e., Dalit-Bahujan castes and communities.⁶

The historical roots of the Dalit movement in Kerala reveals a fact that the formation of Dalit identity in Kerala was never a linear process. It was defined and redefined in the discourses of colonial modernity. The transforming political economy in late nineteenth and early twentieth century had also brought about new initiatives for imagining equality and selfhood among the communities of inferior grades. It formulated new vocabularies for social action and imagination for a

²Bourdieu, Pierre and Wacquant, Loïc, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Polity Press, 1992.

³Babasaheb B.R. Ambedkar (1987). *The Triumph of Brahmanism: Regicide or the Birth of Counter Revolution*, Vasant Moon, [Compiled], *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol.III, Education Department Government of Maharashtra, Mumbai. 267–331.

⁴Sukhadeo Thorat and Narendra Kumar (Eds.) (2014). *B.R. Ambedkar: Perspectives on Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–55; Paramjit S Judge (Ed.) (2014). *Mapping Social Exclusion in India*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–23.

⁵G.P. Deshpande (Ed.) (2002). *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*. New Delhi: Left World, pp. 25–99.

⁶Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2010). *Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. New Delhi: OUP.

society on equality, freedom, and civil rights. The ideas and articulations that had been evolved in the creative and organic intellectual culture of the social margins that provided the basic tenets and dictums of the process of social modernization called 'renaissance' modernity. New forms of critical engagement of caste hierarchies had been deconstructed and redefined in the critical social imageries, literary vocabularies and imaginative cultural geographies of the marginalized in the context of historic modernity.⁷ It was this momentous rupture in terms of anti-caste ideology and social justice activism that formulated the realms of imagining equality and freedom among the slave castes and broken people that also formulated a writing culture for them reflecting their historical lived experiences and identity of their political present. It discovered new realms of self-identification that their identity had not been developed from the caste Hindu *thrivarnika* cultural lineage but from a wounded historical past of broken lineages that defined the identity of *Dalithood* as a political vocabulary.⁸

The term Dalit signifies not simply a statistical category of the marginalized people but a generic and collective vocabulary of high sounding political meaning reflecting consciousness of the oppressed in terms of caste discrimination and cultural marginality that kept them aloof from accumulating varied forms of resources that can be converted into capital.⁹ It was in tune with the Dalit subaltern political visualization of nation and the *swaraj* for sub-continental India as a whole encompassing the social and political democracy in representative terms.¹⁰ Dalit identity and its manifold articulations in different domains of everyday life and academic practices that made possible an assertive appearance in critiquing dominant political systems in favour of social democracy.¹¹ Thus the term Dalit has become an anchoring mark of identity that is used to define the multiple and mosaic nature of national culture and inclusive democratic political representation for different social groups who had historical disadvantages. It was in the context of reform and nationalism that the Dalit assertion in Kerala had been developed, formulating social imageries of anti-caste activism and notions of equality along with social modernization that created a critical rupture from the pre-modern social world.

⁷Gail Omvedt (1976). *Cultural Revolt in Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873- 1930*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust Bombay; G.P. Deshpande (Ed.) (2002); Gail Omvedt (1996). *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and Dalit Movement in Colonial India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 15–36.

⁸Anand Teltumbde (2016). *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt*. Delhi: Aakar Books, pp. 1–18. Gail Omvedt (2016). *Understanding Caste: From Buddha to Ambedkar and Beyond*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, pp. 39–47.

⁹Neera Chandhoke [2009]2012. Equality for What? Or the troublesome Relation between Egalitarianism and Respect. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. (Ed.) Gopal Guru. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 140–160.

¹⁰G. Aloysius [1997]2017. *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

¹¹G. Aloysius (2016). *Contextualizing Backward Classes Discourse*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–50; K.M. Panikkar (2004). *Caste and Democracy*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–27.

Discourses of Movements and Dalit Icons

The notions of *sadhujanam* by Ayyankal,¹² *adimavishayam* by Poyikayil Appachan/ Yohannan,¹³ *dharmam* of Narayana Guru¹⁴ defined the early trajectory of the social reform movements in colonial Kerala. It was these intellectual movements and radical social activism that developed the communities of untouchables and outcaste groups like Ezhavas, Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas, and Sidhanar as agencies of socio-historical change and imagining equality.¹⁵ The initiatives and efforts predicated on the radical movement of breaking caste orders and occupying the attributed social spaces of dominant caste groups defined the reform activism as a movement of social protest of politics of social justice.¹⁶ Ayyankali, Poyikayil Appachan, Pampadi John Joseph and many others who were located at the base of social hierarchy intervened in the public domain in the princely state of Travancore that made the spaces of human interaction into arenas of breaking hegemonic social notions of caste hierarchy.¹⁷ Dalit experience with missionary activism provided vistas of dignified human life, soul and body that provided them new notions of emotions, feelings, everyday existence in familial life and the spiritual world.¹⁸ Dalit mobilization under colonial modernity was aimed at consolidation of different individual caste groups into a single community. The bonded historical past of these social groups was recovered and a repository of their historical experiences was constructed either as *adima* [slave] i.e., people of historical un-freedom with the genealogy of slave experiences and broken cultural lineages. This imagination provided an alternative historical understanding and creative historical formulation in defining the Dalit experiences and selfhood not only in historical past but in radical initiatives in their political present.¹⁹ One can also see the co-optional

¹²T.H.P. Chentharassery (2017). *Ayyankali*. Thiruvananthapuram: Mythri Books. 10–34; N.K. Jose (1989). *Ayyankali*. Vaikkam: Hobby Publishers. 106–167; N.K. Jose (1994) *Sadhujanaparipalana Sangam*. Vaikkam: Hobby Publishers.

¹³V.V. Swami and E.V. Anil [Eds.] (2010). *Prathyksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, Orma Pattu, Charithra Rekhakal*, Eraviperur: Adiyar Deepam Publication, pp. 18–75. Society of PRDS Studies, Vyavasthayute Nadappathakal, Slate Publication, Kottayam, 2017, pp. 55–98.

¹⁴Sunny M. Kapikkadu (2017). *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*. Kozhikode: Vidhyarthi Publications, pp. 239–249. K.K. Kochu (2016) Srinarayana Prasthanathinte Keezhala Paksham. Pradeepan Pamparikunnu [Ed.] *Narayana Guru Punarvayanakal*. Kozhikode: Progress Publishers, pp. 32–42.

¹⁵P. Sanal Mohan (2015) *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 116–126.

¹⁶P. Sanal Mohan (2015) pp. 126–146. Pradeepan Pamparikunnu (2016) *Adhunika Keralam Arute Bhavanayanu*. Pradeepan Pamparikunnu (Ed.) *Narayana Guru Punarvayanakal*. Kozhikode: Progress Publishers, pp. 119–130.

¹⁷Sunny M Kapikkadu (2017) *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*. Kozhikode: Vidhyarthi Publications, pp. 209–238. M Nizar and Meena Kandasamy (2007) *Ayyankali: Dalit Leader of Organic Protest*. Calicut: Other Books, pp. 28–92.

¹⁸P Sanal Mohan (2015). *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 26–34.

¹⁹K.S. Madhavan (2012). Formation of Dalit identity in Kerala, in Symposia on Dalits: Life and Culture of the Marginalised, The Post graduate Department of History, Nehru Arts and Science College, Kanhangad, pp. 28–33.

patronage of the nationalist engagements of the caste Hindus as spiritual ethical politics of anti-untouchability activism²⁰ that stood in tune with the dominant and mainstream political initiatives of the nationalist roots.

The historical trajectory of Kerala's Dalit movement reveals the fact that the early movements were predicated on the sociality of the Dalit body that was articulated as negotiating radical political signifiers in breaking caste and structures of systemic caste subordination. The notion of social labour and the embedded labouring body was negotiated and used as a reflexive site of protest as an instrument of reform activism for civil rights. This was also used as social vocabularies of rights for accumulating economic and social capital in the context of the social modernizing process under colonial modernity. The Princely states in Thiruvithamkur and Cochi provided its representative institutional mechanism to the oppressed caste groups and their members were nominated to the state Legislative Councils which enabled the depressed class groups to demand and register their civic rights and represent their everyday social sufferings. Subsequently Dalit-Bahujan imageries of reform activism had used political space to lead struggles for inclusive human and civil rights. This was started as radical activism made by the Dalit communities in the wake of social reform movements. The attempts to represent Dalits for themselves in representative governance like popular assemblies called *Prajasabha* in Travancore was the logical culmination of these initiatives. The demands and representations made by the depressed class members in the Legislative Council also reveal the ways in which the argumentative public concern was made possible in their efforts that had been articulated for an early form of democratic political activism through the representative bodies. This domain of political communication was met with the reform activism that necessarily imagined the notions of equality and an anti-caste democratic public. This was practiced as radical public engagements by leaders like Ayyankali, Poyikayil Appachan and Pampadi John Joseph who were also members of Travancore Legislative Council popularly known as *Srimoolam Prajasabha*. The primary demands raised by these leaders in the Assembly were allotment of sufficient land and free public education for depressed class which was considered as important socio-economic capitals to attain material resources ensuring dignity and equality. Attempts were also made by the depressed class leaders in the Legislative Assembly not only for entitlement to material resources, land for settlement and livelihood, and public education as cultural capital but also protests of anti-caste activism outside the representative body for public negotiation for social justice. This was, in fact, a turning point in determining the nature of Dalit initiatives in colonial Kerala.²¹ This shows that the Dalit movement in its early momentous initiatives had also contributed to the formation of a responsible common Malayali public and the making of colonial civil society in Kerala. The movement for equal citizenship rights and equal opportunity in society for Dalits was made possible by acquiring material resources and social respect

²⁰Gail Omvedt (1995). *Dalit Vision*. New Delhi: Orient Longman

²¹Sunny M Kapikkadu (2017). *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*. Kozhikode: Vidhyarthi Publications, pp. 209–238.

and dignity. The political trajectory and cultural itinerary of Dalits had developed a set of discursive vocabularies as part of a multi-vocal movement of self-respect that made a critical departure in the intellectual history of the Dalit movement in colonial Kerala.

The Dalit life worlds and the wretched lived experiences were recovered and made available as texts and reports by missionaries in their activist proselytizing engagements in Kerala. The missionaries portrayed the Dalit life world and their everyday suffering in vivid manner in reports and pamphlets. These reports were also used to represent the lived experiences of the Dalits in a new literary genre called Novel in colonial Travancore. Mrs. Collins' Novels 'The Slayer Slain' [*Ghathakavadham*] deals with the question of slavery and the need for conversion for emancipation of slave castes.²² In Malabar, the missionary emancipatory education had become a form of struggle against caste inequality and social change. This was also a theme of literary imagination by the educated lower classes. The *Saraswathivijayam*, a novel, written by Potheru Kunhambu [1892] also addressed issues of caste and modernity in which modern education through missionary intervention became a vantage point for anti-caste social change.²³ The lower caste engagement in literary production attacking caste inequality and upper caste literary sensibilities was represented in the works of poets like Pandit K.P. Karuppan and Muloor S. Padmanabha Panikkar.²⁴

Discourses of Untouchability and Making of Dalit Politics

The anti-untouchability campaign and the so-called temple entry movements were projected to engage the civil rights for the untouchables to come in touch with the public arena of Malayali social life. However, it was operationalised as a consequential deployment of incorporating untouchables into the temple religious idol-worshipping Hindu-fold. The pre-colonial non-Hindu identity of Dalit castes and their historical identity as a broken people of untouchable past was selectively appropriated by the nationalist discourses to reform Hindu society by eradicating untouchability. Untouchability as a nationalist meta-narrative can also be seen in Kerala's reform process and the question of caste inequality and oppression of various fields was set aside. The nationalist discourses of caste in Kerala failed to address the caste inequality in terms of its political vocabulary and instead it projected an ethical programme of eradication of untouchability as a political rhetoric. In the nationalist efforts, eradication of untouchability revolved around a nationalist activism of ethical

²²'The Slayer Slain' was written by Mrs. Collins during 1859-1862. After her death in 1862, the unpublished manuscript was completed by Richard Collins, her husband, and published serially in *Vidhyasamgraham*. [July 1864-April 1866], Ancy Bay (2015). *Translating Modernity: Conversion and Caste in Early South Indian Novel*. Kozhikode: Olive Publication, pp. 44-47.

²³Asokan Mundon (Ed.) (2016). *Religion, Community, Identity: Reform and Change in Kerala*. Thiruvananthapuram: ISDA Publication, p. 164. Ancy Bay (2015). pp. 66-84.

²⁴Pandit K.P. Karuppan, Jathikummi, originally written in 1911 and published in 1912. Kerala Sahitya Academy Thiruvananthapuram, 2012. *Kaviramayanam* was an important critical engagement in the field of literary production made by the Muloor Padmanabhapanikkar. M.R. Sahruthayan Thambi [2013] *Muloor: Kaviyum Vyakthiyum*, State Institute of Languages, Thiruvananthapuram.

predicament of the upper caste nationalist Savarna Hindu.²⁵ This ethical politics of Gandhian turn was used to incorporate the Dalit as Harijan, a pejorative identification and nationalist politics of naming into the dominant patronage politics of the Congress that subjugated the Dalits as objects of nationalist narratives of reform. The temple entry movement and the Vaikkam Sathyagraha of 1924 in Kerala also reveals the problematic entanglements and the predicament of the anti-untouchable campaign and the trajectory of the civil rights movement in the Gandhian anti-untouchability programme. This was a time when the Phule-Ambedkarian philosophy and political imaginaries²⁶ formed within the national movement. It recovered a new political imagination and critical theoretical sensibility for understanding caste and graded inequality and also the Dalit-Bahujan world of political presence.²⁷ The making of an ontological turn of lived experiences and epistemological validation for the Dalit historical past can also be seen in the history of Dalit movements in Kerala as well.²⁸

The discourses on caste and equality developed by Sahodaran Ayyappan, a rationalist and anti-caste thinker who is known for his campaign for inter-caste dining or *panthibhojanam* and inter caste marriage as a practice of anti-caste ideology, who had developed the strategies of anti-caste everydayness in the political contemporaneous of modernity in Kerala which is popularly known as *sahodarya prasthanam* that aimed at breaking caste barriers in its customary social everyday life, accomplished in the form of inter-dining and inter-caste marriage tools of breaking the subjective experience of caste divisions. Sahodaran Ayyappan could visualize the larger political imagination of the non-Brahman movement and the Ambedkarian notion of reconstruction of society in the notions of equality, liberty and fraternity. Ayyappan's view was in favor of adequate political representation, proportionate share in national wealth and equal social opportunities. It was in this context that there emerged in Kerala's anti-caste reform movement a larger question of anti-caste contestation and political negotiation for equality and representation, the ideological standpoint of which was negotiated with the political strategy of conversion of untouchable castes to other religions. This was one of the primary reasons that made Savarna upper caste Hindus to engage with the anti-untouchability movement incorporating Dalits and lower castes in the nationalist reform of Hindu religion.²⁹

²⁵Dilip M. Menon (1994). *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 89–118.

²⁶Gail Omvedt (1976)

²⁷Gopal Guru (2004). *The Language of Dalit Bahujan Political Discourse*. *Class, Caste and Gender*. (Ed.) Manoranjan Mohanty, New Delhi: Sage Publications, pp. 256–267. Bharat Patankar (2015). *Contemporary Caste system*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–29; Lal Mani Joshi (2007). *Brahmanism, Buddhism and Hinduism*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–40.

²⁸Uma Chakravarti (2014). *Panditha Ramabai*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–32. G. Aloysius (2010). *Dalit–Subaltern Self-Identifications: Iyothee Thassar and Tamizhan*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–64; B.D. Khane (2006). *Chhatrapati Shahu's Crusade Against Untouchability*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–36; G. Aloysius (2006). *Dalit Subaltern Emergence in Religio-Cultural Subjectivity*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–36; Nandini Gopu (2006). *Swami Acchutanand and the Adi Hindu Movement*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–40; M.C. Raja (2005). *The Oppressed Hindus*. New Delhi: Critical Quest, pp. 1–40.

²⁹K.K. Kochu (2017). *Idathupakshamillatha Kalam*. Kottayam: D C Books, pp. 89–93.

Communists in Caste-ridden Social Structure

The communist engagement with the caste question and the emancipation of Dalit-Bahujan communities in Kerala as elsewhere was problematic as communists did not have any specific attention to the caste question in its uniqueness as a system of inequality and exploitation of oppressed castes. Rather, the Marxist position on the caste question was predicated on the notion of a feudal social order and caste was treated as a form of extra economic coercion of Indian feudal relations in a pre-capitalistic society of the Asiatic mode of economic production. Economic interpretation to the Indian social system of graded inequality does not make sense of the complex relations between caste and class. The intersectionality of caste, class and gender had not been taken in to the political point of view and strategies of class struggles among the Indian socialists and communist groups. Communists thought that the caste system was a feudal vestige and castes would be done away with or would be evaporated when capitalist forces develop within India. This deterministic position and inadequacy of a Marxist understanding of the caste question and Indian [Brahmanical] social order failed to address the issues related to caste and graded inequality. Inequality in the Marxist sense of the term encompasses an economic base where the material production takes place and the ideological superstructure in which non-economic relations are embedded.³⁰ This position is also represented in Marxist writings on the culture of Kerala as well. The notion of *jati-janmi-naduvazhi* (caste-landlord and political authority) system had been postulated to explain caste as a system of division of labour. Land reform and redistribution of landed resources among the so-called peasant communities i.e., ‘land to the tiller’, the notion on which Marxists romanticized land reform has, in fact, not benefited the Dalit communities giving them land in Kerala. Dalit communities were not the subject peasant or tenant at will but they were attached to the landed wealth of upper castes as untouchable forced labouring groups. Dalits lived in hut settlements as various *kutis* of occupational groups of unfree nature and conditions of slavery made them attached to the land as primary producers devoid of any rights to settlement and entitlement to land. The Marxist positions did not problematize the condition of untouchables and refused to consider Dalits as the most exploitative groups in the social world of caste violence and deprivation. Dalits were, in Marxist narratives and political standpoints, treated as agricultural labourers to be settled without farmland as *kudikidappukar* or as landless labourers in settlement colonies.³¹ These *kudikidappu* settlements had become the settlement colonies of Dalit ghettos.³² While Marxist-backed governments were in power and implemented the land reform in Kerala, the land did not go to the Dalits

³⁰K.S. Madhavan (2015). *Jatiyum Varghavum: Marx, Ambedkar Kosamby*. Marx Vayanakal. (Ed.) T.V. Madhu. Kozhikode: Raspberry Books, pp. 331–369.

³¹T.T. Srikumar (2011). *Navasamuhikatha: Saasthram, Charithram Raashtriyam*. Calicut: Pratheeksha Books, pp. 66–78.

³²There are as many as 23,000 Dalit settlement colonies in Kerala. To get a sense of the lived world of these Ghettos, see Maya Pramod (2020). *As A Dalit Women: My Life in a Caste Ghetto in Kerala*, *Caste /A Global Journal on Social Exclusion*, Vol. I, No. I, pp. 111–124.

or other marginalized groups but they were given only the legal provision to protect their settlement, right to settle as *kudikidappukar* without entitling land to cultivation and livelihood. Settlement right of the Dalits as *kudikidappukar* was protected in four to ten cent land habitats. The land was subsequently concentrated among the middle and upper castes and other religious groups. The identity of a national community of non-Hindu culture was denied to Dalits in Kerala Marxist discourses. Dalits have a long historical past as broken groups under the brahmanical social order that has become a historical absence in the Indian Marxist narratives.³³ Indian Marxists do not seem to have made any substantial contribution to interrogate the castes and graded inequality in its proper historical context. This in turn diverted the real issue of the Dalits while allowing for Marxist imaginations and a utopia of class conflict and consequent changes.

Discourses of Dalit-Bahujan Narratives

The term Dalit, as encompassing wide connotations in the political and cultural dynamics began to be used in Kerala only in the 1970s in response to the nationalist patronage politics that imposed the denigrated and token category of ‘Harijan’ on the identity of the former outcaste (s) and untouchable groups.³⁴ The term has a genealogy of its own, making sense of a radical transformation from being untouchable to the Dalithood.³⁵ Rejecting state-centric and nationalist juxtaposition of nomenclatures like depressed class and untouchables, the notion of Dalit has become an inclusive category to encompass all marginal groups who are persecuted under Brahmanic social order. The condition of existence under Brahmanic order was the immediate existential reality of Dalits. Therefore, de-brahmanising dominant narratives and writing culture was an ethical and political necessity for Dalit aesthetics and emancipatory epistemology.³⁶ The literature and aesthetic production in art and performances made Dalit a category of political articulation of lived experiences of caste discrimination and varied forms of humiliations. The Dalit literature could, in fact, offer a saga of resistance culture and realm of repudiation of cultural and social dominance. As Saran Kumar Limbale has rightly been pointed out that Dalit literature is an attempt to artistically portray the sorrow, tribulations, slavery, degradation endured by the Dalits.³⁷ This must have

³³K.K. Kochu (2017).

³⁴Gail Omvedt (2004), pp. 413–430. Gail Omvedt (2016), pp. 74–82.

³⁵Eleanor Zelliot (2001). *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*. New Delhi: Manohar.

³⁶Gail Omvedt (2016), pp. 97–104. Jyothi and M.C. Raja (2005). *Cosmosity: A Cultural Discourse of the Unbroken People*. Ambedkar Resource Center Rural Education for Development Society, Tumkur.

³⁷Sharankumar Limbale (2003). *The Outcaste/ Akkarmashi*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Omprakash Valmiki (2003). *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Kolkata: Samya. J. Mohan (2001). *History of Dalit Struggle for Freedom: Dravidian Parties and Dalit Upraise in Tamil Nadu*. Pondicherry: Dhamma Institute of Social Sciences. K.A. Gunasekaran (2009). *The Scar*. Chennai: Orient Blackswan. Paul Chirakkarodu [1993] 2014. *Ambedkar: Boudhikavikshobhathinte Agnijwala*. Kottayam: Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society [SPCS]. K.K.S. Das (2011) *Dalit Prathyayasasthram: Charithram Sahithyam Saundaryasasthram*. Thiruvananthapuram: State

resonated in the remembrance of the Dalit slave historical past and memorialization of the slave experience in the oral renderings made by Poyikayil Appachan in the context of the historical modernity of Kerala.

Dalit literature has created a particular form of writing culture, a creative and radical literary production with emancipatory aesthetic taste and a standpoint epistemology of identity and selfhood. It created a critical tradition and reflexive interrogation to the social and cultural system based on graded inequality in which the ascending order of power and privileges were reserved for the caste Hindus and descending order of contempt for the marginalized groups. It is because this system of graded inequality that maintained and reproduced a social order of caste-based oppression and social exclusion along with cultural and intellectual dominance predicated on systemic violence of the Brahminical social order. It was this social order that had been reflexively engaged with critical postulations and protest imageries in the reform modernity of Kerala.

The term Dalit has been derivatively posited to critically engage with the system of dominance and subordination. This social order had become a matter of contestation for Dalits and marginalized groups in the post reform period in Kerala at large. It is through literature that the Dalit communities of Kerala could develop a critical attitude of protest as oppositional consciousness to the upper caste-centric aesthetics. The rebellious articulation and contentious potential of this reflexive interrogation has been narrated in different literary genres of oral traditions and textual imagination of Dalits. The lived social experiences and individual social memory of systems of exclusion, humiliation embedded with unparalleled cruelties of caste violence, its pain, agony and destitution were depicted in an un-archived historical genealogy of the oral memory of the Dalits. The memories of social experiences are woven in terms of lived plotment of remembering caste subordination experiences of social exclusion. It is through these literary genres, artistic expressions, aesthetic intonations and creative performances that the Dalit subaltern groups could have repudiated the dominance of the caste hierarchy and imagine equality and visualize a world of freedom.³⁸

The availability of Writings and Speeches of B R Ambedkar in Malayalam has opened up new possibilities for a critical reading of Kerala society and cultural and political establishment through the post-colonial and Dalit-subaltern intellectual imageries, though a section of Dalits had attracted the radical left or Naxal movement in Kerala, the Dalit sensibility of engagement of Ambedkar intellectuality and critical scholarship provided new understandings of caste and Dalit questions. There were debates and polemic factionalism in the radical lefts regarding the question of caste and class relation and also for amicable political praxis in annihilating caste. However,

Institute of Language. M.B. Manoj (2008). *Aadarsham, Ezhuthavastha: Dalith Sahithya Padanangal*, Pranatha Books, Cochin; Sarankumar Limbale (2004). *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, pp. 23–39.

³⁸Paul Chirakkarodu [1993] 2014. *Ambedkar: Boudhikavikshobhathinte Agnijwala*, Sahithya Pravarthaka Co-Operative Society [SPCS], Kottayam, K.K.S. Das (2011). *Dalit Prathyayasasthram: Charithram Sahithyam Saundaryasasthram*, State Institute of Language, Thiruvananthapuram.

Dalits who detached from the radical left romanticism and took to Ambedkar and Dalit politics helped create robust intellectual activities and community activism based on Ambedkarian politics incorporating the historical past of a radical stream of social reform led by Ayyankali, Poyikayil Appachan and Sahodaran Ayyappan in Kerala. This resulted in the formation of independent Dalit organizations and public intellectual activities. This provided new possibilities to engage with the Dalit historical past and the lived experiences with the politics of democratic equality of Ambedkar in the Kerala Dalit movement.

The literary expression in the forms of novels and short stories also came up with alternative aesthetical expressions and literary sensibility in Kerala.³⁹ Amateur historians from Dalit communities have emerged looking beyond the conventional frames and notions of the history of Kerala who critically engaged with the dominant historiography in the case of caste and culture of Kerala. The Dalit students' movement was formed in various colleges interrogating the Dalit students' life in mainstream campuses and to make sense of Ambedkar thought and non-Brahmin and Dalit-Bahujan politics.⁴⁰ The vicious circle of models of development has created underdevelopment and conditions of perpetual marginality of Dalits and Adivasis in Kerala. The failure of land reform to entitle Dalits to landed property and the token politics of mainstream political parties including the left parties towards Dalits were important issues of concern of new initiatives of Dalit leadership. It created a new sensibility and community identity that paved the way for new literary criticism and Dalit aesthetics. A radical initiative called SEEDIAN [Socially Educationally and Economically Depressed Indian Ancient Natives] was an important turning point in the intellectual history of the Dalit movement in Kerala. This intellectual and cultural initiative engaged with art and literature, history and cultural studies that made possible new Dalit critical engagements and artistic and aesthetical expressions.⁴¹ The growing incidents of atrocities against Dalits, public torture and humiliations, institutional violence and discrimination, police atrocities and governmental negligence were taken into public domain for live debates. In the post 1990 period the activities of Dalit women society and Dalit Students Forum⁴² appeared in the public domain. The printing and publication of books and pamphlets developed among the movement which gathered wider attention in intellectual communication and public activism. SEEDIAN Magazine, *Dalithakam*, *Suchakam* and a number of other publications were important in this venture. The Dalit Christian movement started functioning

³⁹T.M. Yesudasan (2011). Towards A Prologue to Dalit Studies. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*. (Ed.) K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu. Penguin, pp. 611–630.

⁴⁰The empirical reality of Dalit students' life in campuses was deeply alienated in terms of their caste identity. P Sanal Mohan (1993). *Kalalayangalile Dalithar*, Kerala Padanangal, October–December, Cochi: Chithira Printers, pp. 295–301.

⁴¹Rajesh Komath and Sudheesh CP (2022). Making Sense of Dalit History: Locating SEEDIAN as an Archive. *Journal of Human Sciences*, Vol. 1, Issue 2. pp. 46–66.

⁴²Dalit Student Movement [DSM] mobilised a large number of students in various universities and colleges on Ambedkar politics and radical Dalit thought. A.K. Vasu, M.B. Manoj, A V Murukaraj, P.K. Prakash were some of the organic leaders of this movement.

from the 1960s and Dalit Christians protested against discrimination of upper caste Christian Churches of various Christian denominations which were well articulated in popular imaginaries through print.⁴³ Dalit Christian groups propagated liberation theology and emancipatory protest faith forms among Dalit Christians that created far-reaching repercussions problematizing caste and religious discrimination in Kerala's Christian communities and Churches.⁴⁴

The new literary turn in Dalit articulations and community mobilization in Kerala was a turning point in the history of Dalit communities in modern Kerala. This had been manifested in the form of powerful writings in creative literary genres like short stories, novels and poems. The Dalit literature that developed by and large tried to posit textures of imagination, literary idioms, representational emplotments and linguistic tropes reflecting the lived experiences and life worlds of the Dalit communities. It reflected upon the world of un-freedom and the dissent and protest that the Dalit communities had been experiencing through the ruptured genealogies of their historical past and their everyday life of subordination and subjugation. It dealt with atrocities and trauma, violence and humiliation, prejudice and public torture, subordination and dominant forms of oppression, sexual violence and discrimination, labour and gendered body and embodied experiences of subjugation and forms of distancing practices on account of inequalities in terms of the graded position in the caste system and the world of untouchability.⁴⁵ Literary criticism and linguistic imagination developed among the Dalit writing culture and esthetical production made path-breaking interventions not only in the field of dominant literary culture but also in the domain of Dalit mobilization resonating a genuine and creative social movement heralding the birth of an alternative Dalit intellectual public.⁴⁶ The rediscovery of the Kerala Reform movement in terms of anti-caste democracy and politics of proportionate representation in political power

⁴³Janakeeya Vimochana Visvasapasthanam and Dynamic Action are important initiatives among Dalit Christians of Kerala.

⁴⁴John C.B. Webster (2012). *Historiography of Christianity in India*. New Delhi: OUP, pp. 182–218.

⁴⁵Historical evolution of Dalit literature in Kerala has been narrated by the late Pradeepan Pamirikunnu, Dr. Pradeepan Pampirikunnu [2007] 2017. *Dalit Padanam: Svathvam, Samskaram, Sahithyam*. Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages Pradeepan Pampirikunnu (2011). Nationalism, Modernity, Keralanes: A Subaltern Critique, in K Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu [Eds], *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India*, Penguin, pp. 556–569. Narration of the historical evolution of Dalit literature can be seen in the works of late Kaviyoor Murali—Kaviyoor Murali (2001). *Dalit Sahithyam*, Kottayam: Current Books. K.K. Kochu [2015]2017. *Idathupakshamillatha Kaalam*. Kottayam: DC Books, pp. 133–138.

⁴⁶The making of a Dalit public in various regions in the colonial context is important as the civil right movements in India from the part of the Dalit communities in the form of anti-caste struggles had created civil society ethos in region-specific public arenas. The notion of 'movement public' can be used to understand the appearance of Dalit intellectual activities and the initiatives in the process of widening the domain of the common public, Eva-Maria Hardtmann [2009], 2015. *The Dalit Movement in India*. New Delhi: OUP, pp. 87–90. Ramesh Kamble (2016), Understanding Dalit Movement: Trajectories and Concern. *Caste Based Exclusion* (Ed.) Jagan Karade. New Delhi: Rawat Publication, pp. 15–44.

and the material and cultural resources taking into account the principles of India's constitutional morality on social justice was the ideological base of this new turn in Dalit initiatives of political articulations. The critique of mainstream nationalist imagination of India's cultural past and the legacy of critical intervention of the Phule–Ambedkar tradition within the national movement was also radically revisited in the intellectual activism and everyday mobilization of Dalit initiatives in Kerala. Kerala's Dalit literary and intellectual engagements was also influenced by the writing world of the Black Atlantic along with the radical Caribbean, Latin American, Black literature and liberation theology. In the literature and art, post-structuralist deconstruction of language, literary criticism and discourse analysis were also imprinted in the narrative vocabularies and critical writing culture of the Dalit intellectual arena of Kerala. The Brahmanic and upper caste notions of literary production, writing culture, aesthetic imaginative representation in art forms and popular culture have been interrogated with new critical sensibilities and reflexive aesthetical interrogations in Dalit writings in Kerala.⁴⁷

The issues that have been taken up by the Dalit movement in Kerala in the beginning of the twenty-first century are SC and ST reservation in the aided education sector and the need for land and livelihood. This is a new turn in setting the agenda of the Dalit movement. This was influenced by the Muthanga Adivasi Struggle for land and Chengara and Arippa land struggles made by the Dalit and Adivasi communities in Kerala. Social exclusion and marginalization of Dalits in the public arena in various forms also took place in the prerogatives and planned moves of dominant communities, case in point as far as the alienation of Dalit lands and their traditional ritual spaces are concerned. Vadayambadi in Puthankurishu in Ernakulam district and the struggle for regaining usurped public or Dalit landed property is one of the new phases in the ongoing Dalit struggle in Kerala. This has taken place in the context of co-option and incorporation of Dalit communities and organizations into mainstream electoral politics. This can also be noted in tune with the increasing assimilation of Dalits into the brahmanical values and Hinduisation of traditional Dalit ritual spaces like *kaavu*, *kottam*, *thara*, and *madams*. This has been instrumentally used to spread anti-Dalit values in ritual idioms and every day forms of faith practices. Public surveillance and vigilantalism on Dalit body in Kerala society has been developing as a brutal form of violence. This is a form of caste prejudice and intolerance to the Dalit bodies that has been manifested in torturing Dalits in public spaces and institutional torture like police atrocities. Vinayakan, a Dalit youth who lived in Engandiyur near Vadanapilly in Thrissur district, was tortured in police custody and later committed suicide. The murder of Jisha in Perumbavur can be cited as an important example of caste violence towards Dalit women and social insecurity of the Dalit community at large. The caste and economic status and the question of social privilege is also manifested in

⁴⁷K.K. Kochu [2015] 2017. pp. 133–138. Pradeepan Pamirikunnu [2007] 2017. Dr. Pradeepan Pamirikunnu, *Dalit Padanam: Svathvam, Samskaram, Sahithyam*, Thiruvananthapuram: The State Institute of Languages, S Anand [Ed.] (2003). *Touchable Tales*. Pondicherry: Navayana, pp. 1–42.

the murder of Kevin Joseph, a Dalit Christian youth, whose death indicates that the perpetrators of violence planned the crime with the support of the police. Growing violence against Dalits when they enter into inter-caste or inter-religious marriages indicate the extent of public contempt that operates towards Dalits. The caste-based matrimonial advertisements in newspapers seeking brides and bridegrooms from different communities seem to have deliberately excluded Dalits and Adivasis in the title called 'Caste-No-Bar'.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of the Dalit movement in Kerala shows that caste was a contested institution and its distinctions and anti-caste reform initiatives fought against it in manifold ways. It was in the form of social movements by Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan, Pambadi Joseph and Sahadaran Ayyappan and shifted to a critique of the Marxist orientation of class-based equality. Articulations and ideological translations developed since Kerala modernity and social reform formulated anti-caste activism for democratic equality, public discourses and imaginations of an egalitarian society. New assertions taking identities as serious concerns portrays modern issues and concern for contemporary Dalit lives taking into account new imaginations and articulations of movements and aesthetical production of Dalit literature. However, the larger political projects of imagining social justice in a democratic order are yet to be realized.

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