

Mirrors of the Soul

Performative Egalitarianisms and Genealogies of the Human in Colonial-era Travancore, 1854-1927

Vivek V. Narayan¹
(Bluestone Rising Scholar 2019 Award)

*for Pradeepan Pampirikunnu,
with gratitude and in loving memory of an all-too-brief conversation*

Abstract

Scenes of *avarna* castes (slave and intermediate castes) pondering their reflections recur throughout the history of anti-caste struggle in the princely state of Travancore in colonial-era south India. These scenes represent what I will call *performative egalitarianisms*, which are repetitive enactments in the performance of everyday lives that embody claims to equality against the dehumanizing caste codes of colonial Travancore. In this paper, I will describe three scenes that represent distinct yet intertwined routes for the flows of egalitarian discourses in colonial Kerala. The concept of equality emerged in Travancore, first, via Enlightenment values of the British Protestant missionaries, or *soulful Enlightenment*; second, as non-dualistic equality of Narayana Guru, or *repurposed Advaita*; and third, through the discourses and practices of a Tamil religious cult called Ayya Vazhi, or *radical Siddha Saiva*. In viewing the flows of egalitarian discourse through the lens of performance, I demonstrate the method of *intellectual histories in the repertoire* which allows us to investigate how particular conceptual frameworks and discursive modes are transmitted, transformed, and embodied by people for whom these ideas are, quite literally, a matter of life and death. The intentional, productive, and empowering relationship between universals such as equality or humanity and the particular claims of anti-caste struggle in Kerala leads to a politics of practice that I describe as *repurposing universals*. The centrality of the notion of the human in the anti-caste politics of colonial-era Travancore leads me to refer to these flows of egalitarian discourses and the political struggles that they empowered as *genealogies of the human*. In sum, I analyze the genealogies of the human in colonial-era Travancore by focussing on three scenes exemplifying performative egalitarianisms: soulful Enlightenment, repurposed Advaita, and radical Siddha Saiva.

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Gandhinagar, India
E-mail: v.v.narayan@gmail.com

I

This paper reconstructs three scenes from colonial-era Travancore pertaining to the everyday lives of *avarna* (slave and intermediate) castes. In each of these scenes, the *avarna* castes gaze at their reflections, asserting interiority, reclaiming self-respect, repossessing dignity, and ultimately, recuperating their humanity. These scenes represent and document what I will call *performative egalitarianisms*, which are repetitive enactments rooted in the performance of everyday lives that embody claims to equality against the quotidian dehumanizations of caste codes. In colonial-era Travancore, as elsewhere in what is today Kerala, the caste codes of *jati maryada* (caste-based forms of respect, or caste-based rules and norms) governed all aspects of social behaviour.¹ By prescribing and enforcing minute details of everyday behaviour, *jati maryada* made castes legible, and ultimately, governable. Set against the historical backdrop of *jati maryada*, the three scenes I analyze in this paper help trace the flows of egalitarian discourses in colonial Travancore. They reveal not only the existence of egalitarian discourses but show that the *avarna* castes understood these discourses as such and took them up in ways that enacted, and inspired further enactments of, equality. In other words, not only do these scenes represent three routes for egalitarian discourse in colonial Travancore, but they also document the performances of everyday life through which we can discern the uptake of these concepts in the everyday lives of the *avarna* castes.

The first scene is drawn from archival records of an interview conducted by the missionary John Hawksworth (1855a, b) with slaves Cherrady and Thewatthan in 1854. This scene exemplifies the first route of egalitarian discourses emerging from Enlightenment universal values via British Protestant missionaries, which I call ‘soulful Enlightenment.’ The second scene depicts Sree Narayana Guru’s installation of a mirror as an idol in a temple in Kalavankodam in 1927. This scene embodies Guru’s reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta as non-dualistic equality, or ‘repurposed Advaita.’ The final scene portrays one of the ritual practices of the Ayya Vazhi (the Way of the Father), in which followers salute themselves in the mirror before entering a temple of the Ayya Vaikundar cult² (1838 – present). This scene represents theological discourses and documents practices of worship of the Ayya Vazhi that drew upon older notions of universality and corporeality from the Tamil yogic practice of Saiva Siddhanta, which I call ‘radical Siddha Saiva.’

I reconstruct these scenes from sources such as newspapers, missionary ethnographies, and oral historical accounts to identify distinct yet intertwined routes for the emergence of egalitarian discourses in Travancore. For each of these routes, I read archival records that show discursive articulation of egalitarian concepts alongside interpretations that reveal the uptake of these concepts in the repertoires of embodiment. What’s important for me is, in short, not only showing that egalitarian ideas existed in the three discourses I trace, but equally, that they were understood and taken up as such in popular consciousness in ways that inspired further enactments of equality. My dramaturgical logic for assembling these three scenes depends, in large part, on their potential to reveal the enactments of equality in everyday life.

This hybrid method straddles the archive and the repertoire to seek clues that reveal the lived experience of the *avarna* castes in order to attempt an intellectual history in the repertoire of embodiment. The pathbreaking work of Sanal Mohan (2015) has guided my efforts, where, following his example, I have tried to seek

clues for the lived experience and intellectual formations of the *avarna* castes from colonial missionary ethnographies. Intellectual histories in the repertoire provide a way to understand the ideas of unlettered people; to ask how particular conceptual frameworks and discursive modes are transmitted, transformed, and embodied by people for whom these ideas are, quite literally, a matter of life and death.

Along with identifying three routes for the flows of egalitarian discourses in colonial Travancore, this paper demonstrates a method of doing intellectual history in the repertoires of embodiment. I show here that analysing discourse, representation, and performance, by accessing sources in the archive and the repertoire, leads us towards the genealogies of the human in colonial Kerala.

Central to these flows of egalitarian discourses is the notion of the soul. As a substance at once immanent and transcendent, the soul holds particular importance to these performative egalitarianisms by providing a conceptual language in which to assert the *a priori* humanity of the *avarna* castes, as well as to exercise their capacity for action and transformation. The discourse of the soul derives primarily from the Christian evangelical discourse of British Protestant missionaries. For the missionaries, the soul designated, first, that which was *a priori* human, or human interiority; second, that which enabled human beings to act intentionally, or human agency; and, third, that part of the human which could be transformed through the discourse of sin and repentance, redemption and salvation, or transformative self-possession. This notion of the soul suffused the newly constituted public sphere in colonial Travancore and made its way to non-Christian forms of worship such as the movements led by Narayana Guru and Ayya Vaikundar. The soul, with its multiple valences of interiority, agency, and mutability, conceptualised and articulated egalitarian discourses in the language of a universal humanity. By designating that which characterised a human being, the notion of the soul organised missionary abolitionist discourse in colonial Travancore around the figure of the human. The soul provides, therefore, a vivid marker through which to trace the suffusion of egalitarian discourses and the concomitant notion of the human in colonial Travancore.

These genealogies of the human are, like all genealogies, not a search for point of origin, but a delineation of paths of descent and emergence.³ My argument here is not that egalitarian discourse had its origins in the Enlightenment values of British Protestant missionaries, but rather, that the Enlightenment provided one route of descent and emergence for the concept of equality that was repurposed with enthusiasm by the *avarna* castes. These routes are necessarily plural, appearing rarely, if ever, in singular form. Moreover, these genealogies of the human are also, invariably, compromised egalitarianisms: if soulful Enlightenment was qualified by its colonial context, both repurposed Advaita and radical *siddha saiva* exhibited an emerging sentiment of Hindu communal consolidation in response to conversions as well as a barely-concealed misogyny in discourse and practice. The heterogeneity of these genealogies and the acceptance of their compromised natures allow us to trace egalitarian discourse in the real and messy world that steers clear of the temptation to overemphasise such contradictions, or—worst of all—discredit the radical impulses of such historical movements by deconstructing their contradictions. Such a focus on the compromised egalitarianisms in everyday life can help us understand the contingent and always-imperfect processes of political struggle through intellectual histories in the repertoire.

Through intellectual histories in the repertoire, I attempt to trace here the ways in which universal values and particular contexts interact to empower anti-caste political struggle. I am interested here not only in the emancipatory possibilities of the imagination afforded by universals—the concepts of equality, and shared common humanity—but of the particular struggles that emerged through the situated and contingent practices of repurposing universals. The historical appropriation of a universal value such as equality or humanity to suit particular political contexts such as the struggle against caste in colonial Travancore is a double process that bends the universal claim to fit the particular issue, and expands the particular to universalistic proportions. Such practices of contingent and historical appropriation that articulate particular claims in universalistic language for strategic purposes I call ‘repurposing universals.’

I will now turn to each of these three scenes to describe the genealogies of the human in colonial-era Travancore which reveal how the *avarna* castes repurposed universals to advance their particular political claims.

II

SCENE ONE

Soulful Enlightenment: Suffering Slaves and the Sufferance of Christ

The first scene depicts the slaves of Travancore seeing parallels between the body and suffering of Christ with their own person and experience. A rare published interview from 1854 (Hawksworth, 1855 a, 1855 b) exemplifies the numerous conversations between slaves and missionaries that affirmed the ordinary lives⁴ of slaves and helped recuperate their humanity.

Q. Can we see God? A. Yes. Q. How? With the heart. Q. Can we see Him with the eye? A. We cannot now. Q. Did not the disciples see Christ? A. Yes. Q. How was that? (He being God.) A. He came among us (men) and walked with us. Q. Had Christ hands and feet, &c., as we have? A. Yes. Q. What nature had He? A. He took ours.

This interview sets up a mirroring between the suffering of slaves and that of Christ, and, significantly the verisimilitude between their human natures. In other words, this interview not only witnesses slave suffering but also asserts their *a priori* humanity.

Missionary recognition of slave humanity makes their records replete with detailed reports of the lived experience of slaves—the imponderabilia of encasted everyday life⁵—which bear traces of deeply felt conversations.⁶ Amongst these conversations, the interview by the colonial missionary John Hawksworth (1815–63) of the Church Mission Society (CMS) (and, in all probability, the native missionary George Matthan⁷) with the slaves Cherrady and Thewatthan, is rare for including a transcript of the conversation which affords us a glimpse of these everyday interactions. This interview—henceforth, Hawksworth, Cherrady, and Thewatthan—was originally published as ‘Questions by a Missionary, and answers by Travancore slaves, taught in a school of the Church Missionary Society’ in the *Madras Church Missionary Record*

of February 1854, (Mateer, 1883)⁸ and subsequently reprinted as ‘The Travancore Slaves’ in the *Missionary Register* of November 1854 (Hawksworth, 1855 a), and as ‘The Slaves of Travancore,’ in *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record* of January 1855 (Hawksworth, 1855 b). Hawksworth, Cherrady, and Thewatthan was intended to demonstrate, one version declared, that the ‘gospel of Christ is restorative in its action.’ The interview was specifically framed as evidence of how Christian faith can effect a transformation in ‘the most degraded, the most apparently hopeless and deeply sunk and [raise] them up to that dignity of character’ (Hawksworth, 1855 b) That is, the gospel would restore the degraded slaves—note the discourse of degradation with the implication of *a priori* humanity—to their full human selves characterised by self-respect and dignity.

‘I should say,’ prefaces Hawksworth in one version, that ‘the manner in which these answers were given was most satisfactory, and interested me very much.’ Hawksworth’s notes on ‘the manner’ in which they spoke suggests the self-possession of Cherrady and Thewatthan who calmly recounted the travails of their everyday lives. As representatives of a section of humanity degraded by caste, Cherrady and Thewatthan demonstrated their humanity as speaking and suffering subjects. The act of prayer recuperated the inner worlds of the slave castes, and restored to them their humanity in full.

In the brief extract from Hawksworth, Cherrady, and Thewatthan above, we see the rhetorical operation of recognizing the first meaning of soul, which was to emphasize the inalienable interiority of the human. Cherrady and Thewatthan answer that we can see God with ‘the heart.’ That is, through the interiority that characterises the human soul, or that which makes us human. The following questions and answers underscore this relation between interiority and humanity. Christ, they say, ‘came among us (men) and walked with us.’ The humanity of slaves and the human form of Christ in Christian doctrine are equated here to argue again for the inclusion of slaves within the category of humanity. The elaboration of ‘hands and feet, *etcetera*,’ equates his ‘nature’ with that of the slaves to assert that Christ took the form of slaves. They assert later in the interview that we ‘must pray with all our heart.’ Once again, they were asserting in the language of the gospel, the inalienable interiority of their human souls.

Missionary discourse had it that the recuperation of their human souls was made possible through the gospel, which allowed them to come into their own as suffering subjects and articulate human agents. In fact, they demonstrated not only the worthiness and possibility of redeeming the souls of slaves but attested that such transformation was already well underway. They performed in other words, the collective suffering of the slave population in eloquent terms.

The notion of collective social suffering is significant to encasted subjectivities. Sanal Mohan (2015) argues that missionary abolitionist efforts drew upon ‘Enlightenment ideas of equality and liberty and constructed slavery discursively’ in order to critique it as ‘a modern phenomenon.’ Missionary efforts to engage slaves included, critically, collecting information on the lived experience of slave castes which, as Mohan points out, discursively ‘constituted the suffering slave and helped evolve a language of resistance’ irrespective of whether slaves converted to Protestantism or not (2015, 48-9). For Mohan, then, the recognition of slave suffering and its narration as a modern phenomenon paved the way to recuperate their humanity and articulate anti-caste politics.

Mohan is not alone in placing the experience and articulation of suffering at the centre of anti-caste politics. Suffering occupies the central conceptual and ethical category in BR Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism, where he reinterprets the Buddhist doctrine to give it anti-caste political form. Here, *dukkha* becomes the equivalent of 'exploitation and poverty' caused by the 'exercise of power by one person or class over another.'⁹ Indeed, *dukkha*, in this sense of social suffering is, Ananya Vajpeyi (2012) asserts, 'constitutive of the very identity of the Untouchables[.]' Social suffering is 'the modality in which they experience their being in the world—especially since society, from their perspective, is created by and for those with caste.' Ambedkar's *dukkha* is to be understood, cautions Vajpeyi, 'not as individual, karmic suffering, but as collective, social suffering.'

Social suffering, as theorised by Kleinman, Das, and Lock (1997), refers to the human experience of horrors and brutalities that the structures of social life enable and legitimize. This concept of social suffering 'brings into a single space an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience' (pp ix-x) Their understanding of social suffering explicitly refuses the dichotomies of the individual and the collective, and the local and the global; a fact of particular significance to encasted subjectivities.

Such an emphasis on suffering is always a double-edged phenomenon, argues Alexander Weheliye (2014) in the context of trans-Atlantic slavery: while discourses about the suffering slave recognised black humanity, they also 'subjugated black subjects in much more insidious and elaborate ways than de facto enslavement' (p 12). That is, if suffering recognised the human soul, this discourse also trapped suffering subjects into other modes of subjugation that denied their agency.

Yet, as Mohan (2015) points out, missionary recognition of the humanity of suffering slaves played a role in their transformation under colonial modernity. A careful parsing of these narratives of suffering also helps to identify the agency of the slave castes in ways that do not further subjugate them through historiography. This is what I'm attempting here: to unpack archival records that help us understand the social and political transformation in the *avarna* castes of Travancore through their encounter with egalitarian discourses. To narrate suffering was not to remain relegated to a suffering subjectivity, for social recognition led to political transformation.

For the slaves of colonial-era Travancore, the epistemology of sin and repentance provided an imaginative terrain in which to narrativize, and therefore begin to transform, suffering, and to conceptualize modern concepts of justice, equality, and autonomy. In missionary discourse, the figure of the 'Thief on the Cross' exemplifies the epistemology of sin and repentance, as well as the eventual reinstatement of justice. Hawkworth, Cherrady, and Thewatthan discuss the Thief on the Cross:

Q. If a thief becomes afraid of God, and lessens his stealing, is it enough? A. No use—must obey God's commandments entirely. Q. If the thief, hearing this, gives up thieving, will he be saved? A. He must beg pardon. Q. Yet all cry for pardon at death? A. Should cry before. Q. But the thief on the cross cried then, and was saved: how was that? A. By faith. Q. Can we obey precisely? A. Only by God's grace. Q. Can we think holy desires without this? A. We cannot. Q. Who puts these holy desires into our minds? A. The Holy Spirit.

The first generic thief they discuss is a direct reference to the regular practice among the agrestic slaves of what we might call ‘subsistence stealing.’ Denied even adequate food upon which they could survive, slaves resorted to stealing grain, cattle, and other goods for subsistence. Their subsistence stealing was structurally necessitated by the far worse, socially-sanctioned structural stealing by *savarna* overlords. In other words, subsistence stealing was not a question of morality, but of survival (Mohan, 2015 p 96-7).

Although stealing contained a ‘hidden transcript of everyday resistance practices’ (Mohan, 2015; Scott, 1985), as a form of resistance, it remained below the radar, and could not accommodate any conception of transformation of the abjected situation of slaves. It is such hidden transcripts, represented by the generic thief, that missionary instruction encourages slaves to disavow in colonial Kerala.

The transformation they encourage is that of the biblical ‘Thief on the Cross’—a repentant one who understands the doctrine of sin and wishes to mend his ways. The conversation makes it clear that such repentance ought not to be opportunistic by crying for pardon at the hour of death, but rather that it ought to be a performance of everyday life according to reformed principles. The doctrine of sin and practices of repentance held, for slave castes, a simultaneous acknowledgement of their interiority, agency, and capacity for transformation. This polyvalent recognition of the human souls of slaves is indicated through the shorthand of the Holy Ghost. In response to the question—‘Who puts these holy desires into our minds?’—Cherrady and Thewatthan answer, ‘The Holy Spirit.’ That is, their interiority (‘minds’) are imbued with the agential desire for change (‘holy desires’) to realise their unnameable capacity for transformation (‘the Holy Spirit’). The simultaneous acknowledgement of external influence, internal transformation, and self-possession acted as the context within which slaves conceptualised their agency—the key second meaning of ‘soul’ in missionary discourse. Facilitating the narration of transformative self-possession in everyday practices through biblical metaphors was one way in which missionary intervention acted as one route for egalitarian discourses in colonial Kerala.

This sense of transformative self-possession articulated in the language of sin and repentance stands in contrast to forms of worship that surrogated slave abjection. In another report from 1855, Hawksworth describes an idol of worship, which was in ‘the image of a murdered slave’ (Hawksworth, 1855a, 1856 p 92).

A few weeks ago a slave brought an idol to the bungalow. He himself had worshipped it until he learned the religion of Christ. His story about the idol, which I have had confirmed from other quarters, is singular. The idol is the image of a murdered slave, and was made and set up by the murderer to appease the spirit of his victim. The shocking mutilation of the body, and other particulars, have been narrated, proving that several must have committed the crime. One of the suspected parties destroyed himself a short time ago. Perhaps nothing could be a clearer or more affecting proof of the moral degradation of the slaves, than the fact of their regarding as a deity what they believed to be the image of a murdered slave, and actually worshipping it.

We need not subscribe to the missionary’s condemning attitude towards ‘heathen’ practices of worship, nor affirm his unshakeable faith in Christianity, to learn about the spiritual lives of slave castes before Christianity, and their transformation through

colonial modernity. Hawksworth reads the mutilated body represented in the idol as evidence of lynching, as opposed to random violence. He further notes that one of the perpetrators ‘destroyed himself’—suicide, perhaps—suggesting that it was widely known who the perpetrators were, which would be entirely in keeping with the public and spectacular nature of lynching. Hawksworth ultimately notes that ‘nothing could be a clearer or more affecting proof of the moral degradation of the slaves, than the fact of their regarding as a deity what they believed to be the image of a murdered slave, and actually worshipping it.’ The performative violence of lynching, which constitutes the slave body as subject to terror and enfleshment, is surrogated here through the everyday act of worshipping of the idol.¹⁰ But for Hawksworth, such surrogation represents nothing more than moral degradation because he sees no evidence of transformative self-possession. Such worship remembers constitutive violence, but does not transcend it, or attempt to change the conditions for its existence. Moreover, the representation of ‘shocking mutilation of the body’ makes commonplace the encasted subjection of breaking slave bodies. Far from the transformative self-possession that informs the discourse of sin and repentance, such surrogation enacted, for Hawksworth, the naturalisation of encasted violence and, ultimately, perpetuated the cycle of encasted subjection (Hartman, 1997). In using the miraculous powers of the Gospel as shorthand for the work of individual and collective transformation and the everyday performance of self-possession it wrought, Hawksworth presents a valuable insight into both the self-evident biases of missionary discourse, and, far more importantly, the impact of missionary activity upon the everyday lives and imaginations of slave castes. The discourse of sin and repentance points to the third meaning of ‘soul’ in missionary discourse: that which can be transformed or redeemed in a human life.

Apart from such transformative self-possession, which missionary discourse presents, naturally, as evidence of the restorative power of the Gospel, and the understanding of the discourse of sin and repentance that articulated individual and collective transformation, what impressed Hawksworth was the lack of exaggeration and overstatement. His reassurances—which, presumably, addressed his British peers—attested to the veracity of these slave narratives. ‘There was no attempt to represent things,’ Hawksworth hastens to add, ‘as worse than they actually are, but rather’—with the forgiveness that befits Christian charity—‘to soften the case.’ The act of forgiveness is the construction of a new self that elevates its spirit through recourse of spiritual values.¹¹

When an unnamed slave declared, ‘amid sobs and tears, the deep depravity of his own heart,’ he was performing new selfhood rooted both in the eloquence of his suffering and the potential of his transformative agency (Hawksworth, 1855). Through these narratives, the slave castes not only began to make sense of their social suffering—their *dukkha*—but began to demonstrate the process of asserting transgressive agency by embodying individual and social transformation. The discourse of sin and redemption, while offering modalities to articulate individual and social transformation, also gave slave castes a language to assert their selfhood and agency. The emphasis upon forgiveness performed the renewal of slave selves, their spiritual ascension to a position of foregoing reactionary retribution and granting pardon.

In one version, Hawkworth ends the interview with a report of a redeemed soul. ‘Last week, a slave woman—who, some months ago, was forsaken by her husband because she would attend the Sunday-school—died in peace. Her last words were, “I am entering heaven.”’ (1855 a, p 473). Hawkworth concludes, ‘Such are some of the effects of the gospel among the slaves.’

The slave woman’s fervent hope that she was entering heaven brings together the experiences of spiritual ascension and the redemption of slave humanity through religion. The slave woman’s last words express the hope of what TM Yesudasan calls ‘*matharohanam*,’ or religious ascension. In his important study of the relationship between Christianity and the anti-caste movement in Kerala—*Baliyadukalude Vamshavali*, or *A Genealogy of the Scapegoats*—Yesudasan refuses the term ‘conversion’ and offers instead his influential formulation of *matharohanam*, which I translate as ‘religious ascension.’ The term ‘conversion,’ points out Yesudasan, applies only to those who switch allegiance from one organised religion, say Hinduism, to another, such as Christianity, or Islam. In Yesudasan’s view, given that slave castes in the nineteenth century were not considered to belong to Hinduism—or, indeed, any religion—their acceptance into the Protestant church can only be understood as an ascension into the realm of religion. Yesudasan’s formulation of religious ascension reveals the origins of his conceptual framework in the Christian doctrine of ascension. But, this is not all *matharohanam* signifies: given the dehumanization and social death (Patterson, 2018) that marked the lives of humans-as-property, acceptance within the social and communal life of the church initiated their ascension into the realm of the human. For Yesudasan, then, the term *matharohanam* also denotes the ascension of the slave castes of nineteenth century Kerala from ‘a completely unorganised and helpless situation’ to one of relatively ‘better circumstances.’¹² That is, it describes their admission into the social realm of the human from the sub-human or non-human.¹³ If *matharohanam* is ascension into the realm of religion, it is also, equally, ascension into the realm of the human.

The testimonies of slave castes from the nineteenth century, when read through Yesudasan’s theoretical contributions, suggest that there existed a growing common sense among the slave castes of *matharohanam*: theirs was not so much a switching of allegiances, but a simultaneous ascension into the spiritual realms of religion and humanity. It is in this sense that I have argued for Enlightenment universals via British Protestant missionaries to provide one genealogy of the human in colonial Travancore.

Cherrady and Thewatthan were enacting much else besides rote-learning of the Gospel teachings when they saw reflections of themselves and their experience in the body and suffering of Christ. This narrative mirror held for them a recognition not only of their suffering but of their inalienable human interiority and with it, the hope of transformation. This scene represents the flow of Enlightenment universal values via British Protestant missionaries and documents the performances of everyday life through which the slave castes repurposed those values to articulate their particular political claims.

SCENE TWO

Repurposed Advaita: Worshipping an Idol of the Self

In 1927, Narayana Guru (1855-1928) consecrated a temple at Kalavankodam, near Cherthala, with a mirror inscribed with ‘Om’—signifying, quite simply, that the divine was to be found within the self. Every time Guru’s followers worshipped the mirror at Kalavankodam, they performatively asserted that the fullness of a human being was worthy of adoration. Nearly a century after its consecration, this temple continues to be a popular destination for followers of Guru.

Fully appreciating the significance of the performative egalitarianism in the Kalavankodam mirror installation requires reading two of Guru’s best-known works that led up to it: *Jati Nirnayam* [*A Critique of Caste*] of 1914, and the older, *Atmopadesha Satakam* [*One Hundred Verses of Self-instruction*; henceforth *AS*] of 1897. In *Jati Nirnayam*, Guru coined the phrase that has since become the de facto slogan for the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam¹⁴ in particular, and the anti-caste movement in general: ‘*oru jati our matham our deivam manushyanu*’ [one caste, one religion, one god for man].

Guru begins this short poem with a species-level argument: humanity marks a human being just as bovinity marks a cow. What does not make a human is ‘Brahminhood and such.’ Significantly, he uses the word ‘*jati*’ to denote species. The second stanza is the famous slogan in which he repeats *jati*, using the insistent rhythmic drive of the bi-syllabic word interspersed with the staccato *oru* (one) to slide between his precise usage of *jati*-as-species, and the more commonly understood usage of *jati*-as-caste. The third stanza adds the critical argument that a species is that which can beget offspring. This is an argument Guru would return to in a later work, *Jati Lakshanam* [*A Syntax of Caste*] (c. 1921), giving it a greater emphasis on corporeality: ‘Do not ever ask/ “Who you are (by caste)?”/ Because the body itself/ Tells you of that truth.’

In *Jati Nirnayam*, Guru continues the species-level argument in the thesis stanza: ‘Of the human species/ Is a Brahmin born/ As is a Pariah too./ Where is the caste difference, then,/ Amongst the human species?’ This is a familiar Advaitic trope: *maya* (illusion) occludes our perception, preventing us from separating the real rope from the imaginary serpent. The human species (*manushyatvam*) is the reality, articulated in the true category of *jati*-as-species, while caste differences are false appearances articulated as *jati*-as-caste.

The image of the human and animal unequally yoked together that haunts the history of caste in Kerala¹⁵ certainly exerts its influence upon Guru’s rhetoric, though this is not all that he articulates here. For Guru, the human-animal comparison allows him to elevate his arguments to universalistic proportions, and also allows him to return to the individual human self. The last two stanzas reveal this rhetorical maneuver in operation.

The penultimate stanza brings the weight of scriptural authority to bear on the issue. Guru points to the sage Parashara, the mythic author of the *Puranas*, as being ‘Of a pariah woman/ was born the great sage.’ Lines referring to Parashara’s son, Ved Vyasa, the mythic author of the *Vedas* and the *Mahabharata*, and Vyasa’s mother Satyavati, follow as if to illustrate the possibilities of greatness that lay within the realm of the human irrespective of caste. Guru says, “‘even the sage who/ condensed the Vedic secrets/ into great aphorisms,/ was born of the daughter/ of a fisherman.’

These lines also self-reflexively refer to Guru himself, for he was born an Ezhava. If these great sages were born of pariah and fisher castes, and they are the authors of the *Puranas* and the *Vedas* respectively, then how can the caste distinctions be true to the scriptures?

Does Guru suggest then that all humans are the same? The final stanza ends on a note that provides an answer by asserting the primacy of the self.

Species-wise, does one find,
When considered,
Any difference between man and man?
Is it not that
Difference exists apparently
Only individual-wise?

Here, he raises two questions: the first rhetorically restates his central thesis, while the second, returns to the perceiving subject—the autonomous human self. The first being more or less self-explanatory, it is the second rhetorical question in the final verse of the poem that interests me. In it, Guru deploys three significant poetic devices. First, he appears to say, on the surface, that if humans are one species, as argued throughout the poem, then any differences whatsoever are at the level of the individual. Second, through this explicit thematic closure from the species-level argument in the first half of the poem to the individualistic argument in the final stanza, Guru effects a movement from the universal to the particular. At the beginning of the poem, he brings the weight of universals (species, humanity, *manushyatvam*) to bear on the particular (individual differences), while in the final stanza, he expands the particular (the individual self, the person) to universalistic proportions (the human). The concluding phrase in the last line ‘*vyakthibhagathillalle bhedamirunnidu*’ (individual differences) establishes this rhetorical closure with the famous opening phrase of the first line ‘*manushyanam manushyatvam*’ (Man’s humanity). The conceptual unity between these two lines lies in the relationship between *vyakthi* (person, or individual) and *manushan* (the human): the autonomous self and the figure of the human. This return to the primacy of the self in the final stanza is a revealing example of the discursive and performative efforts to claim subjecthood and personhood that I am calling *genealogies of the human*.

Some two decades before *Jati Nirnayam* was published, and nearly thirty years before the Kalavankodam mirror installation, Guru had crystallized the central ideas of repurposed Advaita in his landmark work, the *AS*. This long philosophical poem of a hundred verses foregrounds its central themes in its first eleven verses: first, consciousness; second, ascendance of the individual self to universal human consciousness; third, images of spiritual depth; fourth, figures of transformation; fifth, transcendence of ‘hell’; and finally, the articulation of particular historical claims in the language of repurposed Advaita. I will take up each of these themes in turn below to elaborate upon repurposed Advaita.

Consciousness is the underlying theme that unites *AS*, and indeed, all of Guru’s works. Consciousness appears in a number of ways throughout *AS*. First, it appears as the transformative entity that is both within and without the human subject (1, 2). Here it denotes the transformation of the subject. Second, consciousness is the non-dualistic principle that unites the object known and the knowing subject (3). Here it compares to *karu*, a key concept of Narayana Guru’s that I discuss below. Third, consciousness

appears in contrast to, on the one hand, sleep (5), and on the other, to mindless impulses (6). Consciousness here demands something more than wakefulness, and suggests intentional living with self-mastery. It is the ‘one priceless lamp’ that is ‘never lit, nor ever blown out’ (5). In verse 8, Guru expounds on this idea further: consciousness is the ‘weapon of a radiant inner clarity/ That fills one’s entire being’ and it can shoot down the flighty senses.¹⁶ Fourth, consciousness holds the promise of transcendence of ‘hell’: the man who ‘subjects himself to *tapas* [penance]/ Never has to confront hell’ (9). (The hell denotes here, as I will discuss later, the dehumanizations of caste-bound colonial Kerala.)

The second theme—the ascendance of the individual self to universal human consciousness—is encapsulated in the first verse of *AS*.

Permeating the knowledge which brilliantly shines
at once within and without the knower
is the *karu*; to that, with the five senses withheld,
prostrate again and again with devotion and chant.

Knowledge here is both immanent and transcendent: it permeates ‘at once within and without’ the knowing subject. The recuperation of the inner realm, the unfettering, so to speak, of the human spirit, is an abiding concern in Guru’s work. For the perceiving subject here is not merely the knower (*ariyunnavan*) but ‘one who transcends empirical knowledge,’ or *arivilumeriyarinnitunnavan* (Yati and Guru, 2003) Such transcendence moves from an immanent empirical experience of the five senses to the universal consciousness or the indefinable *karu*. This concept, usually translated into English as the Core, lies at the heart of Guru’s repurposed Advaita. The *karu* is the universal consciousness—‘That alone,’ in Guru’s famous phrase (*AS* 4)—which unites the knower and knowledge of absolute reality. Such knowing is, the commentator Nitya Chaitanya Yati points out, ‘not an interaction between the subject and the object, but a transformation of the subject’ (Yati and Guru, 2003, p 1). Yati compares *karu* to the blacksmith’s mould in which is poured molten metal: the mould of knowledge (*arivu*) is consciousness (*Arivu*) (Yati and Guru, 2003, p 3). The conceptual generalization of all these moulds called the *karu*, or the Core (Yati and Guru, 2003, p 2-4). The relationship between the absolute/ universal consciousness or knowledge (*arivu*) and the subjective/ particular knowledge (*arivu* or *thannarivu*) is the *karu*. In a later work, *Arivu [Knowledge/ Consciousness]* (c. 1887-97), Guru further demonstrates his non-dualistic conception of subjective knowledge and universal consciousness by using the same word for both: *arivu*. Thus, for Guru, the individual self is transformed through an encounter with the world, and subjective/ particular knowledge (*arivu* or *thannarivu*) melds into a universal consciousness (*arivu*).

The poem contains numerous images of depth—the third theme—which read as metaphorical representations of spirituality. These images of depth stand as metaphors for interiority and profundity.

Verse 3 exemplifies the images of depth in *AS*. External worldly phenomena such as the five elements of earth, fire, water, air, and ether, are, ‘when contemplated/ [...] like waves rising in rows./ from the treasury of the watery deep, without any/ separate reality whatsoever’ (3). This verse uses the oft-repeated Advaitic marine imagery of the waves and the depths to suggest the inextricable relationship between the subjective self and the universal consciousness.

This image metaphorically represents interiority, endurance, and profundity. The rows of waves are, obviously, a surface phenomena. Guru begins with the surface phenomena to show its relationship to the watery deep. The waves are, moreover, not merely surface phenomena, but are inextricably linked to the watery depths. 'The waves', which stands analogous to the subjective self, is inseparable from the depths of universal consciousness. Thus, the image first suggests interiority, which is inseparable for Guru from universal consciousness.

Moreover, the waves do not merely disappear but, in being possessed of inward depth, they endure. The theme of the subject enduring through consciousness of actions over time is the theme of verse 6, where he asks whether an individual caught in 'fleeting urges' can 'become enlightened as to the truth/ that is always immutable'? (6) Guru's rhetorical question here both establishes, and puts pressure on, the relationship of ephemeral actions and enduring consciousness of the self, or self-possession. The waves and the depths of verse 3 set up this non-dualistic relationship of ephemeral action (fleeting urges, or crashing waves) and enduring consciousness (immutable truth, or the treasure of the watery deep).

The relationship of interiority and endurance makes the ocean a 'treasury of the watery deep' (*jalanidhi*) for it suggests, according to Guru, the profundity of the human spirit. The human spirit is, Guru repeatedly points out in his writings, inseparable from the cosmic absolute reality, like the waves and depths. What makes the individual consciousness of the self a profound entity is its relationship with the absolute. The waves arise from the treasury of the watery depths.

Figures of transformation that appear frequently in *AS* make up its fourth major theme. Such transformation is a recurring motif in *AS*; indeed, it is, as the title indicates, the stated objective of the poem. The image of the waves I discussed above indicate one kind of transformation characterised by relentless change. Such 'fleeting urges' exist in a dialectic bond with the immutable truth (6) just as the waves and the ocean depths (3).

A second figure of transformation appears as a kind of merging of the self with the infinite, or the absolute. Verse 4 exemplifies this kind of transformation in its exhortation to bridge the distance between the knowing subject and known object by merging with the absolute, or to 'become That Alone.' Here, Guru suggests that self-possession begins and ends in universal consciousness of an infinite, absolute reality. This consciousness—the precious lamp that is neither lit nor extinguished (5)—is what Guru exhorts his readers to remain cognizant of as they 'go forward' (5). Consciousness of the absolute and transformation of the self exist, for Guru, in a relationship of continuous interiority and exteriority. Such a Möbius strip-like conception binds the individual self and universal consciousness, or the particular subject and the universal value, within a continuum of mutual causality.

Guru advocates a third figure of transformation: the meditating subject. In verse 8, the meditating figure masters external sensory phenomena with 'the weapon of a radiant inner clarity/ That fills one's entire being' (8). As noted in the present tense of 'fills one's entire being,' as well as its imagery of attaining fullness, the act of meditation represents, for Guru, the slow process of transformation of the self. Such transformation is critical, suggests Guru, because it saves the meditator from having to 'confront hell' (9).

Transcendence of ‘hell,’ the fifth major theme, presents the object of the transformative practice of meditation. Although Guru never explicitly defines what ‘hell’ might refer to, the following stanzas (reproduced in full) offer an explanation.

“Tell me who are you sitting in darkness?” one asks.
 On hearing this, the other,
 In order to know, asks in return, “Who are you?”
 The answer to both these questions is the same.
 What is spoken of as ‘I’, ‘I’, by each
 When well-pondered upon,
 Is found to be not many but just one in true essence.
 The I-senses divergingly, of course, are many,
 And, therefore, in and through the sum total
 Of the many assuredly endures
 The one essential content of ‘I’. (AS 10, 11; Guru, 2006, 237-8)

I read these two verses as representations of the caste ‘hell’ of colonial Kerala. Guru is concerned here with the closed world of subjection circumscribed by the caste codes of *jati maryada*. It was common practice, as I pointed out earlier,¹⁷ for castes to shout out particular phrases that identified caste and therefore helped maintain the spatial codes of ‘distance pollution.’ The maintenance of spatial codes required that caste be made visible at a distance. The embodied codes of attire and accoutrement—a palm-leaf umbrella signaled a Namboodiris, for instance, while brass bangles and stone-bead necklaces indicated Pulayas—answered that need. This is the world of caste subjection that in verse 8 Guru characterises metaphorically and literally as being in the dark. The metaphorical darkness exists because caste-bound Kerala society denies, for Guru, the psychic non-dualistic unity of being. In literal darkness, Guru depicts two individuals asking each other to reveal their caste. We can surmise the answer Guru imagines from *Jati Nirnayam*: ‘*manushyanam manushyatvam*,’ or a human characterised by humanity.

The following verse suggests that the ‘I’, ‘I’ (*aham aham*) that each answers in vain is ‘not many’ but ‘just one in true essence’” (11). While this may appear to be a standard Advaitic discourse which depicts and denies externalities in order to assert an essential psychic and cosmic unity, Guru’s rhetoric here achieves much more when one remembers the context of *jati maryadas*. The ‘I’, ‘I’ answer that Guru gives, uses a heavily Sanskritised Malayalam word, ‘*aham*,’ that stands in weighty contrast to the more common ‘*njan*.’ In a world where the slave castes referred to themselves as ‘*adiyen*’ or ‘this slave’ through linguistic caste codes, and in which the ascending scale of caste reverence meant that even landowning Nairs referred to themselves as ‘*adiyen*’ when speaking with Namboodiris, such assertion of self through the use of the weighty ‘*aham*’ represents an astonishing claim to subjecthood. This is, ultimately, what makes *AS* so significant in the history of colonial Kerala: it exemplifies Guru’s metaphysics of equality which I have called repurposed Advaita.

It was the same sense ‘I’, ‘I’ (*aham aham*)—a self-conscious elevation of bodies abjected and degraded by *jati maryada* to a kind of dignified personhood that enabled them to experience the transformative effects of self-possession—that informed Guru’s consecration of the mirror at Kalavankodam in 1927.

In his philosophical works and political actions, Guru drew upon the brahminical discourse of Advaita Vedanta to elevate the encasted individual subject to an anti-caste universal consciousness. He states his central philosophical principle in simpler terms in the *Darsana Mala* [Garland of Visions] of 1916: ‘*atmaiva brahma*’ (*atman* is *brahman*) (8.4). Here, as everywhere in his work including the *AS*, Guru appears to say that the individual self is the absolute reality; the soul is the Godhead; and *this* human is all of humanity—*manushanam manushatvam*. This simultaneous process of, on the one hand, recuperating the human soul hitherto crushed under the dehumanization of *jati maryadas*, and, on the other, elevating it to the cosmic consciousness, is the greatest contribution of Narayana Guru’s repurposed Advaita. In Guru’s repurposed Advaita, which provided a second genealogy of the human in colonial Kerala, non-dualistic philosophy found an anti-caste edge that it never had before, and hasn’t regained since.

SCENE THREE

Radical Siddha Saiva: Saluting the Dignified Self

The Ayya Vazhi (henceforth, AV), or the Way of the Father, which follows the teachings of Ayya Vaikundar a.k.a. Vaikunda Swamy (c. 1809-1851) prescribes a number of important rituals that continue to be practised by believers at sacred sites known as *Pathis* and at smaller shrines known as *Nizhal Thangals*. A notable characteristic of these rituals is the emphasis upon self-presentation: during acts of worship, men appear, even today, wearing a turban on their heads. (While women devotees of the AV are not easily distinguished today from non-devotees, as they were, in the early nineteenth century, among the first to adopt the blouse, or *kuppayam*.¹⁸) Such care in self-presentation, as performative acts asserting self-respect and dignity, is institutionalized in the AV through ritual. One such ritual provides the action in the following discussion of the third and final scene exemplifying the genealogies of the human in colonial-era Travancore.

Before entering the shrine in Swamithope—literally, the Swami’s Grove, a town named after Vaikundar, which acts as headquarters for the AV—turbaned devotees view and salute their dignified selves in a mirror. As with repurposed Advaita, the AV too held that the divine was to be found within the self, and what was worthy of worship was the fullness of humanity.

Prior to ritually reaffirming their humanity, they also take a ritual bath known as the *tuvayal tavasu*—or the penance for self-purification (literally, the washing penance)—which included bathing in the sea thrice everyday and eating simple vegetarian meals of rice and green grams once a day (Ponniah, 2014; Patrick, 2017). This emphasis on purification of the individual body was part of the larger logic of Saiva Siddhanta. As Mohan points out, the discourse of hygiene in terms of bodily practices as well as food habits played a central role in both the ongoing exclusion of slave castes as well as in missionary reform. On the one hand, *savarna* castes justified the exclusion of slave castes from the church on the grounds that ‘if not caste at least one should consider cleanliness as health sciences advice.’¹⁹ Missionary reform, on the other hand, introduced modern medicine and hygiene whose positive impact upon the slave castes they often noted with satisfaction (Mohan 2015). Such missionary zeal in disciplining bodily practices resonated with *avarna* leaders: Mohan discusses Poikayil Yohannan’s advocacy of personal hygiene and cleanliness in the early

twentieth century, while Chandramohan (2016, 132-135) points out Narayana Guru's frequent exhortations against the 'filthy' profession of toddy tapping and in favour of personal hygiene and cleanliness. In all cases, the discourse and practice of personal hygiene arose from the modern notions of self-respect and dignity that was profoundly attractive to the *avarna* castes. As a precursor to the anti-caste movements of Yohannan and Guru, the AV's emphasis on ritual acts of cleaning within its worship formed part of this sweeping discourse of self-respect and dignity that characterizes the genealogies of the human. Bodily cleanliness was, for Vaikundar—much like it was for the missionaries, Yohannan and Guru—an inseparable analogue of spiritual cleanliness.²⁰ Indeed, missionaries who saw Vaikundar's enterprise as a competitor in the conversion marketplace were forced to acknowledge, albeit somewhat begrudgingly, the superior hygiene of AV followers. 'It is true,' one missionary conceded, 'that their bodies and their houses are more cleanly [*sic*] than those of the rest.'²¹

A Society of Equals

The discourse of hygiene and body cleanliness became one way to assert shared common humanity amongst the slave castes, amidst other conceptions of modernity and equality. Religious movements in colonial Kerala—Protestant missionaries, Narayan Guru, Poykayil Yohannan, and Ayya Vaikundar, to name only a few—made concerted attempts to refashion the encasted bodies of slave and intermediate *avarna* castes. Such refashioning of the body was inseparable from asserting the dignity and self-respect central to modern notions of the human. And as Mohan (2015, 121) points out, any conception of modernity was, for the slave castes, inseparable from the discourse of equality.

In the AV, the discourse of hygiene led to the performance of what Vaikundar called the '*Samatva Samajam*,' or, the Society of Equals.²² The usage of the word *samatva* in the name of the organization bears unpacking, for the term exists in similar form in many Indian languages. The intellectual historian Aishwary Kumar discusses the valences of '*samata*' in Ambedkar's discourse to point out that the term yields 'not "equality" as a passive condition,' which would be *samaanta*, but rather that it suggests 'the "equal-ness" of a living being grasped at the moment of its coming into the world.' This notion of equality—*samata*—is 'not a moral precept' but 'an equal-ness grounded in a person's inalienable right of being and becoming' (Kumar, 2015, pp 48). In other words, this understanding of *samata* suggests that it is best understood not as a universal condition—whether in a social, moral, legal, or constitutional sense—but as a political claim that seeks inclusion of particular lifeworlds within the ambit of the universal. Throughout, I understand equality in this sense of a situated claim to the universal rather than an actually existing universal condition; that is, as a repurposed universal that provides intellectual heft to particular political claims. In the case of *Samatva Samajam* too was making a similar claim to the universal, a situated claim against the dispossessions of caste and the subjugation of hierarchy, to argue that they too could belong as humans to a society of equals. By ritualizing its meetings²³, the *Samatva Samajam* pointed out that, in fact, they already did.

The flag of the AV—saffron with a white vertical mark (*naamam*) in the middle—today commemorates the memory of this society of equals, and interpellates all worshippers as members of this society of equals. The organising principle of this society of AV is universal love—or, in the words of one historian, 'indiscriminating

love'²⁴—as evidenced by the name of the flag: *Anbu Kodi*, or the Flag of Love. The stated objective of *Samatva Samajam* was to unite all humanity under the *Anbu Kodi*.

Other aspects of ritual worship in the AV included cooking food with water drawn from a communal well called the *Munthiri Kinaru*, or the 'well of sweet water'.²⁵ (Today, the ritual includes bathing in water from the well.) A communal well was rich in significance for an anti-caste movement given that colonial-era Travancore maintained separate wells for the castes as another mode to practice untouchability. In such a context, the name of the well—*Munthiri Kinaru*—could not have failed to promise the sweet dream of a society built on principles of equality. In caste-ridden colonial Travancore, the act of drawing water from the *Munthiri Kinaru* and washing and cooking with it would have performed the promise of equality.

This becomes especially true when considering that the act of dining too was ritualised in the AV. The communal act of interdining—jointly enjoying a communal meal irrespective of caste—was preceded by a ritual call: 'Ayya, *saappadalama?*' or, 'Ayya, can we eat?' The call was followed by a ritual response—'*Saappadalam*' (You may eat.) The significance of this ritual call-and-response is not lost on the ethnographer and religious studies scholar James Ponniah, who points out that such a practice ensures that 'everyone has been served,' which, in a hierarchical society, 'inculcates a sense of absolute equality among the human beings gathered at the table.'²⁶

The Ordinary and the Metaphysical, or the Mundane and the Mythic

Be it the *tuvayal tavasu* (washing penance), or drawing water from the *Munthiri Kinaru* (well of sweet water), or the communal dining with its call-and-response, the rituals of AV institutionalised everyday practices to enact individual self-respect and dignity as well as communal solidarity. These acts contested caste in the realm of the ordinary and the everyday, but caste—as we know well following Ambedkar's famous call to destroy the authority of the *shastras*²⁷—is inseparable from the metaphysical realm. These ritualised everyday practices, which we might think of as codified ordinariness, had their scriptural analogues in the metaphysics of the AV. Like the repurposed Advaita of Narayana Guru, the AV too worked against caste—simultaneously in the realms of the ordinary and the metaphysical.

The metaphysical thought of the AV—written, or compiled, by one of Vaikundar's senior disciples, Hari Gopalan Citar—are largely to be found in two canonical works: a primary scripture called the *Akilathirattu Ammanai*, or the World Collection of Ballads (henceforth, *Akilam*), and a secondary work, the *Arul Nool*, or the Book of Grace, which offers commentary on the *Akilam*. These texts compile myths that offer fantastical renditions of history that narrate the past, interpret the present, and conjure visions of a future. These myths provide not only an affective version of history—history, as Roland Barthes had it, turned to nature (2012, p. 254-6)—but they also provide an interpretive framework for lived experience that inspired further action. Myth formed, for followers of the AV, narratives about the past, present, and future that enabled them to understand and change their personal/individual and political/collective identities. Chief amongst these narratives was the unique *yuga* theory of AV, which substantially reworks and subverts the better-known brahminical version drawn from Sanskrit philosophy.

The brahminical *yuga* theory articulates what Romila Thapar (2013) calls 'cosmological time' since the time of the *Dharmashastras* and the *Mahabharata*,

which are dated approximately to the beginning of the Christian era. The *yuga* theory conceptualises time as a cycle called the *mahayuga* (or, the great age, or an eon). In this version, each *mahayuga* consists of four lesser *yugas* (ages or epochs), each of decreasing durations: Krita/ Satya (4800 years), Treta (3600 years), Dvapara (2400 years), and finally, Kali (1200 years)²⁸. A characteristic of *yuga* theory is ‘moral decline and a falling off of the rules of social behaviour from the first [Krita/ Satya] to the fourth [Kali].’” From its earliest articulations, *yuga* theory was, thus, inextricably tied to caste mobility: in the *Mahabharata*, God prophecies that ‘all four social orders will adopt the same dress and the same ways’ in the Kali Yuga (Pollock, 2006, p. 71). The linear moral decline of *yuga* theory imagines a ‘downward slide’ from a utopian past to a degraded present: with the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, Kalki, bringing about ‘the end of lawlessness’ and the ‘usurpation of power by the low castes.’ (Thapar, 2013, p. 203) As always, the codification of caste hinged upon policing the sexuality of women, so the vision of moral decline in the Kali Yuga included the violation of rules of conduct by women (Sarkar, 2002, p. 14)²⁹.

The presence of the *mlecchas*, Thapar points out³⁰, is an important reason for the decrease in the duration of each subsequent *yuga*. The *mleccha* was a catch-all term for those outside the four-fold brahminical imaginary of the *varna* system, and included forest-dwellers, untouchables, and—significantly, in the context of the *Kali Yuga* prophecy in the *Mahabharata*—nomadic conquering tribal chieftains and kings such as the Śakas, who consolidated their rule across the Gangetic plains beginning with c. 80 BCE. At the time of the composition of the Kali Yuga prophecy in the *Mahabharata*, the Śakas were well-established and the threat posed by *mleccha* kings to the *varna* social order was well-understood. The Kali Yuga prophecy in the *Mahabharata* decreed, ‘The *mleccha* king [...] will destroy the four social orders, recognising all those that had previously gone unrecognised... The Śakas will destroy the good conduct of his subjects and their devotion to their proper tasks’ (Pollock, 2006, p. 71).

The particular vision of moral decline and social turmoil that the Kali Yuga prophecy narrated in its earliest articulations hinged upon caste mobility and the presence of powerful *mlecchas*. Both these plot devices—so to speak—would illuminate the vision of anti-caste politics in the *yuga* theory of AV mythology.

First, let’s consider the vision of moral decline. The unique *yuga* theory of AV includes eight ages: Neetiya Yuga, Chatura Yuga, Nedu Yuga, Kretha³¹ Yuga, Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, Kali Yuga, and Dharma Yuga (Ponniah, 2006). The first three and the last are unique to the AV, and have no correlates in brahminical *yuga* theory. Evil—or ‘Kroni’—is present in all the *yugas* and its destruction in the first age by Vishnu did not lead to its annihilation, for parts of it were reborn in each subsequent age. In the Kali Yuga—also the age of Ayya Vaikundar—evil is born as Kalineesan. Kali takes over the hearts of all people and begins to rule the world from within. An oft-quoted verse from *Akilam* attests to the ubiquity of evil in Kali Yuga: ‘*kali enral eli allave, kanaiyali ventame,*’ which translates to ‘Kali is not a mouse and you do not need any hammer to kill it’ (Ponniah, 2006, p. 70).

The moral decline in the eight-fold *yuga* theory of AV was not a linear progression. After the great evil of the Kali Yuga came the age of justice: the Dharma Yuga. This final *yuga* would be a utopian era of justice characterised by ‘one religion and one caste’ and would be ‘free from crimes and vices.’³² Fighting the evil within, or *kali*, gave mythic articulation to everyday practices of self-fashioning to assert dignity

and respect, while the figure of the Kalineesan—the embodiment of evil—cast the hereditary ruler of Travancore, Swati Thirunal (1813-1846), as a mythic villain. Publicly referring to the king as ‘Kalineesan’—literally, the evil of Kali, or the Kali-oppressor—invited the state’s attention, which imprisoned Vaikundar for over 110 days (Ponniah, 2016; Pandian, 1992). The Dharma Yuga followed the great churn of the Kali Yuga in AV’s mythology, suggesting that *dharma* was not simply moral decline, but something to be struggled for and established by fighting the evil of Kali. AV’s *yuga* theory thus gave mythic articulation to the egalitarian imagination that powered their mundane practices.

Caste mobility became for AV a *means* to resist moral decline, in contrast to brahminical *yuga* theory, which saw moral decline as a *consequence* of caste mobility. This distinction cannot be overemphasized: for brahminical *yuga* theory, *dharma* was lost due to caste mobility and had to be reinstated, while for the AV *yuga* theory, *dharma* was to be established by resisting the moral degradation of caste.

Let us now turn to the second plot device of the presence of *mlecchas*. Vaikundar appropriated this plot device too to advance his political agenda. The *mlecchas* of his time were, of course, the colonial officials and missionaries. Although his teachings drew upon Christianity and indeed benefitted immensely from the catalysing presence of the missionaries, Vaikundar referred to missionaries as *venneesan*, or the ‘white evil/ oppressor.’ The rule of the *mlecchas* was a time, like in the brahminical *yuga* theory, in which moral decline accelerated. Unlike brahminical *yuga* theory, however, in the AV, this was because the *mlecchas*—the white oppressor, or *venneesan*—worked hand in hand with the embodiment of evil, the Kalineesan, embodied by the king of Travancore, Swati Thirunal. The historian MSS Pandian (1992) points out that Vaikundar ‘could accuse both the *neesan* (king) and the *venneesan* (colonizers) simultaneously.’

Vaikundar claimed to be the son of Vishnu, an *avatar* whose purpose is to defeat Kalineesan and ‘wipe out the evil of *kali* from the people’s minds’ and instill ‘thoughts of *dharma*’ (Ponniah, 2014). While positioning himself as the son of God appropriates a noticeably Christian mythic trope, it also adopts the *avatar*, or incarnation, narrative, which has been a particularly efficient mythic mode of appropriating non-brahmin deities and narratives within the brahminical fold. The historian DD Kosambi characterises the *Dashavatar* myths of the ten incarnations of Vishnu as *mechanisms of assimilation*.³³ The trope of incarnation allowed Vaikundar to assimilate the social turmoil born of anti-caste sentiment within the Kali Yuga myth, while simultaneously allowing him to claim to be the son of God: reconciling, in the paradoxical way that only myth can, both the desire for egalitarianism and a messianic exceptionalism into one popular movement.

Through particular renewals of these two plot devices—visions of moral decline, and presence of *mlecchas*—AV mythology subverted brahminical *yuga* theory and articulated new social imaginaries of an egalitarian society that inspired and sustained anti-caste political action. Such metaphysical conception of justice was inextricably linked to their everyday practices enacting self-respect and dignity, meshing together the mundane and the mythic in deeply empowering ways.

AV and Saiva Siddhanta

Although AV was decidedly syncretic in its discourse and practice, it demonstrates significant continuities with the traditions of Saiva Siddhanta. Saiva Siddhanta is a philosophical doctrine whose followers engage in the worship of Shiva through discourse and performance. The discursive aspects of Saiva Siddhanta are textualised in the scriptural works, the *Agamas* or the *Saivagamas*, and the Siddha canon that is still referred to as the Tamil Veda. The first of these—the *Agama* scriptures—are dated to the centuries between the Buddha and the beginning of the Common Era (5 BCE to 1 CE). Their antiquity forms one reason why Saiva practitioners consider the *Agamas* to be on par with the Vedas, which are typically dated to 1200-900 BCE. Another reason for the importance of the *Agamas* lies in their antipathy towards the brahminical social order. ‘The Agamas do not emphasise the supremacy of Brahmins,’ says the Indologist HW Schomerus (1879-1945) in his study of Saiva Siddhanta, ‘so the Brahmins may well have opposed them, and certainly did see to it that they were not widely known’ (1979, p 6). The *Agamas*, as a philosophical school whose antiquity is comparable to the Vedas and whose texts evince anti-caste sentiment, would find enthusiastic uptake in the anti-caste struggles of colonial south India.

The performative aspects of Saiva Siddhanta were equally important, and these ritual practices and corporeal techniques are referred to simply as Yoga or, more accurately, Siddha Yoga (Zvelebil, 1993). The Siddha Yoga shares its objectives with the better-known Hatha Yoga, namely, liberation from bondage through bodily practices. The Orientalist scholar of religion Mircea Eliade describes Siddhas, or adepts of the Saiva Siddha traditions, as those ‘who understood liberation as the conquest of immortality.’³⁴ Such liberation from bondage is of critical importance to Saiva Siddhanta, and derives from a central tenet which organises the three modes of reality.

This central tenet is common to all Saiva Siddhanta thought and categorises reality in three modes: *Pati* (God), *pasu* (soul), and *pasam* (bondage). This three-fold conception of reality, popularly referred to as *Pati—pasu—pasam*, or *God—soul—bondage*, both defines the Saiva world of the transcendent divinity, immanent spirit, and mundane matter, and distinguishes it from the chief doctrinal rival: Advaita. As I described in the previous section on Narayana Guru, Advaita emphasises knowledge (*arivu*) of the absolute reality (*Karu*, or the singular unitive core of existence) through self-realization (*thannarivu*). In simple terms, the divine and the human entities were not separate, or reality is conceptualised non-dualistically, which gives the school its name: a-dvaita, literally, non-dualism. In contrast, Saiva Siddhanta has a determinedly dualistic conception of the divine (*Pati*) and the human (*pasu*), which it reconciles by putting into play the third term unique to it: *pasam*, or bondage. The relationship between *Pati* and *pasu* are forged through *pasam*: that is, the soul reaches out to God through various forms of bondages. These bondages are also impurities that keep the soul apart from the divine, and are also referred to as *mala*, or the impure. Saiva doctrine recognises three forms of *mala* that characterize *pasam*; namely, *anava mala*, *maya mala*, and *karma mala*.

The key point I want to foreground here is the philosophical claim of Saiva Siddhanta that the bondage of the soul with the divine is characterised by impurities, and that liberation of the soul by breaking free of these bonds requires purifying oneself. Saiva Siddhanta typically opposes seeking metaphysical and discursive knowledge

through purely speculative methods (Zvelebil, 1993). This was an approach in sharp contrast to the speculative and discursive mode of inquiry that Advaita favoured, and a major point of distinction. The *Saiva siddhantin* emphasis on the practical and the empirical would be especially important to the Ayya Vazhi, as well as other more overtly neo-Saivite³⁵ movements in colonial south India, for it provided them with a philosophical framework within which to articulate anti-caste ideas. Transgressing caste codes became, in part, a matter of seeking to elevate one's consciousness through practice: if AV intertwined bodily and spiritual cleanliness³⁶ in rituals such as the *tuvayal tavasu* (washing penance), then such practice had close affinities with the philosophical discourses of Saiva Siddhanta.

Thus the key point of liberation of the soul from bondage through removing impurities is a central idea in the discourses, rituals, and popular practices in Saiva Siddhanta. This trope became the philosophical cornerstone which provided the basis for radical *Siddha Saiva* to articulate anti-caste ideas, and eventually, emerge as a genealogy of the human. AV drew upon this three-fold conception of reality in Saiva Siddhanta, and sought liberation of the soul through the removal of impurities. In doing so, it finds a place within the emerging historical milieu of colonial south India in which Saiva Siddhanta was being positioned as a universal religion (Bergunder, 2011; Raman, 2009; Vaitheespara, 2011).

III

The three scenes I described and analyzed above—soulful Enlightenment, repurposed Advaita, and radical Siddha Saiva—represent the major routes of egalitarian discourse in colonial-era south India. The significance of identifying these discrete yet entangled routes of egalitarian discourse is two-fold: first, in pointing to multiple interrelated sources of the self that characterised colonial modernity and the explosive potential it held for the *avarna* castes, we can foreground the radical political agency of the *avarnas*. Out of the tumult of this period rose the radicalism of the *avarnas*, stealing fire, so to speak, from what heavens they could reach. Second, the hybrid methods adopted here demonstrate ways of doing intellectual histories in the repertoire that can help trace the ideas of unlettered people. The view of intellectual history here is anti-elitist and high-stakes: it is a politics of ideas forged in the rough and tumble of everyday organising in the real and messy world.

The dramaturgical and performance-centric reasoning that informs this work arises out of a conviction that selves are always performed—done, undone, and redone—in the repertoires of embodied action. Moreover, such a performance-centric reasoning does not pretend to schematise that which cannot be fully understood. For instance, I do not ponder what came first: a realisation of injustice, or an articulated notion of egalitarianism, or a performative reconstitution of the self? While the dominant mode of intellectual history seeks to identify these flows, the method of doing intellectual histories in the repertoire that I propose here focuses on identifying the scenario (historical background), the action (political agency), and the resultant altered scenario (political consequences).

Ultimately, intellectual histories in the repertoire oscillate between the universal and the particular in revealing ways. The three scenes I discuss represent the heterogeneity of the genealogies of the human in colonial Kerala, and accommodate their compromised natures. The compromised natures of egalitarianisms in everyday

life remind us of the contingent and always-imperfect processes of political struggle. In exploring the relationship between a universal claim such as equality and its particular political contexts such as that of anti-caste politics in colonial-era Travancore, intellectual histories in the repertoire elucidate not only the emancipatory possibilities of the imagination afforded by universals—the concepts of equality, and shared common humanity—but the particular struggles that emerged through the situated and contingent practices of repurposing universals. By oscillating between the universal and the particular, embodied intellectual histories do not relegate the agency of political actors *within* their context, but accommodate the fact that people think and act *out of their context*.³⁷ The historical appropriation of a universal value such as equality or humanity to suit particular political contexts such as the struggle against caste in colonial Travancore is a double process that bends the universal claim to fit the particular issue, and expands the particular to universalistic proportions. Such practices of contingent and historical appropriation that articulate particular claims in universalistic language for strategic purposes I have called *repurposing universals*. These three scenes of the *avarna* castes gazing at themselves in the mirror instantiate acts of repurposing universals. As repetitive actions that constitute new beings and worlds organised around equality, these acts exemplify performative egalitarianisms that lay claim to the right to have rights (Arendt, 1976 p. 277).

Central to the strategic acts of repurposing universals is notion of the human. As human beings thingified by caste, the slave castes found missionary discourse of soul—as a sign of *a priori* humanity, intentionality and agency, and worldly transformation—profoundly attractive. The language of the soul, with its potential to recuperate and reassert the humanity of slaves and *avarnas*, conjoins the notion of the human to the concept of equality. If the actions of performative egalitarianisms exemplify the routes of egalitarian discourses, then the notion of the soul stands as metonym for inalienable humanity. Together, egalitarian discourses and the concomitant notion of the human constitute what I have described here as genealogies of the human in colonial-era Travancore.

When the *avarna* castes gazed at their reflections, what they saw in the mirror was their human souls and, in the background, a society whose caste norms withheld recognition of their humanity. These performative egalitarianisms filled the hearts of the *avarna* castes with a desire for change that sought an egalitarian society.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editorial team of *J-CASTE* for the recognition and encouragement offered by the Bluestone Rising Scholar Prize. In the spirit of acknowledging the privilege afforded by caste, I would like to note that I am a non-Dalit who tries to practice anti-caste politics.

I dedicate this essay to the memory of the scholar, thinker, novelist, activist, and teacher, Pradeepan Pampirikunnu. In many ways, this essay owes its existence to an all-too-brief conversation with Pradeepan Sir, whom I met in Kozhikode during a fieldwork trip in the summer of 2016. Having read and admired his brilliant work in English and Malayalam, I sought his advice as I was beginning to work on egalitarian discourses in colonial Kerala, which, at the time, I understood to have emerged through two routes: Enlightenment and Advaita. After having listened to my description, Pradeepan Sir pointed out in his friendly and unassuming manner that I needed to

look into Saiva Siddhanta as a possible third genealogy for egalitarian discourses. I left the brief meeting greatly inspired to learn more about Saiva Siddhanta, which, up until that time, I had barely heard of. I hoped to show Pradeepan Sir a draft with all three routes, but that was not to be—I heard, with great sadness, of his death due to a road accident in December 2016. I am grateful for his brilliance and generosity and for having fundamentally changed my research in one brief encounter. I thank him, above all, for his scholarship which continues to teach all of us who can no longer benefit from his presence.

References

- Arendt, Hannah (1976). *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers.
- Ambedkar, B.R. (1987). Buddha or Karl Marx [1945], in Vasant Moon (eds) *B.R. Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vol 3*, Education Department, Maharashtra: Bombay, 441-462.
- Barthes, Roland (2012). *Mythologies*, New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bergunder, Michael, (2011). Saiva Siddhanta as a universal religion: JM Nallaswami Pillai (1864-1920) and Hinduism in colonial South India, in Bergunder, Frese, Shroder (eds.) *Ritual, Caste, and Religion in Colonial South India*, Delhi: Primus Books.
- Chandramohan, P. (2016). *Developmental Modernity in Kerala: Narayana Guru, SNDP Yogam, and Social Reform*, New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Das, Veena (2018). *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Guru, Narayana (2006). *Narayana Guru: Complete Works*. Translated, compiled, and introduced by Muni Narayana Prasad. New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- Haber, Joram Graf (1991). *Forgiveness*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hartman, Saidiya (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hawthorne, John (1855 a). The Travancore Slaves, in *The Missionary Register for MDCCCLIV containing the principal transactions of the various institutions for propagating the Gospel with the proceedings, at large, of the Church Missionary Society*. Nov 1854. 471-473.
- Hawthorne, John (1855 b). The Slaves of Travancore, in *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, January 1855, 22-24.
- Hawthorne, John (1856). Travancore—The slave population, *The Church of England Magazine*, Vol 40, Jan to Jun 1856, London: John Hughes, Stationers' Hall Court, pp. 92.
- Kleinman, Arthur, Das, Veena, and Lock, Margaret M. (1997) *Social Suffering*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kosambi, D. (1964). *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline*. New Delhi: Vikas Pub. House.
- Kumar, Aishwary (2015). *Radical Equality: Ambedkar, Gandhi, and the Risk of Democracy*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.
- Mateer, Samuel (1883). *Native Life in Travancore*, London, W.H. Allen & Co.
- Mohan, Sanal (2015). *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Pandian, M.S.S. (1992). Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism': An essay on Vaikunda Swamy cult, *Studies in History*, 8(2), <https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309200800202>

- Patrick, Gnana (2017). Religion and the subaltern self: an exploration from the Indian context *Changing Societies and Personalities*, 1(4), <http://dx.doi.org/10.15826/csp.2017.1.4.024> pp. 380-1.
- Patterson, Orlando (2018). *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018 [1982].
- Pollock, Sheldon (2006). *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Ponniah, James (2014). Alternative Discourses of Kali Yuga in the Ayyā Vaḷi, *Nidān*, 26(1), July, 65-87.
- Ponniah, James (2016). Agency in the Subaltern Encounter of Evil: Subverting the Dominant and Appropriating the Indigenous, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, Vol. 29, also available at <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1630>
- Raman, Srilata (2009). Who are the Velalas? twentieth-century constructions and contestations of Tamil Identity in Maraimalai Adigal (1876–1950), in Pemberton and Nijhawan (eds.) *Shared Idioms, Sacred Symbols, and the Articulation of Identities in South Asia*, New York and Oxford: Routledge.
- Roach, Joseph R. (1996). *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sarkar, Sumit (2002). Colonial Times: Clocks and Kali-Yuga, in *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Schomerus, H.W. (1979). *Saiva Siddhanta: An Indian School of Mystical Thought* [1912]. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Scott, James C. (1985). *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Taylor, Charles (1989). *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Tejani, Shabnum (2007). Reflections on the Category of Secularism in India: Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Ethics of Communal Representation, in Anuradha D Needham and Rajeswari S Rajan (eds). *The Crisis of Secularism in India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- Thapar, Romila (2013). *The Past Before Us: The Historical Traditions of Early North India*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Vaitheespara, Ravi (2011). Forging a Tamil caste: Maraimalai Adigal (1876-1950) and the discourse of caste and ritual in colonial Tamil Nadu, in Bergunder, Frese, Shroder (eds) *Ritual, Caste, and Religion in Colonial South India*, Delhi: Primus Books.
- Vajpeyi, Ananya (2012). *The Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Verma, Vidhu (2010). Reinterpreting Buddhism: Ambedkar on the Politics of Social Action, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(49), 56-65.
- Weheliye, Alexander G. (2014). *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Yati, Nitya Chaitanya, and Narayana Guru (2003). *That Alone, the Core of Wisdom: A Commentary on Ātmopadeśa Śatakam, the One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction of Narayana Guru*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld.
- Zvelebil, Kamil (1993). *The Poets of the Powers: Magic, freedom, and Renewal*. Lower Lake, California: Integral Publishing.

Endnotes

1. The caste codes of *jati maryada* governed all aspects of social behaviour, and can be organised broadly in three domains: spatial codes, which choreographed the exact distances to be maintained between castes; embodied codes, which made caste visible from a distance through attire and accoutrement; and linguistic codes, that enregistered speakers within the caste hierarchy through vocabulary, voice, and attitude.
2. Named after its messianic founder, Ayya Vaikundar (1809-1851), this cult continues to thrive as the Ayya Vazhi (or, the Way of the Father) in the Kanyakumari district of today's Tamil Nadu. Until 1956, this area was considered a part of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. This cult and Vaikundar himself played a significant part in the historic Channar Lahala, or the Revolt of the Channars (1822-59) that are known in colonial records as the Breast-Cloth Controversy or the Upper-Cloth Disturbances. See Sheeju N.V. (2015) *The Shanar Revolts, 1822-1899, South Asia Research*, 35(3), 2015, pp. 298–317.
3. I am drawing upon Foucault's influential theorisation of genealogy here. See Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, 76-100. See especially pp. 77-86.
4. I am echoing Charles Taylor's contention that modernity is characterized by the "affirmation of ordinary life," which distinguished the new epoch from previous ages. In agreeing with and echoing Taylor's pithy phrase, I do not mean to suggest that modernity is a European font in which the slaves of south India were baptized out of their servitude. Rather, I find it helpful to think with Taylor's description of the religious origins of modernity in Protestantism—what Michael Gillespie calls the "theological origins of modernity"—and to trace Protestant missions as one significant route through which modern conceptions of the self took hold in south India. An assumption I work from in this paper is that emancipatory ideals are not necessarily more or less attractive or effective should they be home-grown; rather, oppressed communities—slave and avarna castes here—pursue their emancipatory politics within actually existing historical conditions. These egalitarianisms are, always, compromised in the nature of much practical politics, but such heterogeneity should point not to the irreconcilability of ideals but to the ingenuity of the oppressed.
5. To repurpose Bronislaw Malinowski's famous phrase in which he identifies fieldwork as a method of "observing and recording [the] imponderabilia of actual life and of typical behaviour" (pp. 20, original emphasis). See Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An account of native enterprise and adventure in the archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. Prospect Heights, Ill: Waveland Press, 1984 [1922]. Print.
6. We have any number of archival records of missionaries reporting with great feeling on their converts' fervor. They are typically framed as evidence of the power of the Gospel that miraculously appeared during routine transactions between the missionary shepherd and his flock of new believers. See, for example, Henry Baker, *The Hill Arrians of Travancore: and the progress of Christianity among them*. London: Wertheim, MacIntosh, & Hunt, 1862, pp. 26.

7. Hawksworth notes in one version that the “two men who gave these answers came to me at my request, and answered in the presence of another native, who explained my words occasionally, when necessary.” This unnamed interviewer was almost certainly the renowned native missionary George Matthan who held charge of the Mallappalli area and often worked alongside
8. No extant copy available. Original cited in subsequent reprints, “The Travancore Slaves” in the *Missionary Register*, Nov 1854. 471-473, and “The Slaves of Travancore” in the *Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, January 1855. 22-24. Full citations below. Samuel Mateer cites the original version in his classic ethnography, *Native Life in Travancore*, 1883, pp. 302-3.
9. For an insightful discussion of the political dimensions of Ambedkarite Buddhism, see Vidhu Verma’s ‘Reinterpreting Buddhism.’ The two phrases I quote are from Verma, (2010 pp. 60), and she is, in turn, citing Ambedkar, (1987 pp. 184), in the first phrase, and Shabnum Tejani, (2007 pp. 63), in the second.
10. I am drawing upon the work of Veena Das (2018) in thinking of the performative aspects of violence and its ability to constitute subjectivity. Enfleshment refers to Alexander Weheliye’s theoretical contribution in *Habeas Viscus*, where he points out that the assemblage of flesh (viscus) and person (habeas) is made visible through the process of “enfleshment,” which adjudicates who counts as human and who doesn’t (2014). Enfleshment refers to the transaction between racialized violence and the experience of suffering which shapes our definitions of humanity. Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead* theorizes surrogation (1996), which refers to the transmission of cultural memory and the remaking of identity through the ongoing processes of substitution.
11. I am thinking here of Joram Haber’s performative view of forgiveness, which emphasizes the performative act of overcoming resentment in the act of forgiveness. Sanal Mohan too makes a similar point in his analysis of the missionary Henry Baker’s reports of slaves risking death to visit their former masters in order to seek, or grant, forgiveness. “[T]he equality of the master and the slave,” writes Mohan, “was emphasized by the slave in the dungeon [where Baker reports he was imprisoned] as he prayed to God to forgive all his own sins and those of his master’s too. A prayer like this is only possible if the slave felt himself to be the equal of his master, indeed better—in that he could seek forgiveness for the master.” (Mohan 2015, 100, emphasis mine.)
12. See TM Yesudasan, *Baliyadukalude Vamsavali [A Genealogy of the Scapegoats]*, pp. 3, my translations. Yesudasan goes on to define two kinds of *matharohanam*: transitive religious ascension, such as through acceptance into Protestant Christianity or Islam; and intransitive religious ascension, such as through the apparatuses of the ethnographic state or through those of modernist Hindu reform movements. Yesudasan borrows linguistic metaphors to distinguish between active or transitive *matharohanam* (*sakarmaka matharohanam*) and passive or intransitive *matharohanam* (*akarmaka matharohanam*). Where transitive *matharohanam* emphasizes self-authored agential action, intransitive *matharohanam* denotes the passive condition of being acted-upon. He further identifies two sub-categories of intransitive *matharohanam*: those created by ethnographic state apparatuses (census, penal codes, proclamations, gazettes etc.), and coerced conversions, including reformist reclamation of converted slaves as Hindus. Elsewhere, Yesudasan makes a brilliant argument that interprets

- Narayana Guru as precisely such a reformist movement. See TM Yesudasan, “Aruvippurathinte Marupuram” [“The Other Side of Aruvippuram”] in *Karutha Deivangalum Nagna Sathyangalum*. [*Black Gods and Naked Truths*.] 69-71. pp. 71.
13. It bears saying here that I am talking about the social construction of these categories of human, sub-human and non-human through caste. I am not questioning the humanity of slaves, however commodified, nor do I consider such a brutalizing system to be natural. It did, however, exist—and the social construction of this system is what I am referring to here through that three-fold distinction. The undeniable and resilient humanity of the slave-as-thingified-human is in fact, the overarching subject of the larger work—*Stolen Fire*—to which this paper belongs. My thinking on this subject is considerably informed by Alexander Weheliye’s helpful theorization in *Habeas Viscus*.
 14. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), was founded in 1903 as a community organization that organized Ezhavas through the teachings of Narayana Guru. Its genesis lay in the Aruvippuram temple consecration by Guru, and an earlier avatar of the organization founded in the 1890s was called the Aruvippuram Temple Trust. In today’s Kerala, the SNDP is a powerful organization that has considerable political and economic clout.
 15. In the 19th century Travancore, it was common practice to yoke slave castes and cattle to a plough. Throughout the 19th century, British Protestant missionaries bore witness to the dehumanization enforced by *jati maryada*. Their gaze—colonizing and “civilizing” though it certainly was—performed two vital functions: first, it defamiliarized the everyday brutalities of caste; and second, it expresses disapproval, even outrage, based on their professed egalitarian cultural norms rooted in Enlightenment universal values. A story about Thomas Gajetan Ragland, a missionary who founded the CMS mission in Tinnevely (today, Thirunelveli in southern Tamil Nadu), shows the operation of this defamiliarizing gaze. The missionary biographer Amy Carmichael writes that Ragland was “filled with compassion for the slaves, especially after seeing one of them unequally yoked with an ox pulling a plough.” See Amy Carmichael, *Ragland, Pioneer*, Madras: S.P.C.K. Depository, 1922. pp. vi. See also “Memorial of the Rev. Thomas Gajetan Ragland, B.D.” in *The Church Missionary Intelligencer and Record*, Vol IX, Feb 1859, 25-28.
 16. The logocentric rationale here where the senses present a threat that must be shot down with a gun is typical of the deep-seated misogyny in Guru’s poetry. In fact, he deploys such phallic imagery as a form of mastery over the senses on more than one occasion. If I do not devote much attention to this irrefutable aspect of Guru’s poetry, it is because my argument is trying to trace the flows of these compromised egalitarianisms rather than judge their purity of intention. Similarly, I do not pay particular attention to the racist assumptions that the missionaries often espoused. Ditto for the misogyny in the Ayya Vazhi. As I pointed out earlier, genealogies of the human are also always compromised egalitarianisms. My interest here, and elsewhere, is how exactly the slave castes repurposed these compromised egalitarianisms to further their political ends.
 17. See footnote 1 on *jati maryada*.

18. The Channars a.k.a. Nadars, who make up the bulk of the Ayya Vazhi followers were early adopters of Christianity in the 19th century, amongst whom missionary influence included propagating a bodice fashioned as the kuppayam. When the third phase of the Channar Lahala broke out in the late 1850s, in fact, over the right to cover their breasts with a cloth draped over the *kuppayam*. See Sheeju NV. "The Shanar Revolts, 1822-1899." *South Asia Research*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2015, pp. 298–317.
19. From an early edition of *Deepika* in 1910; qtd. in Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, 32.
20. See the illuminating discussion about the PRDS and the discourse of hygiene in Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, 177.
21. LMS Report, 1892; qtd in Pandian, "Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism'," pp. 180. See MSS Pandian, "Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism': An essay on Vaikunda Swamy cult," *Studies in History*, 8,2, 1992 <<https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309200800202>>.
22. See Sarveswaran, "Sri Vaikunda Swamikal," 9-10; Pandian, "Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism,'" 178-81; Selvanayagam, "Counter-Liberation and Cult-Formation," 249. Pandian terms the Society of Equals, *Samathuva Sangham*, which translates to Organization of Equality. I have used *Samatva Samajam* based on scholarly consensus.
23. In a fascinating ritual that points to the irreconcilable tension between egalitarian principles and the messianic origins of *Samatva Samajam*, a chair is ceremonially covered in a white cloth in a meeting of the society. This chair is thought to be Ayya Vaikundar's seat, and is referred to as the asana, or the seat, and his spirit is believed to attend these meetings. To point out the obvious: an egalitarian society cannot easily be reconciled with a spirit who presides over meetings in god-like fashion. But such are the always already compromised egalitarianisms of the real and messy world.
24. The phrase is Pandian's: see "Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism,'" 181. I understand his usage to mean "non-discriminatory love" in the sense that it did not discriminate between human beings, as opposed to "indiscriminating" in the sense of lacking discernment. In any case, I prefer the less confusing usage of "universal love."
25. See Pandian, "Meanings of 'colonialism' and 'nationalism,'" 181; Sarveswaran, "Sri Vaikunda Swamikal," 7. A literal translation of *Munthiri Kinaru* would be the Well of Sweet Grapes, but the South Indian idiomatic usage of grapes to mean sweet does not translate well into English. The Well of Sweet Water remains true to the spirit of the Tamil usage.
26. Ponniah, "Alternative Discourses of Kali Yuga in AV," 77. I do not believe values such as equality can ever be "absolute," nor are they simply "inculcated," as if it were merely a process of disciplining and rendering bodies docile. Those differences notwithstanding, I am broadly in agreement with the substance of Ponniah's claim.
27. For Ambedkar, the "real remedy" for caste is "intermarriage" (*Annihilation of Caste*, 285). However, caste is "a notion; it is a state of mind" which calls for "a notional change" (286). Given that caste has a "divine basis" (289), the only way to effect this notional change is "to destroy the belief in the sanctity of the shastras." "Not to question the authority of the shastras" is, for Ambedkar, "an incongruous way of carrying on social reform" (287). Ambedkar asserts that it

- is impossible to destroy caste without also destroy the Hindu scriptures whose tenets espouse and legitimize the caste system, eventually concluding that the task at hand was to “destroy the sacredness and divinity with which caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the shastras and the Vedas” (289). See Ambedkar, BR. *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. Ed. S Anand. Introduction. Arundhati Roy. New Delhi: Navayana, 2014. Print.
28. These years are not human years, but a mythic construction of time rooted in what was believed to be a day in the life of Brahma. These years of all four yugas added up to 12,000, which constituted the mahayuga. A 1000 mahayugas made up one day in the life of Brahma. For an illuminating discussion, see Thapar, *The Past Before Us*, 201-3.
 29. See Sumit Sarkar, “Colonial Times: Clocks and Kali-Yuga,” *Beyond Nationalist Frames*, 10-37, pp. 14. My claim relating caste to the policing of women’s sexuality is derived from the influential work of BR Ambedkar and Uma Chakravarti. See Ambedkar, B. R., and Sharmila Rege. *Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar’s Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2013. Print. Also see Chakravarti, Uma. “Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State.” *Economic and Political Weekly*. 28.14 (1993): 579-85. *JSTOR*. Web.
 30. It is important to point out here that Thapar, as well as the historian Sumit Sarkar and the linguist and literary historian Sheldon Pollock, have persuasively historicized and contextualized the yuga theory in ways that categorically refute the Orientalist overemphasis on cyclical time and what Orientalist scholarship saw as a lack of historical traditions. It was yuga theory in particular that led numerous Orientalist scholars such as Mircea Eliade to assert that the notion of time in South Asia is cyclical, or—worst of all—that South Asian cultures do not have a sense of history. Eliade’s theory of the Eternal Return, in particular, was inspired by yuga theory. Thapar provides a magisterial argument against such Orientalist scholarship in her magnum opus, *The Past Before Us*.
 31. Although the spelling differs slightly, this age corresponds to the Krita/ Satya Yuga in brahminical yuga theory. Note that the Kretha Yuga in AV has no connotations of a utopian past and is not, therefore, a Satya Yuga.
 32. Sarveswaran, “Sri Vaikunda Swamikal,” 10. His summation is derived from Akilam, p4. P Thankiah Nadar, ed. *Ahila Thirattu Ammanai*, Nagercoil, 1935. [Sarveswaran transliterates *Akilathirattu Ammanai* as spelt in the title, but I prefer the now-standard spelling and its corresponding abbreviation, *Akilam*.]
 33. While remaining true to Kosambi’s intent, I have slightly modified the language from “mechanism of the assimilation” to “mechanisms of assimilation.” (Kosambi, 1964, p. 170; also p. 205).
 34. I cite Orientalist scholarship here to point out their understanding of Saiva traditions, and not, of course, to uncritically adopt their colonialist notions of civilizational difference.

35. It is important to bear in mind that the AV is a syncretic tradition with pronounced Vaishnavite doctrinal influence. However, its practices and theological discourses draw considerably from the neo-Saivite tradition of 19th century Tamil Nadu.
36. In a vivid parallel, Poykayil Yohannan of the Pratyaksha Raksha Deiva Sabha (PRDS) made similar claims, and the tradition of Protestant revivals and dream revelations that he came out of that gave him legitimacy. Once again, reason and ecstasy, and bodily cleanliness was an analog for spiritual purity. For a detailed and illuminating discussion, see Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*.
37. This claim of mine bears more than a little trace of Aishwary Kumar's thinking, which I wish to acknowledge here. His important book, *Radical Equality*, traces transnational flows that characterize the political thought of Gandhi and Ambedkar, and attempts "an archeology of the decisive and precarious turn in anticolonial thought toward the question of equality, an archeology that attempts to determine not merely the context but the order of conceptuality—the origins, structures, and modulations of concepts—within (and in excess of) which the contours of modern political thought were redrawn in twentieth-century colonial world" (2015, p. 30). While that is the closest he comes to stating outright his interest in tracing that which exceeds the limitations of context, he has, in a number of private conversations, made such claims in less ambiguous terms. In this talk, he says more directly that we "think not in a context but to grow out of it." Aishwary, Russell Berman, and Robert Harrison. "What is Intellectual History and Why Does it Matter?" Introductory remarks by Sojourner Ahébee. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MyiE80QZR-w>> See 00:38:00-00:42:00. A transcript of the relevant section: "If context is our only game in town, we will never actually unpack the true power of ideas, and their transformative promise. We think not in a context but to grow out it." (00:39:39-00:40:00)