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Mapping the Historical Trajectories of Dalit communities in Kerala

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The caste system and its classification exert a pivotal influence on the socio- cultural fabric of India. While caste identity is intrinsically given at birth, administrative classifications can be characterized as Pertaining to politics, being adaptable and being attained by effort. The many caste and sub caste found in India farther divided into several groups according to their level of development. Scheduled caste, scheduled tribes, Backward, most backward, nomad, De- notified and general. The implementation of reservation in education, employment, empowerment and other development measure in the Indian setting, particularly in the post- colonial century, relies heavily on these administrative categories. These administrative classifications are political, fluid and achieved, in contrast to intrincically 'ascribed'caste. Depending on the circumstances, a caste that is considered backward in one era could be classed as most backward or scheduled caste in another[1].

The caste system in Kerala is widely regarded as one of the most rigid social structures in India unlike the generalized fourfold Varna model. Kerala society became more complex and caste based influenced by local traditions and power structure. Brahmins or Namboothiris represented the highest social groups. They were priest, scholars and landlords who controlled temples and large areas of land. Kshatriyas (Samantha, Kshatriya, and Nair,Cheiftains). The true kshatriyas were very few in Kerala, Some Nair sub- groups and ruling families like zamorins (Samoothiris and Kolathiris claimed Kshatriyas status.

The third groups of varna system in Kerala vaishyas. This class was practically absent in Kerala. Trade and commerce were mostly conducted by foreign traders (Arabs, Jews, and Christans) and certain local communities like chettis or vaniyas. The last groups of Varna system in Kerala Shudras. Its mainly Nairs and others. The nairs were the dominant caste in Kerala's social and military setup, performing

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administrative and warrior roles. Other lower castes like Ezhavas,Thiyyas and Pulaya, Paraya and Kuravas were placed below them[2].

In Kerala,the caste hierarchy went far beyond the simple fourfold Varna model. It included hundreds of Jathis [castes] with rigid rules about pollution distance and social interactios. In Kerala 11th century witnessed the emergence of jenmi system. The jenmis emerged beloned to upper strata of the society and land was transformed to a preferred class of men on the basis of tenure called Kanam. The kanam land holder was called Kanamdar or Kanakkar. The kanakkaran who acted as Jenmis did not engage in actual cultivation, in turn the land was under his control. Whereas land of others includes lower ranks of Nairs, Ezhavas, Muslims and christains were under '*Verumpattam*'

Hence there was inam or anubhogam which was a perpectual lease granted for service rendered according to caste status of the grantees. There were several sections of people who performed caste defined activities which was essential for agricultural production the concept of Pollution prevailed as the caste system strengthened it was refined a unique complexity. Pollution was viewed as being transmitted not merely by touch. But also, by nearness [Thindal] certain castes were unseable for higher castes. Some of the worst form of untouchability in the country are said to have been practiced in the tradional kerala society with persecution of people of the opperesed class taking savage form Brahmins and Nair's considered they polluted if a slave approached with fifty or hundred yards. The interesting to note that each caste in Kerala had its subdivision.

The disabilities of lower caste people can be understood in terms of both socio-cultural and economic material condition rather than merely of economic exploitation. In other words, Dalit oppression is not only economic but also includes the ideological aspects that society perpetuates. The historical materialist method is mostly extended to incorporate the ideological formation of the relationship. There is a need to diagnose both basis of caste in the structure of land relations and its super structural dimention in politics, emphasizing various levels of interaction between economy, culture and politics. The concept of high castes and low caste which was

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prominent features of Hindu caste system prevailed in Kerala. Caste system is a type of social stratification in which an individual's social status is determined by birth into particular castes.

Historically saying, Untouchability was the social outcome of Aryan conquest. Untouchability is not simply a reflection of caste phenomenon but of underlying socio- economic factors of semi- feudal relations. The very genesis of the caste system and the various Hindu castes uphold the myth and reveal the dominating urge to maintain the status through the operational process. Further, the social oppression of the untouchables had been approved as part of religious rituals and rites. Thus the untouchables had been approved as part of religious rituals and rites[3]. Thus the untouchables, who had not by choice taken that that status, have been the victims of brutal exploitation to an extreme extend and had suffered the stigma of untouchability, social isolation, residential segregation, economic deprivation, political subjugation and cultural degradation. The controlled the land and acted as aristocrats and militiamen. Besides other sections including populations, the entire labor community who were untouchables of varying ranks belonged to the group of lower castes. They could contaminate the whole society with their presence itself.

During the period Dalits suffered a lot of feudal bondage and experienced economic oppression which was in different ways. The lower castes were forced to remain as obedient agricultural labourers under their masters. Early social groups including the vellalar, the Idayar, the Kuravar and the Parayar were the orginal inhabitants of this land, whereas the Brahmins were who came from outside. There are justifications to prove that the original inhabitants who were having up and downs according to their economic conditions, finally decided to be part of different caste system. And thus we realize another aspect of the original inhabitant is the ones who are now called Dalits and had been marginalized ever since[4].

In the course of centuries, the caste system had evolved itself so perfectively. If by chance there arise a situation where the high class and the lower class have come nearer than the recommended limits or in case, they had touched, then the person from the higher caste is banned from taking food before bath. They belived that such

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contacts would cause degeneration and the person can be ousted from the caste, if he eats food without taking bath after being with an untouchable person. If a person is outsted from the community, they are left with no other options, other than choosing Christanity or Muslim religious or exiling from the land altogether. Higher caste was not supposed to eat any food prepared by lower caste. The popular belief by most Keralites was that, in case they touch any lower caste people below them,it can make them impure. To avoid the contamination caused by the slave communities, they were forced to keep a specific distance from the higher class.

The unwrittern rules and customs and the serve punishments inflicted even for slight faults by the government added to their grievance. Punishments also varied according caste and social position of the offenders. Dalit communites enjoyed no opportunities to escape from caste degradation and servitude. They are regarded as so unclean that they are supposed to convey pollution to persons of other castes by contact and even by approach. When a high caste person meets lower caste people he must keep some distance. If he comes within this prohibited distance, his approach is said to cause pollution, which is removed only by bathing in water. Even while using the public roads, if he sees his lords and master, he has to leave the ordinary way and walk, it may be in the mud, to avoid his displeasure by accidently polluting him. To avoid polluting the passer -by he repeats, the unpleasant sound 'O', OH, and adiyan, your slave, he dares not call his rice choru but Karikadi dirty gruel[5].

The Dalits lived the terrifying influence of the upper caste people and they were entirely at the disposal of their masters. They spent their nights in the kaval madams built in the landlord's land. They were subjected to cruel treatment from their masters if they are reluctant to do work. They started working before sunrise and finished off late in the evening. As the system of paying wages as the laborer often satisfied with the food that the thampuran offered. Kanji was served on a leaf placed in a pit in the courtyard. Later they started preparing Kanji in earthen pots their homes. Thus, they fed their young ones. A man earned edanazhi rice and a woman three nazhi rice in the evening. They prepared Kanji with this. Lights were not lit as Kerosene was costly. Kitchen works were done in the lights of the fire from the fire place. They did not

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bath and were unclean. Clothes were scanty. They worked in the farmland wearing dirty clothes.

William Logan in his Malabar Manual narrates the language discrimination meted out to the Dalits. The name of their dwelling places clearly suggests their castes. The houses of Parayas were called Cheri and those of the slave cherumar's are *Chala*. The houses of gold smith, black smiths and carpenters like Thattan, Asaari are Puras. Those related to temples dwell in *varyam, pisharam poovam.* The upper sections live in houses or *idangal.* Kings live in palaces or *Kovilakams.* While Brahmins reside in illams[6]. The dalit do not have the right to utter the names of their houses in the presence of Brahmins. Instead, they humbly address their houses as *chaanaka kunnu* which is suggestive of their acceptance of disrespect and humiliation.

There were other accepted codes of behavior for each caste. The language used by the untouchables was degrading. Their inhabitations of 10-15 families staying together were called a *kudi.*The person in charge of the kudi was the *Kanikkaran* and the houses which were small, were generally called madam or *koora.* They were not supposed to build separate rooms. The term monkeys or claves were used to denote children of Pulayan and Parayan and

their women were called as *pulakkalis,* and *prakalies.* Corresponding to the low caste status, the Dalit were compelled to use self-degrading language while talking to the upper castes.

The people were not allowed to cover their upper body and were allowed to wear nothing except a small cloth to cover their body below waist and above knees. They were not even allowed to construct pucca or tiled house and or using gold and silver ornaments. They could not maintain family relations since their master were authorized to sell them out at his wants, will and pleasure. They were denied of education. When they spoke to the high caste men, covering mouth with one hand was the custom observed by Dalits.

The women of the lower castes where the worst suffers because they were the marginalized within the downtrodden communities. In order to make distinction

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between each caste, strict caste and pollution rules, which had to be observed very strictly by all sections of society. Any isolation of any law regarding caste matters or pollution would invite serious punishment from the caste dominated society and authorities and that was the reason why swami Vivekananda called Kerala in the 19th century[7], an 'Asylum Lunatics'. While women of the upper caste were expected to show respect by removing their upper clothes, the lower caste women were prohibited to wear any upper cloth at all both inside and outside the houses. Clothes above their waists. However, Dalit women were not subjected to sexual exploitation like the Nair women from the Brahmins[8].

Unlike the upper caste women, the Dalit and lower caste women engaged themselves in some occupations for their livehood, such as wearing mats, or making baskets, or coir making or in cashew industry. The social circumstances of the Dalit women were so hard that they had to work hard for their livehood starve if they remained idle.

Evil customs like *Pulapedi, Parappedi* and *mannapedi* existed in kerala in the 17th century. The lower castes had used it as form of revenge against the higher castes that oppressed them. The higher caste women feared these customs because it could make them the slave of the lower caste men. Duratte Barbosa an Italian traveler of the 15th century referred to these customs. During certain months of the year these lower caste man try to approach at night as near as possible to the houses of the higher caste women to touch them or least see them from a distance. The woman who is seen or touched by the low caste man is considered polluted and as a punishment she is banished forever from the caste and family killed by the higher caste to protect the purity of the caste. *Parapeddi* was a custom in which the lower caste men turned into robbers and kidnapped the women and the children of the Brahmin and Nair houses, who were wearning ornaments[9].

The fear of expulsion from the caste was very powerful among higher caste women so that they never went out of their houses without proper escort. If male members of the family accompanied them, they were not touched by the lower castes. If a pregnant woman was caught in these evil customs, the lower caste assailant kept her in isolation till she delivered. If the child happened to be a female, her relatives

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would never accept it, if it was a male child could if her relatives were willing, go back to her family.

Many social taboos and superstitions were a part of the kerala society up to the end of the 19th century. These obsolete customs and practices were abolished as a result of the spread of western education, the growth of liberal outlook developed due to the influence of the chrisian missionaries, and the socio-religious reforms advocated by the social reformers of kerala.

Till recent times, the customs or lower caste women removing their upper garments while entering Namboothiri residence was strictly observed throughout kerala. The Namboothiris went a step further and declared that low caste women need not observe chastity, the cardinal virtue of womanhood. A number of bad customs like *smarta vicharam, thirandukalyanam, kettukalyanam, devadasi* system, prohibition of brest cobering, *pulapedi, mannapedi* together with a number of obsolete taxes made the life of the people, especially women, miserable during the latter half of the nineteeth century. These social taboos curtailed the freedom of the woman- folk ranging from the antharjanam to the slave - women.

All the taboos were part and parcel of our society up to the second half of the 19th century. These social taboos and peculiar customs scheduled the women of Kerala for a long time, but as a result of spread of western education liberal ideas, socio-religious reform movements and the work of social reformers, these obsolete customs, practices and social taboos were abolished. Kerala social order kept the women of all classes and social taboos were abolished. Kerala's social order kept the women of all classes and castes in the strange holds of traditionalism and out-mode customs, which enslaved them within the four walls of caste taboos. It seemed that they had no escape. But the impact of colonial modernity they realized their backwardness in the socio economic fields and they try to overcome all these social taboos[10].

The historical position and condition of dalits in Kerala reveal a ling trajectory of oppression, exclusion and structural marginalization shaped by the rigid caste hierarchy of traditional Kerala society. For centuries, Dalit communities - such as the

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Pulaya, Paraya, Kurava and others were denied access to land, education, public spaces and even the basic right to dignity. Practices like untouchability, unseability, and caste-based slavery entrenched their subordinate status and reinforced a deeply unequal social order.

However, Kerala's socio-political landscape began to transform from the nineteenth century onwards. Missionary interventions, anti- caste reform movements led by figures such as Ayyankali, Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, and later leftist mobilizations initiated new space for Dalit mobilization initiated new space for dalits assertion. Acces to education, Struggle for civil rights, and participation in political movements gradually challenged the hegemonic caste norms. The temple entry proclamation (1936) land reforms after independence and the growth of democratic institution further contributed to improving the conditions of Dalit communities.

Yet, these deployments although significant do not imply the eradication of caste-based inequalities. Contemporary Kerala still witnesses forms of discrimination, economic disparities landless and underrepresentation of Dalits in position of power. Social mobility remains uneven and many communities continue to grapple with systemic barriers, particularly in rural areas. At the same time the rise of dalits movements, intellectual leadership and cultural revival initiatives has strengthened identity assertion and collective resistance.

In essences the history of Dalits in Kerala is a story of both oppression and resilience. While the region has achieved remarkable progress compared to many parts of India, to social justice require continuous efforts to address the deeper structural inequalities that persists. Recognizing the historical injustices faced by dalits and empowering marginalized communities through inclusive policies, representation and cultural affirmation remain crucial for building a genuinely egalitarian Kerala.[11]

Endnotes

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