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HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND IMPACT OF COLONIALISM AMONG THE PULAYA COMMUNITY IN CENTRAL KERALA

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Introduction

As Pulayas were the primary producers, agricultural production depended up on the labour of these groups. this paper attempts to the historical roots of the transition of the tribes into the castes, the condition of the Pulayas during the pre-colonial and colonial period and the effects of the abolition of slavery on Pulayas are also highlighted.

In ancient period Kerala was a part of Thamilakam.Society in ancient Thamilakam was tribal in character. The division of population into castes and communities were absent in the Sangam period. Social evils like the denial of equal opportunity, exploitation and untouchability were unknown during that period.Various social groups like the *Panar,* the *Parayar,* and the *Kuravar* enjoyed social freedom and social equality. (Elamkulam P.N.Kunjanpillai, 1921,*Keralam Anchum Arum Noottandukalil)*

The social formation structured by the dominance of productive relations based on kin-labour was broken down all over Thamilakam during the early medieval period. In this process the transformation clan identity disappeared and *jati* came as the substitute, mostly by retaining the names of the clan. *Jati* is a term used to identify the different social segments of the Hindu society based on caste. (V.T.Rajeshekar, 2007, Caste, A Nation with in the Nation)

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Growth of Brahmin Supremacy and Proliferation of Caste System in Kerala.

Various professional historians have addressed the formation, evolution and subsequent transformation of the caste system. They deal with formation of caste system in Kerala in general and with the formation of the Pulaya caste in particular.

Ellamkulam P.N Kunjan Pillai for the first time proposed a historical analysis of origin and growth of the caste system in the pre-colonial Kerala. He says:The period of the early Tamil anthologies popularly known as Sangam period was a casteless society. He contended that the collapse of the Kulashekara Empire and the subsequent emergence of small principalities helped the Brahmin to further foster the caste system.

The view of M.G.S Narayanan about the formation of the caste system in Kerala is as follows:The context of the temple centered Brahmin villages and the brahmanical ideology played an important role in the formation of caste system. He opines that hereditary group in the Dravidian society such as Ezhavas, Vaniyar, Thachar, Thattar, Vallalur,Pulayas and so on had become rigid castes during the Perumal period. This hereditary occupation provided a strong trust to the evolution of sub castes within the general frame work of caste system. (M.G.S., Narayanan, Perumals of Kerala, 1996)

Kesavan Veluthat in his work Brahman Settlements in Kerala - Historical Studies, explores the process of Aryan migration and settlement in Kerala had begun as early as the age of the Sangam. So he assumes that: Brahman settlements of Kerala took shape between the closing years of the Sangam age and 7th century A.D. He used the term Aryan is applied to the groups of people who came originally from north India with the Sanskritic ways of life. A Brahmin settlement in Kerala was temple-centered and the temple which was the nucleus of the Brahmana settlement functioned as the agency which transformed the way of life in Kerala- in terms of economy, society and polity. (Kesavan Veluthat,2013)

The caste formation was attributed to the expansion of production and led to the proliferation of hereditary occupation made by the Brahmins and temple centered Brahmin villages. Through the specialization of labour, several clans like the Panas, the Parayas, the Vettuvas, the Pulayas and the Maravas came to be identified as jati.

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The caste system originated in Kerala as a result of migration of Brahmins .The expansion of Brahmins in Kerala had taken place in between the 7th and 10th centuries A.D. They were mostly agriculturists who cultivated virgin lands. The slowness and the gradualness of the Aryan migration to the south resulted in the development of caste system and the consequent separation between the communities. Communities and sub-castes were formed in a temple-centered society on the basis of hereditary occupation. (M.G.S.Narayanan ,1972) It was a practice to rear the specialized labour with land-based entitlements which made the specialized labour hereditary. This hereditary specialization might have resulted in the emergence of profession labeled groups which in turn might have led to the sub castes. During this period toiling classes like the *Parayas,* the *Pulayas,* the *Panas* and the *Ezhavas* were begun to be looked upon as low castes. *Pulayas* which was a term indicating agricultural labourers began to be treated as 'caste'. (N. K. Jose,1982)

Evolution of the term Pulayas.

There are various views on the origin of the term *Pulayas.* Almost all names have a link with the traditional occupation of the *Pulayas,* namely work in the field. (N. K. Jose, 1982, Pulaya Lahala) The word *Pulayas* is derived from *pulam,* which means *Nilam or Field*. The term *Pulayas* was related as outcaste and they were working in the field. (Kanippayyur Sankaran Namboothiripad, 2009, Aryanmarude Kudiyettam Keralatthlil Vol.2) *Kerala Basha Nighandu,* and Kerala Charithra Nighandu, mention the Pulayas as the earliest inhabitants of Kerala and their traditional occupation were work in the pulam or field . Folklore Nighandu, by Vishnu Namboothiri says that Pulayas were the earliest inhabitants of Kerala and main occupation was farming. The Pulayas and Cherumans were separately classed, but there was no difference between Pulayas and Cherumas . But Census Report of 1901 states that they are differently designated in different localities. In the district of Malabar and in the Northern Taluks of Cochin State, they go more generally by the names of Cherumakkal and Mulayan. In Travancore and the Southern Taluks of Cochin, they were designated as Pulayas. A different observation is made by K. C. Alexander, who states that:The word *Pulayas* originates from *pula* which means birth and death pollution. He holds the view that the term *Pulayas* is associated with impurity because the word *'Pula'* is used to denote 'pollution' or 'impurity'. This term was

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applied to the lower castes to indicate that their presence or approach will cause impurity to the upper castes. Therefore, the *Pulayas* were considered as concrete symbols of pollution.

Conditions of Pulayas during the pre-colonial period

Pulayas suffered from various kinds of disabilities like social, economic, occupational, educational and religiously.

The life situations of the Pulayas have been accounted by K. Saradamoni, she writes,The life of Pulayas in the economy was chiefly centered on the institution of slavery. For a slave, the possession of a piece of land was a day dream. They had to cultivate the land and take the yield to their masters. They were hereditary slaves attached to the soil, and their proficiency in agricultural operations was considered greater than that of any other classes of people. They were denied all social and economic rights and privileges (K. Saradamoni, 1980)

Socially the practice of untouchability and unseeability militated against human dignity. Schools and courts were not open to the lower castes. Thus the rules and regulations of caste hampered social mobility, fostered social division and sapped individual initiative. Untouchability and unapproachability had been strictly observed in dealing with them owing to their low caste origin.

Untouchability had basically an economic foundation and the untouchables were the most poverty stricken section of the people. Their low social position accentuated their economic exploitation and their economic conditions tended to stabilize their low status. Life of these people putting up with hopeless poverty was miserable. Their lives were considered of no value and they were inferior to chattels. They were separate from the fabric of caste, community, lineage and religion.

Ward and Conner in *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States* remarks: 'Their name is connected with everything revolting, shunned as if inflicted with plague, the higher classes view their presence with a mixture of alarm and indignation'.

They were not allowed entry into public buildings like the village office or the post office. If a low caste man needed anything from these offices he had to stand at a

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distance and shout out Thamburanay. Only after he had shouted for a long time would the official come out and enquire what he needed. When the low caste man had explained his requirement the official would ask him to keep the coins there on the sand. Accordingly, the low caste man would keep the coins on a green leaf and move away. And then the official would come and collect the coins and keep there the receipt or stamp or whatever else was required. Only after the official reached back the office building could the low caste man come and pick it up.(Information gathered from, Kunjumon)

Occupations were specifically associated with their caste. They were dispossessed of land in pre-colonial period; they became the labouring groups in the agrarian system. They were not paid for each job done, but food and other minimum necessities were provided every day to keep them alive. Some grain was supplied every harvest time to feed their families. Some gifts were given during times of festivals and family ceremonies. (M.Achuthan, 2009).Their earnings were meager and they were primarily indebted and forced to work as bonded labour to the upper caste on low wages. They were also under obligation to perform forced labour. Men, women and children worked together.

Discrimination on the basis of caste was severe in the field of education. Education was highly religious oriented and the Brahmins had a monopoly over the institutions of learning in the state. Historically the Pulayas had been the most uneducated and illiterate group. The Pulaya children were not permitted to attend schools. They were forced to tend cattle or such work on nominal wages.

Socio-Economic Transformation- Impact of British Rule.

Social change signifies changes in structure, composition and functioning of the social order. The caste system isolated the Scheduled Castes from the rest of the society. The caste and untouchability based exclusion and discrimination have been pervasive in the socio –economic, educational and political realms. Social change is influenced by education which significantly helps in the reduction of poverty, class discrimination and gender bias.

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Abolition of Slavery

The Slavery Abolition Act of 1872 in Cochin State did some changes in the life of the Pulayas. Due to colonial intervention in agriculture, labour was to be released from land to land and to be converted into capital. The beginning of industries in Cochin State provided salaried employment to some Pulayas as coolie labourer's. This facilitated a transition from slave labourers to wage labourers.

Labour mobilization.

In the nineteenth century, transition to the commercial agriculture brought about changes in the pattern of land utilization and labour mobilization. Colonial transformation of the agrarian sector expanded considerably with the development of plantations as follows: Forest lands were cleared for the commercial cultivation of coffee, tea and rubber. Introduction of plantation and commercial agriculture created demand for agricultural labourers who would be free from the obligation of wetland agriculture mediated by the traditional relations of production. There was pronounced shift both in its economy and the structure of the work force away from agriculture to processing industries which, by and large, catered to foreign markets.

The industrial blooming had a significant role in engendering positive changes in the socio-economic life of the Pulayas. These people lived in isolated villages. Opening up of new industries provided opportunities for slightly better living conditions for this class of people. After the growth of industries agricultural labourers migrated to the towns in search of employment in the factories and the people had migrated permanently and seasonally. With this development income has increased rapidly which facilitated a better life in town, but it had also pushed them out from the agrarian economy. The Pulayas, who ceaselessly toiled for the master and having known nothing but servitude and deprivation, had found themselves more at the mercy of other people. This labour mobility was looked upon by the landed class with suspicion because they enjoyed the traditional rights and privileges on labour. (P. Sanal Mohan,2015) With the gradual monopolizing of the free labour market by the entrepreneurs, they started hiring the cheap labour of the erstwhile agricultural labourers, mostly the Pulayas.

Changes in Education System

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By the end of the19th century, English, as well as vernacular schools were set up in different parts of the state by the government and by the private agencies. State activity in the field of education began in Cochin from the time of Col.Munro. By 1818 the Raja of Cochin established 33 schools providing education in Malayalam medium.(C. Achutha Menon,1925) In 1835, six vernacular schools were started, one in each Taluk in Cochin.

The government of Cochin took active interest in the education of depressed classes from the beginning of the 20th century. Various ameliorative measures were undertaken by the government for the progress of depressed classes in the educational sphere. Lower castes, owing to their social disabilities, poverty and the nature of their occupation were very backward in the realm of education. The Education Code of 1911 provided special concessions to the Pulayas, the Parayas and other backward classes as follows:the government met the expenditure incurred for (a) the purpose of maintaining schools; (b) providing scholarships; (c) giving stipends for training of teachers; and (d) providing mid-day meals .(Report on the Administration of Cochin, 1919). In 1919, government started working on a scheme of free and compulsory primary education in the state . The scheme was extended to the poorer classes, mainly the Pulayas, the Parayas, the Kanakans and the Muslims. Cochin Education Code was revised in 1921. The special feature of the Code was the encouragement of education among the backward communities. The education of the depressed classes, notably the Pulayas, received great impetus with the exemption of fees in English schools, both sirkar and aided.

The missionary education had created a new social consciousness among the Pulayas. This engendered the transformation of the status of the Pulayas castes from 'slaves' into 'converted Christians'. The mission schools and their activities led to significant changes including the rise of the discourse on free labour, individual freedom, and social justice. Missionary leaders in Cochin State, Rev.Hokes Worth, Rev.George Mathan and Rev.Hentry Harley mobilized the community of depressed classes and created awareness of human rights among them. The missionaries were at first forced to establish separate schools for the education of the depressed classes. The 1891 census report noted that:in Perumanur Kalathil Pulaya Schoool,

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situated in the Kanayannur taluk, 17 students belonging to the Pulaya caste had studied. They were taken to promote social and economic equality and justice and to provide equal educational opportunities among the Pulaya pupil. (Report on the Census of Cochin) In 1925 individuals started a number of schools for the benefit of Pulayas; the Ramavarma Memorial School, Vijayaraghavachari Memorial School and Davies Memorial School.

Impact of the socio-religious reform movements

The socio-religious reform movements which had originated in Bengal and other parts of India had an impact on Kerala. It was the social reformer Ayyankali who espoused such noble cause as eradication of caste barriers and *Harijan* upliftment also left his indelible mark on the socio-cultural life of modern Kerala. He was convinced of the need for an organization to channelize the new found Dalit power through the right course, to spread awareness regarding their rights and to acquire those rights through mobilized strength. In 1907 he founded an organization for the lower caste called the *Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham*, which fought against the inequalities prevailed in the society and tried to uplift the backward and downtrodden. He considered that the political unification and consolidation of the dalits were imperative to bring about any change in the social and political status of the dalits.The main goal of Ayyankali was to empower his community through education and organization. Ayyankali advocated free and compulsory education. He and his followers had given petitions to the government highlighting the right of the depressed sections to have access to schools. As a result, the government issued an order in 1910, allowing children from depressed communities to have access to schools. (Diwans Proceedings, 1910)

Ayyankali went to the Ooroottambalam school with a Pulaya girl based on a government order, but she was not allowed to sit with the upper-caste students. Seeing that children from lower castes were not admitted to regular schools, he decided to start a school of his own. He quickly built a shed and brought in furniture, but there was no teacher because no one from the Dalit community was educated. With the help of Kumaran Asan, he finally found a pandit to teach. The school began functioning, but upper-caste people attacked it and burned it down at night. A new

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shed was built the next day, but that too was set on fire. Such attacks and violence continued repeatedly.

In June 1913 a strike demanding right to education for the lower castes was launched Pulayas realized that their future generations would live as human beings only if sacrifices were made at this stage. strike was successfully ended by the Magistrate in May 1914, giving admission for the Pulaya children to schools both government and aided. (Archives Letters in 1914) This strike was first of its kind not only in Travancore but in all of India for access to education of lower castes and for their human rights.

A new wave of assertion of civil rights, agitation against untouchability and other forms of oppression swept through Central Kerala in the early decades of the 20th century. The reflections of Ayyankali's idea of equality had its impact on the formation of *'Cochin Pulayar Mahajana Sabha'* in 1913 and also the formation of '*Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha'* in 1970. The ideological influences resulted in mass mobilization of *Pulayas* in Central Kerala by Pandit K.P. Karuppan, Krishnadhi Asan, P.C. Chanchan, K.P.Vallon, Dhashayani Velayudhan and P.K. Chathan Master. The leaders of the Pulayas realized that their petitions and the consequent moderate welfare measures by the government did not improve the condition of the lower castes. They believed that education was an important tool for the emancipation of the community and so they carried on intensive campaigns among the Pulayas to send their children to school. Pandit Karuppan and K.P.Vallon, leaders of the Cochin Pulayar Mahajana Sabha raised these problems of the depressed classes in the Cochin legislature.

The *Cochin Pulayar Mahajana Sabha* played a pivotal role in opening schools and hostels for the *Pulayas*. The setting up of Harijan hostels was a favourable step towards the promotion of *Pulaya* education. The graded progress of education among the *Pulayas* enabled them to have occupational opportunities other than agriculture. The Reservation Policy and Special Recruitment considerably enhanced the placement of the *Pulayas.* However, a substantial section of them constituted last grade employment.

Conclusion

The Slavery Abolition Act of 1872 in Cochin State did effect some changes in the life of the *Pulayas*. Due to colonial intervention in agriculture, labour was to be released

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from land and land was to be converted into capital. The beginning of industries in Cochin State provided salaried employment to some *Pula*yas as *coolie* labourers .This facilitated a transition from slave labourers to wage labourers. The impact and consequences of colonial policies, missionary intervention and their impacts, Changes in the agrarian relations, opportunities for occupational changes and socio-religious movements were favourable factors in the betterment of the life milieu of the *Pulayas* in the Central Kerala.

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