

Colonial Modernity and Social Reforms: Mobilisation of Lower Caste Communities in Kerala

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The caste reform movement in Kerala had implications for Dalit culture and identity. These movements almost tried to Brahmanise the lower caste community to claim status in the highly caste-ridden Kerala society. The reform movements in Kerala tried to achieve upward mobility; vegetarianism and purity were significant articulations among them. People have articulated the reform as a 'renaissance'. Kerala's entire social reform movements mobilised the lower caste into Hinduism that they had never experienced.

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The first half of the twentieth century witnessed the development of many social reform movements in Kerala. The caste reform movements and community formation have placed the caste as a historical injustice in contemporary Kerala (Raman, 2010, p. 46). The popular understanding of caste in Kerala is that it is a phenomenon that has disappeared from the public place, but caste is kept alive in the private discourse. The lower caste was identified through their gestures, body colour, culinary practices, language, the structure of the house, locality, and many other caste markings (Raman, 2010, p.367). Modernity in the Kerala Society failed to make a radical transformation in the perception of the caste-based society. The dilemma of caste is hidden in the individual and family consciousness of Kerala society. It operates within all aspects of public and private life.

The reform movements never addressed these questions seriously; it was addressed as a reform to form a more significant Hindu identity (Gladston, 1984). In this milieu, the nature of the caste reform movements should be studied critically. The reform movement lacks the intellectual tradition to disentangle the caste question in Kerala. This paper illustrates the contemporary discourse on caste reform movements in the Travancore-Cochin state. The discourse on the reform movement was erroneously conceptualised as 'renaissance' even in the academic discussion. The values of the 'renaissance' were never reflected in the reform movements in Kerala. It needs a critical understanding of the reform movement to clarify the undercurrents of the discourses around the reform. Through these reform movements, the caste communities responded to the social transformations that evolved through the intervention of missionaries and British colonialism (Jeffrey, 1979)(Mohan, 2015). Later, it formed the 'Hindu' religious identity among the lower castes in Kerala.

The debate on the Indian 'renaissance' was mainly associated with movements from the Bengal 'renaissance', which had a critical phase in the mid-19th Century of India. The Bengal 'renaissance' is sometimes considered as 'Indian Renaissance'. When looking at the model of the European Renaissance aside, if one just looks at the 'Bengal Awakening' as a separate event, then its main facets could be brought under review. It was doubtless that there was a sort of intellectual arousal in the undivided province of Bengal. This movement began with Raja Rammohan Roy. This renaissance was a revival of the positives of the ancient past and an appreciation of the western elements. Thus, the 'Bengal Renaissance' blended the teachings of Upanishads to create 'Hindu' public opinion against social evils and western education and politics (Sen, 1946). This reform was mainly intended to reform the orthodox values of the Hindu religion. Thus, the modernity brought into India by the British produced an awakening known as the Bengal 'renaissance'(Panikkar, 2011). The critics of Bengal 'Renaissance' point out that, unlike the European Renaissance, the range of the 19th-century intellectual upheaval was rather limited, and its character had fewer modernists.

'Renaissance' or Reform: Debates on Social Movements

European society had become acquainted with the renaissance after the long cleavage period from the scientific tradition. This cleavage was filled with the recapturing of their classical texts. In this intellectual milieu, they went back to their classics and tradition. It was a 'rebirth' of classical learning and a rediscovery of ancient Rome and Greek. During the renaissance, France, Germany, and England began to write classical poetry and rhetorical speeches, collect classical axioms and even tried to learn Greek. The reform movements in India never had such intellectual tradition. The vital question is what we had was a

'renaissance' or a reform movement. What the Indian society witnessed was social and religious reforms imbibed from tradition and colonial modernity which failed to fulfil its historic mission. The fundamental question is what kind of tradition and classics we must recapture. The misapprehension of religious conversion and colonialism propounded social changes as a 'renaissance'. The reform was only an attempt against the church's religious firmness system in Europe.

The Indian experiences of reforms were more integrated with the newly emerged western-educated Indian Intellectuals; they began to search for a new Indian identity. They went to the traditional past of India (Pandian, 2002, pp. 1735-1741). Back to Vedas was Swami Dayanand Saraswati's call when he established the Arya Samaj, which influenced many contemporary intellectuals. Balgangathara Tilak was most influenced and raised the slogan *Back to Vedas* for recapturing India's past. They wanted to place Indian philosophical tradition against the western material interpretation of India. Indian elites tried to modernise the caste system and stood for the codification of the Hindu religion as a monolithic religion. Another batch of reformers stood against the values of the religion itself. Many upper caste and middle class were trying to revive the old tradition against the threat from western religion and modernity. For a long time, the 'renaissance' in Bengal was almost exclusively identified with the concern for modernisation among the upper castes. The movements for reform among them have been treated as synonymous with the 'renaissance'. The newly educated upper caste youths were apprehensive that the recently emerged colonial institutions would challenge the orthodox Indian caste structure. As a result, the reform or revivalism remained only an upper-caste project in north India. Many reform movements started or were funded by the upper caste middle class because of their anxiety about their social position before colonial modernity.

But the south Indian experience was entirely different; many social reform movements emerged from the lower caste community. Towards the end of the 19th century, there was a remarkable awakening among the lower castes in South India. It was because of the colonial mobilisation of caste communities for the reform. One of the major articulations of these mobilisations was caste reform. These mobilisations were mainly among the *Ezhavas* and many slave castes in Travancore (Ravi Raman, 2010, pp. 40- 45). Some of the critical reform movements of this kind were those initiated by Narayana Guru, Periyar, Ayyankali, and Ayothee Das. But the involvement of the upper caste middle class in the reform movement in south India was very few. Even the Travancore Brahmin community entered very late in the reform movement, and they formed their organisation very late.

Contextualising Social Reforms in Kerala

In the light of some of the debates on the 'renaissance' in Bengal, we need to look at the experiences of the reform movements in Kerala. In the popular readings and debates, people commonly perceived that Kerala experienced a 'renaissance'. The lower caste movements and contemporary debates around it articulate the early 20th-century social reform movements as 'renaissance'. Many of the social reformers were considered as the architects of Kerala's renaissance. It needs to be critically looked at.

Unlike the British provinces in north India and Bengal, the south Indian response to colonialism differed. The British influenced many of the policies of these native states through indirect rule. The initiatives of colonial modernity altered all socio-economic spheres of Kerala. Mainly the lower castes were mobilised to articulate a new identity through religion and through the transformation from agrarian slaves to plantation labourers. The attitude of the members of the newly emerging lower castes towards traditional institutions, beliefs, and social relations was quite critical. Significant changes took place in the land tenure relations in Travancore and slavery. The lower caste communities received employment opportunities in the public works department and plantation economy. The new demand for the land and the declaration of *Pandara Pattom* has changed the entire scenario of land relations in Kerala (Varghese, 1970). Accumulation of private property emerged from the caste-ridden feudal system. The major impact of this process was to create a new consciousness of self and identity among the lower castes during the colonial period. Newly converted lower castes experienced new identities and selves through religious assertion. It has given them some kind of social freedom and relief from the caste shackles. And the missionary schools and institutions led to the emergence of a new middle class under the influence of colonial education and religious conversion, which directly influenced social change. This new self among the slave castes triggered the major social movements in Kerala.

The social reforms in Travancore were almost exclusively associated with the reform of caste and religion. The entering of the newly converted slaves into the public spaces and the continued flow of the lower castes to Christianity compelled the upper castes to reconsider the reform process (Gladston, 1984, p. 208). The transformation of the agricultural economy into a plantation economy also accelerated this process. The

missionary intervention and the entering of the colonial authority were altering the entire system in Travancore. Another intervention among the lower castes in Travancore was also intended to mobilise the larger Hindu community towards the Christian conversion (Gladston, 1984, pp. 161- 163). The Hindu concerns that developed in the 1930s manifested in C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyer's intentional favouritism towards the *Nairs*, promotion of Hinduism, and hostility against Christians. Many upper castes were influenced by English education. The missionaries started many schools and colleges to educate the upper castes in Kerala. But later, its beneficiaries were included from the lower castes too. Missionary schools began to admit lower caste pupils. They began to be eagerly sought out by people lower in the caste hierarchy, and by the 1930s, they had established a wide network of primary schools throughout the state. A large number of slave castes were attracted to the new experience of religion. In the early 20th century, Kerala witnessed lower castes converting to Christianity to escape caste shackles. The upper castes had foreseen the dangers behind the conversion and feared that it would make the Hindus to become a minority in the Hindu state. The Christian mass movement among these people also coincided with some legislation in Travancore and Cochin, which provided slight opportunities for the socio-economic development of these people. In the late 19th century, Travancore witnessed the Hindu gurus travelling in Kerala and giving lectures in opposition to Christianity (Jeffrey, 1976, pp. 3- 27). Such a lecture took place in 1887 in the Maharaja's College Thiruvananthapuram hall. Also, the swamis were engaged in dialogue with the Christian preachers to protect the integrity of the Hindu religion.

Travancore faced a crucial identity crisis as a Hindu State. It privileged the Hindus to protect the Hindu system's values and caste norms. But the emergence of the lower caste and their demand for civic rights compelled the Travancore state to rethink its policies toward the lower castes. The Hindu state attempted to refurbish its traditional sources of legitimacy by deploying the modernised version of its (Hindu) self-description as *dharma rajyam*, or the land of charity. Travancore missionaries continuously requested the Travancore state to implement the modernisation policies in Travancore. In the early-mid decades of the nineteenth Century, Travancore underwent extensive reform- a systematic hallowing of the crown under the supervision of the British residents.

Reforms of Caste: Trajectories of Caste Reform Movements

During the encounter with colonialism in the nineteenth century, the Hindu elites realised that the fundamental privileged ground of western modernity was its claim of universality, and nationalism is its best expression (Raman, 2010, p. 40). These new social spaces of colonialism and its agencies compelled the authorities to make some arrangements with new changes. Travancore state was not an exception from that. The peculiarly needy relationship between the state and missionaries was a major impetus driving the Travancore state's initiatives. Simultaneously the state-required missionary schools to meet the need for education of the lower castes. On the other side, the state was under great compulsion from upper caste people to open their Hindu schools. The missionaries' schools were considered as a platform for converting lower castes to Christianity (Kawashima, 1998, p. 98). The upper castes thus began to insist on the Travancore state to open up government schools for the lower classes. In 1905 a Nair headmaster of a high school complained that low caste *Pulayas* had to give up their religion to gain an education. Similar complaints were raised against missionary schools, accusing them of being more concerned with conversions than education. In an important sense, the Education Code of 1909-10 that followed the growing complaints was considered to inflict more state control over education. One ironic consequence of missionary intervention in education in Travancore was that the upper castes agreed to a new universalistic policy regarding education. State officials responded in kind, recognising that an increase in the Christian population through conversions threatened the homogeneity and thus the stability of Travancore. A vocal and restive Christian population also threatened to unsettle the upper caste-based regime of Travancore. In Travancore, the reforms were a pre-emptive reaction to British proximity and the threat of annexation and mass conversions to Christianity, which would have reflected the increase of the Christian population.

The social reforms advocated during the early twentieth century had two dimensions. The first was related to codifying the rituals performed on different occasions, such as birth, marriage, and death. The lower castes could not be part of the social mainstream: they could not enter temples, use public roads, or draw water from wells. They were forced to live in segregated parts of the village. But when they converted to Christianity, they provided a minimum level of dignity and freedom. This inhuman treatment was opposed by reform movements, particularly by those from within the lower castes. Both religious and social reforms were caste or religious specific. One of the most important things of the Travancore State was the kind of attention given to the lower caste people when they converted to Christianity. After the abolition of slavery, the agricultural communities were moving to plantation economies that were worst affected by the

agricultural production in Travancore (Kooiman, 1991, pp. 57-71). For these reasons, the Government gave more attention to the lower caste in Travancore. The interventions of missionaries brought reasonable change among the low caste people of Travancore. It includes the need for a better life other than the slave-like life they were following. All these social interventions urged a sense of dignified life and social identity to the low caste people; it inevitably created tension in colonial Travancore. The reform movements among the lower castes tried to reform their society and demanded the Government better opportunities. But in nature, these social reform movements articulated their identity through Hinduising the lower castes and looking for upward mobility. Upward mobility was the major objective of the social reform movements in Travancore. The reform itself changed dietary practices and ritual purification of the lower castes to that of the Brahmins. Upward mobility means discipline and purifying the lower castes' rituals and following the upper castes' standards. The caste hierarchy was primarily concerned with cleanliness as the major criteria for distinguishing sub-caste identity among the lower castes. Cleanliness was associated with food habits, mode of dressing, houses, and surroundings. The major important factor deciding the superiority of the one lower caste over others was their caste job. It created a particular type of consciousness to avoid relationships among the lower castes in Travancore. This unbending sub caste social order was important to maintain rigid caste identities among the lower castes. And this kept them scattered and prevented them from coming together against the oppressive social order. This social phenomenon prevented them from attaining a larger identity as a caste group and organising themselves. Instead of fighting against the caste order as a large lower caste movement, each sub-caste has preferred to rise as an individual caste association. Therefore, the social reform movement in Travancore was not a movement of high caste intervention but a movement of low and untouchable communities fighting against the inequities of a rigid caste system with the help of European missionaries. After the emergence of communities (*samudayam*), the lower caste was appropriated into Hinduism, and a larger Hindu identity in Travancore was formed.

Articulating New Identity: Lower Castes Search For New Caste Names

A significant aspect of the cultural change of conversion was adopting new names. The conversion was a break from their miserable past and the beginning of a new life. The newly converted Christians received new saint names instead of their menial old caste names. Receiving a new name means raising their status in society through a new identity. The lower caste people cannot use other names except caste-bound ones.

Similarly, the formation of the caste organisation also looked into their history and a new identity. They imagined their community through their golden past and new caste identity. Each community began to rename their caste through government gazetteers. People have submitted petitions to Divan to change their caste names. The *Parayas* in Travancore renamed their caste name to *Sambavar* in 1918. Pazhoor Rama Channar organised the Pariah community and formed *Sambhava Sangham* in 1919. Another organisation which Kandan Kumaran started was *Brahma Prathyaksha Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham* (Kawashima, 1998, p.161). Kurumban Daivathan formed another organisation called *The Hindu Pulaya Samajam for the upliftment of the Pulayas* (Tharakan, 2008, pp. 11-18). These organisations developed to raise their voice in Travancore and make their demands for caste communities in government bodies. This caste identification and the emergence of caste organisation depended on the newly emerged myths. Every individual community went back to the history and tradition of lower castes and found that their original superior position might have come down due to various reasons.

When we observe the caste associations in Travancore in the early twentieth century, we can see that many of the non-Dalit caste associations were submerged into a single caste organisation and created a unique caste identity. For example, the Nair services society included many layers of *Nairs* in the organisations (Jeffrey, 1979, pp. 235- 237). It emerged as a *samudayam* with many minor Nair communities with differences. One of the essential demands of the Nair *Samajam* was changing their caste name *Malayali Sudran* into Nair in all records and references. It means to eliminate the social division among the Nair. Their attempt was resisted by British authorities under the influence of Brahmins (Padmanabhan, 1998, p. 53). The abolition of social division among the Nairs was aimed at removing all elements that divide the Hindus.

Simultaneously people were searching for their history and sought to know how they began to live in this miserable condition. Every community tried to generate a glorious past in its history. The *Pulayas* were imagined as the descendants of the ancient *Chera* kingdom. The leaders of the *Pulaya* community demanded that the Government must protect the history of the community and give permission to change the community name to Cheramar instead of *Pulaya*. Calling people *Pulaya* is an injustice to their community ("Preja Sabha Proceedings Dated March 21st 1923 Eighth Day," 1923, pp. 175-176). These kinds

of identity articulation were prevalent among the lower caste Travancore. *Pulayas* also demanded a new caste name identity under the leadership of Pambadi John Joseph. Pampady John Joseph (1887-1940) was one of the prominent leaders from the untouchable community and a converted Christian. He was educated and earnestly engaged in caste reform activities. The turning point in the life of John Joseph was his association with Gnana Joshua-the Chief Accounts Officer of Travancore. Joshua had a rich collection of government records, and from these, Joseph learned that the *Pulaya* lineage was linked with the ancient *Chera* Dynasty of Kerala. The ancient name of Kerala was *Cheranad*, and its first inhabitants were a tribe called *Cheramar*, who was also known as *Cherumar*, *Cherumakkal*, or *Cherar*. They were the rulers, landlords, agriculturalists, poets, and educated people of the land. Gnana Joshua conveyed this history as a golden past of *Pulayas* in Travancore to John Joseph. This history identification as a golden period created an identity awakening among the *Pulayas* in Travancore (Chentharassery, 2015). Under the leadership of John Joseph, they argued that they were the original inhabitants of the soil the *Cheramar* and the foreign invaders captured their country by conquering and making them slaves. The enslaved people began to be known as *Pulayas*. On this basis, this newly articulated caste name gave them pride in their past.

This was a serious phenomenon among every caste community in Kerala - to enquire about their identity in history and identify them as a superior caste in it. The *Ezhavas* in Kerala acquired much mobilisation among the lower castes, and a few emerged as the middle class. This newly emerged middle class began to enquire about their history as descendants from Sri Lanka. Sree Narayan's arguments on caste names can be seen as pointing to the false nature of their identity. He argued that the word *Ezhava* was not a caste name but a place name, reminding us that *Ezhavas* came from Sri Lanka. If *Ezhava* wants to use a place name, Sree Narayana argued, why not use the appellation *Malayali* since they have been living in Kerala for a long time? Sree Narayana Guru categorically asserted that the word *Ezhava* signified neither caste nor religion (Kumar, 1997, p. 257). So many identity articulations have emerged among the lower castes in Kerala. Newly emerged middle classes among the lower castes were seriously enquiring about their caste and its degradation.

Untouchables, Social Movements, and Hindu Consciousness

The last quarter of the 19th century witnessed the rise of mass anti-Christian waves among the upper-caste Hindus. Many upper-caste Hindus realised that lower caste people converted to Christianity, challenging traditional caste norms (Gladston, 1984, p. 205). During the early decades of the twentieth century, the lower caste Christians asked for their proportion in Government with the church's help. Along with that, the lower castes were supported by some social reformers in Travancore. The Devan also favoured the lower caste to check the conversion to Christianity. This created a binary opposition among the lower castes as converted Christians and other lower castes. Poykayl Yohannan, a PRDS member, nominated to Prejasabha, also complained about the discriminatory position of the Travancore state against the people converted to Christianity from *Parayas*, *Pulayas*, and *Kurvas* ("Preja Sabha Proceedings Dated March 10th 1921 Ninth Day," 1921, p. 123). Travancore state and the Hindu social reformers tried to protect the lower caste in the Hindu fold. They regularly contacted the leaders of the lower caste movements to ensure the support of the lower caste to protect the Hindu religion.

In 1896, Swami Vivekananda visited the Malabar regions. His visit, as in many other parts of India, to Travancore, also strengthened the revival of Hinduism. Also, many Hindu monks travelled through Travancore to overcome the threat of conversion. Sadananda Swami was very concerned about the conversion of the lower caste, and he met some Nairs, but they discouraged him. Later he contacted Ayyan Kali for the upliftment of the lower caste and to protect Hinduism. The Travancore government decided to nominate lower caste people to Sri Moolam Popular Assembly in 1907. With the support of Sadananda Swamikal, Ayyan Kali entered into Preja Sabha and raised the voices of *Pulayas* in Preja Sabha Proceedings. Ayyan Kali pointed out the utter helplessness of the Hindu *Pulayas*. They had no benefactor, no patron, no organisation, and fund. They were Hindus to the core, but they were still an outcast and untouchables. Their only salvation lay in conversion, which facilitated their social emancipation. That contingency should be avoided in a Hindu state like Travancore. He, therefore, appealed to the Government to remove the disabilities of the community and emancipate it from social injustice and degradation. Also, the Government introduced a separate representation for the lower caste Christians. It's considered Hindu and Christian *Pulayas* separately. Ayyan Kali pointed out that Mr Saradan Solomon was not a member of the *Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham*, an organisation solely of the Hindu *Pulayas*. He requested the Government not consider any of his (Saradan Solomon's) representation as emanating from the *Sangham*. Similarly, every lower caste community emerged as a Hindu identity in Travancore. The social reform movements played a significant role in it. When we observe the representations in Preja Sabha

Memberships, we can see that communities are identified through religion. Likewise, the *Parayas* and *Kuravas* identified themselves as Hindus.

The lower caste spirituality was considered menial, and their worship and Gods were considered 'black magic.' According to K. N. Panikkar, the Dalits and Adivasis faced cultural colonisation; their culture, beliefs, and worship system were overwhelmed and destroyed by the ongoing extensive Hinduisation and Brahmanisation process. The cultural colonisation was as harmful to Dalits' existence as the economic one. Across the country, the *Kavus* and other shrines of the Dalits and 'Adivasis' were being converted into temples. Brahminical deities were being installed in these shrines after throwing out the local deities. This way, Dalits were told that their deities were pagan and that their faiths and worship systems were inferior to the Hindus. The practice was a significant form of invasion (Panikker, 2004, p. 4). Before these reform movements in Kerala, Dalits followed their indigenous belief systems like ancestral worship and local deities like *Chathan*, *Marutha*, *Chamundi*, etc., were common in their day-to-day life. But the local deities the Dalits venerated for a long time were being eliminated from their belief system. The temple's opening to the lower castes eliminated entire local worship from their life.

Conclusion

We can see that the caste reform movement in Kerala had implications for Dalit culture and identity. These movements almost tried to Brahmanise their community to claim status in the highly caste-ridden Kerala society. There is a question of 'who is reforming and whom regarding the caste reform movement.' Kancha Ilaiah addressed this problem in his *Why I am Not a Hindu* saying that the reform should mean not be Brahmanising the Dalits but Dalitising the Brahmins or the upper castes. But the reform movements in Kerala tried to achieve upward mobility, and vegetarianism and purity were significant aspects among them. People have articulated the reform as a renaissance. Some reformers challenged the contemporary system but did not alter it. Kerala never experienced the caste annihilation movement, and Sahaodaran Ayyappan was the only exception. The Christian conversion has accelerated the movement to appropriate the untouchables into the Hindu religion. The mobility and transformation of the lower caste were triggered by the conversion. The movement for the temple entry was also very much concerned about the mobilisation of the lower caste to Christianity. Finally, entire social reform movements in Kerala mobilised the lower caste into Hinduism that they had never experienced before.

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