



WEAVING HISTORY FROM THE FRAGMENTS OF MEMORY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SONGS OF POIKAYIL APPACHAN

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Abstract: Memory, in scientific terms, implies a bioelectric action, while in philosophy, its repercussions are vast and interdisciplinary. Memories are inevitable for individuals and society as they revolve around objects, are shared among people, and are woven into the fabric of culture. History and memory lean toward the past, viewing it from the same angle but with different perspectives. Early academia relied on evidence and traces to write history, formulating narratives by connecting the dots. The history of Kerala was not much different in this regard; it documented the ruling dynasties, culture, religion, wars, foreign transactions, and caste-based discrimination. However, some people's struggles are absent in the records. Poikayil Appachan, a renaissance leader in the nineteenth century, from the remnants of the past, recollected the forgotten history of his community through his songs. This paper discusses how his songs were able to bridge the gap between history and memory.

Index Terms - History, Memory, Oral history, Collective Memory, Slavery.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India is not simply a narrative of grand events and prominent figures; it is also a history of deep-rooted caste conflicts, which often remained overlooked or disregarded by dominant or elite historians. The hegemonic wave of historical narratives often neglected the experiences and struggles of marginalized social groups, particularly the untouchables. Caste slavery deprived the untouchables of basic amenities and resources, severely restricted their human needs and eventually caused them to submit to their condition. In the face of such deprivation and subjugation, they found solace in oral narratives and songs, which helped ease the burden of their hard labour and the pain of their subjugation and slavery. Their stories, songs, and oral narratives provided a means of expression and a way to cope with their harsh realities, allowing them to preserve their collective memory and culture despite the oppressive conditions they endured. They have stored their experiences in songs, weaving their sorrows and joys into the fabric of these melodies. Passed from generation to generation, these songs became a form of documentation of their collective past—a history in verses. This oral history, rich with the memories and experiences of the subaltern masses, can be viewed as a living document. It is a form of history not confined to printed words on paper but is transformed and transmitted through sound. These narratives enter the psyche of the listeners, imprinting themselves as memories that remain vividly present. The past, as represented in these oral histories, continues to reverberate in the present, reminding society of the struggles and challenges marginalized communities face. These oral histories serve as a powerful tool for preserving and sharing the collective memory of the untouchables. They contain valuable insights into these communities' lived experiences, traditions, and perspectives, providing an alternative to dominant historical narratives and shedding light on the often-unseen aspects of Indian society.

II. THE SAGA OF APPACHAN

One of the essential characteristics of oral narratives is that they are not static or fixed. They can be accessed and 'downloaded' whenever needed, enabling continuous engagement with the past. These narratives offer a counter-narrative that challenges the exclusivity of written history, providing a platform for the voices of the marginalized to be heard and acknowledged. The process of transformation and preservation of history continues, even as oral narratives transition into written or electronic texts. Thus, the resilience, agency, and cultural richness of the untouchable communities ensure that their stories are not lost or forgotten in the annals of time, allowing the past to remain relentlessly present, and "are inscribed not solely on the mind but also on the body: they score the face, furrow the heart, flute the lungs, make ravines of hands whose fingers knot into mounds at each survived collision" (Mukta 179).

Memories are not merely engraved within the depths of the mind but also leave unique imprints on the body. They carve their presence upon the face, leaving traces of laughter and tears that have shaped one's identity. They create intricate patterns upon the heart, etching the joys and sorrows experienced. Memories dance within the lungs, their rhythm flowing with each breath, carrying whispers of past moments. They sculpt the hands, moulding them into landscapes marked by battles fought and victories. Fingers intertwine, forming gentle mounds as a testament to the resilience and strength gained from overcoming life's trials. The body becomes a living testament, bearing the physical evidence of a life lived, a story told through the complex language of scars, lines, and contours. Memories become intertwined with the essence of being, intertwining mind and body in a symphony of lived experiences. Facing up to the past, responsibilities, and how one has been formed is never easy, nor straightforward, for as Bhabha expresses it: "remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present." (121)

The songs of Poikayil Appachan played a transformative role in creating history, preserving memory, and shaping the subjectivity of the untouchables. Through his poetic compositions and lyrical expressions, Appachan not only documented the experiences and struggles of the marginalised communities but also instilled a sense of pride, resilience, and identity among them. Appachan's songs served as a form of historical documentation. They captured the lived realities of the untouchables, their oppression, and their aspirations. He voiced their experiences and ensured their stories were not forgotten or erased from the collective memory. These songs became a powerful testimony, preserving the untouchables' history, resilience, and resistance against caste-based discrimination. Moreover, Appachan's songs became an essential medium for transmitting memory. As it passed through generations, the oral narratives embedded in his compositions carried the weight of collective memory and cultural heritage. These songs acted as a repository of shared experiences, enabling the untouchable communities to connect with their past, understand their present, and envision a better future.

Poikayil Appachan played a significant role in organising the untouchables and leading them towards liberation from the shackles of casteism. Recognising the dire need for collective action and social change, he tirelessly worked to unite the marginalised communities and empower them to challenge the oppressive caste system. Appachan's first step was to create awareness among the untouchables about their rights and the injustices they faced. Through his songs, speeches, and public gatherings, he highlighted the inherent inequality of the caste system and the urgent need for solidarity and resistance. He actively encouraged the untouchables to unite, transcending the divisions imposed by the caste hierarchy. Appachan emphasised the importance of unity and collective strength in the face of discrimination, urging them to shed their internalised oppression and stand up for their rights, Appachan sings:

No, not a single is seen
 On my race
 So many histories are seen
 On so many races.
 There was no one on this earth
 To write the history
 Of my race in the olden days
 What a pity! (Appachan 17)

Appachan laments the historical lack of his community and is trying to evoke a historical consciousness through this song. Among the written testimonials of elite archives, the absence of the history of his race was devastating for him. So far, history has always portrayed the stories of warfare statecraft and the diplomatic relations of the upper strata. With the advent of colonial modernism, Appachan learned to read and write and recognized the horrendous situation in which his community The history of Kerala, while

narrating the stories of Perumal and Swaroopams and the royals who lived after that, failed to record the history of ordinary people who worked breaking their bones for the upper cast and were cast out from history. Ignoring the community while writing history is a cultural genocide, denying the existence of an active group engaged in the day-to-day lives of the society. The historical narratives neglected the existence of caste slavery that was prominent; after the arrival of European powers, the practice of slavery was enhanced to a new level of trade. The native elite class seized the opportunity to sell the lower castes. The lack of history summons the need to recollect the fragments of memories to portray the past. Cultural memory is connected to specific figures, images, symbols or rituals. A mnemonic energy recaptures the pictorial memory of a place, thing, or experience. Appachan sings:

They have enslaved us
Us as Paraya and Pulaya
And we were pushed down to the bottom of things
Beating and blows
And the other bodily tortures
Many couldn't stand it all for long. (25)

For Appachan, being a slave and the aftermath of suffering as an enslaved person left imprints in his and his community's memory. The pain endured by his kith and kin and his ancestors is well-drawn in the songs. Enslaved people never received the privilege to be human enough to possess some fundamental rights. Being an enslaved person itself is the denial of all human rights. Appachan vividly pictures the social situation of 18th and nineteenth-century Kerala. Sometimes, literature reflects a society where history and historical consciousness need more efficiency of inclusion. Appachan continues singing.

A tiny cup of paddy
For salt and tobacco
And the rest two cups for the day's meal.
In the month of meenam
There is nothing to eat
But it is more than mere fish
Need to till the land till dusk
Blows and kicks if taken a break
If answered back murder is certain. (25)

The lyrics are testaments of slave sufferings from the past. The song pointed out what is invisible to history. Hunger can be a memory; pain can be another, and hard labour and life-threatening moments are memories. The insurmountable traumatic memories of a group are Appachan's contributions to historical writing. History is embedded in literature, and historians need to extract the stories. Slave memories are incomplete without auctions and transactions., Appachan sings:

Father sold to one place
Mother sold another
Children were orphaned
Can the slave ever forget. (32)

Here, Appachan narrates the depths of slavery and the impacts it had on the enslaved families. Enslaved people bought and sold as if they were commodities, with labour as surplus value defining the proof of their animal existence. The agency which instilled the idea of subjugation was the caste religion ideology in the Indian- the Kerallite scenario. The Caste system enables the society to practice the inhuman slave trade for individual profit. The song recollects the past traumatic experiences negated in the historical narratives. The story of such slave transactions was there in the colonial records and church records, too, even though the historians ignored the possibilities or were unaware of the endless possibilities of reconstructing the history from all sorts of records possible, whether it is a diary or a memoir or the memory of a person or the memories of a community. The songs of Poikayil Appachan were one such way to explore history through literature. Literature is a reflection of society; while analysing the work, one can locate the period, the culture, and the tradition of a locale through the story and songs (written or oral). Appachan's poetic universe carries the pain and inequalities suffered by people in the 18th and 19th centuries. The agony of centuries left on the outskirts of the historical narrative was taken into account with the introduction of memory studies. Memory studies took a new dimension with holocaust discourses, written or unwritten, told or sung. Through commemoration, remembering the slave experiences recollected the painful past. The emergence of holocaust fiction was to keep the memories alive; the Diary of Anne Frank was such an example of how a community was tortured during war. The pain of Jews who were brutally ill-treated in the concentration camps carried individual memories, and in recollection, the suffering and pain

were mutual, forming a collective memory. Every Jew out there in the post-war period is occupied with several stories from their memories, and as they say, sometimes the truth is stranger than fiction; every Jew's stories within the camps were tearjerkers to humanity. Hence, oral storytelling gained momentum because those sufferings are undeniable to the records. The experiences of the people have become a significant component in forging history.

People are under historical amnesia when it comes to the slave transaction history of the Renaissance toiled soil of Kerala. Collective memory indisputably can shed some light on social amnesia. The subjective nature of memory lacks authenticity, whereas history is accepted at a certain level, even though it is open to interpretations and mutations. The enigma of history is under scrutiny regarding the authenticity and unreliability, the percentage of truth and deception, and the accuracy and inaccuracy beyond the theories. The difference between history and memory is that history is a document, and memory is to remember and recollect; remembering is an act carried out by the mind, a subjective one. Humans share the collective memory of a tribe, a family or a nation to remember the heroes for eternity. The past and written history are not the same thing. We cannot directly converse and engage with the past; narratives bridge the gaps as a medium. History deliberately ignored a category; whatever is written is presented as facts. Writing history was translating some evidence into a literary form and naming it "facts." The process extends to collecting the evidence, locating the chronology and the contextualization, and finally overlapping all the data by constructing history. Hayden White opines that historians can use a writer's tools to make history. White observes:

. . . what distinguishes "historical" from "fictional" stories is first and foremost their content, rather than their form. The content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator. This implies that the form in which historical events present themselves to a prospective narrator is found rather than constructed. (27)

III. CONCLUSION

Literature carries the qualities of history and history and vice versa. One is attributed as fiction, the other as an event. White uses the word "emplotment" to narrate a series of events in a story. Appachan does the same through the songs as a historian: narrates the experiences, and contextualizes and weaves the moments to construct a plot. White opines, "The story told is mimesis of the story lived in some region of historical reality, and insofar as it is an accurate imitation, it is considered to be a truthful account thereof" (27). Hence, the experiences of slavery have become part of the history of Kerala. Appachan is a unique figure in the renaissance phase of Kerala history because a commoner with minimal education understood the social inequities and fought against a robust system. A system that denied all sorts of freedom and rights to stand up against the abusive state, his modus operandi was to use the knowledge system. Conducted itinerant meetings, instilled the idea of freedom in the enslaved, and called for a revolution. The songs were not written or published during the early years, but they carried a folk texture that was easy for an illiterate group of ordinary people to understand. The oral songs paved the way to form oral history, which later ended up in academic circles as an undeniable part of Kerala history. The songs are the revolution of memory against the perpetrators of the erasure. His songs are recollections of slave experiences, which later shed light on the unacknowledged slave history of Kerala. History and memory cannot be the same; they can have parallel roads extending to infinity with infinite possibilities of interpretations. The disparities emerge from the subjectivity and ideology of the narrator. Hence, the future of history and memory are entangled in a way that creates endless possibilities for those still wandering in the peripheries of world history.

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