



From Slavery To Peasantry: Dalit Christian Quest For Human Dignity In Migration To Malabar

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Abstract: The peasant migration from the Travancore region to Malabar marked a significant social transformation in Kerala, India, during the first half of the twentieth century. This migration is commonly described as a movement of peasants in search of land. Most scholarly studies on this phenomenon have been conducted by researchers from economics backgrounds, resulting in a dominant narrative shaped by economic perspectives. However, a notable segment of the migrating population—slave caste communities, particularly Dalit Christians—has received little scholarly attention. This paper examines the Dalit Christians' quest for dignity as they migrated from a life of bondage to attain the status of peasantry. Based on ethnographic interviews and social memory, the author argues that the Malabar migration provided Dalit Christians with dignity and the status of peasants, in contrast to the conditions of enslavement they experienced in Travancore.

Key Words: Malabar Migration, Dalit Christians, Dignity, Slavery, Peasantry

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyzes the context of Dalit Christian migration from Travancore to Malabar in the twentieth century Kerala. The origins of Dalit Christians could be traced historically to the enslaved castes who joined Christianity during nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Migration of Dalit Christians was a calculated attempt for wresting freedom and dignity by breaking the cultural chains of slavery in Travancore that continued even after the legal abolition in 1855. This study is based on the analysis of social memory of Dalit Christian migrants in the Kottukappara and Parakkappara Catholic congregations in the Kannur district, gathered in the course of my field work in the above villages. The central question discussed in this paper is how Dalit Christians struggled for subsistence and human dignity in post-abolition phase of slavery in Travancore and how they laboured to establish a new life in the hill tracts of Malabar. I wish to investigate the experiences of the community from a critical social science perspective within the frame work of social justice and human dignity. This analysis would show how Dalit Christians asserted with determination, dignity as a right through their struggles in everyday-life.

During 1920s peasants of Syrian Christians community – the traditional Christians of Kerala with a higher caste status – from northern Travancore region of Kerala started to migrate to the eastern hilly areas of Malabar. This migration was aimed at securing cultivable waste lands that were in the possession of landlords of Malabar. This stellar migration movement gradually increased and reached in its peak between 1941 and 1951 and came to an end by 1970s when the cultivable lands were exhausted completely (Joseph, 2008). Since the late 1940s, lot of *Pulaya* – a predominant slave caste – Christian families from different parts of the present day Kottayam district also migrated to various places in Malabar. Existing studies on Malabar migration have been mostly focused on Syrian Christian migration, analyzing economic development brought about by

migration. Some other scholars have analyzed literary representation of migration. (Tharakan 1976; Joseph, 2002; Varghese VJ, Sebastian, 2002; Raj, 2003; Joseph, 2008; Joseph, 2011; Markose, 2017). The social and cultural aspects of Malabar migration is yet to be analyzed in detail. All these studies are about the migration of Syrian Christian community. These studies show that the entire course of migration was pioneered, determined, dominated and mostly benefitted by the Syrian Christian community. We are yet to have academic research on the experiences of Dalit Christian migration to Malabar from the late 1940's onwards. This paper is a modest attempt to understand the dynamics of Dalit Christian migration to Malabar.

Abolition of Slavery and Dalit Struggles for Human Dignity

Social memory of Dalits show that various practices related to slavery continued even in the early decades of post-independence period. The survival of several aspects of caste slavery in the mid twentieth century was a culturally sanctioned extension of slavery that harnessed Dalits labour perpetuating oppression, humiliation and indignation. Sanal Mohan points out that "In fact they (slave castes) were in intermediate stages between the abolition of slavery and their final evolution as free citizens" (Mohan, 2005: 105). In this context the struggles to attain a dignified life was a major challenge for Dalits. The struggles of Dalits against slavery signaled their desire for dignified existence in society. Dalit migration to Malabar beginning in the late 1940's was a major expression of this desire. However as Kaufmann et.al; affirms "any satisfactory conception of dignity should be able to explain the reality of its violation and should not be detached from concrete occurrences and interpretations in social life" (Kaufmann et. al; 2011: 2)

It is in this context that we have to situate the opinion of ninety two years old Parikkappalli Mathew, who recollected the typical terrible conditions in which his family lived in the 1940's. His family lived in Thiruvambady village near Muttuchira in Kottayam district.

"We were a family of enslaved *Kudiyans* (attached labourer) and we worked for Thiruvambady *mana*, a Brahmin landlord. We had neither land nor any other form of property. There were lots of other *Pulaya* families as their slaves other than our family... The *Pulayas* job was to look after the paddy fields, coconut plantation, and other farms of the *mana* and work for them grazing their cattle and live for them. There was no food to satisfy one's hunger at least once a day although one worked hard. Three measures of paddy was the running wages for the whole days' work. Sometimes the landlords would serve gruel in a plantain leaf which fixed in a small pit made on the ground. There would be some rice water and some rice sedimented at the bottom along with some pieces of boiled tapioca. This meal would be eaten by using spoon made of jack fruit. He recalled that he had eaten such meals for many years. All *Pulayas* were served meals like that... It was a time of severe poverty and hardship and they survived on fresh water fish in the paddy fields of Thiruvambady. Fishes, crab, oyster, wild taro, a variety of yam, wild jack fruit etc. sustained *Pulaya* lives. Thakara leaves were widely eaten by *Pulayas*¹.

In his analysis of the life and conditions of *Pulaya* agricultural labourers, Sociologist TK Oommen has observed that "The form of labour that evolved in the period after abolition is generally referred to as attached labour – the practice of the former slave castes remaining with the old upper-caste masters as labourers for a pittance" (Mohan, 2005:42). The settlement of *Pulayas* after the abolition of slavery was referred to as *Kudikidappu* even in official documents including Land Reform Acts. However, we need to observe that it was not just a pattern of settlement, it was a product of the historical evolution of agrestic slavery in Kerala that confined the slave casts to the small plots of land on which they could raise their huts.. The entitlement to this system *Kudikidappu* is incapable to represent slave caste life. The slaves continued the same pattern of dwelling even after the abolition of slavery because they did not own land or any other property. But the term entails the agency of this dwelling up on the slave castes, as they did not want to have a better life. Such a system benefitted the landlords as they could use the free or underpaid labour of Dalits as, Mathew recollected. This system was a humiliation to Dalits as it connotes their 'incapability' to own land. This term, *Kudikidappukar* was debilitating as it could not represent the slave castes' urge for freedom, desire to acquire land and achieve a dignified existence.

¹Peter Mathew, "Interview with Mathew Parikkappali," In *Interviews with Dalit Christian Elders of Kottukappara, Karikkottakkari and Parakkappara* (Unpublished Manuscript, 2018)

According to Mathew the slaves were living for the landlords, not for themselves. In a similar articulation Thamara Enhuber has shown the bonded labourers in India have expressed the same self-alienation. She notes the bonded labourers “have been left with little opportunity to design, live and become agents of their *own* lives, to nurture their relationships, to cultivate their roots, to develop and live their potentials, and to build up assertive community identities” (Enhuber, 2011: 200). An element of freedom that Dalits enjoyed was to choose the landlord with whom they could beg to be attached with and get permission to begin or continue such relations of submission to the landlords. In such a situation, when Syrian Christians migrated to Malabar they took along with them *Pulaya* families as attached labourers.

According to Avashi Margalit, humiliation is “any sort of behaviour or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured” (Margalit, 1966). The continued practice of serving meals in the pit dug in ground even after the abolition of slavery was a reminder of the days of slavery. Mathew recollects that he has eaten such meal for many years as he was working for landlords in Travancore. It is important to note that this practice was existed in Travancore even in 1960s (NDSP Interviews)². More importantly this is very much part of the social memory of the community that could be construed as ‘wounded memory’ of untouchability and indignation. The worst part of this episode is that the person who serves the gruel in the pit would have completed his duty and left the place much before the slaves reached the spot where meals are served. Most of the time crows would have eaten their portion from the served gruel. The slaves ate this meal because it was their only choice of food at work place. Dalits were living in a ‘vicious circle of poverty’; as the classic principle that Nurks explains. This poverty forced the slaves to eat any available edibles³. Mathew has narrated that “there was no food to satisfy one’s hunger at least once a day”. And it was the caste rules that denied to Dalits decent and healthy food. This lack of choice made Dalits to follow as Sanal Mohan points out quoting Bourdieu, the ‘taste of necessity’ (Mohan, 2015: 70-71).

The search and preference of Dalits for nonagricultural pursuits was an expression of their desire for attaining dignity. EJ Chacko Elanjimattathil recollects about his father who was staunchly opposed to undertaking *Adimappani* (slave work) instead he preferred nonagricultural works. He would do these works on a contract basis, so that he could stop the work whenever he wished so. (Interview chacko Ilanjimattathil). *Adimappani* (slave work) is a term that denotes work in slave-like circumstances including the sufferings, humiliation in getting wages, and struggles for subsistence even after a daylong work. Missionary historian WS Hunt portrayed this situation in 1920s as the slave work was “all day long and sometimes, when the moon shines, all night too”. He has also listed various chronic diseases caused by work in paddy fields (Hunt,). It was never possible to acquire and save cash from their daily wage works for the landlords. Because, they were paid in kind—raw paddy(rice)— not cash

Work in the paddy field was not considered a dignified act though it ensured the entire society was fed well; rice as a commodity even today signifies cultural value in Kerala society. The matured paddy fields are the symbol of prosperity of the land. Yet, people who owned paddy fields ensured that slaves who worked in the land and produced rice remain without dignity denoting a total absence of decency in the caste society. In fact the work done in paddy fields only brought prosperity to the upper castes and the state and it is often thought of as invaluable. But the upper caste entrepreneurs are claiming the credit for bringing new wetlands under paddy cultivation at the expense of the work done by the slaves. The best example for this theft of dignity is epitomized in the name of ‘Kayal Murickan’ who was an entrepreneur who invested capital in reclaiming thousands of hectors of land for paddy cultivation from backwaters in *Kuttanadu*, known as the rice bowl of Kerala. It was the *Pulaya* and *Paraya* slaves who worked hard for this very tough and dangerous accomplishment of land reclamation. In the classical Marxist theory, surplus value is thought to originate due

² In 2013, it was a surprising experience to listen to the emotional narrative of a Homeo doctor aged 50 plus, in which he shared his childhood experience of watching his father’s eating from a small pit made in the ground, at his work for a landlord.

³ See also, Report of Praxis intervention Research, Manjadikkari, But we can see in contemporary times people romanticize the food culture of Dalits in slavery as natural, delicious and medicinal.

to the exploitation of labour. In Kerala, the dignity of work which is also a surplus produced in the course of human labour is alienated from the slave workers along with the profit gained from unpaid work.

It was in this context the slaves searched for new works other than agricultural labour in the landlords' fields. Non-agricultural jobs on contract basis signified relative freedom for the worker to exercise their choice and wages mostly in cash. Non-agricultural works would often provide a possible escape from demeaning labour of an agricultural labourer. Contract work implies an assertion of worker's freedom against an oppressive social set up and a possible new self-image of the labourer. It helped Dalit assertion of dignity, the purposeful giving up of enslaving and humiliating situations that would ensure a dignified existence.

Migration as a mode of articulating Dignity

For Dalits, it was permanent leaving of the home land once migrated. The painful departure of Dalits in a "death like situation" (Interview Chacko Ilanjimattathil) was narrated by many informants, implied the uncertainties in Malabar due to the lack of sufficient capital and other social support. Dalits had to sell their small plots of land, to mobilize capital to, purchase land and settle down in Malabar. The entire money they gathered was to be spent on land purchase. Though the desire for freedom and dignity was the main factors for Dalits in this move, their determination that drove them was notable.. Dalit determination to migrate showed their critical consciousness to escape from the land of unfreedom and oppression and a possible future of liberation. They were ambitious, having a vision and imagination of a bright future. The narrative of Peter Mathew, aged 75, shows the determination of his mother Thresiamma. He recollected their migration as follows.

My mother had a great consciousness of freedom. I remember, in my childhood in Travancore she asked my father, "Why do we live here like this? If we stay here we can only foster *Neerakkans*, *Namboodiries* of *Thiruvambady Mana*, and *Plathanam Nairs*. (upper caste landlords) Would there be any benefit for our children? Why don't you try going to Malabar?" I have heard this many times. It was her dream for her children. She had been witnessing the sufferings of her parents and grandparents. She feared her children also would have the same fate (Interview Peter Mathew).

The importance of Thresiamma's determination is that her visionary suggestion evoked strong opposition from her father-in-law. But she secured her husband's good faith and he agreed to try Malabar. Oppositions to migration to Malabar generally emerged due to the uncertainties involved in migration. But in some cases the commitment to the landlord became unbreakable hindrance for Dalits. Peter Mathew remembers that his grandfather was a *Pulaya Mooppan* (Head man of the workers) who was committed to accomplish the task of farming the landlords fields every year and oversee the *Pulaya* workers for meager wages. He asked what would he tell the landlord and how could he leave the place after cultivating crops. For him Malabar was not a promised land but a land of forests that hold out extreme difficulties of survival. But the dreams of Peter Mathew's mother succeeded eventually above the opposition of the grandfather.

The discordance over the question of migration of this family was in fact between a Dalit Christian woman's imaginary of a good life and the false respect entailed in her father-in-law's dedication to the work for landlords. Her undisputable consciousness of freedom and the imaginary of a good life originate from the maternal love for her children. Her observation about Dalit community begins in childhood and concludes that the only beneficiaries of physical labour of Dalits are various landlords. She realized that the benefit of their labour should go to their children. Her father-in-law was guided by some false notions that made him dedicated to the landlord's work which prevented him from espousing a serious search for freedom and dignity. As a *Pulaya Mooppan* he had a 'respectable' position among Pulayas that in a way was recognized by the landlords too. But this 'recognition' is false because the landlords' actual intention was to increase their yield that the Mooppan guarantees. But ultimately this position underpins the smooth functioning of the system slavery even after abolition. By this false respect and false recognition, Dalits would shift their focus from the real problems to the responsibilities enforced on them by the structures of domination.

The determination of Dalits can turn to invincible power against oppression as we see in a serious setback that Peter Mathew's family confronted in Malabar. His mother proved this determination against a hostile intimidation offered against their survival in Malabar by a landlord. As a strong woman Thresiamma always showed courage to affirm her dignity as a Dalit and a woman. According to Peter Mathew his mother resisted the landlords who normally used dishonoring suffixes to the names of Dalits (Interview Peter Mathew). It was during the early 1950s that Peter Mathew's family approached Karakkattidam Nayanar, a powerful landlord to purchase land and they gave their entire savings, nearly Rs 120, to the landlord. The landlord authorized his manager to allot land. But a group of Syrian Christians threatened Peter Mathew's family and they said that the land in question was already being occupied by them and that the entire area was their property. Thus the purchase did not happen and when they went back to the landlord, he refused to return the money. Peter Mathew's mother was not willing to give up their entire savings and dreams. She gathered the entire family members and started sitting in front of the landlord's house. They continued this protest for two days and on the third day the landlord was forced to give their cash back. He also gave the group meals and saw them off happily. According to Paulo frère, the power springs from the situation of oppressed only can humanize the oppressed and the oppressor (Freire, 1993). This power of determination came from the poor Dalits' lived reality of no choice. This is how a situation of oppression creates counter power that can humanize the oppressor.

Reaffirming decency and trustworthiness in behavior have been important and acceptable form of Dalit assertion of dignity. This behavior is powerful enough to demand the same from upper caste landlords. In such cases of the relationship between landlords and Dalits has transcended the limits of landlord-slave relation to that of a patronage of the landlord. Landlords supported Dalits to own land in Malabar by trusting verbal contract deferring payment to a future date and pledging Dalit labourers to work for such landlords in order to pay the balance amount (Interview, Peter Mathew). This shows that self affirmation and trustworthiness of the oppressed people are important aspects of dignified existence.

Conclusion

The inhuman practices of Slavery in post abolition phase in Travancore have defused by the government entitlement and everyday labeling of the system as *kudikidappu*. Dalits underwent oppression, humiliation and a state of self alienation under slavery that continued even in the early decades of independence. In this system Dalit labour has been the pillars of prosperity and development of the state as well as the landlords. However the upper caste entrepreneurs have stolen the dignity of work along with the surplus value generated by the underpaid labour of Dalits. In this context Dalits asserted their dignity with determination of various sort. Many Dalits preferred to leave the demeaning labour in paddy fields and choose nonagricultural works on contract basis. Such a group of Dalits showed determination to refuse false respect and false recognition that the caste society thrust upon them to perpetuate their domination. The decision to migrate to Malabar among uncertainties was a search for new beginning as land owning peasants with a vision to secure the lives of their children and a dignified existence in society. It was the determination and desire for freedom that made Dalits survive in the hills of Malabar in hostile situation. The assertion of dignity has been visible in the lives of migrated, visionary Dalits in reaffirming decency that demanded the same from upper castes.

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