



Towards Class Consciousness: Role Of Communists In Transcending Traditional Caste Barriers In Malabar

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Abstract: This study has been undertaken to investigate the role communists in fostering class consciousness among the lower caste people in Malabar in the second quarter of the 20th century. Representational spaces that surfaced in Kerala by the 1930s significantly shaped public consciousness and bolstered communist ideology among the people. Work environments, tea shops, and reading rooms formed novel public spheres and fostered inter-caste interaction and thus, expedited the process of socialization. The presence of subaltern people rendered these spaces crucial for communists leaders, predominantly upper-caste Hindus, to engage with. Transcending caste barriers, upper caste-Hindus, utilizing these spaces, mingled with lower strata of society. Dynamic political interactions at these spaces, nurturing numerous friendships, infused class consciousness among subaltern groups, thereby bringing them closer to communism.

Index Terms - public sphere, communists, work spaces, subalterns, class consciousness.

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of novel social arenas such as tea shops, village squares, workplaces, and reading rooms significantly contributed to the socialization of the lower castes and shaped social relations in Kerala. The Communist Party unit of Kerala adeptly leveraged these spaces to contest prevailing narratives and cultivate their own venues for social transformation. Upper-caste leaders of the party, transcending caste and untouchability constraints, earnestly endeavored to integrate lower castes, who were largely excluded from mainstream social, ideological, and physical spaces, into the mainstream. Their deliberate interventions and engagements with subaltern groups utilizing non-formal spaces managed to bring the latter to the political realm. This paper delineates how the communists in Malabar capitalized on available representational spaces to reach out to the lower strata of society and thereby, inject proletarian class consciousness among the latter in the second quarter of 20th century.

Marxist class consciousness is the awareness by the working class (proletariat) of their shared economic and social position, a recognition of their collective power, and a unified understanding of their shared interest in overthrowing the ruling class (bourgeoisie). Marx believed that this self-awareness was crucial for sparking a socialist revolution to create a classless communist society. In the 1930s class divisions in Kerala were pronounced, though subjective awareness of them was slight. There were classes, but there was little class consciousness. Communal and caste was intense and because caste roughly coincided with class, agitation against caste disabilities was to lead the poor towards class consciousness. Robin Jeffrey argues that the matrilineal family system of caste-Hindus and the attendant system of extreme disabilities enforced against the low castes collapsed in the early 20th century. It created a deracine generation of caste-Hindus who was forced to seek remedies for the disruption and misery that daily confronted it, while increasing numbers of

law castes refused to submit to the restrictions that traditional society sought to impose. This situation of social turmoil contributes to the establishment of Kerala's vigorous, broad-based Communist Party in the late 1930s¹.

Jurgen Habermas, says that a public sphere is a domain of social life where public opinion is formed. It is made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state². Habermas explains how modern European salons, cafes, and literary groups contain the resources for democratizing the public sphere. The citizen plays the role of a private person who is not acting on behalf of a business or private interests but as one who is dealing with matters of general interest in order to form a public sphere. There is no intimidating force behind the public sphere but its citizens assemble and unite freely to express their opinions. The public sphere plays a crucial role in social transformation by providing a space for public discourse and debate.

Social space in pre-modern Kerala, was largely controlled by the rigid caste system, creating hierarchical divisions and spatial restrictions. Lower castes were largely excluded from mainstream social, ideological, and physical spaces, including public areas like markets and roads. This exclusion was maintained through control over spatial mobility and access to resources. Upper castes exerted control over space, including where people lived, worked, and travelled, reinforcing their dominance and limiting the mobility of lower castes. It is right to say that the missionary work in the nineteenth century among the lower castes sowed the seeds of protest against existing social system. The socio-reform movements which were launched by the native intellectuals and later by the English educated challenged the existing spatial restrictions and contributed to the emergence of new social spaces and interactions. The common spaces including markets, village squares, work spaces, tea shops, *vayanasalas* (reading rooms), which emerged as public spheres in the second quarter of the 20th century, enabled socialization for the proletarian classes with the aim of transcending caste differences and thus, played crucial role in shaping social relations and political culture of Kerala.

The formation of the Kerala unit of Communist Party of India towards the close of the fourth decade of the last century is a significant epoch in the social and political history of Kerala. The first file of communists realized the importance of the common spaces in taking communism to the masses. Unlike institutional spaces that are maintained and worked under rigid party guidelines, informal spaces enjoyed an autonomy that allowed them to create a broader network of people cutting across party differences. The main forms of communist propaganda are personal discussions, interaction with public at village and town squares and use of party's press and literature. Oral, person-to-person propaganda were carried out above all through systematically organized door-to-door campaigns by working groups established with that purpose³. Special care was taken to ensure that no dwelling in the reach of local party units was omitted. Every member, without making any negligence, took part regularly in this activity in one way or another. Taking full advantage of the newly emerged public sphere, they succeeded in actively utilizing public spaces where rigid caste rules were challenged and voices of the marginalised were asserted. Communists, thus, created new avenues for the subaltern classes for communication and public discourse.

The literate high-caste members who were already attracted to Marxism saw engagements with the peasant and labourers- most of whom belonged to the lower-castes- as being important to win their trust. For this, they were asked consciously to break those spatial practices that had defined traditional caste hierarchies⁴. The caste-Hindus visited the houses of the untouchables and before leaving the houses they never forgot to drink water from their houses and some even had food with them. The communists, thus, tailored their campaign strategies, messaging, and outreach efforts to effectively reach out to these outcastes and convert them into active supporters or sympathisers.

The distress relief operations carried out by the communist volunteers during the cholera and smallpox epidemics of the 1940s presented a favorable opportunity to get into the masses. Launching programmes, ranging from visiting the epidemic affected houses including those of the untouchables and distributing tablets to cleaning drives, they created a platform to get engaged with them. This type of interventions helped foster good rapport with those residing in *illams* and *taravads* of the elite, as well as *chettakudils* of the subalterns⁵. Even the spaces that arose from the rehabilitation zones, where families temporarily shifted their stay on account of the spread of epidemics, were promptly utilized for their political ends. The communists also managed to sustain and revitalize this relation by intermittently renewing their acquaintance and later, graciously invited them to *vayanasalas* and party events.

The communist strategy of communicating communism to the masses was executed through systematic programmes. Class and mass organisations were formed to address the concerns of the respective sections of the people. It was realized that ensuring the active participation of the people in the common movement was the best way to free them from petty-bourgeois inclinations. The presence of *namboothiris* among the communists, who challenging the orthodoxy dared to enter the subaltern spaces, embellished programmes under the red flag. During the time of the conference of Karshaka Sangham, a feeding organization of the party, communist volunteers got engaged in an initiative known as *pidiyari shekaranam* (collection of handful of rice) in Kannur. As part of it, party activists, including *Namboothiris*, paid visits to the houses of people including those of the untouchables⁶. The conspicuous and purposeful endeavors undertaken by the party's elite echelon had a pronounced impact on marginalized subaltern groups within the caste-ridden society.

Communist youths and women's organizations awakened the interest of many, who were uninterested in politics, in the activity of collective organizations, through their classes, reading groups, special trips, festivals, Sunday excursions, and so on. In this way, they could ensure their participation in the organization and in useful party works like distributing leaflets, newspapers, pamphlets, etc. Kunjakkama, the leader of the *Pullariyal* (grass cutting) strike in Kandakkai, North Malabar, who evaded authorities following the Kandakkai incident in 1947, took refuge at the residences of some party members. During this period, she utilized her accommodations to mobilize women in those regions through her instructional sessions and initiatives. Her caliber and the ability to influence other women resulted in a collective action of the peasant women⁷.

The gathering of the youths at the kavalas or crossroads, streets and markets was a potent factor to proselytize the youths. In the evenings, it was a habit for youths to gather in streets or squares in their localities after their works, engaging in discourses pertaining to their quotidian concerns. Discussions within them contribute to a sense of community belonging and shared identity, as people interact and find common ground or define themselves in opposition to others. U.A. Khader, one of the famous litterateur in Kerala and recipient of Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, notes a street in Koyilandy town, referred to as *Angadi Mukku* or *Viplava Mukku* by critics, which served as a gathering point for youths during the evenings⁸. The discussions and activities that unfolded on this street attracted numerous youths, including him to the party.

Work places also developed into vibrant spaces of discussions on divergent issues. In villages, the local shops of the *beedi* rollers were as important center as the local village library for radical discourse, particularly for the less erudite. In the *beedi* shops, someone literate used to read the daily newspaper aloud, and other *beedi* rollers listen attentively. It was usually read out by the party workers themselves. T.K.Hamsa, a veteran communist leader, in his earlier days, used to go to *beedi* companies and speak out loudly *Deshabhimani* and *Navayugam* to the workers⁹. Besides, novels were also read out to the workers and sometimes outsiders were brought to read them. C.Kannan notes that novels like *Thottiyude Makan* of Thakazhi, *Odayil Ninnun* of Kesava Dev, *Paavangal (Les Misérables)* of Victor Hugo, and *Amma (Mother)* of Maxim Gorky were brought to his *beedi* company¹⁰. In Alathur near Palakkad, a *beedi* worker used to take his son, a high school student, to his *beedi* shop for news reading for the workers¹¹.

The reading rooms, tea-shops, toddy shops, ayurveda shops etc. were new spaces that signalled and influenced a transformation in social relations. The libraries and reading rooms, ushered in a new space in the modern public sphere, shaped mini-publics in villages. The establishment of the *vayanasalas* can be considered as an inspiration for the young people for reading the better books during that era where books were not abundant in the villages. Literacy became an essential part of the KCSP and later CPI programme and thus, became an integral part of the new political culture of Malabar. The communist teachers of aided schools were those who acted as a catalyst agent in the foundation and permeation of *vayanasalas* across the villages. Besides their teaching at schools, they got engaged in the task of imparting knowledge to the illiterate at night classes. Abhinava Bharatha Yuvak Sangham and Youth League in north Malabar, which were politically oriented organizations with definite programmes of social services, were at the forefront of literary campaign as part of *vayanasala* activities¹². notably, under the leadership of a group of women there was a night school functioning in Anthur during 1945¹³.

Reading rooms, which were kept open between 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. so that labourers could read after their work, became the nerve centre of cultural activities of the respective localities where matters of social and political importance were discussed and debated. It was often here—in the local reading rooms—that later political leaders began their association with the cultural, literary and political institutions. *Bala Sanghams*, youth organizations, arts and sports clubs etc. were formed as part of *vayanasalas* and different games like football and other competitive matches were organized. The members of the clubs were given training in different art forms including plays, *kolkalli* etc. The plays written by Communists like K. Damodaran, Thoppil Bhasi, and others portraying the social, political, and economic conditions of the people were often staged under the aegis of the libraries, generating discussions and forming public opinions. Thus, majority of the *vayanasalas*, ushered in a new space in the modern public sphere, turned to be breeding grounds of communist ideologies.

Tea shops or *chayakkadas* functioned as vital public spheres, serving as spaces for social interaction and political discussion. Being spaces they necessitated interaction between the different castes. They belonged to a specific time period of Kerala's political history when communism and progressive ideals seemed attractive to the youngsters. George Woodcock observes that the little tea shops of Kerala in the mornings crowded with *coolies* scanning the newspapers or listening while others read them aloud¹⁴. The presence of *coolie* labourers made such spaces important for Communist leaders to tap into. They were non-formal centers of political education, where people came for tea but the newspaper reading and discussions and arguments continued even after the tea was done. The vibrant political engagements, ranging from everyday life issues to national and international politics, made many spent a lot of time at these left-leaning spaces. K. Madhavan writes about the Koman's tea-shop at Kanhangad which served as the "central office" of political activism and political discussions for the Communists¹⁵. They provided a common platform for people to meet and talk together irrespective of caste and religion and thus, fostered camaraderies among them.

Similar was the case of an *ayurvedic* shop run by Unniyeppan and Nottan Vaidyar in Mukkam near Kozhikode. The shop, where *Deshabhimani* (party mouthpiece) was accessible, served as a venue for dialogues on various subjects, particularly pertaining to the communist party. Toddy shops, or *kallu shaaps*, were places where people from all walks of life gathered after a day's work to relax. In fact, they served as informal spaces where everything under the sun was discussed—including politics, village gossips, arts etc. Talks on the speeches and activities of E.M.S.Namboothirippad and A.K.Gopalan and on Soviet Russia and China were matters of emotional experience for the workers¹⁶. These spaces, be it tea shops or toddy shops, offer a "third place" beyond home and work, where people can gather and form social bonds irrespective of caste and religion. Exploring the potential of these shops, communist party units tactically ensured participation of educated party members in these discussions which were instrumental in shaping class consciousness among the patrons.

It was the print that enabled the formulation and discussion of social and political issues and the mobilization of significant numbers of people around such issues. In Kerala, the social turbulence of the 20th century happened in a public sphere, which was made possible partly because of the spread of print, publishing and newspapers¹⁷. Newspapers changed from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion—weapons of party politics. The new representational spaces were provided with *Deshabhimani* and other party literature which were read out by any educated party men. The focal point at these spaces was the dynamic political discussions followed by the news reading. Besides fostering comradeship, the arguments and counter-arguments within the four walls of the proletarian spaces widened the narrow world view of the listeners and thus, became catalyst in the growth of proletarian class consciousness among the subalterns.

Conclusion

New representational spaces in Kerala, which constituted informal but vibrant associational spaces for the youngsters, predominantly male, had an extremely influential role in shaping the public consciousness and strengthening communist thought among the common people. The vital elements in propelling large numbers of men and women towards proletarian class consciousness was the utilization of emerging public sphere by the communists, large majority of whom were upper caste-Hindus who, making use of these spaces, served as a catalyst for the disintegration of traditional caste hierarchies by fostering interaction between individuals from different social strata. In Malabar, the expansion of social opportunities fostered a platform for

individuals to engage in open discourse on divergent issues and thereby, accelerated the process of socialization of the lower castes. The traditional, birth-based social hierarchy was replaced by economic and social standing. Attitudes and perspectives towards existing social and political institutions got transformed which facilitated the emergence of class consciousness among subaltern groups, thereby took them to the fold of communism.

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