

Complexities of Colonialism and
the Question of Affect:
The Problem of Caste Slavery in Kerala.

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Abstract

Affect and its ramifications in the context of caste slavery form the central concern of this paper. Certain narratives found in archival sources provide an entry into the emotional world of slave caste women analyzed in this article. It is argued that colonial intervention provided the context for the articulation of strong emotions and the desire to seek legal redress for continuing caste oppression and slavery.

Key words: Colonialism, Agrestic slavery, Domination, Hegemony, Missionary, Christianity.

Caste slavery of Kerala received global attention in the 19th century through the writings of the Anglican missionaries and the British colonial administrators who were influenced by the ideas of the abolitionists¹. In such writings the caste slavery that Dalit communities such as the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas and Cherumas had experienced historically was compared with the Atlantic slavery. It will be appropriate in this context to have some idea about the extent of slave population in Kerala in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the colonial period Kerala

was divided into three administrative units viz, the British Malabar, and the native states of Travancore and Cochin. The southern princely state of Travancore had as per 1836 census a slave population of 1,64,864 out of the total population of 1,280,663². In 1856 the Malabar region had 187,812³ slaves out of a total population of 1,602,914 while Cochin State had in 1854 more than 50,000 slaves owned by landlords and 6,589 owned by the government that together constituted one sixth of the total population.⁴ However, the native rulers were reluctant to accept any critique of caste slavery offered by the missionaries and the officials of the British Government. Finally they had to issue proclamations abolishing slavery in 1855 following the demands of the paramount power. Yet writing in 1872, seventeen years after the abolition of slavery in the native state of Cochin, the Diwan Peishkar observed that “that ordious form of modern slavery of which the Negroes are the subject, has never existed in this country”(Sic). He further asserted that “the slave castes of Cochin have existed from time immemorial.” Almost all statements on the slave castes whether taken from the writings on slaves of Travancore, Cochin or British Malabar refer to the fact that they have existed in Kerala from the very ancient past. However, many communities that are referred to as slave castes in the famous copper plate inscription of 849 CE were not slaves in the age of Tamil Classical Age when Kerala region was also part of ancient Tamilakam. It is quite possible that the beginning of caste slavery could have been a political development following the Brahmin migration and the expansion of their settlements. The documentary evidences available from 9 Century CE to 19th century CE provide irrefutable evidence for the existence of slavery of the untouchable castes. Another important point very much central to our inquiry is the prevalence of the practice of slave transactions that was well established all over Kerala. While most of these documents on slaves are on transaction of slaves within Kerala, historical evidences suggest slaves from Kerala reaching international slave routes particularly in the colonial period. While an inquiry into the history of international trade in slaves from Kerala is worth pursuing, the present paper is limited to the analysis of certain documents on lower caste slaves in the nineteenth century that gives interesting details of their experience of

colonial modernity. I wish to focus primarily on certain official documents on slaves in which we find the slaves emerging as legal subjects. Along with this I also wish to analyse some missionary reports and writings on slaves that focus on the life and conditions of the slaves in Travancore region of Kerala in which their humanity received greater attention, different from the government sources. In fact through these writings slaves emerged as individuals deserving love and compassion. By contrast, in the documents related to slave and land transaction, they appear for a different purpose; to be bought and sold by the landlords as commodities. As it is the case with the slave societies generally, in Kerala also, the upper caste landlords held the slaves in great fear and repulsion even though they had absolute power on the slaves. In order to situate lower caste slavery in its historical perspective we may discuss briefly agrestic slavery in Kerala.

Agrestic slavery and colonialism: A historical analysis

Although historians and other social scientists are generally reluctant to analyse the all-pervading nature of agrestic slavery in Kerala by using concepts such as slave mode of production, we wish to use the notion of slave mode of production to begin to problematize the history of agrarian slavery that prevailed in Kerala for at least ten centuries. In fact any study of agrarian society and its class structure in Kerala would show the widespread practice of the use of slave labour and the practice of slave trade. The three major forms of land ownership, Janmam, Kanam and Pattom were the chief modes by which slaves were also owned and transacted. Their labour was indispensable for the wet land rice cultivation as well as dry land farming. In places where lower caste slaves were not in plenty, the landlords used to have non slave lower castes as free labourers. Such a practice has been noted in the agrarian society right from the 12 century CE onwards. It has been noted that the Brahmin settlers could produce substantial agricultural surplus between 7th and 12th centuries due to the labour provided by the slave castes. When Kerala polity was divided into petty principalities after 12th century under the sway of local chieftains drawn mostly from the upper caste Nairs, the agrarian production was carried out by the lower caste slaves. The documents of the major landowning families of Malabar region published so far provide insights into the structure of

agrarian production that was based on slave labour. The situation was not different in the native states of Travancore and Cochin.

The slave transaction documents of Travancore and Cochin testify to the fact that sale and purchase of slaves used to take place without any hindrance in the native society until the intervention of the Anglican missionaries in the late 1840's. In the native states of Travancore and Cochin in addition to the upper caste Hindu landlords, Syrian Christian landlords also owned lower caste slaves. There were slave markets among other places in Cochin, Kottayam, Changanassery, and Anikkat. It has been noted that Church buildings were used to hold slaves on week days as noted in the context of Cochin. The price of able bodied male, female, and children varied from place to place. Similarly their wages also differed; they worked for a pittance of two Edangalis(two measures) of paddy for men and one for women. Generally children and the elderly were never paid anything as they were never thought of as capable of performing productive labour. In addition to such exploitation the sale of slaves without any consideration of kinship often led to break up of families that made stable families almost impossible for the slave castes. The narratives of slaves available in the missionary writings show that slaves used to be sold—father to one place, mother to another and children to various other destinations—without any consideration for the emotional aspects of the people thus separated. In addition to this, there are accounts of how the landlords used to break families and choose spouses for the slaves according to their will and pleasure. Similarly, there were marriages of slaves generally orchestrated by the landlords who wanted the slaves to procreate more so that they got more hands to work in their fields. The oral tradition of the slave castes across Kerala, in fact, reiterate the emotional aspects of such forced separations, marriages and ill treatments, humiliation and miseries suffered by the slaves.

While the everyday life of slaves presented a picture of oppression at the hands of the landlords, colonial law supported the practice of slave labour by registering slave transaction documents legally. Such registration of slave transactions continued well into the 1830's. The colonial intervention to abolish slavery in India was part of the larger

effort of Britain to abolish slave trade globally in which they themselves had played a substantial role. Without going into the detailed history of the abolition of slavery in Kerala—British Malabar and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin—we may say that one of the lasting effects of it was the possibility of structural changes in the position of slave castes in the agrarian society. Although not immediately successful, it created a situation for the evolution of wage labour in the agrarian sector, that would eventually transform the slaves into wage labourers. Another possibility was the emergence of at least a class of marginal peasants from the slave castes if not peasants with any greater land holding as there continued to exist upper caste hegemony on land preventing even the emancipated slaves from owning land. It may be appropriate here to recall the fact that traditional pattern of land ownership that was an exclusive privilege of temples, Brahmins and Nair households, prevented the untouchable slaves from owning land. Although by late nineteenth century there were changes in the pattern of ownership following the pattom proclamation of 1865, we do not find untouchable castes acquiring land in any substantial manner. However, we come across reference to amazing stories of former slaves such as Pathrose Puthuparambil of Kangazha, near Kottayam, who owned twenty-five acres of land through their own efforts; he also became leader of the slave community and instrumental in inviting British missionary Henry Baker Jr. to start the congregations of slave castes. From 1843 onwards in Malabar and from 1855 onwards in Travancore and Cochin, several laws were introduced making roads, markets, government offices and courts of law accessible to the slave castes. This in fact may be construed as an example of making available spaces of citizenship to the slave castes. At the same time there are evidences that suggest the resolve of the slave castes to avail legal redress to some of their longstanding woes as several forms of oppression including physical torture for the alleged violation of the norms of distance pollution that continued to mar the everyday life of the slave castes even after slavery was formally abolished in 1855. Right from the middle of the 19th century many slaves who joined the Church Missionary Society began to use the public roads as they thought themselves to be no more polluting. However, there were several

occasions when such teachers from the slave castes were forced to leave the roads for the upper castes, lest they pollute the latter and therefore they had to wade through muddy paddy fields or pass through bushes. Such contests over the public space became a major problem from the mid nineteenth century onwards. It was in fact through such experiences that the slave castes began to articulate a new critical consciousness and started to consider their social conditions differently from what they were accustomed to. It is necessary here to reiterate that slave castes did possess critical consciousness as evidenced in their oral tradition against oppressor castes which was drawn from their 'common sense'. However, the colonial intervention created new spaces that made possible the further articulation of the critical consciousness of slaves. One may also mention here the sustained campaign of Protestant missionaries in Travancore and Cochin against caste slavery. The most significant moment of which was the submission of a memorandum to the Maharaja of Travancore signed by twelve missionaries of the Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society. Elsewhere I have argued that the missionaries provided the most rational argument for the abolition of slavery. They argued that slavery was in fact a very costly form of labour as it prevented the masses of slaves from acquiring new and varied skills. The campaign of the missionaries against slavery introduced new categories of thought, religious and secular, to the slave castes that included ideas of freedom, equality, dignity, salvation, cleanliness, revelation, good life, human worth, community, congregation, and Christian prayers. We may also mention here the new discipline that the slaves began to acquire as thousands of them joined the Christian missions by the end of the nineteenth century. One of the significant things had been the introduction of new bodily practices, mode of dressing, new ways of building their huts, organizing the interior of the house and keeping the their surroundings clean. In the missionary writings slaves emerge as suffering human beings deserving compassion. In the missionary writings their body and soul appear as mortified and we come across narratives of such horrible experiences as beheading, drowning, chaining, maiming, breaking of families, whipping, and escaping to the wilderness only to be eaten by animals, and suicides.

Amidst these horrible experiences we also observe the development of qualitatively different relationship among slaves, within slave families, that in a way turned against the norms of caste slavery. I wish to state that colonial modernity provided the context for such a qualitative transformation. We will analyse these issues first by critically reading some documents of the mid nineteenth century belonging to the native state of Cochin and subsequently some writings of CMS missionaries.

A Slave Mother in Search of Daughters

In spite of the endless stories of breakup of families through slave trade and resultant separation, towards the mid nineteenth century we come across examples of motherly love rearticulating and making a search for the daughters who have been separated through sale and deceit by a Nair landlord with the connivance of the officials of the native estate of Cochin. It is noteworthy to observe that the incident of abduction of the Cherumar women was reported in a petition submitted by their mother Kally to the Magistrate in Cochin on 30th May 1850. According to the petition they, Kally and her daughters Ponnamah and Poomatha had fled from the ill treatment of masters who belonged to the territory of the native state of Cochin. They took refuge in British Cochin and after having resided there for two months the master of her daughters came to the British Cochin and threatened to take them back as the master claimed the daughters to be his “bought slaves”. Having sensed the danger, the mother petitioned the Joint Magistrate who directed the local officials to see that they were not taken away by their former master. However the Nair landlord met the Diwan of Cochin at whose intervention the Magistrate sent back the two daughters of Kally on a charge of theft. Soon after Kally approached the British Magistrate pleading and praying that her daughters may be released and restored to her. The charge of theft proffered against the slave women by the Diwan made easier their seizure from British Cochin. The Magistrate of British Cochin actually doubted the entire story of theft. In spite of the positive attitude of the British Magistrate the case went against Kally and her daughters and the latter were sent back to their former master who used to “ill-treat them in various ways.” The mother once again approached the Joint Magistrate of the Company in

Cochin. The Joint Magistrate through the Diwan of Cochin was informed by the Samprathy Menon of Trichur that the slave women were sick and unwilling to come down to Cochin. The Diwan asked the local official to get their deposition if they were unwilling to travel to Cochin. Meanwhile the magistrate had received the message that one of the slave girls had already returned to Cochin and deposed that her sister would return if she could and requested an immediate enquiry. The follow up action of the officials of the Cochin state on account of the pressure exerted by the British officials, the other girl was also send back to Cochin along with a peon and she was also accompanied by a brother of the master to take her back if she was willing to go back to the master. However, the girl expressed the Joint Magistrate her desire to remain with her mother in the Company territory and was “delivered over to the care of her mother”

Having stated the story I wish to explore the possibilities that the narrative offer to a historian. I wish to state that the intention here is not to recover the voices of the slave women that are stifled in the correspondences between the officials of the Company Administration in Cochin and the officials of the native state of Cochin. The intention here is to work through the archive to understand the specific practices of slavery as they existed. This would enable us to write a possible history of the experiences of slavery from the perspectives of slave woman. In fact from the original complaint filed by Kally to the final moment when the second daughter was “delivered to the care of her mother” there was a span of eight months that witnessed several communications between the officials of the Company and the native state of Cochin. I wish to consider the possibilities such documentation has thrown up for understanding the agency of slave women in the mid nineteenth century that was not available to them earlier. We may also note here that the agency of slave women was perhaps made possible by the abolition of slavery in British India in 1843 that gave the Cherumar slave woman to escape to the Company territory and retain their freedom after escaping from the oppressive landlord of Cochin. This event is far more well documented than several other official accounts of lower caste slaves. Another interesting point is the singular absence of slave men in the narrative. We do not come across the father

of the young women/ the husband of Kally. Was it a case of breakup of the family in the context of the sale of slaves that erased the presence of their father? It may not be easy for us to get information on this as the documents mentioned do not shed any light on such issues. It may not be out of context here to recall the narrative of another slave woman, named Kali, who was sold to a European captain of a ship in 1828 and was supposed to accompany him to Java. However, she failed her courage and escaped from him and hid somewhere in Cochin and appeared in the CMS mission compound and pleaded the missionaries Mrs. and Mr. Ridsdale to save her. After much pleading she was eventually admitted to the compound, baptized as Lucy and lived there as a devout Christian. What is striking here is the fact that the missionaries noted this as the first ever 'joining' of the mission by a slave caste person. This decision was entirely hers.

Another important aspect of slave life that emerges here is the intimacy that is shared by the individuals, Kally, Ponnamah and Poomatha. This intimacy and the possibility of nurturing it is really significant as it was sustained against several odds. In the oral tradition the separation of husband and wife, parents and children are narrated in a heartrending manner. We hardly come across songs that celebrate family reunions. Probably in the historical example of Kally and her daughters, colonialism provided the context for rearticulating the affective dimensions of their life. Moreover, Kally emerges as a caring mother who made use of the avenues of colonial law to acquire their freedom. For their part the colonial officials were serious about restoring the freedom of the slave women. Such situations in fact make the colonial policies very complex.

I may give here another narrative from the early twentieth century sources. Forced separation of the family remained part of the slave sublime still available to collective memory in the early decades of the twentieth century. For example, the journal, the Travancore and Cochin Diocesan Record for the year 1912 carried the story of an ex-slave named Kumaran who was more than eighty years of age at the time he recalled the following events. Kumaran was undergoing missionary instructions but had not yet been baptized. He used to visit the church occasionally and had problems

with walking. He also could not remember things properly. However, he described how he was sold at the age of 10 or 12 for 14 rupees from Pandalam in the south of Kerala by a Muhammadan from Kanjirappally to a Nair, the forefather of his current master in the plantation district. He recalls his harsh experiences to the missionary including how he worked for different masters and also describes the extent of his sufferings⁵.

The oral tradition of the slave castes available in Kerala show that desire for family and affective dimension of life were very much central to their social memory. We may note that in the example of the slave women we come across an instance of slave women asserting their rights and possibly freedom to use the legal means to resolve the oppression of caste slavery. Can we think of this as a possible route to citizenship? Elsewhere I have argued that struggle against slavery was fundamental for Dalit to claim citizenship in Kerala. However, there is a disconnect between slavery, its abolition and the emergence of citizenship in Kerala which was largely due to the denial of slavery in the reigning historiographies of Kerala.

Slaves Responding to the Severity of labour Exaction

Moving away from the possible staking of claim as citizens by the slave women we may now turn our attention to nine Pulaya slaves whose violent act was recorded in a letter addressed to Lieut. General Cullen, British Resident of Travancore and Cochin by the Diwan of the native state of Cochin. The Diwan reports the killing of a Brahmin Kariasthan (manager) of a Namboodiri landlord of Cannaiyanoor District of the native state of Cochin by nine Pulaya slaves. Of the nine, they could apprehend six who confessed the crime. Others were at large and the Government offered a sum of Rs 40/- as reward for capturing them. The slaves stated that they killed the manager due to the “severity of the labour he has been exacting from them and the smallness of the hire he had given them in return” The above event took place on June 20, 1857. The severity of labour has been a recurrent theme in the slave narratives that are available in the missionary writings on lower caste slaves in the Travancore region of Kerala. The severity of labour was not much different in other parts of Kerala too.

We may go little bit more into the details. Most slave transaction documents from Kerala would begin with the phrase “Sell, you may sell.

Kill, you may kill” indicating the absolute power the slave owners had on slaves bought and sold. The slaves were forced to perform the most tiring jobs in the rice cultivation—fixing the breach of bunds, raising blocks of silt from the bed of back waters and rivers for reclaiming paddy fields, watching the crops in the night—for a pittance. They had to perform this even as rice never formed their major diet even during the harvest season as wages were very meagre. In many places in the wet land tracts the landlords used to sacrifice the slaves for fixing the breached bunds. Such practices have been very widespread even in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, we have information from the wet lands of Travancore and Cochin the practice of yoking slave caste men and women along with oxen to draw the plough. There have been several cases of slaves being chained after a day’s tiring work. What could have been the responses of the slaves to such extreme forms of cruelty? As could be expected many of them used to run away from oppressive landlords and hide in the jungles and inaccessible small islands in the backwaters forming little maroon communities. In the mid nineteenth century writings of the missionary Henry Baker Junior we come across references to the Pulaya slaves living in the jungles as they had run away from the upper caste landlord. In the course of the field work in a village near the small town of Mallappally in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala we heard the narratives about a small paddy field named “Vettu Kandam” where the Nair landlords used to behead the Pulaya slaves. The sword used for beheading is still kept in a small shrine built on their compound to propitiate the malevolent spirits of the killed slaves who returned to the world of assassins unleashing vengeance on them. Today, in order to appease the malevolent spirits of the murdered slaves the assassins are worshipping them. There is an annual feast day when the sword is taken out of the small sanctorum where it is ritually installed and taken as a procession in the neighborhood for veneration. In fact, in the wetland tracts of Kuttanad in Travancore there are several such shrines in which malevolent spirits of lower caste slaves are worshipped.

The incident of the killing of the kariasthan of the landlord could be viewed as a rare event. The official report of the incident in fact refers to the severity of labour and the lack of wages to compensate it as the

main reason for the killing. Probably the slaves were aware of the abolition of slavery in 1855. Towards late nineteenth century incidents of violent clashes between the Cherumar slaves and Nairs have been reported from North Malabar. Apart from such incidents we are yet to know about any organized revolt or mobilization of slaves in Kerala as happened in the case of many historical slave holding societies. However, 'weapons of the weak' kind of responses have been noted as the predominant mode of resistance to caste slavery in Kerala. In spite of this we have references in folklore as well as in local narratives stories of heroes of the slave castes who had effectively challenged the violence unleashed by upper caste landlords. The incident of killing the despotic agent of the landlord mentioned above points to the particular politics that was developing in the wake of the abolition of slavery that showed the critical understanding that the slaves had been developing even amidst sever oppression. However, they failed to evolve large scale resistance movements in the absence of such a politics. The anti slavery politics that developed out of initiatives of the missionaries would definitely disapprove of such acts of slaves that would be referred to as crime. Probably because of such complexities the disconnected events of slave's violent mobilization never went beyond their depiction as violent 'criminal acts'. However such 'criminal acts' made the officials of the state to admit that conditions of labour was 'severe' as against the earlier notions of slave labour as a practice which was 'time immemorial' and normal. We may read into such events the desire of the slaves for liberation, however inchoate the idea of liberation had been.

Coming of the Missionary Christianity and the Narratives of Slavery

In the following sections we shall analyze how the Protestant missionaries in the Travancore region of Kerala tried to understand the world of slaves that was changing. It will be instructive in this context to see certain observations of the Parayas given by one of the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society in the mid nineteenth century. According to him, the Parayas were the property of their upper caste owners. These owners had supreme control over their slaves including as mentioned earlier, the power to sell and kill the slaves. This economic power and domination coming

out of the control of land and the labouring slaves enabled the upper caste landowners to perpetuate their hegemony in which ownership and control of slaves was important ritually and economically. While economic significance of slave labour is obvious the ritual significance emerges out of the fact that the ideology and practice of caste legitimized by Hinduism perpetuated the upper caste control over the slaves.

I wish to refer to a particular event from the everyday experience of slavery that helps us to understand the question of domination over the slave castes. It also shines on the religiosity of slaves who joined the missions. One of the missionaries observed the case of a 'recalcitrant' slave boy owned by a wealthy Syrian Christian master. The boy used to be 'so disobedient and headstrong' that he used to be taken to the master's house every day where the master would give him fifteen whacks with a cane especially kept for such purposes. The master would claim it as a treatment to set him right. The master felt that the boy had changed substantially after his conversion although he could not even guess how it happened. The master gave the missionary 'some interesting particulars of his present good character' which are not stated in the text by the missionary. Hearing this, the missionary responded by saying that 'the things thus revealed unto babes are often hid from the wise and prudent'⁶. What the missionary and the master wanted to state here was the disciplining effect of the Gospel which was extremely powerful and that it touched the heart of the boy transforming him. The internal negotiation that might have taken place in the mind of the boy remained as elusive as ever. It is this negotiation that is valid when one thinks about the transformation that he had undergone. This is sequel to the way the boy was characterized before he joined the mission as 'headstrong and disobedient'. Both the missionary and the master spoke from their dominant positions but aware of the new mentality that the slave boy or people like him began to have. The missionary refers to it as a privileged position that was revealed to those with a heart of the 'babes' but remained opaque to the 'wise and prudent' disarming the arrogant master. These incidents are recounted here to show how the prevailing social structure traumatized the low caste slaves.

I shall quote here another source that provides interesting information

that is relevant to a discussion on the religiosity of the slaves. In the course of the conversation that Rev. George Matthan, a very prominent native CMS missionary had with a Paraya slave. He understood that the Paraya informant ‘believed in the existence of one Supreme Being, the original cause of all things but was unable to comprehend how the government of this vast world could be carried on by him without the assistance of subordinate agents.’ During the short span of time of their conversation the missionary endeavored ‘to correct the Paraya informant’s views on this and other important subjects’ and to impress upon him the notion of the exceeding love of God to men in giving up his only beloved son for their redemption⁷. We do not get further information on what must have been the Paraya informant’s ‘views on this and other important subjects.’ Conceptions of divinity that the Paraya informant had are significant when we try to understand their world view in the context of modernity.

Another missionary narrated the conversation he had with a poor slave from the jungle through an interpreter. The conversation was on the concept of the Holy trinity. Although he understood that there was only one God, he could not follow the concept of holy trinity as he thought the concept was referring to three Gods. Finally, the missionary left it to the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth to him⁸. The missionary explained to him about the love of Christ whose name the latter had never heard of. But according to the missionary the slave appeared much struck by the love of Christ. Meanwhile a few more slaves came to the missionary and he ‘took all of them to the boys’ school and let them hear the slave’s hymn sung at which they were all pleased’. The reference to the love of Christ and slaves listening to the slave hymn are significant here. The slave hymn celebrates the redeeming love of Christ for the slaves which was very effective in slave congregations⁹. In fact the slave hymn effectively used the oral tradition of the Dalit communities in which the emotional aspects of slave life have been kept alive.

The missionary told the slaves in the course of their conversation that baptism required some trial of their sincerity and testing of their learning¹⁰. Baptism signified for the slaves a fundamental reorientation of their lives. They were being asked to reflect on their lives and actions

from a Christian perspective of sin and redemption. The missionary asked them if they would send their children for further studies and they all expressed their willingness to do so. He went on to ask them to work for him in constructing the school shed¹¹. This, according to the missionary, was for making a decent place of worship for them. He promised to give them what they wanted if they promise to give him what he needed. The slaves were enthused and agreed to do whatever they could for him¹². The will of the slaves and its autonomy become pronounced in such contexts. We can see from their actions that they were trying to change themselves according to a new social vision that they had projected for themselves. Learning became central to the social vision of both the missionaries and the slave castes. In this context it will be interesting to analyze the observation of the missionary, Koshi Koshi, that among the lower castes the slaves were most willing to learn and ready to understand the knowledge of God. He refers to one of the slaves who was studying under him and who was of 'dear character'. Although much injured and annoyed by his Nair landlord he remained 'firm and clear in his view of the Gospel and is spreading the knowledge of truth among his fellow slaves¹³.'

Similar observation has been made by another missionary working in Alleppy region. He had observed that:

- » the Gospel was making rapid but silent progress among slaves. Although their
- » trials, discouragements and poverty are great and various yet their firmness in
- » their profession, contentment with their lot, their meekness and humility, their
- » attachment to the ordinances of God can in no way be accounted for but as
- » illustrative of the existence and power of divine grace in them¹⁴.

The 'rapid progress' of the Gospel was achieved through resistance to the severe opposition from the upper castes towards the lower castes learning the Gospel and eventual baptism. But at the same time those who joined the missions become meek and humble and stayed firmly in their profession

of faith. They managed these contradictory situations by staying firm in the faith and committed to the new social imaginary that they were able to develop through their interactions with the missionaries. Similarly one needs to probe the question of their humble position and meekness which was reminiscent of their situation in the traditional hierarchical caste society. The Christian virtue of meekness and humbleness should appear to them fundamentally different from the effect of domination that they had to undergo in the traditional structure. In the traditional society they were coerced into meekness through the exercise of upper caste hegemony. The inner transformation of the slave castes that joined the missions through the disciplinary effects of Christian teachings made them humble. Notions such as 'sin' had played a crucial role in effecting such changes. Similarly one could identify the otherworldliness and extremely conservative understanding of the notion of salvation that made the poor slave caste people further meek draining off the subversive dimensions of their new religiosity. At the same time one could argue that the meekness that was observed in the character of slave caste Christians were different from their historical powerlessness as imposed by the caste structure. In the new circumstances the emphasis given to salvation of the soul made them meek and worthy of heavenly blessings. It is in this manner that one could understand the different meanings of meekness of slave castes before and after their engagement with Christianity. The attitude of otherworldliness had pronounced effects on Dalits who joined the missions that made them more comfortable with resolving social contradictions by taking refuge in the spiritual realm. The disengagement of some sections of Dalit Christians in Kerala with the public sphere in the twentieth century might have resulted from this particular situation. This is more so in the case of those Dalits who are with Pentecostal Churches. However, such a mentality is visibly present among Dalit Christians irrespective of denominations. This is largely because of the multiple marginalities that they experience in Church today.

The clash of the worldviews of missionaries and the slave caste people who joined the missions was evident in many practices of the latter. An example of this is to be found in the recollections of a missionary with

a slave named Choti, “a very intelligent and a leading man among the slaves” who died in August 1856.

He was from the very beginning in the habit of regularly attending the services and receiving instructions and had made an admirable progress in the knowledge of Christianity. He refused, however, to come forward to be baptized from the circumstance of his having two wives, neither of whom he was inclined to divorce. His being a priest among the ‘heathen slaves’, an office hereditary in his family and deriving considerable income from their stated and voluntary offerings, was another impediment in the way of his formally embracing Christianity. The last time when the missionary was in the school, Choti expressed his hope that he would not consider him to be a nonbeliever from his delaying to be baptized and stated that his sole motive in their activity was his desire to bring more of his fellow caste men to the knowledge of the truth; for his influences would be lost among them if he entirely separated from their community by baptism. The missionary was at a loss to form an opinion of his state of mind during the sickness, as within a few days from the catching of the disease a severe kind of jungle fever, he had lost his consciousness.¹⁵

Despite being regular in church attendance and receiving instructions Choti did not come forward to be baptized. But at the same time Choti did not want the missionary to consider him an unbeliever. Moreover, the missionary himself admits that he had made considerable progress in knowledge of Christianity, something that they considered essential to the new claims that the slave castes were making. While continuing with his traditional practices of ‘witchcraft’, he was equally concerned with the new notions of Christianity that he had imbibed. In other words, he betrayed ambivalence as far as his religious perceptions and practices were concerned; this is not unusual in the case of Christianity among indigenous people in other parts of the world¹⁶.

Choti, according to the report of the missionary, did not want to lose contact with the people of his community who have not become Christians. Hence, he remained without baptism but at the same time he hoped that he would not be considered nonbeliever¹⁷. It may be that he did not feel “sinful” as he continued to attend church regularly. More than

this, he may have felt that, as he had not severed connection with them, he would be able to influence his people who have not yet become Christians and bring them to the knowledge and truth. He was a liminal person, in Turner's terms. As Victor Turner has pointed out "the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ("threshold people") are necessarily ambiguous since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial." It may be suggested that the liminal position appeared liberatory to the protagonist of the story; it may have given him some amount of freedom and equality vis-à-vis missionary judgments¹⁸.

Learning and the changing social world

The number of those who could read and write was increasing. It was also pleasing for the missionaries to record that the grants received for education indirectly helped evangelical work, because those who had been taught were generally diligent in teaching others and they read the word of God to their 'heathen' friends and relatives with the result that they often succeeded in bringing them to the Church of Christ¹⁹. But at the same time there were imbalances in the facilities available for the education of Dalit Christians compared to the Syrian Christians within the CMS. It has been reported that in some of the slave schools owing to the extreme poverty students were unable to attend regularly although they have been taught reading and writing. But at the same time the upper caste students regularly attend the schools for them run by the mission. In his annual letter, the Rev. George Matthan, the missionary in charge of the school expressed his fear that if the necessary support for the education of slave caste children were not forthcoming that would defeat the very objectives with which those schools were established²⁰.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century this trend changed qualitatively as there was some improvement in the enrolment of low caste children in schools. This period signified the slave caste people receiving minimum literacy that enabled them to read. The CMS missionaries in Travancore right from the mid nineteenth down to the

early decades of the twentieth century especially in the phase of the “mass movement,” were still confronted with similar problems in training the children of the slave castes. They felt that in order to raise the converts no effort is more powerful than the boarding school. Transfer the children from their miserable, insanitary and often vicious surroundings and educate them in a Christian environment and with Christian discipline and instruct both boys and girls which is the effective means of moral and spiritual elevation. Varied training included technical agricultural as well as intellectual²¹. It may be observed that qualities such as clean surroundings, discipline and the general presence of moral alertness and spiritual upbringing provided Christian characteristics to the boarding school environment. According to the narratives of the missionaries these were precisely what slave caste students lacked in their home environment.

A visiting missionary to a congregation was astonished to see ‘such a large and interesting company of slaves flocking our school in so clean and neat dress as on this occasion’. The missionary expressed his ‘high opinion of cleanliness and told them to learn to wash their cloths hereafter²². Similarly right from the beginning of the mission work both the CMS and LMS missionaries from various parts of Travancore used to report on the habit of the lower castes of eating carrion. But by early twentieth century the missionaries began to feel that ‘now no one approach’ the carcass of a dead animal.²³ The moral vigilance and discipline of the missionaries was such that ‘any failure of good conduct on the part of our people is at once noticed about and made a matter of public reproach, as inconsistent with their high profession²⁴ All these changes were prerequisites for the effective articulation of their demand for equality. In fact access to social space depended on the social worth that the slave castes were able to acquire by adopting the new practices discussed above that ultimately objectified the untouchable body as a cleansed object.

Discipline and Conviction

In this section we briefly deal with certain narratives of slave caste individuals who joined the missions and symbolized the transformation that missionary Christianity and colonial modernity brought about. We try to understand this by following the career of the first slave caste individual

who was baptized by the CMS missionaries in the Travancore region of Kerala. His name was Thewatthan , and was christened as Abel in 1854. According to the missionary the ‘seed of the word of God took deep root, and bore fruit’ in the case of Abel. That was exemplified in the uncompromising moral ground of conviction and faith he showed. This diligence, that was exercised by him continued till the last moments of his life. While in his deathbed he expressed the desire to see the Nedungadapally Church coming up afar where the slaves also had membership and for which he and his people have contributed money. “Feeling that his end was near he asked to be carried to the top of the Kaippatta hill so that he might see this ‘new house of God’ at Nedungadapally, about two miles away, before he died. On the top of the hill they raised the old and dying man in their arms and seeing the distant church he thanked God and died in peace.” This is a clear example of the desire of this man to achieve equality within the Church although the later history does not validate such an expectation²⁵. It is remarkable to note that in describing in a very detailed manner the hopes, trials and sufferings of the slave castes as authentic experiences, the missionary discourse projected a model for precise social action. The sufferings were described both at individual and social levels, focusing on the problems involved in them. At the individual level detailed descriptions of the everyday life of the slaves are given in the narratives that foreground the slave as an individual who undergoes countless experiences of oppression²⁶. At the social level it was sought to describe the webs of the social relations in which the slaves were placed as labourers in agricultural production, and as commodities to be exchanged by the masters.

Conclusion

Colonialism transformed the slave castes of Kerala in many ways—the intimate spheres of family, bodily practices, huts they lived in, dress they wore and the food they ate—that witnessed violent responses from the oppressor castes. Similarly, there were contests over social space and physical space that assumed serious proportions by the early twentieth century. As noted in the foregoing analysis, slave caste individuals began to acquire social and individual dignity that was denied to them in the pre-colonial

social order. The notion of individual in its various manifestations became available to slave castes. The ideas of social sufferings that was replete in missionary writings created a context for subsequent mobilization of slave castes people in the twentieth century. In a way the question of affect was central in redefining the individuals who were escaping from the terrible experience of slavery that made any kind of intimate expressions impossible. The struggle for citizenship of the twentieth century enabled the descendants of slave castes to articulate their new social imaginaries that were central to their experience of colonial modernity.

Notes

1. For example see the extensive writings on caste slavery in Travancore and Cochin published in the nineteenth century British Periodicals. For a representative case see *The Anti-Slavery Reporter*, March 1847; 2,15, p.36.
2. K.Saradamy, *Emergence of a Slave Caste: Pulayas of Kerala* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House,1980),p.81.
3. William Logan, *Malabar* (Madras: Asian Education Services,1989[1887]), p.148.
4. Francis Day, *The land of the Perumals or Cochin Its Past and Its present* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2006[1863]), p.65.
5. TCDR vol. XXII August 1912 No 4. p. 86. This story was reported by the catechist at Ponkunnam named T. S. Nanu. He told the catechist that he had cultivated many compounds for his master who was very kind to him. He was living in one of such compounds and unlike many others his master was kind to him. He was allowed to take the produce of the compound and whatever he gave to his master the latter received gladly and left the rest to him. He claimed that his master had great faith in him. The catechist asked the local teacher to earnestly prepare the old man for the baptism that he desired. Also see Sanal P. Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*(New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.65.
6. Annual Letter of Koshi Koshi for the year 1857 dated January 2,1857.
7. The Rev. George Matthan, *Journal for the quarter ending December 1849* entry dated October 12. CMSAUB.
8. *Journal of Rev. H Andrew for July to December 1856*. Entry dated July 19 1856.It used to be the general practice of the missionaries to leave things to be revealed through the holy intervention of the Holy Spirit. CMS Missionaries in other parts of the colonial world also did the same as they thought that the

real conversion as the work of the Holy Spirit. For a detailed discussion see JDY Peel, *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000). P161. Especially the chapter 6 'Preaching the Word', pp.152-186.

9. Samuel Mateer, *Native life in Travancore* (Madras, Asian Educational Services, 1991) p. 317-318. The exact lines went as:

‘Our slave work is done, our slave bonds are gone,
For this, we shall never henceforth forsake Thee, O Jesus!
To purchase cattle, fields, houses, and many luxuries(we were sold);
(Now) Messiah himself has settled in the land a people who once fled in terror.
The father was sold to one place, the mother to another;
The children also separated...’
10. ‘Conversation with Slaves in Mepra’ in *ibid.*, p.138.
11. *ibid.*
12. Church Missionary Record, No 5. May 1857, vol. XXIV, pp. 138-141. After taking the promise from them the missionary pointed to the little shed that was being used as place of worship and slave school and asked them to go to the jungle and bring some poles to construct the school and they obliged it. Following the instruction of the missionary they began the work of levelling the land for constructing the building.
13. Annual Letter of Koshi Koshi for 1857 dated January 2, 1857. CMSAUB.
14. Annual Letter of Oommen Mammen for the year 1861 dated Jan 1 1861.
15. ‘Rev. George Matthan’s Journal for the Quarter ending 30 June 1856 entry dated 20 April’.
16. There is a considerable anthropological literature on figures like this, especially from Melanesia. Two famous individuals are Mambu and Yali, described, respectively, in Kenelm Burridge, *Mambu: A Melanesian millennium*. Peter Lawrence. 1964. Road belong cargo a study of the cargo movement in the Southern Madang District.
17. *ibid.*
18. For a discussion of liminality, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 94-128.
19. See for details, ‘Report of the Henry Venn Fund Grant for the year 1886’ Document No.58. CMSAUB.

20. Annual Letter of the Rev.George Matthan, Thiruvalla Station dated December 3.1867, CMSAUB.
21. ‘Mass Movements’ letter from the Bishop of Travancore and Cochin to Mr. Durrant, Travancore and Cochin Mission G2 / I 5 / 0 1912.Document No. 7 (emphasis added) CMSAUB.
22. The Rev.Oommen Mammen’s Journal for the Quarter Ending June 30, 1856.
23. Report on the work of Attingal District 1908 p.11.
24. Also Rev. Koshi Koshi’s journal from July 22 to the end of September 1857 entry dated 22 July. Also see *ibid*.
25. J. Caley, An Account of The Pastorates Under The Native Church Councils In The Diocese Of Travancore And Cochin. (Kottayam: CMS Press,1905), p. 10. But the dream of Abel (Thewatthan) never materialised, as his people were never allowed to worship in that Church. The author of the text J Caley who was Bishop’s Commissary noted an incident that occurred in 1896 in the following manner. “Nine years ago I insisted on at least a dozen of them being allowed to worship there, and brought them in for that purpose, the others all left the Church in a body and I conducted the Sunday morning service with the twelve despised ones. We are suffering from the vile spirit of caste yet”.
26. Madras Church Missionary Record 1854, pp. 52-53.