

Locating the Slave Converts in the Nineteenth Century Malayalam Novels

Sephora Jose
Research Scholar, IIT Kanpur

Abstract

Nineteenth century Kerala has witnessed mass conversions of the slave castes to Christianity thanks to the missionary engagements with the slave castes. This paper attempts to understand the material context of the slave conversions which were happened in the 19th century Kerala with reference to the Malayalam novels which represent slave converts. The study identifies various discourses through which conversion is understood and posits a Marxist understanding of the historical episode with reference to the Nineteenth century Malayalam novels dealing with conversion. Unlike the dominant discourses of missionary historiography and that of colonial modernity, Marxists project the material and economic motivations behind religious/ caste conversion of slaves, abolition of slavery and the emergence of plantations in Kerala during 1850s. Reading the social scene vis- á-vis the Malayalam novels through a Marxist lens reveals the link between the slave conversions, abolition of slavery and the emergent plantation economy in the nineteenth century Kerala. While abolition of slavery replaced the idea of bonded labor with mobile wage labour, conversion to Christianity worked as disciplinary mechanism on slaves which facilitated regulated disciplined labour force for the plantation business.

Keywords: Caste slavery, religious/caste conversions–missionary discourse, colonial modernity, Marxist historiography, slave labour, plantation economy

Introduction

Caste conversions into Christianity which took place in colonial Kerala are deeply connected to the engagement of the protestant missionaries with the lower castes. Being the untouchables, the *Pulayas* and *Paraiyahs* in Travancore and *Cherumars* in Malabar were slaves of the upper castes. Slavery that existed in Travancore, Malabar and Kochin till the middle of the nineteenth century was structured by the caste system. Unlike Atlantic slavery which was clearly a colonial mission, caste slavery is a form of social oppression and exploitation that prevailed in the south western part of India since the early medieval period. Mainstream historical studies [and literary representations] have subsumed caste slavery under the concept of ‘feudal servitude’ which neglected the transactional nature of this social practice (Vinil Paul 2019). The transaction of untouchable men, women and children was a common practice in Kerala. However, it got global attention only through the missionary records of the latter half of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century. The latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed massive conversion to Christianity when the European missionaries began working among the slave castes which comprised mainly of *Pulayas* and *Paraiyahs* in Travancore. Their efforts at evangelization and social emancipation through education have been hailed by most of the mainstream histories written by the colonizers. But an exploration into the historical context of caste conversions vis- a -vis the activities of the European missionaries reveals a complicated relationship between the Christian missionaries and the slave castes.

A Brief History of the CMS in Kerala

The Christian Missionary Society (CMS) was established in 1799 by the Church of England with the agenda of the propagation of the gospel and evangelization in Africa and Asia. It was founded by a group of protestant men comprising of Charles Simeon, who was the vicar of a church in Cambridge, John Venn, who served as the rector of Chapham,

James Stephen, who was a lawyer, and Wilberforce and Thornton, who were two distinguished laymen. In 1813, the British parliament gave the missionaries the license to pursue their mission in India and granted them the permission to form a regular church establishment in the territories of the East India Company.

The first protestant missionary who came to Kerala was Claudius Buchanan who met the priests and bishops of the Syrian church in Kerala. Syrian Christians constituted the social elites among Christians. As documented in the historical accounts of the CMS, Buchanan tried to maintain good relationships between the Church of England and the Syrian Christians. In 1810, John Munroe, who was the Resident of Travancore and Kochin tried to renovate the Syrian Church. He wanted to extend civil and religious rights to the Syrian Christians assuming their support for the British administration. Secular and scriptural instruction was given to Syrian Christians in the missionary schools attached to Syrian parishes. However, the cordial relationship between the Syrians and the missionaries did not last long. After the sudden death of the Metropolitan Punnatera Mar Dionysius III in 1825, Cheppat Mar Dionysus ascended to the position of the Syrian Metropolitan. Cheppat Mar Dionysus was sceptical towards missionary evangelism and opposed all missionary reforms. Owing to this disunion between Syrian bishops and the European missionaries, the partnership between them was unanimously dissolved in the Synod of Mavelikkara which was held in 1836. From 1840s onwards, therefore, the missionaries turned their attention to the lower castes. 1850s also witnessed social movements of the depressed castes and their mass conversions into Christianity. But understanding conversion merely as the result of theological indoctrination would be reductive. It also needs to be understood in relation to the material changes brought in by the abolition of slavery in Travancore and Malabar and the emergence of plantations during the 1850s.

Representations of Slave Conversions

The historical event of mass conversions in the nineteenth century has been interpreted in multiple ways. Slave conversions as represented in the missionary discourse are guided by the ideas of spiritual and secular

liberation. Within the framework of spiritual liberation, the evangelists and missionaries read conversions in relation to the Christian mission of salvation and the binary of virtue and vice which puts emphasis on individual transformation and the redemption of the soul. Within the same missionary discourse, the narratives of secular liberation, which revolve around the notion of purity- pollution, show how evangelism helped to bring the slave castes into modernity through the mission of education and literacy. In contrast to such missionary discourses which represent the slave castes' access to modernity as a mode of liberation from traditional caste hierarchies, the discourse of colonial modernity understands conversions as a compromise between traditional and modern ideas and practices. These narratives point to the co-existence of these two contradictory world views. A third kind of reading of caste conversions is provided by Marxist historians who foreground the shift from a feudal-agrarian economy to a capitalist-plantation economy during 1850s. Such interpretations also highlight the rising demand for mobile waged labour in the wake of the emerging plantation business which is availed by caste conversions and the slavery abolition act. This paper attempts a conversation between the Marxist history of conversion and the nineteenth century Malayalam novels which deal with conversion.

Historiography of Conversions through a Marxist Lens
Marxist readings on conversion and its engagement with caste primarily investigate on how conversion is related to the economic structure and labour relations. Different from the evangelical lens which projects the theological and social aspects of conversion, and narratives of colonial modernity which highlight the co-existence of modern and pre-modern social values even in the post-conversion phase, the Marxist readings focus on how conversion and the abolition of slavery helped the emerging plantation economy. The marxists emphasize on the coevality of three events – the abolition of slavery, mass conversions of the slave castes into Christianity and the emergence of plantations, and infer how they are linked. Missionaries launched the campaign for the abolition of slavery in 1847 by submitting a memorandum to the then ruler of Travancore, Uthram Thirunal Marthanda Varma II, pleading to abolish slavery in

the territories of the East India Company and requesting implementation of the same in Travancore. The memorandum was received with strong opposition from the landlords because they knew that the abolition of slavery would leave their fields uncultivated and jeopardize the production of food crops. Slave labour was integral to the agrarian economy of Travancore till the middle of the nineteenth century (specifically until the emergence of plantations). Paddy was the major produce in Kerala which demanded intensive labour. The socio-economic system of the times ensured slave labour for agricultural production by deeming lower caste/untouchable people as agricultural slaves who were bound to the land. The lack of good technology also stressed the demand for cheap human labour. In the feudal economic system, the slaves used to get a specific amount of the produce (usually two measures of paddy) as their reward and landlords were responsible for the health and basic subsistence of the slave families. C.H. Jayasree claims that despite the plea to abolish slavery from the missionaries and a British official named T.H. Baber, the colonial government tolerated the system of slavery because it would antagonize the land owners whose collaboration was crucial for colonial rule (711). However, as Kooiman points out, despite their initial opposition to abolitionist cause and massive conversions of the slaves to Christianity, the landlords also began to support the initiatives once they realized that waged labour was cheaper because it cancelled the master's responsibility for the subsistence of slave families and indoctrination of Christian values conditioned the slaves to be loyal disciplined labourers (63). Consequently, in 1855, slavery got legally abolished in Travancore. The missionary initiatives of evangelism and the abolition of slavery fueled the massive conversion of the slave castes to Christianity during the 1850s.

Marxist historiographies show that slavery—understood as labour exploitation—continued to prevail in practice despite the legal abolition of the system. They detail the exploitative dimensions of plantation business which were veiled in literature and the historiography by missionaries. Though scholars like Kooiman take sides with the colonialists interpreting the abolition of slavery as a humanitarian act and elaborating on the employment opportunities which the plantations facilitated, Marxist

historians such as C.H. Jayasree expose the economic and material considerations of conversion and the abolition of slavery in the background of emerging plantation business. The fact that missionaries also owned plantations indicates the link between the missionary initiatives to abolish slavery and to convert the slave castes. Jayasree understands the abolition of slavery as the means to avail mobile waged labour required for the plantations (717). She elaborates on the manipulative strategies of the *kanganies*/contractors to mobilize labour and reveals the essential retaining of the servile nature of labour despite the nominal shift from slave labour to indentured labour, in which the labourer is bound to work for the plantation owner under specified conditions and specified duration. The abolition of slavery effectively put slaves in an “uncertain terrain of freedom” (Jayasree 717) characterized by indebtedness and servitude.

In the wake of plantation-based capitalist economic system, the notion of wage labour replaced the traditional idea of slave labour/ free labour. Since the cash-crops produced in the plantations were not edible and mobile contractual labour was needed for the plantations to flourish, the capitalists had to introduce wage system. The abolition of slavery facilitated mobility of slaves who had been bound to the paddy fields of the upper caste landlords. Labour which was immobile and not rewarded in monetary terms in the agrestic system, became waged and mobile and monetary transactions came to the centre of the economy. The idea of surplus labour and contract labour (*Kangani system*) also evolved in the new economic system. Although the shift to cash economy is claimed to be emancipatory in the discourses of modernity, the material conditions in the plantations were exploitative. As Jayasree notes, despite the immobility and poverty, the agrestic slaves experienced some sense of cosines even in their wretchedness. When they were freed, they were condemned to find jobs elsewhere (213). The historical study by K. Ravi Raman on the colonial plantations in southern India during 1797-1947, reveals that labour was scarce in the plantations because the work conditions there were exploitative and the slaves were reluctant to uproot themselves from their families and the world of habituated servitude. Therefore, the plantation owners had to resort to contractual labour system to lure the

slaves (Ravi Raman 10). In the *Kangani system*, labourers from different parts of Travancore, Madras, Kochin and Malabar were mobilized on contract basis by *kanganies*/labour contractors and plantation owners.

Malayalam novels of the times dealing with caste conversions give hints of this ideological and material shift from a feudal to a capitalist economic system. Joseph Muliyl's *Sukumari* refers to the demand for labour in the plantations. *Sukumari* not only portrays how caste conversions enabled labourers to work in the emerging plantations but also how it facilitated the export of labour. After conversion, the character Satyarthi was exported to multiple countries to work in the plantations. *Sukumari*, in the novel, recollects that a man dressed in suit, who speaks English asked Satyadasan to join the coffee plantations. The man said to him that he works as a contractor to facilitate labour in the plantations (97). Satyadasan remarks that it is easy for the converts to get jobs in the plantations (98). The character Satyarthi, a pulaya convert reminds how he was exported to work in plantations where he faced miserable experiences. Satyarthi was transported as a slave on the British ship to Bourbourn and escapes to Australia where he had to work as a miner. He used to thank God for keeping him alive despite the traumatic experiences he had in Borboun (167). But when his master came to know that he has learned English from the missionaries, he was promoted to the post of clerk. While highlighting Sathyarthi as a rich man who speaks English and wears good clothes thanks to his interactions with the missionaries, the novel veils the abusive conditions that he faced in the plantations. The novel implies the shift from agrarian to plantation economy and the contract labour system (*kangani*) through which labour from different parts of south India was mobilized.

While the abolition act availed mobile labour, conversion to Christianity facilitated disciplined labour. Missionary evangelism and conversion assume importance because they worked as regulatory mechanisms on individuals. Converts who absorbed the values of honesty and loyalty worked efficiently on the lands. In *Ghathaka Vadhom* (1877), Mariam appreciates Paulosa for his abstinence from theft. Paulosa used to steal mangoes from the land of Koshy Kurien. When he was informed about Christian morality, he not only refused to steal but confessed all

his sins to Mariam (20). The landlords also benefitted from conversions because the converts worked industriously even when they were not under supervision.

Ghathaka Vadhom implicitly traces the transformation of the slave castes as a result of their conversion to Christianity. Though the narrative refers to the slaves' observance of Sabbath by abstaining from work, it also shows how that the abstinence from *uzhiyam* (customary labour to be performed by the slaves on Sundays) was compensated by extra labour time. The slaves collectively decide to labour intensively in the fields for longer durations thanks to their loyalty to the landlord. The internalization of Christian values not only conditioned them to be devout Christians but also good workers. Paulosa's loud confession that he has stolen mangoes and jackfruit from his master's land indicate how conversion worked as an effective strategy to regulate the body and mind of the converted slave.

Ghathaka Vadhom also raises the issue of landlessness of the slave castes. The repeated burning of slave chapels at night is not only to disturb the religious practices and gatherings of the slaves but it barred them from possessing land, however small it might be. Since the ownership or possession of land was a crucial marker of class/caste status and agency of a person, curbing the slaves from owning land was essential for maintaining the material dependency of the slave castes. The slave characters in the novel live in small huts made by themselves in the corner of the master's land. Lack of the ownership of land forces them to continue in their slave status and depend on the landlord for daily sustenance.

Saraswati Vijayam hints at the judicial and economic changes introduced in Kerala during the fourth and fifth decades of the nineteenth century. Kuberan Namboothiri asks his assistant Ramankutty Nambiar to punish the Pulaya slave who dared to sing while working in the field. Though the police investigation of the murder of the pulaya slave does not constitute the dominant narrative of the novel, it implies not only the emergence of legal rights of the slave castes, but also shows the changing economic dynamics through the depiction of the officers who were bribed by Kuberan Namboothiri.

As these novels suggest, plantation owners who consisted of colonialists

and upper caste men, considered the converted slave bodies as docile bodies from which efficient labour could be extracted. *Saraswativijayam* suggests that the photographs of the converts were taken and sent to the West by which the colonialists understood the body composure of the slave castes. The photograph of Marathan Pulayan which was taken at the time of his religious conversion by a missionary priest was used as an ethnographic tool through which the capitalists estimated the physiognomy of slaves. During the trial scene in the novel when Kuberan Namboothiri is asked about the photo of Marathan Pulayan, which he had captured years ago, he says that,

I took the photograph since I was informed that men in *Bilathi* (old Malayalam usage for Britain) wanted to know the physiognomy of various castes in Kerala. Especially because the person in the photograph had decided to convert to Christianity. I thought the picture would help the English men to understand the bodily features of that man and how much would he change after his conversion to Christianity (self translation, 107).

Unlike *Ghathaka Vadhom* (1877) and *Saraswati Vijayam* (1892), the absence of paddy fields in the setting of *Sukumari* (1897) is significant. Sugarcane farms constitute the background for many scenes in Joseph Muliyl's *Sukumari*, which is set in the post 1840s. The absence of paddy fields and the profusion of sugarcane farms point to the shift to cash crops. As portrayed in *Ghathaka Vadhom*, which was written much earlier than *Sukumari*, and set in the 1850s, paddy fields owned by Koshy Kurien form the backdrop of the novel. But the central character Paulosa lives in a hut made inside the sugarcane farm owned by Koshy Kurien which is indicative of the gradual spreading of cash cropping (17). The difference in topographic setting is significant because it implies the spreading of plantations which is symptomatic of the gradual shift from an agrarian to a capitalist economic system.

Potheri Kunjambu's novel *Saraswati Vijayam* exemplifies the socio-economic transformations through the events that follow the assumed death of Marathan Pulayan. Though the facts that a police case was registered to investigate the murder of the labourer and Kuberan Namboothiri becomes anxious over this police case (43) show the development of

modern legal provisions to extend basic rights to the slave castes, Kuberan Namboothiri could wash his hands off from the responsibility of the crime through bribery. Namboothiri's bargaining with the officials, suggesting the consequences of penalizing a Namboothiri, prove to be inadequate to save himself. His buying the favour of the officers through bribery is not only indicative of the importance of money over caste positions but also the shift from a feudal society to a capitalist economy.

Conclusion

The historiography of religious conversions of the slave castes in Kerala during the nineteenth century mainly exhibits three different discourses. Primarily conversions of *Pulayas* and *Paraiyahs* are interpreted as the result of missionary evangelism which improved the social and spiritual worlds of the slaves. As presented in colonial missionary narratives, missionary evangelism not only introduced the slave castes to modern ideas of freedom, equality and individualism but also the Christian project of salvation claims to have redeemed them from their wretched, dark, sinful being. On the other hand, the discourse of colonial modernity details how the traditional relations of power coexist within the new modernized society. Unlike the evangelical descriptions, the discourse of colonial modernity shows how the traditional structures of power operate implicitly yet actively in the lives of the slave converts. Though they are claimed to be given access to modernity and social emancipation, caste stays as an inerasable reality even in the protestant Christian reforms. Marxists provide a third perspective as they interpret conversions in the context of the abolition of slavery and the emergence of plantation economy. They locate the material foundations of the social act of religious conversions. Marxist historiography unpacks the connection between the economic motivations behind missionary activities, abolition of slavery and caste conversions.

The dominant narratives of the Malayalam novels produced in the nineteenth century which deal with caste conversion seem to validate the discourses of colonial missionaries and that of colonial modernity. The representations of caste conversions in these novels, however, have not been read through a Marxist lens which locates conversions and the abolition of slavery in the context of the emergence of plantations.

When looked through a Marxist lens, Malayalam novels such as *Ghathaka Vadhom*(1877), *Saraswati Vijayam*(1892), *Sukumari*(1897) imply conversion as the source of disciplined wage labour which was crucial for the plantations to flourish. When looked through a Marxist lens, conversion and the abolition of slavery neither appear as a means of social emancipation nor as introduction of the lower castes to modernity but as strategies through which disciplined mobile labour was facilitated for the plantations.

This paper is an overview of how caste conversion has been looked at and represented in various discourses, suggesting the need to re-look at the historiographies in juxtaposition with the literature produced on caste conversion and slave life in British colonial Kerala. The Malayalam novels about converts written since 1840s and prior to the strengthening of communist movement in Kerala, when looked through a Marxist frame, unveil the economic motivations of religious conversions and the abolition of slavery in the context of the emergent plantation business. Though the dominant narratives of the novels fit conversion in the discourses of liberation and/or colonial modernity, reading them from a Marxist perspective uncovers the silences, gaps and concealments in the texts which are highly suggestive of the material aspects of religious conversion. When the focus shifts from the socio-cultural dynamics to the economic dimension of conversion, religious conversion appears not as a refining medium but as a regulatory mechanism through which disciplined labour is produced.

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sephorajose44@gmail.com