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**EXPLOITATION OF CASTE: A STUDY ON PRE-INDEPENDENT TRAVANCORE****Renjini P.****Ph.D., Research Scholar , Department of History ,  
Annamalai University.****ABSTRACT**

*Caste is the terrible thing that has been existed in India. The people of low class have been ill-treated for several decades. The low class people made slave in the name of caste. The majority of the people had been slaved at Travancore in Pre-independence India. Rani Gowry Lakshmi Bai had been supporting the low class people. India has been suffering from the existence of the caste system. The people were tortured and mercilessly killed in the name of caste. The caste system had emerged, when the religion started to rule the people. The Hindu religion was the reason for the existence of the caste system in India. The low class people were not allowed into the temples, shops, common halls, and public places. The outcast people who violated the rules were beaten to death. Sometime, the high class people made them to stand in the public places without dress. The equality was denied to them. The high class people extract too much of work from them and gave only small amount of money as salary. The wealthy people also lived in India from low class. They also lowered by mention their caste. The low class people were named as dalits and Rani Gowry Lakshmi Bai introduced number of reformers to abolish the slavery in the name of caste. She tried to liberate the dalits for that she had been organized the reformer club.*

**KEYWORDS:** Caste, dalits, liberate, outcast, reformer club.

**INTRODUCTION**

The people of Kerala have been suffering of caste system and it is considered to be one of the important things in Kerala. The same thing is happening in all the places of India. It is believed that the Aryan had introduced the case system in India. According to Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, the caste system was unknown to the Dravidian society before the arrival of Aryan to India. The translations of Sanskrit literature induced the caste system in India. The caste system was detail described in Sanskrit literature and they made the original inhabitants as slave. They ruled India by occupying the minds of Indian Kings and Prime Ministers. Indians were divided into four categories. Those are as follows: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras as the process of Aryanization progressed. The people who were outside the pale of varna system were considered as 'avarnas' or 'untouchables'. This type of division of society resulted in the emergence of a high caste 'savarna' governing class which was considered as pure and a low caste 'avarna' subjugated category considered as polluted. Thus the distinction of purity and pollution set one section of the people above the other section and thus the polluting castes were suppressed by the so-called pure castes. The ruling caste monopolized resources, social status and power while the enslaved castes led a life of deprivation and marginalization. The caste system which evolved in Kerala was peculiar as it did not constitute into the conventional fourfold varna scheme. While the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Sudras were present, Vaishyas were conspicuous by their absence. Their role was performed by people belonging to other religions especially Christianity and Islam.



## EXPLOITATION OF CASTE

The present paper analyzes the caste system practiced in Travancore. Further, it illustrates the characterization of the hierarchy of different castes. It focuses the roles played by each caste as either masters or slaves in the caste social fabric of Travancore. The People of Travancore were hierarchically categorized as Brahmins, Nairs, Ezhavas, Nadars and Slave castes or Untouchables. The Brahmins and Nairs enjoyed special powers and privileges of wealth in Travancore. The the Nadars, the Ezhavas, the Parayas and the Pulayas were the castes that prescribed as untouchables. They were the low class people and had to work ugly work for the high class Hindus. At the same time, it is also interesting to note that each caste in Kerala had its subdivisions, which was by nature and outlook as distinct from one another as to constitute almost separate castes.

Brahmins is known as Nambudiris or Nambudiri Brahmins in Kerala. They occupied the highest position among the different castes in Kerala. Their highest social status was interwoven with their ritual purity, wealth and political influence. They were ritually holy and they were representing as God. They possessed the sole right for the interpretation of the scripture and sacred laws that formed the basis of the laws of the land. As a part of religious duty Brahmins were provided free food in free inns throughout the state. This practice was conducted at the expense of the state and kings considered it as a sacred duty to feed them. Brahmins were the landlords and they owned large areas of land and possessed immense wealth. They divided the land among their close allies in the jenmi system, the Nairs, who constituted the military castes. The lower caste kudiyan were the workers of the landlords. Brahmins also wielded tremendous political power and exerted extraordinary control over the Kings. The Nambudiris were the real rulers of Kerala from the 11th to the 16th centuries. They excelled in and controlled the diverse facets of social welfare such as education, arts, culture, science and medicine.

The Nairs held a respectable position after Brahmins. They were the soldiers and trained in the art of warfare. The alliance of Nairs with Brahmins increased their influence and the latter appointed the Nairs as the custodians and trustees of their property. As such the roles of Nairs were redefined as the protectors of land and its people. The people who were ready to serve the Brahmins were called as Nairs. The entire land of Kerala was under the tutelage of the Brahmins, in practice, the Nairs were the owners. They also supplied soldiers to the king in times of war. The Nairs followed marumakkathayam or the matrilineal system of inheritance where the female line determined the descent of a family. The people lived in 'taravads'-a cluster of joint families. Though the form of inheritance was in the female line, the family system in existence was patriarchal in its running, since the Karanavar, the eldest male member of the 'taravad', became the guardian of the joint family.

The slave castes mainly the Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas formed the lowest order in the social hierarchy of Kerala. They were considered as the slaves of higher castes who treated them like animals and imposed brutal discriminations on them. They were so wretchedly provided with the necessities of life that the most loathsome things were a treat to them. They were bought and sold like cattle and were often worse treated. The owners had the power to flog them and enchain them, and even to deprive them of their lives. Everywhere they were paid for labour at the lowest possible rate sufficient to sustain life. They were considered as untouchables and unapproachable and their sight and presence were polluting. In order to avoid the pollution of the upper castes, the slave castes were required to keep a specific distance from them. Simultaneously it is interesting to note the strict rules regarding the distance to be maintained by the avarnas from the savarnas. As such they were denied free access to public roads, wells, temples and even markets considered as polluted by their presence.

The dwelling places of slave castes were tiny huts made of reeds or mud, situated away from the visibility of higher castes. They had no right to education. Decent dressing or wearing gold or silver ornaments were considered offensive. Payments were imposed on their marriages. They never worked or earned living for themselves. Their entire life was dependent on the masters. They did not even own their children. They behead children so that the master could have a continuous supply of workers. Thus the

tyrannical and brutal discriminations imposed on the slave castes made their life setting highly dehumanizing and uncivilized.

The slave castes were often employed as agricultural labourers and paid at the lowest rate in kind. The work of Pulayas were almost exclusively in the rice-fields-pumping them dry, making up embankments, hedging, digging, manuring, ploughing, weeding, transplanting and reaping; yet the grain was not considered as polluted. Parayas and Kuravas also were engaged mainly in agricultural fields as labourers. They were also engaged in the production of mats, baskets etc. They possessed no property at all and were often subjected to deprivations at various levels. Being frequently engaged in digging and manuring, transplanting the young rice, repairing the banks, and performing other labours in the rice fields, sometimes standing for hours in the water, they are subject to rheumatism, fever, cholera and other diseases, which carry off many, long before they approach the old age. The survivors are often left, when past work, to beg or steal for their support or to perish with hunger.

Slavery existed in Kerala as a corollary of its rigid caste system. Higher castes kept slaves, possessing the absolute right to sell chain or kill them. They were forced to toil in the soil from dawn to dusk without enough food or remuneration. The masters treated them in the most inhuman manner subjected them to untold cruelty and suffering. The laws of slavery were hereditary as children born to slave parents remained as slaves. Slaves were mainly used as agricultural laborers. Slaves were not allowed to enter the houses of their masters because of the laws of pollution. Consequently domestic slavery was not encouraged. There were many evidences to prove that slavery was practiced in Kerala. The inscription of 849 AD of the Venad Raja, Ayyan Adikal, Thiruvadigal granting certain privileges to the Congregation of the Tahrisa Church at Quilon is the earliest among the inscriptions relating to Adimakasu (slave levy). 14 From this inscription it is understood that slaves could be bought or sold and those who kept slaves should pay 'slave levy' to the government.

The early travelers who visited Kerala like Varthema in 1505 AD or Buchanan in 1800 AD narrated the system of slavery which existed here. The document which transferred 'Mundrothuruth' to Church Missionary Society in 1819 speaks about the transfer of slaves too. There are also references of slave trade in different parts of the state where the cruel exchange and separation of slave family members took place. Kottayam, Changanacherry, Ambalapuzha, Harippad, Kayamkulam, Eraniel etc were the chief centres of slave trade and the price of a slave varied from rupees 3 to 14. European companies established in Kerala were also engaged in the trading of slaves both within and outside the country.

Slave castes often resorted to religious conversion as a means of escaping from the clutches of slavery. Consequently, many of them in Travancore and Cochin were converted to Christianity. This fact is amply illustrated by the statement of the Church Missionary Society's Bishop of Travancore and Cochin: 'owing to the fact that Christianity has readily welcomed the poorer classes such as the Parayas, Pulayas and Kuravans, they have become Christians in large numbers'. At the same time, slavery abolition laws were implemented in Malabar, Travancore and Cochin as part of the intervention of the state to abolish slavery. Consequently, in 1792 the Commissioner of Malabar, in 1812 the Maharani of Travancore and in 1814 The Dewan of Cochin passed the slavery abolition law.

However slavery was fully banned only when it was declared as a crime in the Indian Penal Code implemented in 1862. Though slavery was legally abolished, the subaltern sections continued to face the worst forms of caste oppression and social discrimination as imposed by the upper castes. The downtrodden had to wage a prolonged and protracted struggle against the dominance of the governing class in the eternal hope of a bright future. The caste system, thus, followed in Kerala was typically rigid having a hierarchical gradation of different castes. Caste determined one's rank in the social ladder and upper castes, though numerically small in size, were at the top of it enjoying the benefits of power, wealth and social status. The subaltern sections who were at the bottom of the ladder were a toiling mass of people who survived at the mercy of their masters and destined to lead a life of marginalization. As such the savarna castes were placed at the helm of affairs while the avarna castes remained as a subjugated group of people.

Caste system systematically kept the marginalized groups, particularly the dalits in bondage and suffering for centuries. It was a system which created a luxurious life setting for the upper castes at the expense of the labouring marginalized castes. They were denied the right to education, social justice, employment opportunities, political representation and economic prosperity. Consequently the sociopolitical and economic empowerment of the dalits remained as a difficult task to be addressed.

Social reform movements inaugurated an era of great social renaissance in Travancore. They revolted against the age-old bondages of caste-oppression, irrational social practices and varied superstitions that crept into the social fabric of this land and wanted to reform its social life in accordance with the noble and humane visions of social reformers. In this context, a brief historical overview of the important social reform movements in Travancore starting from the latter part of the 19th century is relevant to understand the socio-political background of the emergence of such movements and their impact on the political socialization of dalits. In fact, many agitations of polluted castes took inspiration from these movements and they maintained a supportive and sympathetic approach towards the empowerment of subaltern sections. In this context, it should be remembered that among different social reform movements, the Ezhava movement assumes pre-eminence as the first powerful protest movement of lower castes which originated in Travancore and acted as the agent of a great social reform in Kerala. It has also inspired subsequent dalit protest struggles particularly the Ayyankali Movement.

It was the proclamation issued by Sri Chitira Tirunal Balarama Varma- the Maharaja of Travancore on 12th November 1936 by which entry for all Hindus irrespective of their caste distinctions was allowed into the Hindu temples of Travancore. The polluted castes were denied right to worship in the temples from time immemorial. This proclamation granted such rights to them which were the culmination of a series of protracted struggles waged by different sections of untouchable castes, social reformists and other enlightened sections of Travancore society. Among them were the Ezhava memorial, Sree Narayana movement, Vaikom satyagraha, Guruvayur satyagraha, the support of enlightened Savarna Hindu leaders and a series of representations made to the government by different sections of society. Sri Chitira Tirunal had appointed a committee in 1932 to study the question of temple entry and its report was submitted in 1934.

The Government did not take any action on the report on account of the conflicting views of the committee members on temple entry. In 1936, however, the Government resolved that all public roads, public tanks, public wells, chatrams etc. maintained by them out of the general public funds shall be thrown open to all classes of people irrespective of the caste to which they belong. 55 During this period, as instructed by Gandhiji, a memorandum signed by around 50,522 savarna Hindus was submitted to the Maharaja. Further, the Indian National Congress and other organizations as the Hindu Mission, NSS, SNDP Yogam and Harijan Seva Sangam were also campaigning for temple entry. Considering the pulls of multiple factors like the long-standing demands of polluted castes, increasing favourable attitude of the savarna Hindus and the favourable aspects of the reports of the committee, the Maharaja issued the temple entry proclamation. The proclamation of the Maharaja was a historical and revolutionary event as far as the destiny of the downtrodden castes were concerned. They were given a message of hope and confidence in their struggle for social equality.

It is considered as the most progressive act ever made in the history of modern India. It brought about a silent and bloodless revolution in Hindu society. Gandhiji hailed it as a miracle of modern times and a smiriti which is the people's charter of spiritual emancipation.<sup>56</sup> Thus this proclamation has repaired one of the crucial social disabilities suffered by polluted castes for centuries and as such it has inspired subsequent dalit protest struggles and endeavour of dalits to emerge as equal citizens.

In the pre-independent Travancore history, there were mainly three protest movements of dalits organized by the charismatic leaders of the dalit community: Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) founded by Ayyankali in 1907, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) founded by Poikayil Yohannan in 1909 and Travancore Cheramar Mahajana Sabha (TCMS) founded by Pampady John Joseph in 1921. Ayyankali has been considered as a pragmatic and action-oriented social reformer and the record of his movement lay in

the development of a social praxis to confront the deprivations of the downtrodden. On the other hand, Poikayil Yohannan and Pampady John Joseph have been involved in the formulation of a dalit identity by searching for the history of slave castes. They tried to construct the history of their own people to arouse their pride and consciousness.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, the protest struggles of dalits in pre-independent Travancore initiated an era of great socio-political awakening among the dalits of the region and state. It was the result of the influence of different circumstances of the period. Of course, the motive behind the intervention of colonial power in Travancore was guided by colonial interest. At the same time, the colonial presence together with the benevolent phase of the Christian missionary involvement in Travancore brought about signs of cracks on its casteist fortress. The emergence of social reform movements accelerated the pace of social change and created a climate for the protest struggles of untouchable castes. They began to assert their identity and articulate their demands, raising the consciousness and self pride of the downtrodden. At the same time, it should be remembered that the protest struggles of dalits could not bring about any crucial or lasting changes among dalits or in the socio-political terrain of the region. Yohannan and John Joseph made brave attempts in establishing an identity and history for dalits, but failed to produce concrete results. Ayyankali's interventions were brave and dynamic. However, his movement lost its momentum after his time. The early phase of dalit movement in Kerala just as the current phase neither did address the economic deprivations of the marginalized nor did act in a fitting manner to guarantee economic deliverance for them.

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