

## Poykayil Appachan and the Question of Dalit Subjectivity

Lenin C C

*Associate Professor of Philosophy,*

*Govt. Brennen College, Kerala*

&

Nishikant Kolge

*Professor, CDOE,*

*Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad.*

**Abstract:** *Representation of Dalits in mainstream Social Sciences literature often suffers from entrenched prejudices. Dalits are mostly presented either as victims of caste system or as a site of reform. Such a constricted perception gives disingenuous pictures of Dalit subjectivity. Therefore, there is a need to narrate stories of revolutionary Dalits who flout prevailing norms and assert their rights forcefully. This article undertakes such an endeavour. It introduces the life and works of Poykayil Appachan, a radical Dalit of Kerala to provide deserving place for Dalits and their movements in history. It also attempts to highlight his efforts to create a new subjectivity and identity for Dalits in Kerala and how his radical movement was distinct from other contemporary social reformers of his time.*

**Keywords:** Poykayil Appachan, Dalit History, Memories, Subjectivity and Identity

Although Dalit history as a whole gained popularity in India in the late 1970s, Dalit (formerly untouchables) have been the subject of intense discussions ever since the colonial administration and early social reformers began to take steps to implement reforms meant to improve the social conditions of Dalit in India. In fact, in the early 19th century, as response to colonial encounters and imperial allegations that caste Hindu do not deserve equality because they do not treat their own religious fellow beings especially Dalits as equal. Dalits were converted from the 'object of oppression' to the 'site of reform'. Such approaches have the following two consequences. First in such upper caste lead reforms Dalit became objects instead of subjects and agents with the ability to choose their own destiny. Second, for upper caste social reformers, the Dalit question

was not a question of what do Dalit want but rather how can they be assimilated within the dominant national movement and/or how can they be retained within Hinduism.

On the other hand, there were some radical Dalit individuals/voices who resisted such reforms and highlighted the coercive effect of such reform on Dalit subjectivity and identity. Moreover, such radical Dalits refused such approaches that turned Dalit into a site of reform, asserting instead that as modern subjects Dalit must claim responsibility for their role in the creation of their subjectivity and identities, and their emancipation. Appachan and his movement Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS or Church of God of Revealed Salvation) that calls for a radical re-ordering of society in which caste discrimination and hierarchy is eliminated in all social, religious, economic and political contexts. It also attempted to create a discrete and stable subjectivity and identity for Dalits of Kerala. Appachan argues that by being excluded from conceptions of history, rationality, and identity.

Despite the availability of large chunks of English literature available on the thinkers of Renaissance movement in Kerala, a complete life portrayal of radical thinker like Poykayil Appachan are hard to find.<sup>1</sup> However, a solitary exception is Sanal Mohan. In his exploratory and scholarly book *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* devoted a whole section to critically engage the contributions of Appachan and his organization PRDS. His article *Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and The Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala* in *Dalit Studies and Caste in Kerala* also do the same purpose. The present paper makes use of the first English translation of the songs of Appachan.

This paper argues that Appachan realizes that for the emancipation of his people or oppressed castes two things are essential. First, creating memoirs of their past that gives them a sense of pride, belonging, unity, identity and subjectivity. Second, creation of a new religion/sect/organization that can help to revive the social, economic, political and spiritual life of his people and also unite them to fight against all kinds of discrimination and exploitation.

Our understanding of the life of Appachan is bound to remain incomplete; both in the sense of biography and history, in the absence of the clear understating of the colonial encounter in Kerala. during the 19th century. He was born in 1879 in Kerala. His parents were slaves under a Syrian Christian feudal household in erstwhile Travancore. He was born and lived in the most challenging period of Indian history in general and that of Kerala in particular. One challenge being the oppressive social structure and the other was colonial rule. Amidst the widespread existence of hierarchy, discrimination, exclusion and exploitation, the colonial rulers have slowly started bringing about some radical changes into the cultural landscape of Kerala. Sanal Mohan informs us about new socio-political scenario as he writes ...conditions brought about new institutional structures that have been identified with capitalist modernity in

many parts of the world, and included modern structures of governance such as bureaucracy, legal institutions and practices, modern education, new avenues of economic production and exchange, and the emergence of a public sphere.<sup>2</sup> It has given the Dalits a chance for redeeming themselves from the age old hierarchical and oppressive socio-cultural frameworks they have been living for many centuries. Appachan's radical social interventions viz. encountering and by-pass the Hindu and Christian oppressive status quo, mobilization the scattered Dalits and concrete plans for material prosperity and religious/spiritual emancipation should be viewed from this backdrop.

During the time of his birth the society in Kerala-much like in India-was under the clutches of the hierarchical, exploitative and exclusivist caste system. It used to exploit the manual labour of the Dalits and consider them as slaves. Indeed, slavery was practiced in Kerala and even after slave trade was legally abolished in Travancore in 1811 by Queen Lakshmi Bai. For example, the 1836 census shows that there are 164864 slaves out of the total population of 1280668.<sup>3</sup> By 1865, 187812 were slaves out of the 1602914 in Malabar region. Further in Cochin province, there were even 9000 government owned slaves. However, Queen Lakshmi Bai's order was so discriminatory against the Dalits. This proclamation set free one lakh thirty-six thousand Ezhavas. The outcastes like Kuravar, Paraiyar, Pulaya, Pallar, Malayar, Vedar were not included in the list to be released from slavery.<sup>4</sup> This was the social condition of Kerala into which Appachan was born. As a result of this anti-humanistic practice many people have been deprived of the access to many fundamental social capitals like food, education, land, wealth, social and political equality, justice and freedom. In other words, for many such inhabitants to lead a dignified life as human beings have been denied altogether. History proved that the consequence of such a denial has been catastrophic on the lives and psyche of Dalits. Naturally many critical responses in the form of resistances have come along the line.<sup>5</sup> He remembers the slave experience in one of his songs:

"We became the wretched of the world  
Homeless in our own land  
Killed if killed and sold if sold  
Sold altogether along with the land  
Who committed all the sins  
For all these curse and punishments  
Divided and tortured as slaves  
Endured slavery to live on."<sup>6</sup>

He was well aware of the demeaning nature of caste related discriminatory practices so early in his childhood as he himself has personally been a victim of such caste brutalities and also witnessed the struggles of his parents and peer groups. As a result, he questioned Blackmagic, broke the slave bowl, and finally, gave away the slave job after being beaten by his landlord. Thus, he has natural inclination to end the oppressive and inhuman social structure from his early age.

## Section I

### Encountering and by-passing the Oppressive Status Quo

Appachan learned Bible translations and used to critically interpret and explain it to his peers. During the same time, he became Yohannan, associated with Protestant churches. In 1906, he cut his relationship with the Church and also asked his followers to do the same in order to give them a new direction to the pursuit of subjectivity and identity. He also rejected missionary salary as it may restrict his freedom to criticize the Church. His fight against the upper caste and Christians began to take shape during this time. His experiences as a slave caste and serving as a Christian priest for a brief period immensely helped him realize that Christian Churches in Kerala are as oppressive and discriminatory as Hinduism. This alerted him to search for alternate avenues to assert a way of life for his people. The breakaway signs are clearly evident from this song:

“Once I am baptized in the blood of Christ  
 My lasting pollution has ended forever  
 Still, you call me Pulaya  
 And I won't ever come to that church  
 Since I am baptized in the blood of Christ  
 My unending curse has gone for ever  
 Still, you call me Paraya  
 And I won't ever come to that church  
 Since I am baptized in the blood of Christ  
 My lasting lack has ceased forever  
 Still, you call me Kuravar  
 And I won't ever come to that church  
 See the new roads emerging from the old ones  
 Now all you folk have to join the song.”<sup>7</sup>

Even if a Dalit is converted into the fold of Christianity to alter the social identity conferred on them, he/she will still be considered as a Dalit. From 1900 onwards, his criticism of Christian dogmatic doctrines and practices became more apparent and forceful. He believes that The Bible has not been related to the core being of Dalits in Kerala but was specifically written for the Jews.<sup>8</sup> In the next year he formed a small assembly called 'group of Poyka' that became the eventual PRDS in 1910. The events preceded the its formation is relevant here. Appachan proclaimed the birth of PRDS in a court hearing for treason.<sup>9</sup> He started preaching against caste hierarchies and advocated mixed caste marriage between an upper caste Christian man and a Dalit woman. All these developments have enraged the local Christians, Missionaries and Caste Hindus alike. They have decided to use many ways to counter him. While the missionaries classified him as practicing black magic, the localities confronted him through constant physical altercations. They have obstructed his meetings

many times and often tried to kill him.<sup>10</sup>

The preliminary step for the pursuit of a dignified life every group begins with the access of social capital through education, land, job opportunities, shared values and the like. He was well aware of what was lacking.

“...We are landless in the land  
Where we are born and we live  
Though work hard no equal rights  
Cursed as idiots though work hard  
No meals toiled hard  
No one to teach wisdom and knowledge  
No place here on this earth  
No place in the kingdom of God  
O Don't stop salvaging us in this peril...”<sup>11</sup>

As slaves the Dalits were deprived of such benefits. Appachan's established many schools in places across Kerala. His fights for land became very evident. He also became active in the field of politics and submitted many memorandums on; land ownership and to prevent the encroachment of higher caste people on lower caste lands, land for the establishment of churches for his people, student scholarships, permission to establish hand weaving skill centre and on various other issues. Most notably in 1930, he also demanded reservation for Dalit women in the Legislative Assembly of Travancore.

## Section II

### Mobilization of the Disintegrated Dalits

Appachan was a prolific poet and the charismatic leader of a slave community. He composed short lyrical oral poems in Malayalam language. In these poems, Appachan criticized social injustice and discrimination, and promoted religious freedom for Dalit of Kerala. Therefore, Appachan's songs are revolutionary, aiming to address the social predicament, creating subjectivity and unique social and religious identity for Dalits of Kerala. During the 1890s, he worked for the integration of different suppressed castes under one single identity. In this song he argues that the assemblage of all the scattered depressed castes will be Poyka. It is the place where all of them find their congregation and unity.<sup>12</sup>

A closer look at the historical literature and oral songs tradition may reveal an apparent and deliberate negligence of the issues of caste and gender from contemporary upper caste reformers of Appachan. One of his poems says:

“No not a single letter is seen on my race  
So many histories are seen on so many races...”<sup>13</sup>

He points to the fact that collective memory of the trauma of past sufferings is another uniting thread for the depressed castes. The shrewd and eloquent use of the popular vernacular songs made Appachan's efforts all the more

penetrative.

His songs have effectively confronted the ubiquitous albeit imbalanced power dynamics between upper caste Hindus and/or Christians and Dalits. Several human emotions like dejection, anger, anxiety, helplessness, mourning and the like have found an appropriate cathartic vent through his songs. They are the outbursts of the of the violent and unjust crimes committed against his people. Appachan gives the sense of purpose to the Dalit lives in Kerala from a stereotyped ignorant, agency less untouchables to more informed and authentic identity. Through his songs he urges how the Dalits need to create an identity of themselves based on the new historical circumstances, as opposed to the convention. It contests all forms of dehumanizing attempts, for a radical consciousness which enables the Dalits to be autonomous persons and creative subjects.

The following two poems narrate historical conditions of Dalits in Kerala. The first highlights the historical side-lining of the Dalits.

“The story of a people who lived in Kerala since the ancient times  
And how they became demons.”<sup>14</sup>

In the second poem Appachan says:

“Hear O hear My dear brethren  
The calamities our forefathers forbore  
Suffered under slavery.  
Bore beatings without brake toiled in misery.  
Father sold to one place.  
Mother to another.  
Children were orphaned.”<sup>15</sup>

He has understood that redemption requires awareness of the historical condition and overcoming such a predicament needs deliberate intervention. It is easy to curse the history but moving forward requires courage and selfhood. Appachan not only narrates the historical condition of Dalits of Kerala but also rebukes them for maintaining differences and hierarchy within Dalit castes. The following part of one poem of Appachan expresses it very forcefully. He wanted to create an identity based on unity rather than differences.

“A Church for the Paraya, another for the Pulaya  
Yet another church for the fishing Marakkan  
A church for the father a church for the son  
A Church separate for each one in the household.”<sup>16</sup>

Subjectivity and identity are the other recurrent themes in the songs of Appachan. His songs strongly suggested that subjectivity is not an isolated cocoon but is evolved as a result of the dialectical process in the network of various societal networks. He keeps on emphasizing the role one's own society

and cultural settings in the formation of subjectivity. He has conceived subjectivity through the never-ending processes of resistance and opposition to the status quo. But for him the most significant and preliminary step is the process of understandings one as a subject. In other words, the deeper awareness of the subjectivity is the eventual outcome of the nuanced functioning style of the power structure-within which one is a victim of-and developing and practice one's own unique methods to resist and overcome those processes.

It is evident from his poems that he wanted to create Dalit identity as early inhabitants of Kerala. One of his poems says: once the peace-loving early inhabitants of Kerala were imprisoned and enslaved by the violent infiltrators, the joy and peace of the descendants of the former have been disappeared and eventually became inconsolable and ever-growing sorrow and grief. Through his songs, Appachan also tried to give a sense of pride and unity to Dalit of Kerala which is important for creating their new social and religious identity. However, it was through PRDS, Appachan tried to create a modern identity for Dalit of Kerala befitting the modern age. Through PRDS, he carries out extensive educational, social, economic, cultural, religious and spiritual works in Kerala and expounds a modern and indigenous version of Christian Church. In the next section, we will explain material prosperity and religious/spiritual emancipation through PRDS.

### Section III

#### **Material Prosperity and Religious/Spiritual Emancipation**

The emergence of PRDS played an important role in initiating and accelerating the attempts towards integrating the Dalit communities towards modern times. However, that there have not been much academic studies about the complicated process of integration.<sup>18</sup> This has positively impacted the overall growth/progress/aspirations of Dalits as a whole in many ways. Some such interventions of PRDS are: integration of all Dalits, identity assertion, ownership over land, establishment of educational institutions and women empowerment.

A closer look at the course of Kerala history would reveal the fact that PRDS was not the only movement in that milieu but there were similar Dalit upliftment movements like Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (society for the protection of the poor), founded by Ayyankali. Another movement was Mahajana Sabha founded by Pampady John Joseph. another organization established for the holistic welfare of Paraya community by K Kumaran of, were also present in Travancore in the first half of the twentieth century more or less with similar intent.<sup>19</sup> It is also notable that other prominent other social reform movements like SNDP was also active at that historical juncture. However, PRDS was different from such organizations in important respects. For instance, Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham was a secular movement which challenged caste hierarchies and demanded access to public spaces and resources. Mohan identifies one important difference between PRDS and the other similar such

movements as he writes the PRDS remains unique as Yohannan had problematized the lack of written history in the Dalit communities. Even after Yohannan, the community kept alive this concern with history as exemplified in the narratives of the PRDS and Dalit communities that are circulated in both the written and oral forms.<sup>20</sup> We can also add that PRDS has added the religious and spiritual dimensions along with other social capital. Moreover, thinkers like Narayana Guru have tried to reform while remaining within the fold of Hinduism. Appachan came out of it as well as the Christian congregations and has created a unique means for religious and spiritual salvation without compromising on the materialistic approach. In other words, his approach is unique because he on the one hand has rejected the discriminative frameworks of Hinduism not to embrace Christianity or any other existing religions but on the other created a separate yet most importantly indigenous religious sect. The available religious identity option for an ordinary Dalit individual was either to stay in the caste-ridden orthodox Hinduism or to convert into the Christian fold-which is equally discriminative, if not more. But neither of them is viable. Appachan writes about the predicament (of the abolished, abandoned lower caste people and draws out the rationale of the need for the emergence of PRDS in the following long song:

“All castes and religions are against us  
 No leader and we wander we became the wretched of the world  
 Homeless in our own land Killed if killed and sold if sold  
 Sold altogether along with the land....  
 No knowledge of scriptures and no education  
 We are mere animals roaming the land no devotion and no way  
 of salvation  
 Lived in darkness and died too in darkness...”<sup>21</sup>

Appachan and his people have never felt belongingness in the major religions of Kerala at his time. This sense of nowhere-ness is a recurring theme in many of his songs. He writes that:

“there was no place for Dalits in the fold of the Hindu practices for practical purposes except as slaves neither did the Christians. Both of them have deliberately declined to confer subjectivity-social, political, economic and religious. This situation has eventually pushed the Dalits into no man's land and therefore made them directionless.”<sup>22</sup>

As a result, this has made the second grade or third grade citizens despite the advent of modern sensibilities creeping into the consciousness of late 19th and early 20th century. Appachan highlighted this situation in the following way:

“No education wealth and knowledge No official jobs for us  
 No proper wages for work No meagre means to survive.”<sup>23</sup>

However, PRDS offered a theoretically and practically viable alternative for Hinduism and Christianity. It has envisaged and designed its structure and functions to cater the needs of a Dalit much more than merely providing a passive religious identity. But it has attempted to offer reliable, long-term, sustainable, meaningful and pragmatic solutions for social, economic, political and educational inequalities encountered by the people of lower strata for centuries. Therefore, the major objectives of PRDS can be delineated as fulfilment of all the deficiencies mentioned in the above song. He has presented these issues in various meetings of Sree Moolam Praja Sabha. As a result of the repeated pleas in the banner of PRDS could be seen in the establishment of many educational institutions, small scale factories, acquisition of cultivable lands. Appachan has been radical in his attitude towards women. He did encourage women to be preachers in their congregation. In fact, there were many women preachers as early as in 1913. PRDS have understood the role of women in various social and political institutions and even moved a motion in Sreemoolam Praja Sabha reservation for Dalit women in the Constituent Assembly in 1930. Such was the radical nature of the approach of PRDS. In this context the observation made by VV Swami et al becomes profoundly relevant. They write...the endeavours of PRDS were not just influenced rights of any particular Dalit sub caste but rather influenced the democratic imagination of Kerala society and created a benchmark for the course of further social reformation movements.<sup>24</sup> In short, PRDS offers a meaningful linkage that connects Dalits to a brave new world of opportunities and identities.

### Concluding Remarks

In this article we argued that the history of Dalits is not just a history of discrimination, exploitation, humiliation and violence alone. It is also a history of struggle, assertion, cooperation and achievement. In this article, we have presented the radical work of PRDS and its founder Poykayil Appachan to argue that Dalit are not just victims and objects of reform, but they are also fully developed subjects who can also lead, organize, and struggle for their rights. It is argued in the article that Appachan and his movement was radical because, it worked for the formation of Dalit selfhood and creating of new social and religious identity for Dalits of Kerala that can emancipate them from the shackles of Brahminism and domination of Christian communities in Kerala. Appachan and his movement was also unique in the sense that whereas most of his contemporary reformer and their movement focused on one or two aspects of Dalit life, on the other hand Appachan's movement focused comprehensive enhancement of the lifeworld of Dalits in Kerala.

### Notes and References (Endnotes)

1. Sunny Kapikkad, *Janathayum Janadhipathyavum*, Vidhyarthi Publications, Kozhokode, 2017, p. 251. He argues that this negligence cannot be considered as a

- mere coincidence and/or innocent and needs to be resolved
2. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*, Oxford University Press, 2015, p.147
  3. K.T. Rejikumar, *Adima Vyapara Nirodhanam: Charithravavum Pradhanyavum*, Sahodahran Publications, 2004, 16.
  4. Rejikumar, *Adima Vyapara Nirodhanam*, p.17
  5. Many such movement SNDP, SJPS, Dravidian movements resisted such inhuman practices. For a detailed discussion see. Sanal Mohan, 'Religion, Social Space and Identity: The Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 28, no. 1 (April 2005), pp.35-63
  6. V. V. Swami, E.V. Anil, eds., *Unknown Subjects: Songs of Poykayil Appachan from 1905-1939* & trans. Ajay Sekher, Institute of PRDS Studies, 2008, p.42.
  7. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.21
  8. O.K. Santhosh, *Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan: Navodhanacharithapadangal* (Thiruvananthapuram: Kerala Bhasha Institute, 2011), p.23
  9. Poykayil Santhosh, *Sree Kumara Gurudevan*, p.33
  10. Various biographers of describes Appachan numerous such instances. See T H P Chentharassery, *Poykayil Sree Kumara Gurudevan*, Navodhanam Publishers, 2011. Also, M R Renukumar, *Poykayil Yohannan*, Kerala State Balasahithya Institute, 2009
  11. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.51
  12. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.46
  13. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.17
  14. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.18
  15. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.23
  16. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.20
  17. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.36
  18. For more details see Sanal Mohan, 'Social Space Civil Society and Dalit Agency in Twentieth-Century Kerala' in Ramnarayan S. Rawat & K. Satyanarayana eds., *Dalit Studies*, Duke University Press, 2016, pp.74-103.
  19. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, pp.146, 147
  20. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, p.147
  21. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.42
  22. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.33
  23. Swami, *Unknown Subjects*, p.33
  24. V.V. Swami, E.V. Anil & V.P. Raveendran, eds., *PRDS Charithrathil Prathyashappettappetta vidham*, Society for PRDS Studies, 2009, p.47