

# The Neglected “Other” within the “Other”: The Rise and Drive in the Songs of Poikayil Appachan

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***Abstract-** India writing in English has traditionally embraced bionetwork, geography, sociology, and has often missed Dalit literary traditions. In the last few decades, literature has expanded its horizons to consider intersections between ecology, society and culture. However, the question still remains: why is there no recognition of organic underpinnings in the writings of subordinate castes by the wider canon of the environmental literary sphere? The aim of the present paper is to examine the varied underlined, invisible ways of suffering embedded in the lives of the Dalit community, particularly woman and their life experiences portrayed in The Songs of Poikayil Appachan. The age in which Poikayil lived was the age of struggle and transformation in Travancore. The caste system could not survive in the old form in the context created by colonial modernity. Different castes reacted against this context differently. During this age of renaissance, a number of social reformers were also born. In this context of Kerala renaissance Poikayil Appachan intervened with a unique theory and praxis which made him a separate entity in his time. The songs of Poikayil was not only presents the plight of the lower caste society but it also plays the role of a constant reminder of the hardships faced by the subaltern women in the society. Their condition is pitiable not only in Kerala but throughout India. The present study tries to envisage the reconstruction of prevailing unequal order, the songs of Poikayil is the saga of resistance against the hegemony of upper class literature which pretends to be omniscient and all- encompassing while presenting a narrow, one sided, twisted and biased view of reality.*

***Keywords-** Caste System, Discrimination, Sexual abuse, Degeneration, Oppression*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rationale of history, then, coincides with text of art, for each promotes a cultural self-knowledge commensurate with and complementary to that personal self-knowledge traditionally viewed as one of the major objects of humanistic study. The term ‘Dalit’ began to appear in the political sphere of Kerala from the beginning years of the 1980s during both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The reason for not using the term ‘Dalit’ while referring to the ‘lower castes’ during this period is that the term implies another set of political argumentations

in the history of caste and anti-caste discourses. Present study tries here to present the discursive patterns that led to the formation of the Dalit politics; to sketch out the historical progression and limitations of the Dalit politics during this era.

Dalit political and cultural interventions in Kerala have a long history going back to the last nineteenth and early twentieth century. This turbulent period of social reformation and cultural revolution is popularly known as the Kerala renaissance. Through modern day Kerala was formed only in 1956; a Malayali identity formation and cultural linguistic solidarity can be identified in the discursive contexts of renaissance. This linguistic nationalism, or regionalism rather, is still forging ahead in various walks of life in Kerala in various avatars. Travancore, Kochi and Malabar were the former princely states of the region. Malabar was directly under the British Madras regime, while the two southern states were ruled by royal families within the imperial power of the Raj. There is considered difference in the historical experience of untouchability and exclusion within Kerala.

Kerala modernity features differently in various historiographies of Kerala. While the mainstream historians used Marxist framework to address the relation between caste and Kerala modernity (Gurukkal and Varrier 1999), some other scholars attempted to understand these issues from a gender perspective and post-colonial perspective (Saradmoni 1980, Devika 2007, Sreekumar 2011, Kodoth 2005, and Linberg 2005). There is a strong tradition of history writing by the subaltern intellectuals, though they received less attention in mainstream academics. It is this stream of historiography, written by the subaltern and lower castes, that forms the focus of this chapter (Kochu 2012, Chentharassery 1979). Here the attempt is not to write a history of lower caste assertions in Kerala, rather to look at the debates and discussion on caste during the early decades of twentieth century. How did the idea of social equality, social justice, individual freedom and other community rights were imagined by the lower caste movements and how did it contrast with the upper caste imaginations? How did these initiatives fail to attain fruitful results? What are the external and internal difficulties faced by these movements in addressing caste? In short, the attempt here is to understand critically the discursive formations of lower castes in Kerala modernity.

Nineteenth century witnessed significant changes in the history of Kerala, not only on account of administrative and political developments by the indirect influence of colonial rule in the southern princely states of Kochi and Travancore, but also through the anti-caste struggles from the lower castes and caste reformation initiatives from both upper and lower castes. The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic change in the political sphere of Kerala. We could find two major streams in the renaissance history in Kerala: one, the internal reform initiated by the upper caste communities which largely focused on the both the individual and reformulation of community practices or rituals (Renukumar and Raj 2000). These initiatives eventually led to the consolidation of community identity and modernisation of the upper castes and some caste groups from the backward community. Indeed, this phase had a crucial role to play in the democratisation of Kerala society.

Today Dalit literature has become a vibrant presence in Malayalam suppressing Dalit who still face upper caste atrocities, social untouchability and economic exploitation. Dalit writing in Malayalam began as an offshoot of the general awakening of Dalit consciousness across the country as result of Ambedker movement for Dalit emancipation in twentieth century. "The primary message given by renaissance movements all over the world is that

humans and civil society have to be formed very consciously and carefully. In the history of Kerala, Poikayil Appachan was the great persona who tried to shoulder this responsibility with all its complexities” (Kapikkad 251). The age in which Poikayil lived was the age of struggle and transformation in Travancore. The caste system could not survive in the old form in the context created by colonial modernity. Different castes reacted against this context differently. During this age of renaissance, a number of social reformers were also born. In this context of Kerala renaissance Poikayil Appachan intervened with a unique theory and praxis which made him a separate entity in his time. The songs composed by Poikayil manifest the journey the race of slaves in Kerala undertook from the dark ages of slavery to the age of enlightenment and identity. These songs, known as ‘*Suvarnageethangal*’ (Golden Songs) have been transmitted orally from generation to generation and are sung as hymns at the prayer meetings of PRDS members.

## 2. SREE POYKAYIL APPACHAN

“The primary message given by renaissance movements all over the world is that humans and civil society have to be formed very consciously and carefully. In the history of Kerala, Poikayil Appachan was the great persona who tried to shoulder this responsibility with all its complexities” (Kapikkad 251).



**Figure1: Sree Poykayil Appachan**

**To say the faults of my caste Though all blame me  
A cursed offspring on earth How is it possible That all blame  
us  
Till the end  
Of earth and sky  
How can God  
Who shaped everything Allow this to happen on earth today?**

Born in 1879 to Kandan and Lechi, who were born slaves of Sankaramangalam Syrian Christian family at Eraviperoor in Pathanamthitta district of Kerala, Kamaran alias Kumaran started working in the field of his master along with his parents. In the early years Kumaran used to talk and sing about the slave lives of his ancestors with great insight. Kumaran later received baptism, accepted the name Yohannan and started preaching as an itinerant mendicant. He was appalled to see caste discrimination prevailed in Christianity even after conversion. Yohannan ended his Christian spiritual career by burning the Holy Bible. Later he declared his new faith proclaiming himself as the god incarnate of this creed and called his faith Prathyaksha *Raksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS).

The age in which Poikayil lived was the age of struggle and transformation in Travancore. The caste system could not survive in the old form in the context created by colonial modernity. Different castes reacted against this context differently. During this age of renaissance, a number of social reformers were also born. In this context of

Kerala renaissance Poikayil Appachan intervened with a unique theory and praxis which made him a separate entity in his time. Poikayil was a man with great insight, knowledge and imagination, who had endeavored to consolidate all the marginalized in Travancore under the identity of sons of slave. He offered them a new theology and predicted salvation in life on earth itself by offering a new life of self-identification, self-determination and self-reliance. He was genius who posited both the theory and the praxis for the eradication of slavery and caste discrimination.

The songs composed by Poikayil manifest the journey the race of slaves in Kerala undertook from the dark ages of slavery to the age of enlightenment and identity. These songs, known as '*Suvarnageethangal*' (Golden Songs) have been transmitted orally from generation to generation and are sung as hymns at the prayer meetings of PRDS members.

Poikayil went around Travancore preaching the new-found faith to the down trodden. These songs and lectures were not only on spiritual exaltation, it also included scathing criticism on prevailing social condition. He opined that caste system was not the creation of the subaltern and exhorted them to fight caste differences among them. "Both Appachan and his disciples questioned, directly or indirectly, the caste discrimination, established religious concepts and belief system" (Chirappad 54). His songs and speeches problematized slavery on material and emotional level and attracted the slaves in large numbers. He realized that slavery created orphanage. For these wandering orphans, Bible was not the means of salvation. An alternate epistemology and theology had to be introduced for the emancipation of the slaves.

### SONGS OF POIKAYIL

Though Poikayil had begun as an itinerant preacher to his fellow slaves, he was quite disappointed to see caste discrimination prevalent in Christian churches and life. Poikayil resisted the way Dalit converts were treated by the elites in Christianity. Poikayil problematized the alienation experienced by the Dalit Christians and composed many songs on caste discrimination in church.

Having baptized in Christ's blood

never ending flaw has gone away.

If you call me Kurava again

I won't come to that church again. (PRDS Songs36).

He had realized that The Bible could not offer salvation to his slave communities. The most important thing about Poikayil was that even when he was involved with Christian missionary works he tried to represent the marginalized. He taught them that the history of the oppressed was not in the Bible and nobody could achieve salvation by reading Bible. He felt that the kingdom of heaven belonged to those who suffered was false. It was this distrust in Christian faith which led him to the burning of Bible and proclaiming a separate theology for the slaves. He believed that the very Bible was written for the Jews and declared that the salvation of his race was not in the Bible. In essence,

this rejection of Bible is theological which lead him to the search for a new theology for slave communities and a new centre of faith named PRDS. To the members of this new faith Poikayil was the savior as well as the god, who had incarnated in the form of a slave and Poikayil was the chosen form.

Poikayil distrusted Christianity and Hinduism as both systems were not free from the caste system and consequent untouchability. In his opinion these religions were religions of the 'savarna' (elite) and they contrived and collaborated to dump the subaltern communities in to the drudgery of slavery and hard work. In the words of Chandramohan: "Most of Appachan's poems and songs are a corollary to his social intervention, which aimed at discarding the Bible and the Vedas on the premise that both tried to sustain slavery, and opposing the fissiparous and recriminatory tendencies prevalent among the lower caste sub-groups" (20).

We on the outskirts of Hinduism

moved about as orphans

We on the outskirts of Christianity

moved about as orphans

The Hindus received us not

The Christians received us not

Nobody is there in this world

to impart us sense and understanding (PRDS Songs 45).

This song expresses how the Dalits were treated by the established religion and its savarna elites. He asked that if those who embraced Christianity were equal before Christ, how separate churches for *Pulayas* and *Parayas* came to be established. Poikayil realized that both Hinduism and Christianity had failed in imparting knowledge and wisdom to the marginalized. To the people who moved around the outskirts of Hinduism and Christianity Poikayil offered parentage by providing a creed. This makes Poikayil quite different from all other renaissance leaders in Kerala by declaring a different faith and ideology for the slave communities.

Caste is specific to Indian context. Religion could not eradicate caste discrimination, Poikayil realized. In his songs caste in Christian church comes to open. The terms *Pulakkalli*, *Parakkalli* brings out the anti-caste, anti-feminist attitude of Christian church.

Have you read the Bible?

How many castes are there,

my dear friend?

When you sermon at church

address all women

as of the same womb.

When the mass is over, out side

you call her *Pulakkalli* or *Parakkalli*

My dear friend.

Can you say *Pulakkalli* ?

Hasn't untouchability removed

after receiving baptism in the blood of Christ?

Can you call her *Parakkalli*? (PRDS Songs 48).

Poikayil's songs carry the essence of his Bible criticism. He had realized that Bible and Christianity were not the last resort of the people who had been subjugated physically and mentally by the hegemonic social system in Kerala. All existing theologies, prophets and epistemologies which create the other all over the world, have been rejected here:

The voice of god stopped

Messengers' journey too stopped, no serf,

Lived so far thinking as my own

the written words.

Having read the Old Testament fully

I did not realize the truth.

Having read the New Testament fully

I did not realize the truth.

Having read the write-ups fully

I did not realize the truth.

Became blind to see

the Holy Bible does not belong to me. (PRDS Songs 43).

Poikayil endeavored to consolidate all the slave communities under the single identity of the sons of slave and taught that they were the offspring of same parents. People used to attend in great numbers at the meetings held by Poikayil. After the meeting people would shed tears profusely unable to part their siblings. This type of bond was

made possible by Poikayil by endowing them, who were once considered as objects to be sold and bought, with thoughts and feelings of which they were not attributed of.

Poikayil strongly believed that the marginalized were the true inheritors of this land, they cherished rich ancient culture and that all the oppressed people belonged to the same parents. They were the first tillers of this land and developed its unique culture. Man, nature and divinity all lived in exquisite unity. But the main stream historiography had erased them from the annals of history. Poikayil sings about the obliteration of Dalits from history:

About my race ...

I see no alphabet

about my race

I see histories

of many races

.....

Oh, that there was no one

in the ancient world

to write the history of my race!

.....

The story of how a people who lived from times long ago in Keralam

came to be lowly on earth

.....

I'm not ashamed

Of the frailties of our castes

(The Oxford Indian Anthology 5).

To him history was not simply the events of the past, but a tool for self-determination and self-definition of consciousness about contemporary realities. The basic tenet of the survival of a people is its understanding of its own history. This consciousness makes him indignant at the invisibility and erasure of the history of his people. The song '*Kanuneeloraksharavum*' (I see no alphabet) expresses "the anguish and anger at the cruel exclusion of Dalits from history, it demands that they be given proper representation in it. It is an attempt at searching for roots and identity"

(Chandramohanan 21). The term 'race' has great significance in the songs of Poikayil. It is used to refer to the indigenous slave people as well as the people who have been chosen for salvation.

Casteism and consequent discrimination prevalent in Christian churches is vehemently criticized by Poikayil. He questioned the rationale of building separate churches for the people converted from different castes. He exhorted that division among churches would not solve human problems.

Pulaya has a church, Paraya has another church

The fisherman Marakkan has another church

The master has a church and the serf has another

Here and there separate churches

A church in South another in North

A church in East another in west

Church after church has come up in line

I find distinction still not removed (PRDS Songs 35).

Poikayil was very conscious of the dangers of disunity among the down-trodden due to its division in to hundreds of sub-castes. He wanted them to unite under the identity of the offspring of slave. He had taught that all the subjugated belonged to the same race. They were the descendents of slaves who were bought and sold like cattle. It pained him to see his race disintegrate in to sub-caste groups and consolidate around caste identities at the cost of unity. He was critical of *Parayas* and *Pulayas* who had changed their caste names as *Sambhavaras* and *Cheramars*. He realized that this would not make any difference in their social status, and sought to eradicate sub-caste consciousness and sense of hierarchy among them.

If all Pulayas become Cheramar

will the untouchability of Pulayas

be removed?

In this world

Is there any end to it?

If all Parayas become Sambhavas

will the blame of Parayas



be removed?

In this world

Is there any end to it? (PRDS Songs 44).

Poikayil wanted to give them self-respect and dream of salvation by wiping out the horrendous experience of slavery. For this purpose, he posited an alternate vision of life and spirituality. Poikayil has written songs on horrors of slavery and the miserable life of slaves. Pain and pangs of a slave mother whose husband has been sold lives with the fear of losing her children reveal the horrific lives of slaves. The world slave-experience and alienation are revealed through these songs.

It has been four or five days

since my husband, Chothi, was sold

I don't know the place.

.....

The one who has bought

comes to take me

I cry hugging my children.

I washed my children

Gave them the last ball of rice

Oh! Son you eat!

O my elder son!

Let me part:

Will you look after your younger ones? (PRDS Songs 42).

The songs delineating the slave experience of his ancestors had touched the very souls of the members. The cries and resistance caused by wounds and cracks resulted from slavery and untouchability can be traced in the songs of Poikayil. Dalits in Kerala are the people who have borne the brunt of cruel agricultural slavery. Kapikkad opines that “when these memories about history evolves into self-consciousness of the people, new possibilities of self-determination is opened up before each slave” (253). This is not the only experience the Dalits in Kerala, it is the experience of those who have been broken, trampled and erased from history all over the world.

Like cattle

they sold our ancestors

and got money (PRDS Songs 38).

When tilling the field

Tied down along with

ox and buffalo

O my god! Shall we forget? (PRDS Songs 45).

When he sings our fathers have been sold in the market along with cattle/ children became orphan /when father and mother were separated /and send to north and south it becomes the recollection of destitution, alienation and orphanage and the cry for parentage and self-reliance. Experience of slavery and alienation are prominent in the following lines:

You, Chaki eagle, have you seen our father?

Mother too has gone without a single world.

No means to quench thirst and hunger.

Don't cry, keep quiet my *Panki*.

Who will come with milk in one breast?

Who will give rice gruel?

Will come with milk in one breast

and water in other.

Don't shout, don't cry, sleep my child!

Poikayil makes use of biblical myths and situations in his speeches and songs. The aim of which is not the spiritual exultation but to bring in awareness to life realities. The song of Noah and deluge is typical example of Poikayil's use of "biblical myths and imagery to subvert the Christian concept of morality and fair play" (Chandramana 25). The song reveals how Jehovah discards the useless trees in the construction of the Arc. He also

forbids those who are not so dear to him from entering to the Arc. Here the downtrodden lives are discarded as the fruitless trees.

Those selected entered the arc

Jehovah closed the door of the Arc

Water hole of the sky was opened

It started raining

What a pity! What a pity! (PRDS Songs 35).

Poikayil's use of names, metaphors and contexts from Bible is likely to mislead the uninformed readers to the impression that PRDS is an offshoot of Christianity. K. M. Sherrif has observed that PRDS is "astonishingly similar in structure and agenda to the dissenting sects like the Lollards, the Levellers and Ranters in fourteenth century England." (Blackness12). The fact that the early life of Poikayil was closely associated with the Bible and Christianity cannot be overlooked. "His use of Biblical references and words was aimed at making comparisons and contrast with the harsh realities of life around him" (25).

The song on brahmanic colonization, composed on folk strain, is an instance of Poikayil's black humour and sarcasm. This song reveals Poikayil's understanding of the Aryan invasion of Indian sub-continent.

From the land of Arya, *theyyam thara*

You Arya brahmins, *theyyam thara*

Clad in rags, *theyyam thara*

You Arya Brahmin, *theyyam thara*

You wandered every house, *theyyam thara*

You wandered every place, *theyyam thara*.

In another song Poikayil portrays, with all emotional intensity, the historic experience of colonization and slavery as well as the orphanage and tribulation of his people.

The age, when we were living happily

as the first citizen of Kerala

Our ancestors, peacefully living,  
Have been shackled and made slaves.  
The age, when the Brahmin priests,  
crossing over the river Sindhu,  
we're settling on this beautiful land,  
Like cattle sold in the market  
Brahmins sold them and got money.

In a valueless society one has to become conscious of values. Kapikkad observes that “when the slave throws away his soul and body, history gives way” (254). Poikayil had advised his people to dress neatly in white, to keep their houses and surroundings clean and tidy, to cook food after taking bath, and not to eat stale food. His advice that as both man and woman are part of the divine, they be given equal importance carries great significance in the present-day scenario of women’s struggle for their existence, identity and rights. His advices not only freed their souls, it as well transformed their slave bodies. And, these were the people who conducted a peaceful procession, dressed in white, against the World War I. It was the time when Dalits had been prohibited from walking on public roads. Poikayil and the members of PRDS questioned the brahmanic hegemony and the dominance of the savarna by walking along the road dressed neatly in white. “This is the context when the sons of slaves, throwing away the signs of slavery, communicate with the world as universal citizen” (255). This incident reveals the depth and far-reaching effects of Poikayil’s teachings.

Poikayil had advised his people not to eat the meat of ox and buffalo not because these were holy animals. During the age of slavery, it was with these animals that their ancestors had shared their pangs and pain. These animas had known the stories of tears and hunger of the slaves, Poikayil realized. This reveals Poikayil’s ecological understanding of an organic life in which human world, animal world and nature exist supporting each other.

Poikayil’s vision of his new order challenges the established religion and its belief system. The concept of god and heaven are introduced in a sense quite different from conventional religions. He envisions an order devoid of caste difference and personal conflicts. It is a centre where universal law and justice are distributed irrespective of caste and gender. All find happiness in his order and no difference exists between king and subjects in his order.

This order is for those  
who have been sold and bought up.

This is the order where  
caste differences and conflicts are solved.

Unadulterated justice is  
meditated in this order.

This is the order, where the truth,  
told by the God, is revealed.

It's the order the All-mighty has incarnated (PRDS Songs 68).

Poikayil had understood that the spiritual salvation was insufficient against the caste dominance of internal colonialism. He was well conscious of the material resources which had to be secured by this reformed people. Land and education were the material resources he and his people tried to secure at first. He advised them to acquire these resources not out of the compassion of others but out of their hard labour and collective effort. His sect had bought more than two hundred acres of land a century back. When he was a member of Travancore Prajasabha he had requested that arable land be assigned to the marginalized. Many schools were started by him for the poor. "The fact that in 1930 he established an English medium school at Vengalathukunnu gives definite indication of where his people should move forward in future" (255).

Poikayil, like B. R. Ambedkar and Ayyankali, had welcomed the advent of modernity with all its possibilities of emancipation for the marginalized. Poikayil celebrates the onset of modernity in his song:

What a magic it is!

A train-horn around Kottayam city!

A car comes, circling Thiruvalla town,

A boat comes, circling Alappuzha town,

Sound of a plane around Thiruvalla town

Where do you go, my fellow travelers? (PRDS Songs 55).

Dr. Ajay Shekhar observes that "these songs prise open the racial-gender-hegemonic dreams of the savarna racism. They are the memories and music of forbearance, slave-experience and survival, and have umbilical connection with the narratives and expressions of the marginalized people all over the world" (17). Poikayil addresses not only the Dalits but the entire marginalized people, on the plane of humanity and brotherhood, all over the world.

## CONCLUSION

“Most of these songs still exist as part of the belief system and discourse of PRDS as well as the expression of the identity formation of the subaltern people” (V. V. Swamy 15). The greatness of Poikayil Appachan lies in his understanding that caste has to be addressed on spiritual as well as material plane. His words and actions substantiate the theory and praxis of his mission.

Appachan severely attack Brahmanism and Hinduism in particular for creating the caste Varna hell in Kerala. He also constested and critiqued the evangelical claims of Syrian Christian ‘Churchianity’ that imbibed the Brahmanical values of purity and pollution and cultural elitism. As Arundhati Roy has observed Christ and Christianity have no caste but unfortunately the caste Hindu elites who have crept into Syrian Christianity in Kerala, have caste. He attacked the Euro centrism of the church and even he appropriation of the Bible by colonial forces and elitist groups outside Europe. As mentioned earlier, we have seen he burned the Bible as in an act of critical rejection and symbolic protest. It can be compared to Ambedkar’s defiant act of burning the *Manusmruti*.

The primary aim of the Dalit Literature is freedom of Dalits and resistance against the nasty caste ridden tradition of Kerala as well as India. In conclusion, the meaning of dalit and dalit literature conveys a message about his/ her community, but not individuality; about his/her revolt, but not passivity, about his/her progress but not regression. The message is conveyed to the whole world about their social, political, economic and educational status through exploitative, desperate, and embarrassed portrayals laced with grief reveling how they continue to be suppressed and enslaved. In this context, it can be easily assertrd that Dalit literature questioned the upper caste ideologies and foregrounded the neglected aspects of life. Dalit literatureis based on *anubhavam* (experience). The experience proceeds *anumanam* (speculations). The seeds of revolution and resistance that are being spread through these writings are powerful enough to trigger a storm in the near future. Homi Bhabha proposes that every subaltern or post slavery narratives attempts interrupt the western discourse of modernity. The writings of Poikayil Appachan directed against the oppressive mind set of the elite groups i.e. effect a redeeming subversive overhaul.

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