

**LIVING IN THE MIDST OF INCOMPREHENSIBLE**

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The issue of untouchability has been taken up by many Indian authors in fiction, poetry and even on stage. Today Dalit Studies is a major discipline of study in humanities. Unlike the whole of India, the Dalit situation in Kerala is quite different. Kerala is hailed as the literate state of India. It has a different layout in regard to the socio political currents. Even when dalit upliftment became a burning issue in the other parts of India, the image Kerala projected to the outer world was of a society where untouchability was long forgotten. Here, I am attempting a reading into the plight of the untouchables and the age old untouchability, in the Kerala context. I have used Taha Madayi's *Adiyar Teacher*, which itself is a study based on the experiences of Sulochana, as basis and ground for this paper.

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Caste in India is a system of social stratification and goes back to Vedic period. With the British, its meaning and significance changed. It is now the basis for reservation in India. The caste system basically consists of two different concepts – Varna and Jati. Varna has clear Vedic origins and was more like a class distinction whereas Jatis are from the post Vedic feudal times and mostly refers to the guild one belongs to. There are thousands of Jatis but only four Varnas – Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas

(administrators, warriors and kings), Vaishyas (tradesmen, artisans and farmers) and Sudras (labourers), the lowest of the classes. There is yet another group / class of people who has gone unmentioned in the Vedic texts, the untouchables.

Though varna classification dates back to the Vedas, untouchability does not seem to be a part of the vedic texts, but it is mentioned in post vedic texts, especially Manusmriti. Mahatma Gandhi took to calling the untouchables by the name Harijans,



meaning children of God. But the term has come to be identified as derogatory in the post independence, post Ambedkar India. They address themselves as Dalits today. The word "dalit" comes from Sanskrit "Dalita", meaning divided, split, broken, scattered. It was perhaps first used in the nineteenth century by Jyotirao Phule in the context of the oppression faced by the erstwhile "untouchable" castes at the hands of twice born Hindus. The term Dalit has become a political identity and today they use the term "Dalit" as they believe the term is more than being broken and is in fact an identity born of struggle and assertion.

The issue of untouchability has been taken up by many Indian authors in fiction, poetry and even on stage. Today Dalit Studies is a major discipline of study in humanities. Unlike the whole of India, the Dalit situation in Kerala was quite different. Kerala was hailed as the literate state of India. It also had a different layout in regard to the socio political currents. Even when dalit upliftment became a burning issue in the other parts of India, the image Kerala projected to the outer world was of a society where untouchability was long forgotten.

On the national front, Dr B R Ambedkar, was a major force for the Dalit cause, himself born into Mahar, a dalit community of Maharashtra, knew first hand the plight of this marginalized group. By the hindu laws all had to follow the religious and ritualistic practises. The ones who err were often castigated. But Ambedkar found that though the Dalits followed all the rules, they were still the untouchables and the marginalized.

In Kerala, long before Ambedkar, there was a lone star who fought for an equal space for Dalits, Ayyankali, the leader of the Sadhujana Paripalana Sangam (Organization for the Welfare of the Marginalized), which was instituted in 1907. He had realized that the essence of social justice is freedom. He did not beg for mercy; neither to the upper castes nor to the rulers, for he believed that freedom was attained through action, and not mercy. The formation of the Dalit body itself was an action. He was the first pulaya (a dalit caste), to ride a 'villuvandi', an upper caste ride, wearing white clothes which dalits were forbidden to wear, along the prohibited road. He demanded that dalits be

provided education, for he believed that education was the key to freedom and upliftment. And when this was denied, he called for a yearlong agrarian strike, first of its kind in the history. "Kallumala Struggle", another remarkable moment of dalit uprising in the kerla history, where dalit women broke the kallumalas (shell necklaces) which they were forced to wear in place of blouse. They swore to never wear those bonds again. Other dalit movements like PRDS, ATCS, SEEDIAN, and KPM also came up along the way.

Kerala matched developed countries in its human development indices, but by 1980's, much later after the revolutionary days of Ayyankali, Kerala dalits came to realize that they have been victims and outsiders of the development discourses undertaken by the left and right wing political parties all along. The progress route that Kerala undertook excluded the dalits who were yet divided as castes and subcastes, even when the other classes and castes were aligning themselves together, taking strength in numbers to form formidable political powers. As the Dutch-American sociologist, Professor Philomena Essed says Power exists as long as the group stays together against the "others"... Exercising power over other people affects them, through action or inaction...whether or not those who exercise power are aware of the success or consequences of their practices and whether or not the other party is aware of the power being exercised over him or her." Ayyankali had renounced caste at his time, and this had kept him from entering into the political domain. Dalit movements over the time have been trying to enter politics to avail for themselves a space to assert their rights. In the national level BSP and other parties are proving their might, but in Kerala a single strong movement is yet to be seen.

Kerala has a history of being the first state to officially let the dalits enter temples. This proclamation by the ruler of the then Travancore state in 1936 is still hailed as a milestone of Kerala social reformation. But the sad part is that this did not affect dalits in the sociopolitical arena of life in any positive way.

Dalits, tired of the differentiation, had begun converting to other religions. Ambedkar took to Buddhism and after him many from the Mahar



community too. Conversions happened all over India. In Kerala, many converted to Christianity and Islam. And it was to curb this conversion spree that the state declared the temple entry proclamation. Another aspect that kept the Kerala dalits from emerging as a sole group was the left influence in the region. This had maintained a cosy blanket of trust among people about an ever absent equality. Not that Marxian theories did not have its effect, it did open up the boundaries of caste. But dalits were still out of the space, as in the vedic texts they were still unmentioned. The whole concept of 'Malayaliness' is itself much afar from the social realities of a dalit's life. By 1990's, as elsewhere Kerala left too was undergoing an identity crisis and there was general disappointment and disillusionment.

Though literary voices from Kerala were heard all over the world, dalit voice remained unheard and marginalised. The dalit literary tradition was basically oral and mostly as songs too. With time, variant forms of the same songs came up. But unlike the mainstream writings that were translated and read throughout the globe, these remained in their specific locales, the only change being that some of the forms died off. According to Bama, Dalit Literature is:

Liberation literature like Black Literature, Feminist Literature and Communist-Socialist Literature...there are traces of the agony and ecstasy of the dalits, the direct and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the supernatural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the reconstruction of a conscious Dalit literature. (Bama 97-98)

Sulochana, from Kannur district in Kerala, whose story Taha Madayi takes up in *Adiyar Teacher*, was a pulaya woman who was forced to resign her teaching job, unable to bear calls of "Adiyar teacher", more than sixty years ago. The study is presented in the form of an interview. And as it unfolds, we find a woman doubly oppressed. She herself seems to have forgotten that she was a teacher once. And there are other things that she does not remember and does not want to either. After completing her schooling in

the nearby Basel Mission School upto fourth standard, she continued her studies in Kozhikode and lived at a Harijan hostel. After her schooling, she was trained in coir making at Bepore training school. After two years of study and a coir teacher's certificate in hand, Sulochana still found it difficult to earn a living, not because the quality of her yarn was bad but because nobody would buy yarn weaved by a dalit. She was later appointed as a coir teacher in Karadukka school, in Kasargod. The problems she had to face there brought her to the decision to resign the job. The students who were mostly nairs called her "adiyar teacher" in front of their teachers and guardians, but nobody ever reacted. And it was not just the students; the teachers had ordered the students not to sit beside her. The upper caste students were prohibited from doing handicrafts, so she taught Malayalam as well. When she went in to the headmaster's room to sign the register, the headmaster would move away to keep a wide berth and after her, it would be wiped with a cloth or paper before anyone else touched it. The only teacher who was civil to her in the whole school was a thiyya teacher from Thalassery. And she remembers the boy, Balan, who used to sit beside her. She was stoned often by people around. And in the end she decided she had had enough and asked DO for a transfer, but soon realized that it would be the same anywhere she went and resigned the job. Her old school friend, Stephen, who joins her for the interview talks about the shock he had when he saw Sulochana, a trained teacher doing menial work. This was what she returned home to.

Ayyankali, an illiterate man himself, believed that education was the sole means of escape. The first child he took to school and demanded be educated was a girl. Then, his demand was denied, but what good did education bring a girl of his own caste. Her years have taught her that no kinship and institution is enough, that only if one works shall one be able to survive. And that is all what she looks forward to these days. Charka is now displayed everywhere as a symbol that stands for swadeshi, freedom and in short for Mahatma Gandhi. But for Sulochana, charka was no help. It did not gain her freedom, not even sustenance.



In legal terms, today dalits are acknowledged as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and with this acknowledgement comes affirmative action and reservation. Pulaya belongs to the scheduled caste and adiyar to the scheduled tribes. In a system where there are hundreds of castes and thousands of sub castes, it may not mean anything if one is not recognised for one's caste. But when the castes are locale specific, and where the dominant castes are identified by all, lack of understanding the adiyar- pulaya difference does raise questions. If the identity of a dalit was then formed by namecalling and segregation, now the means have changed. It is done through identifying and namesaying, a recent trend among the upper castes being identifying one's caste, most add to their first names their caste names instead of surnames. The difference is not created by these "secondary citizens"; instead they are victims of it. They were mass drives of conversion to escape the denigration. Sulochana too has a similar story. She was born Dakshayini, and later became Sulochana when she joined the Basel Mission. Many in her region had already converted and Sulochana's family felt segregated even amongst their own people and this desperation drove them to conversion. Not that the conversions made much difference. Pulaya became a rice Christian within the church.

The question remains, is there no escape for dalits. Even after a text like *Why I am not a Hindoo*, there still is no escape from being a Hindoo, when you are clearly not one, or at least not considered one. Untouchability persists, only that its form changes. Present day politics seems to be paving an easy road for de-sanskritization yet another discourse that excludes dalits.

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