



Identity Assertions and Print in Malayalam and Tamil-Speaking Regions in the Early Twentieth Century: Some Comments

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KEYWORDS: KERALA, TAMIL NADU, ANTI-CASTE COUNTER-PUBLICS, VERNACULAR PRINT JOURNALISM, MALAYALAM

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For the caste-oppressed people of India's extreme South—the region comprising the present-day states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu—the late nineteenth and early twentieth century decades were a period best characterised as a Great Opening¹. In both the Malayalam-speaking and Tamil-speaking areas, Brahmanism, which deeply informed socio-political power in utterly distinct ways, faced stiff challenges from the people who it oppressed and excluded. The hollowing out of local potentates through the spread of British colonialism, the integration of the regions into the capitalist World System, the presence of liberal ideas filtered through the lens of British colonialism, improvements in communications and the emergence of publics, the material and political weakening of local elites, the ignition of new social forces through missionary education—these and many other factors facilitated a strong critique of social organisation based on the principles of Brahmanism in both places. The nascent public spheres in Malayalam and Tamil in the late nineteenth century, which grew in reach and depth steadily in the course of the twentieth century, was an important arena of this contestation.



It is now well-known that these vernacular public spheres departed quite strikingly from the Habermasian ideal of the bourgeois public sphere. Also, the very different pre-British social and political legacies and the distinctly-different political arrangements and state-structures in the Malayalam- and Tamil-speaking regions ensured that the emerging public spheres in these languages, as well as the political possibilities they opened up, would differ quite strikingly. While the mainstream of the new public spheres in both societies were dominated by the elite, the nature of these elites differed. If it was the brahmin community that took to modern education and institutions early in Tamil-speaking areas, it was the *sudras*—the Nairs—who made that effort in the Malayalam-speaking areas. In the late nineteenth century, in the Malayalam-speaking native state of Travancore, public voice was crafted and deployed actively by these sudras to question the wisdom of the Travancore monarchy's reliance on "foreign brahmins"—mainly Tamil and Maratha—as civil servants, and to project themselves as worthy modern subjects of the rapidly-modernising sub-nationality of Travancore (Jeffrey 2020). In the course of a few decades, the existing elite caste groupings in the Malayalam-speaking areas—as well as the *avarna* Ezhavas who benefited substantially from the Malayalam-speaking regions' integration with the World Systems (Chandramohan 2016), embarked on the process of turning themselves into modern communities consisting of modern individuals and families. Through this process they effectively recast traditional caste-affiliated endogamous networks of blood and kinship and united several sub-castes in the loose pre-modern caste groupings. Thus, the modern community in Kerala has always been a caste/community. This process necessarily involved the formation of organisational platforms representing the caste/community to engage the state in negotiations to gain rights and resources.

Secondly, as a result of the massive economic and political change under British rule, the casteist social contract between the brahmin and sudra groups in the Malayalam-speaking areas which allowed for power-sharing between these elites and the abjection of the *avarna* castes, had been weakening. In the late nineteenth century, the sudras of the Malayalam-speaking areas began a process that makes sense much more as an effort to challenge the inferior terms under which the sudras were subsumed traditionally under the pre-British Brahmin-sudra social contract, and simultaneously appealed to the Hindu monarchy of Travancore to recognise them as industrious and valuable subjects deserving resources and rights. In the nascent Tamil public sphere, mainstream Brahmin elites contended with British colonialism over positions of power and other resources.



However, as Ranjith Thankappan points out for Travancore in his contribution, outside this mainstream, subaltern counter-publics, of caste-oppressed groups, had begun to emerge as the nineteenth century ended. The vast inequalities that marked this region contributed to the complexity of the layers and spaces of the nascent Malayalam public sphere. For example, the identity formation and assertion made possible in and through the modern Malayalam public sphere in early twentieth century Kerala had very different aims and consequences for the elites and the subalterns. For the sudras, modern identity-formation (the transformation of sudra groupings into the "Nair" community) involved re-negotiating the terms of inclusion within a broader savarna social formation projected into the future (in which the brahmins continued to be at the apex and sudras were assigned priority according to their cultural proximity to brahmins²).

But for the formerly-enslaved avarna people, the shaping of the modern self and identity self-formation rejecting ascribed caste identifications was nothing less than a coming to life—an emergence from the abjected existence that pre-modern caste oppression had subjected them to. This promised in the future a society of equals united in humanity. And this latter imagination was clearly antithetical to the imagination of the savarna social formation -- which was the aim of the twentieth century refurbishment of the brahmin-sudra social contract that came to be called "Nair" social reform, "Nambutiri social reform", "Ambalavasi social reform" and so on. However, for both groups, identity formation and assertion were crucial in enabling negotiation with the state for resources and rights, and in this, organizing effort and the creation of a modern caste/community discourse were quite crucial. Journals and newspapers were absolutely vital instruments for both projects.

Thus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Malayalam-speaking areas saw the publication of a number of newspapers and magazines that were clearly devoted to the refurbishing of elite caste/community identities: The *Nazrani Deepika* (1887, Syrian Christian); *Service* (1919, from the Nair Service Society), the *Unni Nambutiri* (1919) and *Yogakshemam* (1911, both Malayala Brahmin), and so on. The use of print journalism by the avarnas which had antecedents in missionary publications of the nineteenth century also began to proliferate in this period. As mentioned above, they were distinctly different, as may be evident from the sharp critique of Brahmanism in the Malayalam-speaking areas beyond pleas for reform that they often carried: for example, *Sujanandini* (1881); *Vivekodayam* (1904); *Kerala Kaumudi* (1911); *Mitavadi*,



edited by the avarna Buddhist intellectual C. Krishnan (1913), and so on. However, these were also powerful instruments of collective voice that addressed the state especially regarding redistribution and recognition.

Ayyankali's vision of a liberating identity clearly went beyond the modernised caste/community model—it projected a renewed people united in equal humanity, which he called the *saadhujanam*. The very naming of *Saadhujanaparipaalini* that was the mouth-piece of the organisation devoted to this new community is quite revealing. It is expressive of the twin imperatives that drove the identity-shaping and affirmation by formerly enslaved social groupings away from ascribed identifications and towards a modern community of equals. The word *saadhu* in Malayalam has two, rather drastically different, meanings. It may mean "valid", or "correct", clearly signifying presence and potential legitimacy; and at the same time, it can also mean "innocent", "passive", even "poor". It is used to describe a *janam*—a People, tacitly differentiated from *prajakal* or subjects. *Paripaalanam* too has subtle shades of meaning, ranging from the care of an already-present and possibly already-matured entity, to the nurturing of an emergent one. This ambiguity of meaning cannot be but crucial for the language of radical identity-shaping—the real re-former, then, gestures to the already-present nature of the community on the one hand, but also sees it as a new formation that must be nurtured, on the other.

In the Tamil-speaking regions, however, the emergent social dynamics of the late twentieth century in the Madras Presidency enabled the coming together of non-Brahmin groups against the dominant presence of Brahmins in modern institutions of government, education, and in emergent public forums (Washbrook 2008). Print journalism was deployed early on in this venture—for example, in the early journalistic ventures of Iyothee Thass whose *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* and R. Srinivasan and C. S. Arokiasamy, founders of the *Paraiyan* (1893) and the *Adi-Dravidan* (1893) respectively, which opened up a space for the dalit Adi-dravida self-shaping and identity assertion (Geetha & Rajadurai 1998), or the weekly *Tamilian* edited by C. Pattibhraman, a Buddhist who sought to convert caste-oppressed groups to Buddhism (Mohan 1982: 114). Both these were resolutely critical of the caste elitism of nationalism, extremely suspicious of the Home Rule Movement led by Annie Besant; and they preceded the non-Brahmin manifesto and the campaign against Annie Besant and her Brahmin supporters in 1917 through the English weekly *Non-Brahman* edited by C. Saranagapani Mudaliar (Mohan 1982: 105). This was followed by such journalism—in and through which collective non-brahmin identities could



be consolidated and powerfully politicised in anti-caste terms, as Uma Ganesan's contribution shows. Here, as in the case of the avarna print journalism in the Malayalam-speaking regions, the concerns were as much about building a new, caste-free society of equals as it was of addressing public politics and questions of public resource-distribution.

In the light of the above discussion, how may one make sense of the predominance of sudra contributors to the first issue of the Saadhujanaparipaalini? Clearly, the inaugural issue may be read as a statement—about the new community envisaged in the future. It must be remembered that in the pre-modern order of caste in the Malayalam-speaking areas, the people who were enslaved were not merely deprived of resources but were actually abjected—which is to say, removed from sight, whose mere appearance provoked horror and extreme violence against them by the privileged castes.³ The Great Opening, then, in order to be meaningful, would have to be a time of not just gaining resources to flourish economically; for that to happen, it had to be, but more fundamentally, a time of claiming fully-human presence in both material and social spaces.

This probably explains the invitation obviously extended to the modern-educated among the sudra oppressors to write in the very first issue of the Saadhujanaparipaalini. The two textual strategies that Thankappan identifies—of retrieving history and the use of affect—are of particular significance here. On the one hand, the retrieval of a past of labour—and knowledge, especially of agriculture—as Ayyankali reiterated in his demands for land and education for the Pulayas before the Travancore government (Devika 2010)—was central to the creation of a past in which the new identity could be rooted and in which it would gain framing, and thereby, visibility, presence. On the other hand, the acknowledgement of the fully-human presence of the Saadhujanam has to be elicited from the elites, more precisely, the oppressors. The invitation to leading sudra writers, participants in the ongoing shaping of sudra groupings into the modern caste/community of Nair, to write about the Pulayas and their journey both towards the Saadhujanam (when read as "valid, legitimate People") and away from it (when read as "passive, poor folk"), is, then, an important tactical decision. The first issue, then, constructs a powerful, albeit temporary and surely ambiguous affective community which the sudra contributors and the Pulayas they address seem to share, which however appears to be far more inclusive compared with the savarna social formation newly emergent through the re-casting of the brahmin-sudra social contract. Thus, as it appears in a quote that Thankappan flags, a



sudra writer is able to compare the ex-slave people with post-slavery Afro-American people and implicitly project themselves as the equivalent of their white allies. Indeed, this comparison was made, originally, by the missionaries who wrote on the abominable oppression of the enslaved caste-oppressed people in Travancore in the mid-twentieth century.⁴

Yet the limits of this imagined community of affect is only too apparent—in the fear that the sudra writers express about missionary conversions of the Pulayas. In other words, such a community is conditional on the Saadhujanam gaining visibility and presence within the broader Hindu fold—an impossible future, given that the emergent savarna social formation was now being mapped onto the very idea of the expanded Hindu community, and the latter offered no space to the ex-slave people, or even the more powerful avarna groups such as the Ezhava.⁵

The Self-Respect Movement's total rejection of Brahmanism and nationalism informed by it makes a striking contrast to this. It has been pointed out that the argument that the Dravidian Movement in general represented the collapse of a historical alliance between the brahmins and the vellalars (similar to the brahmin-sudra social contract I have mentioned in relation to the Malayalam-speaking areas, above), and that it was a subsequent attempt at manipulation by a group of saiva vellala intellectuals to make narrow gains as an interest-group is fallacious—empirical unsound (Venkatachalapathy 1995). Indeed, the contrast between the two styles of utilizing print media in constructing identities beyond caste oppression that emerges from the two instances probed by Thankappan and Ganesan seems to confirm this with remarkable vividness. That the sudra re-casters who were engaged in the task of renegotiating brahmin-sudra social and cultural bonds in Kerala had to be drawn into an affective community, however ephemeral, at the inaugural moment of radical identity-building and affirmation by the resurgent ex-slave people, speaks of the salient presence of the emergent savarna social formation. However, in the debate around Katherine Mayo's criticisms of Indian [Hindu] culture, all such refurbished and modernised Brahmanism—the very stuff of the community reformism—is roundly rejected, as Ganesan's analysis reveals.

This also teaches us important lessons, perhaps: about the need to break out decisively from the *varna* framework for a liberating critique of elite nationalism. However, Ayyankali had to deal with both the ongoing rehauling of privileged caste power as well as the caste-Hindu native state the political power of which was wholly and openly shaped by Brahmanism; the significance of the missionary presence and conversion, while generally



providing the enslaved people with powerful tools of escape, had very different material and political significance in the two regions. Indeed, the fact that Ayyankali's burdens were strikingly different from that of the Self-Respecters despite their shared repugnance of brahmanical caste orders, pre-modern or modernised, can hardly be ignored.

Endnotes

¹ As different from the most common characterisations of this period for Kerala, as a time of 'Renaissance' (Gopalakrishnan 1977). The characterisation of this period as a Tamil Renaissance seems far more empirically correct (Rajesh 2014). Nevertheless, in both societies, the sweep of socio-political critique as well as efforts to build a new, more equal society is better characterised as the Great Opening. The idea of Renaissance with reference to Europe has of course been critiqued harshly, for example, Attridge 1987.

² For example the sudra class of temple servants began to consolidate themselves as separate groups higher than the Nairs within the emergent savarna social formation, calling themselves Ambalavasis in general.

³ I draw here on the Kristevan notion of the abject (Kristeva 1982). The Self consolidates itself by the exclusion of the abject—which is its perpetual other and its presence evokes fear, anxiety about boundaries, and most importantly, visceral revulsion. This, I think, describes much better the othering of the enslaved people among the avarnas of Malayalam-speaking areas, which persisted well until the middle of the twentieth century. It is worth noting that the actual practice of caste exclusion in these regions included not just untouchability, but also actually "un-seeability". The concept has been deployed in the social sciences now and does not now always point to a psychic process, but to a social experience of stigma and invisibility.

⁴ The missionaries of the Church Missionary Society in central Travancore actively drew upon the parallels between Atlantic slavery and the miserable state of the slave castes here. See Mohan, not dated.

⁵ This disjuncture between the neo-savarna social formation that took shape in the twentieth century and the Savarkarite imagination of the Hindu Rashtra was completely exposed during the sudra riots in 2018-19 over the Indian Supreme Court's judgment permitting women of menstruating ages to undertake the pilgrimage to the forest shrine of Sabarimala. Devika, forthcoming.

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