Community and the Tribal: *Thalamurakal, Mavelimantam*

Like a viper caste retreated in to the darkness of sleepy memories.

*(Thalamurakal 150)*

It is the lords who robe us, and it is the lords who unrobe us . . .
What is there in a slave’s body that the lords have not seen?

*(Mavelimantam 130)*

O V Vijayan’s *Thalamurakal* (Generations) has been widely read as a fictional attempt to recreate the history of caste society, bringing out its ironic subtleties and eternal paradoxes. It narrativizes the intricacies and complexities of the Varna-caste system under the hegemonic ideology of Brahmanism as manifested in the lifelong struggles of the inquisitive and rebellious male generations of the Ponmudi household in the Palghat region of Kerala. In their critical confrontation with caste, generations of men from
this family struggled with their individual game plans that included conversion, Sanskritization and upward exogamy. The Sanskrit scholarship and “Brahmanyam” of Krishnan Uncle and the defiant conversions of Gopalan (Imtiaza) and Chamiarappan (Theodore) respectively to Islam and Christianity proved futile and absurd. The seductions of Brahmanism, the quest to achieve it and the futility of achieving it as well as the change in faith, everything is enacted in the continuous struggle of the members of the Ponmudi household. The central character Chandran, the grandson of Chamiarappan marries a German woman, Rosemary Wagner, and their son Theodore Vel Wagner survives the struggle and curse of generations as a racial hybrid who exceeds and endures caste.

As the novel opens the young Chandran is struggling with the hegemonic aspects of Valmiki Ramayanam in the Ponmudi tharavadu (7). The opening chapter itself is named “Rama Banam” meaning the arrow of Rama, who is the Aryan God and the iconic protector of Varnadharma and the caste system and the executioner of Shambuka, the Shudra sage. Chandran wonders how the tribal Valmiki could sing the story of the elite Rama, a story that subtly evokes the history of Brahmanic ideological invasion and the sociological process of the tribes getting reorganized into castes. The suggestion obviously is to the ongoing processes of Sanskritization and Hinduization.
At this stage young Chandran is aware of the caste identity - the Avarna Ezhava identity - of his household. He is also aware of the conversion of his grandfather Chamiarappan into Christianity as Theodore, following the torture at the Kalpathy Sathyagraham by Brahmans. His young friend Chelly, the Dalit boy, tells him that Rama killed the Dalit Bahujans like Shambuka who tried to learn Sanskrit and that is why he is also afraid of going to school (8). Thus the long history of the denial of educational, economic, cultural as well as human rights to the vast majority of Dalit Bahujans in India under the hegemonic ideology of Brahmanism is evoked here as a contemporary question. Chelly also hates his very name that reminds him of these age old fears and injustices and Chandran has no hesitation whatsoever in rechristening him “Jesus Christ” after his rationalist grandfather’s defiant praxis. Chandran also raises basic questions about caste identities before his grandfather (8).

Krishnan Uncle was the youngest brother of Chamiarappan’s grandfather. His quest for Sanskrit and Brahmanic knowledge was a valorous attempt to explore, expose and disseminate the epistemological enigmas and knowledge/power monopolies endemic to Hinduism. Using his own community’s limited knowledge of Ayurveda and astrology as a launching pad he strives to gain mastery over Brahmanic scholarship. He ventures out to Kashi/Banaras with a borrowed sacred thread from a colleague and arrives at the understanding of the futility of Brahmanic
knowledge, that has deteriorated in to a hegemonic hermeneutics and epistemology within its protective codes like *Manusmruti*.

Moving away from his caste occupation he studied Sanskrit poetry and grammar. It was the time of the reign of *Manusmruti*. His gurus couldn’t quench his thirst for Sanskrit. Then it happened – the acquaintance with Chathunni Vaidiar. As an exception to Chathurvarnyam, in central Kerala there were some Avarna Vaidyar (practitioners of indigenous medicine, especially Ayurveda) families who were also Sanskrit scholars. Chathunni Vaidyar belonged to such a tradition. For the Avarna Vaidyars (physicians) the patient’s caste was no bar. They could touch, caress and heal. There was no pollution and defilement as they applied the Dhanwanthari oil. In the hands of these Aswini Devas Sanskrit became herbal pastes and saffron for healthy generations. In the hands of Brahman it stagnated into cunning purity-pollution riddles [...] ‘Beyond the writing and articulation of Sanskrit I want the world to know that an untouchable who holds *Brahmanyam* could do whatever a Namboodiri wearing a sacred thread is capable of’ [...] Breaking his silence Chathunni Vaidyar said. ‘Sanskrit is not the language of the Aryan, nor do the Vedas and the
Upanishads belong to him. Flesh eating rapist, nomadic Aryan couldn’t have sung ‘Neti, Neti’, ‘Chathurvarnyam Mayasrushtam’ this is not Gita, invading some small human race on the verge of extinction he indoctrinated their sacred texts with the venom of his selfishness and arrogance.’ These words of Chathunni Vaidyar led the curiosity of Krishnan Uncle to the Indus-Gangetic planes where reclined the history of the Aryan invasion and the Dravidian retreat. (13-14)

So it was an intellectual and cultural challenge for Krishnan Uncle. His inquisitive spirit and explorative potential were the metaphoric articulation of the search of various colonized and marginalized people, the struggles of generations to regain their lost human rights and egalitarian dignity. In this historic enquiry the keen insights and critical observations of Chathunni Vaidyar influenced him deeply. Vaidyar himself is influenced by the changes in the power structures. He is aware of the “white lords” and their lord Jesus Christ, “a down trodden carpenter” of the old Roman empire, who cured common people of their afflictions by his touch (14).

Jesus Christ was not a white man but brown like us. A poor carpenter who earned a living with his hands [...] Our people have also begun learning foreign tongues. In Kongunadu and in south Venadu depressed castes follow this master carpenter of Nazareth. (15)
The history of colonial intervention and the option of conversion are brought in at this early stage of the narration. For the lower castes in Kerala conversion has been an option ever since the missionary intervention in the eighteenth century. This was a kind of “touching cure” that shook the foundations of Brahmanism and provided an alternative worldview:

It concerns memory, not the lack of it. The caste hegemonic attitude lying deep in the mind. That sees others as degraded and untouchable. Cure without mercy rendered the Ashtangahrudaya dry. Herbs and roots shrunk under the green. Let us return to Christ. When the diseased followed him he touched them, with out hesitation and contempt and gave them back their life and health. In the hands of the Namboociris Ayurveda is mere verse… (16)

The knowledge/power monopolies and their controlled use for social engineering and dominance are suggested here. How tribal/folk forms of knowledge like indigenous medicine, integrated into Brahmanic epistemology metamorphose into the hegemonic instrument of governmentality becomes explicit here. The emancipatory touch that Jesus offers is just the opposite of this. This healing touch was a great gesture toward the elimination of caste in our cultural history, but unfortunately the Brahmanic fear of pollution still survives in disguise in all religions in the
land. There are only Caste Hindus, Caste Christians, Caste Muslims, Caste Sikhs ... in India.5

The sense of supremacy and the fear of the loss of hegemony have been in operation in all these knowledge/power discourses:

The learned are hoarding the Sanskrit language. That is the fortress of violence. Remember the story of Ekalavya. There that divine language lay dying. We could have revitalized it, if only our Brahmans had not stood in the way. (18)

Krishnan Uncle’s quest should be read and accommodated in this broader perspective. This is not an infatuation for Brahmanism, but a great redeeming endeavour of epic proportions. That is why he asks for the old sacred thread of his Brahman friend, rather than going for a new one. “I could have bought a new thread, but I need one that had experienced the futility of Brahmanism, a thread that is soaked in the futile sweat of a futile life sans good deeds. My intention is to redeem it” (19). But later in the narrative we find that this quest in to the treasure house of the Sanskrit/Brahmanic tradition also ends up in futility in Kashi where he curses the Manusmruti before his final exit.

Through the intimate and subtle portrayal of this scholar and his search the narrative problematizes the history and the present of the ideology of Sanskritization. It precariously articulates the paradoxes and puzzles in this social process and provides a critique of this urge for “upward” social
mobility. This is important in contemporary India’s social milieu, especially in the context of the orchestrated campaign for Hinduization and homogenization of Bahujans and Adivasis that are being launched by the dominant groups in India to achieve hegemonic and fascist goals.  

The question of Hinduization is again hinted at in the development of the Bali myth by Chandran in his identification with the racial experience of his German partner Rosemary Wagner. The cultural question of caste is given a global dimension by juxtaposing it with the ethnic and racial cleavages in Europe, especially in the period of the holocaust. The extermination of one human race by another is juxtaposed in Chandran’s conscience with the subordination and marginalization of one group of people by another, epitomized in the myth of Maha Bali, the old Subaltern leader of south India, who was undone by the cunning of Vamana, the incarnation of Vishnu. The correspondence between Rosemary’s father’s refusal to kill Jews and Chandran’s father’s acquittal of young revolutionaries against official orders vitalizes this cross-cultural identification:

The holy tale of the retreat and reemergence of Maha Bali.
The subaltern emperor, the loving barbarian, the just ruler.
The Vedic Brahmans say that Vishnu reincarnated as Vamana, not to bless these good virtues but to eliminate them. Poor slaves and peasants worship Vamana by erecting
the mud idols of Bali. It was in the form of a pyramid. Broader base and pointed head, the humility of the Neanderthal man… in the run up to evolution and progress he sought the peace of the under world. That is the tale of Bali and Yamana distorted in and through time… Neanderthal man, Neanderthal emperor, the Paraya emperor who found peace in the depths of the earth. In the violence of evolution Maha Bali melted and sunk deep in to the underworld. His return shows the merging of the beliefs of the Aryan and the Dravidian. (27)

The invocation of the Bali myth has been central to several Dalit Bahujan rearticulations of history including those of Phule and Periyor. It could also be found in narratives like *Mavelimantam*, (K J Baby’s novel in Malayalam voicing the tribal question in Wayanadu, discussed later in this chapter) as an articulation of a subversive and counter-hegemonic desire, a primal myth of survival and resistance. In *Thalamurakal* it is also given a universal and simultaneously local dimension by calling Bali subaltern, barbarian, Neanderthal and Paraya at the same time. The Parayas belong to one of the earliest human settlers of the peninsula and are the most widely and abundantly distributed caste category through out South India. The epithet “the Paraya emperor” points towards the counter movement of Sanskritization enacted by Krishnan Uncle, as well as toward Dalitization
dramatized in the Paraya alliance of Pavithran, the elder son of Chamiarappan, in the Tholannur Paraya slum, to be narrated later. But this pilot epithet provides a striking reconnection to the reader only when this unusual episode is exposed at an advanced state in the narrative.

From this myth of merging, Chandran and Rosemary move to the tentative solution of the racial amalgam and the notion of the redeeming hybrid child as a way out of the eternal labyrinth of caste and race. It also takes the form of an earnest plea for ethnic merging and exogamy reminding us of the doctrines of Dalit Bahujan thinkers like Ambedkar.

Only a hybrid child could save us from this crisis, a pure offspring of lust... let the Gita and the Furor bunker shiver in the rhythms of our union. (28)

The strategic role of the Gita in the perpetuation and legitimization of Brahmanic hegemony and its Varna system has been reiterated in the narrative, exposing its anti-Bahujan ideological history. Along with the Manusmruti it served as the key text that prohibited Varna mixing and Bahujan learning for centuries and legitimized Caste as god given.

This caste regime in its total manifestation is narrativized in the tale of Sumati grandma whose humiliation by a caste lord in the field reveals the inhuman perversions of purity and pollution and of “caste distance” (‘Shudrappadu’ and ‘Ezhavappadu’):
Something forced her to obey the shouting. Through the long tunnel of five millennia that command pierced her ears. The decree and command of Caste. Unable to defend it she began her retreat. One Ezhavappadu, fourteen feet. Her eyes on her feet, Nair's on her bouncing breasts. With the fourteenth count she fell backwards into the muddy field. (29)

This common experience of shame and injustice unites the untouchable Ezhavas and Pulayas in solidarity against the Savarna caste-lords.

Pangelappan, the father of Sumati, and his Pulaya assistant Rakkanakan join hands to avenge this disgrace:

We both are in this same mud, we must wash this off. You are my brother from now on. (30)

This broader alliance and brotherhood has initiated social transformation in the land. The common experience of caste injustice has acted as the force that has strengthened today's Dalit Bahujan alliance. The non economic characteristic of caste is again developed in the episode of Sivakamy, the Brahman concubine of Appu Karanavar. There was no deficiency of wealth and prosperity for him, but still he felt something was missing. It was not the economic capital but the symbolic and cultural ones. So he literally bought a Brahmin concubine and tried to learn the Gayatri mantra from her. But his uncouth tongue and other speech organs failed him (31-2). This episode also provides a critique of orthodox Marxist positions regarding the economic
category of class as the sole site of inequality and exploitation. It foregrounds the cultural and social materiality of caste and its non-economic contexts and their genealogy.

If Appu Karanavar failed to reconcile caste with economic and material power, Krishnan Uncle too was a total failure in his experiments with cultural, educational and symbolic capitals provided by Brahmanic and Vedic knowledge. He throws away the *Gita* and *Manusmruti* to the Ganges (38). Thus it could well be argued that the narrative rejects the notion of Sanskritization and suggests its counter movement of Dalitization as illustrated by Pavithran’s silent and small acts in the Paraya slum.

The era of symbols has not ended yet. The genitalia of time were still fertile. The seascape of saintly signs, departing and dying waves of the Ganges became the great pain of space and water. What have I thrown away? Opening the third eye of the subaltern, Krishnan Uncle said to Bhavathrathan, “*Manusmruti!*” (38)

In his flat in Hong Kong Chandran narrates the tales of his ancestors’ confrontation with the caste question to his beloved Rosemary Wagner. Chandran describes *Manusmruti* as “the *Mien Kamph* of the Brahman” (38). But Rosemary aptly picks up the contradiction in this discourse: “I am pointing towards the contradiction in narrating the five thousand years of Indian cultural continuity and the lack of it at the same time” (38). And this
is precisely the central contradiction and irony of the narrative itself and that of the cultural history of India. This unique blend of "culture" and barbarity is the core conflict of India abbreviated in the word "caste." It is also the underlying narrative element that is the cause of its vital creative tension. It also problematizes the narrative voice by making it double voiced, self-referential and auto telic. The central contradiction of caste is further developed here:

*The secrets of caste are embarrassing.* Failing in the contest those castes who had fallen in to the down trodden status on one side; and on the other side caught up in a mysterious physics Parayas searching for the inner secrets of earth, the magical humans who resumed research in the asylum of untouchability and exclusion, those who could exchange bodies. The nuclear physicists of my ancient hamlet. (39)

Though untold it could be the same caste that could have lead Pavithran to the Paraya slums in Tholannur and made him enter in to their strange arts. He too indulges in the ancient and silent pursuit of his ancient brethren. Rationalist and communist Chamiarappan thus lost his hope in his elder son and he sends his brother Mayappan’s son Gopalan to England for education. But even in the London pub where Marx enjoyed his beer and books he is haunted by the shadow that he thought he had shed away in his homeland. His girl friend Millie asks him about caste;
One noon Millie accidentally asked about caste. In the cheerful spirit of the beer Gopalan became threatened. ‘We could talk something else’ he said. ‘Did anything hurt you, something on untouchability and pollution?’ she asked. The enigmatic threat of caste peeping into the pub of Karl Marx. Entering the pubs the violent youth attacked Jews and communists. But his personal pain took Gopalan’s attention away. He was not bothered about all this. The light of the empire is everywhere; where ever you go you are second rated. Need to come out of this skin cover of the downtrodden. Could convert to Christianity, but it was not a solution. Though colonialism modernized its colonies it did not even touch Varnasrama and caste. Varna and Caste became the chief instruments of colonialism to govern the masses of India, as they became the topic of Millie’s study.

(42)

Contemporary historiography has already established this notorious compromise of colonialism with Brahmanism and patriarchy in India. The so-called interventionist regimes and even missionaries collaborated and compromised to a great extent in retaining the old power structures and hegemonies, apart from tremendous educational and evangelical endeavours. That is the double labyrinth of caste and Christianity in India. Though
Christianity has no caste, Christians have caste in India and in Southeast Asia. The narrativization of Caste Christianity in *The God of Small Things* would illustrate this point concerning the operation of caste hierarchy among Christians in Kerala, where Syrian Christians are equated with the *Savarnas.* Though Islam has no caste, Indian Muslims too are caste sensitive. We also have bloody riots every year between upper caste Sikhs and Dalit Bahujan Sikhs. Gopalan’s dilemma in the London pub therefore was not quite simple:

In his apartment, alone, Gopalan thought of escaping the Hindu slavery. Christianity was of little help. Old uncle Chamiarappan’s conversion to Christianity could not even touch caste. The strong bond between caste and the empire closed the doors of liberation. Being a subject of British India had only emphasized his subalternity. No more of this, one needs to inhale the air of equality and be free at last. (43)

He converted to Islam and became an ardent campaigner for the faith. He became Imtiaz Hassen. As an anti-British campaigner he got asylum in Germany. But his selfless love for his beloved Jessica Bloom, a Jewish woman, brings his life to an end in the endless torture of a Nazi concentration camp.

Another important aspect of the narrative is that though it is a long and fragmented narrative by Chandran as told to his beloved Rosemary in
their Hong Kong apartment in the few hours before they lose themselves in
the cyclone Angela, it has come to him through the stories narrated by
several generations of grandmothers of the Ponmudi household. All this
family lore as preserved and handed down from generation to generation
orally through the intimate and affectionate narratives of grandmas also came
to Chandran through his Devaki grandma. Actually he was born and brought
up in it in the old Ponmudi ancestral home, and as a sensitive child he picked
up and developed its core conflict of Caste that seemed unresolved. Thus
generations of narratives and narrators and voices and perspectives converge
in Chandran and his own voice seems lost in this polyphony. It gives the
novel a unique narrative structure but again the focal point is that of Caste
and the Avarna struggles against it. The grandma narratives and the family
lore converge in Chandran to be codified, edited and rendered in a
standardized form that gathers and recreates the unwritten and often excluded
Avarna domestic history. It is also a textualization of the unwritten
histories of the other in the medium of the fictional narrative, creatively
erasing the boundaries of history and fiction, extending the peripheries of the
narrative and margins of epistemologies.

This unique union is again exemplified in the frequent historical
references to the practices of caste and untouchability. Discrimination in
public spaces and places of worship like that of the Vaikom temple in central
Kerala and the history of the struggle for temple entry and worship are also evoked:

The disturbed generations of Ponmudi were not ready to retire and rest. They knocked at the doors of closed darkness where Krishnan Uncle had knocked before. Not for the nuances of Vedic chants but to ridicule the Gayatri mantras of concubines. The omnipresence of injustices caught their conscience. They blackened the ‘Brahman only’ boards of cheap railway restaurants. The passiveness of society was all pervasive accommodating these small protests. Over the sanctum sanctorum of Vaikathappan, Thotutaya Sivan, Chatayan, the ancient snake charmer, the Adi Dravidian trembled in wrath. His hand shook the towers and pillars of the temple and the untouchable devotees who were waiting outside for generations felt the tremor. (52)

Another reference is to the Avarna struggle for using public roads, for the basic freedom of movement. It is again connected to another historic struggle at Kalpathy in Palghat, reference to which was made at the beginning of this chapter. The details of this might be relevant at this juncture.

The Kalpathy road also belongs to the public roads in general that are built and maintained on public funds raised by taxing
people like me. So I too want to walk on it, my
Thalacheruman (chief Pulaya assistant) too...leading a group of educated Avarna youth Chamiarappan entered the Kalpathy road...he looked back and saw a mob in formation. He was unmoved. The rationalist and the divine dogma confronted each other. Chamiarappan felt bamboo rods falling on his back and the head being pierced as in fever.
Nothing more [...] 'what Suppamani is he finished?' (in mixed Tamil and Malayalam) [...] languages can interbreed.
It is denied only to the Human clans by the Gita and Manu.
(59-60)
Marking Chamiarappan and his fellows with stones as if they are dead, the Brahmins retreat. Recovering from this long unconscious state Chamiarappan declares that he is no longer Chamiarappan, but Theodore. So all these historical references in the fictional narrative register and reinforce the construction of epistemological sites and resources about the Bahujan struggle in the making of Kerala and Indian society a democratic one that is overshadowed and erased in the celebrated nationalist historiography and the popular hegemonic notions about social transformation monopolized by the Savarna mainstream movements of Nationalism in India.14 The grass root level democratization of the society was carried out through the formation of untouchable Avarna subjectivities and their mobilization into democratic
groups called communities. Thus the democratization of Kerala is inseparably linked with the politics of the Avarna subjectivity and communitization. This was a struggle against the internal colonization of caste in sharp contrast to the Savarna version of the nationalist movement, the breeding ground of imagined and chauvinist Hindutva revivalism that is taking fierce proportions into the formation of an Indian Fascism.

This struggle to defy and escape caste is also connected and contrasted with the greater questions of race and ethnicity in the story of Gopalan, son of Chamiarappan’s brother who becomes Imtiaz in Europe. He marries Jessica Bloom, a German Jew, and is exterminated as he prefers to share his beloved’s destiny in her last days (61). Velappan, Chamiarappan’s son-in-law also experiences caste-Swaraj within the British police force. He confesses to his wife that “the caste system in the service is more severe than outside” (264). Though he could not confront the internal caste system of the British service, he addresses the old ones:

As an Avarna Velappan experienced a more extreme form of humiliation than the slavery of his motherland [...] in the teashop there are separate seats for Savarnas and Avarnas...Avarnas must wash the glasses clean after use...

(95)

When he became Subedar Major in the M S P he revisits this tea-stall and hits back at the Savarna man who asks him to wash his glass. As he leaves
the shop the crowd gives him way. Later he comments to Pankajakshy that it was the same crowd that lynched Chamiarappan in the Kalpathy street. The difference was only that there was the crown of the British emperor on his shoulders:

‘Doesn’t the country need freedom?’ Asks Pankajam. ‘whose country you mean?’ ‘I don’t know. Father used to say that we should see greater truths forgetting minor disputes. He is in the Congress, does that harm us in some way?’ [...] there was a force behind my hand that beat Chappan Nair and the crowd that gave me the way. The justice of the British emperor.

The crown on my shoulder. (96)

The complexity of the problem puzzles Velappan as he arrests the nationalists from the Congress. The awareness of an internal colonization by caste and Brahmanic Hinduism as against British imperialism is a major concern in the novel. It is recognized by recent scholarship that, for the Bahujan masses of India the lasting empire was only that of caste and Brahmanic hegemony. The European colonial regime which ruled India for less than two hundred years and its politico-economic exploitations were only secondary to thousands of years of Brahmanic-Vedic-Hindu hegemony and colonization. The British-Raj and the colonial administration in a sense opened up the world for the subaltern. In 19th century western India the Shudra intellectual Phule welcomed the colonial rule, the missionary
education, the colonial administration and judiciary. He appealed to his Satysodhak Samaj not to join the elite Brahmanic nationalist movement.17

At least from the Indus valley devastations to the present, Brahmanic internal imperialism is still continuing through its various avatars. The western intervention and the option of religious conversion opened up a revolutionary liberation discourse for the Bahujan thinkers like Mahatma Phule and Narayana Guru. Phule equated his Baliraj with that of the kingdom of Christ and Narayana Guru declared that it was the British who gave him the right to knowledge, as against the Ramraj where the Shudra ascetic Shambuka was beheaded by the lord himself.18 Dr Ambedkar himself comes from an untouchable Mahar family that had the privilege of receiving English education for three successive generations. Mr. Ramji Sakpal, the father of the architect of Indian constitution, was an instructor in the British Army. The radical realization of the problematic of the internal imperialism of caste and Brahmanic Hinduism as against western imperialism and the urgent need to tackle the former is also articulated in the poetry of rationalist revolutionary poets like Sahodaran Ayyappan as well as that of Asan who is considered a somewhat Hinduized and Sanskritized poet in Malayalam. Building upon the tradition of internal critique and the polyphony of subjectivities in the nationalist appraisals, Thalamurakal also registers the difference of experience and the individuality of Kerala’s renaissance, which is in sharp contrast to its counterparts in the rest of the country, which were
largely Hindu reformist attempts led by Arya and Brahmo Samaj, as in the 
Bengal renaissance. It is more appropriate to describe this as a cultural 
revolution that took place in Kerala in the late nineteenth and early twentieth 
centuries. It was the result of the struggles of the Avarna movements that 
experienced and identified this internal caste imperialism. The missionary 
terventions that brought to the forefront for the first time the question of 
social justice and human dignity had tremendous influence on some of these 
movements including the Narayana Guru movement that mobilized the 
Ezhavas in a process of democratic communitization. Other radical 
movements like the Sahodara movement and the Ayyankali movement 
effectively continued the democratic process that led to a radical reshaping of 
the social hierarchy. The Avarna experience of caste-empire at the heart of 
the nationalist discourse is what distinguishes Kerala’s social transformation 
from other social renaissance movements in the rest of the country.

These greater questions concerning colonial intervention, internal 
imperialism and the homogenizing meta-narrative of nationalism are thus 
effectively narrativized in the subtle but meaningful ambiguities and intense 
dilemmas of Velappan the colonial servant who hesitates to arrest a 
nationalist Congress man in the novel (96-7). 

Chamiarappan confronted this internal empire of caste with his 
rationalism, again signifying and textualizing another major ideology that 
struck the Avarnas, and Ezhavas in particular, at the beginning of the last
century. This was articulated in the rationalist movement of Sahodaran K Ayyappan who re-interpreted his teacher Narayana Guru’s message as ‘No Caste, No Religion, No God, but Dharma, Dharma and Dharma’ with a neo-Buddhist ethical praxis, and initiated a series of inter caste dining and marriage practices in central Kerala. Chamiarappan’s conversion to Christianity was only a symbolic act of his exercise of will and his liberty of thought and belief (98). Soon after his entry into the fold he identifies caste in Christianity:

There is caste discrimination in the Christian church, though the parsons do not preach it. They have their separate assets and estates. The Catholic Church of the southern ‘elders’ and the Basal Mission of the north Malabar both are trying to woo me into their folds. Even the Pentecostal church that does not have much following does not spare me. Pastor Timothy is their man. Though they lack money they talk directly to God. A church without a parish. (147)

The choice of conversion gave the untouchable Bahujans at least a temporary way out of caste hegemony, though it constructed new hierarchies in more paradoxical reality formations within the promised spaces of Christianity, Islam and Sikhism. In Travancore there were even conversions to Sikhism. It was a great act of defiance and a challenge to the Savarna hegemony as we locate these conversions in historical context. Though it gradually gave way
to new elitist claims and monopoly claims, the environment created a radical turmoil in the social sphere that anticipated the above-mentioned cultural revolutions in Kerala. The narrative elaborates with the help of the striking image of a viper, caste retreating into the dark depths of the collective unconscious and lying dormant there:

These conversions couldn’t kill caste as such. Like a viper caste retreated in to the darkness of sleepy memories. pale skinned Christians traced their origin to the Brahman illams. According to Raghava Menon’s account, if their forefathers were Brahmins then the carpenters, porters and toddy tappers of the highlands were also once Brahmans. Simple arithmetic! (150-51)

As mentioned earlier, the option of conversion gave a platform for collective bargaining to the untouchable Avarnas. And it also played a role in the events that led to the official proclamation of temple entry for the Avarnas in Travancore. The evangelical educational intervention too played a critical role in the social uplift of the Avarnas in Kerala:

The temple entry proclamation of Travancore that weakened the Nivarthana Prakshobham,\(^{21}\) influenced, though not directly, the baptisms of Palakkadu. Conversion only remained in Ponmudi and certain other elite households. Many had simply adopted names like Theodore. Seeking a
social space to intervene, established churchmen from Travancore and Germany came to Ponmudi, seizing the opportunity. Only when the Christian priests came the people switched over to Christian attire and prayers. Having no other way some became paid pastors and preachers. (152)

In the story of Imtiaz and Jessica the caste question is connected to the greater questions of ethnicity, nationality and the terrors of the Nazi regime. The same notions of cultural and racial supremacy are seen operating behind the Aryan supremacy theory of the Fascists, providing parallels with that of Brahmanism. This is the lesson one learns from the story of Gopalan (later Imtiaz) who runs away from the caste-curse of his country, only to confront a greater curse, that is, of race:

The Nazi soldier asks, ‘Who is she?’ Imtiaz said, ‘Yes, she is my wife.’ The Nazi spits on Gopalan’s face. Imtiaz is shrieking under the whipping. ‘You, who belongs to the vulgar castes, who defied the Aryans, do you have a wife? Say mate, the female one that multiplies the number of vulgar castes, or simply say whore, the Nazi roared […] ‘Which whore has given birth to you?’ Gopalan didn’t reply. The question was repeated with the pain of whip falling on his face. The sergeant who was enjoying it from inside said, enough. Picking the collapsed man from the ground the
soldier continued his torturous questioning. 'Who is the pig who impregnated your mother?' 'I was running away from India' realizing its futility, Gopalan said, 'from Caste.' The whip once again began its rise and fall. From another time and space Chamiarappan cried, 'No, no!' (241-42)

Decades later Gopalan’s nephew and Chamiarappan’s grandson Chandran writes about this story of the Ezhava Muslim who died in Nazi Germany for his Jewish woman, as he works on the caste conflicts of India for an international human rights publication (301). There are several junctures in the narrative where Chandran as a young man is presented as haunted by the memories of this trans-continental exile from caste that has proved futile. The implication of this is that the caste question is not just a question of memory, but is a contemporary political reality in the present of India. The signification is certainly that of the sustenance of hegemony.

From his childhood Pavithran, the elder son of Chamiarappan moved in the company of the Parayas of the village, who were considered further below the Ezhavas in the caste hierarchy. Though Chamiarappan could not understand this ‘downward’ move of his son, we see him taking a new turn towards the end of his life as he starts working among the scavengers of the suburbs of Palghat. This radical identification with the underprivileged castes is in sharp contrast to the desire for upward mobility in the Savarna social space and is reminiscent of the ethical praxis of ‘Pulayan Ayyappan.’
It is not a paternalistic or patronizing effort but is a democratic act, a process of Dalitization that is in sharp contrast with the failed attempt of Sanskritization enacted by Krishnan Uncle in Ponmudi. Both upward and downward movements in social hierarchy are signified in the text as confrontations with the caste question. While Krishnan Uncle represents the upward mobility of Sanskritization and its futility, the downward movements of Pavithran to the Paraya slums and later of Chamiarappan to the Thotty (scavenger) slums represent the anticipated democratic process of Dalitization.

As a fictional narrative that represents the material context of caste Brahmanism in India, Thalmurakal anticipates the more democratic, decentered and humane process of social transformation that integrates the margins without patronizing pride into the democratic and egalitarian polity. The narrative stands puzzled in this dual dilemma in the irrational psyche of Pankajakshy:

The memories of Ponmudi overflowed. From the sacred thread of Krishnan Uncle to Pavithran’s occult arts of the Paraya ghetto. To where have Ponmudi voyaged? (319)

The role of the English language in subduing the reign of caste too is given voice, through the story of Stella Stanley, a Dalit convert to Christianity, who masters the master’s language with a vengeance to overcome the Sanskrit epistemology and its world view. She is the
daughter of Chelly, the childhood companion who tells Chandran about 'the arrow of Rama,' and was in turn baptized by Chandran as Jesus Christ. As Chandran becomes a journalist she writes to him asking for support. She wants to write in all the leading journals about the caste imperialism of India. As Chandran concludes, like colonial justice and law-and-order administration, the English language also activated the speaking of the subaltern, by opening up a new vista and linguistic domain for the voiceless in India by de-legitimizing Sanskrit as the language of knowledge/power and also abolishing its meta-referential authority. Chandran writes to his parents:

I took it as a joke when father said about the Malabar Special Police being a national movement. But I understand its meaning now. If there is any role for a language in abolishing the caste system, it is English. Like M S P, English also becomes an instrument of our national movement. (340)

At this advanced stage in the narrative the multiplicities of voices seem to converge on the focal point of racial amalgam and organic human continuum as Chandran and Rosemary Wagner sacrifice themselves in the cyclone to bring into the world their hybrid child Theodore Vel Wagner (344). The name of this 'future' child is again significant in that it articulates a plurality of identities, a multiplicity of praxis and ideology and a polyphony of cultures and ethnicities. Theodore is the Christian name of Chamiyarappan his grandfather bearing the marks of his rationalism and his defiance of caste.
Vel is a common south Indian name invoking the old Dravidian god Velan or Murugan, a popular deity of the Bahujans from the Cankam period. And Wagner is his mother’s surname connecting his umbilical cord to the blue blooded races of Europe. A movement from external political realities and socio economic formations to personal and individual reconciliation and transformation could also be identified in this evocative denouement.

Thus after taking up fundamental questions of caste, conversion, communitization and Dalitization, as well as that of the democratization of the polity and culture, the narrative retreats to the realm of domestic and individualistic reconciliation or a resurrection at the micro political or bio political level. This broad movement from the socio culturally political to the micro political could be identified in the whole gamut of Vijayan’s writing, especially with reference to his historic critique of the Left and progressive politics in Kerala. It could again be contextualized and read in the subduing of radical ideology and the eroding of faith in collective struggles and movements in a maturing writer and representative subjectivity in the wake of the commoditization of the third world Left under corporate global capital. Again this attitude of the writer also poses questions on the effect of aging and illness on subjectivity, voice and agency of articulation. Yet the chunk of the argument and critique aims at the progressive mainstream discourses that evade the socio cultural and historic reality of caste and ethnic stratification of economy and polity in India, and the everyday material
reality of multiplying and metamorphosing Brahmanic hegemony. If this is the case of historically marginalized backward communities, the conditions of the Adivasis who are generally imagined as outside the caste system is worse in the all pervasive purity-pollution discursive contexts.

One of the major trends in relation to the Adivasi or tribal debate in India has been that of de-contextualizing it from the discursive contexts of Varna, Caste and Brahmanism. Though it is done in a tactful and covert manner, the general assumption of these debates is the belief that Adivasis have always remained outside the caste system. The reference here is of course to eco-gurus like Ramachandra Guha.24 What is of significance here is the epistemological function of such a discourse in the present. It erases the history of calamities that Brahmanism has imposed on indigenous and nomadic tribes throughout the peninsula. It erases the history of work and toil by the human productive forces of indigenous or ideologically subordinated tribes, that has gone into the making of Brahmanic caste villages and the legitimizing role of the Varna theory in the mobilizing of them in a process that sociologists define as ‘from tribe to caste.’ The emerging alliance of a Dalit Bahujan – Adivasi solidarity is cleverly forestalled by such interpretations. The absurdity of the eco-discourse is that not just the Adivasis, but the Dalits as well as Bahujans, who are grouped together as OBCs (with negligible regional exceptions, since in some states Shudras too are included) were also outside the caste system. The Bahujans
were not ascribed any Varna status by Brahmanism and were called the Avarnas. But though they are outside, they are the basic working and productive communities that bear the brunt of the Brahmanic caste violence. There are also profounder praxis targets to this discourse. Foregrounding the “tribal” and silencing the Dalit Bahujan is the immediate outcome of this status quoist discourse that calculatedly subverts the democratic process of communitization.

This is the context in which the Malayalam novel *Mavelimantam* communicates itself to the reader. The novel narrates the struggle of the Adivasis under feudal lords for survival in Wayanadu in Kerala of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^{25}\) Slave trade, colonial invasion, the Pazhassy revolt and other uprisings form the background of the narrative. The story revolves around the attempted escape to the forest of slave couples from bondage. It concludes with signs of anticipated liberation and hope.

The fundamental factor of relevance here is this hurried or abrupt closure of the narrative. The narrative ends even before the birth of the state (of Kerala) or of the nation, in spite of its passionate references to the valour of Pazhassy and Kunkan. This happens precisely because the two world wars follow this critical moment at the onset of the twentieth century and the great famine and depression in the country lead to the hurried migration of Syrian Christians from Travancore to Malabar, specifically to Wayanadu.\(^{26}\) This migration has been a critical juncture in the history of the Adivasi land
question. The migration pushed the Adivasis to the condition of landless slaves, further deteriorating their social and economic conditions. It also prevented their social mobility and communitization during the renaissance reforms that mobilized the other untouchable Bahujans and Dalits in the state in the early twentieth century. As the author of the narrative that deals with this precarious moment in history, K J Baby, himself a second generation Syrian Christian migrant, is under question for this abrupt ideological closure of his narrative. By covering the history of migration and land poaching through a skewed portrayal of feudal barbarism that happened in an earlier period by Menokis and Nambiars, Baby is playing hide and seek. Any reader of Kerala, having a vague sense of history would be amused at this hurried and abrupt conclusion of the novel, except for a few like K Sachidanandan who has contributed an introduction to the novel. Sachidanandan views the novel as a contribution to the “subaltern and ethno narrative” genre in Malayalam. For him it narrates a tale of resistance and of future struggles. The narrative with a retrogressive effect and a fragmented structure, something that reminds us of eighteenth century tribal oral narratives, then, is a site of fierce contestation.

The myth about Viratpurushan and the pseudo lords (“Kallathampurans”) who subordinated the people’s leader Maveli and his Mantam, the clan has been effectively utilized in the text to explicitly register the fact of Brahmanic Varna hegemony over the Adivasis. It is also
important that Dalit Bahujan thinkers from Phule onwards have utilized and interpreted the myth of Bali for the people throughout India. This liberation myth has been latent in their collective consciousness, which is articulated in the narrative through Jevaraperuman, an old slave. It is also interesting to read the subordination of the Adivasis not through force but through ideological factors like superstitious stories about other worlds, the underworlds of the darker gods. These Brahmanic deities haunt them in this world and the other. For them therefore there is no escape even in death. The battles of the other worlds and of the unconscious are fought by some of the daring ones in the tribe and they are in search of liberation, at a juncture where the very idea is unthinkable to their people.

Thus the metaphysics of purity and pollution, of the construction, diffusion and control of fear, sin and guilt, the notion of hierarchy, and other ideological apparatuses of subordination were extensively used in the Varnadharma pattern by the upper castes (specifically mentioned as Thampurans, Menokis and Nambiars in the narrative) in the construction of the Adivasi margin. So both the caste question and the ideology of Brahmanism are central to the Adivasi issue and the narrative here. Actually Chapter One of the novel articulates the caste factor in the Adivasi reality through the reference to the Adivasis as “the lowest of all castes”(20). It also equates them with darker beasts like buffaloes:
For the Thampurans, slaves and buffaloes are the same. Like buffaloes the slaves must do the work they are asked to do. They are the same for them. (24)

The human is pushed down to the level of the beastly through associations established through the exercise of power. The psychological impact of this association is that the enslaved too begin to associate themselves with the beasts by convention. After all, they get only kicks and rotten food for the hard day’s toil. Even eating rice is a “Thampuran privilege.” The conditions in which they are kept without proper shelter and clothing too is degrading. They cannot even sleep like humans. Having no clothes to cover their bodies with, they herd together to survive on the heat of the other’s body:

Leave the question of sleeping, just had to lie straight. Even that is impossible. All lie like piled leaves, men and women, children and the old. (26)

In such dehumanizing conditions some of the younger ones ask old Jevaraperuman for his response to this injustice. The old slave observes:

“With swords and words they degrade the human in us. To make mere beasts of us. Thampuran, is it so easy every time? You yourself become beasts for every beating that you inflict on us” (27). The story of Maveli Mantu and his Mantam of primitive equity becomes the most subversive weapon from Jevara’s memory. As mentioned earlier, this myth of an egalitarian past and the intervention of the three “Kallathampurans” or pseudo-lords and their
ideological cunning demonstrated in the fabrication of the story regarding the 108 Kulas and Jatis (28) are significant again in the context of the Varna ideology of Brahmanism. It is also interesting to note that this myth helps the thinking among them to subvert the hegemony and to defy it. But look at the power of discourse; they are made to believe that even in the other world after death they have to serve the Karatithampuran, literally “the bear lord” and his lady, the Cheriyamma:

After death we will all end up in the under world, there too we have this Karatitamburan and Cheriyamma. There too we have the slavery of the lords. In deep pits in the ground gruel is filled for us to lick up as for dogs. (28)

The chief Jevaraperuman narrates the details of that golden past and the history of betrayal in the folk tale:

Once we too had a good time. A time when we were not slaves to anyone. That was the time of Maveli Mantu. He was our chief, but there were no slaves and lords. We cultivated and ate together as equals. There were no Atiyans and Paniyans, no Kurichiars and Kurumars. All humans enjoyed equality. No cheat and no evil. Then came the “Kallathampurans” or pseudo lords. They wore the false smile of humans. Maveli Mantu accepted them with a whole heart. But in return they grabbed his land and clan. When the
chief questioned the cheats they knocked him down, and the blood of Maveli fell on the Mantam land. They assaulted his daughter and the clan. They chained the people in to cages and Kulas. 108 Jatis were established. To legitimize this classification they proclaimed this metaphysics: Listen you sons of dogs, this world belongs to a super man called Viratpurushan. We came from the head and hands of the Viratpurushan. You came from underneath his feat, and so you are our slaves. So, slaves, from now on your duty is to obey what we say. The whole earth belongs to us. On your feet to increase our fields and to make the hills orchards. But they didn't move. The lords raised swords, still nobody moved. Where swords and spears failed the lords introduced the goddess with blood oozing sword, Mali with her dangling tongue dripping blood. We became the slaves out of fear, not of this world, but of the under world. We became Paniyars and Atiyars who go to one hill after the other for the lords, to make orchards and fields for them. (28-9)

This myth explains the significant role that god and religion played in the Brahmanical conspiracy of subordinating the tribes and organizing them into slaves in a feudal set up. It also exposes the male conspiracy and the patriarchal core of the Varna ideology. It further illustrates the ideology of
the totem and taboo, of sin and the sacred, of the otherworldly fears that have enslaved generations of people; effectively utilized by the hegemonic power groups that are still surviving as monopoly groups and preventing democratic formations in society.32

Along with the myth of Maveli the “Melorachan-and-Keeyorathi” myth of escape constitutes a dream of resistance for the tribe. Melorachan and Keeyorathi were the first man and woman to attempt an escape from the shackles of slavery (27). But greater calamities were awaiting them. As they were tortured to increase the production for Menoki Thampuran, they even cease to be humans and stop procreating. But the learned Menoki knows that he needs more and more slaves to widen his farmlands, and thus begins the most beastly episode in the clan’s history - forced procreation to generate slave children. Menoki refers to this as “Chavittu,” - literally “kicking” - an animal act. He issues orders to intensify the kicking during night hours (38). Even biological sexuality has been doctored and manipulated for the sustenance of hegemony:

Chemmi was ashamed to hear Menoki’s question: don’t you do the kicking at night as I ordered? Yesterday Thampuran asked him whether the Panichis conceived or not, since they need more slaves and slave children. (38)

Thus sex was used not only for subordination, as a site for aggression and assertion of hegemony, but it was also used for the reproduction of the slave
generations and to ensure the beastly existence of the enslaved, as in Brahmanism, that denied the human status to the Chandals or the Avarna Bahujans. The construction of the beastly within the human and its legitimation were the critical tropes in Varna hegemony.

This beastly subaltern realm has been constructed through generations of torture. Menoki forcing Kaippadan to bury another slave who dies of some disease is a typical instance:

Menoki ordered to push down the body into a small pit, by hitting it down with the pickaxe. Kaippadan couldn’t and he received a rain of blows that broke his back. At last with a roar he hit the body with the pick axe. The body broke down in to pieces. ‘Stamp down it you dog, down it you dog,’ shouted Menoki. Menoki was amused as Kaippadan obeyed him. (41)

Enslaving and taming are done with a great deal of effort. The conditions and experience of the female slaves were the worst. They were mere slave-producing wombs. They are not merely called dogs but are literally kept to produce the young slaves in to the world. The Thampuran controls not only their bodies but their emotions and hormones too. It is he who decides when they mate and how much litter they produce. He also uses them as sexual slaves by night. He howls at night for their instant service:
It is Thampuran who is howling for us out of the anger that Cheriyamma had gone to sleep. He wants to get on us. But we shouldn’t go. We have to give birth to Thampuran’s children (42). They had seen the tears of mothers who had to give birth to increase the slave force of the Thampuran. They felt their heart beat who couldn’t even cry aloud seeing their young ones feeding on their breasts being taken away to be sold in the slave market like mere animals... so they have decided not to give birth to children and bring them in to this Thampuran world. (42)

This extreme form of protest that one can think of, that of self denial of one’s sexuality and the human urge for procreation, reminds us of the intensity of torture and dehumanizing oppression that was historically inflicted on the working communities in India by the parasitic Brahmanic upper castes. It again connects the Adivasi experience to the Dalit Bahujan experience at large by shockingly bringing in parallels from Dalit poems like “Blood Wave” by Daya Pawar, where a similar sacrifice of sex and procreation is suggested as a way out of comprehensive hegemony.33 As the narrative has it, even rice is forbidden to the Adivasis and it is a special privilege of the lords:
On seeing us Karatithampuran roared. When lords eat, slaves shouldn't be even seen in the vicinity, which is the law.

Since our hunger will give them ulcers. (47)

Whether it is Pazhasy or the British whoever gains the upper hand, the true sufferers of history in Wayanadu have been the Adivasis. It is they who fight and die, who suffer and live as casualties, as victims of vengeful persecution that each battle is followed by:

They cut their fingers off, hung them over fire, forced sons to molest mothers and did much much more.... (51)

This history of fear and torture rules over their consciousness and their unconscious, and it haunts Kaippadan even in his attempted escape. Even when he is making love, the very mention of Menoki's name freezes him in inaction:

The moment he heard the name of Menoki, cold and darkness struck him down. 'sorry to ruin your sleep, woman' he told her [...]. (64)

But Menoki is only a mediating instrument, a torturing apparatus, a privileged pimp, a glorified agent of Brahmanism. According to Brahmanic sacred texts, the fourth Varna, the Shudra, must be a lifelong servant to the Brahman. Menoki too is a subservient slave to his high lords, Subarayar and Manippattar; and when they abuse and curse him, they keep him aloof at his “Shudrappad” distance. The Shudra distance refers to the permitted distance
that is allowed for a Shudra while approaching a Brahman.\textsuperscript{34} Again we see here a classical hierarchical structure from Brahman to the mediating Shudras to the untouchable Bahujans down to the Adivasis as the lowest victims of Brahmanic hegemony and caste hierarchy, again bringing in the core issue of caste in to the picture:

Subarayar Thampuran who came in a palanquin looked at his field. It was expected to grow, and he was not quite contented. The hill was still not razed down. He called his clerk Manippattar; ‘was it you who told me that it has been turned in to a field?’ Bending his head he went straight to Menoki, kept him at the Shudra distance, and called him names. As soon as he turned his back Menoki began beating up the puzzled slaves. (69)

The high lords are always eager to retain and sustain the caste system and its vocabulary. They keep on reminding the Menoki that he is a Shudra, and even before it is uttered Menoki’s body falls into a unique servile posture:

‘Call that Shudra Menoki…’ said Subarayar. On hearing this Menoki assumed his Shudra position and bent his head. (70)

Even the white lords are amazed by the “Savarna Buddhi” or caste cunning of the feudal lords, who use music to make the workers work faster, by playing over their sense of rhythm (71).
Whatever be the extent of torture and exploitation they would not run away since the punishments for run-away slaves are severe:

Needles were pushed in to their nails, faces were mutilated with the sting of black scorpions. They were chained and left alone in burial grounds and yoked along with buffaloes to plough the ground. ‘Don’t you see you sons of slaves, if any one dare to go beyond our words, you will be finished, slaughtered’ hearing this roaring of Karatithampuran the slave clans began to shiver out of terror. Their tears were burning.

(78)

But when the company and the white lords came with unquestionable authority and material sophistication the Brahmanic Varna practitioners and their companions of “honour” also found some excuse to compromise with the new regime. Any examination of Kerala history will reveal that these companions of “honour” were always companions of “superior” hegemonic groups. They were the sole attendants and bodyguards of power and naked barbarism of might and manipulative metaphysics. Being the products of the large scale feudal militarization in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the sheath-less sword was their sacred weapon in maintaining Brahmanic caste hegemony over the working communities and they pushed them further away from the public sphere and from educational, cultural and symbolic capital. The self-fashioned samurais of Kerala found
nothing wrong in their shift in loyalty under colonialism. The eagerness with which they receive the white man, even taking care to entertain his horse by providing it a special “Pandal” for shelter, is one of the effective enactments of this opportunism that also ensures caste cleavage and spacing:

The white lord who is coming to rule the land crossing seas and hills is our Maveli. An exclusive palace should be built for the white lord alone. It should be decorated with the choicest leaves and flowers from the forest. Another Pandal for his men. Beyond that one more Pandal for his horse with proper food. Further beyond separate Pandals for the Chettys and Nairs and Nambiars. Far beyond it all slaves can stand behind some tree trunk without polluting them. (86)

The hierarchical structure of castes was maintained with cruel force. A typical Menoki version is provided in Chapter Twelve, where he questions Jeveraperuman about the runaway slaves:

The silence of Jevera was an extreme offence in the Thampuran world. Menoki used his bamboo pole to shower blows on the slave’s back. The clan ran in to the forest seeing this outrage. ‘You will be finished, finished’ shouted Menoki. The old man standing there with out a tear drop angered the lord and he used his rod again and again till the old slave broke down in to the soil. The cries of the hiding
clan became louder even without their knowledge on watching this. Menoki ran in to them raising his sword and they retreated further and further in to the woods...Menoki put his long spear in to the mouth of Jevara to know whether he is dead or alive. He pushed it so down the old man’s throat till his hand began to move to stop this brutal act. That very moment Menoki gave a sudden blow with the bamboo pole and the hand was broken. Menoki crushed the broken hand under his feet and the cries of mothers and children once again came up from the bush. Ambu Thamburan ordered to put the broken hand to his mouth. Menoki was planning to do the same even before the order was issued and he did so. ‘No one should give him water or food’ Thampuran ordered, ‘no one should even talk to him.’ (100)

If the males are inflicted with brutal bodily mutilations, the females are tortured through their sexuality and the organic power of reproduction. A few of the thinking women slaves realize that the birth of a girl child is therefore a double curse in the Thampuran world since it is only an addition to the Thampuran herd, that is, she is destined to produce more and more slave children, especially girl children (123). Along with their body and sexuality, their pain and shame everything is under control and manipulation:
I t is the lords who robe us, and it is the lords who unrobe us. What is there in a slave’s body that the lords have not seen?

(130)

The body of the slave is an object of the master’s gaze. The master manipulates and exercises his power over the slave’s body by concealing and revealing it, by mutilating and subordinating it. The lord covers and exposes it according to his hegemonic fancies and fetishisms. He plays hide and seek with it in the same way as Baby does metaphorically with his material. This also reminds us of the forced practice of uncovering the breasts before the feudal and caste lords to reiterate their hierarchical superiority and unquestionable hegemony forced on the Bahujans by the Brahmanic upper castes in Kerala even in the early twentieth century. Toward the end the slaves manage to get out of this physical, psychological and cultural hegemony and develop a counter-hegemonic discourse. This discourse demystifies and subverts the subordination myths of the lords: “To chain our ancestors in the Thampuran cage they invented sprits and demons and sent them around us. The lords nourished them on the blood of cocks and on tender coconuts, to follow us down to hell. They have grown along with our generations, anchoring our fears. We can now use them against the lords” (164).
The ban on slave trade by the British soon follows and the Adivasis for the first time are granted minimum level of work conditions. In the words of Karian, a member of the clan, the new developments are promising:

In the company work place we can raise our clothes above waist level. We can also lower it below the knee. Woolen clothes for cold nights, and more clothes to wear. The whites don’t treat us as bulls and beasts like our Thampurans. They are going to end the slave trade! From now on we can’t be sold or bought, can’t be exported across seas. (170)

Thus the picture the narrative presents at the end is a seemingly promising one for the slaves. But as mentioned earlier, their history does not end at this promising moment somewhere around the beginning of twentieth century. And the worst thing in the Adivasi history in Wayandu, the Syrian Christian migration from Travancore, takes place at this point of history. The narrative however opts to conclude, without making even a slight mention of this important event, leaving all the related questions and uncertainties open. The silence is pregnant with tales of atrocities worse than what Menoki and Karatithampuran actually perpetuate in the narrative. The tales told are cruel, but the untold ones are definitely more cruel. What is foregrounded in the novel is not the tribal present but the past of the tribals, that too very cleverly chosen particular pasts to eliminate the threat of present turbulence and the democratic process of communitization and construction of brotherhood.
among the victims of Brahmanism. The abortion of radical solidarities should be carried out at any rate, and that is where the worldview of the novelist meets with that of the Thampuran. The non-Dalit, Savarna/Syrian subjecthood of the author is the villain of the piece here. The tribalism discourse that the novel creates, just like the orientalism discourse of the western scholars that celebrates and writes/reiterates the past of the victim, thwarts attempts by emerging radical and broader ideological formations from the present to subvert hegemony, and serves the goals of the forces of status quo.

Notes


3 All the subsequent translated extracts from the text (Malayalam original) are mine from the D C B, Kottayam edition of 1998.


Tanika Sarkar argues that the colonial rule and the church compromised considerably with the Hindu Brahmanic patriarchy and uppercaste norms in retaining hegemony. Arunoday Guha is concerned about the double labyrinth of Christian Dalit hood that robs the victims of their constitutional rights. The futility of Re conversion is the thrust of the argument in Biswamoy Pati since caste, not religion is the key factor. See Tanika Sarkar, Arunoday Guha and Biswamoy Pati in the bibliography.


11 The concept of polyphony is developed from Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogic nature of language and the heteroglossia. See David Lodge, After Bakhtin: Essays in Fiction and Criticism (London: Routledge, 1990).


13 For detailed accounts of these historical events see Kesavan, Jeevitasamaram and also Kesavadev, Ethirpu.
For the conceptual category of the Avarna Renaissance in Kerala see Puthupally Raghavan, where he identifies the movements and leaders of the Kerala renaissance emerging from the untouchable Avarna communities in the late nineteenth century. And for a critique of Savarna Brahmanic Nationalist renaissance in especially north India see J Reghu, “Kolonialisavum Jativimarsavum” Madhyamam Weekly, Nov. 28 (2003): 28-32.

J Reghu, “Understanding Community: Viswakarmas,” Economic and Political Weekly 38 (2003): 5304 contextualizes the process of communitization and understands community as distinct from class and caste. It also discusses the role of Ezhava communitization and other Avarna communitization processes in the modernization and democratization of Kerala as used by Narayana Guru in delegitimizing the meta-referential structure of Brahmanic, hierarchical Hinduism. Also see his “Adhunika Keralavum Samudayavatkaranavum”.


Jotiba Phule, Samagra Vangmay (Bombay: Govt. of Maharashtra, 1990).

Gopal Guru, “Liberating Jotiba Phule,” Economic and Political Weekly 38 (2003): 35 defends and contextualizes Phule’s reading of colonialism from the Dalit Bahujan perspective and says it is possible to give multiple readings for
colonialism. The historically marginalized sections who were made to suffer from cumulative disadvantages would be skeptical of the ‘nationalist promise’ and at times be supportive of imperial attempts that were making some space for these sections. Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar recognized the opportunities provided by colonial modernity. It is in this sense that one can understand Phule’s attempt to compare Baliraja with Jesus Christ. Also see Sahodaran Ayyappan’s interview with Narayana Guru, where he welcomes the western intervention. See Ayyappan, K.

For a detailed analysis of colonialism and the emergence of nationalism in India see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1986).


21 A collective political movement by Ezhavas, Muslims and Christians in early twentieth century Kerala for proportionate share in public service and education according to population.

of Dalitization and Mandalization and anticipates a subaltern hermeneutics that could democratize society and polity.


the hitherto non-communal tribals of Gujarat in to Muslim baiters, the culmination of which was explicit in the Gujarat pogrom in 2002. Also see Rudolf C Heredia, “Tribal History: Living Word or Dead Letter?,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 35 (2000): 1522-25 that focuses on the hijacking of tribal history by nationalist or Brahmanic scholarship and the suppression of oral histories. The present analysis draws on these pluralistic and developing epistemological debates regarding the Adivasi question in India, which are departures from the monolithic reductionism of the earlier accounts that serve hegemonic purposes.

Dilip Menon, *Caste, Nationalism and Communism in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 13-14, observes, while commenting on the relations between agrarian economy and the Nayar households of the early twentieth century in the neighbouring taluks of Wayanadu like North Kottayam and Kurumbranadu, that many large tharavadus (Nayar land lord households) built up informal empires by subordinating the tribal labour in the forests and through judicious alliances with other powerful tharavadus.

See K Ajitha, *Ormakkurippukal* (Kottayam: N B S, 1994 (1982)) 70, for a detailed account of the migration by Syrian Christians to Wayanadu and the subsequent incidents of land poaching by them and the alienation of tribals from their ancestral lands. Specifically see chapter six that deals with the migration to Pulpally, pages 49, 69 and 70. Also see C K Janu, *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story of C K Janu, As told to and Written by Bhaskaran*, trans. Ravi Shankar (New Delhi: Women Unlimited and Kali for women, 2004).

K K Baburaj, "Mantakanavukalile Michasidhantham," Mathrubhumi Weekly, May 9 (2004): 18-23, reads this decomposed narrative craft as part of the decayed pattern obtaining in Malayalam modernism that denied human status to the subaltern, a narrative that negates the possibility of Adivasi sustenance and struggle, but something that covertly imagines genocide.

For a detailed historical account of this Brahmanic social engineering carried out through their chief agents, the mediating Shudras, also called "companions of honour," see K N Ganesh, Keralthinte Innalekal (Thiruvanantapuram: Dept. of Culture, Govt. of Kerala, 1990), specifically the chapter on "Caste and Class" and the sections dealing with the transformation from the tribal to the feudal. Also see K K Kochu, "Swathutamastatayute Avirbhavam" (The origin of land ownership), Madhyamam Weekly Aug 31 (2002): 23-27, for a discussion on the formation of elite land holding groups in the Cankam period and the late enslavement of the tribal clans, who were ideologically subordinated and brought to bonded slavery.
All subsequent translations from the text are mine from the Malayalam original of K J Baby, *Mavelimantam* (Thrissur: Current, 2000).

Note that he is exclusively a Man not a woman, exposing the patriarchal core of the Brahmanic Varna ideology articulated through texts like *Gita* and *Manudharmasastra* or Smritis in general.

33 See Arjun Dangle, ed., *Poisoned Bread* and *Homeless in my Land* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1999).

34 For details of Brahmanic spatial strategies and hierarchical spacing gradations in Kerala see P K Balakrishnan, *Jativyavastitiyum Kerala Charithravum* (Kottayam: SPCS, 1986) and also K N Ganesh and Robin Jeffrey.


36 For the details of these categories and problematic subject positions see Ajay Sekher, “Older Than the Church: Caste and Christianity in the God of Small Things,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 38 (2003): 3445-49.