CHAPTER II

Selected Texts: A Primer and Justification

i) Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku (1930)

This is a comedy\(^1\) distinguished by its kinetic response to the age old customs practiced by the Nambuthiri Brahmins in Kerala. The customs were too rigid that it never allowed the members of that community to have a good discern of the drastic social changes that had been happening outside. The junior male members in a Nambuthiri family were not allowed to marry Nambuthiri girls\(^2\); they only had a right to make nonformal conjugal relations with Nair women which was called *sambandham*. The cloistered life led by Nambuthiri girls unequalled any of the discriminations commonly shared by the women of non-Dalit castes. They had to wear a veil whenever they go outside the abode. Known as *ghosha*, this system rightly exemplified the fettered life led by Nambuthiri women within the four walls of an *illam*.

Imbibing the spirit of social reformation, some individuals in the Nambuthiri Brahmin community revolted against the practice of *sambandham* and *ghosha*. Among them V. T. Bhattathirippad, M. R. Bhattathirippad and M. P. Bhattathirippad deserve special mention. They showed the value of literary work as an agent of social change. Best of such an example was V. T. Bhattathirippad’s ‘Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku’ which rocked the ship of conservative brahminism to a great extent.

In this play, Madhavan, a young Nambuthiri Brahmin, goes to Madras after completing his *veda* studies. As he resided in Vilayoor *illam*, house of his
close relative Vilayoor Achan Nambuthiri, unto the completion of his *veda* studies, he was in great pain to leave behind his cousins Kunchu and Thethi and their parents. But his ambition for a good career makes him endure that separation. Though Madhavan and Thethi love each other, neither of them ever realises its unpracticality. Being an *apphan* (a junior member of an *illam* who is having an elder brother) he cannot marry a Nambuthiri girl. At that time the mores of Nambuthiri Brahmin community were so rigid that it never allowed its members to disaffiliate from the laws that had been imposed through generations.

Even though Vilayoor Achan Nambuthiri secretly wishes Madhavan to be his daughter’s fiancé, he cannot go beyond the restrictions imposed by the community. So he decides Thethi’s marriage with Karkkadamkunnathu Nambuthiri, a sexagenarian. Thethi’s brother Kunchu tries to avoid this queer marriage. He sends a telegram to Madras informing Madhavan that Thethi’s marriage has been fixed to an old rogue. Madhavan exhorts Kunchu to file a petition in the Magistrate court against the unlawful marriage. Kunchu succeeds in getting an injunction from the court. At the time of wedding a court official enters the venue and announces that the marriage between Thethi and Karkkadamkunnathu Nambuthiri has been prevented by the law of court. This unexpected dénouement gives Madhavan a safe opportunity to become the bridegroom of Thethi. After the wedding functions were happily finished, Madhavan introduces Thethi to his friends by tearing off her *ghosha*. Though this action embarrasses the elders, they at last realise the relevance of reformist movements in their community.
V. T. Bhattathirippad (1896-1982) is considered as one of the most vehement activists who gave a novel vision to the reformation movements in Nambuthiri Brahmin community. As an active member of the rank and file of the national struggle, he succeeded in connecting the spirit of national liberation with the reformist movements that emerged within the Nambuthiri Brahmin community. The play ‘Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku’ was really a battle cry against the rigid orthodoxy of his community. It gave an undeniable impetus to Nambuthiri Brahmin community in its move towards capitalist modernity. His remarkable success in different fields of his career ranging from journalism to social activism shows his versatility. He represents a time when literature started to problematise various issues in society.

**Meaning of Community Reformation in the Milieu of Capitalist Modernity**

Among the nine plays that have been taken for analysis, *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* comes first in the chronological order. Its inceptive staging was in 1929, as a cultural piece performed alongside the 22nd annual meeting of *Nambuthiri Yogakshema Sabha*.

The milieu is marked by two important agitations, Vaikam Satyagraha (1924-25) and Guruvayur Satyagraha (1931-32). These agitations show the standards on which the concrete social questions did rest. Despite its stance against untouchability validated the emergence of a new social order totally alien to the feudal social relations, these satyagrahas dissented to see the Dalit questions in a more broader sense concerned with the concepts of
identity, indigeneity and clan consciousness. A. Sreedhara Menon, in his well-acclaimed book, *A Survey of Kerala History*, describes the progression of Vaikam Satyagraha:

In addition to T. K. Madhavan, several other top leaders like K. P. Kesava Menon, Mannath Padmanabhan, Changanacherry Parameswaran Pillai, C. V. Kuhiraman and K. Kelappan were associated with the Vaikam Satyagraha. Its aim was to get the approach roads to Vaikam temple opened for the *avarnas* of Hindu community. One of the highlights of the Satyagraha was the *savarna jatha*, organised under the leadership of Mannath Padmanabhan, by the caste Hindus who supported the movement….The Vaikam satyagraha and the *savarna jatha* helped to influence public opinion in favour of temple entry.³

It is quite evident from this description that the agitation was organised, defined and mobilised by the leaders who hailed from the upper class community. So, it can rightly be observed that the protest against untouchability was rather a revision of the existing system of social values for making it adaptable to the emerging system of capitalist modernity than an attempt to address the reality of Dalit identity. *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* hence becomes a watermark of the process of this change-over from feudal social relations to capitalist social relations. As the process of this change-over crushed the questions concerning Dalit identity, it is relevant to see how a literary work like *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* virtually supported the deletion of Dalit cause from the discursive practices
of the early capitalism. Hence the selection of this play as one of the nine plays for analysis is justified.

ii) *Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam* (1931)

In its content this play is the right successor of *Adukkalayilninnum Arangathekku*. Ettipapthi, a tender virgin in her teens, is married to Puthinappally Nambuthiri as his third veli (wife). At a time when polygamy was vogue in Nambuthiri Brahmin community, no one including her delicate father Parameshwaran Nambuthiri ever thought of the ominous turn the marriage would bring. Ettinangayya, Puthinappally’s first veli, was so jealous that she never missed a chance to blame Ettipapthi for her trifile flaws. She always intrigued against Ettipapthi. It grew an extreme level of physical attack. She was too young to put up with all those afflictions. As she found not a single recourse in life, she put an abrupt end to it by hanging herself.

The observations made about *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* are equally applicable to *Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam*. Nambuthiri Brahmins were an influential community in Kerala since the 12th century AD. Economic dominance as well as social dominance helped them to retain their power till the first half of the 20th century. During the time when the power relations based on feudalism had been disrupted by the early capitalism, the Nambuthiri Brahmin community in Kerala was compelled to renovate itself by adding more laxity to their family system. This process of redefining the social/family system helped them to have a renascence in the capitalist
modernity. Thus they contrived to retain power even in the capitalist society. This naturally endangered the Dalit narratives.

M. R. Bhattathirippad (1909-2001), known as MRB in literary circles, was contemporary of the stalwarts, V. T. Bhattathirippad and E. M. S. Nambuthirippad. Like V. T. Bhattathirippad he gave an impetus to the reformation movements in Nambuthiri Brahmin community by writing a lot in this connection. *Marakkudakkullile Mahanarkam* will show how seriously he engaged in protestations against the *Aacharams* vogue in his community. By marrying Uma Antharjanam he disseminated so serious a message that reasserted the relevance of widow marriage. Not confining his activism inside the community alone he actively participated in the nationalist movement. Apart from being a writer he was also a notable journalist and editor.

**iii) Ritumathi (1944)**

*Ritumathi* comes last in the ‘trio’ of plays which brought to stage the tribulations of Nambuthiri Brahmin women in Kerala. For the sake of the study I prefer to use this ‘trio’ a base portion for the discussions, for it engenders fundamental questions about the political meaning of the social reformations that were sponsored by communities and state itself. Hence *Ritumathi* is discussed thirdly though it comes fourth in chronological order.

Devaki, a fourteen year old Nambuthiri girl, is the protagonist of this play. She, after the untimely death of her parents, is destined to live with her father’s brother and his wife. The opening scene takes place in Panampalli Mana, her uncle’s *illam*, where she lives while completing her schooling.
Uncle Panampalli Nambuthiri, his wife Nangema and their son Kuttan loved her so deeply that she never felt alienation in their house. But Panampally Nambuthiri faces a dilemma when Devaki reaches her puberty. As per the custom prevalent in Nambuthiri Brahmin community, a menstruated girl should stop going school even if she wishes to continue it. Knowing that Devaki has entered her puberty, her father’s brother Kizhakkepram comes to Panampalli Mana and urges Panampalli Nambuthiri that he should send Devaki with him forthwith. Panampally, though with reluctance, sends Devaki with Kizhakkepram. There in Kizhakkeprath illam she experiences incessant harassments from Kizhakkepram and his wife, Ennicha. Devaki, bold and obstinate in character, never obeys him. The turning point comes when Kizhakkepram tries to fix her marriage with Chemmanthatta Thuppan, an old Nambuthiri, who is already having a veli in another house. Devaki struggles in vain. When the muhoortham approaches for the marriage her protestation increases to unexpected levels. She even dares to dash away the mantrakodi (the saree given to brides by bridegrooms). Kizhakkepram, an ardent follower of the rigid customs of his community, considers this an offence which might uproot the very existence of Nambuthiri Brahmins as a prerogative class. In a fit temper he strangles Devaki. Amid the invitees there was standing a young man named Vasudevan. As a colleague of Panampalli Nambuthiri’s son Kuttan, he was also known to Devaki. He, known as an activist in the circle of progressive Nambuthiri youngsters, interferes in the scene and saves Devaki from the stranglehold of Kizhakkepram. For Devaki this becomes a moment of expressing her furtive love towards Vasudevan.
The period during which *Ritumathi* had been published was so critical in Kerala’s political arena. This was actually a time when various social/communal organisations succeeded in getting their demands fulfilled by the state. The long preserved mores concerning family and society were annulled or restructured by various bills or regulations passed by the government. The Nair Act (1912), The Ezhava Act (1925), The Nanjanad Vellala Act (1926), The Cochin Nair Regulation (1919-20), The Cochin Nair Act (1937-38), The Madras Marumakkathayam Act (1933), The Mappila Marumakkathayam Act (1939), The Madras Nambuthiri Act (1933), Malabar Tenancy Act (1930), The Cochin Tenancy Act (1938), The Verumpattamdars Act (1943) were some of the important steps taken by the state to reorganise the society in a more democratic level congruous to a structure demanded by the capitalist economy.

An avalanche of these progressive measures naturally endangered the old social order. For example, various tenancy acts put restrictions on undue evictions of tenants from lands. This subsequently disrupted the *Janmi* system. Since majority of the *Janmis* were Nambuthiri Brahmins, those governmental measures concerning land and lease drove them to seek other sources to retain their power over society. In such a situation they had no options other than modernising their community with the ‘tools’ provided by the emerging capitalism. The instigation of E. M. S. Nambuthirippad to the fellow members of his community that they should come over to the field of industry in the changed circumstances aptly expresses the magnitude of challenges faced by the Nambuthiri Brahmins in a period of transition. Like the first two plays in our discussion, *Ritumathi* also made an avenue for contemplating the necessity of refreshing the community from its outdated
customs. Their adaptation to new conditions naturally helped them to preserve their relative social dominance untouched. This negatively affected the possibility of a counter discourse based on Dalit identity. So, *Ritumathi* becomes relevant in locating the ‘denotified’ spaces of Dalits in the general discursive realm.

M. P. Bhattathirippad (1908-1998) was one of the prominent figures in the reformist circle of the Nambuthiri Brahmin community. Also known as Premji in the art circle, he was hypercritical in his approach towards the conservatism of his community. During the long span of his career as an activist, writer and actor he never gave repose to his incessant activities. It was in the eve of his life that he had been laurelled with a national award for the best actor for his performance in *Piravi*, debut film of Shaji N. Karun, the famous Malayalam director.

**iv) *Pattabakki* (1938)**

*Pattabakki* can rightly be called a play that has directly handled a theme which served as propaganda of the emerging leftist ideology. Introducing ‘socialist realism’ in the literary arena of Malayalam, *Pattabakki* paved the way for at least a dozen plays of this genre to come about. Unlike the three plays that we mentioned earlier *Pattabakki* was rather a direct response to the feudal mode of social relations.

The protagonist of the play, Kittunni, is a lessee of Apphan Nambuthiri, the affluent landlord of his village. He has also been doing an unskilled job in a factory for preventing his family from utter starvation. The salary received by him is so meagre that he cannot help stealing rice from Athankutty’s shop
in order to save his family from hunger. Caught red-handed, he is sent to jail. Raman Nair, the caretaker of Apphan Nambuthiri’s land, approaches Kittunni’s sister with a clumsy debauchery in his mind. But she resists with a womanly pride. Insulted by her strong and sharp reproach, Raman Nair inculcates Apphan Nambuthiri to get the land held by Kittunni be evicted without further time lapse. As they made default in the timely remittance of land-rent, she has no option other than blindly facing the approaching destitution along with her indisposed mother and younger brother. Her mother, derelict and grief-ridden, dies a pathetic death. Kittunni, who has been sentenced to an imprisonment for six months for theft, is not aware of all these new developments. When he is released, it gives such a shock to him to learn that his beloved sister became a prostitute. Though Kittunni is infested with anger he does not turn his back to the realisation that his sister’s choice of prostitution was a poverty-ridden compulsion. Through the words of Muhammed, one of his friends and a trade union activist, he was faintly aware of the reasons behind the prevailing social disparity. He shares his political thoughts with his sister. The play ends with their firm resolution that they should be a part of the emerging struggle which aims for a social change.

The politics of Pattabakki

Pattabakki signifies the subtle interplay of caste and politics in the cultural sphere of Kerala. It was not accidental that the inference made by Pattabakki pertaining to the social disparity situated Janmi-Kudiyan relation at the centre of the debate. Understanding societal inequality in terms of easy binaries like Janmi-Kudiyan/capitalist-proletariat/haves-have-nots will
negate the role of caste in Kerala. The people who had been given acres of agricultural land for lease hailed from Nair community, a community so ardent in its practice and propagation of *varnashrama dharma*. During the time when *patta* system prevailed in Kerala society, the major leaseholders were known as *Kanakkudiyanmar*. Most of them were from Nair community. By giving their leasehold for sublease this community emerged as an influential group of middlemen which helped them to attain a future more safe and consistent than that of the *verumpattakkar*. As dwellers of the lowest stratum of the lease-system, the *verumpattakkar* naturally comprised Dalit mass.

The *patta* system prevailed in Kerala was too intricate to tackle through the ‘Marxian binaries’, for it carried a more vehement factor in it – the mechanics of caste. *Pattabakki* largely disregards this facet. The politics behind the silencing of Dalit cause even in the progressive literature demands special attention. *Pattabakki*, as a play that falls in the lineage of ‘socialist realism’, aptly gives spaces for such questions concerning the ‘virtual’ oppression of Dalits in literature. So, the inclusion of *Pattabakki* in this study is indispensable.

K. Damodaran (1912-1976) was one of the main ideologues of the communist movement in Kerala. During the time of its dawn as a dissident social movement, Communist Party relied on him a lot for his unique contributions to various fields of cultural engagement. Though he had written notable works on literature and philosophy, his main focus was on economics. Damodaran’s memorable contributions are not only confined to writings but also extended to other fields like party leadership,
administration of cultural institutions, etc. Once he was even elected to Rajya Sabha. Besides that, worth remembering is his contributions in the field of journalism.

v) **Nammalonnu (1948)**

The plays, may it be commercial or amateur (if such hard and fast rules are feasible), that have handled the ideas axial to Marxism are abundant in number. An endogenous conflict between two different interests within a society will give birth to a synthesis - this idea of dialectics is so direct that no wonder in using it repeatedly by different genres of art through all these decades starting from the dawn of the last century. But in India, a country with manifold layers of caste, Marxism faced explanatory hazards in disentangling the complex social order. This crisis naturally affected the art and literary productions based on the rudiment of Marxian concepts. In order to get over this complexity, they simply set aside caste and dwelt in a more convenient realm of ‘haves and have-nots politics.’ At least four of the plays that are taken for analysis have precisely exemplified this crisis. The first one in this array is *Pattabakki*, which we have mentioned earlier. The rest are *Nammalonnu*, *Koottukrishi* and *Ningalenne Communistakki*.

Like the other three plays *Nammalonnu* also places the question on land at the centre of the action. Problematising the relation between the owner of the land and his lessee, *Nammalonnu* builds so concrete a position based on the economic rationalities.

As a result, the role of caste in determining the internal structure of the *Janmi-Kudiyana* relation was neglected. This apparently shows the
epistemological deadlock faced by Marxism in a caste-ridden society. So, rereading of these texts will show how efficaciously the reality of caste had been obliterated from the trajectory of the narrative practices. *Nammalonnu* truly offers/leaves such spaces for a rereading of the complex political motives immanent in a society.

In this play, Pangan Nair, a tenant by inheritance, has deep reverence in his mind towards Kunchu Nambuthirippad, his landlord. Nevertheless, his son Shankunni does not share the blind loyalty which his father has in his mind towards the *janmi*. As a member of the peasant movement, Shankunni bears certain values bestowed by the Communist Party. Though not as resolute as his friend Muhammed, Shankunni also keeps a spirit of revolutionary zeal in his activities. At a time when the privileges enjoyed by *janmis* have been jeopardised by various bills and regulations introduced by the Government, Kunchu Nambuthirippad intrigues to evict his tenants as a precaution. He was such an insidious man to start the eviction from Pangan Nair, the very person who exhibited his loyalty towards him without reticence. Though the *janmi’s* caretaker Raman Nair proceeds to get the land evicted, a throng led by Shankunni firmly resists. Raman Nair retreats. All these developments make Pangan Nair to rethink the stance held by him up to this date. He remorses and realises the need for a social change. Joining hands with the comrades he strides towards a better dawn free of serfdom and exploitation.

Govindappisharadi (1914-1976) popularly known as Cherukad, was born in 1914 in Pulamanthol, Valluvanad, Kerala. The tenure of his education in Pulamanthol Illam, a Gurukulam run by Pulamanthol Moosad, sharpened his expertise in Sanskrit and *Vaidyam*. Beginning his career as a Sanskrit
teacher he worked in a number of schools. Later he became a lecturer and worked in two Sanskrit colleges, Pavaratti and Pattambi. As a dedicated communist he was preoccupied with the effort of creating a cultural realm for the communist party. All of his writings invariably carry the signature of his philosophy – a philosophy that articulates the torments of the working class.

vi) *Kootukrishi* (1950)

The immediate years after independence, when the idioms of secularism had won currency within the circle of an educated middle class, brought a definite thought concerning national integration in which the threat of communal conflict reasserted. Understanding India essentially in terms of a ‘Hindu-Muslim composition’ largely obscures the solid reality of caste in Indian society. The ensign of secularism, as argued by some socio-historians, was a contribution of the new national consciousness⁸ propounded by the left wing leaders of the National Congress. Instead of effacing communalism, ironic may it seems, secularism in India retained the very germs of communalism in all the branches of life it interfered including politics and literature.

It is in such a context that the play *Koottukrishi* has been taken into this study. *Koottukrishi* reflects the process by which the communal vs secular discourses have been placed in the centre of the academic and non-academic practices by pushing aside the caste and caste oriented debate from the main discursive platform. The virtual bifurcation of India into a Hindu-Muslim binary allowed the concept of secularism to play its role in Indian polity. But
one question remains. Did secularism heed the plurality based on caste and ethnicity? *Koottukrishi*, given its theme, leaves such spaces for confronting this question in a rather epistemological way.

Sreedharan Nair, a landowner by title, is teetering towards a breakdown. His deceased uncle had filed a lawsuit against his tenant, Aboobeker, for eviction. But the newly introduced bills which reiterated the right of tenants over the lands they possessed brought that suit into a deadlock. Sreedharan Nair, who does not get sufficient yield from his tenant’s possession, tries to reach reconciliation with Aboobeker by proposing a joint-farming venture in which the yield is envisaged to be shared equally. Aboobeker, as he was in such a debacle by the dearth in crop, agrees with Sreedharan Nair. Both of them launch the joint farming venture along with Velu, a whole-hearted village farmer. Their brotherhood beyond the parochialism of community sows the seed of unrest in the minds of conservative Hindus and Muslims. A nexus is formed under the influence of Pokker and Nambiar. Their vicious plots for destroying the fraternity between Sreedharan Nair and Aboobeker do not succeed. But they somehow contrive to coax Bappu, Aboobeker’s son, to move against his own father. They persuade Bappu by saying that his father’s friendship with a ‘Kaffir’ would badly affect his community. Bappu, with a vindictive mind, decides to kill Sreedharan Nair. But Ayisha, Bappu’s sister, interferes on the verge of a tragedy and makes him retreat. Realising that all the wrong informations given to him were part of an intrigue plotted by Poker and Nambiar, he confesses.

Edasseri Govindan Nair (1906-1974) was born at Kuttippuram, Malappuram. Well-known throughout Kerala for his contributions in
poetry he was also enthusiastic in other branches of literature. *Koottukrishi*, the play we discuss here, bagged an award from the Madras government. Besides, he won Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1969 and Kendra Sahitya Academy Award in 1970 for his anthologies of poetry, *Orupidi Nellikka* and *Kavile Pattu* respectively.

**vii) Ningalenne Communistakki (1952)**

Combating caste was too hefty a challenge for Marxism in India. Always facing hazards in defining the proletariat/working class devoid of its caste identity, it naturally embraced a position in which the middle class was introduced as a minimising agent of the social rift derived from caste. The social disparity was envisaged to be resolved through uplifting the downtrodden to a position kept by middle class castes. A close reading will show how efficacious was *Ningalenne Communistakki* in fixing an ‘ideal caste’ in the subconscious of Kerala society. This observation is equally true to the last three plays which we have mentioned above. All these plays invariably present the Nair community as a ‘representative caste’. The socio-cultural process of pushing aside the Dalit castes from the narratives is precisely visible in these plays. The next chapter will discuss it in detail.

The thematic aspect of *Ningalenne Communistakki* is similar to that of *Nammalonnu*. Paramu Pillai is a lessee of Kesavan Nair. As the *Karanavar* of a shattered *tharavadu*, Paramu Pillai solely strives for his family’s sustenance. But Kesavan Nair, so astute and tricky, tries to get hold of his *tharavadu* by arguing that Paramu Pillai made default in the periodical payment of rent for his leasehold. Paramu Pillai, who isn’t aware of Kesavan
Nair’s vicious plots, continues to be a dependant of him. As a conservative Nair, he always reproaches his son, Gopalan, for his Communist Party inclination. Gopalan tries to make him aware that all the crises faced by them were nothing but the result of a *janmi* system. As a person who still lingers on his good old days, Paramu Pillai cannot fall in with his son’s stance. But at last he realises the anathema of *janmi* system. Possessed by the wave of an emerging struggle, he cannot help marching along with his comrades for a better future.

*Ningalenne Communistakki* is considered as Thoppil Bhasi (1924-1992)’s *magnum opus*. Though his other plays achieved considerable successes, none of them ever had such an impact as *Ningalenne Communistakki*. Bhasi’s adherence to Marxism is explicit in it. As a Communist Party activist he had gone through unbelievable torments. Later, when the ban on Communist Party had been lifted, he was elected as a member of the first Legislative Assembly of Kerala. Undeniable was his role in the formation of Kerala Peoples’ Arts Club (KPAC). His link with IPTA (Indian Peoples’ Theatre Association) helped KPAC to strengthen its pro-left politics. Besides being a playwright he was also a skilful stage director and an expert film maker. His other important works are *Mudiyanaya Puthran, Aswamedham, Sarasayya, Puthiya Akasam Puthiya Bhoomi, Mooladhanam, Koottukudumbam* and *Thulabharam*. His autobiography, *Olivile Ormakal*, has also received a wide readership.
viii) Avanavan Kadamba (1975)

Avanavan Kadamba made a paradigmatic shift in Malayalam theatre history. The new experiments it attempted in Angika, Vachika and Aharya brought forth similar practices in amateur repertories of Kerala. The use of folklore in stage was essentially a blow to the conventional beliefs concerning drama and its craft. Avanavan Kadamba introduced a distinct style in stage-craft by adding to it the richness of indigenous culture. The ritualistic acclamations, the wild rhythm of folksong, and the strange costumes were some of the factors which gave Avanavan Kadamba a new hue different from that of the dramas of conventional style. Hence, the pertinence of Avanavan Kadamba in Malayalam theatre history is that it brought in a new genre – a genre which has since been called the thanathu (indigenous).

Dalit and indigeneity

1970s was a critical period in Indian politics. The proclamation of national emergency, the decisive influence of ultra-leftists in Indian villages, the emergence of Dalit politics in Maharashtra were some of the landmarks. The mutual influence of politics and literature can easily be discerned in that period. The hypothesis that Avanavan Kadamba marks a rupture from the Aristotelian theatre adds a political relevance to this thesis. As the concept thanathu brings back an indigenous culture, it is important to find a congruity in ‘Dalit’ and ‘thanathu’. This study presupposes that Avanavan Kadamba was not efficacious in dealing the ‘indigenous’ at a political level.

Kavalam Narayana Panicker was born on April 28, 1928 at Kavalam, Alappuzha. As a playwright and stage director he is one among the stalwarts
of Indian theatre history. By the exhaustive use of folklore in stage he gave a
different hue to Indian theatre. He has written more than twenty plays among
which *Daivathar* and *Avanavan Kadamba* made a decisive impact on
Malayalam theatre. *Kummati*, a play written for children, has been made
film by the renowned director, Aravindan. He has directed plays for different
theatre groups in Kerala and abroad. Sopanam, National School of Drama,
Kalidasa Academy, Kerala Kalamandalam and University of Wisconsin
(U.S.A) are some of the institutions which used his directorial talent. He also
served as the secretary of the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Academy. He has
won the Kerala Sahitya Academy Award for the best playwright. He has also
been laurelled by the Kalidas Samman, the most prestigious award given by
the Madhya Pradesh government.


Being a play which strove to place the particular issues of Adivasis in a
historical perspective, *Nadu Gaddika* deserves a special attention. The very
structure of the play was a dissent from the stereotypes. As some of the
critics observed, apparent was its adherence to ‘Guerrilla Theatre.’ 1970s
was a period of political unrest in India. Not only did it bring forth a radical
outlook in politics but also engendered an *avant-garde* in literature. The
proclamation of national emergency alerted the intellectuals of their fragile
democracy. Quest for a political alternative was normally reflected in
literature. *Nadu Gaddika’s* indebtedness to this *avant-garde* is undeniable.

The germinal ideas of a later ‘neo-politics’ can be seen in *avant-garde*. The
main trait of the neo-politics which won currency in 1990s was its adherence
to the tripartite, ‘Dalit, Gender and Ecology’. During the decades after independence, when India accelerated its strides towards a developing economy by allowing the private finance to dwell in various fields ranging from education to aviation, the socially backward groups faced a great threat on their primary livelihood. The statistics prepared by the ministries of central and state government as well as the non-governmental organisations show that the victims of the much glorified new generation developmental projects were none other than Dalits and Adivasis. *Avant-garde*, as a movement of the 70s, carried such poignant revelations. So, the evolving of such a play like *Nadu Gaddika* makes a compelling case for the study that is proposed.

*Nadu Gaddika* is a ritual performed by Adiyor, an Adivasi sect in Wayanad, to exorcise the germs of diseases from the village. The man who performs the rites is called *Gaddikakkaran*. In this play *Gaddikakkaran* invokes memories in Yachan. Yachan, an Adiyor and a serf of the *Janmi*, muses on his past and sees all the torments encountered by him and his predecessors. As the play develops, Yachan’s recollections become a political revelation of their entire servitude. By unravelling the black curtain of the history, *Gaddikakkaran* creates a spectacle for Yachan in which his *Janmi’s* falsified appearances at different turns of history are opened in a scenario (At first he was a pro-British feudal lord, then he became a Gandhian. After the Independence he joined with the ruling Congress; then he cladded in Marxism!). Through the panorama of remembrances, *Gaddikakkaran* makes Yachan aware of his centuries-old exploitation. Yachan and his comrades revolt against the suppression. As the rebellion slowly comes to its zenith, *Janmi’s* men catch *Gaddikakkaran*. After a brief trial he is murdered. But
the Adiyor never resign. One of them retrieves the attire of the Gaddikakkaran and puts it on with a ritual movement of the Gaddikayattam. He transcends himself to be the new Gaddikakkaran, the invoker, the instigator of the forthcoming revolution. All the rest unite behind him. Together they march towards a liberated society; a republic of their own.

K. J. Baby, the author of the play was born on February 27, 1954, at Mavady, in Kannur district. During the year 1973 his family migrated to Wayanad. Kanavu, his alternative school at Wayanad attracted much public attention. Besides Nadu Gaddika he has written one more play – Apoorrna. He has been given Kerala Sahitya Academy Award in 1994 for his novel, Maveli Mantam.
Notes

1. Though *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku* is considered as a farce, it handles a serious theme that intervenes with the pathetic life of Nambuthiri women in Kerala society. Dr. K. Ayyappa Panicker, while writing preface for its later editions, has tried to situate it in the lineage of comedies. ‘Farces of that period’, he argues, ‘often handled trivial subjects.’ (Preface, 9th edition of *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku*, DC Books, Kottayam, 2008)


3. Ibid., p.315.

4. Ibid., p.106.

   A. Sreedhara Menon writes, ‘The ascendancy of the Nambuthiri *Janmis* in Kerala has to be assigned to the period commencing from the 12th century A.D. when the *Janmi* system came into vogue.’

5. Ibid., pp.319-21.

The referred treatise is E. M. S. Nambuthirippad’s presidential address in the 34^{th} annual conference of Nambuthiri Yogakshema Sabha taken place at Ongalloor, in 1944. He shares his anxiety about the future of Nambuthiri Brahmin community at a time when their prominence as Janmis had been checked by various laws concerning land and tenancy. He urges them to invest their money into industry, for it would give more safe a position in a milieu of industrialisation.


E. M. S. Nambuthirippad argues that different regulations introduced by British Government pertaining to land and tenancy redirected the Janmi-Kudiyan relation towards an economic whole free from its erstwhile preoccupations on customs and conventionalities.

This argument seems to be a subterfuge from the realities of caste defined social relation. As far as the relation between Janmi and Kanakkudiyan is concerned, the argument of E. M. S. Nambuthirippad is valid. But it is important to note that the people who had been in the status of Kanakkudiyanmar were not from the Dalit castes. Most of them hailed from Nair community while the lowest stratum of the Kudiyan system, i.e., the Verumpattakkar, comprised Dalits. Had there been a change over, as E. M. S. argues, to pure economic
rationalities devoid of all the questions concerning social realities, no caste would have been there in our society.

8. Some historiographers of the nationalist movement has pointed out that the idea of nationalism in pre-independent India was strongly fixed in religious edifices. The best example is Gandhi’s approach to religion. He used religion as an impetus for accelerating the freedom struggle. But the left wing politicians of that period envisaged nationalism bereft of its communal categories. This thought engendered secularism. But ‘it merely attempted to distance itself from the conscious construction of nationalism in religious terms, even though its strategic origins would suggest that it continued to remain un-disentangled from its communal overtones. Thus it would be appropriate to reiterate that the received concepts of nationalism and secularism were not constructed historically and theoretically in meanings that rejected communalism; rather, they were constructed in meanings that were enmeshed in it’ (147). See Sujata Patel. ‘On the Discourse of Communalism’ in T. V. Sathyamurthy (ed.), Region, Religion, Caste, Gender and Culture in Contemporary India (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996) pp.147-8 & 160.