CHAPTER IV

Understanding the Politics of Performance in Nine Progressive Spectacles

The nine plays we enumerated in the last chapter are, in a way, as we have seen, metaphoric representations of caste-controlled social changes. The ensign of pan-caste ideology upheld by them made cracks in the ethnic actualities of Kerala society. The literate middle class who subscribed the views of parity introduced by the reformative tradition became the silent propagators of a ‘sans-caste’ society. This was actually a functional compromise of the savarna ideology with the western/modern liberalism. It was not by giving up caste that the middle class developed a universal (western) perspective on individual/social liberty. Rather they furtively preserved a system of hegemony in the multiple discourses brought in by the modern liberalism. It is the mechanics of this dialectics that we can see in literature.

It is perhaps not surprising that the caste/castes which spoke in the euphoric turns of the society could wrest the social exigencies of that juncture in accordance with its/their own interests. So, it is unsurprisingly natural that the literature which reflected those historical turns became a virtual facilitator of the parochial caste interests.

But parallel to the reformative tradition we can see the presence of a counter-voice aired by Ayyankali, Poikayil Appachan, Pampady John Joseph and the like. Theirs was a wholesome Dalit search ruptured from the set savarna paradigms of social progress. Conceptualising the Dalit situation
in terms of race, labour/slavery, indigenerity and religion they made a
discursive breakthrough in the opacities created by a set of canonical
discourses. The significance of the organisations founded by Ayyankali,
Poikayil Appachan and Pampady John Joseph lies not only in the fact that it
succeeded in eliciting the latent presence of the Dalits in history but also in
the truth that the three organisations – Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham
(1907), Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (1910) and Cheramar Mahajana
Sabha (1921) – won in augmenting symbolically the comfortable
expediencies of democracy by accentuating a polemics vis-à-vis colonialism
and reformation. But even before these organisations and its mentors started
to impart their decisive political imprints in modern history there had been in
Kerala a rich and diverse oral tradition that reflected unique Dalit
experiences.

It is in Thottam Pattukal that the subaltern life,
their multiple problems, the torments they went
through, and the resistance they acquire become
strong. We can see in various Thottangal like
Pottan Theyyam, Aippalli Theyyam, Neeliyar
Bhagavathithottam a hypercriticism about
savarna-dominated social order. The stories of the
protagonists like Poomathai Ponnamma in
Vadakkan Pattu, Muvottu Mallan in Thekkan
Pattu, Veerappananarayan in Adivasi Pattu linger in
the verbal tradition of Dalits as indicative of
subaltern resistance. At a time when the Dalits had
no capacity to combat the unjust, it was in folk
songs that they concealed strong diatribes against
dominance. We can see those covert criticisms in a
myriad of singular Agrarian, Recreational and
Communal songs.¹

Almost all the ritual arts performed in Kerala are strongly connected with
the subaltern life lived by the Dalit mass. Its best example can be seen in
_Theyyam_, the popular ritual performed in various parts of North Malabar.
Most of the _Theyyams_ are said to be the revival of the zealous life of Dalit
heroes who fought dead in the battle against those who were in power. As
Madavoor Bhasi, one of the eminent theatre scholars in Malayalam,
observers in his well-acclaimed book, _Malayala Natakavediyude Katha_
(Story of the Malayalam Theatre), it is the divine forms of ghosts that we see
in major variants of _Theyyam_.² These ghosts are the archetypes of the valiant
Dalits who were killed by the mercenaries of _savarna janmis_. One of the
important points that should be heeded here is that the men who perform
_Theyyam_ are none other than Dalits. It is the conferred right of a particular
caste to perform a particular form of _Theyyam_. For example, the variants like
Bhagavathikkolam, Kathivanoor Veeran, Bali and Palottu Daivam are
supposed to be performed by the caste, Vannan. Likewise, the responsibility
to play the role of Chamundi, Vishnumoorthy, Pottan, Karingutty Sasthan,
Ghantakarnan and Uchitta is vested in Malaya community. If the _Theyyams_
like Kunerachamundi or Kurathi are performed by Velanmar, it is Pulayas
who play Uppar Theyyam and Gandharvan Theyyam³.

Similarly, the rituals performed in Kerala in connection with _Kali_ worship
are strongly fixed in subaltern life. The tribal insignia seen in Ninabali,
Mudiyettu, Kaliyottu, Kalitheeyattu and Aivarkali is a strong evidence of its contiguity with Dalit experiences.

The style followed in Kerala for worshipping deities was primevally a Dravidian one. *Kali*, known as forest-goddess, was a Dravidian deity who protects the whole human race from calamities. She was worshipped in groves and Bhagavati temples. It is from wood that the idols of *Kali* are made. After the rites of invocation the idol is reinstalled. This style of idol worshipping is completely an aboriginal one. But Brahmins disliked this tribal element in *Kali* worship. They ‘Aryanised’ *Kali* by changing her name as ‘Bhadракali’. Along with the goddess *Kali* some ghostly spirits had also been worshipped. It is there that the origin of *Chathan*, the hobgoblin, lies.  

So, we can see a strong foundation of Dalit experiences in the cultural edifices of rituals and folklore. These two layers of cultural expressions codify two distinct yet homologous trajectories of Dalit life: the one which connected with deism, and the other which speaks of resistance. It is the political representation of these two streams that we see in Poikayil Appachan, Pampady John Joseph and Ayyankali. Here we can see the major difference between them and the leaders of the reformative tradition. If the former tried to discover the Dalit identity through the unique subaltern experiences of belief, slavery and resistance, the latter never went beyond a
simulated understanding of the caste provided by a colonial knowledge system. It can be clarified in another way:

(i) Combating caste was a functional exigency of colonial modernity. Reformation, as a derivative of colonial modernity, perfunctorily engaged in anti-caste activities.

(ii) Abstaining from the euphoria created by reformation, the Dalit leaders re-emphasised the relevance of caste in retrieving the unique subaltern experiences. For them, caste was a genuine articulation of identity.

In his treatise on Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (P. R. D. S.), V. V. Swamy, who has been meticulously engaging in compiling the history and disseminating the theology of PRDS, writes:

It is through processes of criticism and negation of the hegemonic and colonial interpretations of the Indian renaissance, even when these have been carried out perfunctorily, that subaltern sections of the society have re-construed their historical literature. Until then, the dominant historiography of the social reform projects of the latter half of the nineteenth century, including those of non-brahmin and dravidian movements, was based on the concept of historical continuity that obscured and denied representation to several crucial elements in history. Colonial historiography construed
subaltern uprisings as remnants or supplements of colonial modernity. That narrative project deployed its writing strategies in such a way as to assimilate the concrete historical moments of these uprisings into abstract categories, thus integrating them into perverse schemes and nomenclatures that in effect erased their representational possibilities. As a consequence, it became difficult to provide a comprehensive picture of the meaning or the dialogical range of the dalit and subaltern reform movements that arose in India in the nineteenth century… Debates on the Indian renaissance can be seen to centre on the idea of India as a nation state. It is from the very same sections of society who were once othered and rendered invisible by the grand narratives of the nation that the present re-conceptualisations of renaissance have emerged. These subaltern historians had to necessarily cultivate a truly new methodology and textual strategy to read and foreground the ruptures within the renaissance historiography.⁵

The consequent reverberations of the counter-dialogues rendered by Ayyankali and Poikayil Appachan can be seen in the early twentieth century Malayalam literature. The name which deserves most attention among the writers who problematised in their literature the retrogressive effect of caste
in society is of Pandit K. P. Karuppan. The poems like *Jathikkummi, Udyanavirunnu, Pulayar, Deenarodanam, Mangalamala, Sree Narayana Guru* readdressed caste by standing in the repository of experiences. He has also written a play named *Balakalesam* in 1913. (Brusquely drawing attention to his caste identity, some upper-caste critics nicknamed it as ‘Valakalesam’!). This genre of subaltern writing, though with long silences and interruptions, is seen extending its presence in all through the way towards post-modernism. It was by representing this tradition that T. K. C. Vaduthala, C. Ayyappan, Raghavan Atholi and Narayan wrote in metaphors their life through the caste. But upto late nineties the number of Dalits who engaged in writing was too negligible to create a space of focus in the literary circle. Moreover, the overriding influence of the reformative literature of non-Dalit writers was such large that it could shut the world of ‘Dalit writing’ out for a long time.

**Writings on Dalits and Hindu Religious Reformation**

We have already seen that the Hindu religious reformation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an outcome of colonial modernity. This juncture of history carried two important streams of social movements. If one stream represented a revival of the Bhakthi tradition, the other embodied the values of western thought pertaining to equality and modern democracy. We can see a symbiosis of these two streams in the literature of non-Dalit writers of the reformative tradition. It was not by deposing the Aryanised gods and goddesses that the religious reformers of the Bhakthi tradition spoke against caste system. On the other hand, theirs was a reinstatement of the Hindu religion through reinterpretation and
reconceptualisation of myths and narratives. The quality of universality which they attributed to the Hindu gods was in fact not a thing that had been separated from the Brahminic edifices. So, in effect, the religious renovation initiated by Sri Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, Vaikunta Swamikal, Vagbhatanandan and the like became a symbolised legitimisation of the Brahminical system of beliefs. As majority of the leaders who stood for social reformation in the twentieth century were from savarna background, it was easy for them to find a meaningful foundation in Bhakthi tradition to branch out their savarna-inclined reformatory aims.

It was by conflating this universalised Brahminical belief system and reformatory efforts based on western liberalism that the non-Dalit writers of the renaissance period wrote exhaustively on the anathema of caste system. This background was instrumental in ‘objectifying’ the Dalit as a victim of caste practices. Giving a space for condescending the inarticulate, this objectification opened for the savarnas the rest of the windows of dominance. It is relevant to point out in this connection that the rich contribution of the main literary figures of that time towards an anti-caste dialogue virtually justified the ‘objectification’ of Dalits by repeating the same rhetorics voiced by the reformist leaders. Had they not been represented an articulate/savarna/non-Dalit class their works would not have been obtained a validity in society. Though the poems written by Pandit K. P. Karuppan were far excellent than that of any of his contemporaries, his works never attained a comparable social validity as was received by the literature of non-Dalit writers. The prominence of the Kavithrayam – Asan, Ulloor and Vallathol – in Kerala’s poetic tradition aptly exemplifies this. It is an undeniable fact that the poems like Duravastha, Chandalabhikshuki
(Asan), *Jathiprabhavam, Nityakanyaka* (Vallathol) and *Bhakthideepika* (Ulloor) had in them a strong voice against caste disparities. But it is to nothing else than to its reformist tradition that the poems’ popularity owes.

The vantage-view of the caste system facilitated by this ‘anglicised scholarship’ created a benchmark for the discussion regarding caste and untouchability. This naturally established an invisible hegemony in the discursive field. As the skewed views maintained in multiple branches of knowledge became a standard view/knowledge of Dalit life, it was not easy for the Dalit exponents to create a space for counter-dialogues centered on subaltern subjectivity. The power dynamics worked in accelerating modernity apotheosised the role of *savarna* leaders in making Kerala a model for the rest of the societies by appropriating all the branches of arts and social sciences varied from literature to historiography. So we can rightly say that the linearity of discourse seen in the plays which we discussed in the last chapter was not an accidental one.

If we randomly go through the heroes – take for example Madhavan, Gopalan and Gaddikakkaran in *Adukkalayilinnu Arangathekku, Ningalenne Communistakki* and *Nadu Gaddika* respectively – we can see an obvious creation of patriarchal archetypes within the conventional premises of classical aesthetics. The symbolic dominance created by their didacticism makes invisible layers of assertions pertaining to their ‘consecrated right’ to take, condescend and direct the inarticulate in tune with the immediate demands of a ‘civilised’ society. Creating thus a linearity of discourse, the heroes infallibly supply solid rationalisations for their authorial role in society.
Such binaries like Indian-British, reformative-conservative, secular-communal or communist-capitalist were instrumental in fixing a non-digressive dialogue in the discursive field. It was by closing the bypaths of alternative speeches that these categories of ‘opposites’ operated in various disciplines. One would hardly find further ramification of dialogues in *Adukkalayilninnu Arangathekku, Ritumathi* and in *Marakkudakkullile Mahanarakam* other than the quintessential debate engendered from the opposing binaries of reformative and conservative stances. It is nothing but the linear progression of this standard parameter of opposing binaries that we see in the left – non-left conflicts depicted in *Pattabakki, Nammalonnu* and *Ningalenne Communistakki*. The debate takes another form in *Koottukrishi* by bringing about the notion, ‘secularism vs. communalism’.

**Creation of the Present**

Dialogues based on these opposing binaries put hurdles on the ways which sought to establish a counter-culture. To create autonomy of speech, it was inevitable for Dalits to retrieve in their memories the experiences of the past. It is against this context that the word ‘slavery’ – an elemental term in theorising the *adimajeevitham* of Dalits – has been used metaphorically and literally in some of the counter narratives emanated from PRDS and suchlike Dalit organisations. In his treatise, ‘Narrativising the History of Slave Suffering’, Dr. Sanal Mohan tries to locate the multiple domains on which the memories of *adimajeevitham* (slave life) have appeared as a weapon of resistance:
Among the descendants of the lower-caste slaves of Kerala, such recalling of slave memory as an act of resistance is first found in the early twentieth century. This does not mean that no collective memory of slavery was present earlier. What is new is that memory and the speaking of sorrow takes on a critical (and ethico-political) edge. This is what may be found in the ritual recall of the experience with its related somatic and emotional effects associated with the discourses of the PRDS. Memories of oppression are organised around the new notion of the *suffering body* of the untouchable which is in contrast to the pre-colonial notion of the untouchable body as the site of evil and pollution. 

The author cites some songs of that period from the Travancore region that carry unique Dalit experience. For example, let us look at this song:

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Yoked alongside buffaloes and bulls
We plough the fields,
We plough the fields!
Father is sold away…thinthara!
We wept …thinthara!
Mother too is sold…thinthara!
We wept disconsolately… thinthara!
The oldest child is caught…thinthara!
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The plantain tree is dug out.
He is thrown into the pit,
covered with dry leaves,
and set on fire… thinthara!⁷

In the PRDS too, preachers recreate past oppressions through the imaginative use of specific tropes in their representations of slavery. Ritual performances of the sufferings of slavery during occasions such as Rakshanirnayam, the death anniversary and the annual feast of the founder, emphatically proclaim the significance of slavery in the world view of the Sabha

Equally important is the recollection of cruel punishments meted out to slaves. There are occasions when erring slaves were taken out to the wilderness and buried neck-deep in pits with only the head remaining uncovered.

Collective memory also recalls the harsh labour involved in reclamation of the backwaters [done in the 1930s and 1940s] which some writers regard as akin to an agrarian revolution in colonial Travancore. This reclamation required huge effort and large numbers of labourers… The dangers involved and the harshness of the work finds elaborate treatment in the discourses of the Sabha. Songs
depict the continuous labour of diving into the bed of the backwaters for blocks of mud.\textsuperscript{7}

But the alternative domain created by the invocation of memories had to confront with the immediacies of the ‘present’ which was in fact a fabrication of the binaries infallibly set by the dominant discourse. The plays we studied here perpetuate this ‘present’ by giving an academic certainty to the idealist notions of the dichotomy of opposing social stances. In all the relevant juncture of history this ‘academic certainty’ is being revalidated through the construction of a present/contemporary issue. As the dominant class/caste wants to retain the ‘material surplus’ it is necessary for them to set agendas on the basis of immediate benefits. It is here that the ‘present’ becomes important to the savarna castes. The extra-literary attention gained by these plays evidences the function carried out by a work of art outside the ambit of literature.

A systematic development of a discipline can also be seen along with the growth of these plays. Despite the periodicity that separated each of these plays within a time realm, the discipline grown along with them contrived to overcome this rupture by keeping the linearity of the discourse intact. The role of this discipline was critical in attributing such a label like ‘progressive’ to most of the plays in the series. (Though broadly applicable, \textit{Avanavan Kadamba} and \textit{Nadu Gaddika} are liable to be exempted from this specific categorisation, for they represent a modernity in which the heated debate over the ‘intention of art’ carried no relevance). In short, the possible gaps that might have been left by the periodicity of the plays have been meted out through the maintenance of a linear discourse.
But on the other side, we cannot see the aid of such agencies (like the discourses and disciplines which helped to sustain the *savarna* narratives) to mete out the recurring ruptures and long silences caused to Dalit narrative. For that very reason it remains as scattered as a Dalit life. It was not the speechlessness of the Dalit proponents that put obstacles on the ways which envisaged developing a subaltern discipline. Rather, the notions like nationalism, Marxism or secularism, upon which the stems of *savarna* discipline have been nourished, were too influential for a Dalit dialogue to combat with. We have already discussed the visibility of these notions in *Ritumathi, Ningalenne Communistakki* and *Koottukrishi*. Moreover, we can see the emergence of certain icons along with the dissemination of these notions. Let us take the example of Gandhi and Nehru in the national arena. There is a homology between the *savarna* notions implied in nationalism and the *savarna* origin shared by the two leaders. We can see a fine counterpoise of the colonial and the post-colonial nationalisms in Gandhi and Nehru. The schism highlighted in the conventional history writing about the marginal differences harbouried by Gandhi and Nehru is a betrayal of the fact that they were actually representing a monolith of *savarna* discourse. Anyone who dissented with this meta-discourse did not get the same status as Gandhi and Nehru shared in the national arena. That is why the cause taken by Dr. Ambedkar placed only in the appendices of the national history. Creating icons is not an intentional process; rather, it is an intuitional process emanating from the deep consciousness of the *savarna* order of things. The goodwill constructed through these icons helps to create a sphere of consents.
The observations made above lead us to see the ‘resilient’ premises on which the paradigms of *savarnata* rest in a modern society. Since naked coercion is not desirable in a democratic (or democratising) society, new ways are being sought by the dominant caste/s to perpetuate the power ingrained in it. Literature, as a less lethal weapon, naturally becomes a tool in the hands of superior castes. The nine plays we studied here give direct evidences for this non-coercive dominance.
Notes


7. Ibid., p.538.