CHAPTER V

PRATHYAKSHA RAKSHA DAIVA SABHA AND THE IMAGINING OF EQUALITY IN TWENTIETH CENTURY KERALA

Introduction

This chapter analyses one of the lower caste social movements of twentieth century Kerala, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (hereafter PRDS), using the arguments presented in the previous chapters of the thesis about the experiential aspects of slavery and the claims for resources articulated by the lower castes in Travancore. The PRDS movement tried to engage with problems of caste hierarchy and exploitation, and strove to achieve social equality along with material and spiritual progress. The founder of the movement was Poyikayil Yohannan who mobilised Parayas, Pulayas, and Kuravas to achieve these ends through the new movement. The movement developed in the larger context of missionary Christianity but moved beyond the limits of the missionary project and offered a critique of it. The movement is an effort by lower castes to negotiate modernity by making equality their major concern. The term modernity is used here to describe the fact that lower castes were reacting to and coping with modern social conditions. These conditions brought about new institutional structures that have been identified with capitalist modernity in many parts of the world. These new conditions forced the lower caste people to develop a new self-understanding.

In this chapter I discuss the processes by which equality was conceived by Yohannan during the course of the evolution of the movement and how the concept was broadened to include struggles in the non-material realm. For the lower castes who had experienced slavery, modernity meant emancipation and social equality. In fact all the discourses involving the lower castes in the colonial period during and after the abolition of slavery, show continuous reference to
equality. The problem of equality is discussed in relation to each dimension of human action: those involving material resources, cultural resources etc. Reflections on equality are also a critique of the unequal structures of society that encompassed almost every aspect of social life.

Equality in the spiritual and religious realm

Lower caste movements were simultaneously concerned with problems of the spiritual and religious realms. The PRDS should be situated in the long trajectory of movements of the lower castes that tried to confront inequality that was rooted in the caste structure of Kerala society in general and the prevalence of it within the church in particular. This movement began in 1910 under the leadership of Poyikayil Yohannan who belonged to the Paraya caste. He led an ordinary life, performing the works of lower caste agricultural labourers and received paddy as his wages for his ‘thoppippala’, the cap made up of tender folder part of areca fronds. His biographers say unanimously that as a child he never bothered to observe caste rules and mingled freely with children of other untouchable castes.

---

1 The writings of both European and Native missionaries testify to this. For a representative writing see J. Hawksworth, Questions by a Missionary and Answers by Travancore Slaves Taught in a school of the Church Missionary Society, 1853, C 1 2/07/24 CMSAUB (manuscript); Samuel Muter, Native Life in Travancore, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), pp. 297-317; J. Abo, ‘On Slavery in Travancore’, Box No. 3, Folder No. 1, Jacket C 1847 CWMASOAS; For the perspectives of the native missionaries see the journals of Rev. George Mathan from 1845-69. CMSAUB. For the materials that foreground the question of equality within the sacred domain of the Church and the struggles around it see The Pulaya Question in the Anglican Church, Kottayam. The Correspondence on the Subject with the Bishop, and the Church Committee, in 1907 and 1909. (Kottayam: Malayala Manorama Press, 1910). Passim.

2 Vijayan Kangazha, Sree Kumara Gurudevan: Biography (Trichur, 1978), p. 8. Certain aspects of his biography are essential to foreground his own personal quest as well as the concern of the movement itself with the notion of equality. His forefathers were slaves and parents were attached to a Syrian Christan landlord family following the Marhomite Church, as agricultural labourers. He was baptised at the age of five and named as Yohannan whereas we read in his biographies that his parents named him earlier as ‘Kumaran’. Like any other child of the agricentic slave castes, he grew up performing the daily tasks for the landlord, which included, grazing of cattle and sometimes working in the paddy fields. His naming is important as the period following his death, Yohannan’s followers reverted to Hinduism and renamed him as Kumara Guru Devan invoking what they call his pre-Christian name. But in his lifetime he never used the name Kumaran. Ibid., passim.

3 ibid., pp. 13-14.
The ideology and practice of caste was so pervasive that even lower castes who were at the bottom of caste hierarchy strictly adhered to the norms of distance pollution among themselves. As Yohannan grew up he began to attend the conventions and public addresses of the missionaries. This was a time when Central Travancore was passing through a phase of Christian revitalisation movements. Yohannan, in his youth became an active preacher and was an itinerant follower of missionaries. Before joining the CMS and later Brethren missions he was with the Marthomite church, which was a church of reformist Syrian Christians. One of the missionaries observed his early career and work in a remarkable manner.

Poikayil Yohannan is a Paraya convert who left the CMS to join the Marthomite Church and left that church for the Brethren, from where he seceded a year ago and became an independent preacher. He has attracted a number of followers. He is a fine looking man and many have found power in his preaching. At one time, he contented himself with producing in his hearer, in some particular person, an intense conviction of sin and after that conviction of salvation.

He realised the existence of caste prejudice in Church when at a near by place called Pullad, the dead body of a lower caste Christian was removed from the grave at the insistence of Syrian Christians. Similarly the instance of opposition to the marriage of a Syrian Christian woman to a lower caste Christian made him realise the entrenched nature of caste prejudices among the Christians. Yohannan could not understand the rationale behind this and he left the Marthomite church and joined the CMS. By that time he had become

---

4 Revival movements were popular in Central Travancore area from 1873 onwards and the last one was in 1906-07. For details see The CMS Mission in Travancore and Cochin (London: CMS, 1915), p. 24.

5 TCDR. vol. XXIV, February 1914, p. 15.

6 Vijayan Kangazha, Sree Kumara Curudeva..., p. 13. While Church Missionary Sources refer to Yohannan being a member of their Church we do not find corresponding references in his biographies written by his latter day followers. But it is a fact that large numbers of Pulayas and Parayas who were with CMS joined the PRDS movement right from its very beginning.
famous as a Bible preacher with a talent for articulation and instant composition of verses, talents that were to become useful later when he started the PRDS movement. But soon he was to realise the caste prejudices existing among the CMS Christians, as there was a formidable presence of Syrian Christians in the CMS. Within the CMS, the controversy over the question of interaction between lower caste Christians and Syrian Christians continued to exist and in fact it had a history of more than half a century when Yohannan started his movement. He considered it, as a grave problem as he thought there won’t be any caste distinction once one becomes a Christian.

The continuity of caste prejudices in the church was a problem of immense proportions that denied equality to those lower castes who had joined the missions. This had set in motion contest between different sections within the CMS church. As he found it difficult to settle with caste prejudices and practices within the church, Yohannan left the CMS and joined the Brethren mission where also the situation was not different. His experience in three denominations of the church made him realise that it was meaningless to remain within the fold of the churches that had caste practices and inequality inscribed on them. Thus Yohannan finally broke away from the church denominations and began his career as an independent preacher. He left the church with a group of followers and they preached the message of the Bible among Pulayas and Parayas in and around the villages of Tiruvalla.

The PRDS combined the revolt against the caste dominance prevailing in the church with alternative constructions of power and the rejection of dominance and subordination. The notions of equality that informed the struggle against dominance and subordination drew its resources from missionary worldviews and the cultural resources of the lower castes that were

7 This controversy had generated extensive written materials—letters and other correspondences—which were subsequently compiled and published ‘to lay bare before our readers both sides of the question.’ For the details see The Pulaya Question in the Anglican Church, Kottayam..., pp. 1-65.

available in their oral tradition. The following sections considers in detail the problems that the PRDS movement addressed. I concentrate on the contest between Yohannan and the missionaries and the struggle within the caste inequality complex to transform it.

This contests with the missionaries are important as Yohannan evolved here a powerful prophetic language that provided him equal footing with the missionaries. The prophetic language and speeches endowed him with power to challenge the missionary perceptions of the problems of the lower castes. In fact in course of time Yohannan’s prophetic powers grew to such an extent that he grew beyond the domain of the missionaries and in the process showed the possibilities of transcending the limits of the established Churches. The significance of this process is identified in the potentials that it opened up in constructing equal space in the religious sphere. In fact religion was a site where much of the contest took place that was instrumental in intervention in other spheres of life.

The claim of Yohannan that he had access to the revealed truth for the lower castes in Travancore made him very powerful vis-à-vis the missionaries. Subsequently it became evident that he had great powers in convincing ‘the truth’ that he had propounded. This notion of truth remained fuzzy during his lifetime and which was a combination of his teachings that were rooted in the need for establishing an egalitarian social space for the lower castes that combined in it several notions of Protestantism. This included rational interpretation of the Bible although there were some ambiguities involved in their relationship with the Bible along with such characteristics as thrift, dedicated work to mobilise resources, both material and non-material. These notions were to form part of the truth or the worldview that he had projected for the lower castes the meaning of which was always deferred because he had articulated these ideas in a prophetic language. It can be suggested that the term truth becomes a discursively constituted one that is amenable to several negotiations over a long period of time.
The notion of the truth later on assumed canonical significance in PRDS the meaning of which was deferred and it is beyond definition. In some of the recent biographies of Yohannan the notion of truth is deployed as an amorphous category and sometimes it is a metonymy referring to the message of Yohannan. In the contemporary discourses of the movement particularly on the ritual occasions ‘the truth’ becomes a much-deployed concept. This was made easier by the peculiar usages of words and phrases into idioms that carry special meanings to the community of believers. This particular usage of the notion of truth refers to the ideas of salvation that Yohannan propounded which is always rendered in a fuzzy manner. In other words, following contemporary discussions on similar problems, I shall interpret this as developing and circulating a particular ‘ritual language.’ This ritual language is significant for the community of Yohannan’s followers when we consider the fact that “his speeches could evoke in hearer’s intense conviction of sin and assurance of salvation”. This realisation of sin and assurance of salvation was an integral part of the missionary project that we have already dealt with in chapter two. It was successfully imbibed by Yohannan and practiced in their ritual congregations and tried to turn up side down the common arguments of the missionaries. This power of Ychannan and his new sect was a problem that attracted the attention of missionaries.

The missionaries’ characterised Yohannan’s movement as some sort of “esoteric system” that was unfolded in midnight gatherings at lonely jungles. Those who accept his teachings as divine revelation made certain vows. They used to conduct meetings spanning over a long period of time. Yohannan’s followers regarded him as not only a recipient of divine revelation but himself as a divine revelation. It is this transformation of being divine revelation that granted Yohannan the divine power and raised him to the status of divine power itself. The desire to establish equality with missionary Church in particular and

---

9 M S Thankappan, Sathyam (Trivanthrum: Ravi Sree Publications, 2001). p. 120.

Churches in general was evident here as Yohannan was evolving as divine in the perception of his followers. The divinity of Yohannan is considered as powerful enough to bring down structures of inequality and establish an era of reign, which guarantees equality. The notion of the era of reign is significant to the community of believers as they consider the period after Yohannan as a transitional phase to the era of reign. To the community of his followers he is the one who has come with divine revelation to the oppressed untouchables of Travancore and his messages were couched in subversive arguments. Contrary to the usual practice of celebrating the Bible, we find Yohannan initiating a critique of the Bible even when he was working with the missionaries.

In one of his conferences at Vakathanam, he embarked on a critique of the Bible and articulated that the Bible was not meant for the descendents of slaves and that there weren’t any reference to them in the Bible. He argued that it was meaning less to carry a book so closely to one self, which does not mention a word about them. Hearing this people dropped their texts and up came a pile of books, one of which Yohannan pulled out and burnt. This news spread far and wide. In the next day, there was confrontation at the venue of the conference but as Yohannan’s people were also prepared to meet the eventuality did not spiral in to a big confrontation. But it is surprising to see that missionary records, particularly letters and correspondences of that period do not mention the incident of the burning of the Bible. But the oft-quoted source where this incident is mentioned is the work of the celebrated Christian poet Mahakavi K V Simon that deals with the history of the Dissident Churches in Malankara. However this particular incident became important in the history of PRDS when it wanted to define itself as Hindu in the wake of the schism that ensued in PRDS after the death of the founder.


Yohannan put forward the argument that the message of the Bible was not addressed to the lower castes of Travancore. It appears that he wanted to construct alternate histories and theologies of salvation that are rooted in the experiences of the people and it was accomplished by a critical engagement with Biblical teachings.

In the New Testament are certain Epistles by St. Paul and others. To who did St. Paul write this Epistles? To the Romans, Corinthians etc. There was not one written to the Pulayas of Travancore. Therefore, there is no revelation in those Epistles for you, but only for the Romans, Corinthians etc. The revelation to you Pulayas of Travancore is through me.13

The claim of revelation through him suddenly raises him to a higher position of a prophet. While challenging the power of the church hierarchy on the basis of the prevalence of inequalities within the church he himself tried to assume the power that was equivalent to the church hierarchy. But when he began to be considered as divine power itself he rose far above the missionaries, as they would have never placed themselves in opposition to the apostolic texts. While recognising the force and the extent of credibility he had won among his people, the missionaries were eager to make judgements on the movements of Yohannan. Their interpretation of Yohannan’s movement remained largely within the assumptions of colonial knowledge on the lower castes. It is interesting to read one of the pieces that the Diocesan Record brought out. It is an example of the creation of a separate sphere of religion that contested for equality with the dominant religions.

As might be expected the teaching is fitted with gross extravagances and the midnight meetings are marked by various extravagances—swoons, fits, contortions, wild laughter, dancing and the like—the characteristics in fact, of that primitive animism, which Johanna’s followers quitted at

their conversion. Yohannan seems himself to have degenerated into a megalomaniac, giving himself out to be some great one. He has bewitched the poor people who regard him as the power of God, which is called great.  

Animism is a universal category with which the religion of the lower castes are analysed, compared with and made sense of. This in turn is considered as far inferior to monotheism and it is this animistic spirit that causes extravagant religious expressions such as swoons, fits contortion, wild laughter and dancing which were part of the pre-Christian days of the followers of Yohannan. As Yohannan was the cause of such a movement, missionaries referred to him as megalomaniac bent up on bewitching the poor. Poor people consider him to be the personification of the power of God. Here the observation that people attributed the power of God to Yohannan is fundamental in understanding his later history of the movement and the transformation of his popular image. It is difficult to differentiate his power as one who preaches a new order and the one who himself is that power. He came to be worshipped even before his death and later on his image became entrenched and was ritualised. It appears that during his lifetime Yohannan combined the divine prophetic aura of a redeemer and existed mostly on the liminal space transgressing Biblical teachings but remaining within the Christian life-world. This process was creating a separate sphere of religion that would help them to proclaim equality with the dominant religious (Church) hierarchy. This was achieved by imagining social boundaries that were always in a flux.

Missionaries’ situated Yohannan’s movement in the context of the “unrest” faced by the CMS in Travancore. In fact, the history of the unrest can

14 ibid.

15 It is pertinent in this context to observe the fact that Travancore had several revival movements among the Christians successively from 1873 onwards and the last one was in 1906-07. It was more likely that many people who were part of Yohannan’s movement and Yohannan himself were part of the revival movements. For details see The CMS Mission in Travancore and Cochin (London: Church Missionary Society, 1915), p. 24.
be traced right from the time of the “joining of the way of Christ”. If we consider here the history of CMS from 1850s to the 1900s we find the tremendous inroads that missionary activities had made among Lower castes. Lower castes constituted more than half of the membership within the church. But, they were left behind the process of development that the mission brought about. This included matters of spiritual and material requirements the fulfilment of which was mediated by the upper caste Syrian Christians within the CMS. In other words when we consider the contests within the Church we come across the intertwining of the material and spiritual aspect of life. The continued existence of caste feelings within the church and the practice of segregation gave rise to a variety of movements most often led by the lower castes themselves. In other words: it refers to the existence of inequalities that were religious and social in character and the critical engagement of lower caste people with them were represented as “unrest” among the lower castes in Travancore.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, even the CMS church had to admit the prevailing “spirit of unrest” and they were bent upon redressing the grievances of lower castes as a matter of strategy. The spirit of unrest in the case of Yohannan was different as he evolved a different discourse and critique of the practices of the Church. On careful observation the church hierarchy felt it to be a “heretical blasphemy” and in some of the documents, Yohannan is referred to as “Faraya Christian heretical teacher Poikayil Yohannan”. It is interesting to read the observation of one of the CMS missionaries, W. S. Hunt, who had very close relationship with the lower castes in Travancore.

---


17 Travancore and Cochin Diocesan Report carried brief reports of blasphemy in other mission centres like Uganda in Africa where the Church Missionary Society had to face blasphemy. For details see TCDR, vol. XXVII, January 1919, no. 1, pp. 19-20.

His hearers were naturally, chiefly fellow-out-caste converts, but others even including Syrians, were attracted with his traumatic power and gift of song. He alternatively terrified and soothed them; he worked them up almost to frenzy of terror over the consequences of their sins and produced a corresponding intensity of relief when at the close of the service, he revealed to them the way of salvation. It was the same preaching that had been so successful before but intensified, unrestrained, lasting for whole nights, with drumming tunes and other accompaniments rhythmic throbings under the midnight stars and lit of songs, and the sense of unceasing power of the preacher as he waxed hoarser and hoarser and more wild and blood shot, gave his hearers intensity of emotional ecstasy never experienced in the ordinary ways of Christianity and firmly attached them to him. He became a kind of intoxication. His teaching however, was reported to be orthodox when it was known that any one was present who was likely to report up on it, for the preacher’s henchmen instantly informed him if any stranger was among his hearers and he framed his discourse accordingly. But it gradually came to be known that his preaching was not the same that it had been, and especially that the way of salvation, which he revealed, was not what he had formerly proclaimed. This new way was a secret one only revealed to those deemed fit to believe it and imparted at dead of night with dread accompaniments that appealed to the centuries old animism in his hearers. The thrills of terror and relief, in a lonely jungle. Those to whom it was thus imparted were “the saved”.

The Church was determined to fight back heresy and blasphemy of Yohannan in Travancore invoking the history of fighting heresy in the Christian world. In the Travancore case they frankly admitted that the strategies of the church were not effective to win over the people who were lured away by
Yohannan. The ideas transmitted as heresy were very much part of the desire to articulate equality with the Church at the level of theology. In fact Yohannan had been deriving his ideas initially from the Bible but subsequently he formulated a critique of it but remained within the ideological world of the Bible. These ideas had been projecting a social vision for the people.

At this level it will be appropriate to discuss the most important aspects of the heresy to which the missionaries were referring. Yohannan articulated his social vision in speeches during their conventions and speeches that attracted large numbers of believers. His main themes were sin, repentance and salvation. The conventions of Yohannan were found to be more effective than that of the missionaries as he made use of the methods of missionaries with greater success, as the latter did not have many such effective men to intervene.

Writing in the Diocesan Record, the Bishop of Travancore and Cochin exhorted the missionaries to concentrate more on teaching than on preaching and he observed that teaching was behind the success of Yohannan. This statement of the Bishop shows the power that Yohannan had acquired as a teacher among his people in Travancore. Teaching is preferred as against preaching, as the former should be more calibrated and capable of logical argumentation to establish a particular point of view. The use of the term teaching is important for the reason that it acknowledges the power of Yohannan as a teacher and the desire of the people to learn which is in contradiction with the normal preaching that the missionaries had been carrying on. Here we might observe the fact that Yohannan had reached a position that was far beyond the reach of the missionaries if we consider his ability to convince the people of his ideas. The Bishop reiterated the significance of regular communion, confirmation and other strategies including Christian marriage that would discipline people in the Christian way and keep them away
from the evil designs of the 'false prophets.' In other words it is a suggestion to make the people more ritual bound to have effective control over them.

The significance of heresy in relation to the ideology is further developed in the next chapter where I take up the question of narrativising oppression and suffering. Thus it turned out to be an open contest between the missionaries and Yohannan, both using the same language and metaphors. This equality in the field did not guarantee any success to the missionaries. Hence the need of the hour, they felt, was to have more effective men who could use Yohannan's own methods when they addressed people. This particular attitude of the missionaries was a pointer to the fact that they had realised the potentials of Yohannan's movement. But it appears that Yohannan was successful in influencing his people and winning over even the pastors of the CMS on account of which they had to close down some of the out stations.20

The CMS in Central Travancore was forced to remain alerted to keep their followers with them. The missionaries found it difficult to counter the new movement and its teacher, as the latter knew the lower caste life-world very well. This contest over the religious and social space can be brought to light further if we situate Yohannan in the context of the evolving religious consciousness of the lower castes. In order to do this I would situate here an example from the experience of Church Missionary Society. One of the sites where we can engage with the religious consciousness was the instruction imparted to those who were waiting to be baptised. In mission centres that comprised mainly of lower castes, missionaries appointed teachers from among the lower castes themselves to teach the catechumens. In the local parlance, they are known as "Asans" (teachers). They used to interpret the Biblical themes suited to the occasions. Recurring themes of liberation from bondage, the hope of salvation, were interpreted in such a manner that their aspirations

19 *TCDR.* vol. XXVII, May 1917, No. 8, pp. 36-37.

and self-images found a ready space in such interpretations.\textsuperscript{21} The spread of literacy among those who joined the missions helped them compose simple verses using intermittently, metaphors that were familiar to them. What is striking here is the possibility of bringing their social experiences in realms of discourses that missionaries initiated. They could give vent to these desires that were socially significant. In fact Yohannan and his followers imaginatively used this possibility of interpretation that was available to them. But when we attempt an analysis of the way Yohannan theorised his project, we would comprehend the potential of such interpretations.

The prophetic nature of Yohannan’s interventions may be understood from the fact that people who believed in him and his teachings expected the millennial transformation of their lives. One of the features of this transformation could be social equality, which was noted by many contemporary observers of Yohannan’s movement. Even the Bishop of the Travancore and Cochin Diocese of Anglican Church observed the recourse to prophetic power in the method of Yohannan that could mobilise lower caste masses in a significant manner. In one of the communications to the Travancore Government the Bishop had observed that Yohannan’s movement was chiefly racial and there was not much religious content in it.\textsuperscript{22} But when it comes to describing the influence of Yohannan he positively refers to the faith that people had in him as a saviour. This particular image of Yohannan as a saviour has had its social implications for his followers who believed in millennial transformation leading to social equality. The source of Yohannan’s power is the alleged authority that he had received from ‘the high’ and the communication of the Bishop refers to it.\textsuperscript{23} This is in direct contrast to the power of the Bishop as the ordained priest of Christ for whom the power and authority are delegated. The situation here demands a probe in to the prophetic

\textsuperscript{21} TC\textsc{dr.}, vol. XV, May 1905, pp. 42-43; vol. XXII, August 1912, No.4, p. 85.

\textsuperscript{22} Political Department (confidential) Office of the Resident of Travancore, \textit{Poykail Yohannan} dated 30-7-1915 IOR R/2/882/117.

\textsuperscript{23} ibid., p. 3.
image of Yohannan that was circulated among his followers. This was made possible by the 'social imaginary' of the people who came to believe in him. Charles Taylor’s says that the social imaginary is the ‘way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms; it is carried in images, stories, and legends’. He further argues that while theory is the possession of a small minority, social imaginary is shared by a large group.

It is equally important to consider that it was largely the Christian habitus of the people that provided the space for the circulation and sustenance of this particular image of Yohannan that became a social imaginary. This is proved by the fact that most people who joined the movement of Yohannan were from various Christian denominations and they were very much aware of the biblical prophetic tradition. The missionaries considered this prophetic power of Yohannan a potential threat and that is evident in the following formulation. The prophetic power of Yohannan did transcend the social imaginary of equality and elevated him to a higher plain where as for the masses of his followers it was part of the discourses of equality. It is in this context that the fragment that the Travancore and Cochin Diocesan Record carried assumes significance.

‘In reading about Rasputin the Russian monk who was an indirect cause of the recent revolution, one can’t help thinking of another prophet, in this diocese. His religious and philosophical themes based on his alleged authority from High, and on the “cleansing” of the world from its sins through him, attracted a throng of disciples especially female disciples, and opened a wide arena for the gratification of his propensities.”

25 The term habitus is used here in the sense in which Pierre Bourdieu has introduced it in The Logic of Practice. For details see: Pierre Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice (California: Stanford university Press.1980), pp. 52-55.
26 TCDR, vol. XXVII. May1917, No.1, p. 35.
Yohannan, the prophet referred to here had the potentials to create a revolution unparalleled, in the rural Central Travancore society. He took his authority from the High, but was intimated by a combination of philosophical and religious themes, which would help him “cleanse” the world form its sins through him. He would be the medium between the divine and the mundane mediating the process of cleansing. This cleansing, as we would see subsequently had its material and non-material aspects. At the material level there was an engagement with the cleansing of the untouchable human body and at the non-material level it refers to the cleansing of the mind of the lower caste people from the sins. I have used the term untouchable body as it had acquired metaphorical qualities in the discourse of Yohannan and later on in the discourses of the PRDS. This effectively attracted large number of disciples particularly female disciples and gave him an entry into the minds of the people, which were so far the domain of the missionary discourse. It is important to note that even before the coming of Yohannan’s movement there was a considerable presence of women in the missionary movement. This was the general trend that we find in the missionary organisations as they had appointed Bible woman to visit homes and propagate the message of the Bible through printed pamphlets, flysheets etc. In fact the missionary reports carried details of the visits of the Bible women and other activities that they had carried out that were aimed at women and children of both Christian and non-Christian social groups. In the case of the PRDS movement it appears that they have carried forward that tradition of the Bible women and they had a number of women preachers who are referred to as Upadeshinis.27

It may be argued in the light of the above quotation that the ‘gratification of the propensities’ of Yohannan is a term that is capable of hiding different layers of meaning. The gratification of the desires have been

a much-contested terrain where, the missionary project of improvement and development, of both material and spiritual realm, confronted with the meanings that lower castes attributed to it. While there can't be substantive differences in the perception of development by both the missionaries and the lower castes as the latter learned it from the former, the differences persisted on the role that each agent would play in the process.

The PRDS movement tried to engage with modernity and the resources thus available, for social transformation. It is necessary here to clarify why the term modernity is used here to describe the changes that were taking place among the lower castes in Kerala of which we consider in details the example of the PRDS movement. Modernity here stands for the new experiences of the colonial society in the wake of the expansion of the European colonisers that forced the former to think of their society in a different manner. It may be pointed out that there emerged a situation that necessitated a critical engagement with ones' own society in a rational manner. This developed out of the modern conditions of living made possible by colonial modernity. In the case of the lower castes in Kerala and elsewhere in India this experience marked a moment of fundamental change from the past. It is this particular experience that I refer to as modernity. In the case of the PRDS movement, there was coalescence of elements of modernity with certain notions of the shared life world of the lower castes, which were products of modern critical thinking on their past. In the course of this critical re-conceptualisation that the experience of slavery, Adi-Dravida past, Prathyaksha (revelation) of God and Raksha or salvation etc were made part of the new worldview that the movement articulated. It has been observed in the context of the religious collective memory that religions reproduce “in more or less symbolic forms the history of migrations and fusions of races and tribes, of great events, wars, establishments, discoveries and reforms that we find at the origin of the
societies that practice them." These insights are important if we bring under consideration the collective memories of migration, fights, and sufferings to which the ritual discourses refer to. Similarly the PRDS discourses at a later stage could develop the originary stories of the lower castes and their defeat by Aryans as ritually significant categories.

Following this line of enquiry it is necessary to contextualise the significance of the imagining of history the movement had worked out bringing in the concepts such as Adi-Dravida past of the lower castes, their sufferings under slavery, and the revelation of the truth of their salvation through Yohannan. In the practices and perception of the followers of the movement these ideas were essential for the social and spiritual development. This can be considered as critical resource for engaging with structures of inequality in the context of the mobilisation for equality. It is at this level that mutuality of the spiritual and the material realms could be thought of as important aspects of the project of PRDS. The environment for the spiritual retrieval was integral to the project of Yohannan who had conceived of both the spiritual and material well-being. This was actually a case for making an argument in favour of equality. 

The slave castes of Travancore were leading a life in the sufferings of the present and were not in a position to think of either the future or the past of their lives. Yohannan brought to them his new spiritual project. During fourteen days of Thothu yogam (convention of measurement) he devoted the entire days

---

28 Initially people were approached on the basis of kinship ties and wherever they went Yohannan discussed with the people his 'themes'/ 'subjects' and won their hearts. These deliberations of Yohannan were an irritant to the upper castes and particularly Syrian Christians and they were waiting for an opportunity to finish him. As a result of the opposition, it became difficult for Yohannan and his followers to propagate the new message. In several places the opposition led to open confrontations and are treated in the history of PRDS as important events, which their people had to pass through in their quest for liberation. There were open confrontations at Vakathanam and Vellinadi in 1908, and Kozhikochira and Mangalam in 1912 and 1913 respectively. It was in the scheme of the locally dominant people to suppress the clandestine movement. For the next couple of decades Yohannan and his associates concentrated more on the organisational details of the new congregation and nurturing it. For a theoretical treatment of similar questions see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992) p. 84.

29 For details see, Grandha Rachana Samithi, *Sree Kumara Dvan.* (Etumanoor: Sree Kumara Dharma Samajam, 1983), pp. 11-20
for discussing subjects/themes related to the past and present of the slave castes. Although the texts of such speeches have not been printed it is possible to piece together from the oral tradition of the community and the missionary sources the main ideas that were articulated during such conventions. It may be pointed out here that one of the major themes has been the suffering of their ancestors under slavery. In the course of this convention that he disclosed/revealed the most important theme of plan Kettidam or Planned Building or the notion of a secure structure that is constructed in accordance with a well laid out plan. For the salvation of lower castes that offers refuge to them from the unequal structures of domination.

Yohannan was instrumental in reconstituting the customs and habits of the people. After the thothu yogam the followers of Yohannan began to feel themselves a different community. It may be recalled here that the efforts at reforming the customs and habits of the people started during the early phase of the work of Protestant missionaries among the lower castes in Travancore. It was considered as essential for bringing lower caste masses into the centre of social life. In the case of the PRDS movement the reforms of the customs and habits were carried forward in a rigorous manner. The concept of plan kettidam (planned building) shows the way to redeem the culture along with spiritual and material well being of descendants of slaves. This encompasses the construction of new structures in every sphere of social life of the slave castes according to well-conceived plans. This new structure can provide a ray of hope to those who are already saved, both in spiritual and material aspects of life. According to the later tradition of PRDS those who are saved would dedicate their lives to this task. The construct of plan kettidam as enunciated by Yohannan himself is interesting:

30 TCDR. vol XXIX, No.6, December 1919, pp. 95-98.
31 Grandha Rachana Samithi, Sree Kumara Devan, pp. 50-54.
32 ibid., pp. 71-72.
You must construct a building with four frontispieces. It should be a three-storied building. You should consecrate me on the top most floor in a glass case. On the ground floor should be the throne with barbed fencing. When the time and hour comes I would descend from the western poika with ploughs on the shoulder clad in kachathorth and sporting a thoppi pala [cap made of tender fold of areca plant]. Keep hot water, incha, [fibre of a creeper used to rub the body] and soap for me to bath and white clothes to wear. I would open the building with the golden key. All the buildings of the world will be shaken severely in the whirlwind. But the plan kettidam should provide refuge to those escaping from the severely shaken structures.\textsuperscript{33}

Yohannan’s discourses refer to the era of reign and his followers are the heirs to that reign in which lower castes would be liberated from oppression and live in an egalitarian society. Yohannan who has been born for the descendents of the slaves as their father and mother represents a unity of the self and will remain as the guiding light that will lead the slave castes to the secure structure that guarantees equality. The heirs apparent to the era of reign would come from those who have internalised his themes/subjects. In one of the verses of Yohannan we read:

\begin{quote}
I came in several garbs.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
I have come to liberate you from slavery
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Of God, man, state, religion and
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Jatis by breaking these chains.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{33} ibid., Also see Rev. P C Joseph, Poikayil Shri Kumara Guru Jeevithavum Darshanavum (Tiruvalla: Malayalam Christian Literature Society, 1994), p. 64.

The above lines remind the followers of Yohannan that equality could be achieved only through liberation from the continuing effects of caste slavery. It is in this process that Yohannan deploys the concept of Adi-Dravida past and reflects on the possible liberation of lower castes. According to Yohannan his programme was not to follow what others have argued and substantiated, instead he would embark on a new project that will lead to the future retrieval of history. After Yohannan's phase, this was interpreted as a project to realise the lost spirituality, letters, reign and knowledge. Similarly the later generation of his followers considered him to have undergone great deal of sufferings to accomplish this. And it may be observed that in the course of the discourses of the PRDS movement social suffering was transformed into an analytical category. Social suffering is discussed as a means to achieve equality. A statement alluded to Yohannan recalls sufferings to highlight how he had suffered amidst the horrors of slavery as he was born as low caste slave. He descended to the earth as a slave grazed cattle, peddled the water wheel, was tortured and chained, and endured all this for the descendents of slaves. Now in the discourses of the PRDS movement the personal sufferings of Yohannan were equivalent to atonement for the salvation of a fallen race that would eventually lead them to the attainment of social equality.

Yohannan conceives of his projects a la Moses, leading lower castes to the Promised Land where milk and honey flows. The other aspect of the reference to Moses would remind the followers of the supreme leadership qualities he had to lead the people. This journey passes through difficult terrains of social mediation and reaches the political terrain where the reign of the chosen people should take place. This refers to a possible equality in the political sphere that the movement wanted to achieve. It should evolve, following one of their songs, a phase in 'the

---

35 ibid., p. 31.
36 ibid., p. 20.
37 This argument is put forward following very closely the ritual discourses of the PRDS. Also see Jnanopadesam..., p. 26.
beautiful Travancore where the problems of caste are resolved and the joyful reign starts'. For this purpose he has lighted a lamp for the lower castes and that light would guide them. A new earth and new sky will be born for the lower castes in Travancore that would make possible the unity of the separated souls in the era of reign. According to Yohannan ‘the destruction of sin and desire was the prerequisite for dressing them up in the garment of salvation, leading them through the path of eternal life’.

Yohannan argued that the lower castes became slaves when there was no Prathyakshata or revelation. In order to escape from slavery and to attain equality in social life the lower castes took refuge in the rituals of Hindus and Christians-Baptism and Suddhi that did not clean them. On the contrary Yohannan had a plan to secure his people from these oppressive structures. Prathyakshata is a concept capable of resolving the crisis that individuals and society faced in the context of slavery. As this was not available in baptism and suddhi, lower castes remained as permanent outsiders. Learning of the scriptures too did not open-up the terrain of knowledge to them hence the Prathyakshatha and the act of being ‘born in the skin of the slave’ was an authentic portrayal of the way of salvation for those who were subjected to domination, estrangement and oppression by slavery, caste, spirit-cult and sixty six books.39

The fact that lower castes did not have books and textual knowledge occupied the concern of the movement and in the new era it was felt necessary to acquire such alternatives. It is important to observe here that acquisition of knowledge was thought to be important in the period that lay ahead for the descendents of slaves. It was felt necessary to pierce Ajnanam (ignorance) through the sword of knowledge. The acquisition of knowledge was important as it was considered as the true liberator that will eventually lead to equality. This will enable ‘rajya vazhcha’ (reign) worship of God and priesthood that were considered as essential for establishing equality. In the course of Raksha

39 Jnanopadesam... p. 32.
Nirnayam he wanted to affirm the people in the path of the Raksha. Raksha Nirnayam (ritual for determining salvation) is the most significant life cycle ritual of the PRDS community. The first convention of Raksha Nirnayam was held at Kulathurkunnu in 1909 that lasted for several days. There are differences of opinion regarding the duration of the convention. Some recent writings by the organic intellectuals of the movement argue that it lasted for 41 days while some others make it a month and still some others refer to it as seven days.\(^1\) In the course of the field work I was informed that the first Raksha Nirnayam lasted for a month while today the duration of the convention is for a week.

In the course of my fieldwork I participated in a Raksha Nirnayam convention to understand the transformation that people undergo as they participate in this convention. This convention lasted for seven days and on the sixth night that the particular discourses on slavery were delivered and slave trade performed as ‘ritual rememory’. The concept of rememory refers to the fact that people who have not actually experienced slavery recollect the experience of slavery through narratives and experience the pain and sufferings through such constructions. In a sense the somatic effect of slavery is experienced through its ritual rendering.\(^2\) On the seventh day is the ritual that is named as ‘Sabhayode Cherkkal’ or initiation in to the Sabha, which is the occasion of recognising someone formally as a member of the PRDS. Today on the final day of Raksha Nirnayam, the portrait of Kumara Gurudevan (Yohannan) is unveiled in front of the young children and youth who had been fervently observing the rituals and fast abstaining from close interaction with others, as their saviour and they rush to the stage where the portrait is installed and fall in front of the portrait giving their obeisance. This is the culminating moment of the weeklong observances in which they learn generally about religions and the PRDS in particular. The nightlong discourse on the sixth day


\(^{2}\) I have discussed this in greater detail in chapter five.
on slavery is the most important moment when partaking in the ritual re-enactment of slave trade and cruel separation of families people experience trauma of slavery and break down.\(^{42}\)

The liberation, which is an admixture of the material and the spiritual, are conditioned by the above practices. Otherwise it comprises of divine visibility or ‘Divya Prathyakshatha’, Raksha or salvation and thothu yogam or convention of measurement and plan kettidam or planned building. These are very much integrated to one another and the progressive realisation of which is Raksha. The privileging of the ritual practices for lower castes are essential as they are able to create an alternative ritual space on their own rejecting the tradition of the dominant castes. The ritual space of the dominant castes has been a forbidden space for the lower castes. There is an element of subversion of the ritual categories involved in it. Moreover, it may be said that the alternative ritual spaces have been an important site for the struggle for equality in caste determined social hierarchy.

Metaphors and myths were resorted to in the Conventions of the Trinity right from the times of Yohannan. Convention of Trinity was the special convention for those who were saved through Raksha Nirmayam. Similarly there was another convention that was known as thothuyogam or convention of measurement. It refers to the convention in which the people were instructed on possible strategies with which the lives of the descendents of slaves should be ordered. In the course of Raksha Nirmayam Yohannan revealed his divine powers to the people. He recounted with all details the tragic story of the orphaned children and how he came to the earth to fulfil the promise given to the orphaned children when he appeared to them as the female hawk. He said that he had given refuge to the souls of the ancestors who had to endure inhuman sufferings. His discourses were mostly on the history of the slave

\(^{42}\) Participant observation of Raksha Nirmayam at Amara, September 2001. In the course of the ritual rememory one woman fell unconscious after a loud scream. I have dealt with the discourses on slavery in detailed manner in chapter 5.
castes and the necessity of their liberation from the continuing clutches of slavery. It was in the course of the first convention to determine salvation that the particular theme of Yohanna that later on became famous as ‘Subject of Slavery’ was introduced. Sin became a repeated metaphor along with other categories like eternal damnation and death that were used in the discourses. He used such concepts to explain the causes of the befallen state of lower castes. This particular understanding of the befallen state of the lower castes is significant, as it necessitated strategies to negotiate unequal structures of society. On the final day of the convention Yohannan revealed himself to be their saviour. It has been recalled mythically that as he was addressing them, the people found an aura around him and they were very much frightened and some lay prostrated before him and some others ran away in fear unable to behold the radiance and cried out him to save them and pleaded forgiveness for their sins. One of the songs captures the spirit of the Raksha Nirmayam.

You saved me from eternal damnation, sin and death

You redeemed me from all these

Made me to be in the kingdom of God.

When I think of the boon to be in heaven

My feet does not fix to the ground

When I remember the holy face of God

My feet moves up in joy

My heart leaps up in joy.

Once the divine moments of miracles were over Yohannan called them all and told them about the purpose of his coming. The convention of trinity further solidified the faith of people in Yohannan and they became stable. The new

---

13 Participant observation of ritual discourses on the occasion of Raksha Nirmayam, Amara on 15 September 2001. For an early version of the same song see Poyikayil Yohannan, Golden Lyrics, (Kumbanad: BPH, 1115 Ma), pp. 17-18 (manuscript of the original)
practice evolved by him along with his critique of 'vedas' provided them a new spiritual life. And they began to worship him as 'Prathyaksha Daivam' (God revealed) and in the tradition of the movement he was referred to as Mathiyaya Daivam or a God that was 'enough' for their spiritual and material requirements. It may be reiterated here that the search for a redeeming God is considered as fulfilment of desire for equality in this world although it did not lead to structural changes in their conditions. But it leads to the establishment of a community that shares fervently this particular notion of equality.

**Spaces for negotiating social and political equality**

In this section my concern is mainly to consider the programmes initiated by the movement to acquire new resources by setting up schools, weaving centres, places of worship and similar nascent institutions that they considered as essential for achieving social equality and development. Similarly the lower castes were demanding increasing access to public space in Travancore. Moreover, with the coming of the missions a number of lower caste people were engaged in mission work as catechists, readers, and the Bible women and other small jobs with the missionaries. Moreover, the lower castes were aware of the 'social and spiritual' development brought about by the missionary activities and the fruits of which were forbidden to them. It is in this larger context that we need to place the interventions of the PRDS movement in claiming equality in social, economic and political spaces.

These sites of negotiations were important as the movement was engaged in developing the potentials of the mass of its followers by educating them, and sending the children to schools and helping the people to acquire new skills of reading and writing that would have enabled them to acquire symbolic capital. In fact it has been noted that their pastors were well versed in Biblical themes and used to have critical reading of the Bible following the interpretation of the

---

44 MS Thankappan, *Sathyam...*, pp. 87-88.
45 *TCDR* vol XXI June 1911, No.3, p. 74.
scriptures by Yohannan. We have already seen the extent of the critical interpretation of the scriptures that they delineated. These Biblical interpretations were a source of knowledge for the lower castes. In other words the biblical knowledge was part of both their worldview as well as knowledge. It was in the course of the conventions that Yohannan informed his ideas to the people. Following the prevailing practice of nominating lower caste members to the Sri Mulam Praja Sabha, the popular Legislature of Travancore, Yohannan was nominated twice in 1921 and 1931.46

In the debates and discussions of the assembly Yohannan raised the problems of lower castes in general and not the problems of any particular caste. His demands included making available three acres of land per each household along with agricultural credit for starting agriculture. This would have had an impact on the development of a peasantry from the traditional agrarian population who were agricultural slaves a few decades ago and many of whom continued in semi-slave status even during that time. Similarly he demanded preference for the lower castes in distributing Government Puthuval lands. Along with this request was made for the redistribution of the fallow lands held as the property of the landlords. It was demanded that the cultivable lands in the reserve forests should be distributed among the lower castes for cultivation for which taxes should be levied only after an initial tax holiday. It was demanded that the lower caste members of the legislative assembly should be provided with the list of available cultivable lands for distribution.47

In the sphere of education, Yohannan demanded that depressed class children should be given admission in schools and arrangements should be made to give them noon meals and dress. He demanded that they should not be detained on account of their being backward in studies but be promoted so that they would be encouraged to opt for education. Similarly in order to resolve the problem of the lack of proper dress to go to school he demanded that depressed

46 Vijayan Kangazha, Sree Kumara Garudevan…., pp. 24-29.
47 ibid., pp. 28-29; M.S. Thankappan, Sathyam…., pp. 107-111.
class children should be allowed to attend classes even in thorthus (small piece of cloth wore around the waist) and zadgen leaf umbrella. In one of his speeches he demanded that four students from depressed castes should be selected from each taluk for vernacular education and two each from each districts for English education and that the government should meet the cost of their education. Similarly it was demanded that complete fee concession should be given to students attending class five and above. It was demanded that scholarships should be granted to children studying in English schools and students studying class four onwards in Malayalam school. Similarly it was demanded that grants-in-aid should be released to the schools managed by PRDS and also that permission should be granted to collect building materials such as timber and grass to thatch from the reserve forests in high ranges where the PRDS movement was intending to construct schools. He also demanded priority for lower castes in getting government support in starting cottage industries as well as preference in government appointments. Subsequently we find that he demanded the recruitment of lower castes who had studied up to classes four and seven in the departments of registration, police, post and telegraph and forest as clerks, police constable, peon and guards respectively. Although these jobs are low paid and in the lowest rung of the bureaucracy the fact that it was demanded show the desire of the people to achieve occupational mobility that will help them to come out of the agricultural labourer status. But at the same time it should be noted that when it comes to demanding positions in the bureaucracy they very well knew their position as they were not educationally advanced and they demanded jobs in the lower rung of the bureaucracy. However these demands could be construed as a claim over resources, material and symbolic, which were essential for the development of lower castes in the first half of the twentieth century. I would here quote from one of the news items published by the office bearers of the

---


49 Proceedings of the Sri Mulam Paja Sabha, for the 17th session 2-3-1921 (Trivandrum: Government Press,1921), p. 123. I am thankful to Dr. James Chririyankandath for giving access to these source materials.

50 Vijayan Kangazha, Sree Kumara Gurudevan, pp. 23-25.
PRDS movement that advertises the products that were manufactured in their industrial units.\textsuperscript{51}

*It has been informed here by the activists of the Prahyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha that nearly 100 pieces of high quality bamboo mats woven at the Industrial units at Eraviperoor near Tiruvalla would be available at the industrial exhibition for sale during Kumbha Bharani festival at Kallupara sand banks. These mattings have been specially made to be strong and to last longer.*

The report quoted above refers to the nascent industrial activity of the PRDS movement in the first half of the twentieth century that tried to tide over marginalisation and deprivation by organising ‘industries’ in the modern way, but as their skills and resources were ‘traditional’ they could not transcend the limits set by the initial endowments and what they could produce was nothing but their traditional products. But the organisation of production was in a modern way assuring the quality of the product. I have already mentioned the efforts at acquiring skills other than agricultural work and the most striking instance of which was the establishment of weaving units at Amara as well as Eraviperoor, the head quarters of the movement. In fact they brought experienced craftsmen from Balaramapuram near Trivandrum to train the lower caste men and women in the new skill although it turned out to be a short-lived affair. The most important initiative with regard to the institution building was the starting of the English Medium School at Vrgalathu Kunnu which was a substantial affair considering the fact that PRDS movement developed it against heavy odds. Along with the school they opened a boarding for the school children. They had put in lots of energy to build the school as recalled by several informants. Everyday when people come to the work site of the school they would carry loads of sand and boulders from the near by riverbed for construction. I reiterate this to show the extent of dedication that the people showed in developing their

\textsuperscript{51} Malayala Manorama, 22 February 1930.
own institutions. These institutional sites are important for claims of equality in the public sphere.

Preparing to be equal: Reforming the bodily practices

In this section of the chapter I attempt to provide an analysis of how the new bodily practices of the lower castes were considered as important for claiming equality in the larger society. Using as examples the practices of the movement of Yohannan it is argued here that new bodily practices were integral to the colonial modernity of lower castes Kerala. In fact it has precedence in the works of protestant missionaries who wanted to reform the bodily practices of the lower castes in Kerala that included wearing of clean clothes instead of rags and abandonment of the practice of eating the carcases of the dead animals. One of the universal themes of the missionaries had been the notion of cleanliness that they wanted the new Christians across the globe to accept. Moreover, they developed typologies of the native human bodies as objects to be classified and mastered following the colonial practices. In the early years of the twentieth century the individual reformers and the leaders of the lower caste social movements carried forward such missionary notions. It must be reiterated that the missionaries were instrumental in clothing the lower caste masses that had a different notion of the bodily practices and hygiene. Missionaries supplied clothes to their adherents who came to the congregations wearing such clothes and they appeared to the great satisfaction of the missionaries as clean. It is this idea of cleanliness that the leaders of the social movements worked through.

52 For the mid nineteenth century observations see Rev. Henry Baker Jr. *The Hill Arrivans of Travancore and the Progress of Christianity Among them* (London: Wertheim Macintosh & Hunt, 1862), pp. 34-35. For twentieth century example see the LMS Report on the work in the Attingal District, 1908, p. 11 CWMASOAS.


54 It is interesting to see how much embedded was the notion of cleanliness which is repeated in many missionary reports. For a representative case see 'Travancore and Cochin Mission from Bishop of Travancore and Cochin to Mr. Durrant, at the Head Quarters of CMS in Salisbury Square, London', G2 / I 5 / O 1912, Document No. 7. CMS ABU.
In the reform discourses of twentieth century one of the central themes had been the reform of the bodily practices and the re-conceptualisation of the self. The human body and self came to be considered as an integral part of the society. In the missionary project human body and the newly introduced bodily practices are important when questions of social transformation are dealt with. Hence any idea of social reform came to be considered as part of reforming the bodily practices and the self. In one particular context a statement alluded to Yohannan proclaims that, “I annihilated caste in my body; now you have to realize it”. The notion of the annihilation of caste within Yohannan’s body refers to the singular importance that body had attained as the site on which the effect of the slavery was felt intensely. The notion of annihilation of caste in the body of Yohannan actually suggests parallels to the annihilation of sins of humanity in the body of Christ by accepting and undergoing tortures. It refers in the case of the PRDS movement the notion of the sufferings that the founder of the movement had undergone to save the untouchables from the caste-slavery complex.

The above statements of Yohannan actually draw their sustenance from the missionary language. The human body, and the way power and subjection is attributed to it in the Indian context was very much related to the conceptions of caste. The notion of pollution by touch and its removal through touch and washing refers to the configurations of power that operates both at the micro and macro levels as it involves differently placed individuals. At the micro level it refers to the varieties of bodily practices specific to each castes that determine their social position. Here the relative social position can be understood in the way the upper caste individuals related themselves through differences to the


56 *Inanopadesam...*, p. 31.

lower caste people. At the macro level it refers to the macro structures of caste formation that created multiple hierarchies and guarded zealously in Kerala through the observance of distance pollution. In the quoted lines, the incarnation-Yohannan, it is argued, had destroyed caste within his body, as he underwent the hazardous task of challenging it by accepting new ideas and cultural practices. In fact it does not refer to the destruction of caste in any meaningful manner but to the desire expressed by Yohannan to create a collective life outside the folds of caste. There were efforts within the movement to go beyond the distinction of caste that continued to exist among lower castes in spite of the fact that they had come together within the movement.

There is another context in which the question of untouchable human body enters the discourses of the movement that is related to the sexuality of women. In the contemporary discourses of PRDS, this is related to the fall of the ancestors of the lower castes who are referred to as Adi-Dravidas as their women were lured by the strategies of Aryans. In some of the contemporary discourses, the fall of the mothers are referred to as the original sin. They develop their notion of tradition drawing on the concept of Maharshi lineage, which is a very significant notion in the contemporary discourses of the movement. It is argued that the destiny of the lower castes who had been drowned in the abysmal slavery was to resurrect and continue their journey to the home of the Maharishis.

58 According to contemporary discourses Aryans let loose evils spirits among the Adi-Dravidas and created enmity among the people and subsequently they themselves mediated the disputes that cropped up. Adi-Dravidas disclosed their secrets to Aryans, which the latter used to their advantage. Adi-Dravidas women entered into relations with Aryans that gave birth in evil descendents. The fall of Adi-Dravidas women led to the eventual fall and enslavement of Adi-Dravidas. This particular interpretation is circulated through both the print medium as well as oral communication. See Jnanopadesam..., p. 36 see M.S. Thankappan, Sathyam..., pp. 94-96.

59 Participatory observation of the discourses on the death anniversary of the founder, 29 June 2001.

60 They interpret the birth in the lineage of Maharishis as taking place because of the union of mind, thoughts and feelings that pregnancy takes place. This is the strength of being born in a tradition. They inherit, knowledge and skills, arts, science and Vedas. They are bestowed
It would be appropriate to look at the new practices of everyday life that Yohannan introduced. The everyday practices of people, who were saved, were different from other communities, and it was thought that they should imbibe the original qualities of their forefathers and Yohannan advised his people accordingly. He wanted to keep them away from superstitions and other social evils. Sorcery and witchcraft, according to him, were against the system of faith that their forefathers had developed.

Along with spiritual cleanliness the movement laid equal emphasis on the cleanliness of the body. He made his followers to be aware of the cleanliness of the body as fundamental to the project of emancipation and the practices that they were to follow. One particular instance is portrayed in his biographies that recall his insistence on cleanliness and the efforts that he was willing to undertake for that. Once he was passing through a village and he heard the repeated cries of an infant from a hut. He went straight there consoled the child and bathe him/her and cleaned up the hut and its surroundings to the surprise of the children in the house. Later at night Yohannan and two of his associates went to the little hut and told the parents of the children who had returned after the days work about salvation and how he reached there on that day.61

Yohannan used to take his people to riverbanks in places like Maniyattumukku, Kalluppara, Nakkada and Maraman and showed and instructed them how to use oil and soap to bath. They were also shown how to clean their clothes. He wanted his followers to use white clothes instead of rags. In Travancore society much contests had already taken place on the question of

with practices like rituals of purification to propitiate God. To the great sage these are inborn qualities. He does not learn this from any one. Neither he learns from the wisdom of others nor by reading books or taught by a teacher. In one of the later songs it was sung that

\[
\begin{align*}
&I \text{ am not taught by any one,} \\
&I \text{ learned with my wisdom} \\
&As \text{ wind blows when fan is swung,} \\
&So \text{ those with a tradition would gain everything by birth.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[Jnanopadesam \ldots, \text{pp. 22-23}\]

61 Vijayan Kangazha Sree Kumara Gi rudevan \ldots, \text{pp.} 31-33, Ethnographic fieldwork data.
dress as exemplified in the case of the violence that followed the Nadar women covering their bosom in the mid 19th century.\textsuperscript{62} Although they were permitted to wear upper clothes in the fashion of Christian or Muslim women Nadar women wanted to put on the upper garment in the fashion of Nair women that led to open confrontation with upper castes in many parts of south Travancore.\textsuperscript{63} Lower castes were never permitted to wear proper clothes let alone white clothes even after such wide spread agitations. Under such circumstances insistence on white clothes are significant as that subverted the symbolic world. Similarly Yohannan forbade the use of liquor and other intoxicants that according to him were the evils invented by those who oppressed their forefathers. Yohannan made beef eating a taboo for his followers as their forefathers were forced to plough the fields paired along with the oxen and buffaloes. The people were asked to use large quantities of water and leaves for cleaning after defecation. Toilets were constructed with special provisions of a hole on the wall adjacent to the floor to throw away such leaves after use.\textsuperscript{64}

Yohannan took exception to practices such as kanam on the occasion of marriage. He asked his people to provide separate space for the married couples and instructed them to observe racial purity. Yohannan’s followers were not permitted to wear ornaments. They were instructed not to speak while cooking. Women were asked to cover their heads always. Those who have learned the truth and wisdom of Yohannan's themes/subjects should wish one another by folding hands whenever they met. These practices were essential to bring out a community of people who have achieved proper behaviour in public and who has learned to respect one another that they are in a position to evoke respect for

\textsuperscript{62} For details see Robert L. Hardgrave Jr., The Nadars Of Tamil Nadu: The Political Culture Of a Community in Change (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 55-70

\textsuperscript{63} This particular problem had been a serious matter in the communication of the missionaries based in the South Travancore region. For example see the letters of Lewis E 18 January 1859 from Santhapuram; Dennis J 21 January 1859 from Nagarcoil and Russel J 21 January 1859 from Nagarcoil under the title Cloth Riots. Jacket (B) Box 5 Folder No.2 CWMASOAS.

\textsuperscript{64} Vijayan Kangazha Sree Kumara Gurudevan..., pp. 31-32.
themselves in the larger society. One of his biographies claims this to be a great achievement that helped distinguish his people from the rest of the society. The biography observes that ‘...thus he taught them the things to be observed in their lives and asked them to live accordingly. As a result of it they became distinct from other communities, with their teeth shining without betel stains, clean clothes and shining bright faces signifying the purity of mind.\textsuperscript{55}

The efforts of the reformer that were concentrated both on the material and spiritual realm had its desired effect. But as had been observed before, the object of the cleansing activity was primarily the lower caste human body. I am using here the term human body as it is an essential category that is deployed in the songs of the Sabha. The human body has to pass through various acts of cleaning to emerge out of the stains and stinks. Shining bright faces proclaim the purity of mind they have achieved. In order to reach that stage one should begin from the body and this was thought to provide them the necessary attributes to demand equality in the public space.

The movement tried to change the food habits of the people. The lower castes, especially Parayas and Pulayas, used to eat whatever they could get. This was true, as they could not get ‘clean food’ naturally. Similarly it is difficult to say that they had developed a complex culinary taste or cuisine as it is determined by the social conditions of the people. For them, “a kanji, for a day was a luxury. Their normal food included tapioca, coffee made of the outer husk of the coffee kernel, cucumbers of various types”. This particular menu was considered as of inferior quality. It may be observed here that the perceptions of the food they had used played a role in degrading them. This is more so when we consider the fact that certain food items were considered to be unclean. There are clear indications of privileging of certain food items over others.\textsuperscript{66} It is important to see that the structure of dominance in which they existed made it impossible for the lower caste people to acquire any thing that is

\textsuperscript{55} ibid. Fieldwork in the PRDS settlements at Amara, Vengalathkunnu, 20 September 2000.

\textsuperscript{66} Field data. 20 September 2000.
referred to as good food. Their slave status in society was the main reason for the so-called loathsome food habits. But this aspect is never treated in such manner that the power relations behind the process is recognised. Missionaries have observed long ago their food habits as unclean and thought of reforming them. For example the LMS annual report of Attingal for the year 1908 observed the unclean habits of the lower caste Christians and the eventual rejection of such practices as they joined the missions. "These people used to eat carcasses of dead animals, and no one would approach them. They were accustomed to wear only their old dirty clothes even to Church. But I am glad to say that many of them have left their old habits and come to church with clean clothes."67

**Notions of work and culture in the context of negotiations for equality**

New conceptions of work and culture emerged among the lower caste communities during the early decades of twentieth century. I have already mentioned the reorganisation of production on modern lines and the training imparted to people in new skills such as weaving. At the same time we find the efforts by people during the early decades of the twentieth century to move out of their traditional villages to places where more government lands were available for cultivation. Although the number of people thus migrated are limited it refers to spatial mobility as far as the lower caste people are concerned. Similarly we have examples of people going out to work in the plantations and in the history of the Sabha the people recall how their ancestors worked in plantations of the high ranges to pay for the lands purchased for the movement at Eraviperoor where the headquarters of the movement is situated. Similarly they could purchase land at Amara and settle several families there and transform them as agriculturists. It may be recalled that the notion of work as far as the lower castes were concerned underwent basic shifts after the abolition of slavery in 1855.

---

67 "Report on the work in the Attingal District 1908", p. 11, CWMASOAS.
However there were some forms of unfreedom which still persisted that lower caste people felt they could only overcome and become free by acquiring landed property. Under slavery, it may be remembered that, work meant only subjection to the lower castes or in other words the process of wealth creation sustained their unfreedom. Lower caste people had already internalised the notion of progress and development that they learned from the missionaries. At the same time it is important to mention that the official proclamations during the abolition of slavery visualised the possibility of lower castes acquiring property and civilization that would elevate them from the fallen state. This elevation occurs largely due to the changes in the social position as they acquire property.

In the early decades of the twentieth century those lower castes who had joined the various protestant missions were well aware of the possibilities that development and progress were holding out for them. This is equally true in the case of the lower castes people who were mobilised in the context of the social movements that we have discussed in the chapter on resources. Now we shall take the example of the PRDS to see if there emerged a different notion of work and culture in the courses of the movement and if so how they are related to the notion of equality. In fact the abolition of slavery and the various forms of unfree labour was the essential requirement for the realisation of equality. Subsequently we find the use of the legal means to acquire lands even by resorting to the legal action to reclaim the alienated lands. What was at stake was right to property as far as the lower castes were concerned. Some of the contemporary sources speak of the positive aspect of the land hunger shown by lower castes in Travancore.68

With regard to production we come across new perceptions among the lower castes although such perceptions were not free from many other constraints. It may be argued that productive activity came to be considered in a new way at least among certain sections of the lower castes following the protestant ideals. In the case of the PRDS movement, there were efforts at

accumulating capital out of the meagre savings of rice that each family was supposed to save from their everyday consumption. Similarly the followers of the movement were instructed to save a portion of their earning however meagre that might be. Even before the emergence of the movements such as the PRDS the missionaries have observed the willingness of the lower caste congregations to contribute a portion of whatever they had liberally.\(^6\)

It is important to consider if the PRDS movement could make any investment in the sphere of the culture of the lower castes. While the centrality of slavery is accepted as the significant marker of lower castes life in Kerala in pre-colonial and colonial times, it is necessary to see certain aspects of the culture of the lower castes being reinterpreted in the context of their mobilization for achieving equality. In fact we find them reinterpreting the cultural repertoire of the community to refashion them to the new requirements. In the contemporary ritual discourse the religious functionaries of the movement recall an instance of Yohannan reinterpreting the cultural resource of the community by reversing some of their folk songs and their meanings. One of the songs is a lamentation of the decline that the primeval family of the lower castes-Poovinka Tharavadu-suffered as it did not have heirs to look after the aging mother of the primeval family. The occasion was Yohannan's visit to an eastern remote village inhabited by Parayas labourers. The people at the settlement had just come there after their daily work and were preparing for their household chores. Women were frying the boiled paddy to be husked into rice and then to make their gruel. Children were half asleep for they have not had any food for the whole day. And men were about to play on karu and maram, their traditional drum and other musical instruments. It was then that Yohannan reached there and hearing this news people assembled there in amusement. They did not have anything to offer him to sit upon and then some body pushed from a corner an unused wooden pestle and fixed a piece of mat on it for a seat and requested him to

\(^6\) 'Memorandum by the Bishop upon the Parent Committee's Grant to the Native Church Councils', 1905, p. 2. Private and Confidential. B. Church Missionary Society Travancore and Cochin Mission. CMSAUB.
sit down. Up on their request he told them that he was coming from a distant place in search of them and that he would like to spend that day with them. He had a book with him, which he put safely beneath the thatch of the house. They all felt happy to hear that and he asked them to continue with their singing and he said that he himself could sing. The group of men who were sitting with the musical instruments began to play them and sing and they sang one of the popular folk songs. That song was pertaining to one of the ancient family (Tharavadu) of lower castes the location of which was beyond recognition.\(^70\)

\begin{verbatim}
There is nobody in the Poovinka tharavad.
There is nobody in the Poovinka tharavad
No cock to crow in the dawn
No cock to crow in the dawn
No chirping bird to light a lamp in the dusk
No chirping bird to light a lamp in the dusk
No chirping bird to chirp in dawn
No chirping bird to chirp in dawn
No descendants to light a lamp in the dusk
No descendants to light a lamp in the dusk
No descendants to pick the debris from the courtyard
No descendants to pick the debris from the courtyard
And the mother can't descend form the ascended verandah
And the mother can't descend form the ascended verandah
\end{verbatim}

This particular song was later on to assume ritual significance in the renderings of PRDS as it tried to capture the 'social lack' of the community that is referred to. But to the surprise of all those who were there Yohannan composed another one inverting the original song that displaced the 'lacks' mentioned in the earlier version of the song.

On hearing the song Yohannan asked them where the tharavad was and who were its people for which they could not provide an answer. They

\(^70\) Discourses on the death anniversary of the founder. 29 June 2001.
definitely knew that it has been alluding to something in the past. Yohannan interpreted it as an allusion to the past when there existed the necessary wherewithal and resources for the community to survive. As referred to before, it was then that he composed another song that is a complete inversion of the traditional song ‘the Poovinka Tharavadu’. In the inverted song a male heir is born in the primeval tharavadu (family) who becomes instrumental in restoring it. In contemporary discourses of the Sabha the male heir thus born is identified as Yohannan himself who had come to renovate and redeem the family that had gone astray due to the harsh practice of slavery.

A male child is born in Poovinka Tharavad,
To renovate the Poovinka Tharavad
.............................. (repeat)
People of religion and caste were roused furiously
..............................
All acclaimed and surprised
..............................
How many people did it bring?
..............................
Where do you go my traveler?\(^7^1\)
..............................

It was through this inversion that Yohannan wanted to raise his people from the fallen state and to stake claims for social equality. In the inverted song we find the complete rejection of the ideological assumptions of the previous song that recounted the lack of almost every thing to the lower castes. Also significant is the fact that in the new version the male heir is valorised retrieving the submerged past of the people and reinstate them. Recasting of the images of the past that privileged ‘lacks’ was achieved by the inversion of the song. The contemporary generation of the followers believes that Yohannan had come to renovate the Poovinka Tharavad, which has gone in to ruins.

\(^7^1\) ibid.
There were occasions when Yohannan reeled out the stories of Chengannur Aadi and Malanattil Aadi who were lower caste heroes in the course of his speeches. Today the story of Chengannur Aadi is explained in details to the ritual community as forming one of the cultural resources of the community. In the narrative, Chengannur Aadi comes to meet his wife whom he married when she was seven years of age mounted on elephant to impress upon her. There is a substantial addition to the already available oral tradition of the lower castes once the PRDS movement came into being if we consider different versions of their songs that are available today.

**Engaging the symbolic realm as a means for achieving equality.**

In this part we are concerned with the new mythologies that were found as indispensable for the solidification of the movement after the death of Yohannan in 1939 and the split in the movement in 1950. At the outset itself it should be mentioned that these mythologies were foundational categories to establish equality with other religions as the PRDS had invented their own God who could lead them to salvation. The God thus conceived was referred to as ‘Mathiyaya Daivam’ or a God who is enough for their requirements. The divine status attributed to Yohannan was essential for the community to establish its independence from and equality to other religions and communities. Subsequently these practices became part of the larger question of social equality for which the movement strove ever since its inception. It is in this context that we situate the prevailing myths that are current among the followers of the PRDS movement. In order to build up our arguments further we draw upon the oral tradition of the PRDS. It may be mentioned here that the

---

72 Chengannur Adi and Malanattil Adi were prominent heroes of the Southern Ballads of Kerala.

ritual community was actually solidified on the basis of the oral tradition of the movement.\footnote{Certain portion of the oral tradition has been committed to printing of late but as argued by the scholars on *Orality*, it still retains the features of oral composition even when it is committed to printing. For details on the theoretical positions on Orality see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Methuen, 1982).}

In order to put forward the arguments I draw on the discourses of the Religious men (Upadeshtakkal) of the PRDS on the occasion of the death anniversary celebration of the founder of the movement. These were the most emotionally charged moments that help us to understand the contemporary representation of Yohannan who has acquired divinity as Sree Kumara Guru Devan. One of the interesting aspects of the contemporary representations is to see that the images are created in such a manner they synchronize with the already existing mythologies. Here is one that is connected with Eraviperoor where the head quarters of the PRDS movement is situated and which according to popular perception is the land where divine apparitions had taken place in the past. According to one of the speeches

"He (Sree Kumara Guru Devan) was born in the land of the Pourireveeri. (Golden Eraviperoor) He was born in the land, which was especially selected by the Divinity for his appearance. There was the famous family of Malayala Brahmans known as Puthillathil Pottis in this area. It was to this place that once a Sanyasi came and he asked for Ilanir to quench his thirst. There were no male members in the house at that time and it was disrespect to the Sanyasis not to give them the traditional soft drink Ilanir (tender coconut). The elder women of the household handed over an axe and requested the Sanyasi to fell a coconut tree and to pluck a tender coconut, as there was nobody there to climb the coconut tree. The coconut tree bent to the ground for the Guru to pluck the coconut and quench his thirst. This is the land where God has descended in the past and now at the
Myths were to become a living tradition in the case of the movement and that is evident in the ritual rendering of the life of Yohannan himself. The whole events leading to the birth of Yohannan is recalled in a mythical manner and the endless repetition of the story informs the followers how he was born and suffered along with his mother. The birth of Yohannan and the circumstances leading to it are reworked in a mythological manner. It was recounted similar to the Immaculate Conception, something similar to the experiences Virgin Mary. Once Yohannan's mother was cutting reeds when she heard somebody calling her from behind and when she looked back there was nobody to be seen. As her name was repeatedly called out she looked back and saw fire burning at some distance where she stood and cut the reeds. On seeing that she fell unconscious. It was an hour past when she became conscious and was relieved from the shock but was not in a position to continue her works and returned home with her knife in a trance not sure of what had happened to her.

The vision informed her of the divine plan to make her the mother of the divine progeny who would redeem the descendants of slaves from their degraded conditions. Nobody including her husband could believe it and eventually it led to their separation. This story in certain senses reminds us of the miracles and events associated with the birth of Jesus Christ. Yohannan's mother left her husband and came back to her own house and there also she was not welcome and she was forced to stay alone and then that she gave birth to her child. According to the biographies his birth was preceded by storm and downpour and people were all frightened. Once the torrential rain stopped

---

75 Discourses of Gurukula Upadeshtavu. Illithara Krishnakumar on the death anniversary 29 June 2001 at Eraviperoor.
76 Grandha Rachana Samithi. Sree Kumara Devan.... p. 22.
suddenly the people heard an infant's scream from Lechi's hut. Thus the Saviour was born. The plot has all the characteristics of the birth of a prophet. Divine revelation and the secret of birth, rejection by the society, sometimes at the time of birth sudden changes in the forces of nature determining the time of the birth of the saviour. Prophetic messianic nature of the narrative found a ready acceptance among his followers. Over the decades this has been retold endless times and made an integral part of the faith of the followers of the PRDS.

According to the contemporary discourses when God was about to be born as a slave, the earth was informed of the divine plan that shook her and she informed her inability to accommodate such a being. God consoled the earth that there would be some body to bear him on the earth.

It was a low caste woman who had the fortune to bring God to the earth, as He Himself was to take the garb of a slave. In order to bring God to the earth, the Aadi saktthi had to incarnate as mother of God to fulfil the promise of salvation. The ritual discourse recalls it as the occasion when primeval power that is the foundation of the Aadiyar people revealing itself to them. According to the ritual discourse it signifies the breaking and casting away of slave chains and the Aadiyar people take refuge in the God who had come to save them.

---

77 It will be interesting to see how the experiences of Yohannan's mother are recalled in the contemporary ritual discourses of PRDS. "Our holy grand mother had to endure all the insults when she was pregnant to bear our promised saviour to this world. No body was ready to accept her explanations. Some people even tried to kill her and amidst all these oppositions she thought of the bright light that she saw when she went to cut reeds in the nearby forest. She had to take her child wherever she went to feed him as she was enduring hunger most of the days. On certain occasions when she went to work for the sankaramangalam family she had to keep her infant boy laid on the dykes so that she could feed him the gruel supplied to her. It was under extreme forms of hunger and sufferings that she could bring up her child. Ammachi has been observing fast when she fed the child with the food given to her and experiencing hunger during those days while engaged in backbreaking work". Discourses of Gurukula Upadeshtavu, on the occasion of the death anniversary of the founder, 29 June 2001.

78 ibid.
It is important to know how the contemporary discourses constructs the identity of Yohannan once he was elevated as God incarnate and as Sree Kumara Gurudevan. For this we shall follow the ritual discourses again.

It is known to us that there are many incarnations and as per Hindu mythology God took ten different incarnations to fulfill the desired project and they were all the incarnated fragments of Maha Vishnu. Similarly great men who themselves were Gods like Jesus Christ, Lord Buddha and several other incarnations took place and in none of this cases did the earth show her inability to bear them if so, why then in the case of Sree Kuara Gurudevan alone that the earth showed her inability to bear him? It is in this context that the question whether Poikayil Appachan /Sree Kumaara Gurudevan was the incarnation of Maha Vishnu becomes extremely significant. Is Poikayil Appachan (Yohannan/Kumara Guru Devan) an incarnation of Maha Vishnu? You answer my question. Kumara Guru Devan was God the almighty himself who descended from the heavens to fulfill the promise given to the slave children. Gurudevan came to this earth and his original seat is heaven itself from where he wept seeing the tears of the slaves.  

Before the Upadeshtavu reached any conclusion on the divinity of Sree Kumara Gurudevan the ritual community answered to the question of whether he was the incarnation Maha Vishnu in the negative. This piece of information is crucial to us as it shows the manner in which the contemporary image of Yohannan is constructed by his followers.

The ritual discourse continues by saying that the God almighty came to this earth fulfilled the mission and finally returned to the primeval power/heavenly abode. But the significant thing is that here God himself

---

79 Raksha Nirmayam Discourses by Iithara Krishnakumar, Gurukula Sreshtan, 25 September 2001 Venkotta.
descended on the earth as Poyikayil Appachan. Now the preacher recalls the genealogy of the Hindu myths on incarnation in which Maha Vishnu incarnated as the primeval fish to fight against Hayagreevan who had stolen away the Vedas underneath the seas. Maha Vishnu conquered the evil and recovered the Vedas and returned and with that the mission was fulfilled. In the theological exegesis of the PRDS God came here as a family and that had a lasting impact on those who were cast away leaving asunder familial unity. The rationale for the coming of God as family is to be sought in the word and promise given to the slave children whose parents have been sold away. It was a promise made to them that God would come to their refuge as and when the time comes as their father and mother. The earth could not contain the power of incarnation as it was coming as a family to complete the project of the promised salvation. Because of this the earth looked for reprieve and then that Aadi Sakthi our Holy Mother conceived and gave birth to our God. The PRDS discourses refer to this family as the family of Maharshis where the vibrant human sound resonated with life that flourished for millenia.\(^{80}\)

When describing the events of Yohannan’s childhood and youth some of the biographies rework these myths. Once his mother went to work leaving the sleeping child under the shade of a tree on a spread out old cloth. When she rushed back hearing the repeated cries of the child she found him to be covered with a colony of black ants. She rubbed off the ants, but there was no sign of ant bites. The unusual behaviour continued. Even as a child, Yohannan used to have a critical attitude and he used to defy the practice untouchability that the lower caste themselves followed. When he was taken to kutippallikudam (traditional school where children are initiated into writing) for enrolment and the teacher initiated him to write on the spread out rice he insisted on writing the word ‘God’ which surprised everyone. On another occasion the touch of Yohannan was said to have cleaned the mud stained body of his mother who

\(^{80}\) Ibid.
had just come back from the field. God chose the earthly body of the slave—Yohannan—and incarnated to redeem the slaves. The body of the slave is elevated to a mythical category in the discourses of the Sabha.

There were other acts of Yohannan erasing the signs of the slave past. Once as his friends looked on he tore off the pattappala, the vessel made of the folder of areca plants used for eating. In yet another dramatic way he once told his friends about the sufferings of their forefathers under slavery. The heights of which was achieved when he himself was paired with an ox harnessed to the yoke and drew the plough. It was very difficult for his friends to observe the scene of his falling repeatedly. Suddenly he rose up and broke the plough by striking it against the ground. His friends observed him to be unusually grave.

The breaking of the plough is recollected today in the ritual community as a symbolic act that would proclaim to the world the resolve to break the barriers operating against the slave castes. It was in the same mould that most of the articulations took place. There is an amazing stock of stories and miraculous experiences connected with the life of Yohannan and his disciples. It was within this genre of the myth that past was kept alive in the collective memory of the community and transmitted across generations.

It would be interesting at this juncture to see how a historical event took the narrative mode of the mythical categories. Every event no matter whether it was religious or social was re-inscribed as a myth and the explanations of the phenomenon quite often straddled the genres. The following example will give a very good idea of the narrative genre. We consider here the plight of the peasants who had to vacate the land and crops at the time of harvest, which was permanently leased to them by the government at a place called Kozhukkuchira. The peasantry was drawn from various castes including a substantial number of lower castes belonging to Paraya and Pulaya communities. Then that Yohannan appeared there and claimed all of them to be his people with the local revenue authorities.

---

81 Grantha Rachana Samithi, Sree Kaniara Devan..., p. 28.
82 ibid., p. 31.
Understanding the situation he asked his people to return to their respective villages. Surprisingly there wasn't any move to regain the land. He asked them to be alive to the fact that those who had exploited their forefathers have not all been vanished and that they promised heaven but in actual practice they cheat the descendants of slaves. He assured them that the future to which they are taken by him was a future where this kind of rivalry deception did not exist.  

The welcome offered to the king of Travancore by Yohannan and his people amidst the resistance of the upper castes is also recollected in the same manner. Seeing the white cloth clad black people waiting for him, the king came near to them and asked what they wanted. To that, Yohannan replied that he wanted to convince the king that in Travancore such a humanity existed without any rights whatsoever who were once the rulers of the same land. This surprised the king.

These events have been considered as important in the history and experiences of the PRDS. Yohannan explained to some of his followers who felt disappointed for not asking for anything from the king that Adi-Dravidas were once the owners of this land and it would have been demeaning for their descendants to put forward a request for their legitimate claim.

It is important to observe the merging of myths and reality. It is not our intention to juxtapose myth to reality to arrive at any validation of the former. It is recalled in the context of the practice of faith healing which prevailed among various Christian sects that Yohannan used it in an effective manner to reach out to the people. Once he was preaching at a place called Kulathur where Yohannan is said to have cured three people including a mad man. All this instances are recounted as miracles in the manner of the Biblical narratives.

83 Vijayan Kangazha, Sreekumara Gurudevan..., pp. 17-18.
85 ibid.
86 Grantha Rachana Samithi. Sree Kanara Devau, pp. 73-78.
These myths and miracles constitute the image of the founder of PRDS as a saviour who resolves the crisis of individual’s social and spiritual life. Even after Yohannan’s time the language of myths and miracles remained as the most powerful instrument within the PRDS movement. After the death of Yohannan there occurred the new phenomenon of his spirit speaking through some of his followers. At first it was his daughter Sara who spoke mimicking him. Later on many of his associates began to speak in this manner and finally it was the turn of his second wife Janamma who spoke like Yohannan and institutionalised it as she spoke from behind his grave in the headquarters of PRDS. This phenomenon of Spirit Speech was referred to as Appachan Samsaram (Appachan Speech) and the leaders of the PRDS like Njaliyakuzhi Simon Yohannan accepted it as authentic and denounced all other speeches. In the following decades it was through this spirit medium speech that Janamma decided the affairs of the PRDS, till her death in 1982. The control that Janamma could wield over the sect was in a great measure owed to the exercise of the authority of spirit speech. The later turbulence in the movement was mainly on the basis of the acceptance of the spirit speech and the revelations that came through it. This phase in the history of the PRDS is significant as external mediation emerged as a major trend, which is situated here in relation

87 Here is an instance of the typical way in which believers recall Yohannan’s death. ‘What we need to do now is to establish strong bonds with the God who was born for us and who suffered for us for sixty-one years of his whole life. The generation of our parents could establish their relations with him and when he died it was their breast-beating sound that was echoed in this land. It is this experience that should guide us in realizing the divine that had been with us as he was with our parents. It was a time of intense grief—men, women and children all were weeping and wailing—some crawled on the ground, some fell swooned and all this grief lasted for days and our parents felt that they lost the one who was their saviour and who alone was there to come in search of them to establish strong ties of relationships with them.’ Discourses of CP. Damodaran, Gurukula Upadeshtavu, on the occasion of the death Anniversary of Yohannan/ Kumara Gurudevam. 29 June 2001.

88 For a critical understanding of the phenomenon see, Baby and Babu Rajan, Thiruvithamkooor Prathyaksha Daiva Sabha Charithram, Poikayil Yohannanu Sesham. (Etumanoor, 1994), pp. 13-17: For a devotional account see M.S Thankappan, Sathyam…pp. 138-139

89 A collection of the spirit speeches has been published as a volume recently. For details see Poikayil Sree Kumara Gurudeva I rabhashanam, (Eraviperoor: PRDS Head Quarters, 2000). Passim.
to dominant powers and nation state, as there were efforts at redefining the identity of the movement and its founder as necessitated by the external forces.

The biographies of Yohannan written so far show two major trends. One of the trends is to follow the mythical pattern where the mentality of the lower castes that privileged millennial transformation acquires prominence and in such texts emphasis is laid on the divinity of the founder of the movement. At the same time such histories do not explore the mentalities of the lower castes in any detail. I would argue here that mythical categories in understanding the divine were not something external to the life of lower castes as they were aware of various forms of black magic and other practices to worship their Gods and to resolve the crisis of their lives. This had contributed to the development of the particular mental structure that provided them with categories of thought. It may be said that the new movement sometimes activated such elements of their collective thought. The biographies that deploy mythical categories celebrate the sublime text that is uncontaminated by material aspects of the world that leads to the recounting of those events of the biography that alone would be legitimised later when Yohannan’s personality was reconstructed with divine powers as Kumara Guru Devan. This would bring in a philosophical question of personal identity of the founder of the movement to the later generations of followers. But in the case of Yohannan it is a change superimposed on him posthumously and hence the onus is on his followers to explain how this question of personal identity is to be resolved.

At one level the questions of numerical and qualitative identities are involved in the characterisation of Yohannan as Sree Kumara Guru Devan since in the later reconstructions of the biography of Yohannan there is an overemphasis on his imagined life as Sree Kuara Gurudevan. But the fact that such constructions have been downplaying Yohannan’s real life as Yohannan, numerical identity between Yohannan and Sree Kumara Gurudevan becomes

---

very fragile in such constructions. In the case of the identity of Sree Kumara Guru Devan the predominant feature is that of narrative identity. The essential physical and psychological continuity of the person of Sree Kumara Gurudevan is constructed through discourse. In other words the personal identity of Sree Kumara Guru Devan is accomplished through "narrative forms of history and fiction" in which the question of sameness and selfhood are taken up. In this process it is with the character of the human person that the re-identification is made. But in the case of Sree Kumara Gurudevan these constructions are ambivalent as the narratives try to destabilise the human character of Sree Kumara Gurudevan. It has been argued that the problem of 'identity in narrative' shifts the focus from experience and memory to accounts of events. These events would explain changes in character as the latter is considered as resulting from the former. But in the case of the Sree Kumara Gurudevan there is always a strong recourse to memory and experience particularly when it comes to the ritual discourses to which we have referred to in the course of the thesis. In that case the narrative identity here does not completely dispense with experience and memory.\(^91\)

There is yet another trend of writing the biography that gives the details of personal life experiences of the founder following the rational methods of biography. In this genre one comes across efforts at providing a matter of fact description of the life of the founder which is accomplished by invoking that aspect of writing biography that privileges the features of scientific biography/history. The biographies are considered to be constructions that involve power/knowledge.\(^92\) Such thinking is necessitated by a particular circumstance that makes possible the writing of biographies and also the context in which such individuals have been living. This is applicable in the case of both the genres of biographies mentioned above. The texts thus

---

\(^{91}\) For a discussion on narrative identity see Partha Chatterjee. *Princely Impostor* (New Delhi: Permanent Black 2003). p. 115-137

produced are acceptable to the people as they find the texts and the pre-existing images of the past in their collective memory as mutually compatible. The strategies followed in the construction of the texts become significant here. The site of social memory becomes the most privileged one in this process as the texts will have to take recourse to it or alternatively the images of Yohannan even in its new form will have to be validated against the social memory of his followers. It must be observed that the community made substantial interventions in the site of social memory through repeated ritual discourses to transform the image of Yohannan into Sree Kumara Gurudevan. The ritual discourses made possible the construction of the new image of Yohannan by taking recourse to rendering of the biographies/ hagiographies bordering fiction. There is a contest over the meanings involved in this process in the experience of the PRDS even during the lifetime of its founder.

In the later reformulations of the PRDS, Yohannan remerged in an evidently mythical way once there was a change in the faith and the practices of the movement. New hallowed portraits of Yohannan, his mother and sons came to be venerated and subsequently his wife also became an object of worship after her death. These photographs came to be placed at the headquarters of PRDS and supplied to the followers of PRDS signifying the Godliness that he was bestowed with. Instead of the real life photographs such new imaginary portraits came to be accepted. This is considered here as the re-inscription of the biography. This actually brought about significant and drastic changes in the people’s perception of the image of the PRDS.

---

It may be mentioned that some biographies provide information on his life while others do not provide information on all aspects of his life. He was married twice and the first marriage took place in 1907 in which he had four children. His second marriage was in 1925, in which he had two sons. Some of his biographies downplay the fact that he was married and had led a family life as the narrative mould had shifted to mythology. It was his second wife Janamma and the sons born of her who came to the leadership of the sect after Yohannan’s death. Not much is heard of his first wife, Mariam, daughter of Kunghati Poovathu Melathil and the children born of her. Yohannan died in the year 1939, at the age of 61. By the time of his death PRDS came to be well established with followers in many villages of Central and South Travancore.
At this juncture it becomes important to see how these questions become significant in the discussion of equality. The present argument is that the intervention in the religious realm and the structuring of the divinity of Sree Kumarra Gurudevan was significant to claim equal space in the religious realm. This is considered to have provided the followers of the movement with foundational categories to articulate themselves in the larger society.

**Identity and social boundaries in the context of the struggle for equality**

We have been discussing various aspects of the PRDS movement in relation to the question of equality. In this part our effort is to look at the process by which the new identity of the followers of the movement were constituted over a period of time and how it was related to the question of social equality in the context of colonial modernity. Before doing that we shall have a discussion of how identities are formed. It has been argued that identities are formed, as a result of social process where people come to reject the earlier notion or received ideas on themselves. According to this argument what happens here is not self-discovery, but self-negation. The negation occurs, as the effort is to reconstitute the self by negating all the received notions on them. It is, in other words, an effort at becoming what one was not earlier. It would appear rather difficult to concede this particular position as we may come across certain instances of the reinterpretation of the earlier subject position in a given context of substantial social and economic transformation. In other words it should be emphasised that certain elements of the past that may appear as despicable from one point of view would become an active constituent of the identity of a community or social group in another context. In the example of the PRDS movement it should be pointed out that the notion of slavery and slave sufferings are integral to the new identity that they would ascribe to themselves and other lower castes of Kerala. But at the same time in the public

---


95 ibid. p. 287.
discourses of the other lower caste organisations/ movements in Kerala we hardly come across any reference to the slave experiences of their ancestors. I have mentioned in the second chapter of the thesis the experiential aspect of slavery as memorialised on the occasion of the annual celebrations of CMS during the early decades of the twentieth century. This memorialisation came to an end gradually even in the case of the CMS Christians drawn from lower castes. We hardly come across examples of the memorialisation of slavery among lower caste Christians of other denominations. In this circumstances it may be suggested that memorialisation of slavery is unique to the PRDS worldview and an important element that constitutes their identity as evident in the ritual discourses of the movement.

The above example demands us to have a more dynamic view of identities and identity formation and its significance to the emancipatory politics. Although it is difficult to provide a singular definition of emancipatory politics, when the PRDS movement developed the central concern of the lower caste movements in general had been their liberation from the oppressive caste structure. All these movements had articulated the grievances of the people to the political authorities and in the course of which they provided the crucial self-representation. Their self-representation is evident in the speeches made in the legislative assembly as well as in the memorandums presented to the government. These documents form the materials on the basis of which we can talk about their engagement with the question of social identity. It will be difficult to analyse the shifting sands of identity formation as an object out there. It has to be understood as a process and engaged with, in a dynamic manner to delineate the emancipatory politics involved in it.

According to Hall the contemporary discussions of identity happens in the theoretical context of ‘discursive explosion’ around the concept of identity and at the same time it has been subjected to ‘searching critique’. These critiques
had been aimed at the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity. There are similar efforts to destabilize some of the claims advanced by scholars who advocate essentialist position regarding identity formation. Of these, one of the major trends has been the deconstructive approach that puts the key concepts 'under erasure' because such concepts are no longer serviceable in their originary and unreconstructed form. Identity is a concept operating 'under erasure' in the interval between reversal and emergence; an idea which can't be thought in the old way, but without which certain questions can't be thought at all.

Where and in relation to what sort of questions does the irreducibility of the concept of identity arise? According to Hall the answer lies in its centrality to the question of agency and politics. By politics he means both the significance in modern forms of political movement of the signifier 'identity', its pivotal relationship to a politics of location-but also the manifest difficulties and instabilities which have affected all contemporary forms of 'identity politics'. By agency he does not mean a return to an unmediated and transparent notion of the subject or identity as the centred author of social practice or to restore an approach which 'places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity-which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness'. What is needed is not a theory of the knowing subject but a theory of the discursive practice. It seems to be in the attempt to rearticulate the relationship between subjects and discursive practices that the question of identity recurs-or rather, if one prefers to stress the process of subjectification to discursive practices, and the politics of exclusion which all such subjectification appears to entail, the question of identification.

---

97 ibid.
98 ibid.
99 ibid.
According to Hall identification turns out to be one of the least well-understood concepts—almost trick; as though preferable to identity. It draws meanings from both discursive and psychoanalytic repertoire, and without being limited to either. In commonsense language identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the naturalism of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed—always 'in process.' It is not determinate in the sense that it can always be 'won' or 'lost' sustained or abandoned. Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured it will not obliterate difference. The total merging it suggests is, in fact, a fantasy of incorporation. Identification is a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. There is always 'too much' or 'too little'—an over-determination or a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying practices it is subject to the play of difference.\footnote{ibid. According to Hall in psychoanalysis it is the earliest expression of the ties with other persons. Identification with the parental figure. Similar to the oral phase of the organization of libido, in which the object that long for is assimilated by eating. Demands co-exists with an agency like superego. Similarly, ego-ideal is composed of identifications with cultural ideals that are not necessarily harmonious All these need not be imported whole sale without translation. But this is mainly to show the different ways in which the concept is used.}

What demand our critical engagement are the elements with which such identities are formed. In most cases, the elements of the past are appropriated and reworked where by constituting one's own tradition or traditions. The availability of such traditions and their elements would vary at the time of the transition of society from one stage to another. In the colonial period, as it has been overstated by now, all social movements including the anti-colonial movements tried to rework such categories that were available in their tradition.
along with what came to them from the repertoire of the colonial cultural resources.

"Though they seem to invoke a point of origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about using resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. They relate to invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as the changing same: not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our routes...They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermine its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the 'saturing into the story' through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatc field.  

This is brought in here to highlight the dynamics of such phenomenon in the identity formation of lower castes in Kerala in the particular example of the PRDS movement and would see how the identity was formed along with the deliberation of social boundary through narrativization of self that was doomed to slavery. The fictional nature of the discourses, to which we shall refer in the forthcoming chapters of the thesis, do not undermine the discursive, material or political effectivity. This is accomplished through performative self-production to which Hall refers to particularly on the ritual occasions when slave suffering

101 ibid., p. 4.
is really enacted. In fact it is an important aspect of the process of the subject creation. The kind of identity that was imagined could not have happened outside fictional narratives that accomplished them. The ‘suturing into the story’ of slave experience into the imagined self of contemporary generation of believers is a construction that takes palace in fantasy.

It is appropriate here to take up some historical examples to argue our case. It is clear from our discussion that caste society had always maintained a feeling of ‘we’ and ‘they,’ like racial boundaries for the lower castes although they might have remained fuzzy in the case of the upper castes across space and time. The processes of social reforms in the colonial period brought in larger caste identities sometimes after weakening sub-caste alliances. This was largely the case of horizontal solidarities across caste groups that shared the same ritual and social space. This phenomenon led to the emergence of mega categories, making invalid the earlier boundaries understood as ‘we’. Such developments also occurred among dominant caste groups in Kerala such as Nairs and Ezhavas. The missionary interface witnessed similar differentiation evolved between lower caste Christians and Syrian Christians within various denominations of the Church. It can be argued that such differentiation continued to exist in the post-colonial times. It was this general milieu that created the situation to which Stuart Hall referred to as the process of ‘becoming’ in the above quote. In fact among the lower castes there evolved organizations that tried to transcend the caste and religious distinctions particularly when serious social, political and economic questions were raised. As a result we find the combined mobilisation of various lower caste groups around the questions of public space, economic development and political

---

102 ibid., p. 13


rights. These were made possible by the concerted efforts to surpass the limits of their traditional worldview that was determined by their position in the caste hierarchy. It is in this context that the new mentality of the lower castes evolved in the colonial period. There was substantial change in the way lower caste people perceived the social relations although we find the continuation of hierarchical structure of society. This new mentality was expressed in religious millenarianism along with expectation and desire for progress and eventual transformation of their lives.

The socio-political and economic issues were capable of creating essential requirements of identity. But at the same time certain constructions of the past were integrated with it in the process that came along with modernity. They are subject to radical historicisation and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. According to Hall we need to situate the debates on identity within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively settled character of many populations and cultures, above all in relation to the processes of globalisation, which he would argue as coterminous with modernity. It appears from our previous discussions that the whole question of the new identity of the lower castes in general and the followers of the Sabha in particular became a problem due to colonial transformation which is the early phase of globalisation.

The constitutive elements of such a development were coterminous with modernity although this particular aspect of modernity had differential impact on different social groups. This is very clear in the case of lower caste movements as they articulated problems of modern education, entry into public sphere, economic development etc as their principal concerns. At the same time early twentieth century movements of the lower castes showed a preoccupation with the past, sometimes in a mythical way that led to the process of invention of tradition. This was very clear in the case of the movements with the prefix

---

‘Adi’ referring to the original inhabitants. These movements had certain conceptions of their past and in their discourses we find the resurrection of some imagined histories. These histories and reflections on them would go along with elements of modernity towards envisioning a new identity for them in the process of which they would negate the social images constructed and attributed to them by dominant discourses.

This we would explain with the example of the history and the discourses of the PRDS movement. Hall’s conceptualisation of the concept of identity illuminates the problem. The concept of identity that is used is not essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. The concept of identity does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same,’ identical to itself across time. Nor-if we translate this essentialising conception to the stage of cultural identity-is it that ‘collective or true self hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves” which a people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common and which can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging ‘oneness’ or cultural belongingness underlying all other superficial differences. Identities are never unified, and in late modern times, increasingly fragmented or fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions. Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion. Above all and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are


constructed through, not outside, difference. It is only through the relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the 'positive' meaning of any term—and its 'identity'—can be constructed. Throughout their careers identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside' abjected. Every identity has at its 'margin', an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational is not a natural but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which its 'lacks'.

It is productive to make use of the critical edge provided by the above observation to analyse the new identities that have evolved among the lower castes. In fact the practice of using specific caste names to refer to lower castes in official and unofficial contexts continued to exist in spite of the opposition to such representations. But at the same time there were efforts to go beyond this by imagining new mega categories by assuming new caste names. In the case of Pulayas they assumed the title of Cheramar signifying their relations with historical Cheras while the title of Sambavas show its Sivaite connection. In fact for much of the lower caste theorists of early twentieth century there was the notion of essential self. But at the same time in actual practice we come across instance of instability of such projections. For instances when terms such as Cheramar were used not all Pulayas of Travancore adopted this new title although that was based on a new historical claim to the past of the ancient Cheras. It must be reiterated here that such identities were constructed within and not outside the discourses. These instances show the power of the identities to function as identification and attachment as they had the power to exclude, leave out and render outside abjected. The new Cheramar and Sambava identities had their 'margins and excesses' in the critiques provided for instance

---

108 ibid., p. 5.
by thinkers such as Yohannan. In fact in one of the songs he wanted the proponents of Sambavas and Cheramars to reconsider whether the Paraya’s new name of Sambavars would ever absolve them of the accusation befallen on them. And similarly he asked the Cheramar ideologues whether the new name of Pulayas as Cheramar would ever remove their pollution. It actually shows the strategic and positional nature of identity. Similarly it is clear in this example that it is difficult to have a stable core self. There is nothing like a superficial self that hides the real self of the social groups or individuals. In fact as we have already noted it does not happen outside the discourses.

The PRDS movement tried to break the caste fold and tried to imagine new social categories. Its project was oriented towards the oppressed slaves of Travancore. Slavery was theorised as an experiential category as against the prevailing notions of slavery as a mere socio-economic category. An emphasis on caste identity would have broken the very fragile construct of identity that the movement had formulated and this moment refers to the emergence of a distinct social boundary. As Stuart Hall had pointed out as a process identity formation operates across difference, and it entails discursive work, the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, and the production of ‘frontier effects’. It requires what is left out of its constitutive outside to consolidate the process. In the context of this theoretical position it needs to be stated that the new identity that was imagined for the lower castes in Travancore with the emergence of PRDS movement operated across difference. The project of the movement was to bring together Pulayas, Parayas and similar castes and to transcend the differences, binding them through discursive work. In certain context the binding factor was the new faith that they had derived from the Bible. The Symbolic boundaries were maintained by invoking such unifying notions that were available through the spread of the protestant

---

10 For the complete song see Payikayil Sree Kunara Gurudeva Geethangal (Eraviperoor: PRDS Publication, 1996), p. 29.

11 In a subsequent chapter I provide an analysis of the discourse of slavery and transformation of slavery as an experiential category.
Christianity. Varying practices of reforms including the new bodily practices to which I have already referred to produce the ‘frontier effects’ that demarcated the community from the rest of the lower castes. In the early years of the movement its followers came to be referred to as Poikkakkuttar (people of Poika) or as Appachan Sabbakkkar (People of Appachan’s Church). Let us consider the process of ‘binding and marking of symbolic boundaries’ by following the self-representation of the PRDS movement during its early phase. In a memorandum submitted in 1926 to Morris Watts of Travancore government it was stated that

*We are a people who had been enslaved in this country for quite a long time, and least endowed with education and landed property, belonging to Parayas, Pulayas and Kizhakke Pulayar [eastern Pulayas]. We have come together in the light of the Holy Bible comprising of nearly, 10,000 people with the name Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha. We the indigenous people of the land were enslaved for long and as we do not have land we depend on other castes for setting up our hearth and live in a wretched condition. We are a poor people, who live in the status of animals with the trifling wages that we get from daily work, as we do not have cultural and civilizational endowments such as education and social reform. Now we have established schools and Churches in different parts of the state that numbers 63 parishes where we carry on divine worship and impart primary education for our children.*

We find the peculiar situation of the emergence of new identity as they have come together with the name Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha and the persistence of certain aspects of the earlier identities. In fact the earlier

---

identities refer to the worldviews of the communities that were steeped in the experiences of the castes from which they all 'came'. It is a matter of speculation how far they could surmount the continuing influence of caste inspite of the fact that they could come together in the light of the new world view provided by the Biblical teachings. Similarly the need to elevate themselves from the wretched condition of 'animals' have become an important concern which would be accomplished by acquiring education, social reforms and other civilizational qualities. It is important to observe that the fledgling institutions such as primary schools and Churches were institutional locations that could destabilise the social selves of the communities and individuals that have undergone such changes. They had identified slavery and the continuing effects of it in the early decades of twentieth century as the decisive factor that pushed them down to the wretched condition. These aspects of their social experiences are considered here as markers of symbolic boundaries that are crucial when we consider the question of identity formation.

In the subsequent decades the markers of boundary became prominent as they were rooted in particular discourses such as that of slavery and social development. Although there were efforts to erase the caste based self-images, such problems continued to plague the movement. In fact the caste-determined self-image of the lower castes were never weakened even after they joined the missionary churches. When we consider the later developments within the PRDS movement after the death of the founder, we find caste-based solidarities surging up although there were efforts to denigrate the caste differences. The resurfaced caste identities in fact contested for new representations. Yohannan tried to unite his followers in a new knowledge and practice by which he thought they would annihilate caste. The new knowledge refers to the interpretations that he gave to the history of the lower castes in Kerala beginning with the early history of the Adi-Dravidas and their subsequent enslavement. According to Yohannan there is a bright future for the enslaved people as he was suggesting a strategy for their eventual liberation. In the place of caste intimated social perception there should evolve a new perception of
caste free self, which was anchored on a new worldview of Prathyakshata and Raksha or visibility of God and salvation. This was further integrated with the social and economic project of the movement. This new religious and material orientation gave the movement its distinctive feature. The invention of institutional practices made them different from various Christian sects as well as other lower castes who did not join the missions. But in government documents the PRDS movement continued to be referred to as another Christian denomination while there were difference in their faith and congregational from that of the Christians.\footnote{ibid., p. 12. Also see the Census classification in the Census of India vol. XXV, Travancore Part I Report (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1942), p. 141, and Part II Table (Trivandrum: Government Press, 1942), p. 229.}

Before the organization of the formal structure of the PRDS, there did not exist any institutional space to bind the people together and it remained mostly as amorphous gatherings or conventions of people. The formal institutional structure became necessary to contest the Christian denominations and to acquire their social demands. It is in this context that the institutional structure of the PRDS movement was formed.\footnote{ibid.} It is important here to observe that the movement had to define itself vis-à-vis external elements such as the state and church denominations mediating the constitution of their particular identity. It was happening in the larger context of the Travancore State’s policy of objectifying communities for governmental purposes. This process of objectification of the communities actually provided the necessary information for the people to imagine their communities in a new manner as they evolved as bound serialities.\footnote{Partha Chatterjee, Anderson’s Utopia. Diacritics 29, 4 (1999), pp. 128-34; Also see, Benedict Anderson, Spector of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World. (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 44-45.} Similarly in the context of social movements, these new imaginings provided them with the elements with which they could interpret their past and present conditions that would eventually become part of the popular perception. This process was very important in the case of the PRDS
movement for the formation of their identity. According to Homi Bhabha the
unities which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of
power and exclusion, and are the result, not of natural and inevitable or
primordial totality but of the naturalized, over determined process of closure.\textsuperscript{117}

Whether we consider bound serialities produced as part of Governmental
purposes or the constructions of identity through the discourses of the
movement or the everyday practices of the people they entail the process to
which Bhabha refers. In other words these identities are formulated within the
dynamics of power and exclusion practiced by the state or the social groups that
were variously placed in the social spectrum. In the new discourses that evolved
all references to lower castes become marks that differentiated them or they
become marked words.

During the first half of the 20-century the PRDS movement was outside
the Christian churches but within the symbolic world of Christianity and at the
same time, it contradicted many of the theories and practices of the church.
Generally speaking it worked within a Christian eschatology.\textsuperscript{118} In our context
the unity that the PRDS movement had proclaimed was the direct result of the
play of power and exclusion that they could deploy as they became familiar
with the practices of the missionaries which they used in a deft manner. At the
same time we do not find anything like a complete rejection of the elements of
primordiality but we come across the imaginative use of it as a resource for the
identity formation.

In fact we find the play of power in the interpretations given to Biblical
themes by Yohannan that was carried forward even after his period. For
example, if we consider the twelve themes of Yohannan, it would show the
extent of its links with Christian discourses. \textit{The themes included notions like
the past generation, (from the garden of the Eden to the apostolic church) my
generation (after the apostolic church), the era of the slavery of the

\textsuperscript{117} Homi K Bhabha, \textit{Location of Culture}, (London: Routledge1994). pp. 66-84

\textsuperscript{118} Jnanopadesam, Poyiakyl..., p. 20.
forefathers, the theme of orphaned children, the false teaching and learning of the Bible, sin, eternal damnation and the curse of death, wrath of god, the complete removal of sin at the cross and the complete affirmation of salvation in the resurrected Christ and the complete unity of the church in the Holy Trinity.\textsuperscript{119} The practice of exclusion could be seen in the case of making of the boundaries of the community which were drawn on the basis of the emerging ritual space. During Yohannan's lifetime the perception of him as divine was the major marker of distinction. But after his death as he achieved divinity his new image became the sharp marker of boundary as far as his followers were concerned. The present content on is that this process of boundary making was crucial in the construction of the identity of his followers. This may be referred to as an instance of 'the production of the self as an object in the world along with the practices of self construction, recognition and reflection'. Constraints of the rules are also significant in the process as subjection takes place within the rules. 'The production of the self as an object in the world' in our context would mean the resolve of the movement to create a new self that has as its objective attainment of a different disposition for the lower castes who had come out of the slave experience and who began to experience life in a new manner. The question of the new self evolves in the context of colonial modernity that provided resources for the lower caste people to imagine them as new social entities.

This was achieved by creating new symbolic fields however ephemeral they had been. Similar issues of identity are dealt with in the contemporary debates on gender which draw heavily from critical theories of race. According to Butler all identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside and the production of abjected and marginalized subjects, apparently out side the field of the symbolic, the representable -'the production of an "outside" a domain of intelligible

effects'\(^{120}\) -which then returns to trouble and unsettle the foreclosures which we prematurely call 'identities.' She deploys this argument with effect to sexualising and the racialising of the subject. But it has been pointed out that the argument needs to be developed if the constitution of the subject in and through the normalising regulatory effects of racial discourse is to acquire theoretical development hitherto reserved for gender and sexuality. One of the criticisms to this argument is the privileging of the seamless category of women. In the context of the lower caste social movements in Kerala we come across situations of racial discourses that construct abject and marginalized subjects. They destabilise the field of the symbolic and thereby create a new identity for them.

It is important to observe in the context of the discussion on social identity that Yohannan never felt the need for converting to Hinduism, as did one sizable section of his followers in 1950. One possible explanation could be the liminality of the movement and the peculiar social space that it had inhabited that made conversion to Hinduism an insufficient alternative or no alternative at all to Yohannan. Moreover, the movement spoke a different language of rights and mobilization along with the creation of a different symbolic order to which lower castes will have privileged access unlike the system that was prevailing under the caste hegemony. During this phase, as exemplified in the 1941 census report the movement used to be referred to as another Christian sect. Similarly many private papers and the official documents of the members of the movement refer to them as PRDS Christian. It should be remembered that the social identity of the followers of the movement became a contested one if we follow the debates of the period.

It would have been difficult to fix a specific identity on the followers of the movement as it had happened after 1950’s with their conversion to Hinduism. But in the post colonial phase with the introduction of the new

constitution that delimited the benefits of scheduled caste protective discrimination to scheduled castes within Hinduism, one section of the leadership along with a considerable section of followers of the movement converted to Hinduism. This situation created irresolvable problems to the movement jeopardising its emancipatory potentials. This in fact led to the fissures in the imagined identity of the movement that effected a substantial ‘erasure’ as the contestatory practice of religious affiliation was brought in. The identity of the community was thought more in relation to the material resources that the state offered which was tagged to religious identity of the beneficiaries. This led to a situation of counterpoising the social selves of the followers of the movement with the communities that have been identified as scheduled castes. As a result of this there were sudden changes in the ideas and practices of the PRDS movement, which by then came under the control of Yohannan’s wife, Janamma. Instead of Christian themes, Hindu mythology came to be adopted as the subject of discourse. Similarly, Yohannan himself disappeared and his biography was reinterpreted to appear as the new identity of Sree Kumara Gurudevan, which his wife proclaimed through spirit speech. It was followed by a total reconstitution of rituals, sermons, prayers dress codes in such a manner that a sharp boundary was drawn between themselves and other lower caste Christians and other PRDS sects. The members of the PRDS assumed Hindu names instead of their Christians ones as revealed through the spirit speech. Later on, in a public meeting participated by the N.S.S. leader Mannathu Padmanabhan and R. Sankar, who was the leaders of the Hindu Maha Mandalam, Janamma proclaimed PRDS to be a Hindu sect. This is significant when we consider the strategies of the Hindu community formation that tried to enlist all possible communities under their influence. It shows the gradual appropriation of a protest movement by the hegemonic forces.

121 Baby and Babu Rajan, *Thiruviitharkoor Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha Charithram* .... pp.122-123. The name Kumara Guru Devan evolves from the name-Kumaran/ Komaran that was his pet name before baptism and his eventual naming as Yohannan.

122 M.S. Thankappan, *Sathyam* .... pp. 150-161

123 ibid., p. 22.NSS is the abbreviated form of Nair Service Society, the organization of Nair community. R. Sankar was a prominent Ezhava leader.
Before the drastic changes in the nature of PRDS they had made efforts to evolve as a community with a distinct identity. In 1947-48 it was informed through the spirit medium speech of Janamma that they should evolve as a community—Yohannan community: "I made you one caste, which had been drawn from various castes, and established a Sabha for you. That is the seat of those who do not have caste, and group rivalries. Henceforth you will be known in a new name, that's what Yohannar community is. The state and government would recognise you in that name."\(^{124}\)

A memorandum to this effect was submitted to the Diwan of Travancore Sir. C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer on 29th April 1947, in the memorandum they demanded that they should be recognised as Yohannar community instead of referring to them in caste names as they have become one when they joined the PRDS. It should be mentioned that the movement had made impressive developments by that time in various fronts. This particular example shows the engagement with the state in order to negotiate the identity. Although it became a real contest its eclipse too was very fast once in 1950 the constitution was adopted that guaranteed positive discrimination for the scheduled castes and tribes, but excluding lower caste Christians from it.

There were contests over the nature of the movement between Simon Yohannan, the second in command, after the lifetime of Yohannan and Janamma, Yohannan's wife. It was mainly on the question of the faith of the Sabha and on determining whether they were Christians or not. This situation emerged because of Janamma's conversion to Hinduism. Eventually the High Court after prolonged deliberations decided in favour of Janamma saying that 'Sabha was neither Hindu nor Christian. But it was a brave effort at constructing a casteless society of those who were oppressed by caste and who have become socially weak.'\(^{125}\) Yes, it was a brave effort at constructing a


\(^{125}\) ibid., p. 131.
casteless society. But the legal discourse apart, it had to cross many a difficult terrain to reach that stage. The problem of legal discourse was that it did not have a terminology to explain the 'doubleness' characteristic of social movements like the PRDS. The movement required legal definition and interpretation of its social being only when disputes emerged and until then could remain in a kind of liminal ambiguity. It becomes important to have a theory of the mechanisms by which individuals as subjects identify (or do not identify) with the ‘positions’, to which they are summoned; as well as how they fashion, stylise, produce and ‘perform’ these positions. This theory will have to encompass the reasons why they never do so completely, for once and all time, and why some never do. It will also have to deal with the constant, agnostic process of struggling with, resisting, negotiating and accommodating the normative or regulative rules with which members of movements confront and regulate themselves. In the context of the experience of the PRDS movement it is necessary to think about the relation of subject to discursive formations as an articulation which is founded on particular contingencies which reactivates the historical.126 Following the contemporary debates within the movement it may be observed that there are several realms within the movement’s ideational world where contests still takes place.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the ways in which equality was imagined in twentieth century Kerala foregrounding the experiences of the PRDS movement. The movement was analysed to show how the concept of equality was stretched to include sites and issues that do not normally figure in the discourse of equality. While the notion of equality is understood to be a modern concept it is widened to address the problems of the lower castes in Kerala that run back to pre-colonial times. But when it comes to the negotiations of the unequal social structures in the twentieth century the sites of contests are multiplied. Contestation was extended to the religious and spiritual realm where

even the construction of divinity became very much part of the imagining of equality. In the following chapters of the thesis I shall concentrate on specific discourses of slavery and history through which the imagining of equality was articulated.

The critique of missionary Christianity that the PRDS developed showed its resolve to engage with the religious realm. In fact it was the desire for equality that was instrumental in such developments. Yohannan’s personal experiences showed the entrenched inequity that was prevalent in Church denominations, leading to a search for alternatives outside the established orders. This was the basis for the foundation of the new movement. He introduced new ritual practices for new congregations, using as examples the practices of itinerant missionaries that he was familiar with.

As a powerful speaker Poikayil Yohannan produced amongst his listeners ‘intense conviction of sin and after that conviction of salvation.’ He used the power of his oratory to win over masses of lower castes from the established Churches. The critical language that he developed had a substantial impact on the people and important in developing his image as a prophet. His speeches always emphasised the need to create alternative structures for the lower castes in Travancore.

It became widely known that he had established a path for the liberation of the lower castes in Travancore. This path had both spiritual and material dimensions. Those who followed the new movement and Yohannan had millennial expectations, one major aspect of which was the establishment of an egalitarian social life. The main concern of the movement was to develop a social space where the organising principle would be equality. This is clear when one looks at Yohannan’s critique of the Church denominations that practiced caste as well as his exhortations that his movement was the realm where “even the kings would come down and sit with the despised.”

---

Poikayil Sree Kumaara Gurudeva Ceethangal..., pp. 218.
Moreover, this was a "sphere where one finds heavenly happiness." Such happiness could be found in a space where there was equality and where the structures of domination no longer exerted their severe pressure. Yohannan also used his power as a teacher to introduce new ideas to his followers. He developed a critique of the Bible and put forward an alternative reading of it. He provided his followers with a new social imaginary the core of which were his ideas of social equality and salvation/liberation. This social imaginary was crucial to the popularity of the movement and its later history. It contained multivalent ideas of salvation and liberation and it developed rituals and a ritual language to express them. The performance of these rituals were considered essential to attaining salvation.

Yohannan preached that the salvation of the despised lower castes was only possible if his path was followed. This path included new bodily practices as part of the creation of a new sense of self amongst the his followers. They would act as markers that would distinguish the followers of the new movement. In this chapter I have discussed this issue as a question of identity. I show how, from the collective memory of the Adi-Dravida past the new notions of identity develop amongst members of the movement. This was not a singular identity. Several contesting identities emerged each one having its own peculiar discourses. The differences were the outcome of the mediations taking place within the movement as well as the engagement with other lower castes, nation state and dominant castes. As far as the movement is concerned the problem of identity still remains a central issue. These issues have been articulated in the discourses of slavery and history that I shall analyse in the following chapters of the thesis.

---

128 ibid., p. 217.