Ritual Subversions in Medieval Kerala: Reading N.S. Madhavan's "Pulapedi" as a Cultural Text

RENJINI RAMANKUTTY

> *In this power struggle of dominance, the subject resists and opposes a homogenous social standing that seeks to unify all individuals into a governed position.*
>
> (*Fuery*, Patrick and Kelli Fuery 4-5)

This examination reveals a set of cultural practices and rituals in Medieval Kerala that allowed the lower castes to dominate the upper castes temporarily. The socio-cultural practice of Pulapedi, Mannapedi, and Parayapedi allows the men from low caste communities such as Pulayans, Mannans, and Parayans, the right to abduct upper-caste women during a particular period of the year. Hence the upper caste women were ritually prohibited from going out in public since if they happened to be caught, they were immediately declared outcastes. During this time, upper-caste men too refused to be in public since they were temporarily "castrated." This researcher came to know about these practices through a reference to this custom in Dharmaraja, the Malayalam reader for standard X. In due course, as I began to explore more into the origin and evolution of the caste system in Kerala, a whole paradigm of ritual subversion of caste hierarchy came under analysis. However, these socio-cultural practices were neither mentioned nor discussed in detail in the academic discourse on Kerala historiography. The grand discourse of the history of Kerala constructs such social customs as Pulapedi, Mannapedi, and Parayapedi to signify the absence of modernity. In popular memory and academic discussions, the abolition of Pulapedi is an essential landmark in the history of modernity in Kerala, symbolizing cultural renaissance. Against this socio-cultural background, this paper reads a short story, "Pulapedi," authored by N.S. Madhavan, a famous writer in Malayalam as a cultural text on the ritual subversions of caste hierarchy in Kerala. The examination engages with the theories of Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin to explore the operations of power via subjectivity and knowledge formation in Kerala. In this way, the (im)materiality of power and subjectivity is revealed.

Historical knowledge plays a pivotal role in the process of identity formation and the consciousness that arrives out of it. Modern nation-states deploy elaborate mechanisms to construct such histories and circulate them in the form of discourses. Interpreted herein are the rituals and practices in Medieval Kerala in the context of Kerala modernity as part of the mechanisms employed by the state to keep the low caste communities under constant surveillance. The Dalit community in Kerala, subjected to slavery to the early nineteenth century, attempted to write their histories through reformers like Poykayil Yohannan. Sanal Mohan. P's work *Modernity of Slavery* presents a micro-history of the emancipation of the Pulaya community through the agency of PRDS.[1] What follows is a historicist reading of an early ritual, recognized as part of folklore, to examine the

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 44, No. 4, Autumn 2021 [46-56]

construction of modernity in Kerala. In this way, translatability becomes philosophical and grants access to remote antiquity. Benjamin Botkin defined folklore as:

> [A] body of traditional belief, custom, and expression handed down mainly by word of mouth and circulating chiefly outside of commercial and academic means of communication and instruction. Every group bound together by common interests or purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban possesses a body of traditions called its folklore. Into these traditions, enter many elements, individual, famous, or even "literary." However, all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern that has value and continuity for the group as a whole. (cited in Sims, C. Martha & Martine Stephens 10)

Historical references to the custom of Pulapedi and other similar practices are scanty. Samuel Mateer's ethnographic study Native Life in Travancore presents a detailed analysis of the different socio-cultural practices and rituals in the Travancore region in eighteenth-century Kerala. In North Travancore, Parayans designated as thieves in the traditional caste hierarchy forced themselves into upper-caste homes and abducted women and children. According to the custom of Mannapedi, Mannans, considered earlier as untouchables, had the right to abduct and molest upper-caste Namboodiri and Nair women. Pulapedi was prohibited in Travancore during the reign of Unny Kerala Varma in 1695 AD and Malabar during British rule (Gangadharan T.K., 197). According to Mateer, Pulapedi was practiced during the months of Kumbam and Meenam. In these months, a Sudra woman, unescorted by a Shannar boy, happening to meet a Pulaya man, can be abducted. According to Mateer, "A lower caste man would try his utmost to stone and hit an upper-caste woman after sun-set. If the stone hits the woman, she loses her caste" (376). Mateer also elaborates on Parayapedi, as the custom was called in North Travancore:

> [During February], after the harvest, Parayans forcibly let themselves into Brahmin and Sudra homes, abduct women and children, and dacoit them. They would justify their acts declaring themselves a category among Brahmins, who were declared outcastes after their adversaries (who remain unnamed) fed them beef meat (considered taboo food by Brahmins) through treachery. (376)

According to Herman Gundert, Mannapedi operated during the month of Karkkitaka, considered inauspicious for Hindus in Kerala. Mannapedi means fear of Mannans. Several restrictions and taboos were placed upon the upper castes during these periods (cited in Mateer 375). The month of Karkkitaka remains untoward for caste Hindus even now. No Hindu marriages are conducted during this month. The fear surrounding Karkkitaka might carry an archetypal fear for the lower castes' temporary gain of power. According to Barabosa's description (A.D. 1516) on Pulaya customs, Pulayans frequented upper-caste Nair homes at night during these periods. Upper castes took utmost precautions to avoid them. If the Pulayas "defile" any woman by touch, she had to confess her defilement by wailing out loudly, even though the act had no witness. She was supposed to leave her ancestral home as soon as the act was committed, not to cause further damage to the purity of her clan. She would often seek refuge in some lower caste dwelling to escape the wrath of her clan. She could even be sold to [Black people], other mixed castes, Muslims or Christians (Mateer 376-77).

The erasure of Dalit folklore from the modern historiography of Kerala is an instance of epistemological violence- a part of the disciplinary mechanism employed by the state to monitor the subjects. The concept of constant surveillance or panopticon by Foucault

elaborates on the ways through which power operates in society: "that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it" (6). Here Dalit folklore in the form of rituals and cultural practices is recognized by the power wielders- the state—as one capable of disrupting the traditional hierarchies of caste and gender; the power of the Dalit man over the upper-caste woman. The ritual of Mannapedi is framed in Dharmaraja, a central literary text which circulated and consolidated Nair hegemony in the nineteenth century Malayali society as an object of ridicule. The author of the novel, Sir. C.V. Raman Pillai was one of the Malayali Memorial, [2] which demanded the appointment of native Nairs in higher government posts.

Kesava Pillai, the central protagonist in Dharmaraja, is loosely based on the historical figure of Raja Kesava Das, the Diwan under Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma, who ruled Travancore from 1758-1798. Sir.C. V. Raman Pillai projects Kesava Pillai as an efficient, handsome, and young court official of humble origins. Though he belongs to a decadent Nair family, other characters in the novel are not sure of Kesava Pillai's caste origins. On account of his inferior birth, he is constantly derailed by his co-workers. Ummini Pillai, a co-worker, abuses him when he misunderstands that Meenakshi, his love interest, has been abducted by Kesava Pillai:

> The womanizing official is caught. Haven't heard of mannapedi in the city, in broad daylight, and after the tenth sunrise before. How dare you cross your limits? Let the King hear of all this. Where is the lass? Men, her owners have come. You will answer. The low caste bastard! (112)

The process through which modernity was circulated in the nineteenth century Kerala was through caste (Jayakumar, K.P. "Mandal Commission" 34). A ritual that allowed a temporary reversal of power is ridiculed in a text which supports traditional caste hierarchy. The same ritual is invoked in another literary text to subvert the dominant power structures. The maintenance of caste purity and strict abhorrence of caste pollution was a predominant feature of traditional Kerala society. Practices such as Pulapedi, Mannapedi, and Parayapedi and rituals such as Ochira Thallu, subverted the caste hierarchy temporarily and constituted an alternative symbolic order of ritual subversion.

In Sreedhara Menon A's opinion, a reputed historiographer of Kerala, the caste system was neither strict nor rigid in the Dravidian Vanchi epoch (1-500 A.D.) in Kerala. People were divided into different classes based on their professions, but inter-class marriages were quite common (24). In the opinion of Gangadharan, another historiographer of modern Kerala, Knowledge was freely circulated, and merit was acknowledged irrespective of one's social and economic status in ancient Kerala. Literary and other writings of the Sangam period, such as Tholkappiyam, have left valuable accounts on the cultural, economic, social, and political aspects of the kingdoms of the south (78). The political institution was a monarchy with a patrilineal system of succession and inheritance. The matrilineal system was non-existent though the Chera Kings used the names of both the parents along with their names. Gangadharan suggests in his study on the evolution of Kerala history and culture that communities like Panars (bards), Kuravas, Parayas, and Vedas (hunters) were held in honor by kings and were equals or even superior to the Brahmins.

There was no ritual prohibition against eating beef, meat, and fish. According to Tholkappiyam, Anthanars, Arachars (hangmen), Vanikkars (traders) and, 'Uzhavas'

belonged to higher classes. Pulavar, Parayar, Panar, Porunar also had a higher position in society (79). Pulam in old Malayalam meant to land, and pulavars were the owners of the land and scholars. Pulavars meant those who sustain. All other categories, such as Vinychers (laborers), belonged to the lower classes. Anthanars were educated scholars selected from the society irrespective of their clan or class. They had the right to conduct velvi, a ritual of animal sacrifice to appease gods, followed by a feast of toddy and meat. There were Ezhava scholars in Sanskrit and medicine. Itty Achuthan, who had compiled the compendium on medicinal plants, Horthuse Malabaricus, is believed to be an Ezhava (Gangadharan 220).

The caste system was injected into a more or less egalitarian Kerala society with the arrival of the Aryan Brahmins in 300 B.C. immediately after the arrival of Buddhist and Jain monks. With the decline of Buddhism and Jainism, around the seventh and eighth centuries, the Namboothiri's attained more political power. They even replaced king Pallivanperumal for his support to Buddhists (Gopalakrishnan, P.K 254). William Logan in Malabar Manual argues that the concept of caste was imported to Kerala through tracing the etymology of the word caste. There is no indigenous word in any of the Dravidian languages, including Malayalam, to signify caste. The root of the word "jati" is the Sanskrit word "Jan," meaning birth, and Jati connotes customs associated with birth (110). Commenting on the rigidity of caste practices in eighteenth-century Kerala, Mateer suggests that the Nambuthiris treated anyone who was not a Nambuthiri as an untouchable. Keen to guard their superiority in the political front, the Nambuthiris were scrupulous in the advocacy of the caste system maintained through ritual upgrading, ritual defilement, and endogamy (370).

The Nambuthiris formed pacts with the natives entrusting certain functions to specific classes. Accordingly, the caste known as Tiyyars or Ezhavas were entrusted with the duty of planting the wastelands. They were given privileges such as The Footrope Right and The Ladder Right for mounting trees. The Nairs, so-called after the Sanskrit word Nayak, signifying leader, in the honorific plural "lord" and soldier in the ordinary sense, were deemed the protectors with numerous branches (Logan 110). The Brahmins were unwilling to raise the aboriginal ruling races like the Pulayans to the dignity of the pure Kshatriya caste of Aryans.

Nevertheless, the state organization required that there should be a class to be constituted as protectors but treated as Sudras or the servile castes. In this manner, the real agriculturists except for the Vellalars (irrigators), out of whom the caste of Nairs seems to have been formed initially, came to be treated as untouchables (Logan 116). According to K. Sivasankaran Nair, the Nair community is first mentioned in the eleventh-century documents such as Thirunelli Shasanam (A.D.1021) and Thrikkadithanam Shasanam. Thirunelli Shasanam mentions the Nair as the manager and the chief marshal, while the latter mentions him as the landlord. This notion suggests that the Nairs, who were one of the lower castes, were ritually upgraded to perform the function of protection (36). The ordinary language prescribed for the Nairs to address their superiors in the caste hierarchy indicates their sudra status. A Nair speaking to a Nambutiri must not call his food rice, but kallari (stony or gritty rice), his money, chempukashu (copper cash), and his home, kuppamadam (shack) (Logan 127). According to Logan, the influence of the Nambutiris seems to have been supreme in the state councils, as their caste names imply. Gundert has suggested that the term Nambutiri might have derived from the Dravidian verb

"nambuka," meaning to confide or to desire, and "tiri," a corrupt form of the common Sankrit affix, "Shri," meaning office or dignity (Logan 119).

B. Rajeevan, a cultural historian of Kerala, has conducted exclusive caste formation in Medieval Kerala. He suggests that various tribal societies in pre-Aryan India were accommodated and absorbed into the plow agricultural village system of the Aryan tribes formed in the north Gangetic plains. Commenting on the discrepancy between the theoretical and forms of the varna –jati chaturvarnya systems in Kerala, he suggests:

> the observance of certain distances to avoid pollution among the upper castes and lower castes, the joint family and customs of Kerala Brahmans which separate them from their counterparts elsewhere, the matriarchal joint family and succession among the castes included in the varna-jati system, and above all the peculiarities of the feudal land-relations in Kerala, it is evident from all these realities that the formation of the agricultural village system in Kerala took shape in a different situation from that of the south and the north (7).

The Pulayas, Mannans, and Parayas, were some of the castes who were ritually defiled during the consolidation of caste hierarchy. As mentioned earlier, the Pulavas who sustained the land were re-designated as "Pulayans, the polluted" as the term "pula" (pela in corrupt form) in Malayalam bears connotations of ceremonial pollution caused by touching a dead body. Paradoxically, the grains touched by the Pulayans are not considered polluted but used by the Brahmins and nobles, offered in temples, and carried into the most exclusive kitchens (Mateer 78). Travel writing by Mateer, colonial surveys by Edgar Thurston, and most significantly, the Scheduled Castes, compiled by Kumar Suresh Singh, under the auspices of the Anthropological Survey of India, mentions the Pulayans as polluted. A lost history of Pulayan supremacy emerges when one goes through folk histories. Thurston mentions that Aikkara Yajaman (The Lord of Aikkara), whose ancestors were Pulayan kings, was held in considerable respect by the Pulayans of North Travancore (Mateer 71). Mateer mentions another fragment in this lost history; the Pulayans in the neighborhood of Trivandrum talk about a Pulayan chieftain who had resided in a fort at Pulayanarkotta, literally meaning the Pulayan's fort. A family in the neighborhood claim themselves the descendants of the Pulayan king's accountants (71). In the case of Pulayans, it is clear that the native rulers were degraded when their traditional knowledge of agricultural practices was subjugated to the Vedic discourses. The Pulayans were interpellated into this ritual defilement through stories circulated among them of their origin. Mateer quotes an unknown Pulayan:

> We are content to remain in present circumstances for Bhagwan (God), after having created the higher castes, considered what to do with the surplus earth, when Parvathi advised him to create [in addition to that] a low class to serve the higher ones. (69)

Another popular belief held by the Pulayans of Kanjirappalli is associated with the Parasurama myth. When Parasuraman had murdered the 21 generations of Kshathriya kings, their widows besought Parasurama to supply men to substitute their husbands. He called strangers to husband the widows from whose union the Pulayans were born (Mateer 70).

Mannans functioned as washermen in the caste hierarchy. It was the duty of the Mannans to give mattu (washed white cloth) to Nambutiris; lower Brahmins called Antaralajathis, Nairs, and Ezhavas before going to bath on the day which they are free from pollution. They refused to do this service to Kammalans for uncertain reasons. However, one can surmise that probably the Kammalans, counted as one of the polluting

castes, were considered by Mannans as a caste lower to theirs. Veluthedathu Nairs, whose duty was the same, restricted their services to Nairs. Since washing was considered a polluting act, Mannans, Veluthedathu Nairs, and other communities that functioned as washermen were considered polluted; ironically, it was the same washing that kept the upper castes free of pollution. They were not polluting since they had the right to wash and to wear washed clothes. Castes like Pulayans, Nayadis, and other tribal communities were denied the right to wash and the service of washermen. Hence washing was one act that legitimated one's entry to the upper castes (Singh 910-11).

The Nambuthiris ensured caste purity by allowing only the oldest son to marry within the caste but outside his own family and Gothra. Only when the eldest brother had no male progeny were the junior members allowed to marry the preferably the sister of his elder brother's wife. The younger Nambuthiri men followed the custom of sambandham, relationships with Nair women. The children of this union belonged to the mother's family, and descent was reckoned in the female line (Logan 153). Even the mere sight of the Pulaya or Nayadi was enough to make the Namboothiri consider him polluted. The prescribed ritual distance for some of the castes as codified by Logan (118) consist of: Mukkuvan—24ft, Kanisan— 36ft, Pulayas— 64ft, and Nayadi— 72ft. The Shudra women, especially Pulayas and Channars, did not have the right to cover the upper part of the body. The Sudra women were the sexual property of the upper castes. Mateer observes:

> such classes were required to be uncovered above the waist; shoes, umbrellas, [refined] cloths, and the costly ornaments were interdicted for them. The holding of an umbrella was prohibited for all castes except Brahmins on the public occasion, though the rains were pouring upon them. The lower cast females were not allowed to cover the top part of their body. (70-71)

It is possible to conclude from the above discussion that fear of loss of caste purity was of utmost concern in the social milieu of Kerala. In the opinion of B.Rajeevan, a seminal feature of the caste system in Kerala is the observance of the forms of untouchability prevalent among all low castes, including the lowest ones. The caste of Nayadi, considered the lowest in the caste hierarchy, condemned to keep the farthest distance from the Namboodiri Brahmans observe untouchability from the Pulayas, "For the Nayadi, the food polluted by a Pulaya or Paraya is forbidden, but the Pulaya and Paraya are castes mutually polluting by touch and have to themselves purified through a bathing by immersion" (7-8). The origin and evolution of the caste system in Kerala are deeply rooted in the concepts of purity and pollution. Each of the pre-Aryan tribe which had been accommodated into a model of Aryan class society was mutually excluding itself in the name of tribal purity. These tribes might have been deployed in the division of labor of the agricultural village system and their mutually excluding purity concepts.

The concept of caste purity was so crucial that non- Kshatriya rulers of ancient days used to sacrifice Hiranyagarbha to confer Kshatriyahood on themselves. Hiranyagarbha, literally meaning the golden womb/egg, was one of the ritual practices conducted by the Travancore royal family. Mateer gives a minute description of the practice:

> An enormous gold container is filled with holy water and panchagavya (made from five substances obtained from the cow, milk, curd, ghee, cow's urine, and dung). The king enters the pot while the Brahmin priests chant mantras. The king is made to wear the crown when he emerges from the pot. After the ritual, the gold container is broken and distributed among Brahmins (486).

Mateer has demonstrated that the ritual of Hiranyagarbha enables a Sudra king to occupy the higher strata of caste ((189). Furthermore, Mateer elaborates on another ritual observed by the Travancore royal family during the Navaratri celebrations to maintain caste purity. The idol of the deity Kumaraswamy is brought in a procession from Padmanabhapuram Palace to the temple at Thiruvananthapuram. Kumaraswamy, another form of Lord Murugan, is supposed to have lost his caste as his wives belonged to Kurava and Paraya castes. Hence his idol is prohibited from entering the Padmanabhaswamy Temple at Thiruvananthapuram. The fear of pollution goes to the extent that Kuravas and Parayas were scared out of the main streets during the festival in the heydays of the royal family (192-93).

It may be seen from the above discussions that the maintenance of caste purity and fear of caste pollution was of utmost significance in Kerala till the nineteenth century, from the upper caste Brahmins to the lowermost Nayadis. The temporary domination of the lower castes as seen in the rituals or cultural practices of Pulapedi, Parayapedi, and Mannapedi becomes highly significant when analyzed against the discourses of caste hierarchy, caste pollution, and similar practices of caste subversion.

Considering the ritual subversion of caste hierarchy in Medieval Kerala as an alternative symbolic order, Pulapedi, Mannapedi, and Parayapedi constitute only one among the practices which involved a ritualistic subversion of caste hierarchy. There were other rites and rituals, such as Ochira Thallu, which subverted the caste hierarchy. However, Pulapedi, Mannapedi, and Parayapedi occupy a special significance among these rites because no other custom attributes to the untouchables access to upper-caste women. Special privileges were granted to servile castes in various parts of Kerala during festivals such as Ochira Thallu. During the Ochira Thallu, Pulayans and other lower castes are permitted to participate in the sham fight. They give and receive blows equally with the nairs. The Ochira Thallu is conducted as part of the annual festival celebrated at the Ochchira Parabrahma temple. According to Mateer, during the Ochira Thallu, lower-caste men had the right to abduct upper-caste women and keep them in custody (97).

According to Captain Colin Mackenzie, the Holiers, one of the outcastes in Coorg and Canara, once held the dominant place in the village before the arrival of Aryans. The Holiers are identical to the Pulayans in Kerala. Holiers are supposed to be the first settlers in Karnataka. A Holier functions as the priest to the village goddess and can make the first offering in the annual festivals. The Brahmin priests can offer their worship only after the Holier. At Mailkota and Bailur, Holiers have the right of entering the temple on three days in the year especially set apart for them. A Holier also acts as the Kulawadi or the village Henchman. All such practices could be seen as vestiges of a higher position in former times when they were the masters of the land. One of the death rituals in the region is the symbolic transaction of land between the Kulawadi and relatives of the dead for a nominal fee. They buy land for the dead from the original sons of the soil (Mateer 96-97)

The significance of such privileges cannot be undermined as an occasional excuse for relaxation from painful toil or as bribes to keep the oppressed submissive, as suggested by Mateer (97). They are somewhat symbolic acts that reverse the caste hierarchy for a short period. These customs are significant for two reasons. The first reason, as mentioned earlier, is the availability of upper-caste women for lower-caste men. The upper caste fear for the lower castes, as seen in the customs of Pulapedi, Mannapedi, and Parayapedi, is socially sanctioned. No lower caste man could be penalized if charged with molesting an

upper-caste woman as part of the ritual. However, the woman could be subjected to physical chastisement, honor killing, or other forms of punishment. Mateer also suggests that the custom might have had its origins in the severe marriage laws practiced in the Nambuthiri community, due to which there were several unmarried women (376). Mateer also elaborates on the punishment given to the erring women:

> If any woman of Nayar family should offend against the law of her sect, and the king know[s] of it before her relations and brothers, he commands her to be taken out and sold out of the kingdom to Moors or Christians, and if her male relations or her sons know, of it first, they shut her up and kill her with dagger or spear wounds, saying that if they did not do so, they would remain greatly dishonored (377).

The punishment meted out to women in the name of caste pollution, and ritual purity was so severe that "a Brahman woman erring with a low-caste man became the Rajah's slave" (Mateer 377) and "a low-caste woman allowing improper intimacy with a Brahman was sold to the Mohammadans" (ibid). This form of punishment given to upper-caste women was expected, and the remnants of the law could be found in the Malayalam expression, "Thura Kayattuka," which could be roughly translated as "transportation beyond the seas" (Mateer 377). Mateer also suggests that "this ostracism was reserved for female criminals, on whom the punishment of death is never inflicted" (377). The erstwhile historian of Travancore, Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu,[3] describes one such incident in history "when the women of the Eight Knights (Ettuveettil Pillaimar) [4] who were extirpated in M.E. 908, were handed over to fishermen" (Mateer 377).

Parallels could be found with such rituals in Medieval Kerala and the Marxist-Formalist Bakhtin's concept of Carnivalesque, derived from the practice of medieval carnival when, in an episode of a permitted license, masses would lampoon the authorities of church and the state. These practices provided an outlet for the lower castes' repressed feelings of fear and rage. A major theoretician of popular culture, Bakhtin (1895-1975), analyzed the subversive potential of carnivalesque. The carnivals in medieval Europe permitted the masses to enjoy a holiday from their labors. The people would, in the process, lampoon the authorities of church and the state, unleashing a world of topsy-turvy where all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded, and defiled. In the opinion of John Storey, it used the material body and its normal functions to celebrate human life as an "unfinished becoming," thereby articulating a world view opposite to the official totalitarian regime (251). Thus such rituals constitute an "alternative symbolic order" (Mohan, 281), subverting traditional hierarchies and power structures.

When reading N.S. Madhavan's "Pulapedi" as a cultural text, it is important to note that "Pulapedi" is the title of a short story written by N.S. Madhavan and forms part of a compilation of stories called Paryaya Kathakal. The protagonist of the story, Savitri, is a palimpsest on nineteenth-century nationalist literature, representing the Brahmin widow as the figure of reform. The renaissance discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries focused on the Brahmin widow as the representative of the oppressive social conditions in traditional Indian society. The nationalist reformist discourse positioned the suffering Brahmin widow as the symbol of transformations in Indin society (Tharu, Susie 150).

Savitri, the protagonist of "Pulapedi," subverts this nationalist doctrine of reform by choosing to live with a man outside her community. She openly discards the cultural scripts of gender and sexuality the society forces on her by choosing to live with Chathan,

a Pulaya man. The illam (traditional Nambuthiri house) is a trope of oppression in the story. The west zenana for menstruating women in the illam had no windows. She had to resort to the nadumuttom (open space in the center of a traditional Nambuthiri house) to be aware of days and nights. She senses mornings and evenings through the voices of the Pulaya laborers in the courtyard. Even a patch of sunlight or a whiff of fresh air is denied to her. Savitri's body is another metaphor of her oppression which she uses to resist the traditional hierarchies of gender and caste. On her husband's shraddha day, Savitri is filled with thoughts of her own body and her forbidden sexuality. Savitri is more preoccupied with her own body rather than the memories of her late husband, Vasudevan. Savitri is thrown out of the illam when she resists Parameswaran's, the younger brother of her husband, attempts of seduction. On her way to the river, Savitri finds Chathan, a Pulaya slave in the illam, whom she asks to accompany her. Here Savitri rejects the notions of caste purity by floating her ghosha (a white cloth used by Nambuthiri women to cover the upper part of the body) and palm leaf umbrella (a traditional symbol of Brahmin superiority) in the river. Then for the first time in her life, she opens her eyes to the world outside the premises of the illam and howls with Chathan. Savitri's resilient attitude to life and subversion of an age-old social practice shines through her act of assuming the new identity of a Pulaya woman. The prologue to the story, the lines from Devi Bhagavatham, "Ya Devi Sarvabhooteshu Mukthi Roopena Samsthitha," sets the story's theme as the attainment of liberation. The line offers a salute to the goddess who sustains life in the form of liberation.

In ending, the discourse offered was an excavation and exploration of some cultural practices in Medieval Kerala which form part of Dalit folklore to discuss how these alternative symbolic orders were erased from the modern historiography of Kerala. The deep-rooted fear of caste pollution in Medieval Kerala observed caste rules quite strict. However, masses were permitted relaxation from caste rules on certain occasions and festivities. The socio-cultural practices discussed in the paper probably constituted one such realm of carnivalesque. The discursive formation of modernity, subjectivity, and epistemology in nineteenth-century Kerala enabled a complete erasure of such practices. The policy of strict surveillance employed by the modern state machinery constituted these practices as the absence of modernity. While the nineteenth-century text, Dharmaraja followed the rationale of the modern nation-state in citing Mannapedi as an object of ridicule, "Pulapedi" by N.S. Madhavan subverts the reformist logic of the nationalist doctrine by raising Savitri, a Brahmin widow, to an agent, by choosing to speak for herself.

The immateriality of this discourse provided an opportunity to enquire more into the debate of sublimity in bodily and spiritual manners that permeates caste systems in Kerala. The maintenance of caste purity was of utmost concern in Medieval Kerala that it affected administrative practices, law and legal practices, revenue and tax system, religion and language, to name a few. Hence the need for more research in the field arises, demanding an interdisciplinary approach combining Anthropology, Social Sciences, and Cultural Studies.

Government Arts College, Thycaudu, Kerala

Notes

1. PRDS or Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha was formed in 1910 by Poykayil Yohannan, who mobilized the Parayas, Pulayas, and similar Dalit communities to establish an independent religion of their own. This new religion combined ideas of salvation and spiritual progress along with notions of social and economic development. For more details, see Mohan 152-213.
2. Malayali Memorial is a mass petition submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore in 1891, demanding the appointment of the educated natives in the higher grades of public service. For more details see Menon, A. Sreedhara Chapter XXVII- Political Movements in Travancore and Cochin.
3. Vaikathu Pachu Moothathu alias Vaikathu Parameswara Sivadvija was a versatile scholar of the erstwhile princely state of Travancore. He wrote Thiruvithamcore Charitram narrating the legends and facts of the Travancore dynasty up to Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal. For more details see Menon, T. Shankunni 120-140.
4. The Eight Lords or the Ettuveettil Pillaimar were a group of powerful nobles in the Thripadappu Swaroopam. Travancore, Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma, defeated these lords and killed them, charging treason against the state in 1730. For more details see Menon, T. Shankunni 120-140.

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press, 1941.

Botkin, Benjamin. *Supplementary Instructions to the American Guide Manual: Guide for Folkore Studies*, Federal Writers Project. In Sims, C. Martha and Martine Stephens. *Living Folklore: an Introduction to the Study of People and Their Traditions*. Utah State University Press, 2011. pp-10-11.

Barabosa, Duarte. *Description of East Africa and Malabar*. The Hakluyt Society, 1866.

Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts*, Vol.2, No: 1, Autumn 2008, pp. 1-12, Indiana University Press.

Fuery, Patrick and Kelli Fuery. Visual Cultures and Critical Theory. Arnold Publishers, 2003.

Gangadharan, T.K. *Evolution of Kerala History and Caste and Culture*. Calicut University Publications, 2008. pp. 70-78, 197-220.

Gopalakrishnan, P.K. *Keralathinte Samskarika Charithram*. (*Cultural History of Kerala*) State Institute of Languages, 2000. pp. 220-254.

Gundert, Herman. Kerala Pazhama, Keralolpathi, Ayirathirunooru Pazhanchol. Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society Ltd, 2014.

Jayakumar, K.P. "Mandal Commission Malayala Cinemayum." (Mandal Commission and Malayalam Cinema). Malayalam Weekly. pp-33-35. April 5, 2009.

Logan, William. Malabar Manual: New Edition with Commentaries. Volume II. Ed. P.J. Cherian. Kerala Gazetteers Department, 2000. pp-100-127.

Madhavan, N.S. "Pulapedi". Paryayakathakal. D.C. Books, 2000. pp 2-8.

Mateer, Samuel. Native Life in Travancore. Asian Educational Services: New Delhi, 1991, 2005, pp- 370-400, 69-78, 92-93.

Menon, A.Sreedhara. A Survey of Kerala History. D.C. Books, 2008. pp. 11-24.

Menon, T. Shankunny. History of Travancore from the earliest times. Madras, 1878. pp 120-140

Mohan, P. Sanal. *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Moothathu, Pachu Vaikom. *Thiruvithamcore Charithram*. Travancore, 1865.
Nair, K. Sivasankaran. *Pracheenakeralathinte Rashtriya Charithram*. (*Political History of Ancient Kerala*) D.C. Books, 1998. pp 30-36.
Rajeevan, B. "Cultural Formation of Kerala." *Essays on the Cultural Formation of Kerala: Art, Architecture, Music, Theatre, Cinema*. Ed. P.J. Cheriyan, B. Rajeevan et al. Kerala State Gazetteers Department, 1999, pp 6-9
Raman Pillai, C.V. Dharmaraja. D.C. Books, 1974.pp. 100-112.
Singh, Kumar Suresh. *Scheduled Castes: Revised Edition People of India*. National Series Volume II. Oxford University Press, 1993.pp 910-911.
Storey, John. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. University of Georgia Press, 2006.
Tharu, Susie. "Literature of the Reform and the Nationalist Movements." *Women Writing in India: Vol 1, 600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*. Ed. Susie Tharu and Lalita Kannabiran. Oxford University Press, 1991. Pp 145-186.
Thurston, Edgar. *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, Government Press: 1909.