

Getting beyond the Governmental Category: Contemporary Dalit Assertions in Kerala

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Introduction

Caste inequality is a heavily debated issue in contemporary Kerala. This is in stark contrast, perhaps, to the situation some twenty-five years back, when the idea that Kerala had overcome caste hierarchies through the twin strategies of social development and political mobilization was still hegemonic. In other words, the official position of the dominant left, articulated for instance, by the leading Malayalee communist leader and intellectual, EMS Namboodiripad, in response to the economist P Sivanandan's critique of the Kerala Model in 1977, was the reigning wisdom in Kerala in the 1980s and even into much of 1990s. Responding to Sivanandan's critique that the extension of social development through the strategy of expanding the reach of the infrastructural state had not lessened caste inequalities (1976:4), EMS argued that significant dismantling of caste had occurred, which Sivanandan had overlooked. Essentially, he made two claims. One, caste hierarchies in Kerala had loosened considerably due to the operation of capitalist forces and reservations in education and government employment for the lower castes, and hence occupational hierarchies had been dismantled considerably. Secondly, the situation of the ex-untouchable groups was better in Kerala compared to elsewhere, because the strong presence of the left had weakened caste disabilities and created "an organized working class", consisting of trade unions and associations in which people working for common political goals beyond specific caste interests¹. He continued: "While Kerala has the unenviable reputation of being more caste-ridden than any other part of India it happens to be the one state where the largest number of people have been organized in these unions or associations, which cut across all considerations of caste and community. The political parties of a left character too are stronger here than in most other parts of the country." (1976: 67)

Both these arguments are now strongly contested in radical Dalit political discourse, which is now a clearly audible presence in the contemporary Kerala. Its criticism of the left commonsense on the caste question is not that its claims are entirely untrue. Rather, they seem

to conceal more than reveal – a charge that is coming to the fore in the backdrop of militant political assertions by Dalit and Adivasi people post-millennium. For instance, the argument that caste power in Kerala is minimal because traditional caste hierarchies have been dismantled is now thoroughly challenged, both in public sphere debates as well as in the vibrant Malayalam literary public. Both recent struggles over land by tribal and Dalit people, and research reveal that caste inequalities continue to be rampant here (Kurien 2000; Deshpande 2000; Lindberg 2001). The communist extension of anti-caste struggles in Kerala (Desai 2001) is now recognized as not really uprooting caste but entrenching the pastoral authority of the communist leadership and secularizing caste inequalities (Baburaj 2008; Devika 2010): as anti-caste thinking in India suggests (Nigam 2000; Pandian 2002), the disappearance of traditional caste practices from the public cannot be treated as evidence for the extinction of casteist culture. In Malayalam, Dalit intellectuals are at present pointing to the many dimensions through which caste has been ‘secularized’ as an axis of social and economic power here (for instance, Pampirikkunnu 2011). Again, the argument that left trade unions and other associations effectively undermined caste has been long contested – scholars have pointed to the fact that despite their major presence in these organizations, Dalits have rarely been raised to leadership roles, even in agricultural workers’ unions which comprised overwhelmingly of them (for instance Oommen T K 1985; Prabhash 2001: 179). In the present, more and more Dalit testimonies of the experience of caste oppression within left organizations are being articulated both in non-literary writing (for instance, Ashraf 2010) and in resurgent Dalit fiction and poetry in Malayalam (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011).

Besides, precisely those aspects of the caste question to which the above claim remained blind to are being examined with unprecedented intensity. The most important of these, of course, is the question of redistribution of productive resources, raised by Sivanandan in his 1976 essay, which EMS’s response did not address. Criticism of the denial of productive assets to Dalits during the land reform had resulted in critical political formations such as the Kerala Harijan Federation, formed by the prominent Dalit leader Kallara Sukumaran in 1974, which carried out a number of struggles for land through the 1970s and 80s. A steady criticism of the treatment of the caste question by the dominant left had already been initiated by Dalit intellectuals in the 1970s and 80s. This critique is now voiced all the more strongly within radical Dalit political discourse in Kerala, which asserts the fact that the relative gains of the

Dalits in Kerala cannot erase the fact that neither the economic capabilities that they possessed, nor their agency as political actors, have been acknowledged by the political mainstream in which the dominant left parties are a powerful force (Kapikkad 2011a; 2011b)². While these arguments have been articulated in the public, evolving over many decades, they possess unprecedented force and visibility in contemporary Kerala, prompting the dominant left to launch an all-out offensive against them.

This paper tries to sketch three key processes which seem to have precipitated the vibrant atmosphere of critique and action sketched above. The first of these is the transformation of politics itself in the 1990s in Kerala, from the ‘public action’ mode in which welfare was claimed as ‘people’s [collective] right’ through agitational politics, to the ‘liberal’ mode in which welfare is bestowed by the state through a state-centric civil society, and pegged on self-help and group interests. Clearly, the left, which steered the transformation, did not anticipate the ability of the newly emergent Dalit and Adivasi activism to publicly oppose it, as evident in the eruption of struggles over land rights post-millennium. Secondly, rapidly widening economic inequalities in the 1990s impeded the chances of upward mobility of disadvantaged groups, especially Dalits, on the one hand; on the other, the rapidly-crystallizing elite ideological dominance led to the strengthening of abjection as a mode of marginalization of the lower castes. Thirdly, the churnings within the Malayalee public sphere, especially the Malayalam literary public, (which could well be described as a vital radiating point, a ‘beating heart’ of sorts, of the Malayalee public sphere) since the early 1990s brought to the fore such questions as those of caste and gender that were earlier submerged under the socio-cultural consensus generated by the hegemonic leftist-national popular. The three subsequent sections of the paper take these up in succession. The conclusion presents a summary of and reflections on the previous sections.

I

The transformation of welfare in the 1990s in Kerala forms an important backdrop to the strengthening of a Dalit politics centred upon the demand for land as a productive asset.

The shift of the dominant left away from the promise of productive land to the Dalits towards a liberal notion of minimum entitlements to be administered through the panchayati raj institutions is now defended by key intellectuals and policy-shapers in the CPM, notably, TM Thomas Isaac, who has argued that the agenda of a second wave of land reforms is untenable (Sreekumar 2009). The denial of productive land to the Dalits, however, was nothing new; nor is it the result of the intervention of right-wing forces. Indeed, it has been firmly bolstered by the denial of productive dispositions possessed by Dalits first by ‘progressive’ princely states such as Travancore, and the communists, as early as the 1930s.

It is important to recognize that concern for capabilities and human well-being in Kerala is neither recent nor exclusively imported from contemporary development discourse. As early as the 19th century, missionaries, and later, emergent movements by powerful caste-communities, called for the conjoining of capacities and dispositions they possessed, with specific enabling conditions, to be created by the state. Capacities for agriculture, especially rice-farming, possessed by Kerala’s most disempowered Dalit communities, were never really acknowledged as dispositions that could be ‘hollowed’ and transformed into capabilities through the addition of abilities by the state. The interventions of early Dalit leaders, especially the prominent Pulaya leader Ayyan Kali, in Travancore provide enough evidence to believe that representatives of people who actually worked on the land did value their existing dispositions and skills, and were eager to respond to emerging market opportunities through developing these into capacities and conjoining them with abilities (Devika 2010a). Yet their skills continued to be devalued. At the same time, the construction of Dalits as a governmental category, passive and deserving of the paternal care of the state, proceeded apace. The manipulative moves of the much-hated Dewan of Travancore, Sir C P Ramaswamy Iyer, which firmly limited nascent Dalit political formations within the framework of community competition, prevented the emergence of a unified Dalit community from among the several Dalit groups (Mohan, n.d). This weakened the possibility of their becoming either a powerful interest group, or forming the core of a powerful anti-caste movement.

These tendencies have continued to expand since independence. Thus, as early as the 1930s, EMS Namboodiripad recommended substantial expansion of the access of Dalits labourers to what is now recognized as basic capabilities, but ignored the possibilities of their existing dispositions and skills (Devika 2010a). This perpetuated precisely the twin processes of the reduction of the Dalits to a governmental category, while denying the skills and dispositions that they possessed. This perspective informed the land reforms of the 1970s, in which the landless labourers mainly gained house plots, which did enhance their wellbeing but did not deepen their disposition towards agriculture into a full-fledged capability. The prospect of a ‘second surplus-land struggle’, raised by the CPM in 1979 was, however, weak; as N Krishnaji observed, while logically, the specificities of land ownership in Kerala should have made the CPM argue for lowering the land ceiling, its unwillingness to displease “small-holders”, whose role in agriculture was largely supervisory and who were often part of the urban salaried middle classes. He wrote: “The CPI (M) is either unwilling to recognize the existence of this class or not yet prepared to fight it. The attitude of the Party in this respect is partly due to its middle class orientation springing from the class-origin of the activists and partly arises out of its concern for preserving its electoral base. (Krishnaji 1979: 520). The history of tribal communities in Kerala of the 20th century, too, is one of intense loss of productive and cultural resources on the one hand, and reduction to a governmental category to be supervised and managed by the state – within the framework of a certain ‘bureaucratic modernity’.

However, by the mid-1990s, the very promise of redistribution of surplus land to Dalits seemed to be completely rescinded. Tension and overcrowding in the Dalit ‘colonies’, consisting of housing plots granted to them, were on the rise (Tharakan 2000 ; Kapikkad 2011b)³. Clearly, homestead land gained in the land reforms helped Dalit agricultural labourers to bargain for better wages, working hours, better basic education, health care, pensions etc. However, observers also point out that the operation of market forces ensured that much of these gains was lost in the subsequent decades (Tharakan 2000: 358-59); the failure to modernize agriculture meant that the gains from higher wages would soon die down. Dalits whose community- based educational ventures seem to have either died due to lack of resources or actually thwarted by upper caste hubris, were heavily dependent on public education. Vigorous effort had indeed been made since the 1950s to improve Dalits’ access to modern education; Dalits were relatively

better represented among school teachers in government schools (Padmanabhan 2009: 17). However, their success rates and ability to compete with candidates from better-endowed communities, however, remained poor (Sivanandan 1976: 21; Padmanabhan 2009)⁴. A Dalit middle-class was still weakly formed here in the early 90s (Deshpande 2000)⁵. Dalits and tribal people could not take advantage of emergent opportunities in the global labour market (Zachariah et al 2002: 11; 26; 176-8). Such distress and the tensions that spurted from it were evident in the confrontations over space between Dalits and non-Dalits on the one hand, and Dalits and the state, on the other (Uchiyamada 2000) - much of which remains to be documented⁶.

This, however, was coupled with a cultural context in which the hegemony of Marxism in radical thinking in Kerala, and Ambedkarite thought acquired a new visibility. Therefore struggles over space, in this new context, acquired an unprecedented intensity. The '11-KV Line' struggle at Kurichy in Kottayam during 2000, organized against the 11 KV high-tension line that was to pass over the Dalit colony there (since long a centre of Dalit mobilization and intellectual activity) was thus a key event - one which produced a new group of politicized radical Dalit intellectuals (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011: 32). Meanwhile, the dominant left's efforts to refurbish its hegemony through the People's Planning Campaign (PPC) of the mid-90s, which ushered in decentralized governance in the State, had clearly begun to fail as a political project. The PPC, which inaugurated the provision of minimum entitlements for Dalits, a move that continued to treat them as governmental categories, deployed civic-republican rhetoric - but proved weak in that it did not aim at a renewed political community, but at depoliticized and hyper-moralized 'neighborhood-groups' (for instance, in Parameswaran 2005). The creation of liberal spaces like the Grama Sabha (the village assembly), as the tribal leader C K Janu pointed out, could not by themselves dismantle the power held by the settlers who had grabbed tribal lands and profited from them. Indeed, they could well strengthen these groups In any case, the PPC's concerns rang hollow also because in 1995, the government of Kerala amended the Alienated Land Act of 1975, which according to which all land transfers before 1961 of tribal land were to be annulled and the land returned to the adivasis. Successive governments had however failed to implement the Act; in 1995, it was amended to the effect that only land alienated after 1986 was to be restored! The Adivasi Vikasana Pravarthaka Samiti which Janu founded in 1992 had already begun to occupy surplus land in

The civic-republican rhetoric of the PPC finally fell flat in the face of the collapse of internal consensus on decentralization within the CPM, which culminated in an acrimonious debate about the politics of the People's Planning Campaign in 2004 , when leading intellectuals of the dominant left publicly traded charges (Devika 2007). The heightening of Dalit and Adivasi struggles for land probably hastened this process. The reservation of seats in the three-tier panchayati raj institutions and the special component plan and tribal sub-plan offered opportunities to Dalit individuals, but none of these measures was conducive to addressing them as a distinct interest-group with clear-cut claims on resources and with the right to define what their needs were. As the M A Oommen Committee (2009) which evaluated decentralized planning and development in Kerala, local bodies had spent funds on these groups, but the lack of interest in planning to raise people from poverty seemed severely lacking: " ... given the right priority and planning the panchayats could have materially reduced the severity of the problem and the pains of marginalization of this group of people." The Committeee admitted that "The problem of expanding the social space of dalits through local governments in the state is a serious problem." (Oommen et al 2009: 116)

The post-millennium decade in Kerala has been marked by the rise of intense struggles for land by Dalits and tribals. As C K Janu (2011) remarks, these were already happening in Wayanad and Idukki, two districts where tribal communities were a presence, since the late 1980s right upto 2000; as Rekha Raj's interviews with Dalit women activists reveal, land struggles by the Kerala Harijan Federation were happening steadily through the 1970s and 80s. However, the Adivasi Ekopana Samiti led by C K Janu took these issues to the capital city in 2001, agitating in front of the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram, putting up huts in protest against the denial of productive land to the Adivasis. Radical Dalit groups participated in the 48-day-long agitation and after intense protest and equally charged negotiation, in 2001, Adivasi families were promised five acres of land each by the Congress-led State government. The Adivasi Gotra Sabha was formed in the wake of this agitation. However, the government went back on its promises, and when reports of starvation deaths among tribal communities began to appear, in 2003, the Adivasi Gotra Sabha attempted to build huts in the Muthanga Wildlife Sanctuary, which, Janu claims, was originally tribal land, common lands of tribal

communities (Janu 2011). In these struggles, activists resisted repeated attempts by the government to treat them as passive recipients of welfare, members of a government category. As Janu recalls, at the start of the Muthanga agitation, the government announced a month's free rations for participants, and went on to increase it to four months' rations. The activists refused the offer, pressing for productive land (Janu 2011: 442). The Muthanga agitation was suppressed by the government with considerable violence inflicted on leaders and activists alike, and by the police and 'civil society' in Wayanad (Bijoy and Raviraman 2003). In the Chengara land struggle (2007-09) organized by the Sadhujana Vimochana Munnani led by Laha Gopalan, the failure of the land reforms to redistribute land classified as plantation land came into bold relief. Beginning with some 300 families that entered the Harrisons Malayalam Plantations (the 99-year-lease of the company on this land had expired in 1996, but it continued to hold on to the land) in 2007, landless people began to gather, and in two months, the numbers rose to 7000 families. The struggle faced much hostility from the CITU and the CPM, and despite many challenges, has survived (Velam 2009).

All these struggles have been dubbed 'identity politics', now viewed as a dire threat to democracy in Kerala by the CPM leadership (*The Hindu*, June 1, 2010) and this really is nothing but a repetition of the argument against 'caste interests', familiar to it since the 1930s. Clearly, Dalit intellectuals and organizations have been reflecting on and mobilizing around Dalit identity – and some prominent Dalit intellectuals have indeed warned against reified and intolerant identities (for example, Baburaj 2011). However, there is the need to recognize radical Dalit politics in Kerala as comprising of multiple formations, all of which do not blend smoothly into each other. For example, the identity politics professed by the Dalit Human Rights Network, an organization which has faced immense violence from the right-wing Hindu Siva Sena and the CPM/ CPM-led government in Kerala, is quite different from that endorsed by prominent Dalit intellectuals like K K Kochu or P K Baburaj.

Secondly, there is also reason to believe that these political processes involve more than just identity politics. Indeed, there seems reason to think that the struggles mentioned above do not involve such fixing of Dalits and tribals as 'pure' or 'indigenous', and in fact, draw upon far more flexible identities. Recent research into tribal activism in Kerala seems to point to this. From her fieldwork amongst activists of the Adivasi Gotra Sabha between 2003 and 2006, Luisa

Steur argues against understanding the ‘tribal’ identity advanced by these activists as the ‘true expression’ of Adivasi essence or experience. She contests the idea that adivasis have remained totally marginal to class politics Rather, she claims, it “ ... is better understood as a reaction against the hollowing out of the ‘class’ politics that many adivasis used to engage in.” (Steur 2010: 231). What is emergent, it appears, are more fluid identities which may be strategically constructed, un-constructed, and reconstructed, and which are open to both radicalization and cooptation – Steur reminds us that C K Janu herself evokes the romanticized notion of the Adivasi in certain contexts but also rejects it in other contexts (p.234). Thus an emancipatory Adivasi identity cannot be expected to simply emerge, but must be actively forged: “ ... it is only the more critical interpretations of adivasi identity – which in fact bring it close to the ‘Dalit’ movement in Kerala – that have the potential to pose a democratizing challenge to Kerala’s current path of development.” (p.234).

Indeed, going by some recent research on the new phenomenon of ‘widows’ associations’ in Kerala (Devika, forthcoming), the creation and deployment of fluid identities seems to be a characteristic feature of other sorts of mobilizations of the poor who have been recipients of welfare. Interviewing widow-activists, we noticed that while they inevitably evoked the identity of the ‘moral and hardworking widow’ to justify their claims on the state, these evocations did seem to rest upon a deep sense of self. But their simultaneous evocation of many other identities was certainly no simple free play of identities but an extraordinary attempt to avoid being ‘fixed’ by the state or political parties, into either a governmental or a moral category. This required, we noticed, extraordinary mobility across identities, and the ability to turn them into oppositional ones. The evocation of the identity of the Adivasi, in the context of struggles and everyday life, seems quite similar to the evocation of the ‘moral widow’. In other words, the politicisation of the ‘land question’ in Kerala by Dalits and Adivasis does not involve the simple assertion of pure identities, emerging from a long period of obscurity. Rather, multiple streams of politics and identity-shaping processes are at work. This, perhaps, is inevitable⁷; however, given that organizing for democratising politics and development is much more difficult now compared with mid-20th century, perhaps essentialized identities may do more harm than good, since they lack the mobility necessary when faced with challenges from multiple centres of power and struggling against multiple axes of oppression.

II

The years between 1990 and the present have witnessed the rapid growth of inequality in Kerala, even as poverty reduction goals, it appears, are being met. This is clearly continuity from former times. Examining the occupational ranking among various castes in Kerala in 1976, Sivanandan observed that “the lower a community is treated in the social order, the more inferior and less remunerative are the occupations it can choose from.” (Sivanandan 1976: 10-12) More recently, calculations based on the NSSO data for 1993-94 reveal that “even in a relatively egalitarian state like Kerala, intercaste disparities continue to underlie overall disparity.” Also within-group disparity is comparatively lower among Dalit and tribal populations in Kerala (Deshpande 2000: 325). As Robin Jeffrey remarks that by the early 1980s, agricultural workers were already losing work and incomes, yet “... some evidence suggests a greater sense of security and pride of ownership.”(Jeffrey 2003: 184-5). The evidence he cites is from studies conducted in the early 1980s. It is now acknowledged that poverty has been reduced remarkably: from having the second highest incidence of rural poverty in India in the 1960s, Kerala moved to having the fifth lowest by about 1990s , and this trend has remained equally impressive in the post-reform period (Subrahmanian and Prasad 2008: 27). However, examining Kerala’s ‘growth turnaround’ in the 1990s, these scholars have remarked that “... it is rather surprising that given the historical background of progressive policies and concerns for distributive justice, Kerala state has the highest level of inequality in per capita consumption expenditure (used as a proxy for income) [in India] today under the neo-liberal regime!” (Subrahmanian and Prasad 2008: 25). Further, they point out that the scope to trade off inequality with growth is limited in Kerala (*ibid.* :29).

The social and cultural implications of widening economic inequalities, crisscrossing contemporary struggles for welfare and justice, have contributed heavily to the shaping of critical Dalit politics in the present. As mentioned earlier, Dalits, tribals, and coastal communities were recognized early enough as deserving welfare endowments and the paternal care of the state. In the dominant Kerala Model literature, these groups figure as 'outliers', that is to say, those social groups, which have relatively poor access to social development -- mainly to education, health, and the chances for upward mobility these promise (for instance, in Kurian 2000). They are marginal mainly in the economic sense, in other words, they inhabit the 'waiting

'room' of development. 'Outliers' apparently share in the dominant ideas of the good life, justice, and community; what they are seen to lack are the economic resources and the social and intellectual capital to achieve these. They are, however, the 'acceptable' outcasts, upon whom the elite constantly exercise their pastoral authority. Their oppression, rights, 'voices', and redemption are unendingly discussed in elite circles, though such discussion rarely moves beyond the terms of debate set by the state, elite intellectuals, or technocrats. Deprivation, then, defines their condition as marginal.

There are however, other marginalised groups which remain invisible to the dominant development discourse: these I call the abjects of development. These are, more frequently, the groups upon which sexuality is projected. By 'abjection', I mean the social process by which the normal, the possible, the dominant, the sensible, and the mainstream are produced and supported by the creation of a domain of abnormality, impossibility, subservience, and marginality. Abjection, remarks Judith Butler, ' designates 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nonetheless densely populated by those who are not enjoying the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. ' (Butler 1993: 3) Thus abjection refers to a very specific form of social exclusion and marginality, that which involves the shaping and designating of a domain of abnormality and impossibility. Julia Kristeva has argued that the abject causes a great deal of anxiety precisely because it contains elements, which are necessary aspects of living, which, however, also cause anxiety (Kristeva 1982). Drawing on Kristeva, one could argue that socially stigmatised groups signify 'dirt' and 'disorder' to the dominant. The abject, therefore, remains beyond the pale of reformist efforts.

Under post-Gulf migration conditions, combined with the impact of globalisation in contemporary Kerala, abjection as a mode of marginalization seems to have acquired renewed strength. Indeed, if one takes even a cursory look at the transformation of geographical space in Kerala, the abhorrence of touch and the accentuation of vision that Zygmunt Bauman talks about would be in ample evidence (Bauman 1996). Coeval with this change is the tendency to

blur the already-blurred dividing line between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' marginals, pushing ever-more groups from the ranks of the outliers into the ranks of the abjects. Those who are deprived and female are obviously the worst affected. This was quite visible in the public discussions around the suicide of a young Dalit student of engineering, Rajani S.Anand, in 2004, who was struggling to find means to finance her studies. However, Rajani had to prove her outlier status in another way too: it seems that some demanded a virginity test on her body (*The Hindu*, Thiruvananthapuram edition, 3 May 2005). The question is really not whether such a demand was really advanced or not. Irrespective of whether this happened or not, it brings to view the easiest way to deny welfare to the deprived sections: by 'proving' them to be criminals or prostitutes⁸. In the 'things-fall-apart' narratives of dystopia abounding in public discussions on 'the state of Malayalee society' since the mid-1990s also, this dividing line is drawn all the more thinner. As Sharmila Sreekumar (2009) points out, the scandals over 'sex rackets' colour the dystopic scene: popularly known as various 'cases' -- the 'Suryanelli Case', the 'Vithura Case', the Kottiyam Case', the 'Kaviyoor Case', the 'Ice-cream Parlour Case', and others. In these, however, we have not so much the generic innocent 'women' who are victims, but individual women complaining of sexual abuse of the worst kinds, including relay rape, but whose alleged sexual transgression and possession of sexual bodies seem to inculpate them. The more these women are sexualized in discourse, the more is it forgotten that these are often Dalit, or working-class women, who were seeking work and upward mobility in the scenario of Kerala's 'growth turnaround' of the 1990s.

A similar dystopia has been woven, recently, around young Dalit male activists of the Dalit Human Rights Movement, a movement that organized youth in Dalit colonies, after their leaders were arrested on charges of murdering an innocent morning-walker in the town of Varkala. Newspaper reports spoke of 'Dalit terror' and 'Black Shirts' (referring to the black t-shirt embossed with an image of Ambedkar, which is the DHRM dress-code). Despite the fact that the evidence against the DHRM leaders was exceedingly thin, the mainstream media persistently demonized the organization (for example, see Phillip 2009). Attacks on colonies by the Siva Sena and police harassment followed, and even respected human rights activists who protested were heckled by the Sena. The DHRM, ironically, appears to be a movement that aims not just to raise an identity, but to shape precisely a 'deep self', a new subjectivity through an array of new practices, including a new unisex dress-code, group singing, cooking for each

others' family, new norms of marriage that refuse to call it a sacrament, and instead view it as 'union' (*cheral*), have all led to the circulation of horrendous stories about sexual excess. They also destabilise given caste identities, referring to members of the *pulaya* or *kurava* caste not with the usual *pulayanmar* (the pulayas) or *kuravanmar* (the kuravas), but as *pulayaraakkappettavar* ('those who have been made pulayas') and *kuravaraakkappettavar* ('those who have been made kuravas'). They have also refused the dominant mode in which the dalits have been inducted into the present neo-liberal welfarist regime in Kerala -- as the passive recipient of welfare informed by the ideology of self-help -- by remaining sceptical of the virtues of State-sponsored microfinance. These moves, however, were immediately read in ways that rendered the DHRM 'strange', monstrous – and thus abject⁹.

The DHRM have responded to this move to abject them by protesting visibly in public space and spiritedly moving into politics. In the panchayat elections of 2010, the DHRM put up candidates; it also announced the formation of a Dalit movement that would work against the CPM in the Assembly elections of 2011 (http://twocircles.net/2010jun27/dhram_new_dalit_movement_kerala.html accessed, 20 April 2011). In the present Assembly elections, they have fielded candidates. Their protests are now in space that would be deemed the most public, the most visible, in the whole of Kerala -- since the past five months, DHRM activists have been camping in front of the Secretariat in the capital city of Thiruvananthapuram in protest against the inaction of the police against violence perpetrated against them at a Dalit colony in Kollam. In March 2011, they resisted the government's attempt to remove them, bringing in supporters in large numbers and laying siege to the main road (<http://expressbuzz.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/tension-expected-near-secretariat-on-saturday/253409.html> , accessed, 20 April 2011). By keeping themselves in public gaze, the DHRM resist the efforts to render them invisible; by insisting that their identity is a mobile one that responds actively to challenge, they seek to rebut allegations that render them monstrous. These challenges and the active response from Dalit groups and intellectuals have decisively unseated the commonsensical claim that the social and cultural oppressiveness of caste have disappeared from Kerala. Rather, efforts are on to theorize emergent forms of such oppression, in the wake of widening social inequalities.

III

The third crucial transformative process that shaped contemporary Dalit assertions in the present was the erosion of the Malayalee ‘national-popular’ forged by the dominant left since the 1950s. The literary public, the vital site of cultural production bolstering the leftist national popular through the shaping of Malayalee citizens culturally literate in specific ways, saw momentous changes in the late 1980s and early 90s. Given its early mandate to shape liberal citizens and subjects of the Malayalee sub-nationality, ever since the late 19th century, the Malayalam literary public has indeed been a key site of elite power.

Reflecting on the history of the Malayalam literary public, it is possible to argue that it was the result of a ‘Schillerian project’. In broad terms, the ‘Schillerian project’ sought to exploit the possibilities of the aesthetic to produce the self-governing liberal subject capable of functioning in the emergent modern political order, to produce a form of ‘aesthetic culturing’ of the individual mind to bring harmony into an emergent society of bourgeois individuals. Aesthetic culturing in the literary public, it was hoped, would enable both the freedom of individuals and their functioning as a community: the community of taste. This is similar to the process of building bourgeois hegemony that David Lloyd (1985-86) and others have described for the West. Aesthetic culturing required its ‘informed minority’ – those who would mediate between local culture and that filtering in from the West through colonial institutions to set up and supervise a ‘selection process’ which would generate a realm of aesthetic culture. By the mid-20th century, the left had become a powerful presence in the literary public, not just through propagating Stalinist aesthetic propositions, but also through gaining the allegiance of powerful votaries of liberal humanism committed to progressive political and social goals, which continued to be a powerful presence till the late 20th century.

Nevertheless, modern literature had always been difficult to institutionalize – since it has been widely regarded as a ‘practice of the self’, a possible avenue of self-empowerment. It has been a mode of reclaiming and rewriting objectified, instrumentalized, governmentalized selves through story-telling and assertion of subjective agency.¹⁰ Thus it is no surprise that women and people of marginalized and excluded groups were often members of the ‘republic of letters’ even as they were kept out of the bourgeois public sphere. This was indeed the case in

Kerala too, evident in the fact that women writers kept alive the debate on gender in the literary public long after it had settled into tired pieties in the public sphere (Devika 2006). However, both women and Dalit writers were typically contained through interpretations that subsumed them under specific powerful aesthetic-political positions within the literary public.

In the 1980s, these exclusions and strategies of containment that shaped the literary public, and which, in turn, were perpetuated by it, began to be challenged. In the late 1980s, the eruption of feminism into the literary public, and the furore that it raised with its claims for a separate aesthetic and politics- through the debate around *pennezuthu* (womanwriting) revealed all the more the *savarna* elitism of ‘progressive’ liberal humanists, Stalinists, and modernists alike. This was also the decade in which Dalit literature that was immune to reduction into the literary frameworks dominant in the Malayalam literary public began to take shape. Not surprisingly, these efforts remained less noticed till the late 1990s, when radical Dalit intellectuals began to occupy the space of literary criticism. In the *pennezhuthu* debate, prominent critics and authors declared the votaries of ‘Womanwriting’ to be guilty of conspiring to lower the aesthetic standards of literary creation of Malayalam literature and admit into its hallowed portals the cheap and prurient feelings of ‘women of low creativity’ (Arunima 2005). In a telling analogy, leading figures like the noted literary critic M Leelavati condemned their claims to be akin to the demand for ‘reservations’ (this was in the backdrop of the anti-Mandal agitations). Such a demand, they felt, was invalid in the literary public, where the sole criterion for inclusion would be ‘merit’ (Leelavati 2002).

However, their resistance was largely futile, as it came at a time of liberalization, the proliferation of new media, and most importantly, of vital events like the collapse of the Soviet Union, the anti-Mandal agitation, and the demolition of the Babri Masjid. It also came at a time when the other pillars of the Malayalee ‘national-popular’ were in crisis. For instance, faith in state-led large-scale development has been radically undermined by the environmental movements that had taken shape in Kerala in the 1980s and won important victories, such as in the Silent Valley struggle. The centrality of class politics, another such pillar, has been considerably challenged by feminism, the fish workers’ movement, and finally, by the fall of the USSR. Feminism was also launching a full-scale ideological attack against bourgeois gender ideals and domesticity. The proliferation of the new media, especially television, multiplies the

'sites of enunciation' for such critiques. In other words, the specific cultural literacy that was demanded from the ideal Malayalee subject was itself withdrawing under heavy attack, and into the cultural and intellectual space it evacuated, rushed several identitarian perspectives. As the 1990s progressed, women's and Dalit writing were able to fight and gain greater space within the literary public. Ambedkar's birth centenary and the translation of his collected works into Malayalam have been recognized as important catalysts that speeded the replacement of Marx by Ambedkar all the more firmly at the centre of radical Dalit thinking (Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011: 33). The 1990s saw the formation of several Dalit literary and cultural groups : the Kurichy group (1992), the Dalit Sahitya Vedi (1991). Important critiques of the exclusion of Dalits from mainstream literature were published and widely debated. Indeed, in the debate around Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), dalit literary critics were an important presence.

What is important to note about these gains is that they have worked powerfully to counter the efforts of entrenched elites to dismiss Dalit claims to resources and render them abject. Dalit writers, in other words, have seized literature, as an 'opportunity' (as Derrida puts it, in Attridge 1992); they have made use of its anti-institutionality to 'call forth democracy', by turning its possibilities as a practice of the self to speak the hitherto unspoken. In this, they have appropriated precisely 'high' cultural capital to empower themselves. This has been a vital source of power, especially empowering in the other battles (over resources and visibility in the socio-political field, discussed in the earlier sections). Contemporary Dalit writing is important to these battles because, as it is this that allows both a loosening of the entrenched forms, but also the crucial restaging:

These texts reorganize a field, arrange settings, grapple with lines of authority and address and investigate feelings, sensory perceptions and attitudes ... they fashion the figures, objects and accounts that will make dalit life not just visible, but also meaningful, accountable to dalits and ethically compelling for everyone.

(Satyanarayana and Tharu 2011: 55)

Not surprising, therefore, is the fact that Dalit struggles in contemporary Kerala are led and theorized precisely by intellectuals who straddle the public sphere and the literary public, contributing to the democratization of both, and setting themselves up as a constant reminder of the subtle connections between the two.

IV

Mainstream social science in Kerala limits its focus while investigating ongoing democratization largely to state-led processes, such democratic decentralization, or to the creation of state-centric civil societies, such as government-sponsored micro-credit and micro-enterprise networks. ‘Empowerment’ is understood in this literature in decidedly liberal terms – as access to a share in the state pie, and as the speedy transformation of people into self-governing and self-helping liberal subjects. Yet democratization as a larger process involves social and cultural transformation, which unfolds across political, social, and cultural domains, and this cannot be captured in this limited focus.

This paper has instead attempted a wider sweep, choosing to focus precisely on those struggles that have arisen outside the framework of panchayati raj institutions. Land, visibility in the socio-political field, and culture are the three core issues around which Dalit assertions have taken place in recent times. In each case, the challenges have been huge and victories ambiguous; nevertheless it cannot be denied that the fields in which these battles were fought have been democratized further. In the mid-1990s, the CPM attempted to refurbish its flagging hegemony through a ‘transformative’ process (Hall 2003) quite similar to New Labour in UK. This involved both ‘articulating’ – the reworking of alternate political discourses (such as feminism and environmentalism, in this case, which were perceived to be threats to the left in the early 1990s) -- into subordinate positions in and through local governance, and ‘disarticulating’ – the denial or demobilization of earlier goals – such as that of surplus land distribution to the Dalits. The insistence of radical Dalit politics on the demand for land as a productive resource effectively thwarted this effort. Irrespective of failures or victories, they have been successful in putting the land question back on the political agenda. Socio-cultural

processes of abjection have been more insidious and perhaps more hard to fight; however, precisely because there has been resistance to abjection, the contours of new casteism lie completely revealed – the claim that casteism does not exist in Kerala because traditional forms of casteist stigmatizing have disappeared rings hollow now.¹¹ The most significant democratization has happened in the literary public. This democratizes the field of culture by challenging notions of literature as ahistorical, essential, transcendent; anti-patriarchal and anti-caste writing lays bare the connections between the field of cultural production and the politics of everyday. Precisely because of this, the space gained by Dalit writing in the literary public strengthens other Dalit struggles outside it.

I have also tried to argue against the lumping of all Dalit assertions into an ill-defined ‘identity-politics’. This has been the pointed edge of the CPM leadership’s offensive against these assertions. Indeed, the subject of Dalit and Adivasi land struggles seems to possess a necessary mobility. Nor does the active construction of Dalit identity in the literary public assume it to be fixed and given for all times. It is thus important to see that these developments are neither the simple reassertion of mid-20th century community competition in Kerala, nor the upsurge of some pure, hitherto-suppressed, essential identity of the Dalit or the Adivasi.

NOTES

¹ In these EMS clubbed together “...middle-class employees, agricultural labourers' organizations and Kisan Sabhas.” (1976: 66-7)

² The failure of Kerala's land reforms of the early 70s to endow Dalits, who were the actual tillers, with land as a productive resource, had been raised steadily in academic writing and in the debates around the Kerala Model in this period (Oommen T.K 1984; Oommen M A 1993). Dalit critiques were powerfully articulated in Malayalam (for example, Raj 2003; Baburaj 2008), but not so much in academic discourse in English, with exceptions, Kunhaman 1989; Ayrookuzhiel 1990; Lawrence 1998. Translations of Dalit critical fictional and non-fiction writings in English are beginning to become available, see Satyanarayana and Tharu (eds) 2011.

Critical academic writings continue to appear: see Bijoy and Ravi Raman 2003; Devika 2010; 2010a; Steur 2010.

³ Uchiyamada (2000) notes from fieldwork in Aleppy district that even though Dalits became owners of house-plots after the land reforms, the actual area of land that they had controlled earlier, which had often included their places of worship. In one Roman Catholic Dalit colony he surveyed, the Dalits' control of land had diminished from 3 acres prior to the land reforms to 0.70 acres after (p. 80).

⁴ A recent report on the achievements and problems in decentralized planning and governance in Kerala (Oommen et al 2009) cited other recent research on education to argue that the SC/ST communities in the State continued to suffer from considerable educational disadvantage. One of these studies showed that the drop-out rates among SC/ST students in the MA/MSc programmes in Kerala was about 44 per cent, compared with just 12.5 among the non SC/ST students; another study showed that of all the drop-outs from engineering education in Kerala, about 80 per cent were SC/ST students, and that only half such students actually pass, and after many attempts (Oommen et al 2009: 114)

⁵ Oommen et al 2009 also observed that while the transformation in the occupational structure in the State, from primary to tertiary sectors, seems to have also affected the SC groups quite strikingly between 1991 and 2001, they continue to suffer serious deprivation. Citing the Kerala State Human Development Report in which a comprehensive deprivation index has been used, they argue that for all districts except one, the index is higher for Dalits than the State average. For the STs, it is higher in all districts (p. 113)

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⁶ Several women activists of the Kerala Harijan Federation – Shyamala Thankappan, Rajamma M M, Rajamma Sivan, Karthyayani Kunjumon, and Kuttyamma Thankappan -- interviewed by Rekha Raj, speak of struggles for land throughout the 1980s, especially in the Idukki district, in which they participated. 'Dalit women and Dalit movement', Unpublished mimeo, 2009. See also, Janu 2011: 434.

⁷ Uchiyamada notes that even in the phase in which Dalits actively identified themselves as 'agricultural workers', they did access multiple identities. "The same social actor may switch his or her identity from being an agricultural labourer (*karshaka thozhilali*) to a *mantrvadi*, and from a squatter to a landowner, according to the context and the locale in which the social action takes place." (2000: 81)

⁸ The incident that the sex worker-activist Nalini Jameela describes in her recent autobiography (2007), about the travails of finding space for the sex workers' organisation in the city of Thiruvananthapuram, must be read in the light of the contemporary thinning of the line dividing 'deprived' and 'abject' marginal groups. She mentions how they found a house close to a Dalit colony, but had to leave the place on the demand of the Dalit people, who claimed that the 'similar looks' of the Dalit women and the sex workers might prove very inconvenient to the former.

⁹ See 'Dalit Human Rights Movement Under the Scanner for Crimes', 30 September 2009 , [dancewithshadows.com/politics/dalit-human-rights-movement-in-kerala-under-the-scanner-for-crimes/] Accessed, 20 April 2011; B R P Bhaskar, 'Kerala's So Called Dalit Terror: How a Dalit Minister Turns Against His Own Community', *Gulf Today*, 14 December 2009 [<http://southasiarev.wordpress.com/2009/12/22/police-attack-dalit-human-rights-movement-in-kerala/>] Accessed, 20 April 2011; Ajit Sahi, 'Ambedkar's Lost Boys?', *Tehelka*, 24 October 2009, [http://www.tehelka.com/story_main43.asp?filename=Ne241009ambedkars_lost.asp] accessed, 21 April 2011.

¹⁰ In his interview to Derek Attridge, Derrida reflects on modern literature as a formation inseparable from modern democracy. Attridge, in his introduction to this volume of Derrida's writings on literature, remarks about how he stresses the historically contingent nature of literature, and its link to the authorization to 'say everything', and to democracy in its broadest sense. (1992: 1-29).

¹¹ Interestingly, these traditional forms of stigmatizing are resurfacing - this time as deliberately staged performances, meant to openly humiliate. In March 2008 , the CPM's women's wing, the AIDWA, conducted a traditional pollution-removal ceremony in front of the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram to protest against what they perceived to be the 'sexual excesses' of people who had taken part in a night-vigil in support of the Chengara land struggle. Just a few days back, newspapers in Kerala protested strongly against the ritual purification of an office and a car used by a Dalit police official, upon his retirement. This act was apparently by someone who wished to deliberately humiliate him. See, [http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/dalit-officers-car-cleansed-with-cow-dung-on-retirement-97333?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+ndtv%2FLsgd+%28NDTV+News+-+India%29] accessed, 21 April 2011; also see, B R P Bhaskar, 'Mass peaceful squatting: Chengara challenges the grammar of protest', Kerala Letter, 14 April 2008, [<http://sanhati.com/news/937/>] accessed, 21 April 2011.

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