

**HEARD MELODIES ARE SWEET, BUT THOSE UNHEARD ARE SWEETER: AN
ANALYSIS OF SELECT MALAYALAM DALIT ORAL SONGS**

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Abstract:

Dalit Literature is concerned with the expression of Dalit voices. It is rooted in the ideology of Dr B R Ambedkar who championed the cause of Dalits and led a vigorous movement for the democratic civil rights of Dalits, the erstwhile untouchables. However, the roots of Dalit writings go beyond Ambedkar and can be traced back to the tradition of Dalit Oral Literature. But Dalit oral tradition's significance in the ambit of Dalit literature remains hugely unaddressed. In fact, the distinct aesthetic and thematic aspects of Dalit literatures are inherited from Dalit orality. This tradition which contains the Dalit historic voice, identity and memory has immense social and cultural relevance. It reinforces the Dalit assertion in the social, cultural and historic fronts. The invisibility of the oppressed caste subaltern in the written realm of knowledge is strongly annulled by the profound presence of the tradition of Dalit orality. Dalit folk literature in Malayalam is vast and diverse and Dalit historic voice and cultural memory remain enshrined in their folk songs, folk tales, folk dramas, legends, myths, proverbs and riddles. In fact, the element of protest that animates Dalit writings in general can be located in Dalit oral tradition where it is expressed in a subdued tenor since any explicit dissent could invite the wrath of the caste-centre. The attempt in this article is to examine select Dalit oral songs in Malayalam to find out how they register the caste subalterns' and gendered caste subalterns' cowed down protest against the unjust caste order that ostracized them.

Keywords: Malayalam Dalit Literature, Orality, Gendered caste subaltern, Dalit folk songs, Protest, untouchability.

Dalit Literature deals with Dalits experiences of untouchability, poverty, stigma and also their hopes for a casteless egalitarian society. The term 'Dalit' means the 'spurned' and the Dalit has been regarded as the 'other'- the marginalized, inferior, subordinate, lacking all virtues and

tastes. A product of the unjust and inhuman caste system, this marginal object's utterances / creative expressions were also treated as marginal or mute. Power structures in the socio political sphere is reflected in literary sphere too. The silence of the caste subaltern in the literary domain was not the result of their failure of articulation since innumerable accounts of the same exist in their oral tradition. The silence of the caste subaltern can be attributed to the cultural hegemony of caste system. The denial of education and other basic human led to the Dalit invisibility in the literary sphere. However, in recent times there has been a spurt of Dalit creativity and Dalit writings are appearing in all major genres: poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies in most regional languages and in English. The erstwhile untouchables are using the weapons of literacy traditionally denied to them for exposing the wretched conditions of caste subordination imposed upon them by the votaries of *sanadana dharma*.

Dalit literature had its origin in the late nineties in Marathi, and it soon spread to other languages, growing into stark portrayals of marginalization and 'Othering' of the Dalit life. It has been recognized as an important area of literary activity and translations of Dalit writings provided a quantum leap to its sojourn even into foreign languages. The growth of Dalit literature arises out of the burning need for creating an identity for the subaltern masses who were denied their voice and agency in history.

Dr B R Ambedkar is considered the father of Dalit Literature. Dalit writings began as an offshoot of the general awakening of Dalit consciousness across the country as a result of Ambedkar's movement for Dalit emancipation in the twentieth century. Hence, modern Dalit literature got its impetus from Ambedkar's struggle for the democratic civil rights of untouchables. Through his writings and speeches, he strongly denounced the age-old caste system. Ambedkar's movement awakened the consciousness of Dalits and gave them a voice and identity denied by caste hegemony. Although a catalyst, Ambedkar is not the prime progenitor of the historic assertion of Dalits against caste. The questioning of caste system has a tradition that can be stretched beyond Ambedkar to the Shramana critiques: Kapila, Charvaka, Ramananda, Ravidas, Eknath, Chaitanya, Guru Nanak and so on. Kancha Ilaiah, the noted Dalit critic and political philosopher locates its origin in Buddha's critique of brahmanism in his famous book *God as a Political Philosopher : Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism* (2001). Further, voices of Dalit protest

can be traced back to Dalit oral tradition where it is expressed in a subdued tenor since any explicit dissent could invite the wrath of the caste centre.

Although Dalit folk literature in Malayalam is vast and diverse and Dalit historic voice and cultural memory remain enshrined in their folk songs, folk tales, folk dramas, legends, myths, proverbs and riddles, Dalit critics do not give due consideration to it in any discussion of Dalit literature and aesthetics. Dalit folk song registers the caste subalterns' and gendered caste subalterns' cowed down protest against the unjust caste order that ostracizes them. Although there is an increased interest in the study Dalit Literature, the area of Dalit Oral Literature remains vastly neglected by scholars. In fact, the classification of literature into oral and written streams is itself arbitrary, since the written text always carries the traces of orality, just as oral form has many specifications of textuality. According to G N Devy, a close examination of any significant written work of literature will reveal that it has internalized and consciously foregrounded features of spoken language such as speech rhythms , conversational tones , musical tonality , dialects and regional styles. Similarly, compositions belonging to a given oral tradition is characterized by linguistic self-consciousness and also devices serving to aid memory such as pauses and stops or punctuation, allusions to earlier compositions and texts and even stylistic clues that help in the exploration of the authorial imagination, which are all features of the written literature (Shirley Chew 30). If we accept G N Devy's argument it is possible to find an overlap of the conventions of speech and script in oral and written traditions of any literature. Hence, oral and written creative expressions cannot be considered to merely represent a simple polarity between literacy and illiteracy or between literature and 'orature'-anything that is orally transmitted whether in the form of speech or songs.

As already stated, the history of Dalit Literature can be extended beyond Ambedkar to the various self-conscious non- brahman movements spearheaded by Jyotiba Phule, Bhima Bhoi, Periyar E V Ramaswamy, Ayyankali and Narayana Guru to name a few. The protest against caste is raised during the medieval period by the poets of the bhakti movement. Namdev, Chokamela, Kabir, Raidas, Sena and Tukaram questioned the caste system and stratification of society based on it. However these pioneers of Dalit Literature belonging to the pre-colonial phase have not been properly accommodated into the Indian poetic tradition and one of the reasons could be the orality

of their transmission. G N Devy does not mince words to condemn this selective cultural amnesia of the Indian critical intelligentsia

It is necessary to remind ourselves that much of the literature of the pre-British bhasha period is still a living heritage in India. The poetry of Namadeva (1270-1350) and Tukaram (1598-1650) in Marathi, that of Narasimh Mehta(1408-80) and Akha (1615-1575) in Gujarati, of Kabir (1440-1518) and Surdas (1483-1567) in Hindi, of Guru Nanak (1469-1539) in Panjabi, and so on, have formed an inalienable part of the Indian consciousness. Tukaram, Mira, Kabir and Basaveshwar, among others have been some of the dream images of India's cultural unconscious. They still guide the hands of modern poets like Arun Kolatkar, A K Ramanujan and Gajanan Mahadev Muktibodh. Yet the cultural amnesia from which the modern Indian intellectual suffers, creates highly confused attitudes to the period- or periods- of these poets.... There is, then, a conscious activity of repressing images from the culture's collective unconscious, and banishing them to the deepest recesses of the unconscious. That is how the greatest poets of India's bhasha literature make their appearance in the unguarded segments of the social discourse, segments reserved for 'folk', women, children, idiots, the 'irrational' ones. In the intellectually institutionalized *bhadralok* discourse they are not fashionable. (Devy 45-46)

Oral tradition has a significant place in the literary map of India. It has a history which is of about 3500 years old. The principal mode of literary transmission in India prior to the nineteenth century A D was mostly oral. The poetics of composition and the conventions of literary reception were profoundly influenced by oral forms throughout the history of India. Of the two major epics that have shaped Indian sensibility, the *Mahabharata* was originally composed as an oral epic. So were the *Puranas* in their initial phases. In the ancient and medieval India, a number of oral forms of presentation developed around the plot of the *Ramayana*. The Vedas, the oldest work of literature known in Indian history were also initially transmitted orally.

Apart from the poetic tradition, the narrative tradition of prose too was shaped to suit oral transmission from the very beginnings of prose fiction in India. *Katha sarit sagara*, *Jataka Tales*, *Vikramaditya Tales*, *Panchathantra Tales* are classical examples of this tradition of prose

narrative. The Middle Ages, as already mentioned, the glorious period of oral tradition was produced by predominantly the Bhakti poets like Guru Nanak, Tukaram, Kabir, Mira, Akkamahadevi, Narsi Mehta and Surdas. During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, encouraged with the royal patronage and the use of paper, a process began in Indian literature by which the written work was considered more valuable than an oral composition.

The reason why the Dalits cultural tradition remains mainly oral is the fact that they had no access to formal mechanics of writing since they were disallowed the benefits of education by varnashrama dharma. Besides, Dalits' lifestyle hardly provided leisure for any formal literary and aesthetic production since by the varna dharma they were bound to the land to toil from dawn to dusk. Hence, the oral literary articulations of the Dalits are inextricably linked to their life, its vagaries, work culture, beliefs and worship, values and morals, relationships etc. They were the treasure houses of age - old worldly wisdom and knowledge. Unlike the mainstream literary forms of upper castes which took birth and developed out of their leisure - only a pleasure prone people could have produced a sexually indulgent text like *Kamasutra* dealing with multiple ways of optimizing sexual engagement - the Dalit oral narratives sprang out of the actual organic surroundings of the Dalit life.

According to Dr. M V Vishnu Namboodiri, Malayalam poetry has three distinct streams: *Pattu, Nadanpattu and Manipravalam* . As written compositions *Pattu* and *Manipravalam* follow certain fixed laws and rules while *Nadanpattu* which contains the raw experience and imaginations of the unsophisticated rustic folk, was orally transmitted from generation to generation (P Raman and Ramakrishnan 13). Dalit folk songs in Malayalam belong to different categories like community songs, ritualistic songs, narrative songs, songs for entertainment, songs at the time of labour like agricultural songs, *Thekkenpattu*, *Vadakkanpattu* etc. The folk songs are marked by innate aesthetic aspects like figures of speech rich in naturalness and local fragrance, vivid descriptions, sensuous imagery, variation in refrains etc. The proverbs, riddles and folk tales also belong to the oral tradition. The proverbs and riddles bear testimony to the Dalits' keen observation of nature and their imaginative faculty to view new forms and meanings in ordinary things of life.

The invisibility of the oppressed caste subaltern in the written realm is strongly bypassed by a powerful tradition of Dalit orality. Dr. M Dasan has observed that in central and south Kerala, Dalits have had their own oral traditions with immense historiographical potential. ‘Chengannuradi’, ‘IdanadanPattukal’, ‘Krishigeetha’ and other folk songs are examples. In North Malabar, there are the *Thottam songs* which proclaim the complexity and diversity of Dalit orality and its strikingly different epistemological foundation (Dasan xxvi). The oral tradition of the Dalits in a way counters Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s contention that the subaltern cannot speak (Nelson 52). Although their voice got no recognition in elite cultural parlance, the caste subalterns continued to speak from the margins. They did not speak to the upper castes, instead they spoke to their own people and to their children so that their stories and songs and through them their culture and ideology might get transmitted. Hence there exists a rich corpus of subaltern’s articulations in Dalit orality which is anterior to Dalit textuality. Therefore, exploration of Dalit oral tradition would lead to a deeper understanding of Dalit literature.

The real strength of Dalit literature stems from its oral roots. Many of the characteristic features that distinguish Dalit writings from mainstream are inherited from its oral tradition. For instance, a remarkable feature of Dalit autobiography is said to be its community-centeredness. While the bourgeois autobiographies are all mostly narratives of the self: centered around the individual’s ego, Dalit autobiographies are community centric, focusing on the collective consciousness of Dalits. In mainstream autobiographies it is the writer’s self that occupies the centre stage and often the individual’s consciousness is at odds with the collective consciousness of the society. But in Dalit auto narratives the focus is on the consciousness of the community and the individual moves more or less in perfect unison with the community. In other words, the Dalit individual’s identity and destiny are inextricably linked with that of the Dalit community. Noted Dalit critic Raj Kumar observes “the autobiographical narratives by the Dalits do not celebrate the rise of an individual to a position of power and glory but emphasize complex interpersonal relationship and a sense of solidarity concerning a much wider spectrum of issues, relating to social relations at the micro level encompassing village, family, caste, peer groups, school, factory, urban streets, slums and the like” (151). The reason for this specification of Dalit autobiography is the fact that Dalit orality is distinguished by its rootedness in the collective consciousness of Dalits as oppressed caste subaltern, and not by individualistic character. The following folk song, though

it emphasizes the physical strength and prowess of the Dalit individual is titled 'Njangalum Thampurakalum' (We and our Landlords).

All these are bought from the landlord
We are Parayas or Kuruvars who carry them
If landlords approach a bull, it will disembowel them
If we go and stand beside it, the bull will bow its head
The charging buffalo will dance to our tunes. (Chandran 67).

The pronoun 'We' is substituted for 'I' to show that the individual represents the community. The song emphasizes the hard toil of the Dalits in the fields of the upper caste landlords. They thrive extricating the surplus value of Dalits labour and yet Dalits are treated as untouchables.

The *thottam* songs – ritualistic songs sung by those who impersonate themselves as the 'kolams' – of Dalits express a similar communal consciousness. The case of *Pottan theyyam* is an apt one. *The Pottan* – the Dalit God – meets Sankaracharya, the staunch votary of Varnashrama dharma and the Acharya asks the Pottan to clear the way lest he should be polluted by the presence of the chandala. Pottan reasons with the Advaita 'vedanti' trying to convince him of the equality of all castes. He says,

If we are stung, it is blood oh *Chowar*
If you are stung, it is blood again oh *Chowar* (Balakrishnan Nair 463)

The narrative about the Pottan intercepting the propounder of Advaita philosophy about the meaninglessness of varna ideology succeeds in offering a counter cultural resistance to the discourse of caste.

Another feature that characterizes Dalit writings in general is the resounding voice of protest. While the Dalitist (Dalit + elitist) writer represents Dalit as an object of pity, as a victim of caste oppression devoid of any voice of protest; the Dalit writer registers his/ her protest vehemently. Raj Kumar has observed "their writings are letters of their own blood, a natural outburst of the feelings and thoughts which have been blocked up for centuries...their vehicle is often the brutal coarse and crude language of the slum, springing from a life of poverty, ignorance

and violence. The jaggedness of word, the granulated structure, the rough, hewn expression, the scarcely muted anger – anger which may spit fire like wrath burn lambently like satire scorch like cynicism, kindle like anguish and enflame like tragedy – these are some of the allotropic forms which are found in the works of Dalit writers. In their various works of poetry and prose, fiction and autobiography, drama and essay” (148). There is a tendency to attribute the causes of protest in Dalit literature to outside elements such as colonial modernity, to the various anti – caste non-Brahmanic resulting from it. But the fact is that the voices of protest in Dalit writings can be traced back to Dalit oral tradition although there it existed in a subdued manner since any explicit expression of the same from the marginal could in no way be tolerated by the caste centre. The following folk song registers the caste subalterns’ cowed down protest against the unjust caste order that ostracizes them.

Who gave the spectre of caste
To the *Pulayas*, *Vedas* and the *Parayas*?
We are the creations of God
Who created the sky and the earth
We toil daily in the mud
The rice we produce from the mud is good for you
Isn’t there any untouchability for that? (Ibid 36)

The song is a sarcastic statement about the absurdity of caste untouchability.

The element of protest and the urge for change implicit in the folk songs assume an urgency and force in modern Dalit writing.

Raghavan Atholi’s poem ‘Kandan’ bares out the travails of the Dalits and the treacheries of history they are subjected to, employing the myth of ‘Kandan Kolam’ in the background.

My forefathers , dead and gone
Their huts cried out for fire and water,
Their hearts remained sobbing.
Then they seized varikkundams, fell;
And with them, their frustrations too.
Then, a Time when Kandan was fit for poetry,

Called out from the *villuvadi* of my mind

Among crops of grass ...

Unjust days;

Truths and means, and

Marks of pain...

Walking up to the fire mountain

Kandan stands burning. (Sreenivasan 303)

Since the songs sung during the work were the only medium of expression of the underprivileged during the feudal times, the suffering and pain experienced by them found an outlet in such songs. One of the most popular songs is in the form of a complaint made by a Dalit farm labourer who is made to toil all day like an animal for a bowl of toddy:

The time is gone, the time is gone,

The water fowl

Is hopping away

Behind the screw pine

When I went there

They made me do the fence which was not there

When I went there

They made me dig the land which was not there

When I went there

They made e thatch the unthatched roof

For half a pint toddy

They drive me to death

For half a tender coconut

They drive me to death (Chandran 30).

The same spirit of questioning is voiced in different words in a poem written by Pandit Karuppan, a pioneering Malayalam Dalit poet, titled 'Pulayas'.

Why is it that , for the great

Hindu overlords, from the long past

The pulaya has been a caste

That is spoken of as slaves?

Then the poet goes to highlight the virtues of pulayas thus:

Is the Pulaya, who robes the earth
With silk of corns by spreading
Grains across the paddy fields.

In the subsequent lines the poet, though in an overt manner issues a warning to the landlords:

Kindly let not anyone cast away
The poor masses of *Valluvas*,
Shall anyone knowingly cut the branch
Of the tree on which one is sitting?

(Sreenivasan 297-298).

The fruits of the hard toil of the Dalits are enjoyed by the uppercastes, when the days of the former are spent in hunger and deprivation. “Ellam Avarakku” the folk song reveals the cruel face of exploitation of the Dalits:

The rock was cleared, hill was cleared
The forest was clear
Dug pillar and built hut
Planted coconut tree and plaintain shrub

Brinjal, bitter gourd, cucumber
Coconut, plantain, banana
Everything they are taking away

(Chandran 21).

Karuppan’s poem also critiques the cruel exploitation of the sons of the soil by the feudal lords:

The noble class of the *Pulaya*
And swiftly come the landlords
Soon enough to enjoy the fruits.

(Sreenivasan 297).

The poet extols the hard labour, agricultural skills and courage of the peasant Dalits:

Is the one who from the break of the day
Toil hard till its end,
Brave among the brave, shedding lethargy
The idol decked for industry?

The Valluvas are ones who enthuse
The farmers with no equals for hard labour
And so, aren't they the first graceful clouds
Of the year turned into humans?

(ibid)

Dalit life is marked by organic unity with Nature. They live in close proximity to nature and know instinctively that all the creatures on earth are bound by an invisible bond of love and understanding. Love for fellow creatures is the hallmark of a large number of songs, some of which transcend the temporal world and dwell on metaphysical and philosophical issues as well.

As is evident from the above analysis the Dalit folk literature in Malayalam is vast and diverse and Dalit historic voice and cultural memory remain enshrined in Dalit folk songs. The discussion of the two streams of Dalit articulation show cases the linkage that exist between Dalit literature and its oral tradition. The element of protest, sense of community identity, presence of polyphony and feeling of communion with nature, all of which mark Dalit writing can be traced back to the oral roots. The challenge before Dalit critic is to investigate the intersection between Dalit orality and textuality and establish the continuous flow of Dalit literary tradition using native tools of critical analysis instead of making elite approaches to the study of Dalit literature from the vantage point of critical theory. G N Devy finds a dire necessity of creating an Indian field of literary criticism. He emphasizes the need to relocate the sources of our ideas, to attempt native formulations of our perceptions and establish culture – specific ways of expressing these ideas and perceptions (41). Therein lies the significance of exploring Dalit Oral Literature.

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End Notes

1. *Thampurakkal* were the feudal landlords of Kerala
2. *Parayar* are a low caste group found in the south Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.
3. *Kuravar* is an untouchable caste in south India
4. *Thottam Pattu* is a ballad sung just before the Theyyam performance
5. *Pottan Theyyam* is a type of Theyyam performance that critiques the caste ideology in a satiric vein
6. *Chovar* or *Chowan* is a caste of toddy tappers popularly called Ezhava found in the southern parts of Kerala
7. *Pulayas* are a low caste group found in the South Indian states of Kerala, Karnataka as well as historical Tamil Nadu.
8. *Kandakkoran Theyyam* is a type of Theyyakollam
9. *Villuvandi* is a kind of ox-cart. In 1893 Ayyankalli, a lower caste Pulaya leader led the historic Villuvandi agitation for the rights of the lower castes to use public roads
10. *Valluvas* are people belonging to Valluva caste which is a scheduled caste mainly in the state of Tamil Nadu

Bio-note

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