

# Conceptions of Community, Nation and Politics: The Ezhavas of South Malabar, India and their Quest for Equality

Anish KK<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article discusses caste reforms, anti-caste ideas, and thoughts on nationalism amongst Ezhavas of South Malabar in the Madras Presidency. The discourses of equality, the right to the public, the process of community formation, ideology, and the mode of struggle for emancipation are examined. The question of caste, by what means the aspirations of the lower castes were addressed in the uniting project of reformed Hinduism and nationalism is addressed. By capturing disagreements, conflicts, consensus, and the politics of ‘sub-nationalities’ within the ‘national,’ the generic view of national movement as a single, homogeneous consensus project is contested. Towards the end, the article contends that Ezhavas’ assertions imply the presence of an “autonomous anti-caste movement” in the South Malabar region. This article also proposes that the dichotomy of colonialism versus nationalism, and the portrayal of South Indian politics as a sectarian competition for British patronage, limits the opportunity to comprehend localised movements and their vernacular expressions.

## Keywords

South Malabar, caste reforms, Ezhavas, nationalism, anti-caste struggle, religious conversion, autonomous anti-caste movement

## Introduction

Colonialism played a role in reshaping India’s pre-modern institutions. The impact of colonialism on institutions was indeed uneven and varied across regions. Competing

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<sup>1</sup>PhD Candidate  
School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences  
Deonar, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India  
Email: anishkunj@gmail.com

notions of community, nation, and nationalism also emerged during this time (Aloysius, 1998a). The social standing of colonial subjects and engagement with modernity shaped their reactions. Then responses of lower caste communities in South Malabar, India's "blackest spot" on the untouchability map, the land of inequality, are considered for the study (Kumar, 1992; Nayar, 1996). South Malabar witnessed uprisings against the state, social injustice, and oppression, but the region and the issues received little scholarly attention. Aloysius (1998) observes, if the majority of the egalitarian, pragmatic, rationalist discourses and dispositions originating from power as resistance are hidden under the multiplicity of local and vernacular idiom, it is an issue of historiography. So, taking the cue from biographical accounts, archival sources, ethnographic fieldwork, I try to examine the discourses of equality, publicness, community formation, ideology, and modes of struggle for emancipation. This article progresses through the social history of Ezhavas of Kerala. Finally, through this study of late nineteenth and early twentieth century South Malabar, I attempt to address the issue of caste, specifically how the aspirations of the lower castes were addressed in the unifying project of reformed Hinduism, Nation and Nationalism.

Caste was firmly founded as a dominant force in the public realms of law, politics, and education. By the middle of the nineteenth century, caste associations were already evident, they had risen, and their numbers and influence were parallel to the increase in political literacy (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960). Caste associations grew in size, and for recognition of their identity, they looked to the imperial state as well as their own histories. For instance, in west and south India, non-Brahmans questioned assumptions that they could easily be incorporated into Congress brand of nationalism and early Dalit leaders, like Ambedkar (O'Hanlon, 2002). The lower castes of west India, by ideologically challenging their lower status, recognized that ritual hierarchy coupled with the impacts of British colonialism had led to social injustices in a number of areas, including politics, religious practice, and education (O'Hanlon, 2002; Omvedt, 1976).

In south India, Nadars and Ezhavas are the two lower castes that have moved from low status in caste society to communities possessing power and control (Hardgrave, 2006; Templeman, 1996). The Ezhavas forms a numerically large middle caste in Kerala, and their caste organisation, Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), was founded in 1903. The middle class among the Ezhavas, imbued with ideals of individualism, humanism, democracy, and reason, wanted to change the conservative, obscurantist, caste-ridden society (Chandramohan, 1987). The SNDP evolved from the uniqueness of local society and derived strength from the oppressive nature of government (Jeffrey, 1974). The SNDP attempted to bring Ezhavas together by publications, local societies, branches, networks, labour unions, conferences, educational institutions, literary gatherings, litigation, trade fairs, and inter-dining. Primarily addressing the Ezhavas, the Narayana movement urged to abandon caste markers and internally reform into 'samudayam' or community (Jones, 1989; Kumar, 1997). Then the idea of community is completely contradictory to the overarching concept of nation as it 'de-imagining nation' (Reghu, 2010)

Interestingly, the formation of consciousness is viewed as a result of colonial modernity and Western influence, as are the lower castes' assertions. The arrival of Westerners was said to have sparked several social reform movements, including the

Ezhavas (Pullapilly, 1976). While the Ezhava movement is known as a socio-religious reform movement it also contains multiple streams, one of which is an evolving socio-religious stream, and another which is more elitist, secular, and political (Heimsath, 1978; Jones, 1989). Colonialism contributes to societal restructuring and creation of ethnic groups; inevitably, each group emerges as an autonomous ethnic identity, and the Ezhavas forged a new identity by the end of the colonial period (Kurien, 1994). In terms of typology, one strand of the lower caste movement is based on Hinduism, while the other is grounded on ethnic or Western ideologies with an egalitarian component. The Ezhava movement falls into the first type (Jaffrelot, 2003).

Despite many of these well-received works, the dichotomy of colonialism versus nationalism, and the depiction of South Indian politics as a sectarian fight for British patronage, limits the potential for understanding localised movements and their vernacular expressions. Also, the dominant theories like ethnicization and Sanskritization narrow the extent of exploring diverse claims of lower castes in various regions. While recognising the merits of these approaches, this article suggests that caste oppression, the desire for new opportunities brought about by colonial modernity, and the aspiration for a fair share of social resources and power drove the Ezhavas to get organised.

Kerala renaissance or social reforms were spearheaded by individuals who embody different religious traditions, and by several caste associations. These caste associations serve as agents of modernity, welfare and improvement organisations, transforming traditional Hindu India's social institutions into democratic pressure groups (Bailey, 1963; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1960). The role of social reformers was to guide social transformation, i.e., to push modernity with a progressive effect on individuals and groups (Heimsath, 1978). Social reform is seen as the first step in the national movement, and supporters of Narayana Guru are regarded as the forebears of the Kerala national movement (Namboodiripad, 1968). If this claim is accepted, the national movement must be viewed as a single, homogenous consensus making project. When this happens, we lose sight of disagreements, conflicts, compromise, and the politics of many 'sub-nationalities' within the 'national.'

The beginnings of caste associations can be traced back to Indian responses to the state's caste identification and classification, and these modalities influenced the birth of caste organisations, or 'sabhas,' that protect the dignity of the people it represents (Cohn and Guha, 1987; Molony, 2018; Srinivas, 1968). The dyarchy constitution also encouraged the rise of associations claiming to represent specific communities (Arnold, Jeffrey, and Manor, 1976). Even so, the influence of the SNDP in South Malabar, specifically in Palakkad remained limited until the mid-1940s. Here, the Ezhava movement had a different structure and agenda, and it was closer to Madras politically. This defies popular view that the Narayana movement, which originated in Travancore, fostered and shaped lower caste movements in other regions. Instead of being united under a single caste association, the South Malabar Ezhavas experimented with the Sanskritization model of emulation, abandoned religion, underwent religious conversion, and became politically active. Therefore, this study does not fit into lower-caste movement typologies or lend itself to a broad view of caste associations.

## South Malabar Ezhavas as a Caste

The Ezhavas form a backward Hindu caste in the Kerala state. If we go by the conventional classification of castes, the Ezhavas come under ‘untouchable’ or ‘polluting’ varna castes (Innes, 1997). The Ezhavas are said to be outside the four varnas of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, but they are the highest among the ‘excluded castes’ and hold a middle position in the caste hierarchy (Aiyappan, 1965). As per one interpretation, they are foreigners who emigrated from Ceylon (Alexander, 1949; Baden-Powell, 1892; Logan, 1951, 1951; Thurston, 1909). The name Chova, another name of Ezhava is believed to be the altered form of Sevaka, servant (Day, 1863). There are claims that the Ezhavas were a martial sect (Aiyappan 1965; Menon, 1962; Thurston, 1909). Their primary activities included planting palm trees and producing toddy, coconut fibre, and jaggery. Among them were woodcutters, boatmen, fishermen, merchants, schoolteachers, and ayurvedic practitioners (Buchanan, 1988).

Colonialists kept much of the existing socio-economic systems in place without making significant changes, and they approved customary laws that favoured Brahmins and caste Hindus (Baden-Powell, 1892). Resulting, Ezhavas in South Malabar had a lower social status, with limited opportunities for education, employment, political representation, and visibility in the public sphere. In reality, Malabar had to wait till the end of British colonialism for an educational upsurge because virtually little had been done to educate backward communities (Innes, 1997). Also, property relations, political and economic conditions, and educational policy had historically been less conducive to educational growth (Shea, 1959). That said, because of their improved economic status and closer social proximity to Hindu castes, Ezhavas were the best-educated among the untouchables, providing them with better educational prospects (Chandramohan, 1987). Western education was the ‘passport’ to government jobs, therefore getting a good education was absolutely critical (Suntharalingam, 1974). There were just a few university graduates among Ezhavas in the early 1900s, but they were unable to find meaningful employment (Chami, 1936).

Almost all of Malabar’s land, both cultivated and uncultivated, was private property owned by Brahmins as their “janmam” birthright, which grants them full absolute ownership of the soil. The majority of Ezhavas were tenant farmers with different types of rights or workers, with little potential for advancement. Ever since its inception, SNDP gave thrust to promote industry among community members (Sanoo, 2018). Though the influence of the SNDP was limited in Palakkad, a few individuals ventured into lucrative businesses and professions, resulting in the creation of a small middle class. Because of British-led social and economic changes such as excise regulations, they benefited from the manufacturing and distribution of liquor and toddy (Bailey, 1957). Notwithstanding modest gains in socioeconomic and educational attainment, caste oppression persisted, which contradicted their achievements. Beside that, Ezhavas were underrepresented in public services and elected bodies including Taluk board, District Board, Municipality, and Legislative Council. The lack of representation in government had aroused considerable discontent, so the Ezhava leaders made it a high political priority.

## Early Efforts for Reforms and to Reconfigure the Social

The first instance of organised reforms among Ezhavas in Palakkad was the construction of the Yakkara temple, founded in December 1907 under the patronage of Vijananodhayam Yogam. The people that started the movements, as said by Chami (1936), were those who “entered the public service with the ideas of civility.” Reforming religious customs, life-cycle rituals, promoting occupations, progress in education and agriculture, bringing prosperity, and providing scholarships to poor students were all priorities of Yogam. Narayana Guru used to send his disciples to the Yakkara temple to talk about religion, ethics, education, and commerce (Sanoo, 2018).

Following the erection of Hindu deity images in the temple, the practise of doing pooja in Ezhava homes gradually grew. Such practices drew Ezhavas closer to the Brahminical system of worship, ‘sanskritising’ people who were kept outside of Hinduism in the name of purity and pollution (Aiyappan, 1965). The Ezhavas’ sense of oppression, however, was unaffected by Sanskritization (Nieuwenhuys, 2004). The Ananda Samajam was another influential movement among the Ezhavas. Brahmananda Sivayogi of Alathur Sidha Ashramam, built a branch at Kannadi, and campaigned among the locals. Samajam persuaded people about religious superstitions by citing examples of priestly Brahmins’ rejection of customs and embracing modern education and professions. After all, this persuasion was only possible by comparing Brahmins who had made progress in pursuit of modernity. These early methods for internal caste reform were necessary in gradually reconfiguring the social.

## Colonial encounter of Ezhavas

British colonial rule established a well-organized governance system by codifying ruling procedures, legislation, defining private and public, enumerative programme, standardisation of language and script, English education, and so on. The colonial project is often seen as ‘civilizing mission’, ‘control and command’, ‘modernizing’, ‘knowledge gathering’ (Bayly and Bayly, 1999; Chatterjee, 1986; Cohn, 1996; Dirks, 2001; Edney, 2009; Irschick, 1994; Mitchell, 1991). Yet, as Pandian suggests, colonialism also provided the ground for articulating new forms of identities (Pandian, 2007). While many subjects viewed colonial rule as oppressive and subjugating, Ezhavas had a wider perception. For instance Chami writes (1936):

*The coming of westerners is the primary reason for modern civilisation and growth of Ezhavas. The sense of equality and liberty began to rise among Ezhava with the removal of ignorance within the community by the general education systems. They began to form organisations and nourished institutions under their community. As a result, even educated people have begun to rise among the poor Ezhavas, who received western education, began to understand the taste of liberty. They understood that acquiring knowledge, education, organisations and freedom is necessary for the goodness of the community.*

While colonialism remained violent, the alliance of colonisers and caste Hindus continued to deny lower caste their rights; nonetheless, colonialism also provided paths to emancipation for some oppressed groups. Colonial dominance appears to be fluid,

complex, and contextual in this case of Ezhavas, instead of rigid and hegemonic. The condition of colonialism cannot be described as monolithic with regard to the lower castes. Depending on their social hierarchy, it was experienced differently by various castes. Certainly, the Ezhavas were victims of colonialism, but their exclusion was due to Madras' peculiar socioeconomic and political condition, in which education and employment were denied.

The colonial bureaucracy required English-educated natives with scribal skills and educational credentials to fill various administrative positions. Brahmins were ahead of other caste groups in terms of English proficiency, which was essential for government jobs, teaching, and politics (Irschick, 1969; Washbrook, 2010). Brahmins made up about three percent of the population, and yet their presence in the colonial bureaucracy, modern professions like law, and the leadership of the Indian National Congress was greater and more apparent (Fuller and Narasimhan, 2010; Pandian, 2007; Suntharalingam, 1974). This Brahmin dominance in public life hampered the prospects of many non-Brahmin castes and depressed classes, culminating in the 1916 "non-Brahmin Manifesto."

As earlier stated, Ezhava marginalisation was primarily conditioned by under-representation in government, inadequate educational opportunities, limited occupational mobility, and denial of access to the public. The question of employment for the educated and representation had already become one of the central issues in the political scenario of Madras (Suntharalingam, 1974). Rather than engaging in conflict, Ezhavas attempted to resolve issues through petitions and memorials. Petition serves as testimony of self-formed collectives that provided the basis for modern associative life (Balachandran, 2019; Raman, 2019). Despite the use of a variety of rhetorical tropes and discourses, petition writing allowed people to express their grievances, opposition, and claims to the government in a discursive way (Jaffe, 2019). This evolution of petitioning occurred within new forms of the public sphere, where individuals or collective petitions play an important role (O'Hanlon, 2019).

Representatives of the Thiyya-Ezhavas of Malabar presented Governor Pentland with a memorandum when he visited Calicut in 1917. The technique of considering 'non-brahmin' as a homogeneous category in elections prevented Ezhavas from sending their caste members to the council, so special representation in local bodies was sought. They claimed that the existing system only serves the interests of dominant castes, as the majority of Hindus are never represented. The response of Ezhavas evinced that the non-brahmin category was not an inclusive political community of equals, but rather existed to protect the exclusivity of dominant castes (Basu, 2011; Jeffrey, 1977; Manikumar, 2020). While these communities were critical of government policies and the unholy alliance between Brahmins and the government, they regularly sought to resolve grievances within the framework of state power.

## **Conferences as Venues of Political Pronouncement**

Many communities formed 'sabha' or caste associations, to work for social progress. These sabhas appeared to be increasingly forming alliances and gaining political

significance. In 1919, the Yakkara temple hosted a significant yogam of Ezhava aristocrats. Depressed Classes Mission leader Shanmugam Mudaliyar was an invitee to this meeting. He reportedly said (Chami, 1936):

*“Brahmin and other upper castes have begun to harass the lower castes before long; it continues even in the present day. One of such harassment is not allowing people to walk in the public roads. They speak about the home rule to accomplish their purposes. If they get home rule, we have to be worried that they would be able to keep the lower castes away from the road where you are now free to walk. To accomplish objectives, they strategically came inside our people and made them Home Rule member with their influence and force. There were a few instances of riots because of speaking against the Home rule. We lower caste should not believe in what they say, if you do believe without thinking, our efforts will become futile”.*

In Madras’ evolving politics, even middle castes like Ezhava were frequently engaging with depressed classes to make political declarations. Non-Brahmin leaders, in their attempt to establish a greater political alliance, strongly supported Adi Dravida’s claim to social equality just before the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms. Prominent non-Brahmin leaders have conducted many conferences to get lower castes close to their doctrine (Basu, 2011). Delegates at the Yakkara gathering were unified in their conviction that seeking progress under the British was preferable to falling at the feet of high-ranking castes who mistreat lower castes. The meeting agreed not to support the Home Rule League in any form due to their dislike of non-brahmin leadership in the national movement. ‘Nation’ was thought to be the only legitimate thing worth fighting for, and any deviation from this drew the ire of Nationalists. After the Montagu–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919, dyarchy system of governance was introduced. The size of the provincial legislative assemblies has increased. The Madras government designated some members of the depressed classes to the newly formed Legislative Council. M.C. Rajah, R. Veerian and Rettamalai Srinivasan vehemently voiced numerous issues of the depressed classes in the council (Viswanath, 2014). Communities like Ezhavas always sought the cooperation of these representatives in raising grievances before the government.

Local Ezhava organisations with varying agendas and structures also proliferated. Ezhava Samajam Taluk Yogam was founded in August 1922. Dravida Samajam was founded in 1923, with participation from a few Brahmins, Nairs, and other castes, and it was the first time upper castes participated in an Ezhava gathering. This Samajam envisions the common ethnic identity of ‘dravida’, transcending the exclusive caste identity of Ezhava. But, it was closed as Ezhava members objected to Congress supporters’ anti-government stance. In April 1923, around one thousand delegates attended the Ezhava Mahayogam Conference in Kannadi. Education, industry, agriculture, employment, rituals, publishing, scholarships, self-help groups for wage workers, government recognition, tenancy reforms, the removal of untouchability, and voting rights were among the topics on the conference’s agenda. After being denied access to caste-Hindu temples, the conference resolved to boycott temples and allow lower castes to enter Ezhava worship places.

Another Ezhava Mahayogam meeting in Kannanur in March 1923 discussed economic prosperity, religious conversion, and community solidarity. An Adi-Dravida session was arranged at the same venue after the Ezhava discussions. Clearly, the Ezhavas sought alliances with other oppressed castes. As the Depressed Class, comprising the Pulayas, had five members nominated to the Legislative Council and the Ezhavas had none, the decision to unite with the depressed classes was a necessary outcome of such a political situation. These small organisations proved effective in emphasising upper caste violence, under-representation, backwardness, irrational rituals and customs, and the desire for progress, in addition to opposing numerous widespread caste practises.

## Political Crusades

The distinction between 'community' and 'political' has blurred as the two have become increasingly interdependent. The new political aggregation based on caste and religious identity further shaped Indian politics. The elites, posing as spokespersons for the Hindu Mahasabha, the Muslim League, the Christians, or the South Indian Liberation Federation, claimed to represent broad, homogeneous constituencies (Omvedt, 1976). New types of political subjectivity emerged as the Madras presidency underwent significant radical political reforms. With the arrival of the non-Brahmin movement and the awakening of Adi-Dravida sections of society, there was a critical political mobilisation (Washbrook, 1975). Depressed classes realised that participation in political power was the universal cure for their ills. Despite its local intent, the Ezhava movement went further, successfully establishing links with the growing provincial politics.

The wealthy upper castes dominated the leadership of the Congress and the Home Rule League. Obviously, this has generated a repulsive attitude among the *avarνας* towards the nationalist movement. Somewhat uncomfortable relations between Ezhavas and Home Rule League exposes the undercurrents in nationalist politics. As, in September 1917, Ezhavas of Palakkad wrote to Theosophist, Home Rule leader Subrahmanya Iyer when there were no favourable steps even after a year since Annie Besant's ruling in 1916 to allow lower castes in the public roads (Chami, 1936; Menon, 2011). Throughout, the League leadership showed great antipathy towards the untouchables (Ambedkar 1946), because caste was seen as a matter to be resolved only at the level of 'social'. It was the view that the caste issue could never be fixed at the 'political'. The Home Rule movement spoke a language of autonomy by refusing to recognize caste (Pandian, 2007). Thus, the intensified ideological struggle between Home Rule, Nationalists and Ezhavas lasted for long as a lacuna that cannot be overcome. Caste actually prevented Brahmins and lower castes from forming alliances to fight the British.

## Up for the State, up against the Congress

Under the leadership of Congress, the national movement gained ground in the early 1920s. Gandhi had evolved as the undisputed leader of the movement and then became an indispensable figure in politics. Congress launched the non-cooperation movement in 1920 in response to the 'wrongs' of Punjab and Khilafat (Sarkar, 1989). Despite its



national character, non-cooperation campaigns were ‘mostly scattered and sporadic, and they grew out of stresses and strains in local society’ (Baker & Washbrook, 1975). The South Malabar Ezhavas, like many religious leaders, moderates, and non-brahmin parties, opposed Gandhi’s move. The fundamental root of their schism was Congress’s incitement of public hatred against the government through speeches and meetings.

Meanwhile, Khilafat got ground in South Malabar and gained backing from the leadership of non-cooperation (Armitage, 1921). The British completely lost control over Ernad and Valluvanad taluk of South Malabar for several months as Khilafat and non-cooperation spread throughout the district (Sarkar, 1989). The first priority of the government was to maintain law and order and create legitimacy among the people to continue British rule in India. Therefore, the government unhesitatingly collaborated with the dissenting groups. In November 1920, the Government called on sober-minded men to take comprehensive measures to assist law and order (Reeves, 1966).

Notably, the interests of nationalists and the lower castes were diametrically opposed rather than mutually beneficial. While the national movement strived to unite people in support of the expulsion of imperial forces, the lower castes were more concerned with plans for their upliftment, with group solidarity being seen as the essential condition for progress. This position was definitely at odds with the concept of “nation” and the nationalist movement. Also, the national movement was thought to be a ploy used by caste Hindus to further their own interests. So, the Ezhavas voiced their strong opposition to Gandhi’s call for a boycott of schools, courts, and government institutions.

Unwilling to face repercussions for supporting organisations that cause problems for the government, Ezhavas resolved to participate in and support all steps taken by the government to maintain order. The government launched counter-programme conferences, circulated leaflets, and issued prohibitory orders where necessary. Years of upper-caste and non-Brahmin oppression had compelled the ‘untouchables’ to side with the British (Basu, 2011). In June 1921, Palakkad saw the first wave of anti-non-cooperation protest rallies. Following that, a series of meetings were held to persuade people of the opportunities to natives in administration, non-discriminatory policies, and impartiality that ensure people’s welfare. All such rallies intended to generate public support for the government while openly condemning nationalists. Exhortatory speeches by officials and local notables were the main tactic used, another being the act of pledging “loyalty” to the State (Reeves, 1966). From 1921 July to March 1922, Ezhava workers instituted about fourteen such yogams in Palakkad. The dissenting Ezhavas have effectively used anti-non-cooperation stand to turn their community into an acquiescent, political community, active recipient of imperial government policies. The national movement’s pursuit for a single ‘national’ agenda was clearly complicated by regional power dynamics, mobility aspirations, and lower caste assertions.

## **Right to the public-Ezhavas and Kalpathy entry**

Several claims-making articulations of community, and its redefinition through collective activities in public space, have received scholarly attention (Freitag, 1989; Price, 1991). Since 1919, depressed-class representatives continued to exert pressure on the government to establish their right of access to public spaces (Viswanath,

2014). The government could no longer ignore the efforts of various social groups seeking permission to enter public spaces, forcing officials to issue an order in their favour. The Madras Government issued G.O. No. 2660 AL&M on September 25, 1924 (No. 1009/1924 of August 25th) concerning depressed classes' access to public roads, wells, and the freedom to travel freely along any public road or street in town or village throughout the presidency. The government's decision and order were widely circulated, with most newspapers in the presidency publishing them.

Following the order, the depressed classes worked tirelessly to invoke the law that guaranteed the right to 'public.' The law provided an opportunity for the government to demonstrate its commitment to its citizens while also allowing lower castes to make collective public claims. The order was printed and distributed, along with a statement encouraging Ezhavas to make use of their right to enter public streets during the Kalpathy cart festival, which was to take place from November 13 to 15, 1924. In Malabar, streets or villages known as Agrapharam are exclusively reserved for using Brahmins, and Kalpathy is one such place. After all, the road is being built with public funds, and Tiyya and Ezhava were never permitted to enter these streets.

M.P. Raghavan, an Ezhava lawyer, informed officials of their intention, reminding them that the Brahmin street is public as it is maintained with municipal funds (Viswanath, 2014). The Palakkad division officer assured Raghavan that there would be no opposition to attending the festival, and that there would be no conflict. Officers ensured that Ezhavas would be assigned a spot and that they would be sent in smaller groups so that they could see the festival and return. The municipal chairman was in charge of finding sites for the group to gather.

As per government order and the collector's guidance, eighty Ezhavas arrived at the festival venue around 3 p.m. on November 13, 1924. They gathered in three groups to watch the festival. As the Ezhava returned, they were blocked by the Brahmins and assaulted with sticks and stones. Some fled to save their life, and injured persons were taken to the hospital. Surprisingly, the entire event occurred in front of police and other government officials. The Ezhavas had sought prior permission from officials and had given written notice; however, the government failed to protect them from the ferocity of Brahmins. Furthermore, the entry was based on the legislature's decision that there would be no opposition to entering public roads.

Those who entered Kalpathy streets included prominent Ezhavas like lawyers, magistrates, district board members, and wealthy individuals, but their socioeconomic status did not shield them from being victims of caste violence. Brahmins made correspondence with municipal authorities to prevent Ezhavas from entering Kalpathy. Similarly, in Madras, Tamil Brahmins have protested most vehemently against the opening of public space—roads and highways—to the free passage of paraiyans (Washbrook, 2010). The government banned the Ezhavas under section 144 of the Indian Penal Code, and Brahmins were allowed to hold the festival. These incidents show the differential treatment meted out by the state on its citizens and perpetual violation of 'rights' of depressed classes.

The Kalpathy incident also prompted questions in Madras' legislative council. Krishnan Nair's motion for an adjournment to discuss the government's policy in issuing an order prohibiting Ezhavas and others from entering Kalpathy during the car festival was denied by the president (Anon 1925). The depressed classes representative

R. Veerain raised the issue in the legislative council, care of which the Kalpathy disturbance gained political dimensions. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the member in charge responding to the questions said:

*'the order was to have effect only during the car festival; that it was not intended to question the right of any community to enter the public highways and was only to preserve law and order. The Government left the matter to the discretion of local official, The Government were satisfied that there were possibilities of disturbances at that time at Kalpathy necessitating the promulgation of such an order. The government policy was always to maintain the principle that every one of His majesty's subjects had the rights to pass through the public highways, but they held that where the rights pertained to a particular road, it had to be established by regular judicial proceedings'.*

The issue is that if the government truly wanted to ensure that everyone has equal access to public spaces, why would it advocate for rights to be established through litigation? The government's refusal to interfere gave savarna violence legitimacy. The Ezhavas' unwavering belief that they could only be liberated under colonial rule is now being called into question. Such an unconcerned government response exemplified 'Brahman Raj,' or Brahmin-British collaboration (Price, 1989). The colonial government always acted in the interests of the upper castes, ensuring the upper castes' dominance (Hardgrave, 2006).

The Kalpathy incident sparked a mixed reaction in many parts of the country. T.K. Madhavan, SNDP Secretary and Swami Sathyavruthan visited Palakkad to initiate reconciliation steps, consulted local leaders, condemned the incident and sought resolutions. Since the fight against untouchability has become a concern for the Congress, five hundred caste Hindus gathered in Akathethara, the seat of the Palakkad Rajas, to condemn the incident. Sadasiva Iyer, a liberal brahmin, of Hindu Samajam, Dharmika Brahmana Sangha, summoned a meeting in Madras at YMCA Hall on November 1924. Consultations were also held in the last week of December 1924 at Kozhikode and at Calicut Bank on 20 November 1924.

Around this time, several presidency districts reported depressed classes revolting against social disabilities (Armitage, 1921). The lower castes adopted litigation to establish their rights on numerous occasions. The lower castes continued to fight for civil rights, but importantly none of these struggles gained significant support from Gandhi or the Congress. As Ambedkar contends, untouchables had initiated satyagraha movement to establish their right to draw water from public well and enter public temples (Ambedkar, 1946). Between 1924 and 1930, Gandhi and the Congress do not appear to have taken any significant measures toward the abolition of untouchability, nor do they appear to have undertaken any projects that would benefit untouchables.

Kalpathy incident triggered intense debate among Ezhavas on religious conversion. The Moplah Revolt and the struggle in Kalpathi have created the fear of 'religious conversion' all over India. As a result, South Malabar attracted the attention of Hindu reform leaders, religious organisations, particularly Shuddhi and Sangathan movements (Congress, 1924; Gupta, 1998; Natarajan, 1925c). The Hindu organisations realised the 'vast field for the work of social uplift in Malabar for those interested in the elevation of the depressed classes' which will avoid conversion of avarnas to other beliefs (Natarajan, 1925b).

The Hindu Mahasabha stressed the need of self-defence training since the Moplah revolt. The Hindus were militarised by forming a 'citizen army' of a thousand people in Palakkad to defend the town from possible rebel Moplah attacks (Vaze, 1921). The Arya Samaj began organising reconversion to bring back those who had converted to Islam shortly after the revolt. These events in South Malabar demonstrate the depths of Hindu anxiety, and how that anxiety was channelled into a military-style spectacle. The positioning of certain gender symbols, pictures, and themes helped to establish and discuss the identity of Hindus (Gupta, 1998). The various expressions of the extremist Hindu community, have historical roots, particularly during the colonial era.

The Arya Samaj took advantage of the situation in Kalpathi, hurriedly their activists begin to work. Gradually Ezhavas started joining Arya Samaj as a last resort to escape from untouchability, formed sabhas and opened a branch in Palakkad. Twelve Ezhava Arya Samajis walked through Kalpathy Agraharam on October 31, 1925, along with Arya Samaj worker Brahmachari Vedhabandhu. Upon seeing them, around two hundred Brahmins came, pelted stones and sticks on them, an Ezhava received a lathi cut on the head and a Brahmin youth was stabbed (Natarajan, 1925d). The Madras Non-Brahmin Confederation conference held at Madras on 19 December 1925 passed resolutions 'condemning the action of the authorities in prohibiting the entry of untouchables and Arya Samaj converts into the streets of Kalpathy' (Mitra 1925). Upper caste outrage, aggression and disdain are not limited to Malabar. Frykenberg portrays Tamil Brahmins' indignation at the proselytizing practices of Christian missionaries in Madras (Frykenberg, 1981).

At a time of significant threat, in November 1925, the police informed Arya Samajis that they did not have any opposition against them entering Kalpathy street and sent two police officers to guard the street. Officials cautioned the Brahmins that no one could prevent Arya Samajis from entering Kalpathy. The Brahmin street continued to be a stage for the restoration of self-respect of Ezhavas even one year after the main struggle. The Ezhavas wearing the holy thread entered Kalpathy as they desired, through this method (Anon 2002). In the meantime, Arya Samaj organiser, president of Bharatiya Hindu Shuddhi Sabha, Shradhanand went Sivagiri to meet Narayana Guru (Sanoo, 2018).

Arya Samaj joined Kerala crusades mainly to encourage low castes to maintain their Hindu identity (Heimsath, 1978). Shradhanand is someone who, after the Malabar Rebellion, turned to shuddhi and the reclamation of the untouchables. Throughout 1922, he negotiated with Congress to provide financial help for his schemes. Only after Congress had refused to engage in the movement did he renounce his affiliation with Congress and turn to the Mahasabha (Gordon, 1975). The crux of the Hindu Sangathan expression was that Hinduism and its ideal representations should be given priority in the nation building agenda of Congress (Ghosh, 1994). Lala Lajpat Rai contributed to Shradhanand a portion of funds collected for anti-untouchability work (Natarajan, 1925a).

The activities of Arya Samaj in Kerala had created a furore, and they faced opposition from orthodox Hindus. Shradhanand's quick visit underlines the fact that Arya Samajis had succeeded in getting Narayana Guru's silent approval for their work (Sanoo, 2018). When Guru was asked to send out a statement in favor of Arya Samaj, Guru said he had no opposition. Caste Hindus, however, could not accept Arya Samaj's interference and approached the court. P.C. Sankaran, an Ezhava convert to Arya Samaj was charged for defiling worship place and insulting the Brahmins by

entering within the polluting distance of Laxminarayan temple. This case ended in his acquittal, ultimately. The quashing of this case, clearly proves that the Ezhavas on becoming converts to Arya Samaj drop their 'theendal' and therefore cease to be polluting castes. This solved the problem of Ezhava converts to Arya Samaj, but not that of unapproachability.

This entire performative, involving orthodox Brahmins, Arya Samaj, and the converted Ezhavas, shows just how religious symbols and narratives have become a critical platform for the reinforcement of upper-caste dominance and group identities (Gupta, 2011). Finally, Arya Samaj had obtained a ruling from the High Court of Madras that all members of the public have equal rights in public streets and that one segment of society cannot exclude another section from using public roads. Though the old notion of communal space and hereditary privilege fades, and more refined ideas of "human" and "public" emerging, Shuddhi did 'protect' Hindus (Frykenberg, 1981; Hardiman, 2007).

## **The Aftermath of Kalpathy Struggles**

Given the influence it has had on the social and political sphere, we should cautiously consider the implications of the Kalpathy struggle. Around a hundred Ezhavas converted to Christianity, Arya Samajam, and Islam, infringing on Hindu social order and Brahmin hegemony. Twenty of them converted to Christianity, while the other sixty joined the Arya Samajam. At the end of the two-year-long struggle, the robust stance of the Brahmins miserably failed, along with Christians and Arya Samajis, Hindu Mahasbha, many Ezhavas gained right, freedom to enter Kalpathy agharam street (Natarajan, 1925e). The Ezhavas who had been converted to Christianity for entry into Kalpathy returned to the community. Just a few of them remained with Christianity and Arya Samajam.

The Arya missionaries warned Ezhavas about the dangers of adopting foreign religions and pushed them to struggle for their rights within Hinduism (Natarajan, 1926). The Hindu leadership was concerned by the deliberations and initiation of the proselytization activity, and devised several methods to prevent more conversions. Social reform movements sought solutions within Hinduism rather than turning to other religions; even minor deviations were not tolerated. Thus, most converts faced strong opposition from society and family members, and were frequently shunned by the community. After all, they were afraid to fight for equality as their lands were controlled by the upper castes, making resistance and confrontation hard. Resources are vital as it gave oppressed and marginalized people with new institutions and political agency, enabling new discourses for social transformation (Mohan 2006).

## **The Quest for Liberation-Religious Conversion**

In theory, Ezhavas' attempt was not to discover a new type of piety, of worldview, to live according to a distinct religion, or to embrace a new religion. The main aim of religious conversion was to achieve liberation from caste harassment, and this was the primary purpose of the entire debate on conversion. They argued that it would be better to convert to another religion than expecting the Madras government to implement orders for right to travel, and conversion should be the non-violent policy towards caste Hindus (Chami, 1936).

Sahodaran Ayyappan, while reacting to Kalpathy rejected the Gandhian position of 'saving caste even for the removal of untouchability' (Gandhi 1927, 1934, 1998). Though stressing Buddhism as the most effective way to annihilate caste, he advised Ezhavas to follow Narayana Guru's 'one caste one religion' principles. Rao Saheb Ayathan Gopalan, Brahma Samajist, reminded Ezhava Samajam secretary that those who want to convert to Christianity should not be doing self-deception. Hindu Maha Sabha Secretary Aandha Priyan cautioned that the number of other religions is increasing through conversion.

In Kannanur, the Ezhavas hosted a conversion sabha, in which religious leaders spoke on each religion and Ezhavas were invited to their faith. K.T. Madhavan had the opinion that religious conversion is inevitable. A five-member committee was formed for campaigning in favour of religious conversion. In April 1925 four persons converted to Christianity and changed their names. Thirty people converted to Christianity and entered Kalpathy agraharam street shortly after.

Although, the Madras Presidency had the largest number and variety of Christians in British India, Basel Evangelical Mission (BEM), St Sebastian Church, Melarcode Syrian Catholic were the only Christians in Palakkad. From 1902 onwards it came under the Bishop of Coimbatore, a mostly Tamil-speaking congregation and BEM was under the control of the whites. Finally, the priests of the Marthoma Church from Travancore came to Palakkad and baptized Ezhavas (John, 1998). Staying at Thenkurissi Pandiyottu Kalam, priests of Marthoma Syrian Church began their work from 1926. They spread the gospel through house visits, individual or open meetings, distributing pamphlets and bible copies in many places. With the relentless coaxing by the priests, nine men and two women took baptism and entered the Marthoma Church in October 1926. Women volunteer groups were formed to work with women, taking into account the cultural traditions of Palakkad. In between October 1926 to 1932, about fifty-two individuals, including men and women, took baptism, became Christians under the Marthoma Church. All these baptized individuals were publicly known personalities and affluent landlords, and maintained a high economic status.

In addition, people have also been converted to Islam on numerous occasions since 1926. Kesavan, brother of E.K. Chami, changed to Abdul Razak. However, in Palakkad Taluk, only four Ezhavas had converted to Islam. There existed a strong belief among the Ezhavas that they were originally Sinhalese from Ceylon. C. Krishnan of Mithavadi, Ayyakutty Judge of Thrissur, K. Ayyappan of Kochi, C.V. Kunjiraman Travancore had already embraced Buddhism (Sanoo, 2018). Six Buddhist groups visited Malabar in between 1918 and 1935. The Buddhist mission was operational in a few amsams of Palakkad Taluk. Kannannur Buddha Samajam had organised a huge meeting in 1924. About fifty individuals took Pancha Sheelam at Thachangad Buddha religious meeting. Later, Palakkad Buddhist mission formed by joining small units (Chami, 1936). By this means, the oppressed discovered a new religion in opposition to mainstream religious discourses. The features of a new religion of oppressed take shape according to the life situation, as a new interpretation, deliberate appropriation, modification, or outright rejection of old beliefs (Aloysius, 1998b).

## **In Gandhi, seeking refuge**

Spiritual and political questions of the Ezhavas remained unsolved even after their conversions and long struggles. Gandhi, for example, received two delegations

during his Ezhavas, led by Sukumaran, T.M. Chamiappan, and P.C. Gopalan. When the Ezhavas inquired about accepting other religions as a solution to their problems, Gandhi told them to stay in the Hindu fold, fight, and find solutions through the Hindu Mahasabha. Gandhi had no opposition to the joining of Ezhavas to Arya Samaj or Brahma Samaj. While Gopalan argued that the redemption of his group lies either in conversion to other faiths or in non-participation in the fight for swaraj, however, the Ezhavas wanted to know whether a purified Hinduism would be possible. Gandhi's response was 'yes', and he said that he wasn't going to be a Hindu and he couldn't survive (Gandhi, 2000b).

Gandhi's conviction was that untouchability was foreign to Hinduism, and as reformers were seeking to eradicate the 'blot' of untouchability, that conversion was no solution (Gandhi, 2000a). The program of swadeshi, in addition to boycotting foreign goods, stood for the safeguarding of traditional institutions and "Hinduism" from Christian missionary work (Gandhi, 1967; Mallampalli, 2004). Gandhi believed that 'India stands in no need of conversion from one faith to another,' warned against 'denationalisation,' and argued that 'the great faiths of India' are sufficient for nation-building (Gandhi 1959, 1969). Though Gandhi recognised untouchability as a crime against God, he assumed that it would end if upper caste attitudes changed (Gandhi 1921, 1933, 1939). This Gandhian stance on caste had far-reaching implications for the anti-caste struggle in India. The quest for the potential of spiritual salvation, moral upliftment, non-Hindu self by conversion was effectively trampled on by Shuddhi, Sangathan, and Gandhian social reform. Reformed Hinduism, and the overarching force of nationalism, conquered dissenting nationalities, crushing all lower caste resistance.

## **Towards a Theory of Anti-Caste**

Communities seeking upward mobility often have rejected their subjugated position and created a new history. Instead of placing Brahmin authority at the centre, they questioned the very foundation upon which Brahmin power was built. For instance, Jyotirao Phule recreated Maratha history by narrating a story about Aryan invaders seizing power from the native Kshatriyas, and targeted the divine authority of Brahmin (O'Hanlon, 2002) (Phule and Deshpande, 2002). Iyothee Thass argued about Tamil Buddhist history in relation to the Parayas' caste status (Ayyathurai, 2011; Rajadurai and Geetha, 1998). Dr.Palppu, co-founder of the SNDP, had made an attempt to write Ezhava history. Despite the fact that many people attempted to write, he found it unworthy of publication (Kumar, 2014). Influential Ezhava thinkers, including Palpu, held that Ezhava had originated from the Buddhists of Ceylon.

In Ezhava Charithram (1936), Elamandham Chami articulates that Ezhavas are Buddhists. To support this claim, he compared Ezhavas of Malabar and Sinhals of Ceylon based on socio-cultural similarities, physical appearances, and religious faith (Buddhism). He goes on to say that by disobeying the Brahmins, the Ezhavas were forced to accept a low social status, gave up their ancient religion, and began worshipping Hindu religious sacraments, causing their ancient religion to fade away. He rationally rejects Hinduism and caste hierarchy by invoking a Buddhist past. Chami also wrote a treatise on Buddhist religious practises called 'Buddha Dharma Pradeepam' (1931), which aimed to popularise Buddhism. In 1931, Odannur Chathu,

an Ezhava sanskrit scholar wrote Jathidaithyaari. Chathu expertly deconstructs the cunning within texts like Manusmrithi, proving that knowledge is a universal right, using a dialogical method. He rejects sacred books because it contradict humanity's core values of equality and fraternity (Chathu, 1931). By narrativizing and invoking the past, these writings advanced an anti-caste worldview centred on fraternity and equality, which also transformed into new practises and discourses (Mohan, 2006). Both rejecting Indian lineage and invoking foreignness are attempts to distance oneself from the Hindu social order. These utterances effectively dissected upper caste dominance and its ideology, despite its limited scope.

## Conclusion

There is a large body of literature about Ezhava movement. Filippo and Caroline Osella have argued that 'modernity together with a generalised commitment to progress, appears as integral to Ezhavas' self-defined identities, embedded in community identity' that was forged through the long process of reforms and mobilisation (Osella and Osella, 2000). This article also depicts the long process of mobilisation and reforms aimed at fostering a sense of 'samudhayam,' or community, rather than creating ethnic identity. Dominant paradigms like ethnicization and sanskritization narrow the extent of exploring diverse claims of lower castes in various regions. Caste oppression, the desire for new opportunities brought about by colonial modernity, and the aspiration for a fair share of social wealth and power drove the Ezhavas to get organised. The Ezhava movement kept its developmental agenda while becoming largely a political movement. Though conversion was once a hot topic in the mid-1930s, the religious question faded as the Ezhavas achieved several of their objectives. Members of the movement were drawn to new secular ideals of socialism and Marxism as part of their continual battle for equality (Jones, 1989; Menon, 1994). The Congress was slow in adopting the lower castes. Caste, region, class, and religion, along with their issues, were not incorporated into the abstract and homogeneous nationalism (Mannathukkaren, 2022).

Lower castes tried to restructure and broaden the public sphere by articulating the fundamentals of anti-caste ideology, the imaginations of nation, community, and sociality. The existing framework of knowledge, ideology, performative aspects linked to caste has been challenged. The alleged dominance of brahmins has been questioned by prudently constructed counter-narratives. They aimed at the construction of an 'alternative public' and public opinion through publishing and history writing. While the Hindu reform movements sought to create a unified Hindu identity, the Ezhava campaign was adamantly opposed to the creation of a homogeneous Hindu community. It is argued that lower caste politics in Kerala differs significantly in ideology and political orientation and had not followed a single trajectory. Lower caste assertions appears to be inherently linked with existential conditions and specific location of castes in the hierarchy. Thus, these instances are uneven and many-sided. I contend that Ezhavas' assertions imply the presence of an "autonomous anti-caste movement" in the South Malabar region. The anti-caste movement necessitates critical analysis because the politics it articulated is as important as the anti-caste ideology.



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