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Conversion, Resistance and Identity: Exploring the Subaltern Experience of the Mala Araya Community in Kerala

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Abstract

This study explores the history of religious conversion in Kerala, focusing particularly on the Mala Araya community and interpreting their acceptance of Christianity as an expression of agency rather than a consequence of missionary coercion. Challenging colonial-oriented interpretations that associate Christianity primarily with Western domination, the study examines the conversion of the Mala Arayans within the broader subaltern framework of resistance, self-respect, and the aspiration for educational advancement. Missionary interventions in Travancore, particularly during the administration of Col. Munro and the subsequent activities of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), facilitated the emergence of new educational and social opportunities for marginalized communities, including the Pulayars and Mala Arayans. The abolition of slavery in 1855, together with the expansion of missionary education, provided oppressed communities with opportunities to pursue social advancement and challenge existing hierarchies. Among the Mala Arayans, conversion gained momentum during the second phase of missionary engagement, largely motivated by the pursuit of literacy, social dignity, and protection against exploitation. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of Ranajit Guha, this study interprets their conversion as a deliberate, voluntary, and collective assertion of autonomy within an oppressive social structure. Although their decision encountered resistance from upper-caste communities, commercial interests, and even sections of the missionary establishment, the Mala Arayans embraced conversion as a means of challenging established power relations and transforming their social conditions.

Keywords: Mala Araya tribes, Travancore, religious conversion, agency theory, subaltern studies, missionaries, CMS, LMS, Henry Baker Jr., education, resistance.

Introduction

There is a strong historiographical tradition that interprets Christianity as an offshoot of colonialism, viewing missionary activities primarily as instruments for advancing European political, social, and cultural interests. However, the English East India Company, which exercised colonial authority over India, was initially reluctant to permit Christian missionaries to operate within its territories. Before the nineteenth century, missionaries were largely restricted to the fringes of the Company's dominions and faced considerable limitations on their activities.

In 1787, Charles Grant put forward a proposal emphasising the necessity of the Company's support for Christian missionary activities in India. However, in the absence of a favourable response to his proposal, missionaries were compelled to seek protection under the Dutch authorities. A significant shift in policy

emerged only later, particularly with the growing advocacy for missionary activities within the colonial administration. Macaulay also supported the relaxation of restrictions on missionary entry into India, advocating that the government at least permit Christian missionaries to operate in the country. Furthermore, following the arrival of Lord William Bentinck as Governor-General of India in 1828, government policy became increasingly favourable towards Christian missionary activities.

In Travancore, a similar transformation took place with the arrival of Colonel John Munro, who assumed office as the Resident in 1810. His tenure marked a significant change in the attitude of the Travancore administration towards Christian missionaries, which also had a considerable impact on the development of education in the region.

Against this historical backdrop, the present study seeks to examine whether the conversion of the Mala Araya tribal community to Christianity can be understood as an act of resistance against the exploitation, marginalisation, and socio-economic backwardness experienced by the community. It further seeks to explore how conversion functioned as an agency of social transformation, enabling the Mala Araya people to claim dignity, access education, challenge existing social inequalities, and pursue liberation from oppressive structures. Thus, the study moves beyond the conventional interpretation of conversion as merely a religious phenomenon and examines its significance as a potential instrument of social emancipation and empowerment.

Origin of Conversion in South Travancore

In 1795, London Missionary Society was established. It was one of the major missionary organizations worked in southern Travancore. The London Missionary Society focused on the Gospel of God. Three years after the formal establishment of LMS in 1975, the first LMS man in India, Nathanael Forsyth landed in Southern Travancore. He was a German Lutheran.[1]

In the beginning there was some obstacles emerged in the missionary activities in Travancore. But the formal establishment of missionary work in southern Travancore started with the consent of Major Macaulay and followed by the next Resident Colonel Munro. The latter persuaded Attingal Rani to grant land to Missionary activities.[2]This would show the gradual involvement of British officials on Missionary affairs. In the meantime, a group of missionaries arrived from England and one of them was Charles Mead, for south Travancore, and it was in 1816. Following this in 1838 Mead fetched a few fellow workers.[3] Thus in 1827 Abbs- a missionary- was appointed for Trivandrum. Finally in 1838 Trivandrum was opened to the Missionaries.

Upper Caste Reaction towards this Conversion

In spite of these missionary activities, the orthodox Travancore Hindu administration hardly provided a democratic treatment to the low caste people. And the upper caste administrative bureaucracy believed that they were entrusted to sustain the hierarchical society.[4] But the missionary organisation showed a deep concern for the under privileged poor.[5] Naturally it became a confrontation between the native government and the foreign missionaries. The lower caste people say of Pallar, Parayah and Pulaya were consisted 11.2 percent of total population in 1875.[6] Tribes like Kuravas, for about 56000 were also under sever slavery. In such a situation the missionaries were forced to contact with the low caste people. For the native government opposed the Missionary activities in the land and the upper caste also neglected the Gospel of Christ. Anti-slavery movement was the earliest motivation of the missionaries for the amelioration of the pathetic conditions of low caste slaves in Travancore.[7] Though CMS and LMS

missionary organizations were not in good terms to each other, but the issue of slavery sticked both these factions.[8] The protest against the slavery and malpractices of the then government naturally resulted in the confrontation between missionaries and upper caste. Upper caste Hindus who enjoyed a better living hardly required neither the missionaries nor their teaching. The latter even physically afflicted low caste people.[9]

In the 1840's the LMS and CMS started a campaign for the liberation of all slaves. In 1847 they presented a joint memorandum to the then king of Travancore, demanding the abolition of slavery.[10] The government and upper castes argued against this abolition. Though, consequent on the frequent interference of missionaries in the administration through memorandum and petition, the Travancore Government proclaimed the abolition of slavery in 24th June 1855.[11] That again boosted the relation between missionaries and low caste people and subsequently led to the conversion.

Two phases in the missionary Activities

The social uplift activities of missionaries constitute the 1st phase of conversion. Not only anti-slavery and Shanar Agitations,[12] several subsequent interventions of missionaries in the social field attracted many low castes to the Christianity. Gladstone observes[13] that people find a new social leadership and spiritual revival in these Missionary activities. Thus a group of suppressed Nadars decided to join the mission and considered Christian missionaries as their social protectors. In return the missionaries are also considered these people deserving their protection and concern.

The second phase was marked by the educational opportunities and charitable activities that missionaries extended to the people. The latter included the establishment of schools and hospitals. Education has always been one of the main fields of missionary activity. Congregations were established in close association with the schools. And education was opened to all children. In the curriculum Bible reading was also included. There was a great emphasis on female education and on an average, a quarter of the children attending mission schools were girls. Still more the relevant fact is that these children chiefly came from poor and untouchable communities to whom the intellectual development was denied till then. The missionary activities revealed the folly of that untouchable were incapable of studying this upper caste notion. Missionaries considered spread of education as one of the most important aspect of social change. Matter observes that, where there were no schools, spiritual progress had been small, 'intelligence is the basis of our work'.[14]

In the letters and reports to higher authorities, the missionaries wrote that many people requested for schools and teachers. The lower castes were fleeing their past and risking a new and liberated future away from centuries of oppression. But this plight from the past also gave them an option to enter binto a new and transformed frame work.[15]

The Conversion of Mala Arayans to Christianity

The conversion movements among the Mala Arayans can be situated within the second phase of Christian missionary activities in the region. As early as the sixteenth century, the Archbishop of Goa, Dom Aleixo de Menezes, attempted to send a few missionaries to work among the Mala Araya community. However, despite the missionaries' earnest efforts, the community did not accept their missionary endeavours.

However during the 19th century, Mala Arayans themselves initiated to meet the missionary. But before approaching him, they were aware of his activities from a person named Kupper Kurian, and traders from

the plains. It is also observed that during his Mission journeys, once Baker, one of the CMS missionaries met some of these Mala Aryans.

Thus their interactions with Baker and the information about his work attracted them to Christianity. It is more apt to say that they had some special aim in mind when they went to meet the missionary. Baker himself observed that "Many thought with me, that the Hill men were seeking for a protector, and not Christianity.[16] Baker rejected the idea of going to the hills as a protector to the Mala Arayans. It was in that circumstances, one of their open discussions the Mala Araya representatives told him that they had visited him five times and they would like to know whether he would send them a teacher.

The hill Arayans specified perfectly before the missionary that they need education and if they attain education, nobody will exploit them. It is their ignorance that made them vulnerable to the exploitation of others.

Though the hill people initially approached the missionaries primarily for education, their frequent interactions with them eventually led them to raise questions about their own religious faith. Finally, Baker agreed to visit the hills and begin work among them. On the day fixed by Baker, the Hill Arayans assembled at their customary gathering place—used for settling disputes, conducting sports and games, and marking special occasions.[17] There they met the missionary, an encounter that marked the beginning of a new worldview for the community. For the Mala Arayans, Henry Baker was not merely a missionary; he became a social protector and a figure of trust.[18] This significant event is described in the church records of one of the earliest Mala Araya congregations in Kottayam district.

Though this moment is often narrated as the expansion of missionary influence, Ranajit Guha's agency theory urges us to see the Mala Arayans as active historical subjects rather than passive recipients of change.[19] Their decision to approach Baker, negotiate for education, and redefine their relationship with authority reflects a clear exercise of subaltern initiative. In this sense, the meeting with Baker becomes not merely a missionary encounter but a conscious act of self-assertion through which the Mala Arayans sought dignity, knowledge, and social transformation.

The Movements against the Conversion of Mala Arayans

However, the movement among the Hill Arayans was not without opposition. The first opposition was from the fellow Missionaries of Henry Baker. They opposed the work on the ground that Baker was creating a group of dependent Christians in unhealthy and inaccessible Mountains.[20] But Baker did not give up his venture. The next opposition was from the people who were used to exploit the Arayans. "Many of the inferior government officials, and some Mohammedan and Romanist Merchants who had been in the habit of practicing extortion", tried to prevent the progress of Christianity among them fearing that "If they learned to become Christians, the people of their gains would be gone. The neighbouring Syrian Christians also advised them not to join in the CMS Mission, for them "It is all for personal advantage" of the Missionary. But Mala Arayans did not give up their intention.

The conversion among Mala Arayans was very strong from 1848 – 1878 because during these period Baker was along with them in all progressive activities.

However the aim of education according to missionaries was something more, that are the following; First the Westernizing[21] or civilizing mission that missionaries aimed at in their work among the people in the colonies.[22] Secondly, through education enable them to attain very respectable place in society. This had tremendous effect on the Mala Araya community.[23] And finally, their aim was to create a group of people who can have the same urge to them to convert other people to Christianity.

Thus with the spread of education, a tremendous change took place in the perspectives of Mala Arayans and advanced dynamically than form other tribes of Kerala.

Conclusion

The history of religious conversion among Kerala's marginalized groups—particularly the Mala Araya tribes—reveals a complex interplay between oppression, aspiration, and self-fashioning. While colonial and missionary sources often portray conversion as a by-product of Western expansion, a Subaltern Studies perspective—especially that of Ranajit Guha—allows us to re-interpret these movements through the lens of agency, autonomy, and resistance. For the Mala Arayans, conversion was not merely a theological shift but a conscious strategy to resist structural domination, escape forms of bonded exploitation, and reclaim dignity within an oppressive social order.

The missionaries' anti-slavery campaigns, interventions in social injustices, and introduction of education created a new moral and institutional space that allowed Avarna communities to imagine life outside caste-bound hierarchies. Within this context, Mala Arayans approached the missionaries not for protection but for education, which they identified as the most effective weapon against exploitation. Their initiative—visiting Baker repeatedly and negotiating for teachers—reflects a distinctive form of subaltern political action. Conversion thus becomes an assertion of self-worth, a deliberate pursuit of literacy, and a pathway toward social transformation.

Seen through Guha's framework, the conversion of the Mala Arayans therefore stands as a powerful act of subaltern self-assertion—a strategic engagement with missionary networks that enabled new forms of knowledge, communal dignity, and social mobility. This historical episode broadens our understanding of conversion in colonial South India, moving beyond narratives of missionary domination to recognize the intentional, resistant, and future-oriented choices of marginalized communities.

ENDNOTE

1. Kooiman, Dick, *Conversion and Social Equality in India, The LMS in South Travancore in the 19th century*, Delhi, Manohar Publication, 1989, p.35.
2. Ibid. p.53.
3. Ibd. p.56.
4. Jeffry, Robin, *Decline of Nayar Dominance in Kerala*, Kottayam:DC Books, 2003, p.62.
5. Kooiman, Dick, Op. Cit., p.32.
6. Matter, Samuel, *The Native Life in Travancore*, London: WH Allan, 1883, p.298.
7. It seems contradictory that why these missionaries did not hampered trade in England confronting administration, yet they have done it here in Travancore.
8. Jeffry, Robin, Op. Cit., p.69.
9. Matter, Samuel, Op. Cit., p.300.
10. Kooiman, Dick, Op. Cit., p.32.
11. Missionaries exerted pressure upon British Residents and Madras Government to pass law on abolition of slave trade in Travancore.
12. The Upper Cloth movement by the Shanars of South Travancore.
13. Gladstone, *Keralathile Protestant Christhumathavum Bahujanaprasthanangalum*, Kottarakara: CD Sidhy Publications, 2004, pp.60-61.

14. Matter, Samuel, in Annual Report, Trivandrum District, 1884, p.22, quoted in Kooiman, Op. Cit., p. 88.
15. Clerk, Santhinathan, *Dalits and Christianity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.32.
16. Ibid.
17. Baker (Jr.), Henry, *The Hill Arrians of Travancore and the Progress of Christianity among Them*, London, Wertheim, Macintosh & Hunt, 1862, pp.11-16.
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19. Guha, Ranajit, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India." *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982, pp.1–8.
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21. Srinivasan, M N, *Social Change in Village India*, (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Co., 1988), p. 2.
22. The theory formed by the colonizers viz. The Civilizing Mission by Ruddiad Kippling.
23. Warren, Max, *Social History and Christian Mission*, London, SCM Press, 1967, p.85.