

# Kerala and Its Trajectory to Modernity: Historical Outlining of Role of Caste and Dalit Movements

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## ABSTRACT

Modern Kerala is the byproduct of long and intricate historical processes. Various historical epochs played a crucial role in the construction of contemporary Kerala society; among them the society's embrace of modernity and the renaissance movements which encompassed are vital ones. In these historical drives; challenging caste was a central theme and the Dalit movements played a significant part in it. In the long history of Dalit movements in Kerala, the reform movements started during 19<sup>th</sup> century which had a great impact on the orthodox Kerala society. These movements were fundamentally well-organized, powerful and systemic. This paper is an attempt to explore how these Dalit movements instigate Kerala society's journey towards modernity, how it articulated the notion of equality in stratified Kerala, and how the luminaries from Dalit community contributed in it.

**KEYWORDS:** *Caste system, Kerala reformation, Kerala modernity, Socio-reform movements, Dalit movements.*

## INTRODUCTION

Kerala is often hailed as one of the Global South's distinctive social development models. The so-called "Kerala Model," which features a strong public sphere, high literacy rates, and positive human development indices, has frequently been cited as indicative of a different pathway to modernity that is not wholly reliant on industrial capitalism and fast urbanization. The prevailing narratives that explain Kerala's contemporary transition, however, have frequently downplayed the significance of caste conflict and Dalit movements in reshaping the social order in favor of state-led welfare programs, missionary education, matriliney, and left political mobilization.

Kerala's contemporary social space was established through numerous social mobilizations that consistently engaged in fierce debates over caste and caste based inequalities. The so-called modernity of Kerala, unlike the normal framing of modernity as an all-encompassing structure that has supplanted 'traditional' structures, is totally makes it impossible to imagine the presence of many overlapping and

possibly contradicting levels of social practices. The historical scholarship has revealed the uniqueness of Kerala modernity, which set in a non-European location, with specificity of diverse ideas and institutions of modernity typically coexist in ambivalent and hybrid forms of social relationships. However, in the historical accounting of it, the elitist historiography intentionally discarded the significance of Dalit movements of Kerala. The dominated narratives identified harbingers of Kerala's modernity and it's challenging of caste always linked with few community reform movements like SNDP movements, NSS movements, and later the communist movements of the region.

Therefore, this study identifies three inter related gaps:

1. Developmental Reductionism: Economic redistribution and state policy are commonly used to explain Kerala's modernity, but the underlying social struggles that made this redistribution politically feasible are rarely given enough consideration.

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2. Elite Reform Bias: The independent political agency of Dalit communities and agrarian labor movements are frequently minimized when reform movements are understood via narratives of upper-caste or middle-caste leadership.
3. Linear Modernization Assumption - The journey from caste-bound society to democratic modernity is typically portrayed as a gradual and unstoppable growth, hiding the violent struggles, resistances, and negotiations that constructed this path.

As a result, there is a need to rethink Kerala's modernity by placing caste and Dalit movements in the analytical centre rather than on the periphery. Without addressing caste as a fundamental power structure and Dalit mobilization as a transformative political force, explanations for Kerala's modernity are insufficient. Hence, this article focuses on the following central research problem: In Kerala's modernization process how did caste-based inequalities and Dalit movements historically impact on the transformation of social, political, and institutional life?

This study places Kerala in the larger context of multiple modernities, questioning Universalist conceptions of Western-centric modernization. Based on S.N. Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities, this paper explores the argument that modernity is a contextually molded process that arises from regional conflicts and institutional changes rather than a single civilizational end.

Furthermore, the research addresses B.R. Ambedkar's concept of caste as a system of graded inequality and incorporates insights from subaltern studies, notably the emphasis on insurgent consciousness and marginalized agency. By merging modernity theory with Dalit and subaltern perspectives, the article views Kerala's transition as a negotiated and contested power reconfiguration, rather than a top-down reformist initiative.

This approach views caste as a political economy of hierarchy rather than just a cultural identity marker, and Dalit movements are examined as institutional and epistemological interventions that reinterpreted equality, citizenship, and public morality.

### **Caste in Kerala: Historical Context**

The origins of caste system aka *jati sambradhayam* in Kerala can be traced back to eighth century A.D., which was the time when the Aryan immigration peaked [1]. Kerala adhered to the caste system with all of its vices before the British arrived, and it had become a prominent social institution in this society.

Here the caste system follows Hindu religious lines, with *Namboothiris* at the top of the hierarchy [2], the *Nairs*, the traditional warrior community and an affluent land-owning community, are the most significant caste after the *Namboothiris*, below them were followed by minor traditional service castes and the *Ezhava* or *Tiyyars*, who were highest among the polluting castes. The Scheduled Castes are outlined beneath the *Ezhavas*, they were considered slaves, untouchable, unapproachable, and unseen [3]. This deprived as well as the discriminated sections of the societies are previously called as untouchables and now they prefer to be addressed as "Dalits."

When we look at the Kerala's caste system, we must first understand that it is a heinous practice and social stratification system that is common in many Indian societies. It entails hierarchical relationship, centered on caste practices also known as '*Jati Maryadhakal*' in Malayalam, which upholds notions of purity, pollution, discrimination and social inequality. In the social hierarchical ladder of the society, the top position is always revered, while lower layers are ranked based on their level of contempt [2]. As a result, people at the top of the socio-cultural hierarchy have accumulated several forms of capital, including social, cultural, economic, and symbolic [4] allowing them to exert dominance over lower castes. This K. S Madhavan narrates as here "*Caste has acted as a source and mechanism of exclusion for certain groups of people resulting in disadvantage and deprivation*" [5].

As a result, the reform energies of the nineteenth century successfully created a sense of social solidarity and awakening among the deprived sections of the society. The Dalits' raised social consciousness and understanding of their social conditions waged war on Kerala's conventional Brahmanism. The caste society's restrictions on untouchables sought ways and means for their members to transcend them. By challenging Brahmanical hegemony and asserting claims to equality and citizenship, subordinated communities initiated a process of social democratization that would later underpin institutional reforms, including expanded education and land redistribution. In this historical background, Kerala's modernity did not emerge as a direct breakaway from tradition. Rather, it was built through confrontation with a profoundly entrenched caste system. The rigidity of Kerala's caste structure paradoxically fueled the extremism of anti-caste activism. Kerala's unique path to modernity must be understood in the context of this dialectic of domination and resistance.

### **Challenging Caste - a Central theme to Social Reform movements and Modernity:**

Since the late medieval period, the socio-religious backdrop of Kerala has been more intricate than in any other part of the world. Along with casteism, feudalism increased social disparities among people; this is because feudalism was regulated and dictated by the caste system. As a result, the plights of Dalits were beyond comprehension. This is why Swami Vivekananda called Kerala's society a "mad house" or "lunatic asylum" during his 1892 visit. However, with the arrival of colonialists, the concepts of reformation and modernism became more prominent in our region's social, cultural, and political realms.

The social reformation (*Samoohya Parivarthanam*) was concerned with societal changes and interactions; whereas modernity represents the rejection of the past, tradition, and all of its intricacies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the so call reform initiatives and the changing political economy led to new efforts aimed at promoting equality and self-esteem among lower-class people. The reformation movements started in Kerala from the lower strata, unlike from the rest of the country. The social reformation was an unconditional fight from the unprivileged, for the unprivileged, and by the unprivileged for an equitable status in the society and a better life. In that context, modernity and reform movements began to confront the caste system, or, to put it more simply, it was the best way to transform a society like Kerala and drive it towards modernity. It developed new vocabulary for social activity and envisioned a future based on equality, freedom, and civil rights. The concepts and expressions that had developed in the imaginative and natural intellectual culture of the social periphery served as the foundational principles and maxims of the social modernization process known as "renaissance" [6]. Therefore, in the context of historic modernity, Dalits have deconstructed and reconstructed caste structures through their social images, literary vocabularies, and cultural geographies in Kerala.

### **Dalit Movements in Kerala in the Reformation Era:**

During the renaissance phase of Kerala (19<sup>th</sup> as well as 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), it beheld with several types of reform movements. The ideological concerns of almost all the movements were the structural reform of the Kerala society. Among these movements, caste and anti-caste movements took precedence.

There are two reasons to identify these types of caste movements as Dalit movements in Kerala, even if the term 'Dalit and Dalit movements' entered in India's philosophical lexicon much later. Profoundly, its

nature and content lead us to refer to it as the Dalit movement itself. Basically, these movements were caste-oriented religious reform movements, which were inward-looking and attempted to remove traditions and mores. Therefore, with the ideological orientation and the activism it envisioned with the society; I prefer to address them as 'Dalit Movements'. Secondly, it's not apt to label them as mere caste movements rather than Dalit movements due to the so-called movement under the title of caste movement originated from different caste groups, regardless of whether they were from upper or lower castes. Most of them wanted purification in their own communities [1], but initiatives from the lower caste movements, simply Dalit movements, that seemed to contradict majoritarian views, and they worked to eliminate the caste system and its practices [7].

Although Kerala's Renaissance encompassed a wide spectrum of social and religious reform movements, anti-caste struggles led by marginalized communities were particularly transformative. Prominent figures such as Ayyankali, Poikayil Kumara Guru, Karuppan, Pampady John Joseph, and K P Vallon played a pivotal part in the liberation of Kerala's Dalits. Their efforts and the movements they have led demanded access to public space, cultural and symbolic capital, human dignity, and civil rights. Because these concerns did not directly contradict colonial forces, colonial authorities occasionally responded positively to Dalits and other "lower castes" requests. However, Brahminical power and caste restrictions rejected what they wanted [8]. The abolition of slavery and expanding interactions with missionaries further broadened opportunities for lower caste communities, enabling the formation of a nascent Dalit consciousness [9].

Ayyankali was the forerunner when it came to untouchables' protest for social change. He was the founder of Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam (Organization for the Welfare of Marginalized), which envisioned an equal political space within the emerging liberal scenario of colonial modernity. Ayyankali challenged the casteist embargo on Dalits using public roads by travelling in a 'villuvandi' along the prohibited road. It was his conceptualization of freedom in a radically new way; it was not through mercy but through action that freedom is created [7]. His politics was about the emancipation of all the oppressed people and a radical transformation of the whole society. His struggles focused on the right to education, the strike of agricultural labor, and sartorial choices of lower caste people [10].

Another important figure was Poikayil Yohannan aka Kumara Guru, who approached emancipation through

spiritual and historical reinterpretation. He encouraged oppressed communities to recover their erased histories as enslaved people and to reimagine themselves as agents of liberation [11]. Kumara Guru established a new religious and social arena by establishing the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), which affirmed dignity as a spiritual right and opposed caste-based humiliation. His movement confronted the cultural foundations of caste hierarchy by rejecting the very codes of *Jatimaryadha*.

Another notable Dalit movement during the period was the Channar Revolt. It is also known as *the upper cloth movement* or *melmundu samaram*, which can be considered as the foremost social movement in Kerala. It was a movement where the body was politically used to resist caste superiority. This movement was a revolt for the right of Channar women to cover their torso just like the upper caste women did [12]. In Travancore, an ex-princely state of Kerala, practiced a "breast tax" (*Mula Karam*), it was a penalty which denied the right to wear clothing above the waist to women from lower castes. It was the women of the *Nadar* community who initiated a change against it [13].

The Kallu Mala Agitation, also known as the Perinadu rebellion of south Travancore, was one of the first untouchable community uprisings against the pernicious societal norms of the 19th century. It was against the restrictions on sartorial choices of lower caste people; that meant caste-defined extensive dress standards that specified what members of particular castes could and could not wear. The Pulaya community organised the Kallumala Samaram; they broke the *kallumala* in public, and pledged that they would never wear such chains again [14].

The Dalit reformers also participated in and encouraged lower caste peoples to engage in numerous Temple Entry movements organized by diverse caste peoples to demand the right to access to enter various temples in Kerala that were previously forbidden to lower caste people. In certain ways, early Dalit movements were heavily influenced by the concept of citizenship, in which equality is prioritized. Through these social movements, the untouchables learned about their rights, which included the rights to freedom, property, education, and public spaces, among other things. They were awakened by so-called Dalit consciousness, and these social movements aided them in their fight against all obstacles to a just and equitable society.

In this regard, Dalit movements played a critical role in Kerala's modernization. They shifted caste from an unquestionable social order to a source of political contention. These movements altered society's moral

code by affirming dignity, contesting spatial segregation, and advocating institutional inclusion. As a result, understanding modernity in Kerala requires respecting the agency of those who were once marginalized. It was through their fights that equality was transformed from an abstract ideal to a practical political demand.

### **Dalit Movements in Post-Independence Kerala: Continuities, Transformations, and New Assertions:**

The region's social history entered a new institutional phase with the attainment of independence in 1947 and the creation of the state of Kerala in 1956. After that the constitutional guarantees of equality, the prohibition of untouchability under Article 17, and the implementation of various affirmative action policies looked to mark the formal end of caste discrimination. With specific to the region, Kerala has entered a new era of equality was further reinforced by land reforms, the growth of public education, and the emergence of Left political mobilization. However, the post-independence period indicates that, while the caste hierarchy was legally delegitimized, its social and material structures persisted. Therefore, Dalit movements rather have to enter a new phase, moving from fights for fundamental civic access to more intricate struggles over identity, dignity, representation, and land.

However, the trajectory of Dalit movements in post-independence Kerala reveals a complex pattern of silence, reorganization, critique, and renewed assertion. Contrary to the vibrancy of early twentieth-century mobilizations led by figures such as Ayyankali and Poikayil Yohannan, the immediate decades following independence-particularly the 1950s and 1960s-were marked by relative political passivity within autonomous Dalit movements. This period did not indicate the disappearance of Dalit concerns; rather, it reflected a reconfiguration of political engagement under new institutional conditions.

### **The Post-Independence Lull: Incorporation and Leadership Vacuum**

In the early post-independence decades, caste-based mobilizations in Kerala were largely absorbed into formal caste organizations [15], and Dalit movements were no exception. Dalit communities maintained institutional presence through bodies such as the Kerala Pulaya Maha Sabha (KPMS), the Sidhanar Service Society (SSS), and the Kerala Sambavar Society (KSS). However, these organizations functioned more as representative associations than as transformative social movements. The radical edge that characterized earlier struggles for public space, dignity, and civil rights appeared to soften.

Several factors contributed to this relative stagnation in this phase. First, the absence of charismatic and ideologically driven leaders like Ayyankali or Yohannan created a vacuum in visionary mobilization. Second, there was a widespread belief that political independence and constitutional guarantees would naturally bring about substantive reforms for historically oppressed communities [16]. The abolition of untouchability, the introduction of reservation policies, and the expansion of welfare institutions generated optimism that structural inequalities would gradually erode.

A more complex factor was the expansion of party politics, particularly the growing influence of Communist movements in Kerala. While Left mobilization played a crucial role in agrarian reforms and labour struggles, many Dalit activists later argued that caste was often subsumed under class analysis. Dalit concerns were frequently reframed within broader proletarian politics, leading to what some scholars describe as the -hijacking or dilution of autonomous Dalit assertion [17]. In effect, Dalit identity was expected to dissolve into class identity, even though caste continued to operate as an independent axis of exclusion.

Thus, the early post-independence period reflected not the resolution of caste inequality but its partial containment within institutional and party frameworks.

### **The Renaissance of the 1970s: reclaiming autonomy**

In Kerala, Dalit politics underwent an unprecedented change in the 1970s. A new generation of activists began to question both the constraints of welfare modernity and the tensions inherent in Left politics. They said that, despite progressive rhetoric, Dalits remained excluded within party hierarchy and socioeconomic structures. The promise of egalitarianism has not yet materialized into substantive equality [18] [19].

This period witnessed the emergence of renewed Dalit consciousness and organized assertion. Two parallel tendencies became visible; 1. The strengthening of caste and sub-caste organizations aimed at protecting specific community interests. 2. The articulation of a broader philosophy of Dalit unity that transcended divisions of caste, religion, and party affiliation [16].

The second tendency was especially significant. It marked a transition away from fragmented caste representation and toward a common Dalit identity based on shared historical experiences of oppression. Ambedkarite thinking had a greater influence on this

era, encouraging conceptual clarity about caste as a structural system rather than a simply cultural residue [20].

Furthermore, new Dalit political organizations and formations emerged in Kerala, aiming to act as independent agents of mobilization rather than subordinate partners within broader political coalitions. Dalit literature, cultural assertion, and historical reinterpretation were critical tools in this renaissance. Memory, particularly memories of enslavement and humiliation, was reclaimed as a source of political force, not shame [21].

### **Dalit Movements and Kerala Modernity:**

To understand Kerala modernity in wholly, one must read it with the outlining of Dalit movements that have witnessed this region. Truly, the social renaissance and reformation that began in the nineteenth century involved a critical interrogation of the past and an imaginative projection of a more egalitarian future. In many respects, this was the flare-up of a distinctive regional modernity [22].

Early Dalit movements functioned under what might be referred to as colonial modernity, which was influenced by the abolition of slavery and missionary engagement [23]. However, Kerala's indigenous modernity was not merely taken from colonial institutions; it was shaped by the struggles of oppressed communities. Dalit movements influenced the moral and political tenor of modern transformation rather than just taking part in it.

Modernity, as a social construct defined by openness to the future, freedom, and equality, took on a distinct form in Kerala. Unlike European trajectories that prioritized secularization and industrialization, Kerala's modernity was fuelled by the liberation from *Jatimaryadha* and religiously sanctioned hierarchy.

Dalit movements emphasize the ideal of equality and egalitarian society as the essential objective of progress in a society impeded by casteism. Dalit movements elevated the concept of civilized beings, with all kinds of freedom-access to public space, education, and the ability to appear in public by dressing civilized. Ayyankali's initiatives and interventions with these principles not only propelled modernization but also instilled the concept of democracy in our culture. Sanal Mohan writes that through establishing alternative groups, Yohannan's PRDS in Kerala aimed to forward the cause of modernity in Travancore without the assistance of missionaries. Their efforts to get property and other resources, access modern education, and establish their own congregations or communities of believers were examples of modern initiatives [11]. For the first

time in Kerala's history, the Kallumala agitation and Chennar rebellion were struggles in which people engaged in a violent and serious protest for their right to exhibit themselves properly, eventually winning their cause after bleeding blood and sweat.

Post-independence Dalit movements extend on critique of Kerala modernity. They questioned the paradoxes of modernity rather than merely applauding it. Dalit activism challenged both the conceptual and functional features of Kerala's development model by emphasizing equality as the most important condition for progress. They emphasized that access to education; public space, property, and dignified self-presentation were not mere developments, but rather the essential essence of modern citizenship.

From the relative tranquillity of the 1950s and 1960s to the assertive politics of the 1970s and beyond, Dalit movements in Kerala illustrate that modernity is a work in progress rather than a finished product. While constitutional democracy and welfare policies strengthened legal equality, Dalit struggle often reminded Kerala society of the gap between legal rights and real justice.

If early Dalit struggles broke down ritual exclusion, post-independence movements have exposed subtler kinds of structural discrimination hidden inside progressive institutions. By doing this, they have forced Kerala to reconsider its belief in itself as a casteless society. Thus, Dalit politics functions as both a social movement and a moral compass, continuously reorienting Kerala's modernity toward broader democratization.

### Conclusion

The trajectory of Kerala's modernity cannot be understood without considering the historical importance of caste and Dalit groups' on-going battles against structural exclusion. This article strongly emphasizes that caste in Kerala was more than just a ritual hierarchy; it was a fully organized system that governed labour, space, bodily practices, political participation, and access to knowledge. Dalits have historically been confined to the outskirts of social, economic, and political life, making them "unseeable" in public. The transition of this entrenched order did not happen automatically; it was made possible by conflict, reform, and political mobilization.

The advent of colonial modernity-through Western education, missionary interventions, new legal frameworks, print culture, and emergent public spheres-destabilized the ideological foundations of caste supremacy. Yet colonial modernity alone did not dismantle caste oppression. Rather, it created

conditions that enabled subordinated groups to articulate new political claims. Social reform movements led by figures such as Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali opened ideological and organizational spaces for equality, dignity, and rights [24]. These reform initiatives were followed and deepened by post-independence Dalit mobilizations, land struggles, educational movements, and later identity-based assertions that demanded substantive citizenship rather than symbolic inclusion.

The post-independence period, often celebrated under the rubric of the -Kerala Model, witnessed significant achievements in literacy, health, and welfare. However, as this study has argued, these gains were neither caste-neutral nor automatically emancipatory. Dalit movements repeatedly exposed the limits of welfare modernity, highlighting landlessness, labour precarity, and representational deficits. In doing so, they transformed the meaning of democracy in Kerala. As Gopal Guru observes, Dalit movements deepened Indian democracy by turning it toward those historically excluded from participation-communities that were treated not only as untouchable and unapproachable but as socially invisible [25]. In Kerala too, Dalit struggles redefined democracy from below, expanding its moral and institutional content.

As Kerala moves forward amidst neoliberal restructuring, identity politics, and new forms of marginalization, the legacy of Dalit movements remains crucial. Their struggles continue to remind us that modernity is not a finished achievement but an on-going democratic project. The history of caste contestation in Kerala teaches that equality must be continuously produced through vigilance, resistance, and collective action. In this sense, Kerala's modernity stands not as a completed model, but as an evolving experiment in deepening democracy-an experiment shaped fundamentally by Dalit assertion and the enduring quest for social justice.

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