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Marginalisation as a Global and Local Phenomenon: A Case Study of the Pulayas of North Kerala

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Abstract

Marginalisation is a pervasive global phenomenon that continues to impact millions of individuals and communities by systematically excluding them from participating in dominant social, economic, political, and cultural spheres. These marginalised groups are often denied basic rights and adequate representation, rendering them dependent on the more privileged sections of society. In the Indian context, the most extreme forms of discrimination have historically been experienced by Dalits, Adivasis, and other socially and economically disadvantaged communities, most of whom belong to the lower castes. While Kerala is often perceived as having fared better than other Indian states in terms of caste discrimination, the reality is more complex. Many communities, particularly the Pulayas of North Kerala, endured severe marginalisation. Under the pre-independence janmi (landlord) system, Pulayas were denied freedom and land rights, subjecting them to systemic exploitation. This study focuses on the multiple layers of marginalisation experienced by the Pulaya community and critically examines their historical plight and current living conditions

Key words: Marginalisation, Dalits, adivasis, Pulayas, North Kerala, Janmi etc.

Global Dimensions of Marginalisation

The experience and expression of marginalization differ across regions and nations. However, common patterns of exclusion are evident among various vulnerable groups, including women, the elderly, transgender individuals, sexual minorities, ethnic and racial minorities, and in the Indian context, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SCs and STs). The absence of strong organisational structures and limited access to institutional support systems further intensifies their marginal position, depriving them of the ability to claim rights and entitlements essential for social justice.¹

Globally, similar patterns of marginalisation can be observed. The Amerindians of North and South America, the Aboriginal communities of Australia, the Samis of Scandinavia, and the Maoris of New Zealand have endured displacement, cultural erosion, and socio-political exclusion—often as a result of colonial or internal settler aggression. These indigenous populations are frequently referred to as the "Fourth World," a term used to denote communities that remain excluded from the benefits of both national and global development. The plight of India's Dalits

closely parallels that of these indigenous groups. Both have been systematically deprived of land, dignity, and political agency, highlighting the universal nature of marginalisation and the urgent need for inclusive and justice-oriented development frameworks.²

Caste-Based Marginalisation in India

Marginalisation is multidimensional, encompassing social, political, economic, and cultural domains. In India, social exclusion often begins at birth, particularly for those belonging to historically oppressed castes. The Panchamas or *fifth varna*, now constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and collectively known as Dalits, remain among the most affected by systemic discrimination. Despite legal safeguards, these communities continue to endure violence, exclusion, and exploitation in various parts of the country. Incidents of caste-based atrocities—such as land dispossession, sexual violence, and social ostracisation, are still reported from states like Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and others. Dalits are often excluded from access to quality education, healthcare, housing, places of worship, and participation in cultural life.³ These patterns of exclusion

and violence reflect the deeply entrenched nature of marginalisation in Indian society and the persistent failure of state mechanisms to ensure equity and justice for all citizens.

Marginalisation in the Context of Contemporary Development

Despite notable developmental strides in many parts of the world, the participation of marginalised communities—particularly women, Dalits, Adivasis, transgender individuals, ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities—remains significantly limited in political decision-making processes. These groups, both individually and collectively, continue to face systemic exclusion and multifaceted hardships that distance them from the mainstream social, economic, and political fabric. In the Indian context, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes remain among the most affected, with their socio-economic conditions still lagging behind those of dominant social groups.⁴ Their exclusion is not merely a legacy of historical discrimination but is perpetuated through ongoing structural inequalities.

Caste Oppression in Kerala: Historical Context

The history of the untouchable castes is very painful. Their true story has rarely been told openly, and much of it still remains hidden like a mystery. Caste oppression in Kerala was far more severe than class oppression. Alongside political and economic exploitation, the most damaging injustice was the denial of access to education. These forms of discrimination reveal that the caste system in Kerala was even more brutal than the apartheid regime in South Africa⁵.

In 2001, a conference was held in Durban, South Africa, to address issues related to the apartheid system. During this meeting, Dalit representatives brought forward the caste system in India as a topic for discussion. However, the Indian official delegation strongly opposed this move, asserting that caste was an internal matter and not subject to international debate. Several social scientists presented papers arguing that caste-based discrimination is not the same as racial prejudice. They claimed that caste is not equivalent to colour, a view that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar himself acknowledged. Nonetheless, the concerns raised by Dalit activists deserve attention, as there are undeniable parallels

between caste-based chauvinism and racial discrimination.⁶

Caste and Landlordism in Kerala

Caste and landlordism in Kerala had been reflected in every sphere of life and action. The reflection could be manifested in art, language, food, intellect, dress, and in toddle. It bifurcated men in different castes and varnas and tried to circumference them in a particular ambit. Both janmi and Chaturvarnya system stood a supporting factor for each other.⁷

Colonial Impact and Subaltern Assertion

British colonisation, with its bourgeois liberal ethos and strategic imperatives of governance, opened up space for the emergence and articulation of subaltern identities, particularly along caste and religious lines. The colonial period witnessed a range of institutional transformations—such as the introduction of judicial systems, civil administration, and commodity markets—alongside cultural shifts brought about by modernity, Western lifestyles, English education, and access to Western knowledge and scholarship. Additionally, economic reforms like the zamindari and ryotwari systems, together

with evolving social dynamics, fuelled the aspirations of the lower castes and enabled them to assert their presence within the changing social order.⁸

Pulayas of North Malabar: A Case of Severe Marginalisation

Lieutenants Ward and Conner clearly observed that in the Chirakkal Taluk, all labuor and menial work were carried out by the Cherumas or Polians, who were effectively treated as slaves of the land.⁹ The Pulayas, the aboriginal people of Kolathunadu, formed an agrarian society deeply rooted in the land. Engaged in continuous agricultural labuor, their bodies were often covered in mud, symbolising their close connection with the soil. In contrast, certain other groups, who kept themselves ritually 'pure' through frequent bathing and temple rituals, began to distance themselves from the Pulayas. Over time, this distinction evolved into a rigid concept of 'pollution,' and the Pulayas were gradually marginalised.¹⁰ They were eventually categorised as a separate caste and relegated to subaltern status by the dominant social order.

The terms *Pulayante Mon*, *Pulayante Mol*, or *Pulayadi Mol* have long been used

in Kerala in a derogatory and sarcastic manner. These expressions often surfaced during quarrels or were used pejoratively while referring to members of the Pulaya community. This widespread social contempt can be traced back to the historical roles and living conditions of the Pulaya people. Considering the caste structure of later Kerala society, it can be presumed that the Pulayas were among the earliest communities to practice primitive agriculture in the plains. They cleared forests through burning and relied on nearby lakes to gather resources for their livelihood. Traditionally, they were engaged in menial and agricultural labour, working from dawn to dusk in fields under harsh conditions. Their lives were marked by poverty, and their appearance often reflected the hardship they endured. Clothing was minimal—men wore simple garments, and women were often bare-chested, covering their lower body up to the knees, with bead garlands adorning their necks instead of blouses. Constant exposure to the sun, mud, and sweat shaped both their physical appearance and the perception others held of them.

¹¹These factors contributed to the social stigma and exclusion they experienced, both from the broader public and, tragically, internalised within the community itself.

Contemporary Realities and Cultural Expressions

Although many things began to change in the second half of the 20th century, the living conditions of the Pulaya community remained largely stagnant for decades. Their poor economic and educational background prevented them from fully participating in mainstream society. Others were well aware of their vulnerabilities and took advantage of them in various ways. In reality, the Pulayas were exceptional workers who played a vital role in agriculture. From sowing the seeds to threshing the grain, their presence was indispensable. They built and repaired dykes, often risking their lives to protect the crops from floods. Many among them died while carrying out these hazardous tasks, driven only by the hope of pleasing the landlords—often their sole source of comfort. Despite their hard work and sacrifices, the attitudes of the upper castes (savarnas) towards them remained largely unchanged.¹²

Their sorrows and joys found expression in their songs, dances, and other rituals. Their emotions and daily struggles were deeply embedded in their artistic traditions. They honoured their ancestors

through worship, often creating figurines and performing rituals at home during special occasions. This unique set of customs and lifestyle practices gave them a distinct cultural identity, setting them apart from the rest of society. Meanwhile, the so-called savarnas considered themselves superior and claimed all virtues as their own. In reality, it was these marginalised communities who had sustained and nurtured the land's ecosystems and organic balance for generations.¹³

Caste, Occupation and Social Hierarchy

In the past and to some extent even today, caste has played a powerful role in determining nearly every aspect of a person's life: whom they can marry, the kind of work they do, the religious rituals they perform, the gods they worship, the duties they owe to others, how they are perceived and treated by society, and even how their body is handled after death. At its core, the caste system functioned to classify people into rigid hierarchies of wealth and status, reinforcing deep social and economic inequalities. This system was legitimised through the ideas of purity and pollution. Higher castes were seen as wealthy, powerful, and pure, while those at the bottom were trapped in poverty, stripped of

power, and deemed so impure that they were considered “untouchable” by those above them.¹⁴

Cultural Heritage and Resistance

The Dalits of India possess a rich and vibrant cultural heritage, but this has long been overlooked and misunderstood by other sections of society. Instead of appreciating their traditions and art forms, they were often viewed with disrespect and prejudice. In North Malabar, the Pulaya community endured extremely harsh and dehumanising living conditions for generations.¹⁵ Although Kerala's modern socio-political reforms have brought significant changes to their lives, a large section of the community still remains confined to the status of wage labourers.

Conclusion

The lives of the marginalised, particularly the Pulayas of North Kerala, have witnessed a remarkable transformation over the years. The rigid structures of landlordism and caste-based prejudice have considerably weakened. Pulaya children now have access to quality education, and many individuals from the community have attained respectable positions in society.

Educated youth have secured employment in government services and various professional sectors, contributing significantly to the socio-economic upliftment of their families and the wider community. Many have shifted from traditional agricultural labour to other forms of wage employment.

However, despite these positive developments, serious challenges persist. Access to land, adequate housing, higher education, and other pathways to an improved quality of life remains a daunting struggle for the majority. While overt forms of caste discrimination have declined, its subtle manifestations continue to affect the community in various indirect ways.

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