‘HOPING AGAINST HOPE’:
THE PRDS MOVEMENT AND THE CREATION OF ITS DISCURSIVE TERRAIN; AN EXPLORATION OF A ‘LOWER CASTE’ MOVEMENT IN KERALA AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT (1890-1950 C.E)

Malavika Binny

ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to explore the socio-religious movement for upward mobility by ‘dalit’ Christians in Kerala in South India called the PRDS (PrathyakshaRakshaDaivaSabha) movement in the twilight years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century emphasising on a phenomenological approach. The distinctive feature of the movement was that it not only emerged from among one of the most oppressed communities in India, but that the movement created its own teleological discourse borrowing from Biblical imagery but juxtaposing it unto the social and cultural landscape of Kerala. The paper intends to investigate the creation of a ‘new’ religio-cultural discourse by the movement in which the idea of hope played a seminal function. The theme of hope found a profound resonance in the movement and it was heavily loaded with multiple layers of social and semiotic meanings. Hope, for instance was understood as the hope of the emancipation of the ‘slave-caste’ from the hierarchical and discriminative caste system, but it was also hope in the form of redemption through the cleansing of sins and the hope for eternity which could be attained by stripping off the baggage of both the traditions of Christianity and Hinduism. The paper shall attempt to analyse the movement which was aimed at and achieved considerable social mobility by probing its rich discursive terrain which manifested itself in the form of books, songs and the invention of a new liturgy and a ritual world which sought to redefine the

1 Doctoral Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.
2 ‘Dalit’ is an umbrella term which is used to refer to the so called lower castes of India/South Asia who were considered to be ‘untouchables’. This is by no means a homogenous category and consists of myriad castes throughout the Indian subcontinent. In this paper, it refers to the Paraya, Pulaya and Kurava communities of Kerala who faced caste based discrimination in the form of both untouchability and unapproachability. Dalit Christians in particular refer to those converted to Christianity from the ‘untouchable’ castes.
identity of the 'lower caste' Christians through a re-configuration of both 'time and being' for both caste mobilisation and identity creation. Archival material from the Kerala State and the National Archives of India, oral interviews and hagiographies of Poikayyil Yohannan will also be used for the purposes of the study.

KEYWORDS

PRDS, Lower caste Movements, Dalit, Identity, Caste oppression, Devotion, Hope

Kerala (8°18'N- 12°48'N and 74°52'- 77°22' E) located on the south-western coast of India, has one of the most vibrant, pluralistic and dynamic histories among the 29 states that constitutes the modern nation of India. Kerala has a recorded history of about 3000 years and finds mention in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* and Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia*. Kerala's population which is presently at 33.3 million consists of Hindus (56.2%), Muslims (24.7%), Christians (19%) and other minorities such as Jains, Jews and Parsis (0.1%). Other than religion, caste as a social category has played a major role in structuring Kerala's history and society. Caste-wise, Kerala's 'Hindu' population consists of Dalits (Pulayas, Cheramers and Parayas), Thiyyas, Ezhavas, Nairs, Nadars, Chettiars and Namboothiri Brahmins among others. In this paper, I shall be exploring the socio-religious movement for upward mobility by 'dalit' Christians in Kerala called the PRDS (Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha) movement in the twilight years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century. The distinctive feature of the movement was that it not only emerged from among one of the most oppressed communities in India, but that the movement created its own teleological discourse borrowing from Biblical imagery but juxtaposing it unto the social and cultural landscape of Kerala. While the PRDS movement has been read as a movement for the acquisition of social space[^3], the element of the

construction of a semiotic world to express dissent and dissonance to the existing social hierarchy which was a fundamental part of the movement has been left unexplored; the paper intends to investigate the creation of a 'new' religio-cultural discourse by the movement in which the notions of hope and emancipation played a seminal function.

**Parallel Devotions**

The first half of the 19th century was a period of tremendous social tumult and political awakening in the history of Kerala; it was also a period formative in the creation of Kerala’s civil society. Modernity had brought with new challenges and varied remedies- new notions of self and society, rationality and democracy, a re-definition of temporality, spirituality and the body. It was also a time of intense competition for resources- both material and social; in the backdrop of colonialism and the struggle against it. It is in this climate of a re-structuring of societal hierarchies that various devotional movements aimed at social mobility and caste based organizations mushroomed and flourished feeding into and from the throes of a massive societal change. The Ezhava movement or the SNDP Yogam with its iconic leader Sree Narayana Guru was right in the middle of the activity engaging in a vibrant discourse for the elimination of inequality and is often quoted as a reason for the basis of the end of the caste-based oppression in Kerala along with the efforts of the Indian Freedom Movement against British rule.

In this article, I seek to trace the growth of the PRDS movement which ran parallel with the Ezhava movement in Kerala, a movement which had a very strong devotional content and one which arose out of social dissent. While the PRDS Movement initiated by Poikayil Yohannan will be discussed by me in this paper, this by no means the discounts the other similar movements such as those led by Vaghbattananda, Yoga Kshema Sabha and so on which played an important role in the elimination of caste oppression in Kerala which included the most despicable and degrading practices such as untouchability and unapproachability. These movements were both internally and externally informed by the politics of modernity and colonialism and a by-product of the emergence of a new self-consciousness and sense of identity which emerged in the wake of the Indian nationalist movement (1885-1947) as well as the strong waves of communist ideology inspired by the Russian Revolution.

One can also view these movements as a response to new logic of equality and rationalism in the backdrop of missionary activities and the transition to a so called ‘modernity.’ The period which witnessed the emergence of the caste based social movements (1880s to the 1940s) has
been dubbed as the period of socio-cultural Renaissance by historians [and as a period of anti-feudal struggle in the Marxist circles], but the historical actuality points towards a reconfiguration of caste and religion and the societal system rather than an overhaul of the same. It must also be pointed out that this period witnessed a consolidation and identity-cementing of certain ‘upwardly mobile’ communities such as that of the Namboothiris, Nairs and Ezhava who were quick to acquire the much coveted social capital under the changed circumstances.


The case of Daivom4 Yohannan is a case to consider as it was a movement of dissent against the orthodoxy in the church and brings to light the complexities in the process and politics of conversion. Under the initiative of St. Francis Xavier and the Portuguese ‘evangelising’ machinery5 under the premises of the Estado da India; a sizeable chunk of Dalits, mainly from the Pulaya and the Cheramar communities had converted to Christianity in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Their conversion itself was a strong register of protest against a religion which condemned them to be literally invisible – untouchable, unapproachable and un’gaze’able. Whether there was an actual conversion from ‘Hinduism’ to Christianity is another bone of contention as these were communities beyond the pale of the four fold division of the Hindu chaturvarna caste system. Recent social theorization as well as certain groups has argued that many groups who are identified as Scheduled Castes among the Hindus or ‘dalits’ were never part of the Hindu religion in the first place.6 These groups were the ones who worshiped the anti-gods (according to Hindu religion): Madan, Marutha and Chathan in non-temple non-Brahmanical sacred spaces; whether they were ever ‘integrated’ into the agamic fold is a case of speculation. PRDS emerged as a spiritual

4 Daivom is a generic term in Malayalam, the vernacular language of Kerala which refers to god.
5 The Portuguese had a formidable presence in Kerala from the 14th to the 16th century and exercised colonial hegemony over Central Kerala with the establishment of colonial port towns in Cochin and Quilon. For detailed discussions on the topic, refer M.N.Pearson, The Portuguese in India; The New Cambridge History of India, Cambridge University Press, 1987, Pius Malekandathil, Portuguese Cochin and the Maritime Trade of India, 1500-1633, Manohar, 2001 and Ines G Zupanov, Missionary Tropics; The Catholic Frontier in India (16-17th Centuries), University of Michigan, 2005
movement carrying in its fold the germ of a powerful dissent against the rhetoric of Christian Missionary activities. So it has been much misunderstood and misspelt in history. 

The PRDS database informs us that P.R.D.S. brought under the same roof, different caste groups such as the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas (who belonged to the lower castes) and the Nadars not through the reformation of rituals and customs or through marriage but through the construction of a domain for philosophic debates and dialogues as is the case with Buddhism in India in a much earlier period. In 1870s and 1880s, the non-Dalit Christians in Kerala, who claims to have embraced Christianity with the arrival of St. Thomas, the apostle to India in first century C.E., did not look upon conversion as an uplift to the level of Syrian/St. Thomas Christians, but as a lowering to the level of the Pulayas. But they had used conversion as a means to claim superiority from the upper caste Hindus till the Royal Proclamation of 1936 granting the lower castes entry into temples. There was considerable opposition from within the church against the acceptance of the 'new converts' into their fold, archival sources not reveal tension but also plans to construct separate churches and worship spaces for the new 'low caste converts'. The PRDS movement tried to engage with problems of caste hierarchy and exploitation, and to strive to achieve social equality along with material and spiritual progress. The founder of the movement was Poikayil Yohannan who mobilized Parayas, Pulayas and Kuravas to achieve this end through the new movement. The movement developed in the larger context of Christianity, but moved beyond the limits of missionary and offered a critique of it. Sanal Mohan opines that the PRDS should be situated in the long trajectory of the movements of the lower castes that tried to confront the inequality that was rooted in the caste structure of the Kerala society.

Poikayil Yohannan was a convert to Christianity from the Paraya caste. Before joining the Brethren mission, he was with the Marthomite church, which was the church of reformist Syrian Christians. He was quite offended by the casteist practices of the Syrian Christians who treated the Christians converted from 'lower caste' as second grade citizens. The final straw came with the Church’s staunch opposition of the marriage of Syrian Christian girl to a ‘Dalit’

Christianity. Even after he joined the CMS mission and later the Brethren mission, the issue of caste followed him as he witnessed the same form of discrimination practiced in CMS as well. In fact, the struggle between the Syrian Christians and the lower caste Christians had been raging for almost 200 years as Susan Bayly has pointed out in her work, *Saints, Goddess and Kings*. By this time, he had become a well-known Bible preacher with prophetic visions which the common masses trusted in. Thus in Tiruvalla, a small inland town in central Kerala, he started a new religious institution—the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha, in protest and breaking off from the Christian church hegemonised by the upper caste Syrian Christians. The claim of Yohannan that he had access to 'the revealed truth' for the lower castes in Travancore made him very powerful vis-à-vis the missionaries. Even though Yohannan began his spiritual career as an evangelical preacher of Christianity, he soon broke off from the mould and began preaching doctrines which assumed the overtones of a variant ‘religion’. He began preaching that in different periods, God assumed human form to establish peace on the earth and in the present, god has been born as himself—Poikayil Yohannan.

It was emphasized that god does not discriminate among his children; hence there were no kinds of discrimination/hierarchy among the members of PRDS. They placed a lot of emphasis on inter-dining and inter-marriage. This was especially relevant in the context of South India as endogamy and commensality were two fundamental practices associated with the caste hegemony. Along with this Yohannan also assumed the title of *Kumara Guru*, he also came to be known as Poikayil Appachan. The PRDS soon grew in numbers attracting to its fold a large chunk of lower caste Christians. The organization had to face the ire of the Syrian Christian orthodox church and had to face persecution of every sort including a court case of treason. Interestingly, the court gave the verdict that the PRDS was neither a Hindu nor a Christian sect. There followed a procession of assaults. In many places like Vakathanam, Vellanidi, Kozhukachira, Mangalom PRDS meetings were disrupted. In the attack on the meetings at Vettiyadu, a woman was killed. At a rebel meeting convened at Muthalapra, a huge bonfire was organised and thousands of Bibles were thrown into it. The word of Yohannan was the law for anything and everything concerning the members of the

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13 Mathrubhumi Weekly, June 1967, p.9
During the period in which it flourished the PRDS was viewed upon as a threat to Christianity and labelled as an anti-Christian sect. In the history of P.R.D.S., the most important feature that we can notice is its ‘belief’ and ‘declaration of God’. P.R.D.S.’ belief and declaration of God arose from neither the perspective of mere devotion nor the P.R.D.S. experience. Sanal Mohan opines that new outcaste converts continued to be encapsulated by a fuzzy world despite critically interpreting the Biblical teachings.

Yohannan was deft in carving out a new doctrine for the newly found church, divorcing it from the earlier Orthodox Church practices. This included the creation of a new liturgy, the construction of a different sense of the past; a ‘dalit’ past, a sense of church decorum, a new rung of leaders and even a different consciousness of the body and hygiene. What was being very.went out of the way to demonize the sect consciously created and reaffirmed was a sense of identity – a lower caste identity [as made quite obvious by the PRDS poem below].

‘Church after church has come up in a line
I find distinctions still not removed
The master has a church
The serf has another
A church for pulaya,
A church for paraya
A church for marackan (fishermen)
Christianity could not do away with caste distinctions.
Different churches prove this. [To us]’

(Extract from the song in P.R.D.S. circular No. 9/1962 P-3, 4, 5, 6 )

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16 The PRDS website claims that Pamphlets and magazine reports of the period such as that of Savisheshadeepika[1918], William Hunt’s [The Anglican Church of Travancore] and KV Simon’s ‘History of the VerpadaSabha[1922].
17History of the PRDS, www.PRDS.org, 12/01/2012.
Re-Configuring the Discursive Terrain: Narrativizing Time, Space and Memory

Heidegger has argued that in order for us to understand or perceive the 'being', it can only be comprehended as 'Being in Time' and as 'being in Space'. This conceptualization is one that is to be understood as one not divorced from a history of belonging and as one embedded in the idea of memory. Poikayil Yohannan in introducing and building a new 'quasi-religious-caste' movement was very conscious about the need to create a discursive terrain for it within the contemporary debates that were taking place in Kerala society as well as contextualizing it within the history of Kerala. He was aware that most of his followers who hailed from the lower caste, Parayas such as himself and his wife, Kuruvas and Pulayas were those who had once already experienced the process of conversion, that is to Christianity, so while invoking in them a new sense of hope towards emancipation from caste oppression was certainly a necessity, he also understood that he had to device new methods to alter the consciousness of caste inferiority which had informed their thinking. He resorted to the popular method of devotional chants, songs and festivities which had been part of both the Bhakti movement of the 18th century as well as the proselytizing strategies of Christian missionaries on the Southern coastline of India.

What is also interesting is that the new songs and chants he wrote and popularized resembled the old Christian songs in character, rhythm and tone, but were infused with the stories of the low caste experience, of their daily struggles, especially about the discrimination that they faced from orthodox churches. A close study of the songs and other archival material associated with the PRDS reveals that Poikayil Yohannan was not only attempting to create a new sense of self respect among the members, but also in the process, trying to create a new sense of time and space. For this, he borrowed Biblical imagery and the language of the Bible; the semiotic world of the Bible was juxtaposed on to the topography of Kerala - thus the Old Testament stories, many of which he cherry picked were re-imagined and re-told as if they happened in Kerala with the Parayas and Pulayas re-imagined as the Israelites who suffered at the hands of Mizraim (Egyptians) who were the landlords and the Christian church in the context of Kerala history. The valley of Lebanon, the olive gardens of Palestine - all found metaphorical and real allegories in the coconut grooves and ghats of the Malabar coast. While the Old Testament became the history of oppression, the New Testament was not relevant for the movement and since Yohannan himself was stylized as

the prophet, priest and god incarnate, the New Testament times were the ones that they were living through.

Similar to the New Testament discourse on truth, the movement regarded Yohannan's words as 'The Truth' and till date refer to Yohannan's teachings as 'the truth'. While a new idea of historical time was thus narrativised and 'memorialised', new practices were also 'created' and routinized. The members of PRDS were instructed to wear white coloured clothes when they came to prayer meetings, they were encouraged to dine together and detailed instructions about personal hygiene and moral conduct were also given. Poikayil Yohannan came to be referred to as Poikayil Appachan. Appachan meaning Father was a term which could refer to both the Holy Father as well as to a more general form of reverence. Processions became an integral part of the movement and PRDS meetings were held on the same days as that of Christian festivals and conventions as the movement amassed more following and spread to various parts of South India. As the movement furthered, the semiotic world of the PRDS was re-conceptualized and realigned multiple times, soon a new identity which discarded and critiqued both Christianity and Hinduism emerged with Yohannan fashioning himself to be god incarnate in Kerala for the purpose of emancipating the lower castes.

One of the songs say:

*I have probed the Scriptures many a time;*

*Nowhere do I find a mention of my race!*

*Or my clan; Where is the name of my ancestors in these?*

*No Scriptures, no histories speak about my people, nor my caste*

*No caste have I, nor race...*

(Poikayil Yohannan, PRDSSongs, c. 1921)

Another poem says:

*We went after Hinduism*

*With the label of orphans*

*We went after christianity*

*With the label of orphans*
The Hindus did not give us room

The Christians too gave us not room!

From Apocalyptic Hope to Emancipatory Hope

As mentioned earlier, the idea of hope was integral to the movement. The Parayas and Pulayas Christian converts formed bulk of the followers of the PRDS movement were already familiarized with the Christian teleological and eschatological framework. The Brahmanic scriptures also had a theme of the 'end of the world with the arrival of Kalki, a deity concerned with judgment. The concept of 'Kali Age'- the idea that they were living in an age which was the one right before the arrival of judgment was one which informed the thinking of the common masses in the later period of the 18th century. PokayilYohannan, through his immensely popular worship songs was not only successful in creating a historical narrative for the community members, but also instilling a sense of hope. He refuted the age old traditions and critiqued and ridiculed them openly through his songs, time and again claiming that there was no space for the lower caste in either the temple or the church. Since, there was no room in the past; the only space for them was in the future. He very effectively used the idea of apocalypse and judgment, claiming himself to be the prophet sent by god for the emancipation of the lower castes. So the apocalyptic hope was re-aligned to the PDS movement and converted into emancipatory hope, when the toiling struggling masses would be reattributed and rewarded for their centuries of suffering. Hope was not only a theme to emancipate and consolidate the masses, it was an effective strategy for mass mobilization. Upward mobility and the acquisition of cultural capital was the dream of every community and the first half of the twentieth century threw open opportunities for communities to move towards the same especially in the wake of the Indian National Freedom Movement which was gathering momentum and also the pro-democracy and civil rights movements all over the world.

The growth of 'mass media', especially of publication of vernacular language newspaper made sure that new ideas poured into the small landscape of Kerala as well. Within this climate, it was convenient for PRDS to carve its own niche. It also has to be mentioned that hope as a notion went beyond working as a device for mass mobilization against caste hierarchies, hope was also a theme which helped PoikayilYohannan to fashion himself as 'The Prophet' for the lower castes. Not only was there hope for escaping the shackles of caste
bondage and the rules of caste hegemony, the release from bondage was a reflection of eternal salvation, so in other words – the hope of salvation which was manifest and directed toward Yohannan as a god figure. To a large extent, the PRDS seems to have been successful in achieving a separate identity of its own, even though it was and is not regarded as religion in the general sense. Caste consciousness prevailed and caste based discrimination continued till India gained independence in 1947 and untouchability was abolished by Article 17 of the Constitution and the right against untouchability became one of the Fundamental Rights in India. Even though, PRDS was not successful in ending caste oppression, its role in the anti-caste struggles is one that cannot be denied and further studies on the same will provide even more fascinating insights into the internal politics of social movements towards societal change. The PRDS movement thus remains a significant one where religion as well as devotion to a god, a godman and to an identity was used to register deep felt dissent against a social system and its unequal manifestations. It was a protest purely based on the identity of the Dalit, capitalizing and using it to mobilize, agitate and establish itself in the public domain.

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