



## Fighting Caste and Losing Ancestors: Untouchable Christians and Dilemmas of Modernity in Colonial Kerala

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### *Abstract*

Colonial Christian missions have often been celebrated as catalysts of social reform in Kerala or dismissed as extensions of imperial empires. Various conversions among erstwhile 'untouchable' castes under the Church Missionary Society (CMS), London Missionary Society (LMS) and Basel Mission Society (BMS) have, thus, been criticized or celebrated, often at the expense of the converting untouchable's agency. While the missionary accounts of conversion have been available in the form of various reports from the nineteenth century, 'Dalit' accounts of conversion and post-conversion dilemmas came forth into public, only in the second half of twentieth century through the literary works of Dalit and Dalit Christian writers. Novels like *Samvatsarangal* (1984) by S. E. James, *Mukkany* (1987) by D. Rajan, and short stories like "Eli, Eli, La'ma Sabach Tha'ni?" (2011) by Paul Chirakkarodu, "Achanda Vendinja Inna" (2003) by T. K. C. Vadutala and "Prethabhashanam" (2011) by C. Ayyappan reveal the dilemmas of Dalit Christianity, while songs by Poikayil Appachan, a.k.a Poikayil Yohannan or Poikayil Kumara Gurudevan, a Dalit convert who later rejected Christianity to start his own cult, Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (Church of God of Visible Salvation), to fight casteism are important for understanding the multifarious nature of colonial Christian missions. This article highlights the entangled nature of religious experience embroiled in converting 'untouchables' in Kerala and how this entangled process influenced emergent Dalit Christian Theology in the postcolonial period. The paper will focus on the tactics and strategies involved within Dalit conversion experiences from Kerala, drawn from the theorisation of everyday life, and its caste-religion liminality to emphasize the literary expression of multicultural and multi-religious entanglements and its emotions in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala.

*Key Words: Caste, Dalit, Dalit Christianity, Syrian Christianity, Conversion*

### *Introduction*

The European missions that worked amongst the slave castes of Kerala in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries are directly or indirectly credited for facilitating various social reforms. They are credited for establishing schools for agrarian slave castes<sup>1</sup>, abolishing slavery and *uzhiyam* (compulsory service by the slave castes to the state), breast cloth movement amongst the lower castes (Houtart and Lemercinier, 1978: 9, 22-23), and enabling social mobility through the establishment of public works and plantations (Kooiman, 1991: 62). European missionary and Christian interventions are often depicted from an 'outsider's perspective' in the prose writings in Malayalam during the 19<sup>th</sup> century like *Pullelikunju* and *Saraswativijayam*, and *The Slayer Slain*, the first serialised English novel from Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast to the above, the Dalit conversion and Dalit Christian literature from the twentieth century can be considered the 'insider's version' of conversion and post-conversion experiences. In the following sections, this article will first trace the genealogy of Dalit Christian writings about caste and conversion from a historical perspective and then discuss the dilemmas of the Dalit Christian identity articulated within postcolonial literature to bring to the forefront literary expression of conversion and the emotions of multicultural-multi-religious entanglements among Dalit Christians in Kerala. Based on novels, short stories and songs from the colonial and postcolonial period, this article elicits the emotions of conversion, caste oppression and the multi-religious entanglements implicit within Dalit Christianity. The vernacular novels, stories and songs analysed in this article include *Samvatsarangal* (1984) by S. E. James, *Mukkany* (1987) by D. Rajan, and short stories like "Eli, Eli, La'ma Sabach Tha'ni?" (2011) by Paul Chirakkarodu, "Achanda Vendinja Inna" (2003) by T. K. C. Vadutala and "Prethabhashanam" (2011) by C. Ayyappan to emphasize the dilemmas faced by untouchables who converted to Christianity. This article will also analyse a few songs by Poikayil Appachan, or Poikayil Kumara Gurudevan that reject casteism in both Hinduism and Christianity, calling for newer religious strategies for Dalits.

### *Colonial Modernity and Contested Christianity in Literature from Kerala*

The advent of colonial modernity in Kerala cannot be separated from the interventions of European missionary Christianity, especially amongst the slave castes. This curious engagement between Christianity and caste gets represented in the various literary works of the period. Though Vijayan Kodancherry claims that *Pullelikunju* by Archdeacon Koshy D. D. (1882)<sup>2</sup> is the first Malayalam novel (Kodancherry 2007: 11-18), it could have been side-lined in Malayalam for

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<sup>1</sup> The Dalit communities like Cherumas, Pulayas, Thanda Pulayas, Parayas, Paniyars and Kuravans were agrarian slaves in Kerala. While most of them remained associated with the cultivation of their landlord's land, they could also be sold and bought in markets. For a detailed discussion of agrarian slavery of Dalit castes see Mohan, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Kodancherry claims in the preface to the book that sections of *Pullelikunju* were serialized in the newspaper *Jananikshepam* before its publication as a book in 1882.

questioning the caste system. Divided into three sections, the novel discusses the Christian gospels and Jesus' teachings in the final section, while the first and second sections are outright attacks on casteism in Kerala during the period. The novel also discusses the prospects of conversion for the slave castes in detail.

In *Saraswativijayam* (1892), a novel by Potheri Kunhambu, there are references to annihilating caste and working for the development of the lower castes, among the achievements of the Basel Mission in Malabar, Kerala. And the protagonist of the novel, Marathan, is a lower caste man, who received education from the mission school, at the expense of offending the upper caste Nambudiri Brahmin landlord. The novel discusses how Christianity and the mission during the colonial period, contributed to changing the basic appearance of the converts. The converts were depicted as happy; and women as neatly, decently and modestly dressed in clean clothes that included a blouse, with combed hair and, with the men wearing shirts. They are also described as speaking clearly with standard pronunciation (Kunhambu, 2004: 59). This decent image in the novel, however, remains in stark opposition to the depiction of the slave castes of the period in missionary literature as "utterly unclean and polluting" (*Proceedings of the C.M.S.*, 1851:52, 145).

'Syrian Christians'<sup>3</sup> from Kerala, also known as 'Syrians' or 'Nazaranis', on the other hand, are not a product of 19<sup>th</sup> century European missions. They have enjoyed higher status in Kerala with social and ceremonial privileges, like the right to use the public roads, or to be part of temple festivals, in a state ruled by orthodox Hindu kings (Bayly, 1992: 8). They also claimed their origins from 'upper' caste Nambudiri Brahmins through conversion by St. Thomas. Syrians, thus, integrated better with the larger Hindu society and observed the same rules of ritual purity as the Nairs. And they refrained from proselytising amongst the Dalit and Backward castes to prevent challenging their own special privileges and status. Koshy Curien, the anti-hero of Frances Wright Collins' *The Slayer Slain* (1864-66), is the perfect example of Syrian resentment against educated Dalits guided by European missionaries (Collins, 2011: 21).

The coming of European Protestant missionaries marked the beginning of a new era in the field of education and social progress (Nag, 1983: 889). It became possible for lower castes to accompany their 'masters' all over India, whereas the traditional upper caste landlord would treat their lower caste slaves only in accordance with caste norms of untouchability and unapproachability (Collins, 2011: 98). The old Poulusa in *The Slayer Slain* shows how the missionary Christian reforms the 'slave' into a better person, who does not steal from his master but offers him wholehearted services instead. The 'good slave' even prays for his master, when the latter beats Poulusa's grandchild to death: "Saviour of mercy, Saviour of love, look down and pity us. Bless and forgive my cruel master. Lay not this sin to his charge, Amen, Amen" (Collins, 2011: 18). While colonial

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<sup>3</sup> Syrian Christians are divided into several denominations under various churches with a common claim of Brahmin origin through conversion by St. Thomas. These include the Syro-Malabar Catholic church and the Syro-Malankara Catholic churches under papal authority, along with the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Christian church under the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, the Malankara Orthodox Church, the Malankara Mar Thoma Syrian Church and few smaller churches.

modernity attempts to make 'humans' out of the slave castes through conversion, Poulusa is only referred to as 'the slave' or 'the Christian slave' by Frances Wright Collins. This irony can be linked to Bhabha's discussion on Frantz Fanon's discourse on "the continuist, progressivist myth of Man" (Bhabha, 1994: 237). The slave convert could, thus, never become the 'Christian', neither in the European sense, nor in the Syrian Christian one. At another point in the book, the native minister of the European mission is projected as the saviour of the slaves, against their cruel casteist Syrian Christian master (Collins, 2011: 29). And the native minister even threatens to invoke government action against the other servants to save Poulusa. Again, ironically, Christianity in such novels is portrayed as an agent that enslaves the converted Dalit Christian further, by dedicating him to his master and to work.

We wish to love our master, and our work; and we love the fields where our fathers and grandfathers have worked before us. We know every flower, and every bird that wades deep in the watery swamp. We know the sound of every *chuckram*<sup>4</sup>, which from our childhood to old age we have turned in their nightly course, while we have joined with the jackals in their howling. Our fathers' spades have dug the soil and made their graves; and they have been handed down to us, and we will again and again sow and reap the paddy, and our bodies shall die and help to fatten the soil: but we will never leave our master; neither will we break God's holy Sabbath day (Collins, 2011: 27-28).

European missionary Christianity, thus, embodied colonial modernity with its emphasis on progress and enlightenment that in other ways kept the master-slave relationship intact, while at the same time being opposed to traditional upper caste and Syrian Christian feudal oppression of lower castes. While Christian missionaries in Kerala played a major role in the social upliftment of various lower caste communities, as well as helped in the transition of Kerala into a modern state, one cannot ignore how they were also accused of the politics entailed in conversion at the expense of social reforms. At the same time, social reforms introduced by the mission, also supported and promoted the political and social base for a communist regime in Kerala that sought to further these activities to achieve better literacy<sup>5</sup>, and land reforms.<sup>6</sup> However, as also indicated above, this is not to say that colonial modernity constituted a panacea for Dalit suffering in Kerala, especially since Dalit Christian conversion was complicated by the presence of upper caste Syrian Christians. The following section on songs from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is a demonstrative case of this with Appachan denouncing those religions, theologies and churches that excluded the

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<sup>4</sup> A *chuckram* is a large traditional water wheel used in the paddy field. A man sitting on a raised platform steps on the blades of the wheel to keep it moving, which in turn, directs the water below. Traditionally, the slave castes performed this strenuous duty in the fields of their landlords.

<sup>5</sup> "The Kerala Education Bill" was introduced in 1957 in the assembly by the then Education minister Prof. Joseph Mundasseri and aimed at standardizing practices within educational institutions that ensured just opportunities and facilities for all. The bill also attempted to regularize the appointments of teachers, who were in service.

<sup>6</sup> Land reforms that were initiated by the Communist government in Kerala in 1957 leading to the "The Kerala Land Reforms Act" of 1964. These land reforms were aimed at ending the zamindari system and distributing land among peasants.

Dalit Christians of Kerala.

*The Songs of Poikayil Appachan*

Poikayil Appachan was born in 1879 as Kumaran, a Dalit slave of an aristocratic Syrian Christian family from Eraviperoor in the Central Travancore region of Kerala. He converted to Christianity at a young age due to the insistence of his landlord, and became an evangelist, working with several churches like the Marthoma Syrian Church and the Brethren Church, before abandoning Christianity and burning the Bible on account of the caste discrimination he faced. Also known as Poikayil Yohannan and Poikayil Kumara Gurudevan, Appachan is known for his spiritual work amongst Dalits and for organising them under the banner of Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) (Swamy, 2011: 597-598). Apart from his work on promoting education and lifestyle changes amongst his followers, Appachan was famous for his songs in which he critiqued caste discrimination and oppression in both Hinduism and Christianity. And his writings could have led the way to a distinct form of Dalit Christian theology:

Like orphans

we roamed the back alleys of Hinduism.

Like orphans

We wandered through the outskirts of Christianity.

The Hindus did not admit us, my friends,

neither did the Christians, oh, my people! (Swamy, 2011: 606)

This song not only critiques the casteism in Hinduism and Christianity, but it implies the absence of any theology or philosophy that reflects on the lives of the Dalits. Appachan engaged with this lacuna through systematic reflections on the nature of sin, salvation and the wrath of God. Being a 'nobody' both within Hinduism and Christianity was unacceptable for him and this led to his final rejection of both religions and the Church:

No, not a single alphabet is seen

On my race

So many histories are seen

On so many races

Scrutinize each one of them

The whole histories of the world

Not a single letter is seen on my race (Abhilash, 2013: 50)

Appachan expresses his disapproval of Christian scriptures and church histories that exclude Dalit Christians from Kerala, dehumanising them. He questions those religions and societies that demonise Dalits by refusing to be ashamed of his history and caste identity and challenging the order that turns caste

discrimination into a norm. While Appachan narratively employed several notions of personal hygiene and personal attire borrowed from European missionary discourse, he also theologised the slave history of the Dalits on the lines of the Old Testament (Mohan, 2005: 147-149):

Chained and locked

They were always captive

Thorny whips lashed them down

Yoked along with bulls and buffalos

Paired with beasts

Used to plough the ground (Abhilash, 2013: 57)

Appachan's songs describe the experience of slavery for Dalits and the violence meted out to them, calling for and comparing the liberation of Dalits with God's liberation of the Israelites from bondage. Appachan rewrites the history of the Travancore region by deploying the myth of a once, glorified past to fuel social transformation (Abhilash, 2013: 55-56), making his engagement with Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in many ways, an early precedent of Dalit Christian theologies within the various churches in Kerala.

#### *Dilemmas of Conversion in Malayalam Dalit Literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

To proceed to Dalit Christian writings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Samvatsaranga (1984) and *Mukkany* (1987)<sup>7</sup> are two important Malayalam novels that narrate Dalit lives, and the historical results of their conversions into Christianity and the intricate politics that emerge in the ensuing clash of cultures, practices and rituals. On the other hand, the short stories "Achanda Vendinja Inna!", "Eli, Eli, La'ama Sabach Tha'ni?" and "Prethabhashanam" detail the various dilemmas and psychic traumas of the Dalit Christian in the post-conversion period, where s/he faces casteism within and outside the church. Finally, Poikayil Appachan's songs criticise both casteism as well as the failure of Christianity in tackling casteism. The fact that three among the above-mentioned works have figured in the Dalit writing dossier *No Alphabet in Sight* (2011) bring the article back to analysing literary discussions about Dalit discourse and the history of vernacular Christianity in the region.

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<sup>7</sup> The names of novels (independent works) have been given in italics while short stories (part of a larger collection) are given in inverted commas.

*Samvatsarangal- The Annals of Dalit Life*

*Samvatsarangal* (1984)<sup>8</sup> written by S. E. James<sup>9</sup> is one of the few Malayalam novels with Ayyankali (1863-1941), one of the pioneers of Dalit struggles in Kerala, as a central character. He fought for the education and land rights of Dalits in the regions of Travancore. The forms of protests and resistance he used against casteism challenged the age-old customs in Kerala. His forceful use of the public roads that were out of bounds to the Dalits revolutionised the struggles for self-respect and paved the way for social transformation (Madhavan, 2008: 765-766). The novel employs Ayyankali as a character and describes the intricacies of Dalit lives and the discrimination they faced at the hands of the land-owning upper castes, the Nairs. It chronicles the life of Daniel Upadeshi, a Dalit convert and protestant preacher, who brings Christianity to Maranthadam, that becomes the location of Dalit revolution. Since he fails to separate himself from his past struggles and suffering, he narrates these to his grandson, Monayi. This includes his attempt to build a church and a congregation in Maranthadam that was met with scepticism, confusions, horror and violence. Both Dalit and upper caste gods were depicted as getting offended with the arrival of a new Christian god in their somewhat mystical and traditional habitat. The elements of magical realism in the novel reflect the myths, beliefs and the multiple contours of religious and cultural practices that pre-existed in Maranthadam. His first convert in Maranthadam was named Daveed, a man called Govindan or Konnan prior to his conversion. And his conversion initiated mass conversions among the Pulaya caste<sup>10</sup> in Patinjattumuri and Kattukulam. Here, faith is not merely an individual effort, but a community-initiated one that stands in opposition to the missionary notion of individual salvation and building personal relationships with God. It is observed that such mass conversions even led to increased competition between the missions (Lankina and Getachew, 2013: 116). Nevertheless, the caste society had nothing but scorn for the converted individuals. For instance, when Daveed comes to a local teashop run by a Nair, he is ridiculed by both upper castes and Dalits for his conversion.

Valladan came close to him. "We were calling your name all this while Konna."

"I am not Konnan."

Hunh! Everyone was surprised. They looked at each other meaningfully then and laughed.

"If so Konna, then how are you the manager *jammi*<sup>11</sup> of Medappera? Or are you the dead Anandanpilla *jammi* of Velakkenni?"

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<sup>8</sup> K. M. Krishnan's translation of Chapter 9 of this novel is included in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* with the title "Annals".

<sup>9</sup> James was one of the first novelists in Malayalam to address caste in all its intricacies. He has published four novels and several short stories and is the receiver of the Mamman Mappila Award in 1980 for his novel *Samvatsarangal*.

<sup>10</sup> One of the Dalit castes in Kerala, previously treated as agrarian slaves.

<sup>11</sup> *Jammi* refers to landlord. In pre-independence Kerala, Nairs were an important landowning community prior to the abolition of slavery through the Government of India Act of 1843 and the Second Proclamation of Travancore and Cochin that repudiated the buying and selling of lower caste slaves by landlords.

"No." Konnan said: "Daveesh!"

"Daveesh?" —They came closer. "Oh, Daveesh!"

"The name given to me by Upadeshi. From now on, call me only by that."

Making the cross mark on the forehead and keeping heaven as his witness, Upadeshi had whispered the name a hundred times in his ear: "Daveed." Then Upadeshi had taken the Bible and told him the story of King Daveed. However much ever he tried, the name of King Daveed of the psalms, came out as Daveesh from his mouth.

Damodaran Nair's regular customers looked at Daveesh sceptically. Vaathi understood the matter. Then he rose and went out of the shop. Turning towards the door, he spat on the ground and asked: "You have become a Christian, haven't you Konna?"

"Not Konnan, Daveesh." He corrected.

"Phew! Kaveesh... Kuveesh!" Vathi walked away blabbering.

While walking towards the church yard, someone called from behind: "Kooi Kaveeshe. Kuveeshe..." in a mocking voice.

Daveed walked on as if he did not hear. Maranthadam's first Christian walked towards the church yard (James, 1984: 92-93).<sup>12</sup>

The new name was intended to change the Dalit Konnan into a Christian Daveed. But the transition was not a smooth one. One could argue that the name Daveesh embodied the transitional liminal space between Konnan and Daveed (Ashcroft et al., 2000: 117). Though Homi Bhabha adopts the notion of a stairwell to explain the nature of liminal space, and how differences are constructed between binaries, converted Dalits cannot really be considered to inhabit a liminal space either, since a Dalit neither converts into European Christianity, nor a Syrian Christian one.

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994: 4).

The sequential evolution of becoming Christians as proposed by colonial modernity, thus, fails in this case to explain Dalit conversions that need to be separately theorized. The upper caste status of the Syrian Christians in Kerala could account for this added ambiguity in Dalit conversions.

Upadeshi is a kind and compassionate man, ready to serve even those who work for him. He provides all the workers engaged in building the church with

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<sup>12</sup> Translation mine



homemade delicacies as well as clothes. This is met with surprise and respect from workers, otherwise located within the local caste hierarchies of Kerala where they were traditionally allowed only certain kinds and leftover food and used or tampered clothes. Upadeshi preaches to the workers about the futility of worldly pleasures, urging them to seek eternal joy in God's kingdom. He translates the protestant theology and ethics<sup>13</sup> of Christian missionaries into his own lived experiences. The new life of the converted Dalit is hence dedicated to Christian ways that build the local church and spread the gospel. The complexity of the conversion experience is also evident in Velu's experiences, who was another Dalit, who took the name Mosha after converting to Christianity and is also appointed sexton of the church. However, he doubts whether he lost something dear to himself, when people are indifferent to him and mock his ideas of 'progress' like wearing the shirt of some fat white man from the church (James, 1984: 102). His fear of alienation in his native land and his attempts to fight it by praying and taking consolation in God were 'essential' components of Dalit Christian beginnings. The sudden shift of status from a Dalit to someone who has embraced a foreign religion disturbs the convert's social location, and traumatizes him/her, as she/he fights this alienation through prayer and performing religious rituals. Apart from an emphasis on salvation through one's personal relationship with Jehovah, Daniel Upadeshi in the novel also popularises education amongst the Pulayas and Ooralis.

He tried to make them aware of the necessity of education. "Don't you need liberation from this state that is close to the life of animals?", he asked.

"We have been suffering this for years and years together!"

"There is only one way to escape", he said. "Learn, and progress. And through education, we can become great people, like the white people, who came here to start the church, like the Diwanji (James, 1984: 165).<sup>14</sup>

This urge for learning and education as part of civilizational progress was endorsed by colonial modernity, having deep repercussions among Nairs in the locality. Dalits with increased access to and an interest in education, especially with the arrival of Christianity is a historical reality in Kerala, which the novelist interweaves with real and fictional incidents to legitimise the history of Dalit Christians and describe their dilemmas of conversions. The invoking of Ayyankali and his historic struggles for justice and human rights for Dalits in Kerala, thus, fits well into this narrative. The novelist, therefore, succeeds in establishing that Dalit Christian lives cannot be devoid of Dalit pasts and their struggle against casteist suffering. In fact, the protagonist carries the struggles against casteism strongly forward, using his faith in Christianity and the various modes of capital that he acquired with it as agents of change and progress.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Weber (2005) for a detailed and celebrated analysis of protestant Christianity and its relation with work culture and the rise of capitalism in Germany.

<sup>14</sup> Translation mine

*Mukkany, D. Rajan's Novel*

D. Rajan, through his novel *Mukkany* (1987), unravels the lives of Parayas, a Dalit community in Southern Travancore, whose occupation was to cut *mukkany*<sup>15</sup> from the Sahya mountain ranges and earn a livelihood on various products made from it. The novel brings to light the internal hierarchies within the Paraya caste, attempting to create space for their myths, beliefs and customs in Malayalam literature. This is also a 'chronicle novel' (Ayrookuzhy and Chirakkarode, 1995: 32) that narrates the story of three generations among the Parayas. The first generation is represented by the Paraya elder, Nanjan Mooppan, who is feared by all in the locality and practices occult rituals and magic. He also symbolises the violent and polygamous 'pagan' Paraya within the Christian missionary discourse. He is the "leader, *guru*, priest, magician and everything for the Parayas" (Rajan, 1987: 17). The second generation that initiates social change is represented by Nanjan Mooppan's daughter Painkili and her husband Chennan. Chennan is revived by Dalit Christians from Myladi,<sup>16</sup> after he was almost beaten to death by some of Painkili's relatives. Chennan and Painkili get married, following which they meet with various hardships. They are supported by Vedamanickam and his wife Nahomi, third generation Dalit Christians, after Chennan meets with an accident and loses his left eye. Vedamanickam and Nahomi bring them home and care for them (Rajan, 1987: 158) and are depicted as pious Christians who did not work on Sundays and who dedicated one tenth of their earnings to the church (Rajan, 1987: 160-1). The couple taught Chennan and Painkili many Christian songs and taught them to recite from the Bible (Rajan, 1987: 162), while the priest and other church members opposed the non-Christian Dalits being hosted by Vedamanickam's family (Rajan, 1987: 163-4). Finally, as conversion seems the only solution, Chennan and Painkilli are baptised as Shilas and Raseena (Rajan, 1987: 166).

The adoption of a new name is significant here, as it is a public declaration of their new belief and life in Christ that sheds their caste identity. But, Chennan and Painkilli continued their traditional occupation of cutting *mukkany* and selling its products along with other Paraya Christians and non-Christians. Vedamanickam, being a devout Christian and appointed deacon of the church, assumes the role of a godfather for Stephen, Shilas and Raseena's son. He is portrayed as guiding Stephen from childhood, to read and narrate biblical stories. While portraying the religious fervour of Paraya Christians, the novel employs many popular Christian songs in standard Malayalam, in stark contrast to the Paraya dialect of Malayalam that characters use for conversations. The narrative voice of the novel employs standard Malayalam, while also highlighting the specific flavour of Paraya Malayalam. The novel uses biblical language and imageries repeatedly for instances when Stephen is discriminated at school for being a "beef-eating Paraya" (Ibid.: 186). Vedamanickam advises Stephen at such

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<sup>15</sup> A variety of forest bamboo, used for weaving baskets, mats, ropes and other utilities.

<sup>16</sup> The novelist attempts to invoke the early history of Dalit conversions in Southern Travancore through his references to Myladi. The first Dalit convert from the region, Maharashan was also given the name 'Vedamanickam' after conversion. For a detailed discussion of this history, see Chirakkarode, 2000.

instances to depend on god and study well to overcome his difficulties, citing the Bible on how the poor and the suffering would receive relief in heaven.

The novelist, Rajan, uses biblical stories and themes meaningfully to describe Paraya lives. For example, when Vedamanickam decides to meet the Bishop to seek permission for Stephen's ordination as a priest, the image of Moses from the Old Testament is invoked to express hope that Stephen would deliver Parayas from a life of slavery and darkness (Rajan, 1987: 194-5). Slavery is not merely spiritual here; it was the lived and systemic experience of caste discrimination for Parayas<sup>17</sup>. The novelist also discusses white missionaries leading the church since the colonial period in glowing terms as: "It used to be foreign missionaries then. They were white bishops. They had sacrificed their lives for others. They were the true disciples of Jesus Christ" (Rajan, 1987: 196). This description of European missionaries is in stark contrast with the native Bishop who gets angry with Vedamanickam and shouts at him for wanting to get Stephen admitted in the seminary. Though Stephen is smart and has passed the matriculation exam with first class that is not enough for him to join the seminary. The Bishop says: "You are a deacon. Your son should be made a priest. In this way, you would say that his son be made bishop. You need lineage and heritage for priesthood. Will church members obey if the Paraya and Pulaya become priests?" (Rajan, 1987:196-7).

The novelist further stresses the difference in attitude between white missionaries and the native bishop by narrating how Vedamanickam's grandfather converted to Christianity. Villi Parayan, Vedamanickam's grandfather was a black magician, who had killed an upper caste drunkard for disrupting a Paraya festival. When all the Parayas in the locality came under police and social persecution for this, the white priest stepped in and ensured the security of the Parayas. The character of Vedamanickam in the novel says: "They were saved from the police with the help of the *saayip*<sup>18</sup> priest. And they joined Christianity *en masse* for self-protection. Villi Parayan, the evil magician was baptized and became Christian and he adopted the Christian name, Habel. Habel's son was Hanok. Hanok's son is Vedamanickam" (Rajan, 1987:197). This incident relates the heterogeneous nature of motives underlying the Christian conversion of Dalits into missions. While for some, Christianity was a spiritual quest, for others it was embroiled with improvement of social status and for still others it was associated with the privileges of mission life.

The novelist makes the best use of his narrative voice to talk about continuing casteism within the church by referring to different parishes for Dalits who were not allowed to attend the same church along with the upper caste Christians. Intelligently enough, the novelist also refers to the works of other European missionaries in Kerala through Vedamanickam's voice, who remembers these as

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<sup>17</sup> The British abolished slavery in Malabar in 1843. And slavery finally ended in practice through Royal Proclamation in Travancore and Cochin in 1853 and 1854 respectively.

<sup>18</sup> *Saayip* is a term for white man, while *madaamma* is used for a white woman. *Saayip* is the same as *sahib* or *sahab* commonly used in other Indian vernaculars.

stories told to him by Habel, his grandfather:

European missionaries came to Kerala to spread Christianity. True missionaries... People who had dedicated their lives for the spread of the gospel... These foreign missionaries had come to India to convert those uncivilised people to Christianity, who were performing evil things like magic, black magic, sacrifices, ghost-talks, etc... For that, they build churches. They started schools. They built hospitals. They made orphanages. They constructed factories... Those white gospel workers went to the huts of the poor and gave them clothes. They gave them food. They took care of the sick. They taught them how to live cleanly and with respect. They got their children to join school... They taught them to sing and pray. They raised them to be humans (Rajan, 1987: 199-200).<sup>19</sup>

Thus, the liminal space that Dalit Christians would have occupied turns more ambiguous and contested with the seemingly 'benevolent' missionaries and the traditionally oppressive Syrian Christians at two possible ends for the stairwell in which the Dalit converts are culturally located. Neither do they become the European Christian nor the Syrian Christian.

The third generation in the novel is also represented by Stephen, who joins hands with other Dalits, voicing his anger against caste discriminations within the church and outside it. He is a fictional representative of the postcolonial Dalit Christian subject, caught up in numerous dilemmas. As a Christian, he is refused any caste reservation within educational institutions or government employment unlike Hindu Dalits. And his dilemma even propels him to consider converting back to Hinduism to avail of reservation, so that he can join a college. But he is dissuaded by Vedamanickam, who reinstates Christian faith in him and warns him from falling for worldly desires (Rajan, 1987: 228-234). This is a realistic portrayal of the Dalit Christian in contemporary India, where s/he gets discriminated against, based on her Dalit origins, even after generations of conversion. S/he is a 'Lower Caste Christian' or 'New Christian' or 'Weak Christian' for society and church and is yet kept away from affirmative governmental action that provides Dalits caste reservation. This anger against discrimination is best portrayed in the words of Christopher, a friend of his, who encourages Stephen to fight casteism in the church:

Nowadays, casteism is most widely practised amongst Christians. They build separate churches for different castes. Pulayas and Parayas have small churches with roofs thatched from grass and coconut leaves. They make fun of it calling it *pulapallikal* and *parapallika*<sup>20</sup>. The elites have tall magnificent churches! They have special cemeteries. Lakhs of rupees are sent to them from America, England and Germany for missionary work. They enjoy its fruits— the upper castes, the rich, those from elite families! We are mere worms (Rajan, 1987: 243).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Translation mine

<sup>20</sup> While *Pulapallikal* refers to Pulaya churches, *parapallikal* refers to Paraya churches.

<sup>21</sup> Translation mine

Stephen draws inspiration from the words of Harold Laski<sup>22</sup> and B. R. Ambedkar in organising against the inequalities of the church (Rajan, 1987: 244). When Vedamanickam dies, his body is taken to a far-off cemetery as Dalit Christians were not allowed to share their cemetery with Syrian Christians. Also, in spite of Stephen being popular as a writer and a god-fearing Christian, his lover Celin's father, the Syrian priest of *parapalli*, refuses to let them get married and she has to run away from home to be with Stephen. Thus, the novel shows how manifold the challenges faced by Dalit Christians are, and these problems do not automatically disappear in the 'post' conversion period. The post conversion experience of the Dalit should not be understood as sequential in nature, but as an "ex-centric site" that reveals newer experiences and avenues of empowerment as well as resistance (Bhabha, 1994: 4).

*"Achanda Vendinja Inna!"- Father, Here's Your Scapular!*

In this short story (2003), T. K. C. Vaduthala<sup>23</sup> brings to light the tensions and ironies of Dalit Christian lives in Kerala, for whom conversion to Christianity constituted a source for liberation and emancipation from caste oppression. The protagonist of the story is a man from the Pulaya caste named Kandankoran who converts to Christianity after suffering from a serious illness, especially after his Syrian Christian landlord, 'Kochu Thamban'<sup>24</sup>, visits him and instructs him to convert. Kandankoran is, thus, baptized with a new name, 'Devassi,' and the immediate effect of this conversion is depicted as impressive, with the Syrian Christians of his neighbourhood willing to sacrifice everything for the "New Christian". Devassi is, hence, proud to be a staunch Catholic and becomes elevated from his lower caste status. However, he also starts to think that Pulaya life is now unworthy of him and pities those Pulayas who continue to remain "two-legged cattle" that work for others. He considers converting his wife and children too, completely abandoning the family's old Pulaya way of life, since he now thinks of Pulayas as the "children of Satan". But his wife refuses, and they fight. He also demands that one of his neighbours, a Pulaya named Thevachan, call him 'Thevasthi Thamban'. But when everyone laughs at Devassi for pretending to be a Syrian Christian and making such demands as a Pulaya, Devassi severs all ties with the Pulayas, abandoning his wife and children. Devassi's encounter with his father-in-law is also a revealing instance of the same caste intricacies of Christian conversion, when his father-in-law calls him 'Kandangan Thevasthi'. Devassi fights with his father-in-law and demands to be called 'Devassi Thamban' and his attempts to transform himself into an upper caste Christian becomes increasingly obvious in the story, when Devassi fights with another Pulaya for daring to call him 'brother'. Devassi, thus, isolates himself from the other Pulayas and develops an aversion to the lifestyle followed by his

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<sup>22</sup> Harold Laski (1893-1950) was a British political theorist, economist and socialist active in the interwar years.

<sup>23</sup> Vaduthala wrote stories on several themes including caste discrimination, feudalism, alcoholism amongst Dalits, and the rise of political awareness, and religious conversions.

<sup>24</sup> 'Thamban' is a term used by the Pulayas of his locality to address Syrian Christians. It is similar to the term *Thambran*, a term traditionally used by the Dalit castes for Nair and other upper caste landlords.

caste.

The author, Vaduthala also describes the material changes that took place in Devassi's life with conversion. He stopped working in his own fields and became an attendant of the Syrian Christian family. He wore a scapular<sup>25</sup> or *vendinja* given to him by the priest and he did not need to refer to Syrian Christians like other Pulayas had to do. He had his own 'elevated' status and better names. But this dream world is disrupted when his father-in-law tells him how the *Mappilas*, the Syrian Christians, still refer to him as a Pulaya. He is perplexed about why they still call him Kandankoran even after his conversion and the change of his name. One can either be Kandankoran or Devassi; but, how can one be both Kandankoran and Devassi? This question troubles him and he realizes that despite conversion, he does not get the opportunity to eat with Syrian Christians, whom he refers to as 'real Christians' (Vaduthala, 2003: 42). Vaduthala invokes the image of a bat, while describing Dalit converts to Christianity, since bats are neither birds nor animals. While conversion instils a feeling of superiority in the mind of a Dalit convert that makes him shun other Dalits, Syrian Christians continue to consider Christian converts Dalits. Kandankoran Devassi is a representative of Dalit Christians in Kerala who face caste discrimination at various levels in the church. The new name after conversion is deceptive and becomes a mere adage to the Dalit's previous identity and he fails to become a 'real' Christian, a Syrian Christian in this social context. One just becomes a 'Dalit Christian' instead.

A culmination of this identity crisis takes place in the novel when one of the church elders, a Syrian Christian of great authority publicly calls Devassi 'Kandankoran Devassi' and all the Pulayas laugh at him, mocking his pseudo-Christian status. He reaches the church with a heavy heart and breaks down before the priest, and without answering the latter's questions, removes the scapular from around his neck and returns it to the priest saying: "Father, here is your scapular. I will live as the old Kandankoran" (Vaduthala, 2003: 44). This is the moment in the novel when Kandankoran decides to shed his belief in Syrian Christianity, an upper caste religion in Kerala, and asserts his identity as a Pulaya, as someone not requiring liberation and emancipation, but as someone who can speak for himself and can see through the casteist agenda of the church. This story asserts that casteism operates in similar ways, both within Hinduism and Christianity in Kerala (Anilkumar, 2004: 83). And borrowing the notion of "psychic trauma" from the postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon<sup>26</sup>, one can identify the Dalit Christian as a hybrid, who realises the futility of attempting to become an upper caste Syrian Christian or shed the specific cultural identities that are despised as

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<sup>25</sup> Scapulars or *vendinja* are locket-like sacramentals worn mainly by the Roman Catholics to show their devotion and allegiance to certain saints. Scapulars would have images of saints, Mother Mary, Jesus etc. or even biblical verses on them and be worn around the neck.

<sup>26</sup> Fanon was a French psychiatrist, philosopher and revolutionary, known for his formulations in postcolonial theory. His most famous works include *Black Skin, White Masks* (Originally in French as *Peau noire, masques blancs* in 1952 and translated into English in 1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (Originally in French as *Les damnés de la terre* in 1961 and translated into English in 1963).

lower caste by the society (Loomba, 1998: 176). Kandankoran's psychic trauma in post-conversion phase leads him to abandon Syrian Christianity, a religion that is comparable to the whiteness that was promised to the Fanonian hybrid colonised subject.

*"Eli, Eli, La'ma Sabach Tha'ni?"- Fighting the Casteist Christian*

In this short story (2011), Paul Chirakkarode<sup>27</sup> narrates how a pious Dalit Christian resorts to counter violence in order to fight the injustices meted out to him and his family by a Syrian Christian. This story is translated under the same name by Shirly M. Joseph in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2011). The story opens with a court scene where Pathrose, a preacher, talks about his life, writing his name as 'Kandankoran Pathrose', as his name was Kandankoran before converting. He describes the lives of the Pulaya caste from his childhood, and how Pulaya men and women toiled the whole day in the fields to earn a living. He explains how he was invited by the priest from the Mission to join the seminary in his youth after which he underwent three years of training to emerge as 'Preacher Pathrose'. His missionary training and Christian fervour are evident in the passionate and biblical phrases he uses to describe his beginnings as a preacher (Chirakkarode, 2011: 397). Pathrose marries Mariam, a Pulaya woman, who was earlier called Chirutha before converting, and they had a daughter called Marykutty. The passion and devotion with which Pathrose preached, shocked people who were prejudiced against Pulaya Christians. To quote:

Crowds gathered to listen to my rendering of the Word. Their eyes reflected the shock of witnessing the unimaginable. They turned to one another and whispered, amazed: 'Is this not one whom we know? Is he not the one who grew up in the pulaya hovels beside the fields? Isn't Thiruvanchan Pulayan his father and his mother Azhaki Pulakalli? Who is it that has given him this knowledge and this power?'... All the way, they muttered to themselves: 'To think that this should befall us; that we should have to listen to a pulaya preaching to us!' 'Enough. Were we not already Christian when they were still heathens?' (Chirakkarode, 2011: 397-398)

The allusion here is to how people in Jesus' hometown got amazed when he started teaching them in the synagogue.<sup>28</sup> This amazement and shock also point at new and multireligious ways of being that simultaneously asserted Dalit identity, facilitated by missionaries. "This knowledge and this power" for Dalits came with the arrival of missionaries in the region, even though Christianity was present in Kerala for a very long time before that as a casteist enterprise.

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<sup>27</sup> Chirakkarode was a Dalit writer and activist who worked against casteism within the Christian churches of Kerala. Apart from several novels, short stories and essays, he also contributed to the establishment of Dalit literature in Malayalam through his essay *Dalit Sahithyathinoru Mukhavura* and the book *Dalith Saahityam: Oru Padanam* (1995, Christava Sahitya Samithy, Tiruvalla), co-authored with Rev. Dr. Abraham Ayrookuzhy.

<sup>28</sup> Refer to Verses 54-56 in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew in the Bible for the story.

Marykutty in the book, on the other hand, challenges Pathrose for ignoring the needs of his family:

God will make a way for us. Pray earnestly. Do you not believe in the One who can send food even through a crow?

And my daughter—God, how could she say that? —she said: Father, these days, food does not get sent through crows, but through ration shops and in hotels (Chirakkarodu, 2011: 399).

This conversation contests faith as the only factor that fends for the Dalit convert's everyday needs, and therefore also contests the teachings of missionary Christianity. The allusion here is to the story<sup>29</sup> of Prophet Elijah in the Old Testament, who gets fed bread and meat by the ravens. But, such miracles are not a part of the lived reality of the Dalit Christian lives. When Pathrose discovers that Marykutty is pregnant as a result of her relationship with a Syrian Christian man named Kunjunjutti, he asks the latter to accept her as his wife. The ensuing conversation between Pathrose and Kunjunjutti reveals how caste determines marital relationships, even in the church. Kunjunjutti says:

The preacher is knowledgeable. And though I am a wageworker, I am from an aristocratic Christian family. We have been Christian since the time of St. Thomas in Kerala.

To that I reply: "Am I not a servant of God? Am I not a Christian?"

"Preacher, you are a mock Christian, a convert. You have forgotten that, haven't you? Go find some Pulaya lad to give her off to." (Chirakkarode, 2011: 401)

In the story, Pathrose kills Kunjunjutti with an axe. Pathrose understands the various events in his life and society purely from the lens of his Christian faith. For him, Christianity has overwritten his Dalit identity. And his trust in God leaves him unaware of the colours and contours of the caste system he is associated with, despite being a fiery preacher:

Do I plead guilty of murder? How can this be murder? I am the one who is the servant of God, the one for whom His Word is the girdle, the one who obeys His commandments? It is according to His commandment that I meted out punishment. His commandment? Which one? The Word of God spells it out: 'The Wages of Sin is Death.' The Lord my God will never find me guilty. Never. Never (Chirakkarode, 2011: 402).

The biblical dictum that the wages of sin is death<sup>30</sup> guides the action of the preacher who considers himself to be the agent of God. He fails to understand the norms and laws of the caste order as well as the legal system, both alien to the Bible that believes in.

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<sup>29</sup> Refer to Chapter 17 of Book 1 Kings in the Old Testament of the Bible for the story.

<sup>30</sup> Refer to Verse 23 of Chapter 6 of the Epistle to Romans in the Bible.



*"Prethabhashanam"/ "Ghost-Speech"*

While Christian conversion has been a major theme in the many literary works authored by Dalits in Kerala, C. Ayyappan<sup>31</sup> stands out with his sarcasm and denial of any 'glory' accorded to Christianity. His analysis of Kerala society and Syrian Christianity, his disrespect for the casteist system and casteist churches is unambiguously depicted in his short stories, containing extraordinary and innovative narrative techniques. "Ghost-speech" is an English translation of C. Ayyappan's short story "Prethabhashanam" (2011) that was initially published in a short story collection *Uchayurakkathile Swapnangal* from 1986. Translated by Udaya Kumar for the book *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India* (2011), the entire story is in the form of a speech made by the ghost of a Pulaya girl, inhabiting the body of Rosykutty, a Syrian Christian girl. The ghost explains the reasons underlying her death in the story.

When she was alive, the Pulaya girl had a relationship with the Syrian Christian girl's brother, Kunjakko, that started after he molested her. The Pulaya girl did not realize that Kunjakko was only interested in sex and asks him to marry her. He retorts with a question, "How can I marry you?" (Ayyappan, 2011: 351), and this reflects the unequal social condition of Dalits, where upper caste men may consider it right to sexually exploit a Dalit girl but objectionable to marry one. Even though Kunjakko is a primary school teacher, with a steady income, he cannot marry a Pulaya girl, especially as he is a Syrian Christian who has traditionally enjoyed upper caste status in Kerala, often equated to that of the elite Nair castes (Bayly, 1992: 249). He also spits at her desire to have his child, since an upper caste Christian would not consider a lower caste person's desire for legitimacy as valid (Anilkumar, 2004: 61). While the Pulaya girl is too young and lacking in ways to identify caste oppression prevalent in Christian society, to identify her own exploitation and exploiter, Kunjakko beats her and forces her to state in public that she does not love him. He also abuses her later in the story when she tries to find out whether he loves her. She cries, not because of the abuse, but because Kunjakko does not love her. And she commits suicide, unable to tackle this trauma. Kunjakko is scared of being polluted by the Dalit girl's love, then, after being forced to accept it in public. It is to be noted here that the Syrian Christians have traditionally observed rituals and customs similar to those of the Nairs in relation to birth, death, puberty, etc. "In fact they were rites which safeguarded the Syrians' corporate substance and guaranteed their status within a shared moral order which was defined in terms of gradations of ritual purity and pollution" (Bayly, 1992: 252). The lack of honour that prevents Dalit Christians from having their own voice leads to the Pulaya girl's suicide in the novel, thus making possible the only means for the articulation and expression of her oppression, as a ghost.

The ghost further reveals why Rosykutty's father killed Kunjakko, Rosykutty's

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<sup>31</sup> Ayyappan was a noted Dalit short story writer and poet in Malayalam and has written widely on Dalit issues and Dalit women's issues. His stories stand apart in their uncommon, intense and disturbing themes as well as narrative techniques. Several of his short story collections have been published, such as *Uchayurakkathile Swapnangal* (1986) and *C. Ayyappante Kadhakal* (2008).

brother. Rosykutty, once inhabited by the ghost, refused to stay away from Kunjakko, expressing a sexual interest in him.<sup>32</sup> Even when he beat her, she laughed and continued. And everyone except him knew that it was the ghost of the Pulaya girl in Rosykutty's body. While the ghost was not worried about the possibility of exorcism, she was worried that Kunjakko would commit suicide, disallowing her from enjoying the smell of his sweat that she now did through Rosikutty's nose. Kunjakko is killed by his father, when the latter finds him sleeping next to his sister Rosykutty's chained body, hugging her. Though the father realized that it was due to the Pulaya girl that Kunjakko took advantage of his sister Rosykutty's illness, he killed Kunjakko because the Pulaya girl was also his illegitimate daughter, making Kunjakko's relation with her incestuous and sinful in Christianity. The father had warned Kunjakko against having any relations with the Pulaya girl, but was left speechless, when Kunjakko replied that he was not planning to marry her. It was as if Kunjakko was reliving his father's past, as the Pulaya girl's mother had faced the same injustice at the hands of the father and the father's younger brother. The story reveals the complicated innards of caste abuse embroiled in the sexual violence against Dalits and Dalit Christians in Kerala, and it was finally God, who revealed this secret to the ghost in the story, calling her a 'sinner' whose nakedness was unveiled by her own brother. But Ayyappan challenges and ridicules the casteist and violent nature of Christianity in Kerala through the way the ghost retorts to God: "Old fool! How can a Christian have a Pulaya girl as his sibling?" This question leaves God speechless "as if he had swallowed a whole plantain. His eyes bulged, and he bowed his head" (Ayyappan, 2011: 354). Ayyappan mocks the casteism prevalent in the churches of Kerala that fail to promote marriages between Syrian Christians and Dalits, retaining Syrian Christians' upper caste status claiming apostolic origin through Brahmin conversion. For him Christianity is unable to bring to life what it preaches—equality amongst all of its believers.

The story finally reveals that Kunjakko had no soul, and whether the author means to question the absence of any soul for all Syrian Christians and Syrian Christianity at large, remains unanswered. Ayyappan's use of a ghost as a narrative medium or character in the story differs from the traditional methods of using a ghost in a novel or play. As Freedgood puts it, the ghostly referent recounts an injustice, an unpunished crime or murder that must be avenged for the ghost to return to his or her proper sphere. But what is interesting about this genre is that the ghost is often easily appeased, the crime becoming readily available for public understanding (Freedgood, 2014: 49-50). In the popular *theyyattam*<sup>33</sup> stories of North Malabar region of Kerala, lower castes punished with death for violating caste and moral restrictions get deified, and *theyyattam* becomes the annual ritual performance where the lower caste performer, while possessed with the deity, gets revered by people of all castes (Menon, 1993: 189). Unlike the deities of the *theyyattam* stories who have become a part of the

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<sup>32</sup> It is not stated very clearly. But it is mentioned that she stuck to him.

<sup>33</sup> *Theyyam* refers to annual ritual worship performances that happen in Kerala's northern districts like Kasargod, Kannur, Kozhikode and Wayanad as well as parts of Karnataka. Most of the performers are men, and the performances are popular, as well as crucial, in retaining the cultural memories of ritualism and folkloric religious expressions in the region.

cultural memory of the region, the ghost in Ayyappan's story is not respectable for the Syrian Christian family in spite of her similar unjust death. The chance of the Dalit girl becoming a saint for the Syrian Christians is also bleak.

In "Ghost-speech", the intricacies of the plot are unveiled only through the speech of the ghost. Also, while the ghost does not take active revenge, it expresses strong contempt for casteist exploitation. The ghost's speech is an act of assertion – not that of a mere victim, but of a rebel who questions the caste system and God who sanctions it passively. Ayyappan's attempt to employ the narrative voice of the ghost, as mentioned in one of his interviews, possibly stems from an appreciation of Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (Ayyappan, 2008: 181).<sup>34</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Understanding Dalit conversions in the context of European and missionary Christianity in Kerala, represented in vernacular literature in Malayalam, as yet remains an incomplete task. The liminal space occupied by Dalit Christians cannot really be well-encompassed by Bhabha's analytical imagery of a stairway that seeks to present the social acceptability of the Indian Christian identity. The upper caste status of the Syrian Christians in Kerala and the impossibility of transcending one's caste identity even through conversion create this uncommon experience. On the other hand, what was lost in the course of conversion leads to further dilemmas for the convert, generating concerns about the Gods, myths, legends and the different histories of their slave past. For instance, CMS missionaries claimed that the Hill Araan tribe in Kerala demanded of missionaries to destroy their traditional worship places and idols, so that they could learn to pray to the Christian God (*Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society*, 1852-53: 130), and it also became evident that the European missions wanted to benefit the Syrian churches and not the Dalit and Adivasi converts in Kerala.

The object of the Mission was expressly to benefit the Syrian Church—not to interfere with its liberty to "ordain rites and ceremonies," but to encourage and aid it to reform itself— "not to pull down the ancient Church and build another, but to remove the rubbish and repair the decaying places" (Church Missionary Atlas, 1879: 98-99).

The social status Syrian Christians enjoyed, along with their legends of an apostolic origin, could have made them a worthier target group in the missions' perspective.

Dalits definitely experienced a loss of ancestral religion while embracing Christianity, and hence, the acts of conversion and the nature of post-conversion

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<sup>34</sup> Tutuola (1920-97) was a Nigerian writer, whose narrative techniques and style received wide appreciation and criticism in the postcolonial literary scene. *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) was his most famous novel, where he employs western and native Nigerian fantastic and mythical elements to depict the story of a person who visits the land of the dead in search of his dead palm tapper.

life was not easy, as Dalit Christian literature reveals. It led to a series of attempts and initiatives within Indian churches in the 1980s to systematically articulate faith through a relevant and caste-conscious theology, forming the context for newly emergent Dalit aspiration for liberation (Prabhakar, 2006: 202). Dalit Christian literature and theology has not just led to the redefinition of Christian hermeneutics in India that responds to Dalit perspectives, histories and experiences, but also strongly critiques the idea of Dalit Christianity as 'little traditions', opposed to the 'great tradition' of upper caste Hindus and Brahmin or upper caste Christians (Appavoo, 2006: 112).

The meta-narrative of an Indian Christian theology is hence reformulated by the Dalit religious experience that is openly expressed in Dalit Christian vernacular literature. And the search for the Dalit Christian's daily bread and their struggle against caste oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy and the denial of human dignity and identity, as expressed in vernacular literature, contributes to the formulation of a Dalit theology. It thus becomes an act of deliberate Dalit theological activism to compare Dalit liberation in India with that of the ex-slaves of Israel. Thus, from the Dalit literary and theological perspective, conversion to Christianity is considered an exodus to liberation from the clutches of the caste system, and from Hindu society and religion. The emphasis on this 'exodus experience' is inspired from Black theological formulations in a similar context.

In the Old Testament, the liberation theme stands at the center of the Hebrew view of God. Throughout Israelite history, God is known as he who acts in history for the purpose of Israel's liberation from oppression. This is the meaning of the Exodus from Egypt, the Covenant at Sinai, the conquest and settlement of Palestine, the United Kingdom and its division, and the rise of the great prophets and the second exodus from Babylon (Cone, 1970: 52).

For Black theologians, Christianity offers exodus and liberation from racial violence and subjugation. Meanwhile, T. M. Yesudasan proposes the distinct notion of 'religious ascension' while dealing with Dalit conversions in the light of the missionary activities. To quote: "Till the time Islam and Protestant religions sanctioned the entry of converts into their fold in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Dalits of Kerala were not even part of any recognizable organized religion. Hence, it is not right to say that Dalits ever converted to their religion. The notion here, of Dalit religious ascension, is more apt, since it denotes ascension into a better state from a disorganized and helpless situation. Dalit conversion was therefore not a shift of loyalty from one organized religion to another; it was religious ascension" (Yesudasan, 2010: 3).<sup>35</sup> Yesudasan's argument need not be considered as a dismissal of the existence of Dalit religions during those days, but as problematizing the notion of distinct organised religions as we understand them now. The fluidity of religious practices, rituals and identities in the social context of caste becomes relevant here.

This approach of Dalit Christianity and Dalit conversion in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, analysed through Dalit Christian vernacular literature, dismantles various

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<sup>35</sup> Translation mine

Hindutva theories of forced conversions and enticement that imagined European missionaries as luring Dalits into converting (Bauman, 2008: 189). Neither can conversion and Christianity be universally celebrated as liberating or patronizing. Yesudasan notes the very few references to Dalits within the C.M.S. records for the seventeen years between 1818-35, when missionaries were awaiting favourable response from the Syrian Christians (Yesudasan, 2010: 16-18), with the exception of Kali, a slave girl, who was baptized by her own insistence and desire to convert in Cochin in 1827-8, after running away from her European master (Yesudasan, 2010: 49-50).<sup>36</sup> Hence, the religious conversion of Dalits viewed as ascensions is on par with Ambedkar's conversion to *Navayana* Buddhism<sup>37</sup>. Quoting from Yesudasan again: "The slaves had gone in search of missionaries. The strategy of conversion used by slaves to attain freedom, at least in a limited sense and to further develop this freedom already attained, is what make Dalit religious ascension an active and creative thought" (Yesudasan, 2010: 51).<sup>38</sup>

Michel de Certeau theorizes the power of everyday resistance, through an elaboration of small and mundane tactics. While strategies are grand in nature, often legitimized through governmental, and the dominant community's sanctions, tactics refer to smaller, more quotidian and common individual attempts that use available structures to subvert and democratize grand strategies (de Certeau 1988: xix). Hence, the slave girl's attempt to embrace Christianity using whatever available opportunity she had, represents an ordinary person's resistance and attempt to establish an alternate order through tactics, separate from grand strategies. Bringing all these diverse literary accounts of Dalit Christians and their conversions together, the arguments for and against the more grand-scale missionary ideas emphasizes a plurality in attitudes and aims. And these plural aims, emotions, personal stories and literature that demonstrate an everyday and painful negotiation with social oppression and structures of caste hierarchies, question the linear logic of modernity and development that the missions proposed. Not only were the reasons and motives for conversions plural, so was the missionary intervention, and this diversity can be well addressed through the literary approach and methodology, enabling an analysis of Dalit Christian literature and theology that presents the experience of conversion as a multi-religious entanglement.

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<sup>36</sup> Kali insisted on conversion in order to avoid going to Ceylon with her family. The sources describe how she stood firm, holding the gate of the missionary's bungalow, refusing to leave unless taken in.

<sup>37</sup> *Navayana* Buddhism was a version of Buddhism, that Ambedkar believed would prove useful for Dalits to liberate themselves from the caste system and Hinduism. Ambedkar, along with a large number of followers, converted to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur.

<sup>38</sup> Translation mine

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