

Pandit K Karuppan: The Dalit Accent on Kerala Renaissance**Anne Placid***Assistant Professor & HoD of English, Sri C Achutha Menon Govt College Thrissur
Kuttanellur (PO), Kerala, India - 680014*annieplacid@gmail.com**Dr Binu K D***Assistant Professor of English, Sri C Achutha Menon Govt College Thrissur
Kuttanellur (PO), Kerala, India - 680014*binukdevasy2011@gmail.com**Abstract:**

Renaissance, the great upheaval of Kerala society in the 19th and the early 20th century, was mainly responsible for the emergence of Kerala's modernity that attempted to address questions of class, caste and gender inequities. The thought and deeds of Sree Narayana Guru, Kumara Guru (Poyikayil Appachan) Vaikundar Swamikal, Vagbhatananda, Ayyankali, Sahodaran Ayyappan to name only a few, accentuated the process of Kerala's modernity. The fight for abolition of untouchability, landlordism, the right for entering temples and public path ways meant for upper castes, the lower castes' right to education and women's right to wear clothes and jewellery of their own choice were some of the achievements that enhanced people's social freedom and economic wellbeing. This article, however, confines itself to the delineation of Dalit presence in Kerala Renaissance with special reference to the contributions made by Pandit K Karuppan, which has received only scant recognition in the echelons of caste and power.

Keywords: Dalit, upper castes, Kerala Renaissance, Landlordism, Modernity, Dalit Literature, Ambedkarite, Malayalam Dalit Writings

It is often a vain exercise to gloat over one's historical memory, for in reality, it is fragile and constructed, built on the edifice of memorials, heritage spots, chronicles, archives and history books. How power and pelf determine one's entry into the annals of history is an over and again debated topic. Then what about those ignored „deported“ souls who were „outcastes“ of history? Earnest enquiries reveal the presence of a long list of such unsung heroes who determined the course of humanity but who were cast outside or made invisible by history. Pandit K Karuppan, Dalit poet, visionary and social activist belongs to this group.

Dalit literature was a phenomenon that happened in the latter half of the 20th century in India as a

reactionary literary movement against the oppressive caste structures, in corollary with the various anti caste movements. In Kerala Dalit literature sprang in the latter half of the 20th century driving energy from the wave of renaissance and modernity. The Ambedkarite movement which was the culmination of the various anti caste movements across the country that gave great impetus to Dalit Literature in other states, however, did not have much impact on the early phase of Malayalam Dalit writings. In the case of Kerala it was the reformatory zeal brought in by Renaissance and modernity that heightened the activities in the socio--cultural sphere.

The spirit of renaissance and zeal for social reformation resulted in the critique of caste in Kerala. The anti-caste zeal was imbibed by the literary world and reproduced in the form of a new writing called Dalit Literature. A look into the past unrecorded history of Kerala reveals the dark ages which are replete with the agonising wails and carnage of the lower castes who were treated as unclean, condemned to bear the yoke of slavery and endure a life akin to that of hell by the *savarna* lords. The power structures and tensions in the social sphere were reflected in the world of culture and knowledge also. The lower castes were denied the access to the sanctum sanctorum of formal education. They were denied the opportunity and the leisure to produce any so-called literature as such. The acme of inhuman and unkind caste structures which choked the lower castes to near death had led to the emancipatory and reformatory activities by the above-mentioned renaissance luminaries. The new light in the social field found its reflection in the literary works of Pandit Karuppan (1885-1938).

It is possible to identify three distinctive phases in the history of evolution and development of Dalit literary movement in Kerala: oral, activist and assertive. The earliest oral phase of Dalit literature is characterised by covert and subdued voices of dissent in oral songs, tales and ritualistic performances as any explicit expression of the same would have been life threatening. The second activist phase is characterised by social reform movements spearheaded by the above-mentioned anti-caste social revolutionaries who critiqued caste and questioned its discriminatory, inhuman exclusionary nature. Activism co-exist with epistemological engagements, impelled by Ambedkarite ideology, in the third phase which is the present-day Dalit literature.

The activist nature of the early phase of Malayalam Dalit writings is inherited from the anti-caste tradition of the Renaissance and Pandit Karuppan serves as an appropriate model.

Karuppan, born on May 24, 1885, hails from the *Dheevara* caste, one of the lower caste community. He set apart his life to defeat the ogre of caste system which reduced the lower castes to mere beasts of burden. He hit hard against the inhuman ill-treatment meted out to the lower castes and the allied social evils through his uncompromising writing at a time when such a discordant voice could never be dreamed of. The same resilient spirit and earnest desire for social change enlivens all his social activities and interventions. He dedicated his scholarship, organisational skill and literary calibre for the upliftment of the backward communities empowering them through education and political consciousness ushering in the fresh ideas and liberating them from enchaining superstitions.

Jaathikkummi, Karuppan's most important work which holds up caste system and untouchability to sarcastic criticism was born out of his daring pen in 1904. Written in simple folkloric form in Malayalam, the work exemplifies the link between the oral and written tradition of Dalit literature in Malayalam. Ramavarma Raja, the Maharaja of Cochin who got impressed by Karuppan's personality and saw to it that Karuppan got opportunity for advanced study of Sanskrit. Later he got nominated as a Member of the Cochin Legislative Council as representative of the backward classes in 1925. He was quite strident about the needs pertaining to the education, health services and better living conditions of his community. His untiring efforts led to the establishment of the Department for the Protection of the Depressed Classes with Karuppan as full-time Assistant Protector and it was later renamed as the Harijan Welfare Department. His relentless efforts to liberate his brethren from the shackles of superstitions prompted him to write *Aacharabhooshanam* which was printed by the Government and distributed to the public.

Pandit Karuppan's literary genius sprawls across the fields of poetry, drama and essays and some of his works are *Achara Bhooshanam*, *Arayaprasasthi*, *Baalakalesam*, *Baalodyanam*, *Bhaasha Bhaimeeparinayam*, *Bhanjithavimanam*, *Chithralekha*, *Dheevara Tharuniyude Vilapam*, *Dhruvacharitham*, *Edward Vijayam*, *Jaathikkummi*, *Kairaleekouthukam*, *Kattile Jyeshthan*, *Lalithopaharam*, *Lankamardanam*, *Mahasamadhi*, *Mangalamala*, *Panchavadi*, *Sakunthalam*, *Vanchippattu*, *Sangeetha Naishadham*, *Soudamini*, *Sree Budhan*, *Sree Ramavarma*, *Sugathasooktham*, *Thirunalkkummi*, *Udyanavirunnu*, *Ulukopakhyanam*, and *Vallorkkavitha*.

Honouring his literary contributions, the Maharaja of Kochi conferred the title „Kavithilakan“ on him which was considered one of the highest literary honours of the time. Though Pandit Karuppan’s most famous and popular work is *Jathikkummi* the most controversial work is *Balakaresham*(1919). *Jathikkummi* was written during his learning period in Kodungalloor Kovilakam while he wrote *Balakaresham* while working as a government employee. *Jathikkummi* is written in the folk style called *Ammanakkummi* which aided easy singing by the common folk. *Balakaresham* was written in the dramatic form without fully adhering to either the Sanskrit dramatic techniques or the modern dramatic ideas. While *Jathikkummi* was made popular orally by the common folk, even before it went to print, *Balakaresham* won applause and accolades from all and sundry. Pandit Karuppan wrote both these works with the noble motive of propagating the ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity.

Jathikkummi is an independent song narrative based on Sankaracharya’s *Manekshapanchakam*. Sankaracharya’s work has been elaborated and simplified to facilitate the easy singing and grasping of the narrative. Thus, *Jathikkummi* can be regarded as the work which simplistically explains the Advaita Vedanta principles to establish that the caste system is starkly against the spirit of Advaita philosophy and the essence of Indian tradition. The composition pronounces not only the knowledge and intelligence, but the courage of the poet as well, for at a time when it was deemed to be the bounden duty of the king to formulate and implement laws in support of untouchability, Pandit Karuppan made his stand against the same, loud and clear.

The poem begins in the form of a debate between Sankaracharya and the lower caste Paraya. When Sankaracharya asks the Paraya to move away from his path lest the former be defiled, the scholarly Paraya asks whether his body or soul should move away: “Is the defilement for the body or for the soul?” (14). Faced with this intelligent interrogation, the caste pride of Sankaracharya sets down and the master of Advaita philosophy acknowledges the Chandala to be a Guru.

A seminal work like *Jathikkummi* exerted great influence on the lower caste community in Kerala. Long before it broke into print it was memorised and sung by the common folk who viewed it as a source of strength and inspiration. Aravindan K S Mangalam in „The Relevance of Re-reading of Pandit Karuppan’s Works“ in *Jathikkummiyum Mattu Pradhana Kritikalum* quotes the renowned Dalit writer

T K C Vaduthala on the influence of the work on lower caste lives.

The illiterate pulayas and other unfortunate folk of Kerala had memorised many parts of *Jathikkummi* at that time. Moreover just like the upper castes chanted their Harinama Keerthana and evening prayers, the pulayas used to recite parts from *Jathikkummi*, happily sitting in their huts. Asan's *Duravastha* appeared much after *Jathikkummi* attained a place in the heart of the common man. (11)

Jathikkummi became the liberation song of the lower castes. Invigorated by *Jathikkummi*, the pulayas of Kochi led by Krishnadi Ashaan, went to meet its author seeking his help. This incident is recalled by Pandit himself in a report submitted by him on the social and economic condition of Dalits to G K Devadhar, President of Servants of India Society as directed by the Government of Kochi in 1934. ("The backward castes..."156).

Balakalesham, largely a prose work, written on the occasion of a competition in connection with the 60th birthday of the Maharaja of Kochi, has the king as the central character. Pandit Karuppan, went to win the first prize defeating many upper caste playwrights. Cast in the mould of an allegory the play delivered a noble social cause. While praising the king for his bold steps of reformation for the lower castes, Pandit Karuppan was obliquely asking for more from the king. The revolutionary spirit in the play becomes explicit in the last scene where *Jathikkummi* is sung. One becomes cognizant of the righteous courage of the author on realising that the king of Kochi was a staunch believer of *Varnashramadharmam*.

Balakalesham has a significant place in the history of Kerala Renaissance. The administrative reforms of the king forms the chief thematic concern of the drama. Namboodiri, Nair, Ezhava and Pulaya appear on the stage as characters. One has to certainly acknowledge the mettle of Pandit Karuppan in making Kochaluk Pulaya proclaim at the face of the higher castes that untouchability is an absurd practice. Taking yet another bold step, the dramatist makes the king award capital punishment to the upper castes who manhandle the Pulaya. All these contributed to make the drama by the author who dared to tread the untrodden path a controversial one. The drama also emphasizes the fact that only modern education can be the panacea for all the caste-based social evils. But the fact remains that such a radical work was neglected in the history of Malayalam drama.

The neglect of *Balakalesham* by mainstream critics tells one among several similar stories of

intellectual cowardice and falsehood shown to a Dalit writer and an audacious work. The intensity of neglect becomes obvious when one realises that *Balakaresham* was a forerunner to V T Bhattathiripad's much acclaimed drama *Adukkalayil ninnu Arangatheke*(1929). While the latter which was written 10 years after *Balakaresham* is often acclaimed as heralding the renaissance spirit of social reform, the former which, with regard to histrionic elements and universal political nature of theme, could claim an upper hand over the latter, was relegated to oblivion. To understand the caste biases from which even the learned people suffered one has to know how Swadeshabhimani Ramakrishna Pillai denigrated the work as „Balaklesham“ (a juvenile prank) and he said that it does not deserve to be called a „drama“ for it lacked many essential features of a drama (As quoted by Aravindan K S, p 12). To this disparaging remark Pandit Karuppan gave a fitting retort by raising a challenge to name a drama containing all the histrionic features. In the after word to *Jathikummi and other important works* which contains the reply to Swadeshabhimani, Karuppan says „...I would agree with raised hands standing on apodium or beforean open stage or on a hill top that *Balakaresham* lacks many dramatic features. But can anyone from any corner suggest a Malayalam play that contains all the elements of drama?“ (263). Pillai even ridiculed the lower caste identity and the family profession of Karuppan calling the play „Valakaresham“.The harsh critical assessment of Karuppan's work by Ramakrishna Pillai was followed by much uproar in the social and literary circles. As mentioned earlier, *Balakaresham* was written in an original style without fully adhering to Sanskrit or modern dramatic art. The objection of the mainstream critics stems from gorging the play using conventional Indian or modern western aesthetic standards. This is in a way, implicative of the play's originality.

Karuppan was not a writer who wrote ensconced in his privileged position but was an organic scholar who worked among his people for their progress. Following the footsteps of his fellow renaissance figures like Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali who founded caste organisations like *Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam*(1903) and *Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam* (1905), Pandit Karuppan took initiative for the formation of different Sabhas for *Dheeveras*, *Pulayas*, *Parayas* and *Panarsin* 1910, coeval with the finding of the *Yogashema Sabha* and the formation of the *Nair Service Society* by Mannath Padmanaban. These regional groups strove to fight illiteracy and superstitions. In Kerala Renaissance, Pandit Karuppan's place is unique as he

stands apart from aforementioned other social reformers mainly because while they focussed on the upliftment of their own community, Karuppan's energies were spent on the advancement of all the lower caste people. Realising the importance of cultural artefacts in signifying the innateness of a community, he collected and preserved the artistic and literary forms of lower castes like pulayas for posterity. He established two temples for pulayas. To liberate the simple minded lower castes from the fetters of superstitions he wrote *Achara Bhooshanam*. Like Ayyankali and Sree Narayana Guru, Pandit Karuppan too was conscientious in setting up educational institutions for lower castes realising the role of education in effecting their social transformation. He was able to procure fee concessions from the king for the education of lower caste children.

The rejections and exclusions the poet faced in his personal life due to his lower caste identity only propelled him to work for a larger political cause. For Karuppan personal was truly political. The context of the birth of the famous poem *Udyanavirunnu or The complaint of a Dheevaram* amply demonstrates it. The Maharaja of Kochi arranged a grand feast in honour of Lord Goshan, the then Governor of Madras to which all the MLCs except Pandit Karuppan were invited. The agonised mind of the proud poet couched in the work touched and transformed the king as testified by Mahakavi Ulloor in *Kerala Sahitya Charitram* (Vol 4. 694-699)

The greatness of Karuppan lies in the fact that at a time when it was regarded the rule of the day to trample the life and toil of the lower castes, to regard attractive Dalit women as mere objects of upper castes' sexual gratification and to remove every element of their self-pride by physical and verbal abuse, impositions on dress code, eating and movement, constantly reminding the lower castes of their wretched existence, Pandit Karuppan emerged as the symbol of hope for the downtrodden armed with education and unyielding ethos. After reaching respectable positions through education and personal calibre, Karuppan unlike many affluent and influential Dalits in the present, did not forget his less fortunate brethren mesmerised by trappings of power. Pandit Karuppan's visionary zeal urged him to relinquish the comfort of a secure job and plunge into full time social work. At this juncture it is relevant to recall the words of Kallara Sukumaran, the Dalit critic and thinker regarding the „Aryan thought process“ that subsumes the mind of the Dalits who

climb up the social ladder and their sanctioned oblivion of their less privileged fellow men as mentioned in his biography:

The Dalits are now shielded by many kinds of protective measures. Some of them have also been able to reach the top echelons. They also continue to be involved in the struggle for better opportunities. But forgetfulness memory, the sorrowful yesteryears, and to imbibe the message that they hold will act as a hurdle to the total liberation of society. (17)

Another remarkable aspect about Karuppan is that his philanthropy traversed the limits of his community. The *Kochi Pulaya Mahajana Sabha*(KPMS) was formed in 1907, invigorated and emboldened by Karuppan's *Jathikkummi*. Karuppan arranged a place for convening the meeting of the pulayas at the backwaters of Kochi by tying together a number of small boats, when they were denied place for a public meeting. The backward sections like *Velas*, *Sambhavas*, *Ulladas*, *Kudumbistoo* got support from Pandit Karuppan to formsabhas for social emancipation. He was able to procure the right to use public roads for the depressed classes. For his relentless efforts to procure democratic civil rights for the downtrodden castes, Pandit Karuppan rightly deserves a place alongside the pantheon of renaissance. He represents the Dalit accent on Kerala renaissance.

Pandit K Karuppan is relevant today when the Dalit-Bahujan politics in India is facing a central crisis. Instead striving to realize Ambedkar's vision of an inclusive social democracy based on a social and economic development agenda and the use of political voice, Dalit- Bahujan politics has unfortunately degenerated to demanding more reservation and representation. The shallow representational politics of social justice that the so-called Dalit-Bahujan parties indulge in, instead of attempting to create an autonomous space through political mobilization, make them susceptible to appropriation by mainstream political parties. They act as vassals of political parties forgetting to fulfil the dreams of their leaders like Ambedkar and Ayyankali. Dalit-Bahujans are also factionalised in the name of different subcastes which drain out their energies and weaken Dalit-Bahujan unity. Empowerment dawns in through awareness of one's strengths, pride in one's identity and realisation of one's unique cultural heritage. Karuppan's efforts were directed towards instilling

in the lower castes this sense of self awareness and confidence. He tried to create organisational skill, political and social awareness in them so that they could resist getting indoctrinated to the creeds and ideologies of political parties that use them for their electoral gains and betray their cause.

The mainstream critics and literary historians have not paid much attention to the literary endeavours of Pandit Karuppan which held the fire and light for social transformation much before the birth of Progressive Literary Movement. The absence of political affiliations and the politics involved in canon formation rendered Pandit Karuppan invisible in the literary historiography. Dalit critics too have shown scant regard for this pioneering figure of Malayalam Dalit literary movement. The influence of Pandit Karuppan during his time, cutting across all caste divides, was acknowledged by his contemporary T K C Vaduthala. Vaduthala pays a fitting tribute to Karuppan master in his novel *When Shackles Break* (1979) by narrating the staging of his revolutionary play *Balakalesham* and the spark it left in the Dalit minds. It attests the solidarity that existed among the various Dalit communities in their struggle against the perpetrators of caste atrocities. Such a solidarity has systematically tapered down and now is evidently missing in the contemporary scenario which has drastically weakened the Dalit politics in Kerala.

The selective amnesia of editors of the first ever published anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing, *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing* regarding Pandit K. Karuppan can be attributed to this divide. Even a random stocktaking of Karuppan's works reveal him to be a path breaking Dalit writer and activist. The tendency among the contemporary Dalit writers and critics to selectively ignore the cultural legacy of pioneering Dalit writers like Karuppan is the main impediment in the creation of a distinct aesthetics and tradition of Dalit literature. To cure this "cultural aphasia" of contemporary Dalit intelligentsia, it is essential to subject Karuppan's works to serious study and research to accord them the true space they deserve in the literary history of Malayalam Dalit Literature.

References

- Dasan, M et al. eds. *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit Writing*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2012. Print.
- Guha, Ranajit ed. *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986-1995*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Jayakumar, Elikulam. *Kallara Sukumaran*. Peerumedu: Ambedkar Publications, 2000. Print.
- Karuppan, K P. *Jathikkummiyum Mattu Pradhana Kritikalum*. Kottayam: D C Books, 2013. Print.
- . *Adankrita Samudayagal Thalamurakalkkappuram. Jathikkummiyum Mattu Pradhana Kritikalum*. Ed. Aravindan, K S Mangalam. Kottayam: D C Books, 2013. 156-173. Print.
- . Afterword. *Jathikkummiyum Mattu Pradhana Kritikalum*. By Karuppan. Ed. Aravindan, K S Mangalam. Kottayam: D C Books, 2013. 263-68. Print.
- Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004. Print.
- Parameswara Iyer, Ulloor S. *Kerala Sahitya Charitram*. Thiruvananthapuram: Publications Division, U of Kerala, 2015. Print.
- Vaduthala, T K C. *Changalakkal Nurugunnu*. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Co-operative Society, 1989. Print.