

Multiple Modernities: Readings on Kerala

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Students book

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Curing Caste

Sahodaran Ayyappan

There are two types of cures for the caste disease,
One from the outside and another from inside.

Some use external ointments to cure caste,
This is of transitory value.

Caste may disappear from outside;
But it will retreat into the inside and do damage.

Hate, gossip and nationalist rhetoric are symptoms
Of inwardly drawn caste, says sages.

Those who nurture it inside are becoming big shots
In politics here through their hate rhetoric.

Those who curse caste without trying to alleviate it
Are trying to cool off without extinguishing the fire.

To eradicate caste from inside and outside
First the faith in caste must go.

That caste is truth; caste is morality; and caste is divine.
And breaking the caste is taboo and being casteless is a
shame.

These dogmas must go and the medico must ensure it
Through proper medication for cleansing.

When the dogmas and conventions of caste change,
We see human as human and become healthy and
normal.

The faults and qualities of a person are truly identified
By those who are cured of the caste disease.

How much you study and how much your intelligence
grows
You can't gain this potential without getting rid of caste.

(Translated by Dr. Ajay S. Sekher and published in his
book *Sahodaran Ayyappan: Towards a Democratic
Future*. Calicut: Other Books, 2012. The book won the
Sahodaran Sahitya Puraskaram in 2014)

About the Author

A social reformer, revolutionary, poet, rationalist, an
impeccable administrator and a legislator who brought
in several landmark legislations, Sahodaran Ayyappan is
considered one of the foremost figures who changed the
face of history in Kerala.

Ayyappan was born on 21st August 1889 in Cherai,
Vypeen in Ernakulam. Kumabalathuparambil Kochavu
Vaidyar and Unnuli were his parents. After completing
formal education, he joined for a pre-degree course at
Malabar Christian College. After completing B.A. in
Literature from Maharajah's College in Ernakulam, he

As wretched in Keralam.

I am not ashamed
To unveil the weaknesses
Of my race, forever called
The cursed progeny.

All blame us without hesitations
And are they to blame us
Till this earth and sky perish?

How can God
He who gave shape to all
Allow this to go on?

(Translated by Jessica Sudhir M)

About the Author

Poykayil Appachan, also known as Sree Kumara Gurudevan (1879-1939), was a revolutionary Dait leader and social reformer hailing from Eraviperur near Tiruvalla in central Travancore. He was born to parents who were slaves bonded to an affluent landowning Christian family of the locality. During his childhood itself he came face to face with all the agonies and distresses that a life of slavery and social discrimination entails. During the four years of schooling that he received he was introduced to the Malayalam alphabet and stories from the Bible. During his school years itself he was forced to help his parents by tending cattle and working in the fields belonging to the landlord. He started his work as a preacher at the age of seventeen as a part of which he

organised the early inhabitants of the region, who were subjugated and enslaved by the dominant upper caste Hindus and Syrian Christians under the most degraded forms of slavery in Kerala. His disagreements with the Church led to his eventual exit from the Church. In 1910, with an open declaration in a colonial court, he started his own organization called Pratyaksha Raksha Deiva Sabha, which encompassed all sections of Dalits across sub-caste divisions. He was an inspired orator, an instant poet and a learned organizer; he used carefully crafted songs and spirituals for organising people for their liberation and social emancipation. They addressed the Dalit masses and contained profuse references to their lives, dreams, and fantasies. Appachan liberally used materials from folk literature, rhythms and styles popular in his locality while composing these songs. He was nominated to the Travancore Srimulam Prajasabha twice, first in 1921 and again in 1931, and he initiated many legislative reforms for his people and similar depressed social sections.

Appachan's efforts started bearing fruits when people outside the periphery of Tiruvalla came to form PRDS units in various parts of Travancore in early 20th century. People from various Dait communities co-operated with him and the movement became a part and parcel of the general liberation spirit of the Kerala renaissance. He was also a member of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham which social reformer and Dait leader Ayyankali founded in 1907. Appachan's speeches and songs created a subaltern space of ethical enquiry and resistance in Kerala in myriad ways and contributed to the democratisation of society and polity. They together paved the foundations of modern Kerala along with the pioneers of Kerala modernity such as Sree

Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal, Tykad Ayya, Ayy Vaikundhar, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Chavara Achan and Vakkam Maulavi. The early contributions of Christian missionaries in education and healthcare in 19th century may also be remembered here.

“About my Race: A Song” is the first song in a series that forefronts the question of race. The concept of “race” which refers to the evicted and marginalised first people of Kerala, occupies a central place in the works related to PRDS. This song has the honour of being recited by Appachan in the Legislative Assembly of Tiruvithamkood in the year 1921.

(Adapted with modifications from the article “Poykayil Appachan, Practitioner of Critique and Co-option” by Dr. Ajay S. Sekher)

Glossary and Explanations

- word: in the original poem Appachan uses the word ‘aksharam’ and most translators have opted for the word ‘alphabet’
- race: the word has a special significance with reference to Appachan’s poems and the literature of the PRDS. It denotes the original inhabitants, the first people of Kerala
- conceives: form or devise an idea,
- grieves: saddens, fills with grief
- wretched: a person in a deprived and unfortunate state
- unveil: uncover