

## **Agrestic Slaves in Cochin State: Perspectives from Pulaya Untouchables in Pre- Colonial and British Rule**

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**Abstract:** *The Agrestic slaves belonged to the lowest castes in the Hindu hierarchy. They were not only untouchables, but were unapproachable too. Disabilities of untouchability become severe as they are also physically and socially segregated from the rest of the Hindu society through the institution of caste. These discriminated communities are then officially designated as Scheduled Caste. Scheduled Castes were subjected to 'Agrestic Slaves' and they were landless peasants; they have been producing the goods and services for their master. They were always on the marginalized sections of the Kerala society, inequality was the main sources of this marginality which led to insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Census report of Cochin 1901, referred to the state of Cochin in various classes of agricultural serfs such as Kanakkan, Prayian, Vettuvan and Pulayan or Cheruman. The Pulayans or Cherumans are the most important not only in numerical strength but also as representing the type of the class, they form about 75% of the Agrestic serfs, they are still field labourers properly so called, being engaged in digging, ploughing or irrigating the fields, watching the crops or tending the cattle. They are constituted an important category of the dalit community in Cochin.*

**Keywords:** *Agrestic slaves, primitive dwellers, Predial Slavery, Cherumakakl, Jennum, Kanam, patam.*

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### **I. Introduction**

India is an agricultural country forever two-thirds of the population whether as land lords, tenants or labourers live upon income derived from land. Agrestic serfs have therefore seen an essential element in the population. Slavery as an institution was one of the notorious social evils of Kerala society; appeared in different forms and continued for several centuries among many nations. Cochin was not an exemption to this, Cochin society was a slave owning society and the state also the serfs was attached to estates as agricultural labourers used to be bought and sold with the land. Pulayas of Cochin form an important class of the agrestic slaves. The Pulayas belonged to the early inhabitants of Kerala and were one of the primitive dwellers (Adivasis) of Kerala, Cherumans or Pulayans, who form the great majority of the slaves, their work in the field as agricultural labourers- ploughing, sowing, crop watching and reaping- and are paid in kind. According to Francis Buchanan's, the greater part of the labour in the field is performed by the slaves, that is Cherumas or Pulayas. The Cherumas of Malabar and the Pulayas of Cochin and Travancore were the absolute property of the master and were transferred with or without the soil on which they worked.

The present study examines the historicity of the largest agrestic slave community in Cochin, viz the Pulayas and it analyzes whether the Colonial policies and programmes had a bearing on the movements for the social upliftment of the Pulayas. It highlights the important problems: the emergence of a slave caste from the early dark days to the present, the 'purchase and sale of slaves', socio-economic condition of slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the impact of the Abolition of slavery also come under the scope of this study.

### **II. Agrestic Slaves In Cochin State In Pre- Colonial Period**

**Predial Slavery-** Predial means, 'of slaves attached to the land', Agrestic means 'rural', the expressions predial slaves and agrestic slaves used to slave castes or belonged to the lowest castes. The slaves were of different castes namely, Pulayas or Cherumas, Prayans, and Vettuvans. The greater part of the labour in the field even now performed by the Cherumas or Pulayas, they constitute much the largest number of the predial servants. Even though 'Pulayas' is the name by which the entire community is generally known now, they were also called 'Cherumas'. According to Padmanabha Menon in his work "History of Kerala" 'Cheruman' or Cherumakkal was derived from the Malayalam word 'Cheru' which means 'soil' and 'makkal' meaning 'children.' The term thus meant 'children of soil' or 'sons of the soil.' Term 'Pulaya' expressed the idea of impurity because the word 'Pula' is used to denote 'pollution' or 'impurity.' In 'Pulayan' means one who works on land. He is one who works in paddy fields. The agricultural workers or agrestic slaves belonging to the scheduled castes, they face extreme poverty indebtedness and illiteracy and even bonded labour to a small extent among the scheduled caste communities in Kerala could be directly traced to their slave past. Slavery is one of a class of labourers bound to and transferred to the soil. The slaves did not have a life of their own. They never worked or earned a living for themselves. Francis Buchanan's observed that the slaves were the absolute property of the thampurans or lords,

and were employed in any kind of labour which their masters interest. They were poor and they lived in small huts by the side of paddy fields of their high caste masters, liberty of any kind was denied to them and they had no right to personal safety and freedom. It may be employed in any work that their masters interest they are not attached to the soil but may be sold or transferred in any manner that the master thinks fit only a husband and wife cannot be sold separately but children may be separated from their parents, and brothers from their sisters. he master was bound to give a slave a certain allowance of provisions; a man or women able to work received three measures of paddy for a man, two for a women and one for a child .This was totally inadequate to support them but the slaves on each estate used to get one- twenty first part of the gross produce of the paddy in order to encourage them to care and industry. A male slave used to get seven cubits of cloth for two mundus and a woman fourteen cubits for two muris.

**Condition of the slaves in former times**-slavery was common throughout the western coast and the prejudices of the high caste people rendered their degradation. They were in many places attached to the soil and their market value was not much above that of the cattle united with them in the same bondage while they were far below them in the estimation in which they were held. their freedom could only be productive of starvation or a change of servitude which occurred, the deed of transfer generally contained the clause, " you may sell or kill him or her", they had no ideas beyond their occupation and were never guilty of any violence to their masters to whom they were absolutely obedient from the sluggish apathy of their character. Which rendered them ever mindful of their own lot? Being themselves born slaves, their children also were born slaves and every land lord had a number of them. They toiled day and night in the soil and its fruits were exploited by the privileged classes of the society. They were even exchanged and sold like cattle's along with land, this depressed and polluting caste had been denied all privileges enjoyed by other caste of Kerala.

The Pulayas were restricted from choosing their occupation. Both male and female were mainly agricultural labourers. They also performed most of the manual, unskilled, virtually unclean and least prestigious jobs. As they could not enter a town or village, no employment was available to them, except that of working in the paddy fields. They could neither work as porters nor as domestic servants, for; they defiled everything that they touched.

A large number of slaves belonged to the government to which they were escheated along with other property on the extinction of their owner's families and they were partly employed on government lands and partly reined to riots. Slaves forced a source of income for the Sirkar nearly a century and a quarter ago. The rate of slaves varied from half a parrah to six parrah of paddy according to the physical ability of the slave. According to the Sirkar account of 1023 M E (1848)there are 6760 full –grown Sirkar slaves male and female and 1226 children making together 7986 slaves.

In the pre-colonial period, Pulayas did not have a life of their own. They never worked or earned a living for themselves. Their entire life was dependant on the masters' When a pulayan wished to marry, he applied to his master who met the marriage expenses. There was no fixed rule as to where the slave couple lived after marriage. The former practice was followed by slaves following the matrilineal law of inheritance of their masters, if the women came to live with her husband; she worked for her husband's master as long as she lived with her husband.

According to L.K Anathakrishna Iyer, in his work 'The Cochin Tribes and Castes' Vol.I, the Pulayas were the most agricultural laboures of kingdoms which now constitute almost two third of Kerala State. They have owned land and controlled the whole agriculture of Kerala .It claimed that they even ruled over certain regions of Kerala and that they held high social and economic status. But the arrival of the Brahmins marked the decline in the position of the properties as gift to the Gods and Goddesses who would protect them from all dangers and evils. Gradually the temples which grew with the famers land and money become the property of the Brahmins. The land and properties transferred came to be regarded as Devaswams and Brahmaswams and enjoyed freedom from devastation by the enemy forces. Later the right of ownership itself was vested on the Brahmins by law. Eventually; they became slaves of the owner of the land as well as an essential commodity for the workmanship on the land. Thus the Pulayas became agrestic slaves' All the glory of the Pulayas had vanished and they were reduced to a state of slavery. When the practice of Chaturvarnya became very widespread, the Pulayas and their work in the soil began to be regarded unclean and they became untouchables and unapproachable.

### **III. Transactions Of Agerstic Slaves,**

The 'purchase and sale of slaves' stated Karl Marx 'is formally also a purchase and sale of commodities. But money cannot perform this function without the existence of slavery. If slavery exists money can be invested in the purchase of slaves. On the other hand the mere possession of money cannot make slavery possible'. So the slave owning society of Cochin encouraged the slave trade. Malayalam Diary, 1007, Karkkitakam, Vol.ii, from Regional Archives, Eranakulam, mentioned the transactions of slaves, every wealthy

man owned a number of slaves they were bought and sold like cattle in several markets' Buchanan's observed that Cheruman was a term applied to slaves in general in some parts of Malabar irrespective of their caste, while in some other parts it referred to the member of a particular caste who was also known as Pulayan. Buchanan's explained that there are three modes of transferring the slaves. The first is by Jennum or sale, where the full value of the slave is given and property is entirely transferred to a new master who is in some measure bound by his interest to attend to the welfare of his slave. The second Kanam or mortgage. The proprietor receives a loan of money generally two thirds of the value of the slaves he also receives annually a small quantity of rice to show that this property whenever he pleases to repay the money borrowed for which in the mean while he pays no interest. In case of any of the slaves dying he is held bound to supply another of equal value. The lender maintains the slaves and has their labour for the interest of his money and for their support. The third manner of employing slaves is by letting them for patam or rent in this a certain annual sum the master gives them to another man they provides them with their maintenance.

#### **IV. Impact Of British Rule: The Abolition Of Slavery.**

Kerala was fragmented as Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Cochin State came under the political control of the English rule on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1795. The establishment of British power in India was a prolonged process of piecemeal conquest and consolidation and the colonization of the economy and society. The British provided peaceful atmosphere to new learning and it prepared the people to struggle against caste rigidity and caste restrictions. The development of railways and other modes of transportation equality before law, growing urbanization, increased rural communication, development of industries all these helped to improve in the condition of untouchable's class. The question of slavery and the slave trade attracted the attention of the honorable company's government. The agrestic slaves were owned and treated like any other beast of burden by masters and land lords. In the Cochin State, Colonel Munro taken various legal measures were suggested for the amelioration of the condition of slaves, Slavery is an institution of ancient growth in the state also and in times gone by serfs attached to estates as agricultural labourers used to be bought and sold with the land itself a practice which was continued even up to 1854 a when by means of a proclamation issued by the Darbar the practice of buying and selling slaves or mortgaging them as live chattels was made penal and it also put a stop to the sale of slaves for our decrees and gave freedom to the Pulaya slaves residing and working in the government lands. Though the slavery has now been abolished but the condition of Pulayas –they are obliged to depending up on their masters for maintenance. In 1872 Diwan Sankunni Menon, royal proclamation to be issued prohibiting the purchase and sale of slaves other than those attached to the soil for purchase of agriculture, such as Pulayas, Kannakans, and Velans. Those who violated it were threatened with confiscation of their property and banishment from the country.

- **The condition of the slaves after the abolition of slavery-** Change is a characteristic of all societies- be they primitive or modern. A society going through revolutionary changes may lose its earlier identity because of the replacement of a large number of structures. The formal abolition of slavery did effect some changes in the life of the Pulayas. Some of them went to work in the plantations, wages are very high but many became coolies. Some Pulaya women who were converted to Christianity were taken as domestic servants in Christian households, but these changes affected only a very small number of the Pulaya population. The enactments against slavery were one of the first 'reforms' made in Kerala for the 'downtrodden'. The members of these castes are profoundly ignorant and superstitious, steeped in abject poverty and subjected to many vexations and degrading restrictions and disabilities. Their emancipation from slavery has improvement in their material condition. Though emancipated they have been and are even now in many localities, more or less in the same condition. They have been unable to appreciate the benefits conferred upon them. Working from day to day they depend upon their masters for their maintenance, Sometimes a few of them runaway from their masters.

It was the missionaries who influenced the Government to take such a step. Missionaries give more opportunities and improving their talents they will do well to the down-trodden community and to the mission societies that are ever doing their best to improve their condition. Something more was needed to uplift the Pulayas than mere legislation, declaring slavery a crime. It was the missionaries, who first took interest in starting schools for the Pulayas, gave them free education and rehabilitated them. Many of their men, women and children are taught reading and writing and their girl's needle work also.

Concluded my paper, Slavery was very strong in Kerala in the pre-colonial period; the Pulayas or Cherumas were living as slaves, in condition of barbarity and cruelty which defies description. When the British established their supremacy over Malabar, Cochin and Travancore, an agrestic slave was widely prevalent throughout the region. The impact of utilitarianism upon the British government to take drastic measures to abolish slavery. The second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the legal abolition of agrestic slavery in Cochin State

buying, selling and possession of slaves were prohibited by law. This alone as we have seen did not release the Pulayas either from their miserable existence or from the hold of their former masters. They had to wait till the dawn of the present century when the winds of change began to blow over Kerala, sweeping away many of the rigid customary practices that had prevailed for generation and shaking the socio- economic order to its roots. A study of the steep road to abolition of their bonded labour of the winds of modern change which swept over the Kerala, the upsurge for human rights and the success in securing a new deal for the Pulayas has a national importance in the perspective of the civil revolution in our country. The transition of the traditional society and the emergence of the modern age had its impact on Kerala society in general and Pulaya community in particular.

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