

AGRESTIC SLAVERY IN KERALA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY*

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Not many in Kerala today can recall the days when slavery, to be precise agrestic slavery, was widely practised in that part of the country with a severity that would shock any modern mind. A study of the nature and extent of agrestic slavery in old Kerala is not simply an exercise in exorcising the dark days of the past. It is of great relevance to understand some of the basic problems facing the country today.

Slavery may be a thing of the past. But an important segment of our society, especially the agricultural workers belonging to the scheduled castes, still stagger under the dead weight of the economic and social oppression of the past. Extreme poverty and squalor, indebtedness and illiteracy and even bonded labour among the scheduled caste communities in Kerala could be directly traced to their slave past.

It is not yet known when and how slavery originated in Kerala. Anthropologists and other social scientists think that the institution of agrestic slavery in Kerala "rose out of the conquest of the original owners of the soil by invaders and settlers from the north". But much patient research work has to be done to find out when and how these original inhabitants and owners of land were subjugated and harnessed to one of the most thorough slave systems known in history.

In the absence of any authentic history of early Kerala, the historian as well as any other social scientist is compelled to go to the widely prevalent Parasurama legend about the origins of Kerala. According to this legend, Parasurama the sixth incarnation

* This article is an adaptation of a chapter in the author's forthcoming book on the Pulayas of Kerala.

of Vishnu created Kerala by throwing his deadly battle axe into the sea, when the waters withdrew along the coastal strip from Gokarna to Kanya Kumari. To expiate the sin of killing Kshatriyas, which he had done in twentyone battles, he then distributed the new land to the Nambutiri Brahmans. Many scholars believe that the Nambutiris themselves would have invented this story to bestow a touch of divinity to their right over most of the land in Kerala. While modern historians dismiss the mythological aspect of the story, they think that the Parasurama story denotes the arrival of an alien people from the north to Kerala and the subsequent reorganisation of the social and economic set-up of the region.

It is significant to note that the Parasurama legend is not only linked with the origin of a system of landlordship called *janmam*¹ by which the Nambutiri developed a superior right over land but also to the origin of agrestic slavery which supported that system. *Janmam* right is said to have originated when Parasurama divided Kerala among the Nambutiri families. According to the story the Nambutiris complained to Parasurama that the lands he had given them would remain uncultivated unless they were provided people to assist them. Parasurama then went into the forests, captured wild people and presented them to the Nambutiris as slaves, to till their lands in perpetuity.

This legend gives a clue to the indissoluble link between the origin of *janmam* rights over land and agrestic slavery in Kerala.

Scholars today agree that a trickle of Brahman immigration to Kerala began at least three to four centuries before Christ, and became a stream in the early centuries after Christ. Between 8-12 centuries A. D. the Nambutiris had established their undisputed dominance over the land and people in the various regions of Kerala. Perhaps these were the centuries when agrestic slavery

¹ According to the eminent Kerala historian and linguist Professor Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, *janmam* right originally meant *right during lifetime*. Only by 11th century AD it began to mean inheritance *right through birth*. (Janmi Sampradayam Keralathil, 1959, p. 55).

originated and was cemented into the body politic by economic and social arrangements.

According to Professor Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, there is evidence to show that the condition of these agrestic slaves deteriorated after the 14th century A.D. But there is only scanty evidence about the conditions of the slaves till the beginning of the 19th century when European travellers and administrators tried to record the social life of the period. Some of these narratives are inhibited by the political and religious prejudices of the authors. But in spite of all the drawbacks, they help us in having a glimpse of Kerala society of that period.

After many turmoils and vicissitudes of history, Kerala by the beginning of the 19th century was divided into three regions, the British territory of Malabar² in the north and the princely states of Travancore and Cochin. At that time there were many slave castes, but the Cherumas (as they were called in Malabar) and the Pulayas (the name used for the same community in Travancore and Cochin) constituted the largest single group of agrestic slaves³. Even the interpretations given to the terms denote the long years these people have spent in slavery and the abject conditions in which they were kept. Logan, the Special Commissioner appointed to enquire into the land tenures and tenant rights in Malabar and the author of the Malabar Manual thought that the term Cheruman was derived from the Malayalam word *cheru*, which means small. He wrote :

“Size depends upon conditions of food (more) than upon anything else and a race which was for centuries on centuries continued to be fed by its masters on a minimum of what will

2. The District of Malabar became part of Madras Presidency on May 21, 1800.

3. In Malayalam, these terms are Cheruman and Pulayan (m. s.) and Cherumar or Cherumakkal and Pulayar (m. pl.); but they were spelled differently by different authors, especially the 19th century writers. Cheruman and Pulayan are synonyms today; but these names by which the main body of agrestic slaves were known in the Malabar region and in the Southern regions respectively were entered as such in the first list of scheduled castes appended to the Constitution. As a caste or an identifiable group, Cherumas and Pulayas form the main body of agricultural labour even today.

keep body and soul together is pretty sure in the long run to degenerate in size"⁴.

Buchanan who had toured the regions of Malabar during November 1800 and January 1801 and has left voluminous records on the place and people of that time had also thought that the diminutive stature and squalid appearance of the Cheruman showed a want of adequate nourishment⁵. But Padmanabha Menon⁶ the noted historian of Kerala thought that the term Cheruman could denote the indigenous origins of these people and their work in the fields. According to him, Cheruman or Cherumakkal was derived from the Malayalam word cher which mean wet soil and makkal (children) meaning thereby children of the soil. Another derivation, Menon thought, was from *Chira* which meant the bunds of a paddy-field where they generally lived.

Similarly, Samuel Mateer⁷ the English ecclesiastic who lived in Travancore for many years, thought that the term Pulayan was derived from *Pula* which means funeral pollution.

But modern Kerala historians claim that there are archeological records to show that even in the 10th and 11th centuries after Christ the term Pulayan was not a caste name. It meant cultivating people. In the opinion of Professor Kunjan Pillai⁸, Pulayan in the original sense meant either owner or caretaker of fields. He argues that the word (pula) was not used in the sense of pollution and did not connote impurity until the Nambutiri Brahmans dominated Kerala society.

Another question thrown up by modern researchers is this: If Pulayan meant polluted, why did not other polluted castes like Parayyas and Kuravas come under this name?

4. Logan, William : *Malabar* Vol. I, p. 147.

5. Buchanan, F. : *A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, 1807, Vol. II, p. 371.

6. Menon, K. P. P. : *History of Kerala*, Vol. III, 1933, p. 33.

7. Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, 1883, p. 33.

8. Elamkulam : Quoted by Chentarasseri in *Kerala Charitratille Avaganikkappetta edukal*, 1970, p. 162.

By the time the English established their suzerainty in the region—around 1800 A.D.—these agrestic slaves were owned and treated like any other beast of burden by the masters and landlords.

Buchanan observed that slaves were the absolute property of their masters or lords. They were not attached to the soil. They could be made to do any work that the master wanted them to do and could be sold or transferred in any manner the master thought fit. Major Walker, one of the first English officers to be appointed in Malabar made the following observation :

“the Chermas are absolute property ; they are part of the live stock on an estate. In selling and buying land it is not necessary that they should follow the soil ; both kinds of property are equally disposable and may fall into different hands. The Chermas may be sold, leased and mortgaged, like the land itself, or like any cattle or thing”⁹.

It is no wonder that these people did not have a life of their own. They never worked or earned a living for themselves. They did not make decisions or plan a future for their existence, they depended on the mercy of the masters. And they begetted children so that the master would have a continuous supply of workers.

When a Pulayan wished to marry he applied to his master who met the marriage expenses. Buchanan calculated the total expenses to be a little more than 16 shillings. This included the payments to the girl's master and her parents, the cost of cloth bought for the bride and the bridegroom and the expenditure on the 'feast'.

There was no fixed rule as to where the slave couple lived after marriage. In some places the husband lived in the wife's hut ; in some others the wife came to live with the husband. The former practice was followed by slaves following the matrilineal law of inheritance. To these people who did not have anything to inherit, this just meant that they were the slaves of masters who followed that system of inheritance. If the woman came to live with her husband, she worked for her husband's master as long as she lived

9. Walker : *Slavery in India* 1828, p. 366.

with her husband. In the event of the latter's death, she was sent back to her own master. The male Pulayan who lived in his wife's hut went to work for his own master. The owner of the wife could not command his services.

There were differences in the right of the master to the children of the slaves. Graeme in his report as special commissioner gave the following explanation :

“In the Calicut district, there is a mixture of the two customs of Mukkatayum and Murroo Mukkatayum,¹⁰ that is, the one or the other does not obtain separately in different families in the district, but in all the families throughout the district, the inheritance partakes of the two modes, and half of the children are considered to go with the mother, and consequently to belong to her proprietor, and half to be attached to the father, and therefore to be the property of his master. Where the number may not admit of an equal division, the odd number is reckoned to be the mother's¹¹.

In some taluks, the first born went to the father's master. If there were no more children, a valuation was put on the one child and the amount divided between the owners of the husband and the wife.

It is a matter of surprise for us today that Buchanan, a severe critic of Kerala Hindu Society found good points in the agrestic slavery practised there. He wrote :

“This is a custom that ought to be recommended to our West Indian planters, and if adopted, I am persuaded would soon induce the Negro women to breed and would give a sufficient supply of inhabitants without having recourse to an annual importation from Africa”¹².

10. Mukkatayum (Mukkattayam) is inheritance from father to son. Murroo Mukkatayum (Marumakkattayam) is matrilineal right of inheritance.

11. Graeme, *Slavery* (East Indies) Return to an Order of the Honourable the House of Commons 1841, p. 129.

12. Buchanan, Vol. II, p. 371.

But this point, that slavery in India was different from slavery elsewhere formed the central point in all records that came up. From what we have seen earlier it is not surprising that the transfer of slaves was exactly in the manner in which land was transferred. Buchanan described three ways of transferring the usufruct of slaves. The first was by sale where the full value of the slave was given and the property was entirely transferred to a new master. The second method of transferring slaves was by mortgage where the proprietor received a loan of money generally two thirds of the value of the slave, and also a small quantity of rice to show that his property in the slave still existed. Whenever he repaid the borrowed amount he could reassume his property. No interest was paid on the borrowed money. In case a mortgaged slave died, the owner was to be supplied with another of equal value. The third manner of transferring slaves was by rent. In this case, the master gave the slaves to another man for a certain annual sum and the borrower commanded their labour and provided them with their maintenance.

Buchanan found that a young man and his wife were sold for 200 to 250 fanams. This was something between f 6 to f 7. Ward and Conner who surveyed Travancore and Cochin between July 1861 and end of 1862 recorded the price of a male Pulaya to vary from Rs. 6 to Rs. 10. The price of a female sometimes reached Rs. 12. Mateer found in the church Mission records of 1850 that the price of slaves varied from place to place. On an average it varied from Rs. 6 to 9. But in one place it went upto Rs. 18.

Graeme noted that the price of slaves had risen since the establishment of Company's government. This was attributed to the increased demand for slaves. The demand in turn owed its rise to the settled state of the country and extended cultivation.

From various observations it is obvious that there was no rule against the separation of husband and wife while selling. Buchanan observed that wife and husband were not generally sold separately, but children could be separated from the parents and between themselves. But Graeme found instances where Pulaya women were sold separately. Mateer¹³ wrote that a rich slave owner informed

13. Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 303.

a missionary in 1841 that he could separate slave children from their parents and the wife from her husband to be given as present to friends or dowry, or as payments for his debts. In his book *Land of Charity* Mateer wrote that in former times, slaves were let or transferred at the choice of the owner, were offered as presents to friends or as gifts to temples and were bought and sold and mortgaged in the same manner as land or cattle or other property of their owners. In 1854, one year after the first Proclamation to abolish slavery was issued in Travancore, one Syrian Christian family who owned four married slave women, separated them from their husbands and compelled them to take others chosen by the master.

It is from observations like these and others that Ward and Conner¹⁴ stated that slaves were treated with 'capricious indifference' by their masters. All castes of masters, whether they be Brahman, Nayar or Christian, were one in oppression. The slaves were left to nature during illness.

These slaves who lived to till the masters' lands were only paid a subsistence allowance by the landlords. Buchanan found that a man or woman while capable of work received two measures of paddy weekly. Children and old persons who could not work got half the volume. No allowance was made to infants. The workers were entitled to the crops of a particular portion of the field as a compensation for watching them during harvest. In addition, a Pulaya headman was given a "further fee of the same kind" as a reward for his preventing the cattle entering his masters' paddy fields. Once a year they were given a cloth to wear; a male slave seven cubits and a woman double that.

All records noted that the allowance was inadequate. Graeme stated that :

"In most places, slaves are fed by their masters throughout the year, but their allowance, on days that they have no work, is only half of what is fixed when they are employed. In several

14. Ward and Conner : *Memoir of the Geographical and Statistical Survey of Travancore and Cochin*, 1863, p. 40.

places on the coast, however, they are only paid when they work, and when not employed by their masters, they seek subsistence elsewhere"¹⁵.

Graeme found that alternate work was found without difficulty in the neighbourhood of large towns. In fact by doing such work like carrying grass, firewood and other things to the market, and in working for others, they earned more than what they got from their masters. The following observation of Graeme touches the crux of the situation :

“Slaves in this situation (doing work other than for the master) are in finer condition, more intelligent, and more cheerful than they are elsewhere. The only hardship to them is that they are obliged to obey their master’s requisition for attendance upon an inadequate allowance”¹⁶.

At the same time, according to Baber, who had served in the capacities of judge and magistrate of Malabar, those slaves who resided in those remote parts where there was no demand for their labour were left to eke out a miserable existence by:

“feeding upon wild yams, and such refuse as would only be sought after by that extreme wretchedness ‘that envied the husks that the swine did eat’, and not unfrequently are they tempted by the cravings of hunger to rob gardens of jack (*artocarpus*), plantains (*musa*) accounts etc.”¹⁷

But Graeme found that the slave is :

“scarcely ever exposed to the extremity of actual starvation ; and it has been stated, by respectable public authority, and I understand with correctness, that a beggar of this caste is seldom or never to be found”.

15. Graeme : *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 133.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Baber, *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 134.

even though in another place, Graeme himself observed that :

“the slave in the interior is a wretched, half-starved, diminutive creature, stunted in his food, and exposed to the inclemencies of the weather”¹⁸.

Mateer thought that the physical boundaries of Kerala were one reason that prevented the slaves from running away. He wrote that the Pulayas of Malabar were in a far lower condition than the Parians of Tamil country. The “Carnatic Serfs” could run away from one king to another. Some Parians were known to have come generations ago to Nanjinad¹⁹ for greater freedom and safety. In Malabar they were hemmed in by impassable mountains and forests. There was the deep sea to cross. “So they sank from generation to generation”.

The ‘sinking’ of the 19th century agrestic slaves of Kerala, had begun generations ago ; but the fall was made steeper not only by the impassable western Ghats and the deep Arabian sea, but more by the socio-economic arrangements of the time.

The agrestic slaves belonged to the lowest of castes in the Hindu hierarchy. They were not only untouchables, but were unapproachable too. Their presence was polluting and the distance they had to maintain from the different high castes was fixed by a kind of arithmetical precision. With respect to the observances of the slaves towards people of the pure castes, Graeme stated that :

“the rules of Malabar prescribed that a slave of the castes of Poolyan, Waloovan and Parian shall remain 72 paces from a Brahmin and from a Nair, and 48 from a Teean, a slave of the Kunnakun caste 64 paces from a Brahmin and Nair, and 40 from a Teean ; and the other castes generally 48 paces from a Brahmin and Nair, and 24 from Teean”²⁰.

18. Graeme, *Slavery (East Indies)*.

19. Nanjinad, a rich rice belt in the South, was part of Travancore and now forms part of Tamil Nadu.

20. Graeme, *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 129.

In the northern division, these rules were deviated from in practice in favour of the slaves, whilst in the Southern division they were exceeded in strictness.²¹

Brown, an English planter and estate owner, who interestingly inherited the estate and the slaves who worked in it from his father, stated that the slave castes could not approach nearer than the prescribed distances, either to the houses or the person of the pure caste, without polluting both the "one and the other". Accordingly

"the lower servile classes, wherever they go, give notice of their coming by uttering a particular cry at every four or five paces; if the cry be answered by another uttered in like manner by a superior, giving warning that he is approaching, the slave instantly quits the road and retires."²²

Brown stated that the Pulayan was interdicted the highway, as his presence would pollute the houses situated nearby. According to him, towns on the coast were the only exception where Pulayans could be seen on the highway and the reasons according to him were the "presence and the countenance of Europeans, and their own numbers." Regarding his own slaves he wrote :

"Upon my own property, where we have been settled so many years, and in my own neighbourhood, where we possess some influence, the restriction is so rigidly enforced, that my Polyans cannot approach, much less walk through, the village inhabited by the free labourers; they cannot work on the lands near their houses, and when at work upon my own lands at a distance, or walking upon my own roads, they are obliged to leave their work and quit the road, if a child, able to speak, utter the usual cry of warning and superiority"²³.

Nothing more than this description of Brown is needed to portray the extent of the subhuman existence of the agrestic slaves. Hence

21. It has to be noted that in the Northern division, the Nambutiri population and their hold on land was less strong while it was just the opposite in the Southern division.

22. Brown, *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 129.

23. *Ibid.*

it would be irrelevant to add that domestic slavery was not allowed by the Hindu masters of Kerala, which made it impossible for the Pulayas and Cherumas to see at close quarters how the masters lived. It should be remembered that some of the Negro slaves of the United States of America worked as domestic servants and were very close to the master's household.

But slavery in Kerala had another side which to a large extent kept the slaves subservient. They were divided into castes and subcastes and had their separate and peculiar customs. The different castes of slaves kept a distinction between each other and did not intermarry or eat together. Brown has left an account of the distinctions observed by the lowest castes between themselves. The Pulayan was to remain 10 paces from the Vettowan²⁴, the Parayam the same distance from the Pulayan and Nayadee, who was not a slave, but of a caste lower than the lowest of the slaves, 12 paces from the Parayan. There is an illustration by Brown taken from the practice between the Vettowans and Pulayas upon his own estate.

“They meet and work together on all working days, but on leaving work the Vettowans invariably bathe ere they return to their houses or taste food. After bathing they utter the usual cry and warn the coming Poolyan to quit the road and retreat to the prescribed distance. . . .²⁵”

Their houses were built away from the Pulayan's. They did not frequent the same roads; nor did they buy at the same market.²⁶

This elaborate and almost perfect system of keeping man away from man, and caste from caste, prevented the birth of any kind of solidarity among the slave castes. The beliefs, practices and ideo-

24. Vettowan was a slave caste while Nayadee, who was not a slave caste was the lowest of untouchables in Kerala.

25. Brown, *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 128.

26. In those days, there were no markets, bazaars or shops as of today. Muslims, Christians and some lower orders of Nayars sold essentials to different castes; sometimes the few goods the seller had were kept in a box.

logy of the times were such that each caste, however low it was, developed a pride in its own status. Buchanan made this clear when he wrote that :

“even among these wretched creatures, the pride of caste has its full influence ; and if a Churma or Poolyan be touched by a slave of the Parian tribe, he is defiled”.²⁷

The net result of the economic and social oppression to which the Pulayas were subjected was that they became both landless and even homeless.

Barber wrote that there was no legal objection, to his knowledge, to slaves possessing property of their own. Brown also wrote that “they may and do acquire property for themselves and hold it against their master”²⁸. But the general opinion was that these were rare exceptions to the general rule. Graeme has pointed out the real position when he observed that :

“masters are not entitled to the property of their slaves, unless they die without heirs ; but except near large towns on the coast, it would appear that this privilege is not very profitable to the proprietor, as property is seldom made by slaves”²⁹.

He did not have even a proper hut to live in. Buchanan found that the Cherumas lived in small temporary huts which were no better than “large baskets”. These were put up in the rice fields while the crop was on and near the stacks while thrashing. Ward and Conner saw them living in hovels perched on the sides of the fields or nestle on the trees by the fields to watch crops after the day’s toil. They were discouraged from erecting better accommodation. Ayyar³⁰ also thought that the slaves were permitted only to erect temporary huts as the masters wanted them to move about when work was demanded in different places.

27. Buchanan ; Vol. II, p. 491.

28. Brown, *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 132.

29. Graeme, *Slavery (East Indies)*, p. 137.

30. Ananta Krishna Ayyar, *The Cochin Tribes and Castes*. Vol. I, 1909, p. 89.

Buchanan observed that none of the slaves could read. Other writers did not think it necessary to record the state of literacy or education of these 'wretched' human beings.

In spite of the detailed descriptions of the miserable or subhuman existence of the agrestic slaves, the early English writers thought that slavery as existed in the regions of Kerala was one of 'consideration'. The following quotation gives light to the way the Englishmen saw a society which was different from theirs:

"In comparison with some other parts of the world, the slavery of Malabar may be considered of a mild description. The individuals are born in it, and it is a second nature to them. The habits of their lives from childhood are formed in subservience and accommodation to it, and they feel no impatience, irksomeness arising from the cherished memory of rights and comforts once enjoyed, which they have recently lost, or from a spirit of proud independence conscious of a title to higher privileges, and indignant at an unjust exclusion from them. Their habitual dependence upon superiors would, for a time, even make them uneasy upon being thrown adrift upon their own resources"³¹.

The agrestic slaves of Kerala accepted their state of life without complaint and protest. The society was organized in such a way that it presented an apparent unity and cohesion. The socio-economic arrangements were in such a way that there was mutual dependence between the castes, and also between the landlord and the tiller.

The slave castes meekly tilled the land of the master who in turn fed, and clothed them and "brought up" their children. Moreover the slave castes had certain rights and privileges. They had a part in all festivals connected with sowing, harvesting and other agricultural activities. They had certain rights in the local temple festivals. Of course they were restricted to their allotted places at these

31. Slavery in India : correspondence of Court of Directors and the Governments in India, p. 921.

functions. But they belonged to the same race as their masters. It was partly for this reason that the English writers did not probe into the origin of agrestic slavery in Kerala. Instead they emphasised the relative harmlessness of slavery in Kerala and concluded that it was an integral part of Hindu Society.