



JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)

An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

"The Ayyankali Phenomenon: A Driving Force for Pulaya Liberation and Transformation"

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Abstract: Travancore has been witnessing to a multitude of historical events and deeply rooted traditions, the echoes of which have distinctively reverberated through the tapestry of Kerala's historical narrative. This study addresses the overarching question: What is the enduring legacy of Ayyankali, and what are the broader implications of his multifaceted contributions to Kerala's social fabric? Delving into the transformative impact of Ayyankali, who emerged from the humble roots of an ordinary Avarna family, this research explores how his profound influence transcended conventional norms, instigating a seismic shift in the social fabric. Ayyankali's outstanding success spans various domains, showcasing his prowess in challenging age-old customs, combating mistreatment and untouchability, championing freedom of movement and public roads, upholding self-dignity, spearheading compulsory education, and leading agricultural workers' strikes. This multifaceted journey stands as a testament to his accomplishments, with the ongoing struggle evolving and expanding over time. His unwavering dedication to myriad social struggles symbolizes a triumphant spirit against injustice and inequality. Ayyankali's remarkable resilience in the face of adversity is exemplified by his exceptional journey, triumphing over even the most daunting obstacles to ascend to the echelons of the Praja Sabha. The advancement and upliftment of the Pulaya caste during the 20th century can be unequivocally attributed to the relentless struggles of their past, notably spearheaded by the singular figure of Ayyankali. This research aligns with the broader objective of comprehending Ayyankali's enduring legacy and the lasting impact of his contributions on Kerala's social landscape.

Keywords: ayyankali, caste system, untouchability, thiruvithankodu, pulayas, peasantry, vengannur, renaissance figure, agricultural strike, conversion, revolt, denied education, caste rules, public roads, upper caste, panchami, sadhu jana paripalana sangham, janmi kudiyan, nairs.

Linking Ayyankali's early life to the broader historical context of Travancore

Ayyankali 1863-1941, was birthed into the Pulaya community on the auspicious date of August 28, 1863,¹ in the vicinity of Venganur, proximate to Thiruvananthapuram, as the progeny of Ayyan and Mala, who were domiciled in the esteemed Perumkattuvila House.² During the 19th century, the deplorable plight³ of the Pulayas in Kerala was lamentable, as they were ensnared in a state of serfdom, consigned to a life of toil within the agricultural domains, devoid of reprieve or emancipation. Beneath these strata lie numerous classes, including outcaste, authentic descendants of the land, prominently represented by the Pulayas and Pariahs.⁴ The mere proximity of these groups, well before any physical contact occurs, is deemed contaminating by the higher castes. These groups were like property linked to the landowner,⁵ bought and sold along with the land.⁶ The circumstances pertaining to the lower castes have been elucidated within numerous historical treatises, thereby affording us a facile conduit through which to glean insights into their plight.⁷ William Logan categorically designated those individuals of lower social strata or those in servile conditions as "Cherumakkal."⁸ The explication of their origin remains multifaceted, encompassing conceptualizations ranging from being considered the offspring of the land to associations with pollution denoted by 'pula.' It further extends to connotations implying insignificance, such as equating them with mere "little children." In the realm of laboring on the land, the equivalence between Cheruman and Pulayan is established.⁹

Travancore was plagued by numerous entrenched social maladies, including caste pollution, tindal, breast cloth restrictions, coerced labor (uriyam), and the abhorrent institution of slavery. Slavery in Kerala was typically based on either debt (kanom or mortgage), rent (pattom), or outright sale (jenmam).¹⁰ The abolition of slavery and uriyam occurred progressively in 1855 and the 1860s, marking a gradual departure from these reprehensible practices.¹¹ Because of his dedication to the Pulaya community, Mr. Mateer was sometimes called the "Puliyar Padre," which means "the Pulaya Priest."¹² Samuel Mateer has eloquently said that if the miseries and sufferings of the Pulayars and other slave communities of Travancore can be portrayed authentically and vividly, the hearts of our readers will be melted by their deep feelings of compassion and sympathy.¹³ He further says about their degraded position, *"the only dress of the degraded pulayan is a piece of coarse cloth fastened round the loins, has no education,"*¹⁴ *He dares not say I, but adiyam, your slave, he dares not call his rice, choru but karikadi, dirty gruel. His house is called madam a hut, when speaking he must place the hand over the mouth, lest the breath*

should go forth and pollute the person whom he is addressing.”¹⁵ In caste-stratified societies such as Kerala, individuals belonging to lower castes are proscribed from employing specific linguistic expressions, perceived as transgressions against established caste norms. Samuel Mateer further says “Very rarely has the Pulayan land of his own.¹⁶ ...remember the effect of thousands of years of oppression and tyranny. The pulayan is not allowed to use the public road when a Brahman or Sudra walks on it. The poor slave must utter a warning cry, and hasten off the roadway in to the mud on one hand or the briars on the other, lest the high caste man should be polluted by his near approach or by his shadow. The Pulayan cannot enter a court of justice.¹⁷ Pulappedi and mannappedi were social practices in Kerala that restricted the Pulaya caste and their washermen, the Mannars. These practices dated back to 1696-1697 and involved excommunication and social restrictions for high-caste women who touched or were near Pulayas or Mannars.¹⁸ In the formative years of Ayyankali's childhood, he endured multifaceted humiliations that catalyzed profound introspection, compelling him to independently grapple with myriad challenges. These transformative experiences served as the crucible for the genesis of a redefined persona, symbolizing the inception of a novel individuality. Untouchables were subjected to strict segregation, forbidden from proximity to higher castes, denied access to public spaces and temples,¹⁹ barred from education and property ownership, Hospitals exclude them, Land deprivation precluded cultivation for them, and relegated to a status inferior even to that of animals. Ubiquitous spatial disparity among individuals persists. Ayyankali made a dramatic entry into Kerala's public sphere in the year 1893. "Ayyankali exemplified remarkable dynamism and fervor in his response to the abhorrent mistreatment of the Pulaya community by the upper castes. He harbored an ardent aspiration to ameliorate the dire circumstances in which the Pulayas found themselves. Motivated by this aspiration, he undertook an unyielding journey spanning the entirety of the nation, serving as an inspirational beacon for his compatriots. His mission was clear: to rally his people in their struggle for justice and self-dignity, while simultaneously challenging the oppressors and aggressors who sought to undermine their rights."

"Ayyankali's Legacy: Charting the Course from Channar Lahala to Pulaya Challenge"

As early as 1822, a predicament emerged concerning Christians wearing upper garments. Influenced by the guidance of missionary wives, Christian women started adopting a modest sense of dressing by incorporating small jackets.²⁰ The Channar Lahala, also called the Channar revolt or Maru Marakkal Samaram, signifies the

prolonged fight for the right to wear upper-body clothing, initiated at Kalkulam market from 1822 to July 6, 1859.²¹ The Nadar women started wearing upper-body clothing reserved for high-caste women, resulting in violent conflicts, including bloodshed, arson, and the destruction of Christian properties.²² It persisted as a caste-based conflict and concluded solely through the intervention of Maharaja Uthram Tirunal and the British Government. These protests served as the driving force for comprehensive social and cultural advancement throughout Kerala. Believing that the European missionaries would serve as their allies and guardians, masses of individuals surged in the hundreds and thousands to submit themselves to Christian tutelage. Consequently, churches and schools witnessed an overwhelming influx of people eager to be registered as Christians.²³ This contentious campaign centered on asserting the right to don upper-body garments, specifically covering their breasts. The missionary activities and the conversion of Nadars to Christianity and the enjoyment of forbidden fruits by the converts blossomed a new wisdom in Pulayas. Lower-caste women, denied upper-body attire rights, endured widespread dehumanization, unjustly perceived as a tribute to upper-caste dominance. The Channar revolt fiercely challenged this injustice, advocating for blouse-wearing freedoms.²⁴ The status of Nair or Namboothiri women was equally deplorable. The substantial mass conversion of the Nadars to Christianity provided them with a potent catalyst to vehemently counteract this abhorrent practice. In 1813, Colonel John Munro's order permitting Nadar women to wear upper clothing marked the start of their battle for rights. Eventually, in 1859, a proclamation under Charles Trevelyan's influence granted them the right to cover their breasts with jackets or coarse cloth, though not akin to higher-caste Nair women. The Nadars were the first untouchable community to revolt against injustice. Nearly a century later, the Pulayas were inspired by the Nadars' courage and revolted too. The struggle persisted until 1915-1916, championed by Ayyankali.

The state of Travancore did not always prioritize the needs of the lower castes, even though the missionaries were very focused on converting them to Christianity. Even the lowest castes, such as the Pulayas and the Parayas, who used to be obedient farm workers, started to speak up for themselves.²⁵ Pulayas' conversion to Christianity was significantly influenced by various factors, with a primary catalyst being the relentless efforts of Christian missionaries in combatting slavery and facilitating educational dissemination among the lower castes. Contemporary authors frequently attribute a substantial number of conversions to Islam to the fervent aspiration

of the marginalized lower castes to liberate themselves from the oppressive constraints enforced upon them by the stratified Hindu social order.²⁶ The foreign Christian missionaries seized the opportunity to execute a systematic and comprehensive conversion initiative targeting Hindus belonging to the low-caste and enslaved strata.²⁷ Ayyankali played a pivotal role in the pivotal Pulaya challenge against entrenched traditional restrictions that forbade females within the community from concealing their upper bodies in public. While the Channar revolt had effectively dismantled such practices among the Nadar community prior to Ayyankali's birth, it remained ineffective in fostering a similar transformation in the preservation of Pulaya self-dignity, specifically regarding the right to cover themselves, a change that materialized only in the years 1915–16. The Nair's angrily confronted the Pulaya women who had covered their breasts. The Nair's in 1916²⁸ were forced to concede to Ayyankali's demands, fearing that further discrimination against Pulaya women would lead to mass conversions to Christianity.²⁹ From the latter part of the nineteenth century, the state increasingly focused on improving the plight of the lower castes, motivated partly by the government's perception that the conversion of the lowest castes to Christianity posed a substantial threat to the stability of the Hindu state.³⁰ Ayyankali commenced his public career amid a notable surge in Pulaya caste members converting to Christianity. Despite conversion, social equality with other Christians remained elusive for them.³¹ Ayyankali, a leader from the Pulaya caste, guided his people away from socio-economic challenges, helping them make progress without adopting Christianity.³²

Although Ayyankali was originally a follower of Thycaud Ayya Swamikal³³ (1814-1909), the guru of Narayana Guru and Chattampi Swamikal, it was from him that Ayyankali derived the impetus to combat the entrenched caste system and untouchability. Ayyankali was further influenced by Sadanandaswami, who, in his efforts to prevent the conversion of low castes to Christianity,³⁴ encountered bitter criticism and failure due to the lack of cooperation from the Nairs.³⁵ In response, Sadanandaswami, upon connecting with Ayyankali, established a branch of his organization, 'Brahma Nishta Matham Chitsabha'³⁶ striving relentlessly to capture Maharaja's attention for the amelioration of the Pulayas' plight. However, amidst these endeavors, a significant mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity unfolded. Witnessing this, Ayyankali was consumed by restlessness. Ayyankali became restless and his thoughts about his people stirred his mind.

"Defying Dominion: Ayyankali's Bold Struggle for Dalit Rights on Public Roads"

Ayyankali is defiant, challenging the status quo by refusing to adhere to unjust laws and societal norms; his stance is clear: "We won't beg for our rights; we'll take them." Ayyankali, born into the Pulaya caste, confronted the harsh realities of social inequality from a tender age, grappling with the systematic denial of the fundamental freedom of movement, they were often prohibited from entering public spaces. Humans were strictly prohibited from traversing anything beyond the paths deemed suitable for animals, imposing a stark limitation on their freedom of movement. The lower castes were compelled to evacuate the roads, relegated to navigating through arduous terrains, dense bushes, or similarly challenging environments. The upper-caste Hindus harbored apprehensions that the untouchables' nascent exposure to freedom might jeopardize their entrenched vested interests. This circumstance instilled a profound sense of disquiet and concern within Ayyankali. The bow carriage strike of 1893 (known as (villuvandi)³⁷ ox-cart stood as Ayyankali's resolute method of insurgency against this oppressive system. Ayyankali orchestrated the formation of an audacious cadre of revolutionary youths known as "Ayyankalippada."³⁸ With the unwavering support of his devoted followers, he fearlessly trod upon the forbidden roads within his native village of Venganur.³⁹ Two white bullocks, (bullock cart and oxen)⁴⁰ their corpulence indicative of abundant harvests, adorned with resonant bells secured to their horns and necks, bore the finest mundu garment of the time, the illustrious 703 malmal mundu, elegantly wrapped around the waist.⁴¹ Cloaked in a pristine gown, devoid of artifice, Ayyankali embarked on his journey in regal opulence atop a bow-chariot, crowned by a resplendent harp turban. For the inaugural instance, he opted for the public thoroughfare leading to his native hamlet, Venganur. Ayyankali's progression was obstructed by the obstinacy of high-caste Hindus. Unperturbed, Ayyankali decelerated the chariot, extracting a gleaming knife from his waist, brandishing it defiantly. His resounding challenge echoed: "If you possess the audacity, draw near and reveal who Kali truly is." Faced with his unyielding stance, none dared to advance. Disregarding all dissent, Ayyankali forged ahead to his destination and triumphantly returned, marking an unprecedented milestone in the annals of Kerala's struggle for the emancipation of movement. The tidings of Ayyankali's bow-chariot (villuvandi) odyssey resonated far beyond the confines of Travancore, reverberating across neighboring realms. The marginalized castes cohesively

rallied in unison behind the indomitable Ayyankali. While the initial foray into this struggle was solitary, the subsequent endeavors saw Ayyankali at the helm with a formidable cohort standing resolutely behind him.

Ayyankali's initial endeavor was to vehemently assert the long-denied right of utilizing public roads for himself and his people. Furthermore, the Hindus who persevered within the community lacked a commanding leader capable of mobilizing them to stake their claim to this essential right. Progress had to be forged in the teeth of formidable opposition from the entrenched caste Hindus. Ayyankali was the first Maharartha (great warrior) to prove his mastery of bow carriage (villuvandi), setting a precedent in a challenging field. During an era when public roads were off-limits to Dalits, and the privilege of traveling by bullock cart was monopolized by the Brahmin and Nair castes, Ayyankali boldly commandeered a cart on the public thoroughfare.⁴² In a resolute morning of 1898,⁴³ the cart bearing Ayyankali embarked on its journey along the prohibited public road, boldly defying the rigid constraints imposed by caste laws.⁴⁴ Clad in upper-caste attire with a turban, he vociferously expressed his dissent. Unsurprisingly, the Nairs and Nambuthiris of Venganur were aghast at the unfolding defiance before them. Despite the eventual physical confrontation at Kalliyoor, the damage had been inflicted. The audacious act of challenging upper-caste dominion over the road had transpired publicly. Ayyankali and his followers forcefully asserted their presence on the roads from which they had been practically ostracized, despite the existence of the government circular of 1884.⁴⁵ It's 1899 at Aralummoodu near Balaramapuram in Thiruvananthapuram district Ayyankali and his friend tried activistically assert the right of lower castes to travel on public roads. Though he had to face severe opposition he kept on travelling on public roads in a decorated bullock cart. Ayyankali led an expedition from Venganur to Aralummoodu on the public road in 1898.⁴⁶ Ayyankali and his cadre encountered a halt at Balaramapuram Chaliya Street during their journey on foot. Undeterred by opposition, the Ayyankalipada⁴⁷ surged forward, instigating a confrontation. An armed clash unfolded between the Savarnas and the Avarnas, with the Muslims assuming the position of the high castes in the conflict. The Chaliya Street skirmish reverberated across the nation with unprecedented velocity. At multiple locales, including Kazhakuttam, Manakkad, Nemom, Nedumangad, Parasala, Amaravila, Kaniyapuram, Aralummoodu, clashes erupted between the low castes and the high castes.

He never believed that the oppressors would even repent and change their minds and attitude until or unless the oppressed fought for it.⁴⁸ Ayyankali's movement subverted the caste system's symbolic order by boldly violating its rules, which prohibited lower castes from using public roads and marketplaces. This made him a popular leader among the Pulayas. This induced the Pulayas in many other places also to claim and enjoy this right. As a result of defiance and confrontations, the Pulayas under Ayyankali's leadership won the right to walk on the public roads in most of the areas of Travancore by 1900, though there were many private and special roads prohibited to them for many more years.⁴⁹ By 1900, numerous processions along the thoroughfares of Travancore had effectively secured the Pulayas' entitlement to use the majority of the state's public roads, albeit with the exclusion of those leading to temples.⁵⁰ Ayyankali broke another traditional ban that the untouchables should not see the Maharaja at the time of art festival in Thiruvananthapuram. As part of the *Sanchara Swatantra* (freedom of movement), Ayyankali undertook a significant action by making his way to the Putharikandam Maidan to witness the sunrise on the day of Puja, purposefully unveiling his countenance before the Maharaja. Ayyankali strategically bore the image of Sri Moolam Thirunal on his head during his travels, rendering the Savarnas powerless to act against him. Any aggression towards him would be tantamount to treason. Upon the culmination of the procession, a violent assault was launched on Ayyankali and his entourage at Manacaud. Ultimately, Ayyankali and his team had to resort to reaching Venganur by boat, facilitated by the assistance of the Mukuvar.⁵¹ Ayyankali's struggle for *Sanchara Swatantra* was a way to challenge the caste system and to assert the right of the Pulayas to move freely and with dignity. Non-violence served as the genesis of the bow-cart struggle. Yet, confronted by the entrenched power and authority of the organized feudal class, the Avarna class found themselves compelled to embrace violence. Ayyankali was etching his presence into history through the resolute bow-cart strike. Ayyankali proved impervious to helplessness despite enduring numerous defeats in various struggles. Resolute and unwavering, he steadfastly refused to succumb to the harsh social milieu, opting instead to confront it head-on with unyielding determination.

Ayyankali's Historic Stand: From Fields to Classrooms"

The inaugural agrarian strike in Kerala orchestrated under Ayyankali's leadership wasn't directed against colonial dominion or agrarian restructuring. Instead, it constituted a resistance against the despotism of the ruling echelon

and the inequity perpetrated by the upper stratum upon their own community. Ayyankali launched the first agrarian strike in Kerala in 1907, primarily to secure educational rights for the Pulaya community. He believed that education is essential for a nation's cultural progress and that denying it amounts to cultural exploitation. Advocating for coeducation in government schools, Ayyankali emphasized education's power not only to level them but also to empower individuals to recognize their rights. Consequently, he devised a strategy to inaugurate an independent educational institution. In 1904,⁵² the initiation of a Kutipallikudam (school) in Venganur village marked the commencement of this proactive initiative. The architectural composition of the educational structure was crafted from indigenous materials, predominantly utilizing coconut leaves, bamboo and other locally sourced products. The absence of individuals from the lower castes possessing pedagogical knowledge and the unwillingness of the higher castes to instruct the lower castes presented a challenge. During that era, there were no individuals from the lower castes equipped with the ability to write, and the lack of education and knowledge constrained their actions within that limited environment. Ayyankali sought assistance from Mahakavi Kumaran Asan, and through their collaboration, a scholar named Paramesharapilla from Kaithamuk in Thiruvananthapuram was appointed as an educator. Upon the inaugural day of the school, individuals from the upper castes endeavored to obstruct access to the premises. Ayyankali and his associates resorted to force, confronting and dispersing them. Nevertheless, during the ensuing night, the high castes maliciously set ablaze to the school. Undeterred, before dawn, an alternative structure was expeditiously erected. Members of the Pulaya community were strategically organized into cohorts to guarantee the security of the teacher and fortify the protection of the educational institution. Inspired by the socio-religious ideologies of Sree Narayana Guru and following the SNDP Yogam model of the Ezhavas, Ayyankali recognized the imperative of establishing an Association for the Pulayas.⁵³ Thus founded the 'Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham' in 1907 (Association for the Welfare of the Poor) which he hoped to be the vanguard for social transformation.⁵⁴ Its inception was also ascribed to the initiatives spearheaded by lower castes who embraced Christianity, including Ayyankali's adherents and Thomas Vaidyar.⁵⁵ The main objective of the Sangham was the socio-economic emancipation of the Pulayas.⁵⁶ At times, when the higher castes used violence against the assertion of social rights by the 'Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham', Ayyankali and his follower's retaliated violence with violence.⁵⁷ The Sangam quickly focused on ensuring that children from the Pulaya community gained admission to schools. In pursuit of this objective, the collective

submitted numerous petitions to the government of Travancore. Ayyankali engaged with Shri Moolam Thirunal Maharaja and Dewan S Rajagopalachari, articulating and presenting their grievances. As a result of these efforts, in June 1907, the government issued a directive permitting the inclusion of individuals from lower castes in schools. Ayyankali and his associates formally approached the school authorities, asserting their demand for the admission of their children to the educational institution. Ultimately, Mitchell Saip personally intervened, precipitating the issuance of this directive in 1910.⁵⁸ Thus the government of Travancore issued orders permitting lower castes admission to schools. K. Ramakrishna Pillai, the editor of the newspaper Swadesabhimani, a vociferous critic of P. Rajagopalachari, delivered a scathing speech⁵⁹ lambasting the aforementioned directive,⁶⁰ despite Rajagopalachari's ostensibly amicable disposition towards the lower castes.⁶¹ In 1911 restrictions on the admission of the Pulaya children to department schools were removed. Pulaya children faced exclusion from all government schools. The attitude of the school authorities vexed and deeply affected Ayyankali. Faced with the inability to secure success in terms of school admission, a new resolve to resist took root in Ayyankali's thoughts. He spearheaded an unprecedented and unyielding struggle of unparalleled intensity. Despite the laborious toil and sacrifices made by his community in harvesting paddy, he took a firm stand against the Janmis who considered it permissible to consume the produce. He vehemently opposed the upper class's assertion that admitting their children to schools would brand them as untouchables. Ayyankali adamantly declared that should our progeny face exclusion from schools, we shall abstain from field labor altogether. Commencing tomorrow, it is imperative that none among us engages in labor for our superiors. "From then on, their act of dissent was symbolized by the slogan, 'If you don't allow our children to study, weeds will grow in your fields. The Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam said that if our children are not taught, all the fields they see will not produce anything. Concurrently, Ayyankali led what might be deemed the inaugural strike by agricultural workers in Kerala, not motivated by demands for higher wages but rather to assert the right of Untouchable children to access education.⁶² The 1907 strike precipitated a complete cessation of agricultural activities in Thiruvananthapuram and its environs. Ayyankali unequivocally asserted that the admission of Pulaya children into schools was non-negotiable, stipulating that failure to meet this demand would result in an exodus from the agricultural sector. The October Revolution of 1917 stands as a watershed moment in history. Ayyankali was a pioneer in advocating for land rights for untouchables in Kerala and led the first labor strike four years before the Russian Revolution.

Remarkably, Ayyankali, devoid of literacy and devoid of a formal study of Marxism, orchestrated a mobilization of collective strength for a profound societal objective. The historical achievements of Ayyankali remained hidden due to his illiteracy and the absence of historians to document them.⁶³ Ayyankali orchestrated a pivotal agricultural workers' strike in Kerala, marking a seminal moment in the struggle for social justice. Motivated by grievances such as meager wages, deplorable working conditions, and discriminatory practices by landlords, Ayyankali and his followers demanded increased wages, improved working conditions, an end to discrimination, and access to public spaces and temples. Lasting several months, the strike disrupted the agricultural sector significantly, compelling landlords to concede to the workers' demands. Despite disputes over the exact date, the consensus among historians is that the strike played a pivotal role in empowering the oppressed castes and catalyzing subsequent social reforms. His was a historic call, for he had heralded the first agrarian strike in the history of Kerala.⁶⁴ The strike began in 1913 and ended in 1914 and affected the paddy fields of Kandala, Pallichal, Mudavurpara, Vizhinjam, Kaniapuram etc. During this period the fish workers extended their fullest and finest support to Pulayas to earn their living. Realizing the seriousness of the strike causing economic hardship with social disharmony, the government intervened to make a compromise. At the instance of the mediators, the historic strike of the agricultural labourers was called off in May 1914 agreeing to their demands. School entry and travel rights were accepted in principle. Ayyankali thus challenged the feudal relations in agriculture and showed his men that there was nothing sacrosanct in their relationship with jenmis.⁶⁵ Post-strike, Dhanuvachhapuram Yakub, a pivotal member of Ayyankali's protective detail, was apprehended; Ayyankali secured his release solely through an unwavering, round-the-clock protest in front of the Balaramapuram police station. Upon Mitchell Saip's realization that certain individuals were endeavoring to subvert the school admission order, he expeditiously arrived at Venganur school. Subsequently, a group of people proceeded to overturn the jeep he was utilizing, subsequently setting it ablaze. Children enrolled in school had to endure significant levels of both physical and psychological maltreatment. But both the authorities and the lower castes didn't give up on their goal.

Panchami's Legacy: Ayyankali's Struggle Against Caste Obstruction

Upon Ayyankali's appointment as a member of the Prajasabha of Sreemulam Tirunal, his advocacy predominantly centered on the education of the oppressed. The resolute tone of his suggestions and appeals resonated with such vigor that, in 1914, the Director of Education in Travancore issued a directive, permitting the admission of children from low castes into all schools. Founded on this decree, Ayyankali led an attempt, with low caste girl, to integrate into the school. This endeavor culminated in what is mistakenly referred to as the Pulaya riot;⁶⁶ however, it was, in fact, a poignant struggle by the lower class to attain education. The uprisings were fueled by fervor, whether for school access, unrestricted entry to public thoroughfares, marketplaces, temples, or as a resistance against caste discrimination, economic disparities, land rights, or basic sustenance. It earned the designation "Thonuramandu Revolt" owing to the tumultuous events that transpired in the year 1090 of the Kollam Era. However, it seems that due to this agitation the permission gained to enter schools was limited to his own area. In 1915, Ayyankali appeared at Uruttambalam school to enroll Panchami, Pujari Ayyan's daughter, invoking the government order as a guarantee. In a brazen display, the headmaster explicitly declared in public that admission for the Pulaya child would be categorically denied. Ayyankali also argued for admission. Upon learning that those accompanying Ayyankali were waiting outside, the upper castes swiftly converged on the school premises, resulting in a violent clash between the two factions.⁶⁷ The conflict escalated with people rushing to the scene brandishing weapons, persisting until dusk. Subsequently, the high castes, in an act of retaliation, razed the huts belonging to the Dalits. The school's owner, Kochappipilla, resolved that an institution marred by the presence of lower castes must be eradicated, thereby ensuring that no Pulaya, in the future, would dare to assert their right to school admission.⁶⁸ To this end, he set fire to the school that night, expressing a sense of satisfaction in the act. The upheaval initiated in Uruthambalam swiftly proliferated to encompass Neyyatinkara taluk and its environs. In certain regions, Izhavas allied with Nairs against Pulayas, but later, Narayana Guru instructed Izhavas to support rather than obstruct Pulayas.⁶⁹ Ayyankali and his cohorts valiantly confronted and combated the intensifying turmoil. In the riot aftermath, Pulayas endured severe hardship, with homes dismantled, seeking refuge in nearby jungles, and more.⁷⁰ The Travancore government, deeming it imperative to address the tumult surrounding school admissions, opted for direct intervention. The cessation of the riots ensued only

subsequent to the issuance of a stern government directive, mandating robust punitive measures against those impeding admission for the privileged students. This struggle encapsulates the relentless pursuit of cultural advancement for a specific populace, namely the low-caste community. In subsequent times, there witnessed a consistent augmentation in the enrollment of Pulaya students within the educational institution. Ayyankali's resistance against the hegemony of the upper castes and his unwavering commitment to the education of his progeny stand as a formidable embodiment of this principle. He recognizing that education was the sole conduit for Pulaya people to attain social parity.

Defying Discrimination: Ayyankali's Struggle for Market Access and Social Equality

In 1872, Pulayar Christians faced brutal assaults at the hands of the higher castes as a consequence of their entry into a public market.⁷¹ After two lower courts, the case reached the Trivandrum High Court, where missionaries continued to support their converts. Ayyankali led a series of protests against humiliation and discrimination in 1914 and 1915, defying customary bans on untouchables entering public markets.⁷² They had to face the anger of orthodox traders especially the Ezhavas and Muslims.⁷³ Consequently, Pulayas had to fight against these people in order to enter the market.

Kallumala Revolt: Ayyankali's Triumph Over Social Injustice

The demarcation between the upper and lower echelons was delineated by apparel and embellishments. The 1915 Kallumala Boycott Movement led by Ayyankali aimed to revolutionize the symbolic caste ornaments worn on the neck, ears, and hands of women from the Pulayar and other low castes. Women from the untouchable castes traditionally adorned themselves with stones around their necks, facing restrictions from donning gold and silver ornaments. Necklaces crafted from polished stones were customary, complemented by iron wire earrings and iron rings adorning their hands. Ayyankali, advocating against the symbols of servitude, directed these women to discard such ornaments.⁷⁴ In the environs of Neyyatinkara, the Pulaya women, following Ayyankali's directives, removed their stone necklaces and iron rings, subsequently casting them aside. In Perinad, Kollam, on Ayyankali's explicit commands, Pulaya women initiated the shattering of stones and garlands as a symbolic gesture. In Kollam, the initiative to carry out the directive was spearheaded by a Pulaya youth named Gopaladasan, who

assumed a leadership role in the undertaking.⁷⁵ The conclaves convened at Prakulam, Taiwa, Anjalumood, Kurua, and Panayam achieved success. A considerable contingent of Pulaya young women actively participated in the boycott of stones and garlands under the leadership of Gopaladasan. The abandonment of ornaments made some Nair chiefs angry, and they started a movement to force Pulaya women to wear stone necklaces again. A foolish Nair interrupted a Pulaya Maha Yoga event, beating their leader mercilessly. This incident sparked a riot. During and immediately following the Nair-Pulaya riots, a substantial exodus toward Christianity occurred among the Pulayas in Kerala.⁷⁶ They initiated arson against the residences of two Nair chiefs, prompting the Nair's to orchestrate a retaliatory assault on the Pulaya community. Ayyankali expeditiously arrived at Perinad, where he urgently conferred with the Diwan encamped in Kollam. The Diwan conveyed that the government's inclination is toward amicable resolution of the issues at hand. Social activists Changanassery Parameshara Pillai and Raman Pillai engaged in a discourse with Ayyankali, culminating in the decision to orchestrate an expansive cross-community assembly. The objective was to address ritual reform issues with unanimous consent across all communities, thereby fostering peace through a collective resolution. The convocation transpired on December 10, 1915, at an expansive venue proximate to the Kollam railway station. Among the multifaceted reform endeavors spearheaded by Ayyankali, the Kallumala agitation of 1915 stands out distinctly and merits particular acknowledgment. During this assembly, several hundred Pulaya women ceremoniously discarded their metallic, glass, and stony adornments.⁷⁷ This occurrence exemplified the burgeoning social awareness within the lower castes of Kerala.

Voicing the Unheard: Ayyankali's Ascent in the Sri Moolam Praja Sabha

The Sri Moolam Praja Sabha held its meetings in the Victoria Jubilee Town Hall in Thiruvananthapuram.⁷⁸ In the same year N. Kumaran Asan was nominated as a representative of the SNDP Yogam. Under the tenure of P. Rajagopalachari, hitherto unrepresented lower castes were accorded representation. In 1908, with the explicit approval of the Maharaja, the Dewan sanctioned the lower class to appoint a representative to the Popular Assembly, acting as a nominee of the government. In 1910, P. K. Govinda Pillai, a Nair, was designated as the representative for the Pulayas in the Assembly. He ardently advocated for the cause of the Pulayas, presenting a compelling and forceful plea on their behalf.⁷⁹ Ayyankali actively implored the Diwan to designate a

representative from the untouchable castes, ensuring a robust representation to articulate the concerns of his community in the Prajasabha government. Towards the end of November 1911, a subsequent encounter between Ayyankali and the Diwan culminated in Ayyankali's official nomination to the Shri Moolam Prajasabha.⁸⁰ A government record in the gazetteer indicates that the Ayyan Kali Avarkal Venganur Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam was designated for the Pulayars by a government nominee under Rule VII.⁸¹ Ayyankali's progression from the agrarian society's nadir, where movement on public roads was denied due to untouchability, to the formidable Srimoolam Praja Sabha, epitomizes an exhilarating epoch in the unrelenting struggle for social freedom. On February 27, 1912, Ayyankali gave a great speech at the Sri Moolam Praja Sabha at first time. His emotions poured out, and it was a powerful moment. In response to Ayyankali's speech, the Diwan stated that 500 acres of outlying land in Nedumangad Valapilsala could be given to the needy. Farmers who cultivate land are often poor and landless. Ayyankali was the first person in this country to say they should be given their own land for farming. Ayyankali submitted a catalog of locations suitable for land allocation to the Pulayas, urging the government to expedite the registration process for his community. Consequently, the government approved additional land grants for the Pulayas. He said that low-caste people should also be appointed in posts where educational qualification is not required. Ayyankali also requested that a member of a lower caste be nominated to the assembly to represent Kottayam district. Ayyankali also demanded that members of untouchable castes be appointed to government service. He earnestly advocated for a complete waiver of fees for the Pulayas across all classes.⁸² Subsequently, full fee concessions were accorded to students from the Pulaya community. Additionally, he pressed for a novel request, seeking government-funded meals for Pulaya students. Once he pointed out "A major obstacle to the education of Pulayas came from the uneducated people of other communities."⁸³

Ayyankali fervently implored the allocation of puramboke lands in Thiruvananthapuram and Kollam for constructing inns (satrams) dedicated to the Pulayas. Additionally, he sought a designated burial ground exclusively for the Pulayas and urged the government to appoint an officer to safeguard the interests of the depressed classes. Ayyankali also pressed for employment opportunities for Pulayas within the government. Owing to Ayyankali's commendable efforts, several branches of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sagham emerged across various regions in Travancore.

Due to the inherent inaccessibility, lower castes found it nearly insurmountable to assert claims in the courts. When a low-caste individual served as a witness, his testimony was extracted by a designated Gumastha (agent) assisted by an intermediary peon.⁸⁴ Ayyankali vehemently raised objections to the denial of low caste entry into public spaces and institutions such as courts and hospitals.⁸⁵ They could not go into the court or even near its entrance. Ayyankali was aware that it was futile to have these illiterate untouchables to depend on the courts which in these days were governed by the upper castes who were hostile to the marginalized sections. So, with a view to finding out a solution for this aspect, he constituted a Social Court and several sub courts. Ayyankali himself was the High-Power Judge of the Chief Court.⁸⁶ Kesava Writer and VJ Thomas Vaidyar provided valuable assistance to Ayyankali in his efforts. The Social Court was held every Saturday and the highest form of punishment inflicted was ostracism from the community. Following these endeavors, the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham underwent a transformation, adopting the new designation of 'Pulaya Mahasabha,' with Ayyankali assuming the inaugural position of General Secretary. He died in 1941. Ayyankali effectively represented the Pulayas in the Sri Mulam Assembly for an extended tenure spanning 28 years until his demise in 1941. His agrarian struggles laid the foundation for peasant organizations in Kerala.

Conclusion

Commencing a journey toward systemic change inevitably introduces a multitude of challenges. Ayyankali, however, tackled these formidable obstacles with steadfast determination. Prior to Ayyankali's emergence, the Pulayas, an indigenous and marginalized community in Kerala, India, were primarily confined to the fringes of society, their voices muted by the prevailing caste hierarchy. Ayyankali's arrival, on the other hand, signified a pivotal moment in their quest for acknowledgment and self-determination, initiating an era characterized by unparalleled activism and empowerment. Ayyankali was able to quickly organize his community and lead them in the fight for their rights, which is a testament to how much the social and political climate in Kerala had changed by that time. The ferment of social change had sapped the vitality of the traditional caste system and diminished the fear of some of the most oppressed groups of people. Ayyankali is the hero of social justice in Kerala. These heroes inspire us to fight for a better world, even in the face of adversity. Ayyankali was also a powerful figure, but he used his power to fight for the rights of the oppressed. His name carries the historical designation of a

former Venad ruler, Ayyan⁸⁷ Adigal. The name Ayyan is linked with regality and authority. By adopting this name, Ayyankali was actively challenging the established caste hierarchy, affirming the dignity of oppressed castes. His inborn leadership qualities were unmistakable, marking him as someone destined for a leadership role from the outset. He held a distinctive standing within his community, wielding considerable power, which conferred upon him substantial influence over the lives of others. Ayyankali, a respected leader among lower castes in Kerala, was affectionately referred to as "Master"(yajamanan) by his followers, indicating a term of endearment and respect rather than an official title. His valor and unwavering commitment to social justice earned him widespread respect. He was also signaling his intention to fight for their rights and liberation. His act can also be seen as an example of courage and determination. Despite the fact that he faced severe opposition, Ayyankali refused to give up on his fight for equality. His courage and determination inspired others to stand up for their rights, and helped to bring about significant social change in Kerala. His deed can be viewed as a direct challenge to the notion that some individuals are inherently superior to others. The caste system is built on the premise that people belonging to certain castes are born with a superior status in society, whereas others are inherently relegated to an inferior position. His act of rejecting the caste system conveyed a powerful message asserting the equality of all people, regardless of their caste background. These inspirational figures serve as a poignant reminder that we possess the ability to utilize our cognitive capacities to reshape the current social framework in alignment with ethical principles. The responsibility for determining how we deploy our minds ultimately lies within our own hands. Ayyankali's memory persists vividly in the collective consciousness of the masses, revered as the formidable liberator from the shackles of caste oppression. Ayyankali encountered difficulties in attaining historical recognition due to the absence of formal education, while Ambedkar, in contrast, benefited from modern education and successfully garnered widespread acknowledgment of his accomplishments. Sri Narayana Guru strategically wielded scholarship as a political instrument against the established system. Ayyankali aspired to nurture at least a few hundred scholars holding B.A. qualifications, a noteworthy feat considering the limited educational opportunities for the oppressed castes in Kerala during that era. It is crucial to emphasize that Ayyankali's objective extended beyond producing individual scholars; he aimed to cultivate a cohort of educated individuals capable of leading the charge for social justice. Recognizing education as a key tool for the empowerment of the oppressed castes, he tirelessly worked to make education accessible to all members of his

community. Ayyankali's historical standing emanates from the strategic utilization of the social agency vested in the laboring populace for a specific sociopolitical objective. He played a pivotal role in engendering universal advancements for the marginalized strata, notably through the accomplishments of the Shimoolam Prajasabha. This platform served as a catalyst for the socio-economic progression of the underprivileged, charting an onward trajectory for their upliftment. His unwavering resolve, epitomized by confrontations marked by retaliatory measures, tit for tat, and equivalent retaliation, instigated a scenario where individuals from other communities were compelled to desist from subjecting the Pulayas to any form of harassment. Education can lead to self-confidence and resistance to oppression, but it is not the only factor. Ayyankali's example shows that other factors, such as personal experiences and community support, can also play a role. In the realm of such an experimental existence, victory and defeat become inconsequential. The act of exertion itself is a gift. It serves as an instructive paradigm for successive generations when appraised through the prism of his disposition, endeavors, and trials. Had he faltered, regression to the subjugated existence of the Avarnas would have been inevitable—a reality from which they were not exempt. Hence, his endeavor was emblematic of a collective imperative for the Avarna community, ensnared within the systemic confines of helplessness. He realized that the caste or untouchability of his community members would not change no matter what religion they chose to follow.

End Note

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