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## Absence in Presence: Dalit Women's Agency, Channar *Lahala*, and Kerala Renaissance

By Binu K D<sup>1</sup> and Manosh Manoharan<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In the patriarchal milieu of Kerala, the woman's world is overshadowed by male suppression and cowed silence; the Dalit woman, however, seems to never take it lying down. As is evident from the Channar revolt of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dalit women have never been silent victims in history. This is in stark contrast to the upper-caste women who tend to succumb to caste patriarchy in silence. Drawing on the Channar *or* Shannar women's historic revolt for the right to cover their breasts, this paper engages with the question of Dalit women's agency in the social reform movements during the period of the Kerala renaissance. Dalit women have been essentialized into silence in Dalit and 'Dalitist' writings. The writings of gendered Dalits characterize the emergence of Dalit women's voices in literary discourses. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the newly emergent Dalit feminism in Kerala has an unrecorded and unrecognized tradition of its own in the early caste struggles such as the Channar revolt. By problematizing the elite historians' *sanctioned silence* regarding the revolt, the role Dalit women played in it, and arguing how it amounts to the erasure of Dalit women's agency in history, this paper explicates how the Dalit as female is catapulted historically into the liminality of (non-)existence. This paper seeks to rectify the erasures by surfacing the tradition of the historical assertion of the gendered caste subaltern. It is hoped that such an epistemological effort will strengthen the cause of Dalit Feminism.

*Keywords:* 'Dalitist,' Dalit feminist, Gendered Dalits, Channar Revolt, Renaissance, Erasure, Dalit women's agency, Caste patriarchy, Silences.

### Introduction

There are many instances in history like the *Channar Lahala* or (*Channar*<sup>3</sup> Revolt) when Dalit women were at the forefront of vehement strikes against the illogical and inhuman practices endorsed by the Hindu orthodoxy in Kerala. However, in the historical records of the revolt, Dalit women are denied agency. While denying Dalit women's subjectivity in these insurgencies, the general tendency is to attribute subject position to exterior factors such as colonial modernity, missionary work, anti-colonial nationalism, and renaissance movements, thereby casting a blind eye towards the active participation of gendered caste subalterns in the early caste struggles in the

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<sup>3</sup> *Channar* is the name of a lower caste community in the southern part of the erstwhile Travancore state, mainly in Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts of the present Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In 1921, Channar was renamed *Nadar* by the Madras Govt through an official order, and since then, the name has stuck.

history of Kerala. In addition to the politics involved in the narration of history, this erasure also results from the general perception, prevalent in literary, media, and cultural representations like cinema, about Dalit women as objects of pity; they are posited as the victims of caste and patriarchy rather than subjects capable of fighting against their oppressors. The reason for such stereotypical representation of the caste subalterns and gendered caste subalterns is the fact that caste-based oppression of the Dalits and the legitimization of sexual atrocities against gendered Dalits are deep-rooted in Indian social ethos and upper-caste discourses.

Dalit Feminism in India questions the tendency to stereotype the voice and agency of the gendered Dalits and attempts to delineate an alternative Dalit female self by deconstructing Dalit women's passive self-image in mainstream discourses. In the place of the popular image of the victimized and traumatized 'other within the other' recurrent in Dalit and 'Dalitist' (Dalit+Elitist) discourses, it is the image of the bold and revolting Dalit female that emanates from the writings of Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Sushila Takhboure, Meena Kandasamy, and Rekha Raj, to mention only a select few. Therefore, this article attempts to analyze the role of Dalit women in Channar Lahala and to demonstrate the erasure of Dalit women's agency in historical representations of the revolt is in the best interest of Dalit Feminism. Following in the tradition of the historical assertion of the gendered caste subaltern will strengthen the cause of Dalit Feminism. The latterly emergent Dalit feminism in Kerala has an unrecorded and unrecognized tradition of its own. The onus of questioning the erasure of Dalit women's agency in the historical accounts of Dalit women's insurgencies falls on the Dalit feminists. This is because such an erasure poses a major challenge in advancing the reformative agenda of the pioneering Dalit women in historical movements such as *Maru Marakkal Samaram* (Breast-cloth agitation) or the Channar revolt.

### **Interrogating Kerala Renaissance**

The Kerala Renaissance is a contested phenomenon in contemporary debates emerging from Kerala, especially in the context of the Supreme Court verdict of 2018 which favored women—irrespective of their age—entering the historic Sabarimala temple<sup>4</sup>. After the CPIM (Communist Party of India (Marxist)) led Left Government supported the verdict and allowed/facilitated the entry of young women into the Sabarimala temple, breaking the long tradition of disallowing women of menstrual age to visit the temple on account of the deity's celibate status (*Neishtika Brahmachari*), the *Hindu Sangh Parivar*<sup>5</sup> organizations were up in arms over the Government's action. They started a huge campaign for protecting the tradition and sanctity of the Sabarimala temple. Consequently, the issues of untouchability of the female body, the sanctity of the Hindu patriarchal tradition, and questions concerning gender justice resurfaced in Kerala's public sphere. The Renaissance Protection Committee (*Navodhana Samrakshana*

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<sup>4</sup> Sabarimala is a temple dedicated to the deity Ayyappan, situated in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. As per the traditional practice, women of menstrual age (between the age of 5 to 50) are not allowed to visit the temple since the deity is a perpetual celibate (*Neishtika Brahmachari*). The practice remained intact until the left government granted permission for the women of this age group to visit the temple following the Supreme Court verdict of September 28, 2018, permitting women of all ages to pray at the Sabarimala temple by overturning an age-old custom which the court said violated women's fundamental rights. This led to political turmoil in the state.

<sup>5</sup> Collective of Hindu nationalist organizations that align themselves to the ideology of RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh).

*Samiti*<sup>6</sup>) was set up by the Government to revive the progressive ideals of Kerala. *Vanitha Mathil*<sup>7</sup> (Women Wall) was organized by Left parties with the support of the Government in which thousands of women volunteers from all walks of life actively participated. In stark contrast to an earlier stance of treating the Renaissance as a finished project of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the above-mentioned political developments in the state pushed the question of Renaissance again into the forefront of public debates. It is in this context that the question of Dalit women's accent on the Kerala Renaissance becomes pertinent.

So far, there has not been any attempt to understand the role played by Dalit women in the so-called 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala renaissance worth mentioning. For instance, there have been no significant attempts either from subaltern historians nor from feminist activists to understand the role of Dalit women in the *Maru Marakal Samaram* (breast-cloth agitation), though the Channar revolt is a milestone in the history of Dalit rights and feminist movements in Kerala. The reason, as a writer and feminist activist, J Devika observes “one of the problematics of the so-called ‘Kerala model’<sup>8</sup> had been that it had drowned the questions of caste and gender under the socio-cultural accord reached between hegemonic ‘*Malayali*’<sup>9</sup> national popular shaped by the communists” (2010: 800). The general tendency among writers and intelligentsia in Kerala is to overlook the issues of caste and gender under the pretext that Kerala is a quite socially advanced state compared to the rest of the states in India and that it has already resolved caste and gender issues during the renaissance itself. This explains why they maintain sanctioned silence when atrocities are committed against Dalits and women. The latest in the chain of violence against Dalits and women in the state is the brutal rape and murder of two minor Dalit girls, ages 13 and 19, at *Walayar* of *Palakkadu* district in 2017. All the accused were acquitted by POCSO court in 2019 due to the improper police investigation.

The revolt of the gendered caste subalterns for the fundamental civil right to cover their bodies occurred in three phases from 1813 to 1859. The Channar revolt marks the beginning of a series of strikes for human rights and social mobility in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, termed by historians the ‘Kerala renaissance’. Before critiquing the role of Dalit women in the historic Channar revolt and other related agitations, it is necessary to have a proper understanding of what constitutes the Kerala Renaissance. The western nomenclature Renaissance is wrongly attributed to the social reform movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century spearheaded by Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Poikayil Appachan, Chattambi Swamikal, Vaikundar Swamikal, Mannathu Padmanabhan, V T Bhattathiripad, and Vakkhadanandan, to mention only some. One wonders why it is hard to find at least one woman among this list of social reformers. Does it mean that women had played no role in the so-called Kerala renaissance, even though, as claimed during the Sabarimala issue, one

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<sup>6</sup> *Navodhana Samrakshana Samiti* (Renaissance Protection Samiti) is a Kerala state government-sponsored body of different community organizations like SNDP (*Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana*) *Yogam*, KPMS (*Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha*), and some Muslim and Christian organizations. This forum was formed chiefly to oppose a right-wing drift in Kerala society in the wake of Sabarimala agitation.

<sup>7</sup> To counter the propaganda launched by *Sangha Parivar*, organizations under the banner of *Achara Samrakshana Samithi* (*Organization to Protect the Rituals*), patronized by political parties like BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) during the period of Sabarimala issue, the left parties launched a mass movement, and as part of it, they organized *Vanitha Mathil*. Lakhs of women volunteers participated in the formation of a human chain across the state of Kerala on 1 January 2019, demanding gender equality.

<sup>8</sup> This phrase is normally used to highlight the advancements the state of Kerala has achieved in comparison to other Indian states, especially in the areas of land reforms, poverty reduction, healthcare, educational access, and child welfare. While economists like Nobel laureate Amartya Sen are all praised for the ‘Kerala Model’, there are others who point out that this model is unsustainable.

<sup>9</sup> Collective name for those who speak *Malayalam* as their first language.

of the ideals of the Kerala Renaissance was gender justice? Does it mean that the so-called Kerala renaissance was purely a patriarchal movement in which the gendered subaltern or gendered caste subaltern played no part?

Describing the native social reform movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century using the western label ‘renaissance’ by historians is not only improper but also a sign of their colonial mentality. The European renaissance<sup>10</sup> of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, as we understand it today, was an attempt to revive the culture and civilization of the Greco-Roman period to set it as a foil against Papacy. Contrary to this, the Kerala Renaissance was not an attempt to revive a glorious past in the state’s long history since such a past never existed. India’s social history has been marred by the evils of the caste system: a system of social stratification with ‘an ascending scale of reverence and descending scale of contempt’ to quote Dr. Ambedkar (Das 2010: 25). It is needless to say that the case of the state of Kerala was no different. Caste has been controlling the lives of *Malayalis* based on arbitrary laws depending on their position in the caste hierarchy ranging from the *Nambudiri*<sup>11</sup> brahmins on top, to the *Shudras* like *Ezhavas*<sup>12</sup> on the bottom, while the *Nairs*<sup>13</sup> exist in an intermediate position. The Dalits, like *Pulayas*<sup>14</sup> and *Parayas*<sup>15</sup>, were treated as untouchables and incurred the most deprivation and stringent restrictions. Having been deprived of their basic dignity and essential humanity under feudal-landlordism, the reigning socioeconomic order of pre-modern Kerala, Dalits were reduced to mere slaves of the dominant caste(s) and remained ostracized as outcaste(s).

While the European Renaissance succeeded in replacing the obsolete feudal-aristocratic and religious values with democratic, social, and humanist ideals, the Renaissance movement in Kerala did not have any far-reaching influence on *Malayalis* (See Footnote 8) as is evident from the raging caste discrimination, communal politics, and gender inequality prevalent in Kerala society. Although, like the Renaissance in Europe which caused the dissolution of feudalism, a renaissance in Kerala also succeeded in eroding the feudal-landlord-ism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it failed to annihilate the caste system on which the feudal system thrived. It also failed to address the question of gender inequality as is evident from the controversy surrounding the Supreme Court verdict on women's entry in the Sabarimala temple.

More than the influence of the western-centered renaissance, enlightenment, humanism, and indigenous anti-colonial nationalism, what impelled the renaissance movements in 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala was the impact of colonial modernity. Contrary to the projection of colonialism in the nationalist historiography as an exploitative system that has a dehumanizing effect on the native subjects, as far as the subaltern groups like Dalits are concerned, colonialism was an empowering experience. For example, while the caste system had forbidden Dalits from the fruits of knowledge, Christian missionaries provided them an education which led to their empowerment.

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<sup>10</sup> The aim is not to highlight the merits of the European Renaissance. Critics have already pointed out the hollowness of the Renaissance narrative that ancient Greece was the cradle of the world’s civilizations and that the revival of the same had led to the Italian Renaissance. Further, they have exposed the emptiness of the claim that the revival of both the Greek and Roman civilizations in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe had made Europe the epistemological center of the world. The fact is that there existed far more advanced civilizations like Egyptian and Mesopotamian before the Greek civilization and coeval with the Greek civilization, the Chinese, and the Indus civilizations. Not only this, but the fact that the Medieval period—which is often termed by the European historians as ‘the dark ages’—had indeed witnessed the flourishing of a greater civilization in Arabia is undisputedly accepted now.

<sup>11</sup> An upper-caste community in Kerala.

<sup>12</sup> A lower caste community in Kerala.

<sup>13</sup> An upper-middle-class community in Kerala.

<sup>14</sup> One of the most backward castes in Kerala.

<sup>15</sup> One of the most backward castes in Kerala.

Even if it is granted that missionaries had welcomed Dalits to their schools on the assumption that poor Dalits are more liable to be converted to Christianity than the affluent high castes, this had proved to be a blessing in disguise for the caste subalterns and gendered caste subalterns as is evident from the Dalit rights movements such as the Channar revolt. This, however, is not to deny the fact that, apart from colonial modernity, the revolt of *Nadar* women was motivated by the anti-caste ideas of native thinkers like *Vaikundar Swamikal*<sup>16</sup> (1809-1851), a pioneering social reformer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hailing from the *Nadar*<sup>17</sup> community.

### **The Role of Dalit Women in the Channar Revolt**

The Channar revolt was one of the earliest caste struggles in South India. While referring to the tyranny practiced by the Hindus upon the Balais, an Untouchable community in Central India, Dr. B. R Ambedkar mentions the unwritten law that, “Balai women must not wear gold or silver ornaments; they must not wear fancy gowns or jackets” (2014:128). This injustice has a parallel in the unreasonable customs which steered the Channar revolt in nineteenth-century Kerala. The visible functioning of the gendered subalterns’ agency during the agitation marks the dawn of a new social order. Dalit women were at the vanguard of the rebellion along with fellow male members of the community. Their active partaking as potent agents of insurrections carried on to other caste revolts like the *Tholviraku* (firewood) revolt and the *Pullupari* (grass plucking) revolt in the succeeding decades (Sreekumari 2019: 256). Highlighting the significance of the Channar revolt, Rekha Raj writes:

The upper cloth movement which could be considered as the foremost social movement in Kerala was a moment when the body was politically used to resist caste superiority. This movement was a revolt for the right of Channar women to cover their torso just like the upper caste women did. As a result of missionary activities, this community developed a new set of values in life. They started to wear blouses the way Christian and Muslim women used to do. This provoked the members of the upper castes and major confrontations happened in south Travancore. The Divan, Colonel Munro, issued an order sanctioning Channar women who converted to Christianity to wear jackets to cover their bodies. Yet, they were not allowed to wear second cloth in the manner upper-caste women were wearing it. But Hindu Channar women demanded the right to wear second cloth, as it was a symbol of modesty then. After years of long struggles and agitations and intervention of British rulers, the Travancore government abolished the cloth restriction imposed on Channar women. (2017: 74)

Thus, it is evident that the breast-cloth movement was not only aimed at covering the female body as a liberal or western ideal but also as an attempt to enter into the standards of social dignity.

Women were denied the right to proper dressing nowhere else in India other than in pre-modern Kerala. This curtailment became an essential practice of the Kerala society along with the

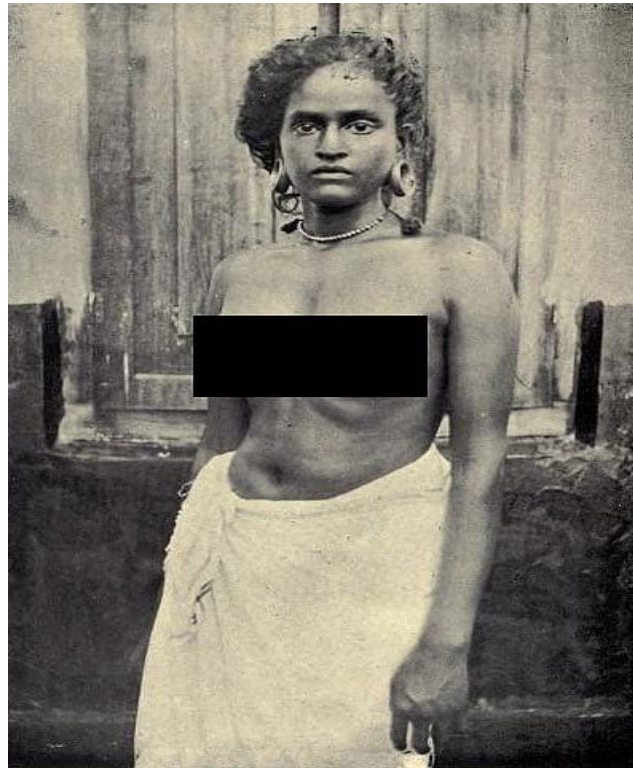
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<sup>16</sup> Ayya Vaikunda Swamikal (1809- 1851) was a nineteenth-century social reformer in south India. His teachings affected many social changes. He worked earnestly towards the fulfilment of the ideals like human rights and equality. His followers consider him as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

<sup>17</sup> A subaltern community in Kerala.

establishment of the Brahminical hegemony which emphasized the *chaturvarnya*<sup>18</sup> by forcing untouchability as a norm (Rajan 2020:19).

Figure 1: A *Tiya* (lower caste) Woman



Only Brahmin women were allowed to use the upper cloth. Even women of the other upper castes like the Nair women had to keep their breasts bare in the presence of Brahmins. Stripping off the upper cloth remained as a way of expressing respect to upper castes. The Dalit women who were at the receiving end were supposed to always keep their breasts bare. The open display of Dalit woman's body implied the upper caste's control over them. While a great majority of Hindu women were, thus, not allowed to use the upper cloth, Christian and Muslim women were forced to use long gowns covering the entire body to show that the body was forbidden by their religious and social morality.

Channars or Naddars mostly lived in the southern parts of the erstwhile state of Travancore especially in Thirunalveli and Kanyakumari districts of the present state of Tamil Nadu. They were treated as untouchables by upper castes and worked as slaves in the fields and plantations of the upper-class landlords like *Nairs*. Their traditional occupations were coconut climbing and toddy tapping. In 1921, the Madras Government renamed the Channar community as *Nadar*. The Channar revolt was inaugurated as the protestant missionaries began to advocate for the rights of the converted Christians. Caste discrimination and poverty had forced the Channars to convert to Christianity in large numbers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. London Missionary Society (LMS), an

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<sup>18</sup> The Hindu social system consists of four-fold Varna division: The highest is the *Brahman* or priestly caste, below them the *Kshatriya* or warrior caste, then the *Vaishya* or merchant caste, and finally the *Shudra* or the servant caste whose job is to serve the above three castes.

evangelical Christian congregation founded in 1795, provided them with English education along with necessary training in socially useful skills. The influence of western education, Christian ideas, and the support of missionaries along with the influence of the self-empowering ideas of Vaikundar Swamikal led to their social mobility. Prompted by Christian morality, the Channar woman began to cover their breasts like the upper caste *Nair* women using *melmundu*<sup>19</sup> or upper cloth. This defiance of social custom by *Nadar* women was resisted by the *Nair* community which led to social tensions between the two communities.

The immediate cause of the revolt was Poothathaankutty Channan and his wife Ishakki Channathi, who donned new attire after their conversion to Christianity (Bhaskaranunni 2019: 66). They had been agricultural laborers of a *Shudra* (Ezhava) master named Madanpillai. After conversion, they stopped working for him and Ishakki began to model the dressing style of her master's wife. When many converted Channar women began to cover their breasts, prompted by the missionaries, the high caste people opposed it, and this led to conflict. But the Channar community enjoyed the support of influential diplomats like Colonel Munroe, who was the Resident and *Diwan* (High Government official) of the states of Travancore and Cochin between 1810 and 1819. In 1912, the *Diwan* made a proclamation, stating that the Channar women who converted to Christianity can cover their breasts using the dress as worn by women in other Christian communities, but they should not wear upper clothes like the high caste *Nair* woman (Munro 1901:1). But the Channar women were not willing to wear jackets or blouses like the women in other Christian sects. Instead, they preferred the indigenous dress code of wearing a *melmundu* as worn by *Nair* women. Consequently, those women who dared to wear upper cloth were teased and abused not only by *Nairs* but even by *Shudras* (Agur 1901: 780).

Christian missionaries played a pivotal role in the Channar revolt. Impelled by the Victorian sense of morality which they had endorsed, they directed the converted Christian women from the Channar community to wear blouses, especially on church premises. Thus, the church was a force to reckon with in the formation of Dalit women's agency. Although the church motivated the Dalit women, it was not in favor of any confrontation with the Hindu orthodoxy. Perhaps they needed the support of the upper castes to maintain their business. There were several instances of Channar women being beaten up by *Nair* men in different parts of Travancore, but the Channar women continued to wear upper clothes even defying the authority. This led to a proclamation by Rani Gowri Bai, Regent of Travancore in 1829 regulating Channar women's dress code, and they were forbidden from wearing *melmundu* like upper-caste women.

It is relevant to mention that when the Channar revolt was at its peak, the Kingdom of Travancore and the British Empire were governed by two women rulers: Rani Gouri Bhai (1815-1829) and Queen Victoria (1837-1901) respectively. While the latter abstained from intervening in native customs, the native women rulers were very adamant about maintaining the order to chop off the breasts of a lady who 'dared' to visit the royal premises by putting on upper cloths:

Once a Kerala woman who had been to Europe for a while visited the Queen of Attingal. She followed the European dress code during the visit covering her upper body. The Queen perceived her action as a sign of disrespect and as a violation of the rules of the land. The ruler immediately gave an order to chop off her breasts as a punishment for the outrageous action. (Rajan 2020: 62)

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<sup>19</sup> The cloth used by high caste women for covering the upper part of their body.



Despite the prohibitory order, Channar women continued to wear *melmundu* and this led to a series of violent clashes between the Channars and *Nairs*. The Dalit women who risked putting on upper cloths against the orders of the Rani and Hindu orthodoxy were tortured. In certain extreme situations, “some converted Christian women were stripped of even the undergarments and were forced to parade in the public. Numberless instances of molesting, houses set on fire, and physical attacks worsened the living conditions of the converted Christians” (Rajan 2020: 25). As Rekha Raj establishes, “Dalit women’s body is always a site of contestation and the everyday violence they face are key to the theorizations of their politics” (*sic*) (2017: 248).

Figure 2: Subaltern Women Engaged in the Making of Coir



Finally, half a century-long the Channar Lahala ended in victory for Dalit women on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1859; all restrictions on Channar women’s dress code were abolished through a royal proclamation issued by King Uthram Thirunall (1814-1860). The British administration had put tremendous pressure on the Travancore Government. Governor Lord Harison (1810-1872) himself had written to Travancore Resident General Kallan (1785-1862) seeking an explanation from him for the revolt.

During the Channar revolt, Kerala witnessed a series of agitations, and many of them drew inspiration from the Channar women’s movement. Dalit women were at the forefront of all those agitations. One such was the protest of Nangeli against the breast tax<sup>20</sup>. The breast tax was imposed on lower caste and outcast Hindu women by the state of Travancore. They had to pay the tax as soon as they passed the age of puberty or as soon as their breasts started developing. While the tax was imposed on men by counting their heads, the tax of women was evaluated by the tax collectors through assessing the size of their breasts. Nangeli was at the helm of the campaign for the right for upper cloth among the *Ezhava* women. E Rajan notes that there was a case registered against her for motivating the subaltern women to oppose the age-old destiny of being denied the right to put on an upper cloth (Rajan 2020: 171). Vichithra Gupta summarizes Nangeli’s story as follows:

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<sup>20</sup> The Breast Tax (*Mulakkaram* in Malayalam) was a tax which the Dalit and lower caste women had to pay in the Kingdom of Travancore until it was abolished in 1924.

A Dalit woman named Nangeli protested against the breast tax by chopping off her breasts and throwing off the same at the tax collector saying, “I don’t need it, give it to your Maharaja.” Nangeli died due to excessive bleeding.... Nangeli’s sacrifice intensified the stir and finally, under the pressure of protests and public unrest, the Maharaja of Travancore had to make a Royal Proclamation in 1859 permitting all women to cover their upper body. The rule of Breast Tax ended and the women won the right to dress up with dignity after a long struggle and sacrifice. By sacrificing her life, Nangeli opened the doors of freedom for all women. (2017: 23)

Vichitra Gupta also comments about the exclusion of Nangeli’s story from the school syllabus. She observes that this history of women’s struggle and sacrifice came to light recently when CBSE announced its removal of the chapter on the revolt from the syllabus through its circular in December 2016 to all 19,000 affiliated schools. CBSE ordered that the section ‘Caste, Conflict and Dress Change’—a chapter that included the Channar revolt—be omitted from the curriculum with effect from 2017. Ten years prior, NCERT had included the Nadar community’s struggle in the social science textbook assigned for class IX for 15 state boards and the CBSE. But a section of *Nadars* objected to it as it was denigrating their community and they wanted to expunge the memory of the heroic struggle of the Nadars to live with dignity (2017: 24). The circumstances leading to the strategic exclusion of the Nadar women’s historic agitation from the textbooks is not only demonstrative of the callousness of the authorities in discrediting the agency of the Dalit women in history, but also demonstrates how Dalits and lower castes internalize the ideology of caste and patriarchy.

There were several revolts involving Dalit women in history during the 19th century inspired by the Channar revolt. P. Bhaskaranunni lists them as the uprisings for the right to use an umbrella, earrings, and nose ring or even for the right to comb hair properly according to one’s own wish (2019:9). Dalit women had also actively participated in the *Tholviraku* revolt, which featured the vehement opposition to the unwritten law that prohibited collecting logs from the forest. As Sreekumari observes, “The ones who went on to collect the logs were brutally attacked. The revolt at Chimeny estate lasted for almost eight months. The leaders of the female faction included Kartahyani Amma and Kuntilju Madhavi” (2019: 256). The *Pullupari* revolt in the 1940s also witnessed the active participation of Dalit women. This rebellion, which was against the tax imposed on the grass collected from the land owned by the feudal masters, was commanded by a woman named P. K Kunjakkamma. Sreekumari, citing the case of Kunjakkamma, writes how the women participating in such strikes sometimes lacked the support of their families: “The landlords relied on government machinery to suppress the revolt. Eventually, Kunjakkamma was arrested. After being freed from prison, it was difficult for her to find shelter as she was admitted into her home never again” (2019: 258). Such ill fates of the Dalit women who were actively involved in social movements are yet to be recorded in detail.

It is also relevant here to mention that Dalit men participated in the above-mentioned revolts without any burden of familial responsibilities. Unlike them, Dalit women set out to fight for their rights by performing family chores like cooking, looking after children, and so on. As Uma Chakravorty notes, “the Dalit women who bore a triple burden: as Dalits from the upper castes, as laborers from the landlords, as women from men and their families and castes” (2018: 4). Dalit women’s presence in the public spaces was deemed a hard task because of their household responsibilities. Besides, it was the Dalit women who bore the brunt of caste violence in most agitations. When the caste Hindus set Dalit homes on fire, in retaliation for Dalit people’s part in

the revolts, the womenfolk of the victimized families suffered more than the Dalit men. It was by facing all these adversities that the Dalit women had participated in all the above-mentioned historic struggles during the Renaissance period.

### **The Erasure of Dalit Women's Agency**

The Channar revolt is deemed a momentous struggle against the oppressive apparatus of the caste system. The gendered subalterns emerged as the active agents of this historic revolt. Both the course and outcome of the revolt resulted in deep impacts on the caste system in Kerala. It inaugurated the vehement volley of voices against the overarching structure which is misogynistic at the core. But historians are reluctant to accept the Channar revolt as a milestone in the history of the Renaissance. Though A. Sreedharamenon (1925-2010), a prominent political historian, in his seminal work *A Survey on Kerala History* accepts that the revolt had profound bearings on Kerala society (2016: 377), he fails to give credit to the gendered subalterns' role in it, the first of the successful campaigns against the caste system in Kerala. Instead, he acknowledges the initiative of the government and the pressure of social circumstances. Writer and critic P. K. Balakrishnan's book *Jathivyavasthithiyum Kerala Charithravum (The caste System and the History of Kerala)* contains a detailed analysis of the period of the renaissance:

The period 1850-1890 marks a turning point in Kerala history...It was in the period between 1850 and 1910 that caste politics was formed in Kerala at the behest of human rights and the intervention of the government (2020: 40).

This outlook by P. K. Balakrishnan is remarkable as far as the historical relevance of the period which witnessed the high days of the Channar revolt is concerned, yet there is a noticeable absence of any references to the Channar revolt as such in his book. While he expresses the opinion that the period is remarkable for the formation of caste politics, he is not specific about it. The fact is that along with many other factors, the successful campaign of the Channar women has also played a significant role in shaping the period of Renaissance but P. K. Balakrishnan fails to acknowledge this fact. Historians like P. Sankunni Menon whose *History of Travancore* (1878) is a seminal work on Kerala history, unfortunately, sides with the upper caste sentiments of the time in condemning "the outrageous attitude" (Bhaskaranunni 2019: 1179) of the subaltern castes. He sees the revolt as propelled by the lower caste's impulsiveness and insurgent spirit. As Bhaskaranunni observes:

When the Channar revolt took place, the historian P. Sankunni Menon was a diplomat appointed at the southern Travancore. Though an official tone is discernible in his account of the Channar revolt, the intolerance of a *Savarna* Hindu towards the rebellion is also evident in recordings. (2019: 1179)

P. Bhaskaranunni (1924-1994) is the only historian who has done at least some justice by recording the Channar women's struggles in detail. His text *Pathonpatham Nootandile Keralam* (Keralam in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century) mentions many such instances of caste struggles besides the Channar Revolt. According to him the *savarna* (upper caste) people's resentment towards the elevated status of converted Christians from the lower caste communities caused the Channar revolts. Bhaskaranunni details several horrid incidents in connection with Channar women's agitation. For

instance, a Channar woman who dared to cover her upper body at a public place was stripped and her nipples were pinned with certain objects as a form of punishment (2019: 66).

Figure 3: Four Upper Caste Women participating in a Procession as Part of a Temple Festival



Though the Channar revolt officially ended with the proclamation of 1859, upper-caste women were denied the right to use the upper cloth for several years and this custom continued even in the post-independence period in Manimalarkavu in Thrissur, where the women participating in the procession as part of the temple festival were not allowed to cover their breasts. This had led to protests, and the practice ended.

Recent protests in Kerala from *Sangha Parivar* organizations in connection with the Supreme Court verdict on Sabarimala are potent signs of the re-emergence of Brahminical hegemony in the state of Kerala. Noted writer and feminist activist professor Sara Joseph's observation is worth mentioning here: "It is very relevant to investigate and analyze the history of Channar revolt ... The evil forces which were countered and eradicated by women's agency in the past are already equipped with capacity for a potential come back" (2020: 12). This statement underlines the historic relevance of the Channar revolt to today.

There are few revolts in India in which Dalit women fought for their rights for almost half a century withstanding the attacks of caste patriarchy before the Channar revolt. It is worth remembering that Dalit women's fight was conducted several decades before the birth of Indian feminism itself<sup>21</sup>. It is an undeniable fact that the initial impetus for the fight was received from Christian missionaries who indirectly supported the agitation to endorse their civilizing mission

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<sup>21</sup> The women's question was taken up first in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century as part of the agenda of the Hindu revivalist movements like the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, and so on which sought to modernize Indian society and resist the influence of western ideas. The campaigns of Bengali renaissance luminaries like Raja Rammohan Roy and educationists and social reformers like Pundit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar succeeded in evoking concern for higher caste women's welfare and their issues like child marriage, sati, widow remarriage, women's education, and larger questions of women's freedom and social mobility got public attention. In Kerala too, though much later, the discussion on women's issues were initiated by upper caste social reformers like V. T Bhattathiripad where the high caste women were the beneficiaries. Though the lower caste women's question was placed high on the agenda of their anti-caste struggles by the non-Brahmin reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Periyar E V Ramasamy, Narayana Guru, and Ayyankali, to name only a few, which happened coeval with the movements of the upper caste social reformers mentioned above, the same was relegated to the background by the priorities set by elite writers and historians with colonialist and nationalist leanings. It is in these religious and social reform movements of the mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century that one can locate the earliest inklings of the Indian feminist movement. The Channar revolt in Kerala, which began in the first half of the nineteenth century, with its focus on the cause of the subaltern women, thus preceded the early phase of the Indian feminist movement.

and conversion agenda. The agitators, as we have already seen, also got the backing of colonial administrators. But this in no way demeans the importance of Channar women's agitation, for the demand of the Channar women was not just for the right to cover their breasts as other Christian women do but to assert their equal rights with the upper caste *Nair* women. That is why even when they were granted the right to dress up like other Christian women, they were not willing to call off their agitation. On the other hand, they continued to wear *melmundu* like the upper caste *Nair* women challenging the authority and caste orthodoxy which demonstrates their agency.

Moreover, more than the Christian theology of silent suffering and self-sacrificing, what prompted the agitation was the insurgent spirit of Dalit women and the sense of equality they imbibed from the anti-caste tradition of Vaikundar Swamikal. This fact is evident from the numerous clashes that took place between the *Nadar* and *Nair* communities. The Channar community countered the oppressor's violence by resorting to the same violence instead of embracing the Christian dictum, 'love thy enemy' or 'forgive your oppressor'. Hence, the image of Dalit women that we derive from the Channar revolt is not that of a mute victim of caste and patriarchy, but that of an articulate Dalit woman who is conscious of the rights of her body and boldly asserts her agency. It has to be noted that the Channar women were able to 'organize' and 'agitate' for their rights more than a century before Dr. Ambedkar led the great Dalit movement for the democratic civil rights of the untouchables.

Viewed from a Feminist standpoint, the Channar revolt can be seen as a pioneering incident in the history of women's rights movements in India. From a Dalit Feminist perspective, it demonstrates the dynamic and resilient spirit of Dalit women to assert their agency even in the most oppressive circumstances. Despite the multi-layered marginalization that Dalit women were subjected to in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the many rigid practices of the caste system—of treating Dalit women as untouchables by day and exploiting them as upper castes' sex objects at night, of the many restrictions on their sexuality such as the breast tax and the curtailment of the rights for covering the upper body—Dalit women still could assert their limited agency.

Looked at from the perspective of the subaltern history<sup>22</sup>, the Channar revolt could be seen as a demonstration of the insurgent spirit of the subordinate class against the exploitation of the dominant class. The Channars who were working as slaves in the fields of the *Nair* landlords became conscious of their class identity and organized themselves for their rights. Christianity and colonial modernity acted as catalytic agents in this process of the transformation of the subaltern subjects. The introduction to western education, the teachings of Christianity, and acquaintance with the liberatory ideas of Vaikundar Swamikal helped the formation of their selves. But what is to be emphasized here is that it was the gendered caste subalterns who became the vocal subject as the agitation was primarily for the right to cover their bodies, though her agitation was strongly supported by their male counterparts. It also needs to be emphasized that while the upper caste women were also denied many basic rights such as the right to cover breasts and that these ill practices had alarming impacts on the self-hood of the entire womenfolk in the pre-modern Kerala, it is only the gendered caste subaltern who dared stage oppositions to them.

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<sup>21</sup> Subaltern history is the method of studying history from the perspective of the marginalized using the theoretical framework of Marxist thinkers like Antonio Gramsci. Subaltern history as a process of looking at history from below contradicts the methods of canonical historiography that privileges the elite classes over the subaltern. The pioneers of subaltern studies include Ranajith Guha, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, Deepesh Charabarty, Sumit Sarkar, David Hardiman, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and so on.

## Conclusion

The above analysis reveals that many factors, both foreign and native, contributed to the emergence of Channar women's agitations such as colonial modernity, Christian philosophy, and renaissance movements. But this does not mean that they were mere pawns in the hands of Christian missionaries, colonial masters, or native reformers who made them act according to their will to serve their ideological agenda. Contrarily, Channar women's upheaval is demonstrative of their culture of resistance and their ability to assert their limited agency even in the face of the most challenging and oppressive circumstances.

The above analysis of the Channar revolt also informs us that although Dalit feminism has many ideological parallels with Afro-American feminism and that they both share many common concerns, they also differ on the question of colonialism. While colonialism was the main oppressing force as far as Afro-American women were concerned, it was the caste patriarchy that made Dalit women's life a veritable hell. In the case of Channar women, the reformatory zeal of colonialism had a crucial role in the formation of Dalit female agency while oppressing practices like the slave trade, which was essential for its commercial interests, worsened the living conditions of Afro-Americans. In short, Dalit women were not victimized by colonialism like Afro-American women. Instead, colonial modernity had provided great momentum for Dalit women's fight against caste patriarchy.

The end of the colonial period marks the first notes of gradual erasure of Dalit women's agency from the political setting of Kerala. Therefore, the first step in countering the erasure of Dalit women's agency and reclaiming the same is to record the active role of Dalit women in the caste revolts in 19<sup>th</sup> century Kerala, beginning with the Channar revolt. This calls for serious and critical rethinking and re-examination of available historical data. Such a move shall propel the rising of voices of the gendered caste subalterns in the contemporary socio-political, cultural settings as well. Such an approach shall unearth the facts regarding the existence of an agency of Dalit women during the period which reshaped the political and cultural scenario of the land.

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