

## Statues and the Emergence of Dalit Visual Field in Southern Kerala

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### ABSTRACT

Kerala has over 32,000 colonies, of which 8,000 are Dalit colonies, known for their marginalisation and harsh living conditions. Every other elected government in Kerala supports the caste colonies, a physical manifestation of the institutionalised caste system that continues to marginalise communities under the guise of progress. Post-colonial Dalit politics in Kerala evokes memories of these communities, with images of historical heroes emerging with unequal significance. Concrete statues, often depicting historical icons and leaders, pay homage to prominent figures like Ayyankali, who championed the cause of Dalit rights. These statues serve as reminders of their contributions to the ongoing discourse against discrimination, acting as catalysts for community empowerment and the nurturing of a strong Dalit identity. The aim of this paper is to examine how concrete statues started to emerge as a new trend of Dalit assertion in these colonies as well as in the post-colonial visual field in Kerala. It also inquires how, by becoming the focal points for community gatherings, celebrations, and discussions on social issues, the statues inspired pride, unity, and collective action within the Dalit community.

**Keywords-** ayyankali, dalit colonies, dalit assertion, post-colonial, visual field.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Travancore, the former princely state in present-day Kerala, witnessed a long history of complex narratives that encompassed centuries of caste-based discrimination and oppression, social reform movements, and struggles for equality and social justice. During the British colonial era, Travancore retained its autonomy as a princely state under British suzerainty, and the kingdom witnessed major socio-political changes, including the temple entry proclamation of 1936, which opened Hindu temples to all castes, challenging caste-based discrimination. Despite merging with Cochin in 1949 and renaming Thiruvananthapuram as the centre of the newly formed state of Kerala in 1956, the centuries-old caste system that divides people into distinct social orders continued to govern the region. Dalits in Kerala were majorly discriminated against on

the basis of social class, economic status, and religion, which continues to be the situation today.

Modern Kerala has a never-ending story of sociopolitical tensions based on religion, caste, and ethnic identities, as everywhere in India. Modernity, in its regional and postcolonial forms, maximized such sociopolitical tensions at various levels. Different sociopolitical groups in Kerala are asserting their cultural and political identities through extensive visual fields. In the cultural field and artistic expressions, this became popularised through images and visual spectacles, including statues and monuments. In the 1980s and 1990s, the Dalit colonies of Venganoor in the Travancore region of Kerala saw the rise of statues as a cultural and political claim, a means of making a claim on public spheres for a certain ideology. Each of the neighbourhoods where statues of 'Ayyankali' have been erected has a rich history of struggle and empowerment

among the Dalits. Furthermore, the political climate of any given area has a significant impact on its visual culture. Thus, considering these points, the article is an investigation into the emergence of concrete statues as Dalit cultural and political identities in Travancore.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this paper is to understand how visual approaches, specifically statues, were used for igniting questions of identity within the Dalit colonies especially in Venganoor, Kerala. By focusing the article on Kerala in context, several works of literature by scholars, historians, and ethnographers were reviewed and analysed to understand the Dalit etymology as well as the growing emphasis on the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of Dalit life-worlds, which led to a renewed focus on the expression and representation of Dalit identity. Analysis was accomplished using qualitative research techniques with an incident towards humanist techniques. Participants' opinions and experiences of concrete as a material for the statues have been analysed in order to determine its effect on the sociocultural dynamics of the region. The primary data was collected through multiple field visits to Thiruvananthapuram and various colonies where Dalit resides within the Venganoor region. Along with visual documentation, semi structured interviews and surveys with the research participants were conducted for the analysis.

## III. DALIT ETYMOLOGY

Before investigating the metaphorical diligence through visual syntax such as sculptural representations that influenced the course of Dalit activism and politics in India, it is necessary to comprehend the term "Dalit," which finds its roots in the Sanskrit word "dal," which means oppressed or broken. Historically, it referred to those deemed "untouchables" within the caste system, subjected to extreme social and economic marginalization. They were assigned menial and degrading tasks, endured systemic discrimination, and were denied basic human rights. Their marginalisation in all democratic spheres, including ministerial governance, bureaucracy, information technology, education sector, market economy, art, cinema, and media, is due to the mainstream understanding of Dalits in Indian society as incompetent and non-meritorious in comparison to a more skilled and knowledgeable upper caste [1].

Over time, Dalits embraced the term "Dalit" as a badge of resistance and empowerment. It became an emblem of defiance against centuries of oppression and discrimination. It sought to redefine their identity, rejecting the derogatory labels imposed upon them and asserting their own narrative. The meaning of Dalit extends beyond a mere social category; it embodies a spirit of assertion and agency. Its meaning also extends

beyond personal identity, encompassing a vision for social transformation. In the present day, Dalits have reclaimed their narrative, challenging caste-based hierarchies and demanding equal rights and opportunities. Dalits strive for a society free from caste-based discrimination, where equal opportunities and social justice prevail. Their identity is intertwined with the pursuit of an egalitarian society that upholds human dignity and recognises the inherent worth of every individual. While the term "Dalit" represents empowerment and resistance, it also reflects the challenges faced by the community as they continue to confront caste-based violence, discrimination, and social exclusion. However, the aspirations of Dalits for social, economic, and political equality remain unwavering, inspiring ongoing efforts to dismantle caste-based hierarchies.

Recent years have seen the emergence of Dalit studies in India as a novel academic subfield. In the 20th century, Dalit vernacular narratives understood humiliation as a personal and political experience that influenced nationalism and struggles for dignity. In other words, humiliation is conceptualised not only as a personal experience but also as one that shapes society and political processes [2]. To delve deeply into the historical, social, and political dimensions of Dalit identity formation, struggles, aspirations, and agency in challenging caste-based discrimination, it is necessary to investigate the oppressive practices and rituals that have subjugated Dalits for centuries, as well as the systemic violence and marginalization the community has endured. According to Anupama Rao, when a person adopts the identity of a Dalit, they transform a negative description or stigmatized subject into a confrontational identity and appear politically active in an effort to seek inclusion or acknowledgment within cultural and social networks [3]. The multifaceted nature of Dalit identity can be seen as an intersectional construct. The interplay between caste, class, gender, and religion highlights multiple dimensions that intersect and shape the experiences of Dalits. Dalit identity can be seen as a complex intermingling of various social categories while emphasising the need for comprehensive interventions that go beyond symbolic gestures and address the root causes of Dalit marginalisation.

## IV. DALIT AND EMERGENCE OF VISUAL FIELD

Following the emergence of postcolonial and subaltern discourses, there has been a growing emphasis on the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of Dalit life-worlds, which has led to a renewed focus on the expression and representation of Dalit identity [4]. It is important to note that the domain of 'Indian visual culture' shows an affinity for enormous theoretical discourse, supposedly aiming at responding to the desires of the broader working class and marginalised

population. However, it falls short in its attempts to critically examine the visual representations of the lived experiences of Dalit and caste discourses. Most of the ethnographical inquiry into the visual practices of marginalized castes and backward populations appeared to be limited to rural areas, where the dominant power-oriented caste groups were more likely to be found in a spatial hierarchy [5].

When considering the context of Indian art and art history, it is critical to acknowledge the apparent absence of Dalit representation within the realm of culturally dominant visual art scenarios. The close examination of Dalit visual culture is thus often materialised as a separate instance, necessitating the assimilation of an extensive number of distinct visual representations that have entered the realm of popular art, including but not limited to calendar art, posters, banners, statues, monuments, etc. Studies on the social functioning of caste in the field of visibility are relatively recent, particularly due to the emergence of discourse within the subject of New Art history. New art history emerges as a critical response to conventional art history, which has historically shaped and limited the interpretation of art to a specific set of genres, thus failing to adequately address the political and social dimensions inherent in public visual culture. It can be considered an attempt by the field of art history and visual representations to challenge and dismantle the traditional divisions and dichotomies that exist between high and low art, as well as between art and non-art [6].

## V. EMERGENCE OF STATUES IN POSTCOLONIAL KERALA

Following India's independence, the Congress Party and the communists in Kerala embarked on a search for heroes who could represent not only the state's newly discovered unity and political convictions, but also their differing perspectives on the state's past and future. On one hand, under communist leadership, the statue of K. Ramakrishna Pillai (1878–1916), a political leader and journalist, was made in cement concrete in 1957, whereas, by a committee organised by non-communists and congressmen, a statue of Velu Tampi (1765–1899), a freedom fighter and leader of the rebellion known as the Velu Tampi Dalawa revolt against East India Company, was erected in bronze in 1965 [7].

The trend of gaining votes by creating sculptures and statues of leaders, social reformers, and other important personnel is still prevalent today. With a similar intention, on November 10, 1980, a bronze statue of Mahatma Ayyankali by sculptor Ezra David was unveiled at Vellayambalam Junction in Thiruvananthapuram. Its location was diligently chosen as the junction was situated in an elite nair community's area with roads connecting Kaudiyar Palace and Padmanabha Swamy Temple [8]. Interesting was the fact

that until a few decades ago, even a shadow of a pulaya's person would not have been tolerated in the above-mentioned streets, and now even the king has to cross the statue of a pulaya in order to reach the temple for his prayers. Even though the decision to erect the statue to honour Ayyankali was a political move to manipulate Dalit votes and an initiative by the 'Ayyankali Smaraka Trust', which was then recently formed, the statue held immense significance in terms of representation of Dalit identity [9].



**Figure 1: Statue of Ayyankali at Vellayambalam Junction**

Born on August 28th, 1863, in the Pulaya community of Venganoor, Ayyankali was a social reformer who fought to obtain the rights of public access, education, economic participation, and social justice for the marginalised population in Kerala. His community's condition was extremely poor, with no right for women to cover their upper bodies, no right for any member of the community to walk on public roads, no temple entry for lower castes, and no education—a few of the discriminations against which he revolted. Despite physical attacks from caste Hindus whenever 'untouchables' implemented his teachings, he persisted in his fight against social injustice until his final moments. Examining the literature on his reforming actions reveals that Ayyankali bears significant responsibility for the advancement and equality afforded to the lower castes in Kerala today. However, people forgot his contributions for a long time after his death on June 18, 1941, until the installation of his statue revived his memory.

The birthplace of Ayyankali, Venganoor, saw the major uprising of his statues, from which I try to understand how the statues embed a sense of self, body, and collective identity through them. Most of the statues in the region were erected after witnessing the significance of the vellayambalam statue in unifying a

community's collective memory and fostering communal growth. They serve as constant reminders of Dalit people's achievements and struggle against prejudice. The first statue encountered in the region was Ayyankali Smaraka Mandapam, near the school established by Ayyankali himself to initiate education among the lower castes, which was later burned down by the upper caste in protest against equal education for all. The statue, made of concrete and painted black, is placed on top of granite dias and is regularly taken care of with lamps lit daily. Installed on 1998, it has received much attention for being the hub for any political functions and is enclosed in a simple temple-like architecture with biographical details inscribed on the outer wall.



**Figure 2: Statue of Ayyankali at Ayyankali Smaraka mandapam, Venganoor.**

Statues are common in the region of Venganoor and the neighbouring places where the Dalit communities are inhabited. These Dalit inhabitants are usually called colonies. Each of these colonies' entrances has at least a small memorial or a bust of the social reformer as a symbol of their community's pride and identity. It is important to notice that these statues share a similar iconography. Puthankanam Dalit colony, for example, has a six-foot-tall pedestaled bust of Ayyankali, cast in cement concrete, then painted in a black metallic finish and highlighted with metallic gold. The figure was sculpted by Rajagopal, a local artist with basic skills in sculpture in 2001. The iconographic features, such as the 'thalappavu' or turban, are very common and prominent in the statue because they represent the authority and power of the individual as strong and powerful. The statue represents the Dalit body, dressed in an overcoat, symbolizing the leader's cultured and dignified position, in contrast to the prejudices prevalent in the previous society.



**Figure 3: Statue of Ayyankali at Puthankanam.**

Similarly, Kalladichamoola, a dalit habitation near Venganoor, is distinguished by two statues, each with a unique approach to its creation and presentation. The first statue is placed on the northern entrance road towards Dalit Village. The place is known for the stone quarry close to it, so the name of the village is related. Interestingly, the statue installed over here in 2003, is also a concrete cast and completely painted in metallic gold, resembling bronze over time. This tendency is also significant for the community, as they strive to make the statues attractive and aesthetic.



**Figure 4: Statue of Ayyankali at Kalladichamoola.**

The second statue, which is present in the Kalladichamoola, stands out in a distinct way. The bust is comparatively small in size and painted black with a combination of golden borders for the 'thalappavu' along with the badge and buttons of the coat, which are highlighted. Every year since its installing in 2003, during the celebration of the birth anniversary in April, the statue undergoes a painting over as part of an annual renovation. However, recent decades have witnessed a higher demand for installing the statues of the Dalit social reformer Ayyankali.



Figure 5: Statue of Ayyankali at Kalladichamoola.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In the post-colonial period, Dalits in Kerala fronted a collective struggle against caste-based discrimination. They challenged the oppressive caste hierarchy and fought for social justice and equal rights. This movement led to a transformation in social attitudes, gradually dismantling traditional discriminatory practices and creating space for Dalits to assert their identity and agency. Their increased political representation is one significant aspect of the Dalits' post-colonial social representation in Venganoor. Political empowerment also played a crucial role in reshaping social narratives and challenging traditional power structures. The postcolonial turn of Dalit politics recalls the experiences of many of these communities in investigating such claims and discussing substantial democratic reforms.

During this time, depictions of their historical heroes emerged, and statues as memorials mushroomed all around, but their importance was not shared. They become places where neighbours gather to celebrate and debate social issues. Through these statues, the Dalit community gains a shared identity, which inspires and creates a sense of pride, solidarity, and collective action. The surge in Dalit political activism after the 1980s can be attributed to the main reason behind the increased emergence of monuments and memorials, such as statues and sculptures of Dalit social reformers and heroes. Subsequently, these statues became landmarks that

safeguarded the Dalit landholders from further oppression.

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