



The Silenced Voices: Epistemic Erasure Against Dalit Women In The 'Progressive' Landscape Of Kerala

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Abstract: Poykayil Appachan, one among the pioneer anti-caste activists and social thinkers from Kerala, articulated the absence of representation for his community by stating, "I can't see anything written about my people." He expressed this concern well before the issues of intellectual subjugation and epistemic invisibility among marginalized groups became widely discussed in Kerala. This paper explores epistemic erasure of Dalit women in Kerala by reviewing historical and modern debates on knowledge production and alternative narratives. Although Kerala is recognized for its high social indicators and widely regarded development model, there have been challenges in recognizing or representing the perspectives of marginalized groups. This paper examines epistemic erasure, focusing on the systemic underrepresentation or misrepresentation of Dalit women's experiences, perspectives, agency, and histories. By analysing several notable movements, the author explores the intersections of caste, gender, patriarchy, and internal power dynamics within the Dalit community. The paper examines how Dalit women writers and activists assert themselves and express agency in mainstream discourse

Keywords – Dalit Women, Kerala Model, Epistemic Erasure, Knowledge Production

I. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, a state known for its progressiveness and high social indicators have always been praised for its development. The Kerala Model of Development, often celebrated worldwide for its impressive human development indicators, reveals a paradoxical reality where many marginalized communities, particularly Dalit women, continue to experience persistent social exclusion and economic hardship despite the state's high rankings. Their lived experiences exhibit the deep-rooted inequalities that remain unaddressed beneath Kerala's progressive façade. Caste inequality has long been a contentious issue in Kerala, both historically and today. Although social justice stands at the forefront of the Kerala model's vision, discussions of caste inequities have often been marginalized, receiving less attention than other forms of social disparity (Devika 2012). This sidelining is evident in both academic and popular narratives, where the focus typically falls on achievements in literacy, health, and political participation, while the persistent realities of caste-based exclusion are underemphasized. For instance, mainstream histories of Kerala's development frequently celebrate progress in social indicators yet overlook the ongoing social and economic marginalization of Dalit and Adivasi communities, whose lived experiences and struggles rarely occupy space in dominant accounts (S 2025).

Given the historical and systemic inequalities previously discussed where Kerala's celebrated progress coexists with deep-rooted caste disparities, the oppression and marginalization faced by Dalit women remain profound. Dalit women endure intersecting layers of oppression rooted in caste, gender, economic, social, and cultural factors. For example, they frequently encounter discrimination in access to education and employment, not only due to their caste status but also because of entrenched patriarchal norms. They are often subjected to gender-based violence both within their own communities and in the broader society. In addition, Dalit women are routinely excluded from participating in social and cultural events, and their contributions are frequently overlooked or erased in both historical and contemporary narratives. Dotson (2011) defines this epistemic violence or erasure as a process where the oppressed groups are silenced, ignoring their testimonies in the process of knowledge production. Despite their lives overshadowed by male suppression and "cowed silence," Dalit women have consistently resisted their subjugation by challenging dominant narratives and empowering themselves through education, political participation, and representation (K D and Manoharan 2021; Jose 2024; S 2025). In this context, epistemic erasure refers to the systematic disregard or invalidation of Dalit women's knowledge, experiences, and voices within dominant discourses, rendering their agency and contributions invisible in mainstream accounts. For instance, Dalit women leaders have organized grassroots movements advocating for land rights and have successfully contested local elections, directly challenging both caste and gender hierarchies. Despite such progress, Dalit women continue to confront persistent epistemic erasure, which curtails recognition of their agency and subjectivity. This paper deeply investigates how Dalit women's voices has been silenced and why such an epistemic erasure impedes the larger goal of achieving social justice in the so-called progressive landscape of Kerala.

II. HISTORICAL ERASURE OF DALIT WOMEN'S AGENCY AND CONTRIBUTIONS

While revisiting the history of anti-caste discourse and the renaissance in Kerala, the central role played by Dalit women emerges powerfully through figures such as Panchami, who courageously entered a school in Ooruttambalam sparking major clashes and revolutionary labor strikes. Similarly, activists like Kumarakom Chinnamma and P.K. Rosy, the first heroine of Malayalam cinema embodied resistance and asserted their identities in the face of systemic oppression. Yet, despite their substantial involvement in pivotal events and movements, the contributions of Dalit women have been persistently overlooked and systematically erased from mainstream historical and academic accounts.

This erasure occurs through several mechanisms such as patriarchal biases in historical documentation which often prioritize male leaders and upper-caste reformers while marginalizing the roles of Dalit women, the continued domination of upper-caste perspectives in academic discourse, shaping what is deemed worthy of preservation and study and the mainstream narratives frequently framing social change as a product of colonial modernity or elite leadership, thus sidelining grassroots Dalit women's agency. Such exclusion not only diminishes their legacy but also perpetuates the notion that progress in Kerala has always been inclusive when in fact, the lived realities and voices of Dalit women have been systematically silenced and made invisible in dominant knowledge systems.

Re-reading the Channar Revolt

The Channar Revolt or the Breast Cloth Agitation which happened in the 19th century led by Dalit women belonging to Channar community is one among the earliest anti-caste protest in South India. This movement demanded for the right of Channar women to cover their upper body just like the upper caste women in Kerala society (Raj 2017). The social oppressive custom in Kerala during the period did not allow Dalit women to cover their breasts and was required to kept them bare as a sign of respect to the upper castes. Only Brahmin women were allowed to wear upper clothes. This custom therefore showed how much control the upper castes had over the bodies of Dalit women (K D and Manoharan 2021). The practices of *Mulakkaram* (Breast tax) were also enforced where women were required to pay for the right to cover their breasts once they hit puberty (Mathew 2024). Nangeli who belonged to Ezhava community protested this system of breast tax by leading a campaign demanding the right to wear upper cloth (K Manoharan, 2021). Nangeli's story which stands as a story of courage and dignity was removed in the CBSE syllabus in 2017. This shows how mainstream knowledge system makes the histories of resistance by Dalit women invisible (K D and Manoharan 2021)

History reveals the presence of Dalit women as the agents of insurrections who has been in constant fight with the oppressive structures and has been claiming their spaces and asserting their identities. Yet, the mainstream records read these assertions through external factors such as colonial modernity, missionary work and anti-colonial nationalism (K D and Manoharan 2021).

Kerala Renaissance - The Untold Story

Histories of the Kerala renaissance often overlook issues of caste and gender, especially Dalit women's roles, suggesting these problems are resolved. E.M.S. Namboodiripad, a leading Malayali communist, responded to economist P Sivanandan's critique of the 'Kerala Model' by arguing that caste oppression in Kerala has largely been addressed through social development and political mobilization (Devika 2013). Contemporary Dalit discourse, however, strongly contests this claim. A prominent thought raised by the anti-caste discourse is that the inexistence of traditional caste practices cannot be considered as evidence for the extinction of casteism and inequality in Kerala (Devika 2013).

The works of prominent social reformers has been studied and researched immensely in the context of Kerala. However, the role of Dalit women in these movements go undiscussed. Rekha Raj in her work *Dalit Stree Idapedalukal* (The engagements of Dalit women) (2017) documents various social, political and historical events that led to the emergence of Dalit feminism in Kerala. Dalit women activists like Kumarakom Chinnamma, Ennipachi, Kaalu, Ammu, Aniyatha Athaani and Kuliri had taken part in various renaissance movements led by Poykayil Appachan and Ayyankali (S and Mathew 2024). In 1910, Panchami, a Dalit girl, attended a school in Ooruttambalam, Kerala, accompanied by Ayyankali, during a period when Dalits faced restrictions on educational access from upper castes. This event led to conflict between upper caste communities and Dalits, resulting in an agricultural strike organized by Ayyankali, who advocated for education rights with the slogan “_Padamillengil Padethikilla_ [If we don't have access to education, we will not work in your fields].” The role of P.K. Rosy, a Dalit woman and the first heroine of the Malayalam film industry, is often failed to observe in discussions about the history of Malayalam cinema (S and Mathew 2024). A reconsideration is required to investigate the role of Dalit women activists in Communist-led agitations in the twentieth century Kerala. The active participation of Dalit women in the communist movements since 1940s has remained unheard in the left political discourses (Raj 2013).

Colonial land reforms in Kerala disrupted entrenched patterns of land ownership that had long excluded Dalit communities, initiating shifts in social and economic structures. Missionary education subsequently opened new avenues for Dalit women, granting access to literacy and knowledge systems previously denied to them, and enabling many to challenge caste and gender hierarchies. The renaissance movements inspired critical questioning of social injustices, while religious conversions often provided alternative spaces for Dalit women to assert their dignity and agency. The influence of Ambedkarite ideology and anti-caste politics further galvanized collective consciousness, encouraging Dalit women to articulate their specific experiences and demands within broader social movements. Together, these factors intersected to institutionalize Dalit feminism in Kerala, shaping it as a distinct and dynamic strand of feminist thought and activism rooted in local histories and struggles. Moreover, examining the roles of Dalit women in ritual labour, unpaid domestic work, and care economies through a feminist economics lens is crucial. Such an approach can illuminate the vital, yet often undervalued contributions Dalit women make to both household and community economies, challenging dominant narratives that have historically overlooked or minimized their labour.

III. EPISTEMIC ERASURE AND SILENCING IN KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

Epistemic violence is a term used to define the process of silencing the marginalized such as the illiterate peasantry, tribals and the lowest strata of the subproletariat (Spivak, 1998). Dalit women have been systematically silenced in knowledge production, resulting in significant epistemic violence. The devaluation or theorisation of Dalit women's experiences and knowledge reflects ongoing epistemic appropriation in society.

Monopoly of Theories

Gopal Guru (2002) gives a clear distinction between the “theoretical Brahmins” and “empirical Shudras” where the mainstream intellectual space only lets Dalits or other marginalized communities speak when it is about their experiences while the upper caste intellectuals have the right to theorize these experiences. The monopolisation of knowledge and theory production by the dominant hegemony will strip down the cultural and political power of the marginalized (Juschka 2001). This kind of epistemic violence occurs against Dalit women where they are merely considered as ‘objects of pity’ as they are always portrayed as the victims of patriarchy and caste oppression rather than active political subjects capable of resistance and assertion (K D and Manoharan 2021).

The Muthanga and Chengara land struggles in Kerala demonstrate Dalit and Adivasi women's determination in challenging state development policies. Leaders like CK Janu and Selena Prakkanam fought not just for protest but for dignity, seeking cultivable land instead of government welfare. Consequently, rather than regarding them as 'victims' or objects of pity, it is essential to ensure their experiences are authentically heard, recorded, and documented.

Dalit Women Writings

Since the 1990s, Kerala has been seeing the rise of Dalit women scholars and writers who have played a significant role in critically examining and challenging the misrepresentations and stereotypes historically associated with Dalit women in Kerala. These writings began to propose a radical understanding of Dalit women's lives, asserting their roles as authors of history instead of mere subjects. Dalit women writers began to discuss the intersectionality between caste and gender in understanding caste oppression. These writings began to construct an alternative knowledge system broadening the scope of Dalit women's epistemology through 'authentic self-expressions' while challenging the Savarna feminist politics (S and Mathew 2024).

Rekha Raj's work *Njaaru* (seedling) narrates caste oppression faced by Mathayi, a Dalit Christian farmer and his wife Anna which reveals the persistence of caste dominance despite land reforms in Kerala. *Njaaru* portrays the transmittance of 'generational trauma' of Dalits through the vision of Mathayi of his slave ancestors among which majority of them were women who have been engaged in harsh labour conditions even during pregnancy (S and Mathew 2024).

Reena Sam's work titled *Mullil Kortha Kannu* (Thorn-strung eye) shows how caste and gender ideologies in Kerala turned Dalit women into "spectacles of sufferings" in present-day society. The story centres around the narrative of a schoolgirl who recollects her childhood memories where her peculiar eyes acted as the powerful weapon through which she deconstructed her identity as a victim by staring back and asserting herself. Staring thus has been established as an act of resistance and self-representation in the story. The intruding eyes of a Dalit girl disturbed and intimidated both upper-caste men and upper caste women including children who follow strict casteist norms. This moral superiority of upper castes to exercise their control over the agency of Dalit women in critically pointed out through this story (S and Mathew 2024).

Maya Pramod in her autoethnographic essay "As a Dalit Woman: My Life in a Caste-Ghetto of Kerala" poses a radical critique of the mainstream assumption that caste colonies represent progress of empowerment for marginalized communities. Instead, she views these colony settlements as a tool of spatial segregation and marginality. She challenges the narratives that pathologize poor settlements and shows how they are casteist spaces leading to institutional neglect, forced proximity and labour appropriation. Her work also questions the epistemic blindness in the 'Kerala Model' for not confronting such segregations and caste inequalities.

Praveena Thaali in her essay titled "Academic Untouchability: The Dalit Woman Experience" unravels how caste-based exclusion reproduces in academic spaces, undermining the intellectual agency of Dalit women students. Praveena labels Brahminic knowledge norms such as meritocratic elitism and exclusionary pedagogies as mechanisms that devalue Dalit contributions as non-academic thus perpetuating epistemic hegemony.

Prameela Prabhakaran in "Gender and Caste Encounter with Travel Writing" invokes a critique of mainstream literature and feminist discourse by pointing out the invisibility of Dalit women's experiences in travelling. She argues that travel writing as one sees as a genre of leisure or self-exploration often depicted in upper-caste narratives in fact is a contested space marked by caste surveillance, spatial exclusion and symbolic violence for Dalit women.

These literary, academic, and autobiographical works challenge mainstream narratives by reclaiming and asserting knowledge from the margins. These writings, along with many others, describe lived experiences as political rather than solely personal, suggesting they can contribute to constructing theory and knowledge.

IV. CHALLENGES TO THE ASSERTION OF DALIT WOMEN'S AGENCY IN CONTEMPORARY KERALA

The historical struggles, Dalit women's writing, and feminist activism have significantly redefined Dalit women's agency by challenging mainstream narratives with alternative perspectives. Despite this, Dalit women continue to face entrenched challenges deeply rooted in caste and patriarchy.

Persistent Stereotyping and The Victim Image

Dalit women by default are portrayed as quintessential victim in research. But these researchers need to rethink whether is it possible that Dalit women can also appear as 'non victims' such as political subjects who has reshaped their agency from being victims to someone who has begun to resist, negotiate and emancipate within the power structures (Anandhi and Kapadia 2017).

The tragic rape and murder of Jisha in 2016 in Kerala reveals how Dalit women's bodies become a site of most brutal form of caste oppression and patriarchal dominance. The ways media reported the incident was sickening with vivid descriptions which even lead to questioning her 'character' rather than focusing on the systemic caste and gender inequalities and violences in Kerala. In the case of Rajani's suicide in 2004, who was struggling financially to pursue her studies, there was a horrifying demand for conducting a virginity test on her body. This shows how the Dalit woman's identity is perceived in a 'progressive' state like Kerala

where Dalit women are denied justice by ‘proving’ them to be ‘sexually immoral or loose’ thus leading to character assassination (Tharu and Satyanarayana 2011). Incidents like Jisha’s and Rajani’s show how the character and sexuality of Dalit women are scrutinized and tainted to invalidate their demand and claims for justice and dignity

Dalit Patriarchy and the Intra-Structures

Anand Teltumbde writes that the category of Dalit women should be separated from menfolk as Dalit women represent multiple oppressions of class, caste and patriarchy. Contrary to the argument proposed by a few Dalit scholars claiming that Dalit women suffer less from patriarchy than other women, Teltumbde says that Dalit women suffer even more violent forms of patriarchy than upper-caste women as Dalit women are relatively powerless than Dalit men. Moreover, Dalit women suffer from multi-layered patriarchy systems from local community, wider society and ultimately the state (Anandhi and Kapadia 2017).

Some Dalit men who have achieved upward class mobility implement “hegemonical patriarchal ideologies” and impose a new way of control over Dalit women in their families, internalising upper-caste, upper-class norms (Anandhi and Kapadia 2017).

Internal divisions within Dalit communities contribute to the marginalization of Dalit women belonging to lower socioeconomic classes. Along with the practices of internal discriminatory practices within Dalits poses a greater challenge to create a broader Dalit solidarity.

Resilience and Emerging Politics

Despite these challenges, Dalit women have been actively engaging in processes that transform social consciousness and challenge societal inequalities rooted in caste and gender. Uma, a Dalit woman leader, emphasizes that politics for them is woven into the fabric of daily life an ongoing negotiation with the system and a persistent struggle to overcome its barriers (Anandhi and Kapadia 2017).

Education serves as a transformative instrument for Dalit women, enhancing their skills, knowledge, and self-assurance. It enables them to challenge systemic barriers, achieve financial independence, and advocate for social justice. In Kerala, education and literacy indeed has become major catalysts that has introduced a social change in the society. The life of Dakshayini Velayudhan, the first Dalit woman graduate shows us how she fought through the oppressive system and empowered herself to voice out for justice and dignity.

Through a few examples, we saw how Dalit women writings can bring a revolutionary change in the mainstream knowledge space by challenging the dominant narratives and redefining Dalit woman subjectivity. Dalit women autonomous wings, student associations in Kerala campuses and many such collectives are initiating this process of establishing an alternative politics in Kerala by filling the intellectual vacuum that has been created historically by the oppressive forces.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper sought to illuminate the ways in which epistemic erasure of Dalit women has persisted in Kerala across historical narratives, academic discourses, and contemporary realities. Over time, Dalit women have moved from positions of imposed passivity to becoming active agents who assert their subjectivities and agency. Their histories, legacies, and voices are not only reclaiming space but also generating new epistemologies that challenge and expand the dominant frameworks of knowledge.

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