

Caste, Social Exclusion and Human Rights: A Historical Study of the Nayadis of Kerala

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the historical experience of the Nayadis of Kerala through the interconnected themes of caste discrimination, social exclusion, and human rights. Traditionally placed at the lowest margins of Kerala's caste hierarchy, the Nayadis experienced severe restrictions on social interaction, mobility, settlement, occupation, and access to public spaces. The study traces these forms of exclusion within the broader structure of caste society and examines the changes brought by colonial interventions, social reform movements, and post-independence constitutional measures. It argues that the history of the Nayadis reveals the deep-rooted nature of caste-based inequality and the gradual transformation of social relations towards equality, dignity, and human rights. The study seeks to foreground the experiences of the Nayadis in understanding the history of marginalisation and social change in Kerala.

Keywords: Nayadis, Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion, Human Rights, Untouchability, Marginalisation, Kerala Society, Social Reform, Human Dignity.

The history of Kerala is often celebrated for its distinctive social reform movements, high levels of literacy, and gradual transformation of caste relations, yet these developments must be understood against the enduring realities of caste-based exclusion and social inequality. Among the communities that experienced the most severe forms of marginalisation were the Nayadis, who occupied an extremely disadvantaged position within the traditional caste order. Their social experience was shaped not merely by notions of ritual hierarchy, but by restrictions that affected everyday life, including residence, movement, social interaction, access to public spaces, and opportunities for economic and social advancement. The Nayadis were consequently pushed to the margins of settled society and subjected to practices that denied them social dignity and equal participation in community life. Their history therefore provides an important perspective for understanding how caste operated as a system of social exclusion and how ideas of human dignity and equality gradually challenged such practices. The study of the Nayadis is particularly significant because their experience extends beyond the conventional history of caste as a system of hierarchy. It brings into focus the lived experiences of a community that remained largely outside the institutions and privileges of dominant society. This paper examines the historical experience of the Nayadis within the broader context of Kerala's caste structure, colonial transformation, social reform, and the emergence of modern human-rights values. By connecting caste discrimination with the wider question of human rights, the study seeks to understand both the depth of historical exclusion and the gradual processes through which dignity, equality, and social inclusion came to be recognised as fundamental principles of modern society. The paper also tries to understand the contemporary issues faced by the 'Nayadis' – a hill tribe who inhabited the hilly regions of Palakkad, Thrissur and Pathanamthitta districts of Kerala

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This study follows a qualitative and historical approach to examine the experience of the Nayadis of Kerala in the context of caste discrimination, social exclusion and human rights. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include Census reports, government publications, administrative records, official reports and other documents relating to the social and economic conditions of Scheduled Castes in Kerala. The study also makes use of anthropological and ethnographic writings that provide information about

the traditional life, occupations, customs and social position of the Nayadis. Secondary sources include books, research articles, scholarly studies and published works dealing with caste, untouchability, social reform and the history of marginalised communities in Kerala.

The sources are examined critically within their historical context. Colonial ethnographic writings are particularly useful for understanding the social position of the Nayadis during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study also examines the changes that occurred during the colonial and post-independence periods, with particular attention to education, social reform, constitutional safeguards and government welfare measures.

The contemporary position of the Nayadis is examined through available demographic, socio-economic and official sources. The study also considers the constitutional and legal framework relating to caste discrimination and untouchability, especially the protection of equality and dignity provided by the Constitution of India. The question of the constitutional classification of the Nayadis is examined separately in order to distinguish their present legal status from subsequent recommendations or claims concerning their classification. Through this combination of historical, anthropological, socio-economic and legal perspectives, the study seeks to understand the Nayadi experience not simply as an example of past caste oppression, but as part of the longer history of social exclusion and the continuing struggle for equality, dignity and human rights.

Human Rights are inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, language or any other status. We are all equally entitled to the human rights without discrimination.

Caste discrimination is one of the most serious human rights issues in the world today. It affects 260 million people worldwide, the vast majority of whom live in South Asia. Caste discrimination, which results from the hierarchical division of a society placing inherent privileges and restrictions by birth, runs contrary to the belief that “all human beings are free and equal in dignity and rights” as stated in Article I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹

Caste discrimination is a chronic human rights condition, which involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Caste-affected communities are denied a life in dignity and equality.

Like racism which is fundamental factor in dividing people in European history, the caste system a deep-rooted factor hindering the integration of people in India, and it affects the socio- economic and socio- cultural system of Indian society. The most unwanted and exploited ones are the untouchables, who are socially, economically, and even culturally and politically suppressed and oppressed and exploited.

Castes in former times have been defined in terms of distinct styles of life. Caste is defined as “a system of rigid social stratification characterized by hereditary status, endogamy, and social barriers sanctioned by custom, law, or religion.”² M.N.Srinivas defined caste as a hereditary and endogamous, usually localized group, having a traditional association with an occupation and particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things, by concepts of ‘Pollution and purity’ and generally maximum commensurate occurs within the caste”³. While this purity– impurity concept is often considered to be “religious”, the ranking of castes is sometimes associated with the Hindu religious concepts of ‘samsara’ (reincarnation) and karma (quality of actions), the idea being that actions during one’s past lives determine present life conditions including one’s caste.⁴

Caste division in caste society is hierarchical in the sense that the status of an individual is determined by the social status of the group in which he is born. The status remains unalterable by education or wealth or success or failure. A man is born into a caste and he dies in it. His position is fixed by the caste– group to which he belongs and efforts to change it are futile.

The caste is an endogamous group. The caste membership determines the customs and rituals regarding birth, marriage, death etc as well as one’s vocation especially among the lower castes, it also determines what a person eats and with whom he eats. Each caste has its own caste committees, which had quasi– legal powers to punish its offending members such as ex- communication, fines and even corporal punishment.⁵ Each caste thus became

a separate socio- cultural group. In Indian context society is characterized by “status summations” as one’s position in any sphere of society is determined by his caste status. A person of low caste status thus occupies the same status in the political or economic hierarchy. Caste status and socio- economic status are corresponding to each other.⁶

In general, the traditional features of caste system are endogamy, hierarchy, restriction on commensal relations between castes, restriction on choice of occupation, civil and religious disabilities and privileges of certain groups, and untouchability.⁷ The inequality of status in caste terms has the sanctions of Hindu religion. Non admittance of untouchables into temples, prohibition of Vedic learning to the lower castes etc, are instances in point.⁸ Whatever the origins of these rules, as Kathleen Gough points out, their codifications recording and adoption to local circumstances have been primarily the work of Brahmins so as to strengthen their hold over the rest of the castes.⁹

Caste, Social Exclusion and the Nayadis in Kerala

Caste has historically been one of the major structures through which social relationships in India were organised. Its most important features included hereditary membership, hierarchy, endogamy, restrictions on social interaction and occupation, and unequal access to social and religious privileges. In traditional caste society, a person's social position was largely determined by birth, and movement across caste boundaries was highly restricted. The ideas of purity and pollution played an important role in maintaining these distinctions, particularly in regions where caste rules were closely connected with everyday social practices. As several scholars have observed, caste was not simply a system of social ranking; it also influenced occupation, marriage, food practices, social interaction and access to public and religious institutions.

In Kerala, caste relations developed through a particularly complex system of hierarchy and exclusion. Social status was expressed not only through untouchability but also through practices of unapproachability and, in some cases, unseeability. The distance that a person belonging to a particular caste was required to maintain from members of higher castes could determine whether they could use a road, approach a house, enter a settlement, access a source of water or appear in the presence of a person belonging to a higher social group. Thus, caste operated not only through formal social ranking but through everyday restrictions that shaped the physical and social space occupied by different communities.

The Jathinirnayam makes mention of 72 principal castes comprising 8 classes of Brahmins, 2 Nanajathis or defective castes, 12 Antharala jatis or intermediate castes, 18 sudras, 6 artisans, 10 pathita jatis or degraded castes, 8 nicha jatis or polluted castes and 8 extra jatis.¹⁰

Practicing untouchability is a serious offence under our legal system.¹¹ In the history of Kerala one can find that the Nayadis were historically kept at the margins of mainstream social life in Kerala. Since they were considered as ‘Chandalas of the Plains’, they were kept outside the Varna- jati framework.¹²

The historical experience of the Nayadis provides an important illustration of the extreme forms of untouchability and social exclusion that existed in nineteenth-century Kerala. They appear in the ethnographical records as a polluting caste. The lifestyle practiced by the nayadis is an excellent example to understand the existence of untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability in the Kerala society.¹³

In the ‘Malabar Manual’, the nayadis are briefly summed up as follows “of the nayadis, or lowest caste among Hindus – the dog eaters- nothing definite is known. They are most persistent in their clamour for charity, and will follow at a respectful distance, for miles together, any person walking, driving or boating. If anything is given to them, it must be laid down, and, after the person offering it has proceeded a sufficient distance, the recipient comes timidly forward and removes it”¹⁴

Dr.Gundert, the first lexicographer of the Malayalam language gives to the word ‘nayadi’ two meanings; (1) a hunter and (2) the lowest caste of jungle dwellers ordered to retire 74 steps from the high castes.¹⁵

L.A.Krishna Iyer reported that they would pollute a Brahmin by approaching him with a distance of 300 feet; the Brahmin has to bath, renew his sacred thread 'poonool' and eat panchagavyam.¹⁶

The interesting fact is that, within the polluting castes themselves untouchability was practiced. The Paraiya caste, the lowest in the slave castes, treated the nayadis as a polluting caste and the paraiya distanced away from the nayadis at 22 feet. It has been reported that in the Vilayur village in Palakkad district "Theendal Rocks" were placed to bar the entry of the nayadis into the village.¹⁷

The nayadis when travelling has to avoid not only people of other castes, but dwellings, tanks, temples and even certain streams when people are bathing in them. When proceeding along a path, they had to continuously shout in a peculiar tone, so that others would be aware of their approach and get out of the way.¹⁸

The nayadis live mostly in isolated huts on the top of the hills. They occasionally collect honey and bees-wax and also the gum (matti- pasai) from the mattipal tree (Ailanthur Malabrica).¹⁹ He lives on the irreducible minimum, having barely clothes to cover his nakedness, a mat to sleep on and a simple hut made by himself for shelter.²⁰

The most disgusting fact is about their food. Their dietary includes rats, mongooses, pigs, deer, parquets, the koel (cuckoo), doves, fowls, paddy – birds, hares, tortoises, fish etc.²¹ Visscher wrote as follows about the Nayadis and their close allies as "... the Nayadi are also bushmen who hunt wild beasts and subsist upon their flesh as well as upon herbs and roots, so that there are many among those castes who have never tasted rice ...".²²

According to custom, the nayadis has to offer four ropes each eight yards long, to every Namboothiri illam and two ropes to every nair house near settlement, on the occasion of the Vishu and Onam festivals. In return he receives a fixed measure of paddy (rice). The ropes are used for teethering cattle and for drawing water from the well.²³

Colonial observers frequently described the Nayadis through highly derogatory and hierarchical language, reflecting the social and classificatory assumptions of the period. They live a life of the utmost want and misery. They enter no town or bazaar, but deposit their money on some stone at a distance, and trust to the honesty of the bazaar man to give what goods, and what quantity of them he thinks fit in return.²⁴

The position of the Nayadis provides an important example of the extreme forms that such exclusion could take. Historical and ethnographic accounts generally placed the Nayadis at the lowest levels of the traditional caste hierarchy in Kerala. They were treated as a polluting community and were subjected to restrictions that extended beyond ordinary forms of untouchability. Their social isolation affected movement, settlement, occupation, interaction with other communities and access to common spaces. The Nayadis were consequently pushed to the margins of settled society and lived largely in isolated settlements. Their experience therefore provides an important basis for understanding the relationship between caste hierarchy and social exclusion in Kerala.

The historical significance of the Nayadis lies particularly in the fact that caste discrimination affected their everyday existence. They were expected to maintain prescribed distances from members of higher castes and, while travelling, were required to make their presence known so that others could avoid contact with them. Restrictions also extended to roads, houses, wells, tanks, temples and other spaces used by the wider population.

These practices indicate that untouchability was not limited to ritual restrictions but affected the everyday life of the Nayadis. Restrictions on movement, residence, access to public spaces and social interaction resulted in both social exclusion and economic disadvantage. The Nayadi experience therefore provides an important historical example of how caste hierarchy affected human dignity and equal participation in society.

The experience of the Nayadis also demonstrates that social exclusion was connected with economic marginalisation. Their traditional livelihood practices included hunting, gathering forest products and other forms of subsistence activity. Historical accounts also describe their dependence upon alms and customary relationships with higher-status households. Such economic dependence reinforced their social position and

made it difficult for the community to achieve upward mobility. Social and economic disadvantage therefore operated together, creating a cycle in which caste status restricted economic opportunities while economic dependence further strengthened social exclusion.

From a human-rights perspective, these historical practices can be understood as serious restrictions on equality, dignity and participation in social life. Modern human-rights principles recognise that every person is entitled to dignity and equal treatment without discrimination. Although the language of human rights belongs primarily to the modern period, it provides an important analytical framework for examining historical systems that denied certain communities equal access to social life. The Nayadi experience therefore allows us to connect the history of caste with the wider question of human dignity and social justice.

Their experience reveals how social hierarchy could be transformed into everyday practices of exclusion and how such practices affected both the social and economic lives of marginalised communities. At the same time, the later history of the Nayadis demonstrates that the dismantling of caste-based exclusion was a gradual process involving social reform, education, political change and constitutional intervention.

There were efforts by social reformers to challenge caste discrimination and promote social equality. The history of the Dalits in general and Nayadis in particular underwent a revolutionary change with the establishment of the 'Sabari Ashram' by T.R.Krishna Swami Iyer in 1923. This ashram was meant for educating the untouchables.²⁵ The ashram was opened for all classes. It has been noted that students from Nayadis, Pulayas and savarna castes studied in this ashram. Under one roof the pupils attended the classes, dined together and freely mixed each other. About 35-40 students studied and lived together in the ashram, along with T.R.Krishna Swami Iyer and Iswari Ammal. The attempt made by T.R.Krishna swami Iyer was a welcome change for the Nayadi students. For the first time they got access to education, equality and fraternity.²⁶

The significance of such initiatives was not limited to education alone. For the Nayadis, access to a common educational space created an opportunity to experience social interaction beyond traditional caste restrictions. Such initiatives represented an early challenge to the practices of social exclusion and contributed to the gradual emergence of ideas of equality, dignity and social participation.

Mahatma Gandhi popularised the term 'Harijan' in his campaign against untouchability. Indian government moved to eliminate the inhuman practice of untouchability and in Indian constitution, Article 17 of the Constitution abolished untouchability and prohibited its practice in any form. It articulates: "untouchability" is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of "untouchability" shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.

The constitutional abolition of untouchability marked an important legal break with the traditional caste order. Articles 14, 15 and 17 of the Constitution provided a broader framework of equality and protection against caste-based discrimination, while Article 46 directed the State to promote the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, particularly the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. These provisions created important legal safeguards for communities such as the Nayadis. However, the continued socio-economic difficulties of the community indicate that legal protection alone cannot remove the historical effects of social exclusion.

Since independence, scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were given reservation status, guarantying political representation. The Constitution lays down the general principles of affirmative action for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

The scheduled castes and scheduled tribes comprise about 16.6% and 8.6% respectively, of India's population according to 2011 census.²⁷ In Kerala, SCs account for 9.1% and STs account for 1.45% of the population.²⁸ The Nayadis are included among the Scheduled Castes in Kerala.

The Nayadis continue to face several socio-economic challenges in contemporary Kerala. Under the various plans we hear a lot about Ambedkar Colonies, Scheduled caste colonies, Tribal welfare schemes etc in Kerala. However, the effective implementation of such schemes and their accessibility to the intended beneficiaries remain important concerns.

The continuing socio-economic difficulties of the Nayadis show that the formal abolition of untouchability did not automatically remove the effects of historical exclusion. Problems relating to education, employment, land, housing and access to welfare measures continue to influence their opportunities for social mobility. These conditions need to be understood as part of the longer history of caste-based marginalisation rather than only as issues of present-day poverty. Effective implementation of welfare measures, together with educational opportunities, livelihood support and social inclusion, is therefore essential for improving the quality of life of the community.

The life of untouchables has not been enviable in the twentieth century when some initiatives have been taken to confer upon them the status of human beings. Recently it has argued that discrimination based on caste is declining. Urbanization, modernization and Industrialization are projected to support their arguments. Their argument is unhistorical. In 2011-12 a survey was conducted by the national council for applied Economic Research in US along with the University of Mary Land. The Indian Human Development survey (IHDS-2) conducted in 42,000 houses representing varied regions and different classes brought to light startling revelations on untouchability. 27% families are against the entry of scheduled castes in their kitchen. 52% among the Brahmanas openly agreed that they observe untouchability. 24% in other higher castes and 33% in other Backward classes practice untouchability. 15% of the Dalits and adivasis observe untouchability. 20% practiced untouchability in cities. 30% such practices exist in villages. Hindus (35%), Jains (23%) and Muslims (18%) agreed that they observe untouchability.²⁹

Though Kerala's development experience showed significant improvement in literacy, health and poverty reduction among the general population, unequal access to political/social/economic resources by different social groups and one's location within the network of social affiliation substantially affects one's access to resources.³⁰

While Kerala's performance in reducing overall poverty is indeed remarkable, there is evidence of disparity across various social and economic groups. Poverty in the state is more concentrated in certain segments of the population especially the people belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.³¹

The broader experience of land distribution among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Kerala provides an important context for understanding the land-related vulnerability of marginalised communities such as the Nayadis. Both central and state governments have made various efforts to protect and promote the land rights of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribe's population. The surplus land declared in Kerala as a part of land reforms was itself low at only 1.35 lakh acres. Out of this 47% of the area was distributed among vulnerable sections as on march 1996. The average size of the land made available to the Scheduled castes was only 41 cents; and for scheduled tribes it was 71 cents. As per the national guidelines, 50% of the surplus land declared is to be distributed among the SCs and STs. Kerala lags behind with only 47% of the area declared surplus having been made available to SCs and STs thus far. Hence the achievement on these front lags behind expectations, which has led to the recent struggles for land rights in Kerala by 'adivasi' organizations.³² Across all districts, the literacy rates of SCs and STs are lower than non SC/ST population (as given by the 1991 census).³³

The Nayadis have experienced particularly severe forms of social marginalisation. Originally nomadic, they have been settled in government 'colonies'³⁴, but are otherwise landless and have very few other assets. They still practice elements of their traditional occupations, which included the gathering of medicinal plants and hunting for small animals such as frogs and tortoises for food. They also collect alms (rice, clothing and other commodities) from certain high caste families to which they are attached a form of charity which was traditionally associated with the performing of polluting duties for these families, and still carries this stigma today.

Even today they are a part of Sradha ceremony. They received rice, curry and other food items and it has been reported from Nalleppully in Palakkad district that there the food items were put together in plantain leaves and the nayadis would have community eating by mixing all these. 'Nayadis' upward social mobility is very low in comparison with other SC communities, their educational levels are low and they have limited economic opportunities through either their traditional livelihoods or participation in local wage labour, where they have taken on unskilled laboring jobs, often of the lowest status such as waste- picking.

Large scale unemployment and absence of proper planning for the rehabilitation of the nayadis increase their hardships which are not seriously attended to by the politicians and administrators. The relatively small demographic size of the community may also affect its visibility within wider political and policy discussions.

The Kerala Institute for Research, Training and Development of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (KIRTADS) has examined the social and anthropological status of the Nayadi community,³⁵ and the question of Scheduled Tribe status has emerged as an important contemporary issue.³⁶ The Nayadis are presently included among the Scheduled Castes in Kerala. The State Government has requested the central government to include Nayadi community to scheduled tribes, but the recommendation was rejected.³⁷

The issue is significant because a change in classification could affect the framework through which the community receives constitutional safeguards and welfare benefits. At the same time, reclassification alone cannot address the deeper problems of poverty, educational backwardness, landlessness, unemployment and social exclusion experienced by the community.

From a human-rights perspective, the issue of classification is important because constitutional recognition determines the institutional framework through which historically disadvantaged communities receive affirmative protection and welfare support. However, the central concern should remain the actual improvement of the community's living conditions and access to education, employment, land, housing and social security. The experience of the Nayadis suggests that constitutional protection must be accompanied by effective implementation of welfare measures and sustained efforts towards social inclusion. Thus, the debate over classification should be examined alongside the wider question of equality, dignity and substantive social justice.

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in general, and the Nayadis in particular, require special attention in the implementation of policies and programmes aimed at improving basic well-being indicators such as quality of housing, access to water, good sanitation and electricity lighting. Though social disparity has narrowed down over the years and the extent of vulnerability may be low compared to all India, attention should be paid to improve the well-being of the weaker sections of the population of Kerala.

Even after more than six decades of independence and the implementation of numerous government development programmes, the socio-economic condition of the Nayadis remains significantly below that of the socially and economically advanced sections of society. They need further support in the upliftment of their socio-economic status. Internal realization within the Nayadi community to fight for equality and civil rights is the only way for a humanist and rational survival of them.

The history of the Nayadis shows how deeply caste discrimination affected the lives of marginalised communities in Kerala. Their exclusion was visible in everyday life through restrictions on residence, movement, occupation, social contact, and access to public spaces. Although social reform movements, education, and constitutional measures have brought significant changes, historical marginalisation can continue to affect social and economic opportunities. Therefore, the upliftment of the Nayadis requires continued efforts in education, employment, economic support, and social inclusion. Greater participation of Nayadis in local institutions and decision-making processes can further strengthen their social position. Most importantly, social upliftment should not be limited to economic assistance; it must also promote dignity, equality, and freedom from caste-based discrimination. The experience of the Nayadis therefore reminds us that true social progress is achieved only when historically excluded communities receive equal opportunities to participate in society with dignity and confidence. Therefore, human-rights protection must be combined with education, livelihood, land security, political participation, social inclusion and effective implementation of welfare programmes.

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