

## **Personal, Political and Planetary: Reading the Life Narratives of Kallen Pokkudan**

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A Dalit life narrative is a subversive and counterhegemonic practice that breaks the silence of generations. It is an attempt to empower the community through the articulation of oppressive experiences. The present paper tries to explore the life and philosophy of Kallen Pokkudan, the revered “guardian of mangroves” from Kannur as expressed in his life narratives *Kandalkkadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2007) and *Ente Jeevitham* (2010). The paper attempts to explore how the personal is political as well as planetary for him, focussing on the ecocentric attitude of the autochthonous communities towards life and existence. The intersectional nature of marginality suffered by the Pulayas of Kerala becomes a point of deliberation as his life cannot be studied in isolation away from the experiences of his community in general. It also probes into the refashioning of the marginal space into one of radical possibilities.

**Keywords:** Life narrative, dalit identity, autochthonous, planetary, counterhegemonic, margin.

Life writings have recently crossed the boundaries of compliance with the dominant power structures and moved to explore the untold tales of the marginalised and oppressed classes. Being a narrative discourse, these writings illuminate and highlight social causes rather than entertaining the privileges accorded to the speaker as seen mostly in the mainstream narratives. Voices from the margins, Dalit

life narratives are articulations of resistance to the hegemonic discourses, which empower the “subject” through the process. As Sharmila Rege observes, “Dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the ‘official forgetting’ of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance” (Rege, 2006, p.13). Breaking the silence of generations, the hitherto excluded communities find a space of representation in these self-narratives which result in questioning the hegemony perpetuated by the society based on caste hierarchy.

Inclusive and pluralistic in nature, Dalit life narratives are attempts to establish one’s communal and cultural identity as well. Being a subversive and counterhegemonic cultural practice, these narratives reinstate the harmonious balance between nature and human beings, re-establishing a pattern of holistic living. As Dalits are autochthonous people, they have a knowledge system of their own, more in harmony with the environment than the anthropocentric philosophies of the dominant classes. In this regard Maurice F. Strong observes: “The indigenous peoples of the world retain our collective evolutionary experience and insights which have receded from our understanding” (Strong, 1992, p.52). The realisation that human beings form only a link in the entire network, placing thrust on interconnection and interdependence, results in a respect to the ecosystem. Sitakant Mahapatra says: “There is also something parallel to the mystical experience of autochthony – the profound feeling of having come from the soil, of having been born of the earth . . .” (Mahapatra, 1992, p.66). Hence their writings become narrations of the self as well as narrations of the earth.

Kallen Pokkudan, a familiar name in Kerala owing to his efforts to grow mangrove varieties to protect the soil, river and river life, is commonly known as “the guardian of mangroves.” An ordinary Pulaya farm worker from Kannur, he devoted the later years of his life for the propagation of mangroves, protecting almost twenty-two varieties from extinction. It is said that “he made the world sit up and take note of the importance of mangrove forests in environmental protection, particularly its potential as the first line of defence against

the rise in sea-water level, caused by global warming” (Basheer, 2018). Revered as the icon of ecological conservation, Pokkudan has left a legacy of symbiotic coexistence not only to his children but to the entire world as such. The present paper attempts to investigate the life and philosophy of Pokkudan as unravelled in two of his life narratives, viz., *Kandalkkadukalkkidayil Ente Jeevitham* (2007) and *Ente Jeevitham* (2010). Having only preliminary education, he has written both the books with the help of professional writers. The paper attempts to explore how the personal is political as well as planetary for him, focussing on the naturocentric attitude of the autochthonous communities towards life and existence. The intersectional nature of marginality suffered by the Pulayas of Kerala becomes a point of deliberation as his life cannot be studied in isolation away from the experiences of his community in general.

Pokkudan uses the medium of life narrative as a counterhegemonic cultural practice that endorses the rightful place of the marginalised and downtrodden classes in the social structure. Writing was not an easy task, it invited hostile responses from many sides: “Maybe because I was born out of the womb of a Pulaya woman that I was thought not worthy enough to write a book” (Pokkudan, 2010, p.7). He voices the question of the dominant classes whether a Pulaya has a biography, as they have not been accorded the status of an autonomous individual at all. But he is bound to express his intentions to the whole world irrespective of other’s thoughts. Born with a spark that desisted him from being subservient in attitude, he is seen as resisting all caste discriminations and oppressions from the upper caste and class. Practising overt forms of resistance like refusing to wash his plates that he had eaten from, which the social structure asked dalits to do, disobeying the rules of untouchability, and violating the mandate restricting their entry in temples show Pokkudan’s indignation towards the centuries old discrimination his people had suffered. The narrative becomes the saga of oppression and resistance of an entire community that had long internalised their inferiority and believed in the god given right of the landlords to enslave them. As Alok Mukherjee has observed, “Each Dalit person’s life partakes of the lives of all Dalits” (Mukherjee, 2014, p.12). Pokkudan’s life narratives evidence

the solid link between the subjectivity of the writer and the consciousness of the community.

The multiple facets of Pokkudan's identity such as an obedient farm hand, a responsible family man, a revolting Marxist party member and a visionary environmentalist are unfurled through the narrative. The evolution of his identity coincides with the changes that happened in the socio-political fabric of Kerala society with the advent of modernity. Pokkudan exemplifies how the social reforms introduced in Kerala like the land reform act resulted in the transition from feudal system, ensuring the rights of the tenants on land and rescued the people of his community from being evicted of their shacks depending on the whims and fancies of the landlord. At the same time, he critiques the law for its inability to cater to the real farmers like Pulayas, and resulting in the intermediaries becoming more dominant, leading to the emergence of a new class of feudal lords. Pokkudan conveys his conviction that all the marginalised sections of the society are the rightful owners of the Earth. N. Prabhakaran rightly observes in the Preface written to the book: "Every autobiography is a description and critique of the society and the historical era in which the person lives rather than simply being the story of that person" (Pokkudan, 2007, p.12). Pokkudan, being a socially responsible individual, narrates his life experiences resonating the social, cultural and political reforms in an honest attempt to provide an ethnographic account of the community.

A veritable account of the life of Pulayas of Kannur, their family system, cultural practices, religious worship and food habits is provided by Pokkudan in his self-narratives. Pulayas had their own religious practices, not having any great connection with the Hindu gods. Readers get familiarised with a community with rich and variegated cultural practices rooted in the history of the people like Pottan theyyam, Kandi theyyam and Gandharvan theyyam, Parakottipattu kalyanam and so on. Dalit women were often victims to the sexual desires of the landlords and the occasional resistances were celebrated and ritualised as seen in Kanditheyyam. Even after independence, the attempts demanding temple entry were suppressed and undermined by the upper caste people. The subservient attitude

of the people who silently waited outside while their women were sexually exploited by the uppercaste landlords took a long time to change.

Pokkudan discusses the relevance of conversion to other religions in an attempt to evade the hassles of caste hierarchy, and finds it ineffectual. Many Pulayas, including some of his siblings, opted for Christianity with the arrival of Chirakkal Pulaya Mission, as they found it liberating, to an extent, from the clutches of untouchability and slavery. Apart from the monetary support they received, Pokkudan very firmly asserts that backwardness related to casteism cannot be erased with conversion. As Sharankumar Limbale observes in connection with the conversion to Buddhism, “the injustices and the ill treatment meted out to them due to communal feelings did not stop” (Limbale, 2014, p.45). Pokkudan believes that the yoke of a religion cannot be lightened by tying it with another one. He identifies the gap between the haves and have-nots as the perennial issue that endangers a safe and secure life. Marxism, being the working class ideology attracted Pokkudan for a long time with its revolutionary ideals and he was imprisoned in a murder case related to his political activism. But gradually disillusionment dawned on him as he realised that the people of his community are not getting respect from anywhere. As Limbale states, “Marxists in India waged struggles on workers’ issues, but they paid no attention to the caste system and untouchability” (Limbale, 2014, p.62). He realised that when a political riot occurs, it is the Dalits who are beaten the most, irrespective of their party affiliations. Pokkudan placed his community’s progress above his personal growth and that resulted in his estrangement from the party.

Indigenous people have a traditional knowledge system interlinked with the nature around. Their textbook was nature, having denied the right to learn reading and writing for thousands of years. They lead a harmonious and sustainable living, conserving the nature in the process of ensuring their sustenance. Pokkudan talks about their food culture that has medicinal values that saved many lives at the outbreak of cholera. The indigenous people realise their role in the cosmic network and do not want to disturb the ecological cycle. Pokkudan explains how man’s greed and the undue importance placed

on the “so called development” undermined the natural order of things. He shares his knowledge regarding the medicinal values of various types of fish and birds for the benefit of the posterity, and expresses his regret on man’s greed resulting in the extinction of different species producing far reaching implications.

Dipesh Chakrabarty states: “Humans will have to think about our ethical and ecological relationship to nature and use our wisdom to prevent the collapse of biodiversity” (Chakrabarty, 2022). This ethical responsibility led Pokkudan to collect the seeds of mangroves and plant them in the seashore, as he was aware of the role of mangroves in purifying the salt water, resisting the wind and protecting the land from sea erosion. He could act as an “organic intellectual” in Gramscian terms, bringing about a change in the attitude of the people who considered him mad by being instrumental in imparting the awareness to thousands of people. His content and satisfaction in leading a worthy life is evident from his words: “I have decided to narrate my life story even though it is not great, by thinking that it would be a motivation to others. I am contented because I have talked more about the environment in which I live” (Pokkudan, 2007, p.68). The focus being not on the individual, but on the environmental, Pokkudan voices the autochthonous community’s philosophy of life.

In her book *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (1989), bell hooks contests how spaces of marginality can be converted to sites of resistance. The oppressive structures do not want voice of the oppressed to be heard and hence, these articulations are silenced, co-opted and undermined. Even if they are allowed to speak, they would prefer the people in the periphery speaking about their deprivation, wounds and pain, instead of having a voice of resistance. Pokkudan transforms his marginal space into a site of resistance “for the production of a counterhegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives” (hooks, 1989, p.230). His life itself transforms the periphery to a powerful location where he sees, creates and imagines new worlds. He was never ready to consider his space in the margins as a handicap, instead refashions it into “a location of radical openness and possibility” (hooks, 1989, p.235). It is a willing choice, leading to an individual as well as

collective transformation, affirming their subjectivity in their space, articulating their sense of the world.

In short, along with Pokkudan's personal life, the history of an entire region and community gets unravelled through these life narratives, as their lives that are interlinked with community and nature, cannot be talked of in isolation. It deals mainly with the problematic of caste and environment, two basic realities in the lives of the dalits, as their existence is interlinked with both. The collective dalit identity is reflected in the portrayal of the self, and Pokkudan depicts an era of transition from the silence of internalised inferiority to the articulations of radical resistance. The narratives focus on the interconnectedness of the indigenous lives and the environment, leading to a harmonious coexistence. It is the traditional knowledge as part of an autochthonous community that made Pokkudan realise the significance of mangroves and rectify the mistakes done by the entire humanity so far. A shift from party politics to environmental politics, from regional to global, from personal to planetary happens in his life, transforming his identity itself to "kandal pokkudan," which he enjoys and celebrates. The intervention of organic intellectuals brings about sustainable changes in the entire community, and the margin is transfigured from a sign marking the despair to a site of radical possibilities.

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