



## **Inter-Caste Untouchability: The Struggle for Education at Kavvayi**

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Intra-caste discrimination, a significant manifestation of untouchability within the Indian caste system, extended beyond traditional inter-caste paradigms. Underpinned by the Hindu system's hierarchical structure and binary notions of purity and pollution, "inter-caste pollution" historically served to perpetuate caste-based stratification and legitimise discrimination against marginalized communities. The exclusion of Pulaya children from the Kavvayi Fisheries School, justified by concerns of ritual pollution at a proximate Mukkuva temple, exemplifies this internal stratification and the persistence of untouchability within ostensibly "polluted" caste groups. This incident underscores the pervasive nature of caste-based exclusion. Social reformer Swami Anand Thirth's pivotal role in challenging this discrimination, through sustained advocacy and strategic use of print media, catalysed a resolution, ultimately leading to the school's relocation and the admission of the Pulaya children. This case study from colonial Malabar illuminates the complex interplay of ritual purity, social hierarchy, and activist intervention in the history of caste-based discrimination and social reform. This event is characteristic of the social reform movements of the 20th century in colonial Malabar, which aimed to challenge the caste system and promote social equality. Leaders like Swami Anand Thirth were instrumental in these movements, fighting for the

right of Harijan children to attend schools and for the overall social and economic upliftment of their community.

**Key Words:** Caste, Untouchability, Discrimination, Pollution, Social hierarchy

## Introduction

Jati is a local system of social groups that are ranked, hereditary, and endogamous. Jatis are further divided into sub-castes, each with its own unique customs and traditions (Srinivasan, 2002, p.176). The concepts of purity and impurity have a significant impact on the caste system, both in terms of a caste's rank and its interactions with other castes. They also played a role in life-cycle rituals and daily life (Srinivasan, 2002, p.182). People who had jobs that did not pollute the environment were accepted into the Shudra varna, while people who had jobs that did pollute the environment were made outcasts (E Singh, 2005, p.36).

The main representatives of the agrarian serfs were the Cherumans and the Pulayas. The Pulayas were not slaves at the time of the Kulasekharas (K. K. Kusuman, 1976, p.25). Pollution by touch, approach, or sight was practiced by the Malabar society. The concept of pollution was attached to them and they were treated as untouchable castes. These untouchable castes were officially defined as 'depressed castes' in 1932 (H Issacs, 1965, p.36). The Cherumans or Pulayas were the agrestic slaves who were maintained by their masters on a Spartan fare for centuries to keep them subsisting with body and soul together (W Logan, 2000, pp.176-77).

In coastal communities, historical practices like untouchability have created deep-seated social divisions. These discriminatory norms often prevented certain groups from accessing fundamental rights, including education. A significant example of this occurred at the Kavvayi fisheries school, where discriminatory practices were challenged.

Despite a government amendment to the Elementary Education Act mandating that all school buildings be accessible to students from every caste and community (Law (edn) Department, 1931, July 2), the Kavvayi school remained inaccessible to Pulaya pupils. This

exclusion was due to the school's location next to a Mukkuva temple. The community leaders of the fishermen community feared that the presence of Pulaya students would "pollute" the temple, a belief rooted in the prejudiced notion of untouchability.

This discriminatory act did not go unchallenged. Swami Anand Thirth, a notable social reformer, spearheaded a protest against this injustice. His actions highlighted the hypocrisy of denying education based on caste, directly challenging the deeply ingrained social prejudices that persisted despite government mandates for inclusion. This incident serves as a powerful illustration of the real-world obstacles faced by marginalized communities and the importance of social reformers in advocating for equal rights.

The Kavvayi school, established in 1921, is located in what is now the Kannur district of Kerala, approximately two miles from Payyannur railway station. Situated within a fishermen's colony, the school was positioned directly west of the fisherfolk community temple. Founded as a result of a petition from local fishermen, the institution has significantly benefited the education of their children (Development Department, 1922, October 4). The Fisheries Department played a crucial role by providing elementary education and fostering values of thrift and cooperation within the community.

The varna model posits that Harijans, or those designated as "untouchable", exist outside the traditional caste hierarchy, and that contact with them is believed to ritually pollute members of the four recognised varnas. However, a comprehensive analysis of economic, social, and ritual interactions within regional caste structures reveals that Harijans function as integral components of these systems (Srinivas, 1995, p.3).

Swami Anand Thirth, a notable disciple of Swami Sivananda, dedicated his life to serving marginalized communities traditionally designated as "untouchable." He played a pivotal role in Kerala's anti-untouchability movement by establishing inclusive educational institutions and ashrams that admitted students from all castes. His work in the Malabar region was particularly instrumental in directly challenging entrenched casteism and ensuring that marginalized communities,

often referred to as “depressed classes”, gained access to formal education. Additionally, he played a significant role in spreading the teachings of Narayana Guru in North Malabar (Kumaran, 1971, p.14). He established a school near Subramanya Swamy Temple in Payyannur, known as Sree Narayana Vidhyalaya. The school’s primary objective was to provide education for the depressed classes of North Malabar (souvenir,1982, p.10).

The Pulaya boys were already facing significant barriers to education, as they were forced to travel a distance of one and a half to two miles to attend school in Kokanassery, a journey that also required them to cross a ferry (Anand Thirth,1932, March 14). The challenges faced by the Pulaya community, particularly regarding their access to education. Swami Anand Thirth attempted to secure admission for a Pulaya boy at the government fisheries school in Kavvayi (Inspector,1932, April 6). However, this effort was thwarted by the local fishermen, who were of the Mukkuva community. Their opposition stemmed from the school’s proximity to a Mukkuva temple, leading them to deny admission to Pulaya children. This incident highlights the pervasive caste-based discrimination of the era.

The enrollment of six Adi Dravida students at the Koroth school included three transfers from the Payyanur Labour School. Subsequently, instructors at the Payyanur Labour School re-enrolled two of these transferred students. This action likely stemmed from concerns that the Koroth school might be closed due to its increased enrollment. The school inspector formally reported this matter to the Deputy Inspector during an inspection at Koroth (A Thirth,1932, June 2).

Despite a demonstrated interest from children residing near the Koroth school to attend that institution, they were compelled to travel two miles to the Payyanur Labour School. Similarly, although the Payyanur South School provided educational access for children from the Ramanthally area, these students were also redirected to the Payyanur Labour School.

On 1st June 1932, Swami Sivanandan of Payyanur attempted to enter the school with some Pulaya boys, but when the fishermen saw them at a distance, they raised a hue and cried and sent the

Pulaya boys back. The school building belonged to the fisherfolk who put it up long before the school caters to the educational needs of the fishermen community for whom it was established. Even in other fishermen's schools run by the department, only a small and limited percentage of other castes are admitted. In view of this and the strong caste prejudice, the school was limited to fisher children (D. D,1932 July 25).

It would have been a significant benefit for the Adi Dravida community if their children could have attended the local Kavvayi school. This would have saved the boys a two-mile walk and made it possible for even the youngest children to get an education. Unfortunately, the school denied admission to three children, even though they were just yards away. A petition was therefore sent to the government, requesting the admission of a few Adi Dravida students (Deputy Inspector,1932, June 24).

According to the Assistant Director (coast), the school has been operating out of its original 1932 building and has 42 students, four of whom are from non-fishing families. The headmaster explained that the school's proximity to a fishermen's temple makes it difficult to admit Harijan children. Specifically, there were concerns that if Harijan children were admitted, their parents might also enter the temple grounds, which the local villagers reportedly opposed (Director of Fisheries,1938, March 7).

This exclusion of Harijan children is not a new development. Since its establishment in 1921, the school has consistently denied them admission. This denial was based on objections from local fishermen, who argue that the presence of Harijan children passing near the temple would cause "ritual pollution", a belief that has served as the justification for their continued exclusion (Madhavan, 1938, June 12).

The issue of the non-admission of Harijan pupils to the Kavvayi school was first brought to the attention of the Assistant Director of Fisheries by Swami Anand Thirth in June 1932. His reply was that they could not be admitted. Swami Anand Thirth again took up the matter last year and addressed a letter dated 29th November 1937 to the Assistant Director, to which his reply was as follows: - "On a

similar letter from you dated 3rd June 1932, the matter was referred to the government by the Director of fisheries" (Thirth,1938, June 13).

Anand Thirth was frustrated with the fisheries director's vague response. He pointed out that while special schools were for specific students, they were open to everyone regardless of caste, and some Harijans were also fisherfolk. In his communication, he sought a definitive response regarding the admission of a limited number of Harijan students and requested a specific date for their enrollment. Furthermore, he asked for a proposed solution in the event of a denial, which would have enabled him to secure admission for the "disabled" children at an alternative institution (Thirth,1937, December 8).

A formal request for admission was submitted by Swami Anand Thirth in a letter to the Assistant Director of Fisheries (Coast) in November 1937. After an initial discussion, the matter was forwarded to the government in March. In April, the government ruled that Harijan children should not be denied admission.

The Inspector of Fisheries, tasked with facilitating the children's admission, encountered resistance from fisherfolk community leaders. In April, the government ruled that Harijan children should not be denied admission and that if the fisherfolk objected, the school should be relocated to a more suitable site. To mitigate this tension, the Inspector proposed moving the school approximately 100 yards from the temple. The fisherfolk objected but offered to build a separate school building within six months in a location where the Harijan children could be admitted without any objections (Director,1932 July 8).

The school building, owned collectively by the local fishermen's community and held in trust by six designated individuals, became the subject of a petition submitted to the Assistant Director of Fisheries, Calicut. The petitioners requested that the school be relocated to a new building, which they proposed to construct, requesting a timeframe extending beyond the monsoon season. Pending the completion of this new facility, they further requested the deferral of Harijan children's admission (D D, 1938, May 5).

On April 12, 1938, the school closed for vacation and reopened on May 20. On June 21, the government rejected this proposal but instead ordered that the school be immediately relocated to a more suitable place where the admission of Harijan boys would not be met with opposition. Their rationale centered on the operational difficulties associated with relocating the school during the monsoon season. The Director of Fisheries agreed with the Assistant Director of Fisheries (coast) that it was difficult to shift the school to a more suitable place during the monsoon (Assistant Director, 1938, June 1), and requested that the owner of the building may be given time till 1st October 1938 for erecting another building in a suitable place, the admission of Harijan children in the school being deferred till then (D F, 1938, June 10).

The decision resulted in a year-long deferral of the matter's resolution. Existing regulatory frameworks mandate student admissions and transfers occur solely within June and July. Therefore, the transfer of Harijan children from the labour school to the fisheries school in October will introduce substantial logistical complexities. Moreover, governmental directives have consistently enforced rigorous admission criteria for Harijan children in privately administered educational institutions (D F, 1938, June 10).

Subsequently, a vacant shop in the Muslim quarters was jointly selected by Swami Anand Thirth and the Inspector of Fisheries on July 9. The location was inspected and approved. In the interim, on July 5, the fishermen, in response to government orders, agreed to a compromise: Harijan children could be admitted through the school's western gate, as the eastern entrance faced their temple. This arrangement was reportedly approved by Swami Anand Thirth, who was present at the conference (Inspector, 1938, July 30).

In light of the proposed school relocation, the building owners, seeking to ensure the school's continued operation, entered into an agreement. They allowed students from the Harijan community to access the school via a path from the fields to the west of the building. However, these students were prohibited from using the eastern footpath, which was accessible to the general public, including Hindus and non-Hindus, but not the depressed classes.

As directed by the director of fisheries, Harijan children were promised admission to the school. On the evening of 10th July 1938, Swami Anand Thirth and Karimban, the president of Arya Dravida Co-operative Society as well as of Kavvayi Harijan Sangham went to Ashrama. During that meeting, they decided to collect the Harijan children, the next morning for admission to the school (Inspector, 1938, July 30). The next day, the boys were taken inside the school and seated on a bench along with several visiting fishermen, both young and old. Swami Anand Thirth then said he had a further consultation with Harijan parents who now demand that the eastern doorway should be re-opened and their children permitted to come also by the eastern way near the temple (Inspector, 1938, July 30).

It appeared that the fishermen believed it was humiliating for their children to use the same path as the Harijan children. To prevent this differential treatment, the Director of Fisheries proposed that the school have only one entrance for all children. Initially, the fishermen had agreed to admit Harijan children through a separate gate while the school was being moved, but the Director did not accept this. Instead, he persuaded them to close the current gate and admit all children through a single, newly opened western gate. The fishermen had initially objected to Harijan children using the eastern gate because it was near their temple. The Director's final arrangement, which involved shifting the doors and changing the building's facade to the west, was satisfactory to all parties, including Swami Anand Thirth (Ministry of Public Information, 1938 August 15).

Following the refusal of Harijan families to enroll their children in the fisheries school at Kavvayi, Swami Anand Thirth intervened. He promised to hold a meeting with the Harijan parents to persuade them to accept the arrangement and admit their children to the school. Furthermore, he committed to submitting a report directly to the director. The children's absence from the school as of July 23, 1938, was therefore not a result of objections from the fishermen but rather the Harijans' own decision not to attend (D F, 1938, July 31).

The school opened to the Harijan community without any distinction. All the children, Harijan and Fisher children alike took the

path leading to the western entrance since there was no eastern entrance to the school. Even fisher children coming from the East will have “to go all the way round”. As the eastern path does not now lead into the school. The school had no concerns with its use of it. The grievance that the Harijans are not allowed to pass through the streets surrounding the temple is another matter altogether and has nothing to do with the school. There was no reason for transferring the school which is intended primarily for fishermen to a site outside the fishermen’s quarter (D F, 1938, July 31).

In an article published in the “Madras Mail” on July 23, 1938, Swami Anand Thirth of the Harijan Sevak Sangh criticized the opposition of local fisherfolk to the admission of Harijan children at the Kavvayi fisheries school in Malabar (The Madras Mail, 1938, July 23). He also complained about the government’s delay in enforcing an order to relocate the school for this reason. Although the plight of the Harijan children had been brought to public attention about six years prior, the government had decided at the time that the school’s primary purpose was the education of fisher children, and it should not take any action that would jeopardize that objective.

Orthodoxy was usually based on false prestige and prejudice, and it easily yields to economic consideration that owners of the building who were anxious to see the school continue itself, have agreed to admit the Harijans cannot use the footpath from the east which was open to all public, Hindus, and non-Hindus, except the depressed classes.

The article continues by noted that orthodoxy was often rooted in false prestige and prejudice, but it was also easily swayed by economic factors. It pointed out that the building owners, who wanted the school to remain in operation, had agreed to admit the Harijans. However, it also highlighted that the Harijans were still not permitted to use the public footpath from the east, a path that was otherwise open to all, including Hindus and non-Hindus, with the sole exception of the depressed classes (Madras Mail, 1938, July 23).

The fishermen objected to Harijan children using the eastern gate, as it was located near their temple. However, the settlement

reached by the Director was considered satisfactory from all points of view and was concurred by everyone, including Swami Anand Thirth (M. P. Information, 1938, August 15). Following a newspaper report highlighting the denial of admission to Harijan children at Kavvayi School, the government took decisive action. The Secretary of the Government of Madras intervened, initiating measures to ensure the swift admission of these students. Concurrently, the timely intervention of Anand Thirth facilitated the enrollment of children from the Pulaya community at the fisheries school. These developments underscore the significant role of both government intervention and media influence in addressing social inequities and promoting educational access.

Moreover, students at the Kaavayi fisheries school faced difficulties with punctuality and attendance, primarily because they had to cross a wide backwater. To resolve this, the Director of Fisheries proposed a temporary solution: hiring a boatman for 3 rupees a month to ferry students across the water (D D, 1939, September 19). This plan was approved and set to last for three months or until a permanent public ferry was established. The temporary boatman was no longer needed after a public ferry was officially established on November 20, 1939 (D D, 1939, November 9).

### **Conclusion**

Caste discrimination was widespread across Kerala, and schools like Kavvayi were no exception. Within the rigid caste system, every caste discriminated against those considered lower, limiting their interactions and opportunities. However, social and religious reformers, along with the British colonial administration, were crucial in advocating for the rights of lower-caste individuals. Significant movements, such as the Temple Entry Movement and the Vaikom Satyagraha in Travancore, challenged the exclusion of lower castes from temples, eventually succeeding in opening some to the “depressed classes.” Educational institutions also faced caste-based discrimination, but the colonial period saw lower-caste individuals gaining access to both schools and temples in Malabar. This marked a significant step toward dismantling the caste system. Reformers like Ayyankali, Pandit

Karuppan, and Anand Thirth worked tirelessly for the liberation of lower-caste people, and their efforts were instrumental in making education accessible to them.

These collective efforts, spearheaded by Anand Thirth and other socio-political reformers, were critical in paving a pathway for the marginalized to gain entry into both educational institutions and the public sphere. Their work systematically weakened the oppressive and discriminatory hold of the caste system on Kerala's social fabric, contributing significantly to a broader social reform agenda.

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### **End Notes**

1. Theendal was a peculiar and notorious custom that prevailed in Kerala.

2. The owners of the school building are V V Appu, Velu, Chappan, P

Kunhiraman, and K Kittan.

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