

**Gender and Caste Encounter with Travel Writing:  
An Analysis of Existing Women's Writing and Travel Experiences of Dalit Women  
from Kerala**

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**Abstract**

Women of the Dalit communities face the double burden of caste and gender oppression; their position differs from other women's in the Hindu caste system. This paper is an intervention into the limitations of feminist academia and politics, which have failed to take in to consideration the intersectional framework to understand how caste complicates the Dalit woman's subjectivities and experiences. The paper critically analyses contemporary travel writing from Kerala and places them in the context of the oral histories of three Dalit women and their relationship to travel, thereby redefining women's travel not only as a question of freedom and choice, but as one intrinsically linked to caste labour, migration, education and economic freedom.

This paper discusses the travel experiences of Dalit<sup>1</sup> women in Kerala (the southernmost state of India). Dalit women face the multiple burdens of caste and gender oppression. Thus, Dalit women's position differs from other women in the Hindu caste system. Being different from other groups because of such multiple oppression makes it a separate issue of concern for feminist politics and academia. As a gender studies scholar, I consciously attempt to create an intervention on Dalit women through my research. In this paper, I look at the social position of Dalit women in Kerala as a way to understand

the present situation and find ways to initiate future discussions on Dalit women's travel experiences and memory in feminist discourse and analyses, and understand how identifications of caste and gender are significant in these experiences. At the outset, I would like to mention that the travel experiences that my research takes into account are not written and published. In this paper then, I critically look at the politics of the scribing culture, which is dominated by the privileged sections and is marked by the absence of travel writing by Dalit women. It is also an attempt to produce knowledge through engagement with the "travel writing" of Dalit women.

This paper also contests the existing notions of womanhood based on gender alone. As Lovely Stephen argues, "the status of an individual in Kerala society is based on two factors: caste and gender. Access to knowledge, wealth, and power depends on these factors. Reactions on issues and their analysis are also based on the same two factors" (Stephen 284). Therefore, I argue that Dalit women and their travel experiences have to be looked at differently within the feminist discourse. This is the time when certain kinds of travel experiences of women from privileged sections are being celebrated in Indian societies. They are happening in the name of freedom and are seen as revolutionary acts by those women who can choose to travel. The nature of these travel writings is associated with leisure and "wander lust". Laura Godsoe's argument on French white women's travel writing is very important in this context. She has argued that those women have undoubtedly benefited from their privileged class position as "eccentricities" of this sort were more acceptable for a woman from an elite family than for a woman from a lower class (228).

The same argument may be applied to people in India who occupy an analogous position in society. Thus, this paper would engage with the existing debates on women and travel writing in Kerala and the complex array of travel experiences which have been represented in Malayalam writings. Representations in cinema and print are, likewise, celebrating women's travel, which simultaneously raises questions of gender and freedom. This paper will compare Dalit women's travel experiences with those of others. As Sara Mills holds, "not all the travel writing is judged to be factual; some travel accounts have been categorised as literary travel writing or as literature, and therefore the

way these texts are read is different” (108). This paper discusses the travel accounts of women that cannot be categorised alone as factual or literary travel writings. However, it is important to see the observations of the writers that are not interpreted according to their social locations and therefore do not come under the criticism of feminist discourses in Kerala. Hence, this paper focuses on the intersections of caste and gender through a historical understanding of the travel experiences of women and their feminist politics.

Intersectionality is a key concept to analyze the categories of caste and gender. It helps understand the relationship between categories that are socially constructed – in this instance, caste and gender – and it also analyses the inequality between social groups. Thus, this paper also uses intersectional analysis to understand how travel experiences are different among different women. It is very important to look at how caste and gender act in intersections of a particular society and how the notions and questions towards such society form the mainstream public consciousness. It is very important to study intersections within and between communities to understand different power structures and how they perform in terms of gender and caste. Intersections between socio-cultural categories cannot be discussed without taking into account the theoretical understanding of intersectionality. McCall notes that “feminists criticizing intersectionality is a major contribution to social theory”. She defines “intersectionality as the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject of formations” (1171). It can therefore be argued that Indian feminist politics also should engage with intersectional identities and our lived experiences related to caste, class and sexuality, thus addressing the complexities in the women’s question.

Feminist criticism creates a space to question the hegemony and marginalisation of various social groups and the dynamics of intersections between them. Anandita Pan’s intervention into the analysis of caste and gender through “Mapping Dalit Feminism” reveals the contemporary debates on anti-caste struggles. For Anandita, “Dalit feminism as an intersectional standpoint looks at how the systems of caste and gender function. The focus on the process and functionality of systemic oppression expands our understanding of how these systems operate in other instances as well. As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism does not restrict its conceptual understanding only to Dalit women. As a

theoretical framework, it provides a lens to reinterpret any text/event from a caste- gender angle” (2021). In India, Dalit feminism has brought up the issue of caste and gender through autobiographical writings which breaks the victim/agent binary through engagement with the everyday life of Dalit women. Dalit feminism has critiqued mainstream feminism’s limitations in failing to address the Dalit women questions in the movement itself and organised solidarity for a feminist movement which recognises the intersections of gender and caste. Thus, intersectional analysis is the central mode of interrogating women’s experiences in this paper, thereby focusing on different experiences and the oppressions that shape their identity. As a critical Dalit Feminist intervention, this paper takes in to account autobiographical experiences of travel which have not been discussed in published travel writings.

### **Caste and gender: conceptual framework**

Indian society is structured by the Varna system; therefore, the logic of caste underlies the existing social hierarchies. Caste plays a vital role in the social and cultural life of women in India, irrespective of their caste and class position. The origin of Indian caste has been debated several times by scholars. As B. R; Ambedkar states, many scholars have studied the origin of caste as a “labour of love”. Ambedkar argues that “Caste is a parcelling of an already homogenous unit, and the explanation of the genesis of caste is the explanation of this process of parcelling. It is true that caste rests on belief but before belief comes to be the foundation of an institution, the institution itself needs to be perpetuated and fortified” (1917). Caste system in India is built on the basis of Hindu ideology. Social, cultural, and economic power in India is enforced by the caste logic of Hinduism. Caste and Varna system have been normalised in India, along with the planned labour system which is imposed on the lower caste by the upper caste people. Dalits were kept as slaves for the upper caste and they were denied a dignified life for centuries. Historically, Dalits were seen as unclean because they continued to live as the lower strata in Hindu society and all rights were denied to them, including access to public spaces and the right to wear good clothes and personal hygiene, therefore, making

them impure untouchables in India. They had to keep distance from mainstream society and their duty was to serve the caste.

Ursula Sharma argues that caste is conceived as unequal and different in Indian society. The classification of caste has been glorified in relation to ethnicity. Thus, the perceived relationship between caste and ethnicity has been internalised by Indian society. This strategy made people accept caste as part of their culture. Moreover, such a strategy ensured that caste continued to remain a silent force while making a significant mark in the cultural life of the people of India. Interestingly, this acceptance of the caste system has been the privilege of one section of Indian society. Hence, they continued to practise it for their stability and dominance over society. Ideologically, caste has been dissociated from the idea of equality; thus enabling the creation of a hierarchical society on the basis of the caste logic of inequality. It breaks the internal connections between people in society and erases their historical consciousness.

Louise Prakash has discussed the notion of Dalit women's freedom. According to her, the overreaching strength of the Dalit community is that Dalit women customarily enjoyed considerable freedom, both spatially and temporally. One is not arguing that Dalit women were equal to Dalit men; but as one moves down the social order, one can recognise the comparatively free existence and operation of Dalit women, for instance, in the absence of dowry exchange and the consequent dowry deaths that plagued the women of upper caste communities. Some emerging voices have been demanding that the dominant castes should learn from Dalits the principles and practices of providing freedom to their women (232). Dalit women's notional freedom in the domestic sphere is widely celebrated both in women's movement and the Dalit movements. This paper will engage with such notions which reduces Dalit women's question when it comes to gender and Dalit discourse. It discusses the ambiguities on freedom from subjugation and freedom to liberation in quest of Dalit women in detail.

Kalpana Kannabiran argues that caste has formed the centrepiece of sociology for close to a century now. "While the practice of caste has been opposed and consistently resisted by movements in the country, caste as a knowledge system in sociology has tended to follow the well-known paths of a depoliticised social anthropology, creating

sharp disjuncture between social practice and knowledge systems within the academy. Further, the disaggregation of social practice in the curriculum of sociology, into various “topics” and “papers”, by situating caste for instance in Indian society or in social institutions, and the politics of caste within social movements, erases the potential for a radical pedagogy, and renders invisible the radical politics of anti-caste movements within the academy even while “teaching” them” (Kannabiran 160). She critically looks at how caste places as a discourse in sociology. The question of caste has been ignored in the pedagogy of sociology when it rises as a domain in sociology. Kannabiran argues that the trajectories of caste and its practises are not a primary concern of Indian sociology when it is taught in the academia. She further contests the intellectual practices of Indian sociology where the caste question has been erased by negating the anti-caste movements as the centre of methodological apparatuses.

Kalpana Kannabiran analyses homogeneity and how it was discussed in academia. She argues that no social group is completely homogenous across regions and time. Hence, the Dalit community is not homogenous either. One common thread which connects the Dalit community is the experience based on caste that historically marked their cultural, linguistic, regional, national and ethnic diversity. Kannabiran argues that Ambedkar used the word ‘Dalit’ in his writings, speeches and anti-caste struggles to “unify” the Dalits and their experience for a common anti-caste cause. Kalpana has criticised the initiatives which attack caste in the academia but ignore the contributions of the anti-caste movements and thereby fail to take in to account the differences in the Dalit community. The locus of this paper is to deconstruct the notion of homogeneity from the core of its essentialist arguments. Historically, social movements have erased the early and substantial activism of Dalit feminists who have been part of these movements. Thus, this paper will intervene into the complexities of feminist politics of India. However, the old forms of inequality do not exist anymore because caste society has transformed, and yet not disappeared immediately. However, the reality remains that caste determines the forms of privilege and deprivation in Indian society. The public presence of caste has increased in India, because of challenges to it by anti-caste movements and writings. Moreover, the lower castes, especially Dalits are continuing the struggle to claim public space and destroy caste. This is the foremost challenge to the contemporary caste system

and the particular sections called *Upper Caste* those who wish to continue their control over lower caste people with the help of their caste privileges.

### **Caste in Kerala: historical background**

Kerala practised casteism and untouchability in different forms; untouchability and unsee-ability have been its most inhuman forms. The lower castes were forced to maintain a given spatial distance from the higher caste people. Dalits were kept away from public places and roads and they were not allowed to see any upper caste person. They were not allowed to enter temples and its surroundings. Slavery also existed in Kerala, and Dalits were slaves of the upper caste people and were treated like livestock, bought and sold openly. Dalit women were treated worse. They were prohibited from wearing clean and tidy clothes; they were not even allowed to cover the upper portion of their body, needless to talk about ornaments (Alexander 1072).

The brutal nature of slavery has had direct bearing on Dalit women's oppression in Kerala. Yet it has been ignored by the majority of social scientists. Slavery as a historical experience for Dalit women is different from any other kind of women's experience. Even after the promulgation of anti-slavery laws, slave trade still existed in Kerala. The peasant communities were allowed to stay alive and multiply but they did not have effective control over the means of production. On the same piece of land, the peasants held inferior rights and the landlords held superior rights. The powerful landlords barred the weak and helpless peasant communities from exercising their rights and made their life impossible. The untouchables could not use public tanks and wells; even if they owned a piece of land, they could not function independently in production. Dalits have been the peasant labourers in India for centuries and still the situation has not changed. The majority of agricultural labourers are from Dalit communities. Dalit women were slaves in the past. Even after the abolition of slavery in Kerala, such practices continued to exist till the early 1990s. Dalits had no option but to continue under their masters. Rice was a form of wage given to agricultural laborers. Slavery and slave trade reportedly existed in Kerala's past and it was not practiced in other parts of India. Thus for

centuries, caste was experienced differently by Dalits in Kerala, who were subjected to a system of slavery by the upper caste dominated social system. They were forced to engage in agricultural and other menial works for their upper caste masters. All members of Dalit families had to commit their life as slaves and they had to protect their master's paddy fields and other properties, while themselves living a life of misery, unfree, unpropertied and homeless. They were not treated as humans. This pathetic life of Dalits had changed with relentless struggles against caste discrimination under the leadership of Ayyankali, Poykayil, Yohannan, Pampadi John Joseph<sup>2</sup> and their contemporaries.

The movement against casteism in south Travancore was led by the *Channar* untouchables in 1926. After 1926, the elite among *Ezhavas* had changed their names to *Nadars* as per an order issued by the Government of Madras. This movement, which initiated the struggles for the right to decent and modest dressing against the upper caste people, forcefully implemented a clothes ban on the *Channar* Christian converted women. This became a great social movement known as the *Channar* mutiny for the right to cover the chest. *Channar* women were supported by the Christian missionaries about the need to revolt against social injustice based on caste discrimination. Dalit women led anti-caste struggles such as *Kallayummalayumsamaram*.<sup>3</sup> This struggle was against the caste norms which were imposed on Dalit women. They were not only restricted from covering their breasts but also prevented from wearing white cloth on their body. They used stone malas (chain/necklace made of stones) to cover their breasts as well as ornaments. A large number of Dalit women participated in this struggle and they broke the stone chains and wore *jumber* (blouse). This was a collective revolutionary act by Dalit women to fight against caste. Dalit women also led the struggle for their children's formal education. These agitations were the stepping stones in the history of anti-caste struggle as well as women's liberation in Kerala. As Sharmila Rege points out, serious debates on class versus patriarchies have emerged. However, the political parties did not address the issue of Brahmanism in India. In Kerala, leftist parties organized struggles against landlords but these struggles expressed class interest alone and ignored the caste issue. Dalit women suffer from cultural alienation because of exclusion by the civil society in Kerala. The Government implemented certain programs for the promotion of

these marginalized groups but the circumstances for the suppression of the Dalits and the Dalit women continue to persist.

### **Feminist politics and travel writing in Kerala**

Feminist scholarship in Kerala has largely focused on *Malayalee* women and their social mobility. “Malayalee” refers to the people of Kerala, a term that erases the social and cultural diversities among the Malayalee communities and aims at producing a nationalist consciousness among the people. The so-called Malayalee culture has historically denied the question of caste and caste-based identities in Kerala. The well-known historian Sreedhara Menon stated that “It is true that inter-caste barriers in Kerala have broken down and caste consciousness is less pronounced in the minds of the people of the present generation, but it is doubtful whether the caste system can be said to have died out completely”. He argues that caste has entered another arena (75). Here, Sreedhara Menon’s argument contradicts the actual state of caste in Kerala. He argues that, while caste continues to be a social reality in Kerala, it does not exist in the minds of the people. This argument is popular amongst the people of Kerala and effectively negates all experiences of caste amongst Dalits in Kerala society. Therefore, Menon’s argument on caste cannot be considered plausible, sociologically and historically. How can one measure caste and its intensity, while at the same time accepting that the caste system has not died completely in Kerala. However, his argument has been used to refer to Kerala society as a progressive state in India and celebrated by the people of Kerala. This popularized idea of “less caste” made an impact on the people, forcing them to say it even if they practise and experience caste, which challenges the unified idea of the Malayalee. J. Devika and Binitha Thampi note that “women belonging to communities that benefited from the high tide of reformism – the new elite – in early twentieth century Kerala moved out of their homes to spaces of paid work, and into the emergent public and politics” (1150 ). These studies have discussed widely the relationship between modernity and the coming out of women (especially upper caste women) to public spaces; however, they do not critically describe the privileges of physical travel and the freedom which they acquired during this transformation. In this paper, I question how such choices to “become” modern women are embedded in the larger social context of a particular time.

A notable number of travel writings that have been published in Kerala have been written by women from that state. These writings are the experiences of the privileged women who could travel along with their male counterparts to European countries even during the colonial period. This kind of writing is filled with their descriptions that reflect the quest for “knowing” foreign countries. For instance, the women wrote about the food culture, the dress code, geographical differences and the beauty of the countries they were visiting. These women, who are mostly upper caste, have remained completely silent about the social contexts of the countries they were travelling through at the time. Although the narrative style of such writing clearly reveals the woman as the writer and the narrator, one can sense the ignorance of political consciousness in these travel writings.

Kamala Suraiyya’s (also known as Kamala Das) *Kerala Sancharam* may be recognized as a feminist travel writing. Based on her travels, it was sponsored by the Kerala state Government towards the documentation of tourist places in Kerala. This travel was documented in 1976 and was unpublished for a very long time until 2009. Kamala Suraiyya brings many discussions on gender in this writing rather than producing a so-called official document. She writes: “a serious conversation is not possible with Kerala men because their thinking and eyes focus on women’s breasts and their waists. We have to wear a *burkha* to prevent that or we should dress like a man” (Madhavikkutty 7). At one point, she compares herself to a rich man with whom she had a conversation as part of her official visit. While describing this conversation, she compares herself to a housewife who suffers to make basic kitchen necessities possible. Through such a comparison, she locates herself as a victim when the reality is that she is privileged enough to travel as a state’s guest throughout Kerala. She does not acknowledge that she was travelling as an official representative and guest of the state government which enabled her to occupy such a position, clearly of privilege, during that time. It is possible to say that her selection was based on her cultural capital as a renowned writer, as the daughter of a writer from a Brahmin family. She does not engage with her privileged position as an upper caste woman who got the opportunity to travel throughout Kerala during the period of India’s political Emergency in 1975-1977, imposed by the then Prime Minister of India Indira Gandhi, India’s first Prime minister. The period was

marked by widespread curtailment of civil liberties, including cancellation of elections, press censorship, and human rights violations including mass sterilisation. Instead, she sees herself only as a woman who is unqualified by any other social categories. However, her travel writing does engage with gender politics in a way that other existing travel writings by women during that time do not. Kamala Suraya's writings are based on her experiences and her expressions of fearless love and sexuality had a deep influence on many women and on feminist politics. However, the question of caste is not addressed.

Contemporary feminist politics in Kerala has undergone a great transformation in the understanding of gender, which has been visible in recent travel writings as well. The existing women's organisations in Kerala are concerned with women and gender issues even though the issues of Dalit women remain the same. Here, women's organisations which are part of mainstream political parties treats women as one category while consciously maintaining silence about caste and Dalit women issues but they engage with gender question without addressing the issues of caste and gender. To understand this nature of women's movements in Kerala, it is imperative that we specifically focus on caste and gender in feminist politics. The difference in the plight of the Dalit women from that of women belonging to other segments is based on the specific experience of the former. All women do not share the same experience and the nature of oppression is bound to be different from that the Dalit women are met with. Dalit women's issues are in many ways different from the women from the other social categories because Dalit women have been treated as the lowest in the society and their vulnerability as the most discriminated in the caste system creates a situation in which the inequality based on caste and gender is produced. This is very critical to the general notion of the global feminist community in which the question of caste and gender is less discussed. The Indian women's status is largely discussed in the feminist scholarship as a homogenous category under the rubric of South Asian women. Most analysis of the women question has been subsumed by the pre- and postcolonial frameworks of analysis, which do not take into account the intersection of caste and gender. The specific issues of Dalit women have in fact been subsumed within class-based analysis.

In this paper, I particularly choose two instances of recently published travel writings by women in Kerala. These are *Penyathrakalvi* (2017) (*Women's Travel*) edited

by Geethanjali Krishnan and Rani Padminar: *Malayalithreekaludekaivittasancharnalvii* (2016) *Unconfined Travelling of Malayali Women*), edited by Dileep Raj. The above mentioned are collections of travel experiences of women from Kerala. The book *Penyathrakal* (Women's Travel) enquires how women's travel experiences are different from the celebrated travelogues written by men. Geethanjali Krishnan points out that women's travel writing has been manipulated largely by the market that is controlled by men. Changes were made to the writings according to the dominant male views and made marketable. She discusses what a traveller means to her and how they relate to the places that they travel to. People who just visit a place do not write travelogues. For her, the place is a "dream world for a travel writer because they feel the place is their home and their world" (Krishnan 13). She argues that conditions of marriage anyway compel women to adapt to a new place and live their life within a new atmosphere. A newly married woman must accustom herself to the new space such that she fights and compromises to live there because she is taught to think of any place and time, where she is sent (69), as her own. Hence, Krishnan argues that women are better equipped to write travelogues. I find this argument quite problematic in that she tries to feminize travel and claims that women can travel and write better than men.

Here, by using the category of women as a whole she ignores the differences among women. Placing women as the better travellers with their repressive socialization and marginal position in patriarchal society without relating it to their privileged locations does not engage with the feminist politics of the time. Instead, it claims women are a homogenous category and they all share the same experiences as women irrespective of their cultural positions. Such attempts to feminize travel do not participate in critical feminist analysis. Feminist politics is not just about the conversation between the binary of women and men, rather it should engage with the social and political locations of people to problematize the differences – which does not deny the multiple experiences that constitute one's identity. Thus, travel writing reflects the author's sensibility and the style which allows the readers to understand its politics as well. Here, Geethanjali Krishnan does not engage with the social locations of the women which she discusses in her book in detail, and the collection of writings does not engage with diverse identities of women. Further, according to her definition of travel writing, travel is

a choice, which women take as their own with some amount of happiness. She uses the metaphor *dream world* for the place where a traveller visits and she says that the place becomes their home and their world. I critically look at her comparison of a place as a dream world. A place becomes a dream world for a person when they travel with dreams, especially when they can decide to travel where they want. This imagination defines the travel and place in a hegemonic understanding where travel writing becomes authentic and particular for a certain category of women.

*Penyathrakal* engages with different travel writings by women written in different periods. In fact, it gives us images of culture and people's life from the traveller's view. The editor's ideas of a dream world are drawn from the narratives of women who travelled outside Kerala. They describe the cultural life of the people and the beauty of the landscape which they visit. The book engages with women and their sufferings at the place where they visited. Most of the writers discuss their exposure to places outside Kerala and India and they bring in their comparison to people in Kerala. I understand this is not different from the travel writings, which already exist; only that it is written by women without engaging in gender politics apart from their observations on other women in their *dream world* and "themselves" as well. This tendency in travel writers was very common and it was accepted as well by the readers previously but the situation has transformed where gender politics has to be discussed critically in travel writings in this time. It is very important to see the gender analysis by women travellers in their writings which will contribute to the feminist scholarship. Geethanjali Krishnan observes Hindu mythology and women's travel in a very interesting way. She argues that women belonging to royalty and aristocracy who travelled for their husbands are glorified in Indian mythology. These narratives did not take into account that *Asura*<sup>4</sup>women were also travelling and they were doing so independently without men or purposes that involved men (46). This I read as a deliberate tendency in Hindu mythological texts to demoralize/demean *Asura* women who did not travel with men. These Hindu religious texts portray *Asura* characters in a derogatory manner. This has effectively compartmentalized people and their cultures and enabled descriptions of *Asura* women as immoral. This has effectively created a framework of reference for upper caste women

who travel without socially legitimized male company to be compared or equated with the morally reprehensible *Asura* or Dalit woman.

In her article “Women and Economics of Travel”, Krishnan writes:

[T]ravel is always related to money and freedom whether it is men or women. A lot of refugees travel from Asian and African countries as the result of war and religious politics! Helpless people became the scapegoat by other’s faults and decisions in their life. *Malayalees* do not have such travel experiences because they have never gone through such political situations in their place. They do not lose their home, nor their homeland (43).

This observation by the author completely ignores the historical understanding of Kerala. She sees *Malayalees* as one category and analyses the *Malayalee* experience as one. This tendency of examining *Malayalee* experience<sup>5</sup> as a shared one does not open up any discussion on caste and travel experiences and it ignores the existing history of gulf migration and the people who are largely known as Pravasi Malayalees. Thus, her comparison merely remains as the *Malayalee* experience that precludes any nuanced understanding of the cultural history of Kerala.

Krishnan observes that women’s travel writing needs financial assistance. She says that “women who have authored travel writings receive financial assistance from a particular source or do so as part of their profession or they travel along with their husbands and children. Others travelled only as part of their spiritual travel. Along with financial assistance, freedom and time are the important factors which women need to write about their travel” (Krishnan42). I agree with her argument that women can author their travel narratives only when they have support in the form of money, freedom, and time. It is clear from her words that the existing travel narratives of women are written by this category of women who could afford certain things, thereby making their travel possible in the first place. This understanding seems to encompass her experience and understanding of the travel writings of women from Kerala. I argue that *Penyathrakal* gives us the travel experiences of women who had the choice and the financial wherewithal to travel and these privileges become part of the feminization of travel in

many writings in this book. I have tried to find caste and gender engagements in existing travel writings by women but I have largely not found any, especially in the published works. This reveals how travel experiences by women in Kerala creates its own boundaries through preconceived notions of travel and women who travel, and this boundary excludes the possibility of any critical engagement with its own politics.

The book titled “*Raanimar Padminimar: Malayalishreekaludekaivittasancharangal*” (*Unconfined travelling of Malayali women*)<sup>6</sup> is a collection of feminist writings, produced through the framework of liberal politics. This book is a collection of travel writings by women from Kerala and edited by Dileep Raj. This book focuses on women who have travelled alone and their experiences. The title of the book itself is very political and is closely connected with the writings. The book largely discusses women’s travel experiences in relation to freedom and gender. Most of the writers have written about their first travel experiences as a woman. Some of the articles in this collection discuss family and patriarchy in society, expressing dissent to patriarchal families where women were not allowed to travel alone. The experiences of the authors vary from each other but the idea of freedom and joy is the one common factor, which is found here as well. In this paper, I examine how caste has been discussed in this “very political feminist writing”.

The question of caste is only used (directly in words) in one writing by Kani Kusruthi.<sup>7</sup> She talks about how she was asked about her caste identity and her father told her not to respond to such questions. She obeyed his words. In her narration, she recognizes that people were skeptical about her caste and religious identity because her skin color is brown. However, Kani had the option to not reveal her caste since she does not belong to a lower-class family. She describes her social background in her writings, identifying that she received her political orientation from her liberal parents. I think that her experiences of travel did not require her to break any domestic barriers. She also talks about her grandmother’s anxieties about her dark skin and how that makes her look like a *pandy*,<sup>8</sup> when she wears dark colored dresses (Kani 11). This clearly displays the casteist patriarchal notions that women have also internalised. Her descriptions of her family reveal that she comes from a privileged family, revealing also her cultural identity. Subsequently, this narration does not allow the readers to understand her caste identity.

This peripheral idea cannot engage with caste politically, especially the way in which she has discussed caste in her writing. Liberal politics and caste contradict each other mostly because the former often has the tendency to not deal with caste and neither do they question the privileges of liberal politics. Speaking against caste and its discriminatory practices itself is a revolutionary step in India towards annihilation of caste but this social responsibility has been taken by Dalit organisations. The author, instead, has chosen to speak about the racial prejudices against colour of skin, which is a global issue, ignoring the more immediate discourse and practices of caste.

In this book, it is quite difficult to understand how questions of caste and gender are being engaged with since the writers do not speak about their caste locations and the implications of it during travel. They connected the relationship with family and themselves as individuals. The narrations in the book speak of travel, as if determined entirely by the individual with complete erasure of the caste question. However, I choose one Dalit woman's travel writing from this book to look at how caste is being discussed in this article. For this analysis, I take Vaikhari Aryat's<sup>9</sup> article, which is titled *Veetilninnum Purathekkulla Vazhikal (The Ways from Home to the Outside)*. She critically looks at patriarchal notions on women and the public place. She talks about how her mother restricted her from going out of the home without the company of men. Her mother told her that women who go out alone especially to spaces such as the cinema and the theatre are considered "bad women". She says that knowing this she wanted and decided to be a bad woman when she travelled alone for the first time in her life to Delhi. Her narrative is about how she experienced her freedom when she was beyond familial control. Her travels outside Kerala introduced new experiences to her. She talks about the kinds of questions Malayalees asked her on the train to Delhi about her travels as well as who she was. They assumed that she was a nurse and was going to Delhi to find a job. She in fact accepts the assumption only to avoid further questions. She says sarcastically that it was thanks to their notions that a black thin weak girl could only be "good" for a nursing job that she was saved from having to speak further lies (Vaikhari, 88).

Here, black skin is understood as a marker of caste identity. She concludes from this that these were the ways in which the *Malayalee* public consciousness created such assumptions about black skinned women. Although she was a postgraduate student in a

university during that time, it is this public consciousness and markers of her identity that compel her to “manipulate” their assumptions to avoid further disturbing questions. Her experience in Delhi was memorable for her (as she claims in her writing) especially when it came to its nightlife and the freedom that she felt there. One can see her excitement at being a woman who could make her travel possible outside Kerala. Vaikhari Aryat discusses a political situation of that particular time when Soumya<sup>10</sup> was raped and killed in a train when she was traveling from workplace to home on 1st February 2011. This created a fear among her family members and many others. This situation brought in a protectionist regime that further affected women’s freedom. Vaikhari’s narrative focuses on that particular time and the connections she makes with her travels and the sense of determination with which she completed her journey. Her writing engages with the contemporary politics of gender in which notions of protection and safety further the patriarchal agenda. Her entire travel note in fact considers the question of gender seriously and critically. However, she continues to remain distant from the fact and issue of caste. Her writing then is produced within a context that limits itself within the discursive construction and reception of the theme of the book, which focuses on Malayalee women. She therefore produces herself as a *Malayalee* woman like in the other narrations in the book, rather than placing herself and her writing within the caste and gender discourse.

*Raani Padminimaar* and *Penyathrakal* are contemporary publications of a time when there are a lot of discussions happening in Kerala on gender in general and caste in the Dalit assertion movements as well. Dalit women who have written in the book such as Vaikhari Aryat did not relate her travel to caste in her writing though she observed the ways her physical appearance is received by the public. It is understood that travel for women means freedom and breaking from the moral consciousness of the family. This idea is well articulated in many of the writings in the book. Subsequently, one can say that breaking those barriers make women further determined to travel and experience their own space within a larger public. *Penyathrakal* is intense in its focus on how women see things differently when they travel. It was an attempt to challenge the aesthetics of travel writing which men have consistently dominated. The travel writings

from this book distance themselves from caste and gender discourses in their focus on glorifying women's travel (as opposed to those by men) as a distinct entity.

### **Dalit women's Travel: a forgotten category**

This paper contests the existing culture of travel writing in Malayalam language – that privileged with the experiences of individuals belonging at the intersection of the dominant class, caste and gender. It is very important to look at the intersections to understand the different power structures and how they perform in terms of gender and caste. Therefore, I focus on what travel means to Dalit women in association with their caste identity. The travel experiences of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular are associated with the social history of caste and the struggles of Dalit assertion as well. Thus, this paper focuses on the intersections of caste and gender through historical understandings. Here, I try to bring travel stories narrated by two Dalit women in Kerala. I will also be writing about my own travel experiences : I discuss three Dalit women and their travel experiences, including myself. This analysis is a biographical one because the other two Dalit women who are included in this discussion are from my family itself. They are my mother Syamala and my grandmother Thaali. It is very important for me to engage with the narratives and memories of Dalit women who I know personally. The experiences related to travel are also part of my social location and existence.

### **The first narrative: that of Thaali:**

Thaali<sup>11</sup> was an untouchable Dalit slave and she used to work for the upper caste landlord for years. She is the one who explained untouchability to me, through a song. She sang “*enidikkinoravilukollame... meloottukarikkuennekanumbamcharidiokkanam!*” The lyrics, when translated, say that the upper caste likes the rice flakes which I make but they feel like vomiting when they see me. This song was sung by Dalits to express their anger against the upper castes. This is the only song I remember though she used to sing many until her death. Here, I recollect and share her experiences of her travels. She would spend her evenings telling us, her grandchildren, these stories. According to her:

We walked miles and miles across the paddy fields, canals and the jungle to reach our destination – for work. We were not able to find the difference between home and work because we would sleep after work and then wake up in the morning and work again. We would travel along with our children and belongings and set up a hut at the paddy field where we worked days and nights. The landlord would offer us more paddies if we agreed to sleep with him and we would be punished if we refused to. We carried a sickle along with us to cut the bushes to make a path for ourselves” (Thaali).

Thaali narrates the social situation of her past and this gives us a picture of the life of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular. They did not choose to travel; it was forced on them. They were compelled to travel barefoot for long distances and work without rest. This is the time when Dalits were not allowed to walk on the public paths and roads and enter into the market and other public spaces that were “owned” by the upper castes. This is how the upper caste maintained control over public spaces and reproduced caste hierarchy. Thus, the situation made their travel even harder. They were forced to work in paddy fields and denied access into public spaces and unsurprisingly Dalit women were harassed sexually by upper caste men. As Sanal Mohan observes:

Most of the lands used to be controlled by the upper caste, while the slave caste labourers, who were slaves juridical till the mid nineteenth century, carried out the actual cultivation. As a result of this, the untouchable slaves continued to exist in the same structural position for a very long time, even after the abolition of slavery in 1855 in the Travancore region of Kerala. (123)

Thaali lived at a time when slavery was abolished but continued to be practised illegally, that is, to exist in different forms until Dr. B R Ambedkar drafted the Indian Constitution which criminalised any form and practice of untouchability practices towards Dalits based on their caste.

### **Syamala’s narrative<sup>12</sup>**

Syamala was a Dalit domestic worker who worked in upper caste houses on the basis of daily wage. She says about her travel:

I worked at a Syrian Christian<sup>13</sup> house as a servant for five years continuously and I walked four kilometres to catch the bus to reach my work place every day. My day started early in the morning at 4 a.m. I finished all the work at home by 6 a.m then stepped out for work. I was forced to work more than ten hours a day because an upper caste family would pay me only RS. 60 for a day's worth of labour. I travelled daily to the town on foot, a distance of 8 kilometres. I had to face obscene comments from upper caste men and even young boys on my way home from work and so I tried to reach home as early as possible. People made stories about me when I came home late. I was always worried about my daughters, left alone at home, because my husband left us some years back which forced me to take up work as a domestic servant. To avoid this, I used to hire an auto rickshaw for thirty rupees which is half of my daily wage to reach home because I thought I should not give opportunity to others to look at me and my daughters badly.

This is the narration by a Dalit woman who used to work as a domestic servant during the late 1990s and until 2007. Walking eight kilometres during the day and working and maintaining home for a Dalit woman does not give the happiness of a trip. She travelled to make money for survival and had to work overtime without any extra payment. Her travel is assigned to her to reach her work place and go back home. Syamala's experience clearly shows how Dalit women are treated in Kerala by upper caste/non-Dalit men. Dalit women in the public are mostly seen as bad women and easily accessible. Her narration breaks down the constructed notion of Dalit women and freedom. Here, Syamala, as a domestic worker, is not just a labourer and she does not work in multiple houses as in urban areas. She worked for an upper caste family for years and only served them from morning to evening. I understand this as a form of slavery where the upper caste search for a servant woman in Dalit colonies and make them work only for that family. The breaking of earlier caste practices where Dalits were not allowed to enter upper caste's premises is also evident. But now Dalit women are working in upper caste houses. For me, this definitely marks the history of caste in Kerala but also reminds us that Dalit

women entering in upper caste houses do not necessarily find freedom from caste and its practices.

Thaali and Syamala belong to two different generations: Thaali lived when slavery still existed and Syamala is alive now, in our own time. But the similarities of their experiences cannot be ignored; they share the cultural history of their community. Also the travels of Thali and Syamala are different from the travel writings which have been published in the form of print.

### **My narrative**

I started travelling alone to other places for my studies. I travelled as part of my education, employment and for picnics. I travelled with my upper caste/ elite friends many times and went to shopping malls and many places. I faced curious questions regarding my caste identity only from *Malayalee* passengers in the train and this makes me avoid conversation with co-passengers when I travel from/to Kerala. The questions on my caste identity disturbed me a lot and I would get agitated when such questions were raised; in turn, my responses irritated those with questions. I can cite incidents where I experienced caste prejudice during my travels. For instance, I had to deal with the discriminatory attitude towards me and my family in a restaurant in Hyderabad, the same city where I was studying. There is an incident, which I want to discuss here, when I had gone to a restaurant with my friends in a highly populated tourist place and we had a good time over there. Later I travelled to the same place and visited the same restaurant again with my family. This time we were denied seating in the family section. The restaurant staff asked us to go downstairs and sit where the lower class men sit and eat. They instead gave space to the fair skinned, well-dressed, elite-looking women who came after us. My sister and I had to question the owner and their caste arrogance and left the restaurant without eating their well-known tasty food. This was a humiliating experience for us: we could afford to go to such restaurants but they reminded us of our caste position by denying their service and ignoring our existence. Such situations force people like me to behave accordingly because caste shapes our behaviour and ways of existence.

I will conclude with an experience with friends while travelling (during the research course on “Researching the Contemporary” in Delhi, India’s capital city). I travelled with

a group of women friends to Dharamshala, Jaipur, Amritsar and Delhi (famous tourist destinations in India). One of the members of the group was upper caste and her casteist mindset became evident through her controlling behaviour during the travel. Right from the beginning, she insisted on assuming leadership of the group and its activities, which entailed that the rest of us follow her directives without question, disagreement or discomfort. I observed her dominating behaviour throughout the journey. I was the only one who was older than her in the group. The other two women were from a Dalit community and there was another one from an ethnic group from North east India. I was new to the group and became close with them only after we met at the workshop venue though four of us had already been studying in the same university campus. Her arrogance was often underlined by her fear of losing her dominant position before a largely non-upper caste group and in particular before a Dalit woman who is older than her. Her discomfort as I avoided her controlling attitude was evident. I felt that she consciously tried dominating someone who is from the lower caste. I had either to ignore her or react in the many situations when she tried to dominate me. Her behaviour reflected her need to teach Dalit women ways to conduct and educate themselves in “new” places. She called me “crazy” when I travelled alone in Delhi at night and Agra. I found her attitude to reflect a patriarchal mindset: she would be comfortable traveling only with all kinds of protection and safety and on the other hand she could not imagine that a Dalit woman would have the confidence to travel alone. She clearly subscribed to the notion that women should not travel alone and should be conscious of their safety as if it were a duty. I was able to travel with the group only because the fellowship gave us a stipend. Interestingly my own notions are shaped by the idea that women can only travel if they have the money to ensure that they can do so safely.

Caste plays an important role in friendships. The Upper caste friends behave towards Dalit women with a preconceived notion, where they believe that Dalits do not know anything and there is a continuous desire to dominate the person who is from Dalit community such as me. This of course made my travel unpleasant when I travelled with her. Her presence made my travel experiences unpleasant. This incident forced me to be conscious about my identity whenever I travelled with upper caste friends, although I did not have any similar experiences after this trip. I was raised by a single mother, working

as a domestic labourer. This meant that I needed to take up responsibilities at a very young age. As a result, traveling alone has been both necessary and comfortable for me. This has been significant in shaping my travel experiences and my presence as a Dalit woman in public spaces. Thus, travel has become not just a movement from one place to another; other factors intervene in it. Dalit women's travel is not just a choice or a manifestation of a desire to travel; it is closely connected to their caste. Thali's and Syamala's travel narrations break prevailing ideas about travel because their travel was for the purposes of survival and livelihood. I therefore argue that travel and travel writing cannot be fixed into a particular genre of writing which ignores the caste experiences of Dalit women and their travel.

### **Conclusion**

I brought these three narrations together in this paper to critically engage with how Dalit women's travel experiences encounter caste and gender differences. These differences can be in multiple forms such as the idea of travel and the need to travel, as well as notions about Dalit women's freedom and their bodies. In this ontological analysis, the narratives by Dalit women from three generations provide three instances of travel where the aspects of caste and gender become crucial rather than mere "subjects of story-telling". This clarifies my journey to becoming a feminist scholar from Dalit community, carrying this knowledge that women from my family shared with me and showing the upward mobility of Dalit women. This social mobility is significant in these analyses, but also in Vaikhari Aryat's writings. Thali represents Dalit lives in the past and Syamala's narration ushers to their mobility, although she is still forced to follow the hierarchy in which caste status dominates. Vaikhari Aryat and my own experiences further show the upward mobility that we have achieved through education, despite our different class backgrounds.

Caste and gender encounter in Dalit women's travel has a complex history which is associated with the struggles of Dalits and their fight to annihilate caste. As a Dalit feminist scholar, I have chosen a political position to discuss these issues in an Indian context where Dalit women are constantly reminded of their identity in social engagements. Existing travel writings like *Penyathrakal* and *Ranimaarpadminiamaar*

introduce women's view of travel in order to decentre the privilege of hegemonic travel writing. However, these two books fail to accentuate the need to historicize the analysis of gender and travel writing. In this paper, I have argued that the travel experiences of women (and for those matter men) are shaped culturally and socially and cannot be studied individually. Christa Cowman and Louis A. Jackson argues that "women's identities and subject positions can be understood more fully if we explore the intersections of the physical, the material, the cultural and social: those processes of remembering and re-remembering, telling and re-telling, and their relationship to the passing of time"(32). Vaikhari's travel writings are different from the travel narrations of Dalit women which I discussed here. I have shown that Dalit women's experience is different from that of other women and cannot be placed within a homogenous understanding of the same because caste persists and does so in new forms. Caste shapes our behaviour and ways of existence. As Sara Ahmad argues, "we must admit to the differences that we cannot name – as well as those we cannot not name" (94). The travel experiences in this paper cannot be named as the only "authentic" experiences of Dalit women but again, I strongly argue that the encounter with gender and caste makes Dalit women experiences different, whether it is travel or any other presence of Dalit women in a given place. The relationship between caste and gender is very much visible in Indian society and is reflected in every sphere of people's life.

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<sup>1</sup>Dalit community comes under category of untouchable people by the Hindu Varnaa system and Dalits were treated as untouchable slaves for centuries according to this caste system. It is still practices in India in its different forms.

<sup>2</sup>Ayyankali, Poykayil Yohannan and Pambadi John Joseph were the contemporaries who fought against caste and its inhumane practices in Kerala during British rule in India.

<sup>3</sup>Kallayum Malayum Samaram was the historical protest led by the leadership of Ayyankali and massive Dalit women threw the *kallumala* (stone necklaces) which they used to cover their breast and wore the blouse.

<sup>4</sup> Asura is a category of people in Hindu mythology . They ae described as black-skinned people who are very violent in nature while Devas are their anti-thesis: they are the gods and fair skinned people. Asura women are portrayed as female demons in Hindu religious texts.

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<sup>5</sup>I use the term Malayali experience here as the prevailing and dominant idea which people largely accept in Kerala. There is a tendency to ignore such discussions on the cultural differences of the people.

<sup>6</sup> The introduction of this book is written by the actor Reema Kallingal, who acted as *Raani* in the movie *Rani Padmini* which was released a few months before the publication of this book. The film *Rani Padmini* is about two women who met each other on an unplanned trip in their life and enjoyed the trip together and later became friends. The film in a way occasioned this book that brought together a collection of narratives of women who opted to travel alone.

<sup>7</sup> This is a theatre artist from Kerala who also works in the film industry as an actor, playing roles of women from subaltern communities. She won the state government's award for best female actor for her performance in the Malayalam film *Biriyani* in 2020.

<sup>8</sup> This is a derogatory term used by Malayalees (known as people from Kerala) to name Tamils, especially as a comment on their skin colour and lifestyle.

<sup>9</sup> Vaikhari is a Ph D Scholar in University of Hyderabad. She identifies herself as a Dalit queer feminist in her writings on social media.

<sup>10</sup> Soumya is a lower caste/class woman from Kerala who was raped and murdered in the train, while she was travelling from her workplace to home.

<sup>11</sup> Thaali is my grandmother who worked as a slave in the early 20th century and died in 2001 when she was 96 years old.

<sup>12</sup> Syamala is my mother who worked as domestic help in upper caste houses for fifteen years to survive as a single mother of two girl children after her husband abandoned her.

<sup>13</sup> This is the upper caste community in Kerala who claim to have been Brahmins in the past and who later converted into Christianity. The community still follows the practices of caste towards Dalits, just like Hindu dominant castes.

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