



The Capability Approach in ‘Ethiru’- A memoir of M. Kunjaman

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Abstract

M. Kunjaman, former professor of Tata Institute of social sciences, in his most celebrated book, Ethiru, containing his own life sketches, does a hermeneutic analysis of how caste system in India limits the social and economic development of subaltern communities in Kerala. He instructively explains various layers of caste structures and corresponding levels of power, privileges and economic resources. He portrays the resourceless- social and economic- nature of former untouchable households and explains with analytical acumen the historical reasons for that deprivation. He follows Marxian methodology and at the end of the book he tries to combine Marx with Hegel and Ambedkar. Kunjaman goes beyond the socialistic prescriptions of Ambedkar for the economic development of former untouchables in India and weds neoliberal globalization as the new path of subaltern development. In this article we make a critical reading of Ethiru under the backdrop of Amartya Sen’s Capabilities Approach and analyse if Kunjaman has justified his claim that globalization is good for Scheduled Castes in Kerala.

Keywords- Caste, Capabilities, Alienation, Globalization, Sanskritization, Cultural Homelessness.



Ethiru is a memoir by M. Kunjaman, a former professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Tuljapur Campus. As the very title of the book suggests, it is an intellectual confrontation of a dalit man in Kerala with the renaissance claims of progressive Malayali and their widely lauded Kerala model of development, which boasts that it has uplifted dalits from the feudal darkness and led them to a shining world of liberty, equality, and fraternity—the greatest human values enshrined in the preamble of the Indian Constitution. The book is not just a linear narration of how Kunjaman as a person has grown from an untouchable ‘Panan’ of an underdeveloped and caste-ridden rural village—Vadanamkurissi near Pattambi, Palakkad district in Kerala—to a renowned professor of economics. It is an academic attempt to prove that the lives of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in Kerala are still continuing like a sad and painful reality trapped in a black-and-white photograph of the 19th century. He says “Kerala has been changing dynamically, but Dalit life is unchanging and still carries the burden of feudal caste baggage, but in different ways other than the blunt and direct forms of feudal caste oppression that existed once in Kerala”. In his memoir, the author gives us a picture of how dalit life in Kerala has been transformed over the years since 1956 and what the contradictions are in that transformation. Kunjaman questions the non-representation of dalits at various levels of policy and decision-making initiatives in Kerala. The book is not only an academic confrontation but also presents an alternative vision of dalit development. In this article, we are trying to analyse the socio-economic ideology of Kunjaman, logically and beautifully explained in his memoir, from the perspectives of Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach in the broad framework of ‘social choice theory’.

One of the critical areas of social choice theory is how we can accommodate the rights and liberties of underprivileged people in social outcomes based on individual preferences. How much space collectives or group decisions provide for poor and marginalized people is the most significant practical problem in social choice theory. In plain language, we can say how much social choice or decisions reflect individual preferences of the weaker people living as invisibles on the outskirts of an affluent mainstream. The human development approach emerged from the overwhelming ambition of scholars and practitioners to place ‘equality and justice’ as integral components of the development paradigm. Amartya Sen’s Capability Approach is the latest and the most popular manifestation of that ambition. The capability approach of Amartya Sen has emerged as an effort to rectify the limitations of the utilitarian and Rawlsian approaches to justice. John Rawls asserts the role of institutions to ensure “distributional justice”. Sen also



argues in his works that social choice cannot be deduced from individual decisions, so the role of affirmative action by the state in ensuring the appropriate socio-legal framework for achieving distributional justice is unavoidable.

Sen's capability approach is a distinctive normative approach to evaluating well-being with regard to individuals' freedom to achieve the kinds of lives they have reason to value. Sen sees development as the extension of those freedoms. Those freedoms are reflected in an individual's capabilities to achieve combinations of such intrinsically valuable "beings and doings," as Sen collectively calls them 'functionings'. In short, the capability approach considers that the conditions for human well-being are built on an objective and material reality rather than some sort of mysterious extrasensory existence like 'Brahma' or something, as Mahatma Gandhi explains in his article "The Ideal Bhangi". The gist of the capability approach is that the well-being of people depends upon the extent to which they are capable of converting their entitlements into capabilities for achieving proper 'being and doings' and leading a life they have reason to value. The capability approach focuses on individuals' actual capabilities rather than certain abstract rights or freedoms to attain those capabilities. Kunjaman, in his memoir, examines how much dalits in Kerala have succeeded in attaining a life they have reason to value. To what extent the newfound accessibility of dalits to public spaces has resulted in bringing desired socio-economic outcomes in their lived experiences is the key focus of Kunjaman's memoir.

Kunjaman was born into a poor Dalit family. After passing through the painful ordeals of caste oppression and silent struggles against it, he passed his secondary education and went to college, as he writes, with a caste certificate, two rupees, two shirts, and two mundu. During the school days, when other children and teachers mocked him for having free midday meal served at the school, he stopped eating it as a protest. That incident created an everlasting impression in his mind regarding accessibility to resources and freedom to convert those resources into desired life experiences. Kunjaman recognized that the free lunch served at the school was not merely a charity of the state but a way to knowledge and capability. When he writes, "I went to college with a caste certificate alone," he reiterates the significance of reservation as an affirmative policy for representation and distributional justice. He passed post-graduation with honours and a gold medal. Unfortunately, within the next two days, he pledged that gold medal and eventually sold it off due to his abject poverty. Desperation and disappointment grew in him because of his helplessness to secure a good job, even though he got the first rank. Kunjaman says with utmost



pain that poverty, fear, inferiority, lack of confidence, and lack of courage were his ancestral properties. Throughout the memoir, the author narrates incidents of caste discrimination and the pains of alienation. He vividly explains one of those caste incidents happened in his life when he was in the third grade. A casteist teacher would always call Kunjaman his caste name. He would never call him Kunjaman. Whenever the teacher wanted to ask something to Kunjaman, he would say “You panan say”. The author felt humiliated, and out of his desperation, one day he raised his voice against the teacher and said boldly, “Never call me Panan, sir. I am Kunjaman. Call my name”. Though he had been experiencing different kinds of caste oppression and discrimination in his school days, a mysterious sense of inner strength and courage was also growing in him. Outwardly, the author was timid and weak, but in the deepest chambers of his heart, he was mentally strong and determined. A sense of injustice and an inherent tendency to fight against it have always been with him since his childhood. This memoir is a true testimony to that personal trait of the author.

In this book, the author has not used much space for his own personal life. He has explored his life as a tool to illustrate the historical transformation of dalit life in Kerala along with the renaissance and Kerala model development. He recognizes that, as compared to any other states in India, Kerala has provided dalits unconditional access to all public places and government utilities. When he was a child, dalits demanded the right to mobility, the right to enter into temples, the right to dress well and at one’s choice, the right to choose jobs that fit their tastes and preferences, the right to enter government offices, and the right to own property. Today’s dalit generation does not experience those kinds of discriminations. What they have been experiencing is not an issue of accessibility but one of equality. The author identifies economic deprivation as the single most crucial factor of dalit backwardness in Kerala. He points out three sources that have been working behind the flourishing of Kerala’s economy. They are government expenditures that include reservation, access to institutional credits, and Gulf migration. He finds that land reform initiatives in Kerala have not provided sufficient amounts of land to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. They did not get any agricultural land, but small homesteads that were mostly situated in rocky and mountainous terrain, so they were not qualified as good collateral securities. Non-ownership of quality landed assets caused the exclusion of Dalits from institutional credit. Non-accessibility to institutional credits is the major reason for dalits’ relatively low presence in trade and commerce, commercial farming, industries, and manufacturing. The



poor participation of dalits among Gulf workers and European migrants is due to a lack of institutional finance. According to Kunjaman, the dalits' limited access to employment opportunities in Kerala's aided educational institutions is another key economic aspect that exacerbates their financial misery. Hence, he contends that institutional exclusion rather than human incompetence is to blame for dalits' poverty in Kerala.

Kunjaman distinguishes three stages of dalit development: First, the Constitution has made dalits human beings. Secondly, the Bahujan politics of the BSP made them political creatures, and thirdly, economic opportunities that emerged during the liberalization era made them economic creatures. A dalit entrepreneurial class in Maharashtra and radical Ambedkarite student politics on campuses outside of Kerala evolved in response to those three concurrent trends in dalit life. As compared to dalits in other states, dalits in Kerala are well educated and they are not experiencing any overt casteism and discrimination in public places, but student politics based on Ambedkar philosophy are totally missing in Kerala. Why Ambedkar student politics is not growing on campuses in Kerala is another question Kunjaman tries to answer in his memoir. Historical loyalty of dalits to left politics and the deliberate exclusion of Ambedkar ideology from the left praxis are the two reasons for the absence of Ambedkar politics in Kerala campuses, according to Kunjaman. Radical dalit intelligentsia-politically built upon Ambedkar ideology and spiritually moulded around the principles of Buddhism- and the dalit entrepreneurial class are missing in Kerala. According to Kunjaman, the main causes of dalit backwardness in Kerala include the failure of land reforms, which led to dalit landlessness, their lack of access to institutional credit and aided educational institutions, and the low rate of dalit migration to Gulf countries and other regions of the world. Renaissance and Kerala model development have provided dalits access to public places and wide range of rights, but they have miserably failed to provide them economic assets, especially land. According to Kunjaman, economic deprivation is the major contributing factor to dalits' powerlessness in Kerala. Kunjaman questions the pseudo-progressive nature of Malayali and says that feudal caste discrimination is absent in Kerala but systematically designed and executed institutional caste discrimination exists in Kerala. Sen argues that institutional intervention is essential for realizing distributional justice. Kunjaman argues that the Kerala model has been implemented by excluding dalits from its developmental agendas and including them only in welfare programs. He mocks mainstream political parties that offer Dalits social security pensions but ignore the questions about their landlessness.



According to Kunjaman, dalits in Kerala have perpetually been trapped in squalor and economic deprivation because they lack entitlements like land, institutional credits, social mobility and access to aided institutions. Institutional exclusion and entitlement deprivation are the true reasons behind dalit backwardness in Kerala. Kunjaman adds one striking point here to justify why institutional exclusion of dalits happens in Kerala. He argues that the dalits have no individual identity but a collective identity of caste, religion, and politics so they are easily manipulated by dominant groups as mere vote banks.

Another striking observation the author has made in his memoir is the dominance of OBC castes in political and cultural spaces in Kerala and elsewhere in India. According to Kunjaman, nowadays, not Brahmins but backward community Hindus are practicing caste discrimination against the dalits. At this point, the author clearly understands the dynamics of Sanskritization among Hindu backward communities and how they have been trying to move upward along the caste ladder, shedding their historical caste backwardness upon the shoulders of the dalits. Since that OBCs have adopted Sanskritization throughout India, it appears that Kunjaman does not believe it to be a useful strategy for enhancing dalits' social mobility. Kunjaman contends that institutional exclusion and caste exclusion aggravate dalit hardships in Kerala by denying them capability building, as Amartya Sen suggests, necessary for choosing a life they have reason to value.

Conclusion

Kunjaman concludes that dalits in Kerala are lacking entitlements in such as land and social capital. Landlessness excludes Dalits from institutional credit sources. They are institutionally excluded from jobs in aided institutions. They are totally estranged from the policy and decision-making processes of political parties and governmental agencies. Even today, most of the dalits live in caste settlement colonies. The locational identity of their residence itself is a criterion for discriminating against the dalits. Outside Kerala, caste discrimination is open, direct, and visible to everyone. There is no veil of pseudo-progressiveness there. In Kerala, casteism and discrimination are so subtle, invisible, and embedded in institutional structures. Kunjaman himself was a victim of such institutional casteism. Institutional casteism and landlessness prevent capability formation among dalits. Lack of capabilities results in the perpetuation of economic deprivation and social backwardness among dalit communities in Kerala. Becoming an independent individual and a capitalist entrepreneur, free from the pettiness of caste, religion,



and political affiliations, and following the liberation philosophy of Ambedkar within the framework of the Indian constitution, is Kunjaman's solution to the dalits' underdevelopment. He identifies that landlessness, lack of capital, and non-accessibility to institutional credits are the real causes of dalit backwardness. When he advises dalits to be capitalist entrepreneurs without suggesting any practical measures to overcome those adverse conditions that prevent their socio-economic upward mobility, it is just a utopian dream.

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