

Body as a ‘Site of Protest’: Performative Strategies of Ayyankali

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Abstract

Self and identity are central to the ‘anti-authority’ struggles that have deepened in recent decades. Lower caste leaders used hypermasculinity as resource to untouchability and resorted to amplified version of mainstream cultural values. The subordinate people developed a hypermasculine model which drew upon a range of cultural resources and deployed as a resistance to casteism.

Keywords: body, masculinity, protest, resistance, Ayyankali, Dalit.

Introduction

Ayyankali’s resistance against upper caste domination was fought taking his own body as a site for registering his spirit of protest against all oppressive networks of exploitation which dubbed the physicality of the dalit and the marginalised as a site of wild, savage and ugly. Ugliness was a culture tag affixed on the dalitised sections by the affluent and this later became a self contemptuous outlook within which the dalit thought of himself as an ugly physical site. Ayyankali sensed this and invented a strategy in presenting himself as a ‘civilized ‘macho’ transmitting a message thereby, through his performance, to all down-trodden sections in raising the collective physicality as a site for protest against the elite atrocities based on a projected masculine order. The body was tuned in such a way and the next step was his performance extended in to the public space which was a forbidden spatiality for the dalits. The paper posits this argument in the contextual background of theoretical strands drawn from scholars who have seriously worked on the area.

The concept of resistance can be seen to be central and fundamental to the concept of power. Foucauldian analysis signals that gender power and oppression can exist across a multitude of social environs, not all of them describable as masculinist or the province of

the male. As Foucault puts it, "there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised." (1982: 142) Much of the discourse on subordinate masculinities is couched in terms of oppression and resistance. Social reformers and activists from subordinate castes got an opportunity to resist, it can be argued, what is at times direct and violent oppression because the discursive possibilities to do so became available to them through education, cultural pluralism and similar knowledge experiences. In their negotiation with dominant discourses, they formed a new self, and sought possibilities that arise for them as a consequence of imagining new, multiple ways of being new man. As a part of this process they were into an agentic, rational, and holistic approach.

Subordinated Masculinities and Resistance

Historically, patriarchal casteist ideology has taken the Dalit body or rather its fantasized version, and attempted to reduce it to a singular identity, an essentialized stereotype fixed on physicality and physical strength, one that is inhuman, dangerous, athletic, and virile. Rather than perceiving the Dalit males as individuals, as social agents, negotiating multiple discourses, oppositional binarisms are constructed. The upper castes had control over agricultural resources, which were used in turn to exercise control over women and men of lower castes, as well as women of their own caste, whereas the new Dalit masculinity spearheaded by Ayyankali and others had a new force that organized and controlled the labour force. Thus the strike declared by the agricultural workers led by Ayyankali is singularly significant in the history of modern Kerala as well as in the history of subaltern resistance. Subordinate masculinity in any local context is determined by the prevailing system in its totality. The caste system has its own differences in accordance with the regional and the cultural specificities. The lower caste people's determination to claim public space was the hallmark of the social-political movements of the early 20th century. Codes of domination were maintained through control over the social space and the bodies of lower caste people. Hence they struggled to claim the same.

Theoretical Perspectives

In his *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) argues that in urban French society bodily demeanour exemplifies social class and gender-identity. He goes on to link postures of openness, assertiveness and self

confidence with certain practices of male authority, particularly that of upper and middle class men. Conversely, he says, women and the poorer class, tend to assume bodily postures which are more defensive, diffident or accommodative. In short, Bourdieu's bodily demeanour reveals one's place in the social hierarchy. According to Bourdieu, the body is a metaphor or bearer of symbolic meaning and values and a key site through which social differences are created, perpetuated and reinforced. Whitehead argues that the body symbolizes or encapsulates the 'materiality of masculinities' (2002:183). He elaborates that this embodiment of masculinity is seen to take three forms: first in terms of experience as it were the very physicality of masculinity; second, the sense in which the male body is inscribed with meaning and becomes a template for a series of signifiers; and third, through the male body relationship to the social world and its social role. As a result, the male body becomes a site "from which masculinities appear both as illusion and as materiality." (2002:186)

This reminds of Judith Butler (1995) who explains that gender itself is more than merely constructed, it is actually "performed," the complex meanings associated with gender are therefore rendered as operations in behaviour, choice and representation. Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990) develops Foucault's theories into focusing on the relationship between biological sex, gender and sexuality. She argues that all gender and sexual identity categories – woman, man, femininity, masculinity, heterosexual, gay and lesbian – are produced through socialization, which she interprets as the repetition of socially sanctioned 'acts' or 'performances.' This means that there is no true essence behind 'heterosexual' identity because it is wholly socially and discursively produced. If gendered or sexual identity is constructed through repeated acts, Butler thinks, gender and sexuality can be performed in alternative ways.

In her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler takes the distinction of constative and performative language from J.L. Austin's Speech Act theory and applies it to gender. In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" she writes:

Gender is not a performance that a prior subject elects to do, but gender is performative... It is compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence, not to mention the transgressive pleasures produced by those very prohibitions. (1991: 23-4).

Butler further argues,

This 'being a man' and this 'being a woman' are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely. (1993: 126-127)

Butler defines gender as performative, and by that she means that gender constitutes the identity it is purported to be. Gender is therefore "always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 1990:25). In a famous statement, Butler says, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1990:33). Butler maintains that there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

The Bodily Demeanour of Ayyankali

All his public appearances can be said to be self declarative. This was the common appearance of Ayyankali described by one of the spectators who attended his last meeting at Kollam (Kannetty near Karunagappally), a few months before his death: decorated headwear, earrings, sandal paste on the forehead, big moustache, long black coat, steady and upstanding posture. One of the important ways in which the Dalits led by Ayyankali and others asserted their masculinities was by asserting control over public places and roads. In 1893, exactly thirty one years before the legendary Vaikom Satyagraha, which sought to claim public space for *avarnas* and the removal of untouchability boards, Ayyankali started his movement for claiming public space in the capital of Travancore. That year he bought decorated bullock-carts from the upper castes which were used exclusively by the elites. He wore white *dhoti*, *vest*, and *thalappavu* and started riding the bullock-cart through the main road which was prohibited to the Dalits. His bulls with ornamented bells were a symbol of authority. This was to break rules of the caste hierarchy. (Chentharasseri, 2009).

Male performativity is often constituted around physical prowess and risk-taking, including the risk of bodily damage. For all its idealism, the method adopted by Ayyankali was dominated by a male culture, of men who consistently sought the perfect modes of risk-taking and in-

terpersonal aggression. His acts were an expression of extraordinary courage, skill and masculine grace. They were typically adventurous, daring, brave and constantly up to all sorts of escapades. The marginalized and subordinated male expressed themselves through collective toughness.

Subordinate Castes: Appropriation of Hegemonic Masculinity

The form of masculinity which is culturally dominant in a given setting is called hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinities are the culturally honoured, glorified and praised forms of masculinities. Hegemonic masculinities include such valued characteristics as achievement, aggression, toughness, and domination over women and the weaker sections. Masculinity is not only a foundational notion of modernity but it is also the corner stone in the ideology of moral imperialism—the Victorian morality and world-view—that prevailed in British India from late 19th century onwards. The cult of masculinity rationalized imperial rule by equating an aggressive muscular, chivalric, model of manliness with racial, national, cultural and moral superiority.

Ayyankali and his compatriots elsewhere in Travancore tried to emulate and at the same time subvert these masculine traits: his encroaching upon the public space in his characteristic bullock carts, his use of physical prowess (tit for tat) (Chentharassery: 72). The subdued and servile nature of Dalit youth was regulated towards aggressiveness and militarism. For disciplining his people Ayyankali got them trained in martial arts. His intention to challenge the opposition physically was a daring instance of resistance and created an unprecedented impact.

Appropriating elite rituals and practices is one form of entitlement to power. Sadanandaswami who helped Ayyankali initially to form his community organization instructed him to take over the public road defying the *savarna* challenge, resorting to a simple, but powerful act. Thus on the king's birthday Ayyankali led a procession carrying a photograph of the king, to East Fort from his native place, Venganoor. The *savarnas* were in a predicament. If they attack the procession carrying the king's photograph, it amounts to treason. Their goal was to make an appearance before the royal presence in which they succeeded. They were attacked severely on their return. But Ayyankali and his men had anticipated the eventuality so that they were well-armed to face the attack. With simple tactics and physical prowess Ayyankali and his men claimed the public space, and appropriated exclusively elite practices. (Chentharassery: 67) It was a simple, but powerful act. With simple tactics and physical prowess Ayyankali and his men claimed the public space, and appropriated exclusively elite practices. (Chentharassery:

67)

When Sadhujana Paripalana Sangham was formed in 1907 with 24 clauses in the bylaw out of which 3 clauses were given prominence: morality, hygiene and discipline. These are the three main components of hegemonic masculinity facilitated by the colonial discourses in Kerala. Ayyankali like all other contemporary social reformers in Kerala and elsewhere demanded austerity measures from the people of his caste. The concepts of tidiness, frugality, discipline, neatness etc. were thus exhorted by Ayyankali in one of his public speeches:

My brothers and sisters, you are assembled here as manual labourers. After the day's toil, you go back to your humble huts in the evening, tired and hungry. You may pay a visit to the toddy shop on the wayside in order to get rid of your weariness. That is not purposeful nor does it have any bad intention. I do not blame you. But by that habit and behavior, what happens? Have you ever thought of it? Domestic quarrels and unrest prevail. The unrest of the family affects your children and also your community at large. That leads to social backwardness. In such a situation we cannot progress socially or economically. Not only this, marriage alliances will also be cut off. In this way, the community has to confront so many problems and handicaps. So I, as a brother of yours, advise you not to drink. That is, the habit of adhering to liquor drinking should be strictly dispensed with. I may demand from you that the people, who take oath to abstain from drinking from today onwards, may raise up their hands. (Chentharassery: 76)

Ayyankali exhorts his Dalit brethren to have a sense of increasing self-discipline, control and suppression of emotions. It was a virtue promoted by colonial discourse. He also observed that aversion to the public display of emotions was a characteristic of the modern individual. To become a 'modern individual' was also a project of overcoming subalternity. In the counter-assertion of a super-tough identity from Dalits, backward castes and other non-Brahmins in general, those who experienced subordination displayed strength, brute power, force, virility and discipline. It had made masculinity itself the axis of the confrontations between lower castes and upper castes. Through protests and other adaptations subordinate castes dissect and reject the conceptual hierarchies that had for so long constructed them as inferior. The history of dissent and resistance amply illustrates that no dominant group has ever willingly dispensed with its power out of a sense of fairness. Moreover, one could gather from the biography of Ayyankali his firm resolves that if Dalits waited for a sense of justice to bloom in the upper caste people's collective unconscious, they would

have to wait forever.

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