


Private Space and Scheduled Caste Colonies in Kerala

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Abstract

Central and state governments have been spending huge amounts year after year for the development of scheduled caste people in India. The state of Kerala is also a good role model in this regard. Social integration of the Scheduled Castes in India with the rest of the communities is still an unfinished agenda of independent India. In this regard, Kerala, one of the states in India having highest rate of social development, is not an exception. The present article tries to theoretically contextualize the socio-economic backwardness of Scheduled Castes in Kerala by analysing to what extent a scheduled caste house property in Scheduled caste Colonies is an economic good. The study uses a theoretical concept-private space which is extracted from Henri Lefebvre's social space.

Keywords: Private Space, Adequate Housing, Social Space, Overcrowding, Coffin Homes

Central and state governments have been spending huge amounts year after year for the development of scheduled caste people in India. It happens under various developmental projects directly undertaken by the governments at various levels - central, state and local bodies - or through Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The state of Kerala is also a good role model in this regard. In the Kerala budget for the financial year 2023-2024, Rs. 1638.10 crores have been earmarked for the development of Scheduled Castes under the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan. Rs. 1341.30 crores have been earmarked for expenditure through the Scheduled Caste Development Department. A total of Rs.2979.40 crores have been earmarked for the development of Scheduled Castes in the financial year 2023-2024 in Kerala. Despite billions of public funds spent for SCs, their social and economic conditions are still very low as compared to other social categories in our country except Scheduled Tribes (STs). Scheduled castes have been facing untouchability at varying degrees across the country, and they have been systematically excluded from education, employment, and social spaces. Social integration of the Scheduled Castes in India with the rest of the communities is still an unfinished agenda of independent India. In this regard, Kerala, one of the states in India having highest rate of social development, is not an exception. The present article tries to theoretically contextualize the socio-economic backwardness of Scheduled Castes in Kerala by analysing to what extent a scheduled caste house property in Scheduled caste Colonies is an economic good. To this effect, we have developed a theoretical concept: private space which is derived from the concept of 'social space' coined and developed by (Lefebvre).

Social space is one of the important concepts in urban planning. Social space, as a concept evades linear definitions. In simple terms, the concept social space assumes that human life in a space is not fixed or static but changing in the sense that it is being produced and reproduced as in Marxian scheme of production. In Lefebvre's view a space is a product as well as means of production. Human beings make space and in which they live.... Space is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by 'laws' of spatial geometry as per conventional location theory. Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it (Molotch). Lefebvre's space is a triad of three different spatial manifestations perceived, conceived and lived (Gottdiener). The first space (perceived) is physical form, space that is created and used which is the real space. The second space (conceived) is the space of the architects, the savoir (knowledge) and logic, mathematics and maps, space as the instrumental space of urban planners and social engineers. Space as a perceptual or mental construct is abstract or imagined space. The third (lived) perceives space as produced and transformed after some time and from its use, spaces devoted with meaning and symbolism, the space of exploration (less formal or more local forms of knowledge), space as imagined and real (Makinde). Physical space is constructed by various agents like state, builders and cultural norms. Discursive space is mentally constructed by the way the space is imagined and represented. It is separate from physical space as spaces can have imaginary representations without physically existing. Representational space is socially constructed by the lived experience of the people who interact with it. A scheduled caste colony is a space constructed by the government and it produces perceived, conceived and lived manifestations of space.

Readers may wonder why the authors use 'private space' instead of 'private property' which is known in common parlance. The concept private property indicates only possession and ownership of a property. Private space is broader in scope than private property. Private space refers to the combined

and composite coexistence of material structure of a house, interactions among the people in that house and their socio-economic exchanges with the neighbourhood. A house is a physical space in the sense of a building made of stone, sand and cement. But a house is not just a building alone. Within each house there is constant exchange between the house and the people living inside the house. The occupants of the house keep on using, reconfiguring and reconstructing the house to fulfil their spatial needs. Just as a house and its people relate to each other and they are constantly in touch with the community in which they live. The house is also a central character in the social relations of people inside a house with people outside the house. A person's social relations cannot be judged by keeping the house aside. A person, his home and the society with which he is constantly connected are inextricably linked. In this sense private space is a broader concept than private property. Private property included only the house as a physical structure and its surrounding land. House as a private property becomes a private space when people living in it carry socio-economic, cultural and emotional exchanges within the house and with outside communities near and far. Private space manifests physicality of the house and various forms of social relations within and outside the house. Private space is the inseparable existence between the house, the people inside the house and the society in which they live. Private space considers the physical space necessary for a family to live happily, as well as how that space affects the social relationships of those individuals. Let's see to what extent houses in Scheduled Caste colonies are a quality private space.

A brief demographic presentation of scheduled castes in Kerala is warranted for gaining a better understanding of the concept: private space. According to the 2011 census report, the Scheduled Caste population in Kerala was 30.39 lakhs. Out of which 23.52 lakhs, i.e. about 77 percent of Scheduled Castes live in 26198 Scheduled Caste colonies. Therefore, any academic discussion on the developmental experiences of scheduled castes in Kerala goes directly to scheduled caste colonies. Let us move a little closer to scheduled caste colonies in Kerala. According to KILA Report, 2010, 5.58 Lakhs scheduled caste families live in

caste colonies where per capita land holding of a family is 1.66 cents. 123871 houses are one room houses. 372013 houses are two room houses. 45959 houses in the colonies are uninhabitable. 54 percent of the houses in colonies are below 440 Sq. Ft in size. Houses in the colonies lay in close proximity without any compound wall and own drinking water facility other than common well, tank and public water supply. Most of the SC colonies are located on hills, nearby paddy fields, rocky or marshy areas and in general, far away from places where other communities normally live. Scheduled caste colonies are spatially separated from the main land with geographical markers like mounds, paddy fields, Rocky Mountains and water bodies. Social and spatial exclusion along with economic exclusion create favourable environment for the continuation of historical structural inequalities which scheduled castes have been facing since Manu Smruti era. Small and dilapidated houses, located in caste colonies, acts as a barrier to socio-economic development of scheduled castes in Kerala. Let us analyse how house properties in scheduled caste colonies prevent the socio-economic development of the dwellers (Jenkins and Barr; Dorairaj).

KILA Report tells us that about 54 percent of scheduled caste house properties in SC colonies have built-in area of 440 Sq. Ft or less. A smaller built-in area of a house brings a chain of problems to the life of inmates. Spatial inadequacy, biological and emotional hazards of congestion, violations of conjugal rights and low social status related with coffin houses are some of the issues of small built-in area. Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, states that every human being has the right to have a decent dwelling. Article 25 of the Declaration of Human Rights states that it is a fundamental human right of every person and their family to own a house of sufficient size to meet their spatial needs while protecting their dignity, and privacy as members of society. 'Adequate housing' is defined as a house that meets the spatial needs of a family by the United Nations. Adequate housing is defined as a house that meets the spatial needs of a family by the United Nations. If a member of a family has at least 165 square feet of space in her house then we can primarily call that house adequate housing.

This means that a house for a family of four should have a minimum size of 660 square feet. Houses smaller than that are defined as Overcrowded Houses by the United Nations. According to the United Nations definition, most of the houses in the Scheduled Caste Colonies in Kerala are overcrowded houses. Another criterion used to test for overcrowding is whether a room in a house is occupied by more than one person and they are not husband and wife. According to this standard, all single-room houses in the scheduled caste colonies in Kerala will be overcrowded houses. Another test usually employed to measure overcrowded is per capita floor space. Floorspace per person is measured as the average space per occupied dwelling divided by the average household size. As of 2018 the average floorspace per dwelling was 90.4m² across England as a whole and 80.7m² in London. Between 1996 and 2018 floorspace per person rose from 34.8m² to 38.1m² in England and from 31.4m² to 32.6m² in London, with very little change in the last decade. Estimated floor space per person for the households in rural and urban areas in USA was about 81 and 70 square feet respectively. The estimated average floor space per person for households with size 1 was maximum for both rural (235.73 sq. ft.) and urban (249.35 sq.) Average Sq. ft is in between 1164 to 2800 in USA in 2022 (American home shield). In 2022, dwellings in Germany provided around 474 sq. ft of living space per inhabitant. Figures increased by a small amount in recent years, though more noticeably compared to the 1990s. Per capita floor space in Switzerland is 465 Sq. Ft. According to a report entitled 'Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2021', released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), per capita bedroom size in Bangladesh dropped to 81.7 square feet in 2021 from 99 square feet a year ago. Per capita floor space in India is 81sq.ft in rural areas and 71 sq. ft in urban areas. Per capita floor space in scheduled caste houses in colonies is 110 sq. ft, if we assume that 4 adults live in each house. In short, majority of the houses in the scheduled caste colonies in Kerala are overcrowded and unfit for people to live in. The concept 'adequate housing' developed by the UN gives us a fair understanding of good healthy housing. Adequate housing is a prerequisite of quality private space.

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has underlined that the right to adequate housing should not be interpreted narrowly. Rather, it should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity. The characteristics of the right to adequate housing are clarified mainly in the Committee's general comments No. 4 (1991) on the right to adequate housing and No. 7 (1997) on forced evictions.

The right to adequate housing contains freedoms like Protection against forced evictions and the arbitrary destruction and demolition of one's home; the right to be free from arbitrary interference with one's home, privacy and family; and the right to choose one's residence, to determine where to live and to freedom of movement. The right to adequate housing contains entitlements. These entitlements include: Security of tenure; Housing, land and property restitution; Equal and non-discriminatory access to adequate housing; Participation in housing-related decision-making at the national and community levels. Adequate housing must provide more than four walls and a roof. A number of conditions must be met before particular forms of shelter can be considered to constitute 'adequate housing'. These elements are just as fundamental as the basic supply and availability of housing. For housing to be adequate, it must, at a minimum, meet the following criteria.

Security of tenure: housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have a degree of tenure security which guarantees legal protection against forced evictions, harassment and other threats. **Availability of services, materials, facilities and infrastructure:** Protection against forced evictions is a key element of the right to adequate housing and is closely linked to security of tenure. Forced evictions are defined as the 'permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and /or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection'. According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), at least 2 million people in the world are forcibly evicted every year, while millions are threatened with forced evictions. Forced evictions are carried out in a variety of circumstances and

for a variety of reasons, for instance, to make way for development and infrastructure projects, urban redevelopment or city beautification, or prestigious international events, as a result of conflicts over land rights, armed conflicts or societal patterns of discrimination. Forced evictions tend to be violent and disproportionately affect the poor, who often suffer further human rights violations as a result. In many instances, forced evictions compound the problem they were ostensibly aimed at solving. Regardless of their cause, forced evictions may be considered a gross violation of human rights and a prima facie violation of the right to adequate housing. Large-scale evictions can in general be justified only in the most exceptional circumstances and only if they take place in accordance with the relevant principles of international law. Housing is not adequate if its occupants do not have safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, energy for cooking, heating, lighting, food storage or refuse disposal.

Affordability: housing is not adequate if its cost threatens or compromises the occupants' enjoyment of other human rights. **Habitability:** housing is not adequate if it does not guarantee physical safety or provide adequate space, as well as protection against the cold, damp, heat, rain, wind, other threats to health and structural hazards.

Accessibility: housing is not adequate if the specific needs of disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not taken into account.

Location: housing is not adequate if it is cut off from employment opportunities, health-care services, schools, childcare centres and other social facilities, or if located in polluted or dangerous areas.

Cultural adequacy: housing is not adequate if it does not respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity.

Private property is a key ingredient in private space. Let us see to what extent scheduled caste house properties in caste colonies are economic good. We have seen that per capita land holding of scheduled caste families in caste colonies in Kerala is 1.66 cent. Scheduled caste land holdings are not only small but also, they are located in barren areas. Most of the families in the colony have only possession of the land not the full ownership. It makes things more complicated. These three key issues – geographical

inferiority, non-ownership and micro size- prevent scheduled castes from accessing bank credit and windfalls in land market. Scheduled caste house properties in caste colonies are not economic goods. In Marxian terminology, scheduled caste colonies in Kerala are open social prisons where Scheduled Caste people are forced to live as a wage labourer with no means of production, but their own labour power.

We have seen that land and houses in Scheduled Caste colonies are not a commodity having economic value. Now let's go inside the house. A house of less than 440 square feet is where more than one family lives. It is certain that single-room houses do not provide an environment for learning or living with individual privacy. Most of the houses in Scheduled Caste Colonies are not able to satisfy the spatial needs of people of different age, gender and disability. Overcrowding and limited space are twin sisters in Scheduled Caste colonies. No need to elaborate on the mental condition of those who have to live in such a way that even the sexual privacy of partners [Sexual Privacy and Conjugal Rights] requires the cooperation of others. The unsanitary conditions caused by crowded living in cramped quarters make the houses of Scheduled Caste colonies hells on earth. Scheduled caste colonies are breeding grounds of poverty, economic and social inequality, immature deaths, dropouts, social deviants and cultural alienation. Spatial constraints place limits upon any possibility in upward mobility of the people.

We have seen that Scheduled Caste houses in the colony have no economic value as private property. We have also seen that as a house they cannot fulfil the spatial needs of the people. Now let us see to what extent the people of Scheduled Caste Colonies are able to actively participate in the society. It is rare for an investor to emerge from the people of the colony because he will never be able to access the bank credit required to make the capital investment. The number of self-employed in SC colonies is only 3.61 percent of the total labour force. As owners of worthless colony land, they cannot enter the land market either. The areas that human labour in the colony can reach are often hard labour that leaves them chronically ill or prematurely dying. 77 percent

of the people working in Scheduled Caste colonies are wage labourers. Most of the parents fail midway and their children never reach any levels of higher education. Because they don't have savings or bank loans to devote to their children's education. Most children drop out midway and rush into low-wage, labour-intensive jobs. 11 percent of the people in the colonies are illiterate. The high dropout rate among Scheduled Caste students is indicated by the fact that dropping out happens at every stage of education and only 2.80 percentage achieve post-graduation and 0.09 percentage gain engineering and medical degrees. Youth in SC colonies are unable to acquire the skills needed for neoliberal jobs due to their poverty and low educational qualifications. They face social discrimination in labour market and workplaces. In short, we can definitely say that houses in colonies, due to their spatial limitations and lack of economic resources, beget dropouts, low paid workers and penniless families. Scheduled caste colonies still face social exclusion in Kerala (Sivanandan; Aryanathu; Kumar; Das; Thambi; Balakrishnan; Yesudas). Scheduled caste colonies in Kerala do not possess any good qualities which make a private property a quality private space except emotional bonding within SC families.

Conclusion

Scheduled caste house properties in colonies are spatially coffin homes and economically, they are worthless. They do not represent adequate housing. Colony dwellers do not have any meaningful participation in land market, property market and institutional credit. Overcrowding prevails in each house in the colony. Within the colony, due to low size of per capita land holding, houses are crowded in smaller areas. Overcrowding in the house leads to poor learning environment, unhealthy living environment, chance of spreading diseases, lack of privacy, especially violation of conjugal rights, behavioural problems, sleep deprivations and the list go one indefinitely. As each house in the colony continues to have no economic value as a private space, no matter how many crores the government spends on each colony, its private space will never be developed qualitatively. Even if the roads of the Scheduled Caste colonies are tarred with gold or its

walls are made of silver and covered with gems, there will be no change in the status of the houses inside the colony as a 'private space'. No colony will ever rise socially and economically without the development of a quality private space. Apart from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Kerala, all the other sections of the people in Kerala have economically developed mainly through three ways. Land reforms, Gulf migration and loans provided by banks. The people in Scheduled Caste Colonies have not got any benefits from those developmental avenues. Poor quality of private space in scheduled caste colonies directly help the preservation of historical structural inequality among scheduled castes in Kerala.

Conventionally, as a ritual, Politicians, administrators and academics in Kerala have been shedding crocodile tears over the pathetic human life in scheduled caste colonies. They recognize the problem but apologetically say that the solution is beyond their capacity. In reality a government with political will power and human considerations can easily solve the problems of scheduled caste colonies. When Kerala introduced land reforms, authorities either failed or conveniently forgot to serve scheduled castes serviceable agricultural land. Scheduled castes were slave castes and were not tenants. So historically they were landless people. They had only dilapidated hutments near the big paddy fields of landlords. As Kerala became an independent state in 1956 and, the first communist government came into power, socio-political atmosphere changed and apparently hostile towards landed aristocracy. While land reforms measures initiated, former tenants kept the land under their custody as their own, land lords protected their lands with connivance of officials and political class and millions of acres of land were converted to plantations to overcome the issues of land ceiling. Nobody took pain to provide arable agricultural land for scheduled caste people. They were rehabilitated in scheduled caste colonies where each family got only three to five cents of land. Here began untold miseries of scheduled caste people. If government takes steps to recover millions of acres of plantation lands, illegally kept by planters across Kerala, authorities can easily relocate scheduled caste families, now trapped in colonies and sustaining under inhuman

living conditions, providing one to five acres of land for each landless SC family. Dominant classes in Kerala have successfully created a myth around the land reform that it was beneficial to scheduled castes. Any attempt to raise fingers against this myth has been prevented politically and academically. Sad result of this unethical political and academic buttressing is the continued subhuman existence of scheduled caste people under coffin homes in caste colonies.

Maya Pramod in her much celebrated essay 'As a Dalit Woman: My Life in a Caste-Ghetto of Kerala' writes 'The history of colonies' as collective dwelling places begins with the Sachivothampuram Colony in 1936. But Dalits were not the only inhabitants in this first settlement colony of Kerala. Ezhavas, Vilakkithala Nairs, and Viswakarmmajars also lived in this colony. (In short span of time non-SC Colony dwellers left colonies and started their life elsewhere outside the colony. Scheduled caste people did not get that fortune due to lack of capital and political support).I can cite a personal example here. In 2006, my family which was dwelling in a rented house for more than 28 years was granted some money for occupying land and constructing a house through the municipality as per the VAMBAY (Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojna). An amount of Rs 30,000 was given for land procurement. In our enquiries to find some land for that amount, the municipality officers led us to a 2.15 cent patch in a barren field in a place called Manjadikkara. As soon as we reached there, we found out that the land was marked with incomplete structures of at least twelve families who had started building foundations and walls for houses. In this way, any place where at least ten-odd Dalit families came to live became a Dalit dwelling and was inscribed as a 'Dalit Colony'. By the time we bought the land, filled it with soil, and laid the foundation, the money and our savings were exhausted. We also received the notice for confiscation in three years. That house thatched with sheets lies uninhabitable even in 2018 (Pramod). What Mays describes in her essay is the life story of millions of scheduled castes living in colonies. Let us hope the authorities may do something good to help those poor people to escape from their coffin homes.

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