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Unveiling the Legacy of Pandit Karuppan: A Critical Analysis of Jathikkummi and Balakalesam in Kerala’s Social Reform Movement

B. Jyothish Kumar*Research Scholar, University of Kerala, Kerala, India* <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7249-2190>**Abstract**

The paper entitled Unveiling the Legacy of Pandit Karuppan: A Critical Analysis of Jathikkummi and Balakalesam in Kerala’s Social Reform Movement delves into the profound impact of two seminal works, Jathikkummi and Balakalesam, in catalyzing a transformative shift within the social fabric of Kerala. Emerging as responses to the entrenched caste system prevalent in Kerala society, these works served as significant milestones in the broader context of social reform movements in the region. Jathikkummi and Balakalesam, attributed to Pandit Karuppan, epitomize the spirit of resistance against caste-based oppression, advocating for the rights and dignity of marginalized communities. Through a comprehensive examination of historical records, literary analyses, and socio-political contexts, this paper elucidates the multifaceted dimensions of these revolutionary texts. It explores the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala during the time of their inception, highlighting the pervasive influence of caste hierarchy on various aspects of life. Furthermore, it investigates the strategies employed Pandit Karuppan to challenge existing norms and ignite conversations around social equality and justice. Central to the discussion are the themes of education, empowerment, and collective mobilization elucidated in Jathikkummi and Balakalesam. These works not only served as instruments of consciousness-raising but also as blueprints for practical activism aimed at dismantling caste-based discrimination and oppression. By critically engaging with these works, we gain valuable insights into the complexities of caste dynamics and the ongoing struggle for inclusive and egalitarian societies.

Keywords: Jathikkummi, Balakalesam, Untouchability, Vala, Dheevara**Introduction**

Pandit Karuppan was a remarkable social reformer who wielded literature as a potent instrument for effecting societal change. His foremost objective was the liberation of knowledge and the equitable dissemination of justice. Recognizing that the emancipation of humanity hinges upon knowledge liberation, he endeavoured to dispel irrational beliefs concerning caste discrimination and foster a sense of communal brotherhood. Through his literary oeuvre, Karuppan sought to cultivate a public sphere inclusive of all individuals, with a particular focus on advancing the welfare and progress of marginalized communities, including his own. Endowed with poetic talent and scholarly acumen, Karuppan assumed the role of a respected officer for his livelihood, leveraging his dual capacities as a poet and public servant for the betterment of the downtrodden. His literary works served as a clarion call against societal injustices while championing human values. Karuppan utilized folk songs as a vehicle for highlighting the inequities perpetuated by the caste system, aiming primarily to uplift the *Vala* community through his writings. However, he soon realized that literature alone could not eradicate social inequalities and recognized the imperative of direct engagement with the populace. Understanding the transformative power of education in elevating the social and cultural status of

marginalized groups, Karuppan aspired to establish libraries in remote villages to cultivate a culture of reading among the youth. Amidst his endeavours, Karuppan addressed the plight of the *Dheevaram* community, which languished in a state of destitution and dependency. He advocated instilling a sense of pride within the community, fostering a realization of their inherent humanity and entitlement to freedom, human rights, integrity, and progressive ideals akin to other communities. With these aims in mind, Karuppan harnessed literature as a catalyst for social reform, creating public spaces through his works to foster social circles where discussions predominantly centred on combatting social inequalities. Indeed, he emerged as Kerala's pioneering social reformer, orchestrating a collective awakening through these social circles. During this period, a customary practice prevailed among lower-caste households in Cochin, wherein they would listen, learn, and transcribe Karuppan's literary works into songs.

Jathikkummi

Jathikkummi stands as the quintessential masterpiece of Pandit Karuppan, leaving an indelible mark on Kerala's renaissance history. It served as a resounding protest against the prevailing caste discriminations and social injustices of its time, encapsulating these themes at its core. While luminaries like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and Kumaranasan raised their voices against social injustices in Travancore, Pandit Karuppan emerged as the pioneer of this struggle in Cochin. *Jathikkummi* is crafted in a simple language, adopting the style of a folk song, which resonated deeply with the masses, including the illiterate and common folk. The marginalized and discriminated 'untouchables' embraced the poem fervently, propelling its dissemination through oral tradition, enhancing its renown. Notably, *Jathikkummi* marked a watershed moment as the first Malayalam literary work to unequivocally condemn the caste system and untouchability. Penned during Karuppan's education at Kodungallur Kovilakom, the work's publication in 1912 aimed to underscore the values of freedom, equality, and fraternity within society (Chummar). *Jathikkummi* stands independently, yet harmoniously

resonates with the spirit of *Maneeshapanchakam*¹, reflecting Karuppan's astute literary craftsmanship.

Despite *Jathikkummi* being modelled upon *Maneeshapanchakam*, Pandit Karuppan's work encompasses numerous other insights. Commencing with a dialogue between Shankaracharya and the *Paraya*, the poem vividly illustrates the fallibility of caste discrimination and elucidates the challenges faced by India and the Hindu community due to caste segregation and discrimination. Discrimination based on caste fundamentally contradicts Indian culture. *Jathikkummi* asserts that all human beings are created equal by God, condemning the practice of untouchability as an unforgivable offense (Karuppan: *Jathikkummi*). Karuppan boldly declares these sentiments in a society where untouchability was upheld as a matter of pride and norm. He asserts that true wisdom transcends caste and creed, emphasizing the pursuit of eternal wisdom and happiness over divisive notions. Karuppan critiques the absurdity of the caste system in lines such as:

*All the world is God's creation
And all his children one creed
Can we keep off one fellow being?
Is not good watching! o! Muse
Is not pollution impudence! (Tapaswini)*

To illustrate that caste discrimination is a recent phenomenon, Karuppan employs various anecdotes involving figures like Kaliarayathi, Vyasan, King

1 The story behind the origin of Maneeshapanchakam goes like this. One day after having his morning ritualistic bath Shankaracharya was going to the nearby temple. The incident happened around the premises of Kashi Vishwanath Temple. On his way he happen to encounter a Paraya (an untouchable) who was in fact Lord Shiva who has come in disguise to test Shri Shankaracharya. Failing to realize this Shankaracharya asked the Parayan to move out of his way. The Parayan then responded thus. 'Should my body be moved from yours or should my soul be moved from your soul? If you want my body to keep a distance from yours, you need to keep in mind that your body is made of Punjabhuthas. Mine too. When that's the case what is the point of asking me to move out of your way? Not just mine and yours, but all the souls in this universe is one. Then how can my soul be distanced from yours.' Upon hearing this Shankaracharya's consciousness (Maneesh) got awakened. Based on the enlightenment he received Shankaracharya later compiled five slokas which came to be known as Maneeshapanchakam.

Shanthanu, Vallikurathi, and Subramanyan. He endeavours to bolster the self-esteem and pride of the fisherman or Araya community, leaving behind a historical legacy through his literary works. Karuppan extols the value of knowledge, asserting that those with wisdom should be respected as gurus regardless of caste. He contrasts the absence of untouchability in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka with its prevalence in Kerala, critiquing the feudal system perpetuated by certain upper-caste Hindus for their selfish interests (Karuppan: *Jathikkummi*). Karuppan reminisces about his peaceful stay in Tamil Nadu, where he encountered no ill treatment or anger, contrasting it with the discrimination prevalent in Kerala. He highlights the absence of untouchability in countries like Japan and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and points out the injustice faced by untouchables in Kerala, including restrictions on entry and access to quality food. Karuppan asserts that self-realization will lead to the recognition of the inherent equality of all human beings, eradicating discriminatory thoughts.

The practice of untouchability was prevalent across all sections of society, encompassing both higher and lower castes². *Kanakkan* would scorn a *Tiyya*, considering the latter to be of a supposedly superior caste. Similarly, *Kanakkans* would look down upon *Pulayas*, who in turn would discriminate against *Parayyas* and *Ulladans*. This stratification of untouchability permeated society in layers, with deeply entrenched roots. Interestingly, if an untouchable were to change their caste by converting

to Islam or Christianity, they would be absolved of the stigma of untouchability. Pandit Karuppan raises a poignant question: In a society where caste is immutable even through religious conversion, how can untouchability cease to exist merely by changing one's religion? He dismisses this notion as mere superstition, sarcastically remarking that such beliefs will ultimately lead to the downfall of the Hindu community (Karuppan: *Jathikkummi*). Notably, there is no mention of untouchability in the Vedas. Karuppan deliberately prompts upper-caste individuals to reconsider the futility of clinging to the caste system. He highlights the irony of seeking validation for their selfish interests and prejudices from the Puranas.

Pandit Karuppan expressed gratitude towards the British for their significant contributions to social reforms. He credited them for not granting the pleasant land to the Portuguese and Dutch, instead acknowledging their efforts in combating the caste system and untouchability in India (Karuppan: *Jathikkummi*). This appreciation towards British reforms resonated among many reformers in India, particularly those from untouchable castes, who supported British rule. Notably, Sree Narayana Guru once remarked, 'the British has given me monasticism'. Karuppan further derided the absurdity of untouchability, advocating for new laws to prohibit its observance. He asserted that only through such progressive measures could religions attain true meaning. His bold stance perhaps influenced Kumaranasan's declaration in 1922, urging individuals to change laws themselves or risk being changed by them (Alice). Pandit Karuppan earnestly appealed to the rulers of his time to enact legislation that would eradicate the scourge of caste discrimination. He concluded his work by extending his regards and best wishes for such endeavours.

Written in 1905 and published in 1912, *Jathikkummi* captured the hearts and minds of untouchables, particularly the *Vala* community including the *Parayars* and *Pulayas*, in areas like Ernakulam, Edakochi, Kodungallur, and Mulavukaadu. The lyrics of the work were memorized by many, reminiscent of how upper-caste *Sanathana* Hindus would recite *Harinamakeerthanam*. Women and children from the community would gather in

² *Vast disparity in the eating habits was rampant on the basis of caste hierarchy from Namboodiris to Nayadi. The rule of the society was that every person should accept the food of Amritethu (sumptuous food) to Karkkadi (Karikkadi is a dark coloured porridge prepared from protein deficit poor quality rice boiled and deep fried). Whole nutritious foods such as milk, butter, ghee and yogurt are reserved for the upper castes. Eleven varieties of curries should be cooked and served accordingly. Not only the rulers but also the rich affluent Namboodiris can eat Amriteth. The lords and Nairs were allowed to eat six kinds of curries and to eat medium quality of food. The Avarnas should satisfy with Karkkadi. Salt and chilli were also considered to be an adequate addition to the Karkkadi. This is considered as God's will. It was taken the law to punish those who violate it.*

their humble huts at dusk to recite the lyrics, treating it almost as a sacred prayer. This dissemination of *Jathikkummi* instilled a profound sense of joy, freedom, and pride within the community. In the years following its publication, *Jathikkummi* played a significant role as the civil rights movement gained momentum, aiming to end caste discrimination and untouchability. The path to the Vaikom temple was eventually opened to untouchables, with even upper-caste individuals stepping forward to support the Vaikom Satyagraha. The formation of organizations led by figures like T K Madhavan and Sahodaran Ayyappan stands as a testament to the enduring impact of Pandit Karuppan and the publication of *Jathikkummi* on society (Valath). This underscores Pandit Karuppan's foresight and wisdom, recognizing the transformative power of literature in effecting social change.

Balakalesam

Balakalesam, a renowned work by Pandit Karuppan, embodies Renaissance values. He completed this work while serving as a Sanskrit Teacher at the Caste Girls School in Ernakulam. Ramavarma Raja, popularly known as *Rajarshi*, ruled Cochin at that time and later abdicated his throne. As a man of independent outlook and self-dignity, his indifference to British rule prompted him to relinquish his crown. In anticipation of his abdication, he released a farewell note to his beloved subjects through the gazettes³. Ramavarma implemented numerous reforms in Cochin, including initiating a drinking water supply from Chovvara through a pipeline to the city of Ernakulam and sanctioning the Cochin Port project. Separate departments were established to promote agriculture and the fishing industry. His sixtieth birthday celebration in 1912

3 'My beloved subjects, the announcement I am going to make, will, I am sure, cause surprise and grief, but, hoping you will bear with me and extend to me your sympathy, I am to convey to you my wish, owing to advancing age, to retire to private life and my intention to give effect to the same as soon as I have concluded the few important measures undertaken by me which, I am hoping, I shall be able to do before long. I hope to bid farewell to you in a Public Durbar the date of which will, in due course, be announced by the Dewan' - Office of the Dewan of Cochin, The Cochin Government, Gazette, Extraordinary, Published by Authority, Ernakulam, 8th December 1913.

featured a committee organizing various events, including a drama competition. An advertisement by the committee members called for dramas with the Maharaja as the central figure, offering distinguished prizes sponsored by Rao Sahib NanPerumal Chetty. Despite the advertisement being published a month prior, Pandit Karuppan learned of it only ten days before the entry deadline. Recognizing the need for utmost care when portraying a Raja as the protagonist, he understood the potential of a successful play to draw attention from the Royal Family, upper-caste representatives, and government officials, facilitating significant social reformation. Thus, he resolved to utilize art for social reformation, focusing on the grievances of the downtrodden, including the *Valas*, *Pulayas*, and other marginalized groups suffering from prevalent untouchability in Cochin. Believing it was the right time to expose this social reality, Karuppan completed the drama within four or five days and appointed his friend K.V. Peter to submit it to Mr. C.P. Achutha Menon, the convener of the examination committee, on the last date (Chummar).

In the drama competition, K.P. Karuppan's *Balakalesam* won the first prize. The title *Bala* represents the state of Cochin, while *Kalesam* signifies the king. The plot of the play depicted the hardships faced by the people of Cochin before the reign of *Kalesa* and the progress that occurred in the state after sixteen years of his rule. Karuppan highlighted the tortures and sufferings endured by the lower-caste people at the hands of the upper caste in the theme of the play. The play was later published by *Kochi Sahithya Samajam*⁴. Swadesabhimani K. Ramakrishna Pillai severely criticized the work upon its release. During a train journey from Ernakulam to Thrissur, K.V. Peter met Sri K. Ramakrishna Pillai at a station and referred to Karuppan's *Balakalesam*. After reading the creative work during the journey, Peter expressed his contentment with the content and assured that *Balakalesam* would win the prize (Chummar). However, for unknown reasons, Ramakrishna Pillai later turned against the work and attempted to discredit it in various ways. This controversy led to a literary dispute, with Ramakrishna Pillai's criticism, T.K. Krishna Menon's reply, Karuppan's

4 A literary assembly formed at Thrissur in 1913 under the leadership of Appan Thampuran.

response, and Ramakrishna Pillai's conviction all being consolidated and published in the form of a book titled *Balakalesa Vadam* by Akshara Ratna Prakasika Press in 1915 (Chummar). Sri. Ulloor S. Parameswara Aiyer eventually resolved these controversies (Appan). Meanwhile, some individuals with vested interests questioned the publication of *Balakalesam* by Kochi *Sahitya Samajam*, demanding the removal of the *Samajam's* name from the publication. This demand stemmed from the selection of the book by the jury for the prize. Appan Thampuran served as the President of the *Kochi Sahitya Samajam*, and the committee members passed the demand to remove the *Samajam's* name from the work based on a majority opinion (Valath). Committee members included Ramakrishna Pillai, Anantha Narayana Sasthri, Easwara Pillai, Kesava Pillai, and Kunjan Menon (Valath). Kottilil Narayana Marar, a prominent judge from the upper class, later provided financial assistance to Pandit Karuppan for publishing *Balakalesam* drama (Karuppan: *Pandit Karuppante Sampoorana Kritikal*).

Balakalesam stands as a representative work with a notable place in the history of the renaissance in Kerala. The major theme of the play revolves around administrative reforms in the state of Cochin. Characters from various castes such as *Namboodiri*, *Nair*, *Ezhava*, and *Pulaya* play significant roles. Karuppan presents reformative ideas including the demand for timely administrative reforms, regulation of the import of foreigners into the state, granting freedom to lower-caste tribes like the *Pulayas*, promotion of marginalized sections through education, ensuring people's representation in administration, and banning social evils such as untouchability and discrimination by law. Karuppan introduces a *Pulaya* character who vehemently confronts his upper-class opponents, asserting that untouchability based on caste is foolish and contrary to the principles of Hindu religion. The conservative upper class's opposition to the play *Balakalesam* stems from their agitation over the final verdict of the Judge, who punished the upper class for their mistreatment of the *Pulaya* on the grounds of untouchability. This opposition reveals their adherence to the prevailing custom of untouchability in the kingdom of Cochin during those days. Despite prevailing laws protecting Brahmins from

capital punishment regardless of the gravity of the crime, the Judge's verdict, ordering some culprits into exile and others to hanging, demonstrates that such atrocities cannot be tolerated in the state of Cochin. The work boldly proclaims untouchability as a punishable crime, echoing the sentiments of the Great Mahatma who declared it a crime against God and Man (Radhakrishnan).

Karuppan fervently exhorts the world that a great ruler should enact severe measures of punishment for those who practice the social evil of untouchability. He addresses numerous social and political issues in this work. The only remedy to cure all deep-rooted social injustices in our society is to impart a modern form of education, and he advocates for the importance of English education, stating that one without English proficiency is considered to be at a disadvantage. When Kochalu, the *Pulaya* character, asserts that a king considers all his subjects as equals, it signifies Karuppan's vision that impartiality and equality in a ruler make him great. The king himself declares in the play some democratic ideas such as establishing tribunals to settle disputes between subjects and lords, forming a *prakriti samajam* to engage with public opinion, and ensuring the participation of commoners in the administration of the country. Karuppan introduces the idea of people's participation in administration as a topic for discussion in this work, which was ahead of its time. All projects initiated in the kingdom of Cochin after the coronation of the king, such as railway development, pipeline water supply, industrial growth, education advancement, township sanitation, and policies promoting equal freedom for all subjects, appointment of candidates based on qualification irrespective of caste or status, and lord-tenant rights and laws, were not mere flattery towards the ruler but tangible manifestations of humanitarian values of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In a political system degenerated by casteism and laws that protect social evils, including untouchability, a drama composed for the Diamond Jubilee celebration of the king, wherein a character rebukes such evil practices, requires great vision and courage from the writer to be ahead of their time. No one could demonstrate such valour as Mr. Karuppan, who satirized *Namboodiris* in this play, even when they held great influence over members of royal families in those days. Although the

upper-class society joined hands against Karuppan, the Maharaja, who admired Karuppan's poetic talents, refrained from taking any action against him. Dr. Palpu once asked Mr. Karuppan, 'How could you remain in service after this?' Such a daring attempt is one that few government employees would undertake in their lifetime (Chummar). Reflecting on an incident in Travancore during the same period, where Sri. Narayana Kurukkal was dismissed from service for pointing out certain administrative shortcomings in his novels *Parappuram* and *Udayabhanu*, underscores the ongoing challenges in challenging the status quo, even within princely states like Travancore. *Balakalesam* was a highly debated work among scholarly social circles during that era. The King of Cochin honoured Pandit Karuppan with the title *Kavithilakan* in 1919. Kerala Varma Valiyakoyi Thampuran bestowed upon him the honour of *Vidwan*. Sree Moolam Thirunal, the King of Travancore, who read the manuscript of the drama, gifted him a diamond ring (Panangad).

Conclusion

The revolutionary works of *Jathikummi* and *Balakalesam* by Pandit Karuppan stand as remarkable milestones in the history of Kerala's social reform movement. Through these seminal writings, Pandit Karuppan courageously challenged the entrenched caste system and the dehumanizing practice of untouchability that plagued Kerala society. His vehement opposition to these evils and his impassioned call for liberation struck a chord with the masses, catalysing a wave of consciousness and activism against the oppressive structures of caste-based discrimination. *Jathikummi* and *Balakalesam* emerged as powerful voices of dissent, urging people to break free from the shackles of tradition and envision a society founded on principles of equality, dignity, and social justice. By articulating the injustices perpetuated by the caste system and advocating for its dismantlement, Pandit Karuppan paved the way for a transformative movement that sought to redefine the socio-cultural landscape of Kerala. The impact of these works reverberated far beyond their time, leaving an indelible mark on the

collective consciousness of Kerala and inspiring generations of reformers and activists to continue the struggle for a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Indeed, the legacy of *Jathikummi* and *Balakalesam* serves as a testament to the enduring power of ideas and the transformative potential of individuals committed to challenging entrenched systems of oppression. As we reflect on the significance of these works, we are reminded of the ongoing imperative to confront and dismantle structures of inequality and discrimination in all their forms. The spirit of resistance and resilience exemplified by Pandit Karuppan continues to resonate, urging us to remain steadfast in our commitment to justice and equality for all members of society. In honouring his legacy, we reaffirm our collective responsibility to strive towards a future where caste-based discrimination and untouchability are consigned to the dustbin of history, and where every individual is afforded the dignity and respect they rightfully deserve.

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