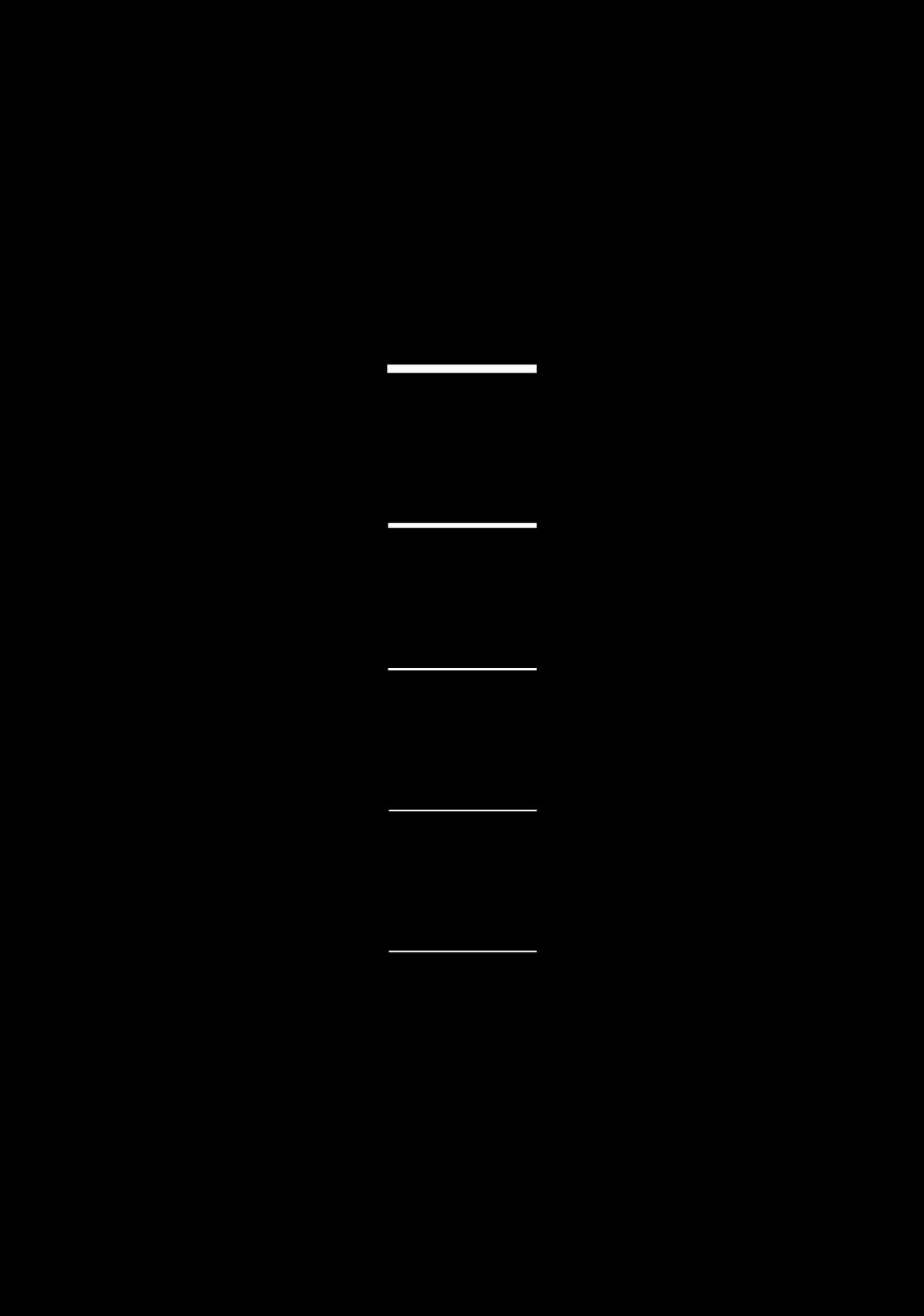




NOME

ALPHABET OF TOUCH
OVERSTRETCHED BODIES
AND MUTED HOWLS FOR SONGS

S A J A N M A N I



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SEPTEMBER 11 - OCTOBER 10, 2020

N O M E G A L L E R Y . C O M

Glogauer Str. 17 | 10999 Berlin | Germany

A THOUSAND PLATFORMS FOR CRYING TREES, AND TOILING BODIES, AND MORE

Antony George Koothanady

From the lands of Aryans, hail o hail!
From the lands of Aryans, hail o hail!
Brahminic Aryans, hail o hail!
[...]
Like selling bulls, they sold our fathers
For money. We can never forget that.
And can we ever forget that?
Father sold to one place
Mother to another
Children orphaned
Can slaves forget that?
-Poykayil Appachani¹

*“Symbols, aesthetic gestures and metaphors are contextual.
And when they try to cross a cultural border, they either crack
open or metamorphose into something entirely different.”*

Guillermo Gómez-Peña²

The Devil's Milk and God's Own Country

A reading of John Tully's *The Devil's Milk* connects the colonial plunder of the Americas, Africa and South Asia, to the everyday life of rubber farmers and laborers in Kerala, a small state in India. On the map of world tourism, Kerala is branded as “God's Own Country,” a land of lush greenery and fabulous beaches. Kerala's cosmopolitan past — its role in the spice trade, the arrival there of Christianity and Islam in the early years of each of those faiths, and the state's later reception of left politics — makes it different from other parts of India. Apart from the coconuts which feature in resort and hotel brochures, it is *rubber* that greens this topography of hills and sea. And rubber cultivation does not make for a life of mobility and freedom. Rather, it makes for suffering and toil: a life of year-round underpaid labor. The rubber plantations in Kerala (mainly

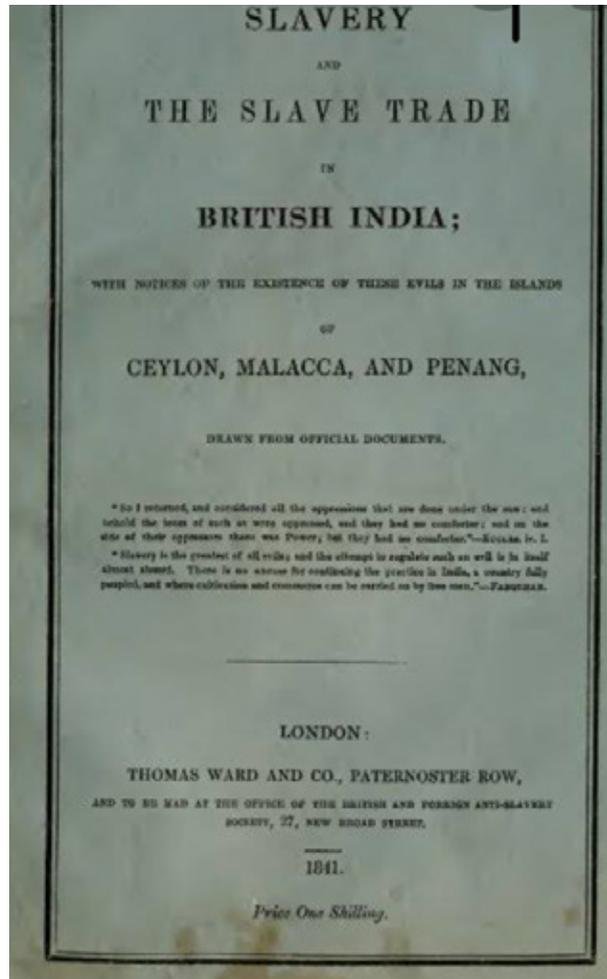
smallholdings) take up 16 percent of India's arable land, account for 90 percent of all rubber production, and shape the lives of nearly a million people in India. But these days, in keeping with the neoliberal policies and international trade agreements that work in favor of the big tire companies, the central government of India imports more than 40 percent of the natural rubber used in India. As a result, agrarian distress has been normalized and made part of the societal structure.

Tapping rubber trees, collecting latex, making latex sheets and drying them, after draining them with the help of rubber-rolling machines, are the preliminary steps in the making of smoked crepe rubber sheets. Women and children are seasonally occupied with gleaning the scraps and remnants known as *mun pal*, or mud latex, the residue that is spilt on the earth at the foot of the tree; *ottu pal*, or groove milk, the ribbon-like rubber sediment that settles in the grooves cut into the tree; and *chirattappal*, or coconut-shell rubber, the residue found in the containers attached to trees to collect latex. (Now plastic, these were once coconut shells.) Then, just before the beginning of rainy season, there are rain guards (plastic sheets) to be fixed on the trees, to protect the grooves from the rain. In short, the lives of rubber plantation laborers and small-scale rubber farmers cannot be separated from those of rubber trees.

Every fifteen to twenty years the trees must be replaced. Prior to the logging is the slaughter-tapping, making as many cuts and channels as possible on the bark of the trees to obtain maximum latex. There follows a phase of total uncertainty in the lives of the workers. Then the impoverished small farmers and daily-wage laborers begin to slaughter-tap themselves, trying to survive by selling off household articles, small patches of land, the ornaments of women and children. The unluckier among them go to the usurers or banks, and sometimes end their lives by drinking the acid that is kept for coagulating rubber milk. If the emaciated black figures whose limbs were amputated for failing to meet the rubber quotas set by colonial masters reappear on social media, do the farmers who commit suicide in the hilly regions of Kerala rest in peace in the obituary columns of local newspapers?

Tully shows the place occupied by rubber in Mesoamerican spirituality to have been that of the tree of life, with comparisons drawn between latex and blood. From Yucatan to Arizona, the ball games played by Indigenous people merged with the metaphysics of rubber. Until explorers in their travelogues related it to human sacrifice, rubber had been a symbol of life and movement. With the coming of the white conquerors, rubber became the devil's milk, a substance that brought death and havoc. Thus, with the loss of rubber's mystic halo, there came the loss of cultures and peoples. The systematic massacre of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, Vietnam and Congo, and the making of rubber slaves at the IG Farben plant at Auschwitz, turned the crying tree (Quechua *kauchuk*) into a genocidal symbol. The atrocities committed against slaves, workers, coolies and trade-union leaders in different rubber producing locations across the globe are very great: seen together, they illustrate a whole world map of plunder and violence.

In Kerala, the rubber in the hands of British planters loosened the boundaries of caste, by the introduction of wage labor, followed by conversion to Missionary Christianity. Caste slavery gave way to wage labor, and the oppressed Dalits began to create their own modernity of access to education and dignity, despite the fragmentation of community life and destruction of family bonds. From the 1940s, the migration of farmers into the eastern hills laid the groundwork for cash-crop farming for the first time in Kerala's history, and rubber became a major form of produce. Rubber's ambivalent role as, at once, a means of survival and a lure toward pauperization and death continues in Kerala, along with deep ecological changes and few electoral impacts.



First page of *Slavery and the Slave Trade in British India, Ceylon, Malacca and Penang*, published by Thomas Ward and Co. for the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society in 1841. Based mainly on documents presented to the British Parliament and the official records of the East India Company, this was one of the first accounts published in English about the caste slavery in Kerala.

Can History Be Salvaged? A Caste Question

Caste is the most oppressive discriminatory practice in existence on the Indian subcontinent, and now, across international borders, it permeates various countries in different forms. In Hindu ideology, caste is like race, only inherited via changeless rules of endogamy. Caste determines one's social and individual life. The everydayness of caste is beyond categorization, but it approaches a racial supremacist, fascist ideology in its rigidity and stupidity. Neither one hundred years of colonial rule, nor the numerous invasions before that, could effect much change in the Indian caste order. Even Buddha and his teachings were collapsed by the persistence of caste. In a violent counter-revolution, Hindu Brahminic ideology effectively annihilated Buddhism in India by the tenth century. Even the representative democracy of India, the fruit of decolonization and modernization, has failed to secure human rights and equal opportunities for the lower castes. To date, in other words, the past, present and future of India remain entangled in the phenomena of caste, whose violent manifestations such as lynchings, riots, massacres, and rapes, occasionally make headlines and then rapidly disappear into the archives of forgetfulness.

The Rig Veda, one of the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, clearly divides humans into four categories or varnas:

- 1) Brahmins, who control even gods with their mantras, are the masters of all others.
- 2) Kshatriyas are the warrior class who are entitled to guard cows and Brahmins, and should rule according to the wishes of Brahmins.
- 3) Vaishyas are the merchants and middlemen.
- 4) Shudras are the servants of all three varnas above them.

To sustain this structure of gradated inequality, the priestly class segregated the Indigenous population from the rest as Dalits — *avarna*, or outcastes. Portrayed as subhumans, born out of shit and urine, the incarnations of evil and sin, they were deprived of all human rights and denied the right to learn letters and gain

knowledge. To further legitimize the knowledge monopoly of the upper castes, several restrictions on the use of language and words also were imposed on the Dalits. If they happen to overhear the chants of Vedas, molten lead should be poured into their ears. They are the untouchables, slaves who cannot walk on public roads, enter temples, wear good clothes, sport a moustache, rear cows, own ornaments or use proper language. Women among them may never be 'chaste' but are the sex slaves of the upper castes. Even the shadow of a lower-caste person was understood to pollute those of upper castes. The rules of caste conduct were codified as *Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu)*, referred to like a constitution by kings and rulers, even into the early twentieth century. In Kerala, the sufferings of Dalits were added to by their unapproachability, or 'unseeability,' a very special Kerala phenomenon. Also among these rules of conduct was the unbreakable law of keeping physical distance between different castes. Touch was the most transgressive act that could make one lose caste; for each caste, on each rung of the caste ladder, the act of touching a lower-caste person was, therefore, the most abject and unthinkable taboo. There are many accounts of certain upper-caste women and children being made into slaves by their being forced to touch lower-caste persons. Inter-caste dining, or sitting with certain lower castes, would lead to expulsion from one's caste, and such persons were then sold into slavery. With the passage of time, as caste became ever more concrete, this ultimate taboo against inter-caste touching gained more and more gendered, sexual, social and spiritual connotations.

Natural Rubber Price Table

Grade	Specification	Price
RSS 4	Clean, smoked with least dirt	132 INR
RSS 5	Clean, smoked and with permissible dirt	129 INR
LOT	Unclean and not smoked properly	90 INR

The higher grades RSS 1x to RSS 3 are mainly used for manufacture of products for medical, pharmaceutical and engineering. The lower grades of RSS 4 and 5 are generally used for the manufacture of automobile tyres, re-treading materials and all other general products. RSS 3 and RSS 4 are the preferred raw material for radial tyres. Quality of Ribbed Smoked Sheets is ascertained as laid down in Green Book Standards. (Top grades RSS 1-3 omitted from the table.)⁴

Physical Distancing for Different Castes in Kerala

Caste	Category	Distance in feet	Description	Grade
Kshatriya	Rulers, smoked with least dirt	2	Born of Brahmins	2
Nair	Shudras	8	Warriors, croppers	3
Ezhava	Low Caste properly	36	Producers, quasi-slaves	4
Pulaya	Dalit	64	Agri-slaves	5
Paraya	Dalit	Not to see	Agri-slaves	6

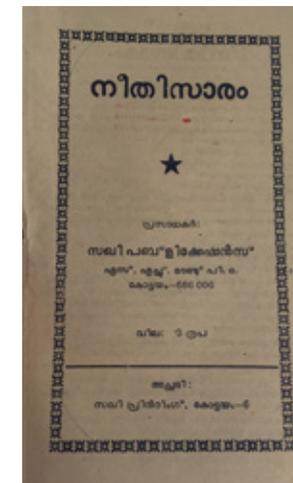
Table showing the required physical distance from Brahmins who are considered the incarnation of all virtues and masters of gods. Nambudiris of Kerala claimed that they were the purest and highest group among the Brahmins of India. They maintained different clans among them and laid claim to all the land in Kerala by virtue of Parashurama, an avatar of Vishnu. According to the traditions, axe-wielding Parashurama created Kerala by chasing away the Sea god Varuna and submitted it to Nambudiris and made them highest of the high caste. These castes in the table practiced untouchability and physical distance among themselves also. Lowest castes like Nayadis cannot be present anywhere in daylight and omitted from the table. *Sankarasmriti* is a standard text for determining physical distance and other purity-pollution rules.⁵

The monopoly of cultural capital in the hands of those belonging to the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and, in some places, Shudra, categories ensures the hegemony of the upper castes over the lower castes or Dalits. Religious conversion, gentrification, social mobility, inclusive policies, the seizure of political power, and other proposed solutions to the caste question that have emerged within sociological discourse — all fall apart in the face of the invincible logic of caste. Certainly, the dichotomy between haves and have-nots, the proletariat and bourgeoisie, seems an ineffectual tool for breaking out of the labyrinth of caste that predetermines the futures of workers and capitalists in India. Apparently Indian art, too, is still intertwined with the hegemony of caste, despite the postcolonial benevolence and intellectual charity of the West. Caste is on view in the surnames of artists and curators, reproducing dominant caste tastes.

The memory of slavery and its enactment is one thing that *can* unite the oppressed castes and create a feeling of community in times of oppression and exploitation. It was Poykayil Appachan, also known as Poykayil Yohannan (1879 — 1939), a Keralan Dalit prophet, social revolutionary and reformer, who realized the potential of history to formulate cohesive dynamics of community formation. He was born into the slave caste of Paraya and, along with his family, ‘ascended’ to Christianity at the age of five, later to realize that Christianity could not be an egalitarian religion in Kerala, where it had been appropriated by the upper castes. Through the enactment of slave narratives drawn from the collective memory of his people, Appachan strove against the erasure of history and began to explore an inclusive faith that could end caste discrimination. Following legal disputes over his right to preach and organize people, he established his own church, the Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), roughly translatable as “Church of the Really Liberating God.” “However [that], during his lifetime, Yohannan, while projecting the prophetic aura and divinity of a redeemer, existed mostly in a liminal Christian space, transgressing Biblical themes and teachings but not formally breaking away from the Christian life-world,”⁶ he succeeded in recovering the identity and self-respect of his people via a liberation theology distinct from the Christianity and Hinduism of those that had enslaved

his people. He composed songs to spread his ideas among the slave castes disintegrated to literacy. The songs of Appachan firmly established the history of the slaves as a project of emancipation and empowerment. In an event that shook the spiritual authority of the dominant religions in Kerala, Appachan was deified by his disciples, mainly lower-caste women, the most oppressed persons in that patriarchal caste society. Certainly, his recourse to *Raksha Nirnayam*, the collective performance of memories of slavery, without reliance on the written word or authentic documented sources, makes him an organic intellectual whose efforts toward the recovery of a history that was under erasure are unparalleled in the history of Kerala modernity.

The experience of slavery ritualistically recovered from oblivion and inscribed in the songs of Appachan has recently resurfaced in art, literature and academic history. A more radical form of revelation, his songs reverberate with waves of pain, produced in the pianissimo endemic to small subjectivities, marginalized communities and minor languages.



Cover of *Neethisaram* (*Essence of justice*), a commoner’s handbook for justifying caste discrimination in daily life. It was widely used in non-formal schools in Kerala until the 1950s. My grandfather used to cite from this book occasionally, when scolding children.



Latex curding shed. Photo: Antony George Koothanady

Touching Bodies and BwOs (Bodies without Organs)

“The organism is not all the body, the BwO: rather, it is a stratum on the BwO, in other words a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences.”

Deleuze and Guattari⁷

In the time of India’s freedom movement, the eradication of untouchability was part of M. K. Gandhi’s agenda. The “father of the nation,” Gandhi (1869–1948) was a deeply religious champion of premodern values and a great critic of modern science. Naturally, he could not relinquish the idea of caste because he was aware of its importance in the Hindu religion. Believing in the goodwill of the upper castes, through which, he thought, the plight of Dalits might gradually be ameliorated, Gandhi advocated the upliftment of the lower castes and an end to untouchability. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), by contrast, he who led the oppressed and drafted the constitution of India in a spirit of modernity and secularism, dedicated his life to the annihilation of caste. Ambedkar advocated the efficacy of conversion as an exit from caste oppression, and after a prolonged critique of Hinduism, embraced Buddhism along with thousands of followers in 1956.

On New Year’s Day of 2018, more than five decades after Ambedkar’s conversion, his followers gathered for the bicentenary celebrations of the historic Bhima Koregaon battle, one of those in which the Dalits fought for the British against the upper castes. While the government was against the commemoration of a battle in which an Indian king was defeated by British colonizers, Ambedkar during his lifetime had recognized its importance as an assertion of the human dignity and equality of Dalits, and paid tribute to the Dalit soldiers who lost their lives in the battle. Nowadays, his position may seem unpatriotic to nationalists, posing an historical dilemma rife with colonial ambivalence for postcolonial pundits. Yet for the

oppressed Dalits, who know “internal colonialism,” Ambedkar is right and his legacy should be upheld.

Thus it was that when, on January 1, 2018, a large gathering of Dalits and activists of different affiliations arrived at Bhima Koregaon, the local government authorities issued a notice of boycott against the commemorative program. When the organizers moved ahead, Hindu right-wing groups attempted to disrupt the commemoration, calling it anti-national. The ensuing confrontation was followed by police firing on the Dalits, killing twenty-eight-year-old Rahul Patangale and injuring hundreds of others. The sixteen-year-old Dalit boy Yogesh Prahlad Yadav died due to police caning, and the body of nineteen-year-old Dalit girl Puja Sakat was found in a well later. Riots broke out in which right-wing groups targeted Dalit streets and ghettos. Both the central and regional governments whetted the mayhem wrought by the fascist voluntary organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and nearly 3000 peaceful protesters were detained. There followed a “made in India” McCarthyist witch hunt of academics, writers, lawyers, human rights activists, feminists, public intellectuals, and artists, which is still ongoing. Books, including Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (yes, a high court judge asked the accused “Why read about a war fought abroad?”!), as well as biographies of freedom fighters, theses, pamphlets, posters, laptops, mobile phones, were seized and produced as exhibits in law courts. Arrests in relation to the incident continue, and the draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) is being put to use against the critics of government. Any vigorous dissent is ample evidence for one to be branded an “urban Naxalite” (a nickname for Maoists) in India today.

At the center of these incidents lies the problem of caste and the failure of the nation-state to protect its own citizens. Interestingly, as Dalit bodies strive to break the walls of caste, they seem to be engaged in a tactile politics. As they debunk its racist order, they touch history and reinvent themselves through touching the intangible — nation.

As Erin Manning clearly illustrates, touch and tact differ in that the former is of movement and the latter is a cautious stop to secure one’s self:

“Tact in this regard would function as an imposition onto bodies more than a quality of potential re-embodiment. Bodies secured with a tactful injunction would have to stop (being bodies). Yet, definitionally, tact operates within all touch, at least as a supplement⁸”

After untouchability was outlawed in 1949, caste itself became more tactful and started operating in more subtle ways on society while deepening its roots in the private sphere. More recently, for instance, even the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has been interpreted as proof of the scientific basis of untouchability. One cultural magazine published by Kerala Brahmins included an editorial on the benefits of untouchability in the context of social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus. Another cultural organization produced a short film entitled *Theendappadakale*, translatable as “polluting distance.” Ostensibly promoting the government’s COVID-19 prevention measures while clandestinely glorifying the discriminatory practices of untouchability and unapproachability, strong protest on social media has led to the film’s withdrawal.

The collection of drawings, moving images and performance entitled “Alphabet of Touch >< Overstretched Bodies and Muted Howls for Songs” markedly refers to history as a living force and a source of hope. Obviously, the ahistorical presentism and all-encompassing relativism of the capitalist art market are at loggerheads here with the presence of history. Here, the immediate set of significations and contextuality is intended to translate the bitter experience of caste slavery and underpaid physical labor into a space of intimate communication. The philosophical journey toward the possibility of non-being, life beyond eternity, is interrupted by the barbed-wire facts of caste and inequality. It all begins in Kerala, South India where caste slavery and the slave trade perpetrated by colonizers both internal and external — namely upper-caste Hindus, upper-caste Christians, and

slave traders from European and Arab countries — have destroyed the lives of lower-caste people.

An artist's endeavors to go back to the Artaudian concept of the BwO, via Deleuze and Guattari, to attain the freedom to assert the muted and scattered, must surely effect a break in the circuits of hyper-aestheticism. A continuum of intensities for collective deliberation goes on in this work, and it is unlike the post-structuralist rage against signification and the real. *I want to touch the BwO of the rubber tree* is an enunciation in the form of a lament, alluding to the muted cries of slaves and the sufferings of laborers. Sajan Mani's works are distinguished by their certainties about subjects outside the perimeter of cultural relativism. Standardized in the nineteenth century by the German missionary Herman Gundert and later democratized by lower-caste access to education, the Kerala language of Malayalam acquires a performative heteroglossia in the act of its alphabet being inscribed in a gallery in Germany. The artist's meticulous efforts to translate, and sometimes contradict, the empirical and sensorial interconnections of locations and people definitely move toward a personal history. There is nothing here nostalgic or repentant for the artist's own privilege, but there is a guiltless passion for what is denied in life, real immanence to speak to the world.

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is a PhD scholar at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, Central University of Kerala, India, working on performance and theatre. He works with Sajan Mani as a "thinking-together partner." He was a creative contributor to the film *Oru Rathri Oru Pakal* (A Night A Day, 2019) directed by Pratap Joseph. The recently published experimental piece "Unrepresentable Anxieties, Unacknowledged Bodies: A Conversation for Memory and Art" (Ord&Bild, February 2020) deals with art, history, memory, and caste slavery.

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¹ Translated from the Malayalam by Antony George Koothanady.

² Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³ Late 18th century [English] caoutchouc: from French, from obsolete Spanish *cauchuc*, from Quechua *kauchuk*.³ Oxford American English Dictionary, Version 2.3.0.

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⁵ Sankara, T.C. Paramesvaran Moosadu, Kunjikkuttan Thampuran, *Sankarasmriti Laghudharmaprasika with Malayalam Commentary* (Trissur: Bharatavilasam Press, 1906). https://archive.org/details/Sankarasmriti_Laghudharmaprasika_with_Malayalam_Commentary/page/n7/mode/2up.

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⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Chennai: Continuum, 2005), 176.

⁸ Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P., 2007), 135.





HOW THEY HOWL

Dr. Cleo Roberts

The legacy of human enslavement taints virtually every corner of the world. From Mesopotamia, ancient Greece, ancient India, Han China, to Germany, the Americas, Britain, Brazil and beyond, subjugation has been a consistent facet of human societies. In nineteenth-century Kerala in South India, agrarian slavery was enacted on the basis of caste, a Hindu system of social stratification that justified priestly patriarchy and a degrading rule over Dalit or so-called 'untouchable' communities. So all-encompassing was this oppressive hierarchy that it spread, transgressed religious boundaries and came to inform the perspective of Syrian (Nestorian) Christians in the region. Land was sold with slaves attached, who, dressed in little more than leaves, would toil in extreme heat. As Sanal Mohan has written: "The inequities that the Dalits had experienced had their origins in the caste system, which denied them almost everything except the hard labour of chattel slavery."¹

It would be naive to assume that caste injustice, expressed most savagely in the practice of bonded labor, has been consigned to history — or that an honest acknowledgement of the full scale of contemporary servitude, very much exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has yet its proper place in the public domain. Through performance, painting, drawing and video, Sajan Mani excavates the annals of Dalit history, exposes these legacies of brutality, and points to their continuity. Like a meticulous scholar, he chases new lines of enquiry, consults academics and experts, synthesizes various materials, and distills his research to create charged works and physically draining, often self-castigating, performances of long duration. His body, frequently, is visibly in pain as he pushes toward sensory proximity with his Dalit ancestors. He has hung himself, dragged himself through the hot Delhi sun, and sunk himself into a steel vessel. In each performance, Sajan's infliction upon

¹ Mohan P, Sanal, *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles Against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 155.

his own body of the suffering of his forebears draws a visceral response. It's discomfiting yet compelling, and awakens our dormant conscience.

At NOME, it is through the songs of the early twentieth-century Dalit activist, social reformer, and son of agrestic slaves Poykayil Appachan/Yohannan (1879–1939) that Sajan retrieves Kerala's tortured past and foregrounds it in the present. Appachan's lyrics, which Sajan scrawls across the white gallery walls in his central performance, are his "muted howls." In his frenzied bouts of activity, wherein his body lolls and stalls, Sajan's Malayalam script overwhelms the gallery. Dancing with Appachan's words, he bounces off the sides of a red monument stationed in the gallery, a reference to Kerala's communist past. There's a bind for Sajan: he is fervent, animated, intoxicated, by Appachan's songs, and equally cognizant of the depressing reality they articulate, and the contemporary relevance it holds.

"No, not a single letter is seen
On my race
So many histories are seen
On so many races

Scrutinize each one of them
The whole histories of the world
Not a single letter is seen
On my race."²

These words and others reach across the gallery's walls and are abstracted into energetic drawings. The loops and curls of the Malayalam script have a dizzying effect. Turning Appachan's words into illegible marks is as much a reflection of the artist's relationship to writing as it is his response to the author's lament: "Not a single letter is seen / On my race." A cryptic scramble of colorful forms, an extravagant mesh of 'text', answer Appachan's grievance and evoke his reliance on the oral tradition.

² *Unknown Subjects: Songs of Poykayil Appachan*, eds. V. V. Swamy and E. V. Anil, trans. Ajay Sekher (Kottayam: IPRDSS, 2008).

Although able to read and write, Appachan cultivated the form of oral transmission. He shared over 1500 songs, and with them, his progressive views. Avoiding the permanence and visibility of putting words on paper, he covertly built his popular Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha movement, starting in 1910. Borrowing from Christian frameworks introduced into Kerala by zealous missionaries, Appachan coopted prophetic language and critiqued biblical teachings, noting that they held no place for Dalits. According to those threatened by Appachan's activism, it was in the jungles at midnight that these potent verses were shared. It fitted the esoteric narrative built around him that his followers fell into "swoons, fits, contortions, wild laughter, dancing and the like."³

In his performance, Sajan plays up to this portrayal of what was deemed "heretical blasphemy,"⁴ and in his video, *Unlearning Lessons from my Father* (2018), returns to Kerala's lush land and the site of this dissent. This is all part of Sajan's ongoing effort to bring Dalit politics face to face with an art world whose outward claims of equality conceal its insidious internal prejudices, which, in India, seemingly operate on the basis of caste. The video follows Sajan's father tapping rubber from a tree. A ring is carved around the bark, releasing a slow dribble of white fluid. Laid out in metal trays, this pool of pus-like material hardens into a gelatinous latex mass, then is flattened and pressed into neat rectangles.

That rubber has the epithet *devil's milk* signals not only the acrid qualities of its sap, but also the acrid history of its production, entangled with colonial enterprise and exploitation across Africa, South Asia and the Americas. Both the trees we see in the video and the body we see holding up the final product are scarred by acts of cruelty, the necessary means to realize profitability. The rubber tablets Sajan brings to the gallery are

³ "Travancore and Cochin Mission Annual Report for 1916," *Travancore and Cochin Diocesan Report*, Vol. XXVII, no. 3 (May 1917), 44–5.

⁴ The *Travancore and Cochin Diocesan Report* also carried brief reports of blasphemy from other mission centers like Uganda in Africa. See for example Vol. XXVII, no. 1 (January 1919), 19–20.

rooted in agricultural anguish. This dense material comes to us through supply chains built upon distress and the lives of workers driven to suicide by volatile income and rising debt. In *I want to touch the BWO of the rubber tree* (2020), Sajan's ghostly silhouette, silk-screened onto the rubber, is textured by the grooves pressed into the material. His faint image forges a connection with other stories of distress, making reference to the Mesoamerican indigenous belief systems which once considered the milky liquid a source of life, akin to blood and semen, offered as a sacrifice to deities. At the hands of colonizers, this spirituality and ritual practice were compromised.

To return to Kerala now is to see the residues of colonial commerce. Although largely unpeopled, Sajan's video alludes to a system of rubber manufacture thriving on the caste prejudices that progressive social movements have been as yet unable to reform. While Sajan may describe his output as muted, this exhibition goes far in adding volume to the voices of Dalits in South India, whose plight is increasingly obscured as the global pandemic takes root and is exploited locally by the Hindu right wing.

Dr Cleo Roberts

writes on contemporary South and South East Asian art. Her work has appeared, among other publications, in *Frieze*, *TLS*, *Spectator*, *Quartz India*, *ArtReviewAsia*, and *ArtAsiaPacific*. She has contributed to books published by Phaidon and Thames & Hudson, reported for the BBC World Service, and has worked on exhibitions at the Met Breuer, Hayward Gallery, and National Gallery of New South Wales.





SONG ABOUT SLAVERY BY POYKAYIL APPACHAN
(YOHANNAN)

From the lands of Aryans, hail o hail!
From the lands of Aryans, hail o hail!
Brahminic Aryans, hail o hail!
Worn torn clothes, hail o hail!
Worn torn clothes, hail o hail!
Brahminic Aryans, hail o hail!
Wandered through homes, hail o hail!
Wandered through lands, hail o hail!
Alike killing dogs, they killed our forefathers
and cried out
War cries.

9

Alike selling bulls they sold our forefathers
And amassed money.

10

Forefathers, yoked to bulls and buffaloes as pairs
Ploughed the fields.

8

Can we who were enslaved for a thousand years
Ever forget slavery?

On this earth, can we forget slavery?

Alike selling bulls they sold our fathers

For money, we can never forget that,

And can we ever forget that?

Father sold to one place

Mother to another

Children orphaned

Can slaves forget that?

36

We were sold to north and south nananana...

We were sold out to east and west nanananana...

Translated by Antony George Koothanady

A R T W O R K S

*ALPHABET OF TOUCH >< OVERSTRETCHED BODIES
AND MUTED HOWLS FOR SONGS, 2020*

Durational performance
on Sep 10, 3hrs and Sep 11, 2hrs
at NOME (Berlin), 2020.



*ALPHABET OF TOUCH >< OVERSTRETCHED BODIES
AND MUTED HOWLS FOR SONGS.
IMPRESSION I, 2020*

C-Print
Variable dimensions
Ed. 3
Photography Billie Clarken



*ALPHABET OF TOUCH >< OVERSTRETCHED BODIES
AND MUTED HOWLS FOR SONGS.
IMPRESSION II, 2020*

C-Print
Variable dimensions
Ed. 3
Photography Billie Clarken



*ALPHABET OF TOUCH >< OVERSTRETCHED BODIES
AND MUTED HOWLS FOR SONGS.
IMPRESSION III, 2020*

C-Print
Variable dimensions
Ed. 3
Photography Billie Clarken



HOWL I, 2020

Charcoal on handmade paper
69 x 89 x 6 cm
Unique



HOWL II, 2020

Charcoal on handmade paper
69 x 89 x 6 cm
Unique



HOWL III, 2020

Pastel on handmade paper
69 x 89 x 6 cm
Unique



HOWL IV, 2020

Pastel on handmade paper
69 x 89 x 6 cm
Unique



HOWL V, 2020

Pastel on handmade paper
89 x 69 x 6 cm
Unique



I WANT TO TOUCH THE BWO OF THE RUBBER TREE, 2020

Serigraph on natural rubber
71 x 52 x 9 cm
Ed. 3



UNLEARNING LESSONS FROM MY FATHER, 2018

Video projection on natural rubber
HD video 4'44''
Natural rubber 38 x 56cm
Ed. 3



SAJAN MANI

b. 1982, Keralam, South India

Lives and works in Berlin, Germany

Sajan Mani is an intersectional artist hailing from a family of rubber tappers in a remote village in the northern part of Keralam, South India. His work voices the issues of marginalized and oppressed peoples of India, via the “Black Dalit body” of the artist. Mani’s performance practice insists upon embodied presence, confronting pain, shame, fear, and power. His personal tryst with his body as a meeting point of history and present opens onto “body” as socio-political metaphor.

Several of Mani’s performances employ the element of water to address ecological issues particularly related to the backwaters of Kerala, as well as to the common theme of migration. His recent works consider the correspondence between animals and humans, and the politics of space from the perspective of an indigenous cosmology. *Unlearning Lessons from my Father* (2018), made with the support of the Asia Art Archive, excavates the artist’s biography in relation to colonial history, botany, and material relations.

Sajan has participated in international biennales, festivals, exhibitions and residencies, including CODA Oslo International Dance Festival, Norway (2019); Ord & Bild, Sweden (2019); India Art Fair (2019); “Specters of Communism”, at Haus der Kunst, Munich (2017); Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh (2016); Kampala Art Biennale, Uganda (2016); Kolkata International Performance Arts Festival (2014—16); and Vancouver Biennale, Canada (2014). For 2019—2021 he has received an artistic research grant from Braunschweig Projects, and the Akademie Schloss Solitude Fellowship in Germany.









ALPHABET OF TOUCH >< OVERSTRETCHED BODIES
AND MUTED HOWLS FOR SONGS

Sajan Mani

Essays:

“A Thousand Platforms for Crying Trees, and Toiling Bodies,
and More” by **Antony George Koothanady**,

“How they howl” by **Dr. Cleo Roberts**

Creative Direction: **515 Creative Shop**

Design: **Matteo Barbani**

Text edit: **Hannah Gregory**

Photography: **Billie Clarken**

Video: **Mario Breidenbach**

This book was published on the occasion of Sajan Mani's solo exhibition “Alphabet of Touch >< Overstretched Bodies and Muted Howls for Songs” at NOME, Berlin, from September 11 to October 10, 2020.

NOME

Director: **Luca Barbani**

Gallery Manager: **Olga Boiocchi**

Sales Associate: **Jesi Khadivi**

Exhibition set-up: **Nino Caltabiano**

Thanks to: Achan, Amma, chettayi, kunjechi, edathi amma, rajeevetten, unni, kingini, kuttu, kunjappi, Olga Gerstenberger, I remember all of my grand parents, Antony George Koothanady, Cleo Roberts, Abhilash Chamban, Edwin David Sam, Dr. Sanal Mohan, Jeebesh Bagchi, Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Dorothee Albrecht, Moira Zoitl, Ralf Hoedt, Ludwig Seyfarth, Christoph Wachter, Mathias Jud, Stephan Moersch, Jagdip Jagpal, Jaya Asokan, Umah Jacob, Gautami Reddy, Bethan Hughes, Teena Lange, Naeem Mohaiemen, Nikhil Chopra, Braunschweig Projects, Marie Couelle, Emanuela Laudati, and Daniela Silvestrin.

I Thank all my friends, supporters, critics and my well-wishers.
-Sajan Mani



