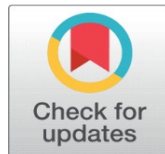


VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF DALITS IN THE CARTOONS OF KERALAM: THE QUESTION OF APTNESS AND ADEQUACY

Basil Thomas ¹  , Gem Cherian ²  

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English, Christian College, Chengannur, Kerala, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Aloysius' College, Edathua, Kerala, India



Corresponding Author

Basil Thomas,
basilthomasccc@gmail.com

DOI
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.1506](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.1506)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2022 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Power and hierarchy have always been intertwined with the social transactions in every culture, and this is true not only in the larger social institutions like religion and education, but even in the smaller social units like family and neighborhood as well. One's position in the hierarchy has been the criterion for exploitation and discrimination in the society, and this has been especially true in the case of Dalits in India. Even in aesthetic forms of expression including art, discrimination based on caste is evident. Dalits in Indian art forms have either been under-represented, mis-represented or not represented at all. The genre of cartooning is no exception in this scenario either. Dalits have been victims of marginalization, discrimination and social exclusion with respect to their social living, but the situation of Dalits is not any different in the earlier representations in literature as well. The cartoons of Keralam incorporated the social structure of the state during its formative years to modernity. The absence of Dalit representation in the cartoon columns demand a scrutiny. As Dalits are not presented in the cartoons dealing with issues like education, employment and Gulf migration, it has to be assumed that they were denied of the opportunity to these imperatives, therefore missing from the social forefront, unable to be represented in cartoons. The paper assumes that there is an underlying social, communal and economic power struggle beneath the naïve periphery of the narrative framework of cartoons in Malayalam, both in the creative and the productive arenas. This paper is an attempt to find out the adequacy and aptness of representation of Dalits in the cartoons of Toms, with the objective to see whether such an absence and misrepresentation is accidental or deliberate. Toms' cartoons are crucial in the cartooning history of Keralam because they have engaged as a mirror of the society of the state for these fifty years and as a major cartographer of the state, the societal divisions in his cartoons deserve to be studied and hence the Dalit representation in them requires special attention. This paper analyses the cartoons of Toms to find whether the representation of Dalits is apt or adequate.

Keywords: Cartoons, Dalits, Discourse, Discrimination, Representation, Social Criticism

1. INTRODUCTION

Discrimination has had a long history in India especially owing to one's descent in the rigid stratification of caste. This is often true about all social and cultural interactions and connections like marriage, neighbourhood, professional and educational spaces. Dalit is an Indian name given to denote people belonging to the lower caste, once considered as untouchables, in India. They have been victims of marginalisation, discrimination and social exclusion from time immemorial, in the name of the Varna or the traditional caste system. The situation of Dalits had not been any different in Keralam as well, with respect to their living standards, social

inclusion and even in the earlier representations in literature. J. Devika observes that often Dalit groups are social outliers owing to their lack of education. Devika (2013), 10 [1]. Their absence in the social pictures of Keralam was probably because of their absence in the above-mentioned sectors including education. It could also be possible that a deliberate neglect of their social life leads to a political act of erasure, thereby portraying a uniform, monochromatic appearance to the society of Keralam, making a foreign reader unaware that such a group of people even exist in the state.

Kerala has a rich heritage of cartoon culture with tycoons like Toms, Shankar, Yesudasan, Abu, O.V. Vijayan et al. All these cartoonists portrayed the social, political, economic and cultural happening of the state in their cartoons. As social cartoons function as a looking glass to the society, the selection of topics for the portrayal depends upon the 'presence' and 'absence' of the events that are seen, heard and experienced by the general public. As Dalits are not presented in the cartoons dealing with issues like education, employment and Gulf migration, it has to be assumed that they were denied of the opportunity to these imperatives, therefore missing from the social forefront, unable to be represented in cartoons.

The representation of the social aspects in the cartoons of the cartoonists of Kerala urges one to re-read the role and presence of Dalits and the marginalized in the 'Kerala Model' of development. The cartoon, when read as a cultural product, engages with any given dominant discourse, its authority and its subjects, through visual images often invoking laughter. Dominant discourses of hegemony side-line people from the weaker strata of the society by exploiting their vulnerabilities. In this manner, cartoons, like other media, can be thought of as one of the tools of dominant discourses to represent the values and attitudes they propagate. The paper assumes that there is an underlying social, communal and economic power struggle beneath the naïve periphery of the narrative framework of cartoons in Malayalam, both in the creative and the productive arenas.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cartoons in Keralam have contributed a significant role in political and social commentary throughout history. As a powerful form of visual satire, they mirror social attitudes, prejudices, and power dynamics. The representation of Dalits in Kerala's cartoons shows how this marginalized community is portrayed in popular media. A review of literature on this topic throws light on the general themes and implications of Dalit representation in the cartooning tradition of the state.

Cartooning in Kerala has a rich legacy, interwoven with the region's political and social history. The cartoonists of the state have been influenced by the progressive movements like the social reform initiatives of Sree Narayana Guru and Ayyankali, who advocated for Dalit rights. Early cartoons reflected the caste-based power hierarchies and stratifications prevalent in Keralam, where Dalits were mostly depicted in stereotypical and derogatory manners. Cartoon Scholar, R. K. Raghavan, argues that traditional cartoons were often instrumental in reinforcing negative stereotypes about Dalits, portraying them as docile, uncultured and subsequently, inferior. Raghavan (2010), 98. [2]. Such depictions contribute to the perpetuation of biased attitudes as well as underpin systemic marginalization of Dalit communities.

Coming to the political cartoons in Keralam that have engaged with Dalit themes, K. S. Pisharody discusses how they began to depict Dalit leaders and activists at the time of the rising Dalit political movements in the latter part of the

20th century. Pisharody (2018), 56. [3]. Nevertheless, an ambivalence in these portrayals could be seen, both supporting Dalit empowerment as well as perpetuating caste prejudices. The caricatures of leaders like K. R. Narayanan and K. Kamaraj were occasionally infused with casteist hints, undermining their political stature.

Yet, there has recently been a glaring shift in the representation of Dalits in the cartoons of Keralam. The emergence of Dalit cartoonists and an increasing responsiveness in the light of social justice issues have led to more respectful portrayals. According to N. P. Ramesh, contemporary cartoonists like S. Jayachandran and S. Balamurugan have begun to challenge traditional stereotypes, depicting Dalits with dignity and highlighting their struggles and achievements. Ramesh (2020), 45. [4].

Engaging with self-reflection, some modern cartoonists have progressively begun to critique the casteist undertones in their own work and the cartooning community in general. E. P. Unny and other prominent cartoonists have publicly admitted the need for more sensitive and inclusive representations. Unny (2021), 7. [5]. This reflection is a crucially progressive step towards addressing the biases in the cartooning tradition of Keralam.

It is evident that the representation of Dalits in cartoons significantly influences public perception and social attitudes towards the community. A. B. Devika highlights how progressive cartoons have played a role in raising awareness about Dalit issues and fostering empathy among non-Dalit audiences. Devika (2019), 78. [6]. The representation of Dalits in the cartoons of Keralam has evolved from reinforcing negative stereotypes to more nuanced and respectful portrayals. While earlier portrayals mostly marginalized or negated Dalits, contemporary cartoons nurture a growing commitment to inclusivity.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The representation of Dalit characters in cartoons is significant for several reasons, especially within the broader context of social justice, cultural expression, and political discourse. Historically, the visibility and voice of Dalits have either been suppressed or distorted in mainstream media. So, cartoons that include them can contribute to their presence in the media, and an authentic representation of their struggles lead to a fair social attitude towards the community at large. The positive aspect about Dalit representations in cartoons is that often they challenge stereotypes about the community. Diverse and authentic representations can help break the existing social prejudices and promote a better empathetic understanding of Dalit identities. This would also help to foster the Dalit identity beyond the stereotypical labels and markers stamped on them from time immemorial. This can also empower the Dalit communities in general.

4. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper is an attempt to find out the absence of representation of Dalits in the cartoons of Toms, with the objective to see whether such an absence and misrepresentation is accidental or deliberate as well because cartoons are assumed in the study as tools of social criticism.

Cartoonist Toms (1929-2016) occupies the prime position as a major cartoonist of Keralam as his cartoon career spans over fifty years, especially the second half of the twentieth century. His cartoons in serialized form, "Bobanum Moliyum", explore the fun and frolic of childhood in the premise of social and political issues happening

in the imaginary 'Keezhkaam Thukku Panchayath', narrated through the mischiefs and misadventures of two siblings Boban and Moly. His cartoons are crucial in the cartooning history of Keralam because they have engaged as a mirror of the society of the state for these fifty years, having left no stone unturned regarding the political and social issues in the state for the above-mentioned span of time. As a major cartographer of the state, the societal divisions in his cartoons deserve to be studied and hence the Dalit representation in them requires special attention. This paper analyses the cartoons of Toms to find whether the representation of Dalits is apt or adequate. The selection of Toms has been made because he is the only cartoonist who has continuously and consistently contributed to the genre in the region for the whole of the second half of twentieth century. While it remains true that the analysis of a single cartoonist does not appear to provide a wholesome picture of the representation of Dalits in the cartoons published in the latter half of the twentieth century, the reason why this study has restricted the exploration to Toms alone is justifiable because the other major cartoonists of the time in Keralam have not made any adequate representation of Dalits at all.

5. INADEQUACY IN REPRESENTATION (OR ABSENCE) OF DALITS

It could be seen in the analysis of Malayalam cartoons that the cartoonists of Keralam have not given adequate representation of the marginalised and the poor, and it should be curiously noted that none of them gave representation to the Dalits in their cartoons. The representation of the upper-class Hindu Nair family in Aravindan's cartoons does not accommodate the lower caste. Similarly, the Muslim and Christian communities are represented in the cartoons because they form the mainstream society. The Dalits would not be brought in the cartoon frames as they did not belong to the mainstream society. Even though there are a few cartoons with passing references of Dalit names, only a single character in the whole plethora of cartoons from the select six cartoonists could be found portrayed as a Dalit. In "Bobanum Moliyum", it was only in the year 1966 that a Dalit character namely 'Chathan', appears as a passing character in the background of the cartoon as an agricultural labourer, portrayed as carrying a bundle of grain. Toms (1966), 24. Fig. 1. [7].

Figure 1



Figure 1 Toms (1966), 24. [7]

Whenever the cartoonist wanted to show the plight or the decline of agrarian sector, he brought this character, drawn in dark shade without any remarkable identity. The name 'Chathan' functions here as the signifier for people from lower caste background. Toms (2013), 67. [8].

Shortage of workhands in the agrarian sector frequently appears in the cartoons and in an instance, the cartoonist finds a remedy for the issue where the fathers married their daughters off with skilled labourers, thus leaving aside the discrimination of caste and financial status. This is also indicative of the commodification of women where daughters are used like goods to buy manpower. Shortage of workhands appears in more than one instance, where there is a shortage of the carpenter and the 'paravan', a caste denoting coconut tree climbers. Toms (2013), 36, 12. [8].

Occasionally, the term 'paravan' appears in the cartoon, signifying the generic name of a person of low origin or lower caste background. The same term 'paravan' is used in the cartoon series as a derogatory word signifying the untouchable. In a cartoon, a marriage proposal is shattered when the bride's family comes to know about the lower caste background of the bridegroom. They identified the 'paravan' origin of the bridegroom and that was the only reason for them to withdraw from the alliance. Toms (2007), 91. [9].

In Toms' cartoon series, the upper caste of Namboothiri's is portrayed to be enjoying special privileges and exemptions in school regarding wearing uniforms, and this is questioned by Boban and Moli. Toms (2013), 352. Fig. 2. [8].

Figure 2



Figure 2 Toms (2013), 352. [8]

One of their friends is an upper caste Namboothiri boy who makes appearance in several instances. In another cartoon, the family of the boy is portrayed and they become a part of the cartoon series. There are other cartoons based on the life of upper caste Namboothiri people as well, in connection with the school. Toms (2007), 143. [9]. This not only brings to light the consciousness of Toms to represent the upper caste in his cartoons but also the absence of Dalit characters in the mainstream activities in the cartoon series.

In the case of Aravindan and Yesudas an, both of them belong to the upper caste as well as the family setting of the protagonists in their cartoons is the same upper caste that is, Hindu Nair community. Characters from various religious communities appear in their cartoons and this shows how the cartoonists are tolerant towards other communities. The fact that there is not even a single character from the lower

caste appears in their cartoons shows that there is no scope for the lower caste in them.

6. THE RATIONALE

In the new era, the political parties of Keralam, including the left parties, shifted their main focus from class struggle to class compromise as the best machinery to gain power through elections. The number of voters from the middle class increased as a result of the 'embourgeoisement' happening in the society of Keralam as a result of the 'Kerala Model'. Going with the definition offered in Merriam Webster's Dictionary, embourgeoisement can be considered as a shift to the bourgeoisie set of values and practices (web source). [10].

Following Louise Ryan and Claire Maxwell, embourgeoisement can be considered as the growing trend of the second half of twentieth century with the growth in prosperity achieved by working classes who in turn, knowingly or not, shifted or re-aligned their values around bourgeoisie or middle class. Ryan & Maxwell (2016), 114. [11].

In alignment with Barrie M. Morrison's statistical survey on the villages in Keralam, it can be considered that embourgeoisement was an inevitable phenomenon in the region necessitated out of the investment shift from agriculture to education and the diversion to off-farm employment and job hunts through migration. Morrison (1997), 81. [12]. In their cartoons, cartoonists focused on the life of middle-class families targeting middle class reader, as they were the major consumers of the publications. The favouritism shown towards the upper class and middle class in the cartoons cannot be considered to be accidental either, as the state in general stood in bigotry in this matter.

7. CONCLUSION

In short, it can be said regarding the representation of the Dalits in the Malayalam cartoons in the twentieth century that none of the cartoonists have aptly or adequately portrayed Dalit characters in their cartoons. Only Toms has given passing references about them, yet mentioning only their names and that too, mostly while hinting about the absence of labourers. The other cartoonists have not included any characters or even passing comments about Dalits and have turned a blind eye to them in their cartoons.

This paper tried to discuss the disturbing absence of Dalits in the cartoons of Keralam. The equation of 'Dalits' with agrarian labourers is fixed in the Malayalee temperament as can be seen in a very few cartoons of Toms, where the agrarian labourers are represented as Dalits with typical names as 'Chathan', 'Koran' and even the generic caste name, 'Paravan'. Some cartoons show the scarcity of manual labourers for the jobs earlier done by Dalits due to the decline in the agrarian sector. Also, they show the lack of job vacancies for educated youth because the shift from agrarian sector to the service sector redefined the job atmosphere and career choices of youngsters of Kerala. The demand for agrarian jobs became high but none of the educated youth were willing to do the same. This aspect is rendered by Toms. Further, it should be noted here that Toms, hailing from the agrarian setting of Kuttanadu in Central Travancore, had ample opportunities to represent the agrarian labourers but he chose not to add the same.

Also, the underrepresentation of Dalits in the cartoons reminds one of the dangers that society can never be conceived as an organic whole and that the

democratic values of art are shattered when the underprivileged receives a merciless neglect. In their critiques of Keralam, right from its formation and evolution to the modern state, the cartoonists have presumably failed to bring the marginalised factions of the society to the forefront of their creative output. It is not to accuse that all of the cartoonists deliberately avoided them because portrayals in their cartoons show what happens in a society and if so, this should mean that the society had apparently turned a blind eye on the Dalits and the marginalised, forbidding them the space to establish their presence or even to interact in the social networks at the forefront. Modernity is a concept that is dichotomously opposite to tradition. The subtle making of the Malayalee modernity is evident in the portrayal of the dress, food, social relationships, education and employment of the people in Keralam during the period undertaken for study. The plasticity of the middle class is a crucial factor in the making of the Malayalee modernity.

Another important finding that one could place alongside this is the establishment of the Malayalee prestige ('maanyatha' in Malayalam). The growing importance of 'prestige' can easily be traced from the chronological evolution of the cartoons, the characterisation of which underlines the idea that improved financial status implied higher stature for the Malayalee. The natural by-product of the Malayalee modernity coupled with the prestige factor conclusively points to the formation of the new Malayalee identity. The characterization in the cartoons of Keralam from the 1950s progressing to the 2000s shows the irony of the new Malayalee identity that is outwardly more secular, and less gender biased in their clothing or food habits, but more conservative and duplicitous in their attitudes.

The alarming absence of Dalits from the canvas of the cartoonists itself is suggestive of the fact that they do not fit into the newfound mainstream 'Malayalee prestige'. The cartoonists try to exaggerate this prestige as part of Malayalee modernity and they themselves pop the bubble. The space of the 'Malayalee prestige' is occupied by the emerging middle class, as a result of embourgeoisement. Naturally, there is no scope for the cartoonists to represent the Dalits in their cartoons because they do not occupy this space of the 'Malayalee prestige'.

The representation of Dalit characters in cartoons is more than an artistic enterprise; it is an important medium of social commentary and tool for activism that can combat against caste discrimination and promote social justice. Cartoons have the potential to play a crucial role in influencing perceptions, challenging injustices, and advocating for a more inclusive and equitable society. In this sense, a fairer and more authentic representation of the Dalits in cartoons can lead to a better empathetic understanding towards the community in the readers, creating awareness about their struggles and fostering democratic attitude not just in the political scenario but in the ordinary daily social transactions as well.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Devika, J. (2013) "Contemporary Dalit Assertions in Kerala: Governmental Categories vs. Identity Politics?" *History and Sociology of South Asia*. 7(1). 10.
- Raghavan, R. K. (2010). Caste and Cartoons: A Historical Perspective. *Journal of Kerala Studies*, 33(4), 98.
- Pisharody, K. S. (2018). Political Cartoons and Dalit Identity in Kerala. *Indian Political Cartoon Review*, 9(2), 56.
- Ramesh, N. P. (2020). Emerging Trends in Dalit Representation in Kerala's Cartoons. *Contemporary Social Issues Journal*, 15(1), 45.
- Unny, E. P. (2021). Reflections on Cartooning and Caste. *Kerala Cartoonists' Forum*, 18(2), 7.
- Devika, A. B. (2019). Dalits and Visual Culture in Kerala. *Journal of Social Studies*, 45(3), 78.
- Toms (1966). "Bobanum Moliyum." *Malayala Manorama Weekly*. 11(5). 24.
- Toms (2013). *Bobanum Moliyum*. Vol. 2. Toms Publications. 67, 36, 12, 352
- Toms (2007). *Bobanum Moliyum*. Vol. 1. Toms Publications. 91, 143.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Embourgeoisement. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/embourgeoisement>
- Ryan, L., and Maxwell, C. (2016). "Social Class and Sociology: The State of the Debate between 1967 and 1979." *Sociology, Special Issue (3)*. 114.
- Morrison, Barrie M. (1997). "The Embourgeoisement of the Kerala Farmer." *Modern Asian Studies*. 31(1). 81.