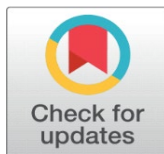
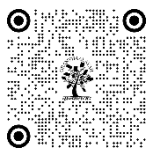


## SOCIAL STRESS AND CASTE REALITIES: A STUDY ON M. KUNHAMAN'S DISSENT

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### ABSTRACT

This study delves into the often-neglected aspects of social stress within the caste life, with a specific focus on M. Kunhaman's memoir, *Dissent*. While conventional social studies emphasise knowledge as an emancipating force for the marginalised communities, this article explores how acquiring knowledge places individuals, particularly those from the Dalit community, under additional societal stress. The term 'social stress' is employed to elucidate the intricate web of caste-based hierarchies affecting individual's psychological, emotional, and cultural experiences.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Social Stress, Self-Reflection, Caste Hierarchy, Marginalisation



Research on social stress within the caste system in India constitutes a highly pertinent and topical subject. Social hierarchies rooted in various factors such as gender, heterosexuality, language, and occupation serve as impediments to the cultivation of robust social relationships among individuals. The institution of caste persists as an assemblage of ideologies and practices that marginalise individuals from active participation in social life. A comprehensive understanding of how the caste system functioned for those situated within its hierarchical framework proves instrumental in elucidating the extent of social stress endured within the lower echelons of the society. Caste life in India transcends mere economic, resource, and power dynamics; rather, it represents a complex fabric of social realities. It serves as a battleground marked by conflicts arising from physical, emotional, and social stresses, which individuals from the lower strata consistently grapple within their daily lives.

M. Kunhaman's memoir *Dissent* serves as a noteworthy exploration into the myriad social stresses endured consistently within the context of a caste-ridden society. The impact of social exclusion experienced by the marginalised in a caste-bound society is much more significant compared to other societies. The narrative *Dissent* contributes significantly to our comprehension of the pervasive anxiety, stress and conflict characterising the daily life experiences of the individuals belonging to the lower strata. In this context, the term 'social stress' is employed as a conceptual tool to enhance comprehension of the caste system and its broader societal implications. The term 'stress', tracing its origins from the

Latin 'strictus' encompasses meanings such as narrowness, oppression, distress, and so on.( etymonline.com, n.d.). Notably, the word stress is used in conjunction with diverse topics as tight and narrowness, distress and oppression, discomfort and anxiety.( wktionary.org, n.d.). This article endeavours to comprehensively examine these connotations within the ambit of social stress. The inclusion of etymology herein is deliberate, aiming to provide insights into the social experience of 'stress'. In this context, 'social stress' denotes the societal impact imposed upon an individual or society by social actions that diminish, degrade or hierarchise the social status of a person or the collective entity.

Social stress is not an exclusive phenomenon relegated to a specific social group; rather, it is a ubiquitous experience across diverse societal strata. Social factors like gender, children, caste, religion, profession, land, and language are subject to social stresses, which in turn negatively affect their individual experiences. This article seeks to comprehend and elucidate the social stress endured by the individuals within the Dalit community, acknowledging the considerable nuances within their social sphere. The study herein focuses on the memoir of an individual who has ascended to higher echelons in terms of employment and education within the Dalit society, presenting a distinctive case for analysis.

Dalits constitute a group that has been subjected to multifaceted social stresses, intricately woven into the historical fabric of the caste system in India. The annals of this system reveal a history marked by the exertion of power over Dalit communities, leading to their separation from autonomy of their resources. The caste system, a pervasive social structure, operates by stratifying individuals through a complex web of various social stresses. Kunhaman's *Dissent* stands as a contemporary manifestation of India's notorious caste life, offering a current perspective on its historical trajectory. Within the framework of this article, the keyword 'social stress' is employed as a heuristic tool to comprehend and explicate the psychological, emotional, and cultural hierarchies inherent in Dalit social life. These dimensions, often overlooked in conventional sociological concepts, find resonance in the fragmented narratives dispersed across autobiographies, memoirs, and novels. The concept of social stress, as deployed here, does not denote a separate entity but rather draws attention to the distinctive and fluctuating experiences that are both common and consequential in Dalit social life. P. Sanal Mohan, in his *Modernity of Slavery: Struggles against Caste Inequality in Colonial Kerala* (Mohan, 2015) explicitly underscores the need to historicise suffering. This deliberate effort seeks to introduce novel concepts into social studies for a more nuanced understanding of the existing social systems and experiences. Sanal Mohan centers suffering and pain in the narrative, altering the traditional orientation of social studies to analyse the historical underpinnings of slavery. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon, 2008) examines how race permeates daily life, pushing individuals of African descent into insecure territories fraught with social stresses. The narration of the social stresses experienced by blacks in close proximity to whites serves as a crucial lens for understanding the experiences of stresses mentioned in *Dissent*. Fanon's work contributes significantly to unravelling the intricacies of these stresses and their impact on the individuals subjected to them.

The Malayalam title of Kunhaman's memoirs is *Ethiru*. In the lexical exploration conducted by *Shabdatharavali* [Pillai, 2015, p.408], the term encompasses meanings such as hindrance, opposition, adversary, enmity, equality and so on. Thus the term means dissent. It implies that the social stresses encountered by Kunhaman, in his endeavour dissent are substantive both in depth and scope.

In *Dissent*, Kunhaman emphasises and elaborates on the recurring stresses experienced by Dalits who are haunted by memories, which inflict pain during their childhood and perpetuate mental distress. Such memories persistently engage in a playful, taunting manner, rendering the individual Dalit weak, impotent, and susceptible to the inherited affliction arising from the impoverished socio-economic conditions. Kunhaman writes:

I am afraid of my memories. The memories acquired from an oppressed, painful, harrowing childhood haunt me down even now. Cruelly. I became helpless. I became cowardly. To have been borne in an oppressed, poor, low-class family has been the one curse in my life. Attempting to free myself of it, has been my one sin. (Kunhaman, 2022, p. 30)

The social stresses faced by Kunhaman require a dual analysis. Firstly, there is the scrutiny of the intrinsic features of social stresses confronted by an individual born into a Scheduled Caste. The second aspect involves evaluating the intensified social stresses encountered by an individual striving to break free from the traditional constraints of Dalit caste life

The term 'papam' (sin), highlighted in Kunhaman's reflections, requires a nuanced examination to discern its significance. The term encapsulates the repercussions of Kunhaman abstaining from the customary duties prescribed by the traditional caste system. It signifies the consequences of deviating from the expected norms, serving as a form of punishment for actions deemed inappropriate within the societal construct. The term 'papam' serves as a symbolic representation of the social stresses faced by individuals attempting to transcend the established norms, shedding light on the intricate interplay of social expectations, rebellion, and the ensuing consequences within this cultural framework.

Engaging in erroneous educational practices is the sole reason behind Kunhaman's 'papam' /sin . To comprehend why acquiring knowledge is prone to distortion, words of Jurgen Habermas is helpful. In his *Knowledge and Human Interests* Habermas describes:

The concept of knowledge-constitutive human interests already conjoins the two elements whose relation still has to be explained: knowledge and Interest. From everyday experience we know that ideas serve often enough to furnish our actions with justifying motives in place of real ones. (Habermas , 1988, p. 311)

This proposition emphasises the nuanced connection between the knowledge acquisition and the underlying motives or interests that guide human actions. By delving into this theoretical framework, one can gain insights into the complexities inherent in the relationship between education, knowledge, and the multifaceted nature of human interests

The acquisition of education, for Kunhaman, had initially been synonymous with gaining knowledge. However, for Kunhaman, who held a caste position, obtaining knowledge became an ongoing struggle fraught with significant adversity. The hardships experienced by him, marked by continuous social stresses were recognised and acknowledged by those who extended support to him, particularly emphasising the crucial role played by his educators in intensifying these stresses. Kunhaman's pursuit of knowledge, influenced by his aspirations and interests, continually fuelled his enduring social resilience, as highlighted in his reflective account, "Reality is not something to be just accepted, it is something to be changed. The beginning of its change lies in ideas" (Kunhaman, 2022, p. 46)

Kunhaman encountered persistent challenges emanating from his place of origin, educational institutions, peers, professional associates, and governing bodies. A salient aspect to highlight in this endeavour is Kunhaman's sustained exposure to stresses as he endeavours to emancipate himself from the predefined societal roles dictated by his caste, seeking to redefine the entrenched system. Conversely, individuals within his caste who opt to conform to established caste roles within the prevailing social order also contend with distinct social stresses. It is imperative to discern that these two categories of stresses are inherently disparate.

Regarding the caste position of Kunhaman's father, he states:

I have observed since childhood, my father's relationship with the zamin. The feudal lord will not come anywhere in the vicinity of my father. They all stood faraway even from our range of vision. We somehow carried on as untouchables, and almost invisible, amid the haybales. We could not, any of us, refer to ourselves as 'T'; it had to be 'faithful servant'. Rare were the occasions when one could keep one's body straight. With servitude, in the fields and bales, the body also became perpetually contracted. (Kunhaman, 2022, p.33)

Kunhaman's family's caste role lineage was described in these texts. As he illustrates the struggles and stresses he faced in attempting to transcend the predetermined caste roles during the early stages of his life, he draws parallels with the experiences of his father, who, like him, lived within the confines of the caste structure. Kunhaman's reflections on the socio-spatial implications of caste roles during the initial post-independence period in Kerala reveal the nuances of social stress inherent in the nature of these roles.

In 1957, post-independence Kerala, the circumstances were still largely characterised by the prevailing caste-based occupational roles, resembling the occupational roles of his father. Kunhaman emphasises that the societal implications of the stresses faced during this period were significant in moulding his understanding of the diverse social dynamics. He recounts that "Before entering their compound, I would have to remove my shirt, ruffle my hair and make it unruly. After 1957, also, the same situation persisted (Kunhaman, 2022, p.34)".

The establishment of caste system is aimed at generating distinctions within society. It involves categorising individuals based on inherent or ascribed characteristics, leading to the hierarchical stratification of people. This results in the creation of societal classes by cancelling the agency of all individuals as equal human beings. Such a stratification engenders societal stresses.

Kunhaman refers to an oppressive teacher who tried to prevent him from deviating from his caste duties in school and sternly reprimanded him for attempting to avoid attending school. He recounts:

There was a Malayalam teacher who had got transferred to our locality from some other place. His children were also studying in our School only. One day, I had gone to his house. After they had their meals, his wife poured water on some left-over food and gave to me. Because of that, that teacher beat me up black and blue in School, without stating any reason. Why was I being beaten, or why was I given left-over food?- I had no capacity then, to ponder on these questions. (Kunhaman, 2022, p.21)

The narrative suggests that the relentless physical and mental resilience displayed by individuals attempting to transcend their caste roles stems from an enduring commitment to reshape the socio-cultural paradigms that impede such transformations. Kunhaman here underlines that the constant efforts of the marginalised individuals to acquire knowledge involve confronting and overcoming significant physical and mental stresses. The determination to cultivate

awareness and break away from the shackles of a predetermined caste role demonstrates a profound commitment to fostering personal and collective empowerment through persistent struggles against social and cultural constraints. The account of Kunhaman's school experiences provides a poignant glimpse into the trials faced by those who dare to challenge the established norms surrounding caste identities and roles.

There was a teacher in class III, whom children looked upon with awe. He would not call me by my name; he would always refer to me as *Panan*. He would write Math problems on the board and call out- 'hey Panan, speak up!' Once, unable to endure anymore, I spoke up:

"Sir, I'm not to be called by my Caste name. Call me Kunhaman"

"So, what if I called you by Caste name, huh?- he landed a slap on my face with a wide swing of his arm. He was a big man in the locality. (Kunhaman, 2022, p.21)

Beyond mere caste nomenclature, Kunhaman experiences heightened stress as he grapples with the acknowledgment of caste-based social stratification. His endeavours to interrogate and challenge this entrenched caste system, coupled with his determination to participate in academic pursuits under his own name 'Kunhaman', subject him to both physical and mental stress. It is not just the marginalised in the caste system who endure such social stresses, but individuals of different races and genders also face it. At the outset, as indicated, the insightful reflections of Kunhaman on the experiences of those situated at the lower strata within the caste-based societies reveal a profound understanding of the significant social struggles and stress they face. This recognition underscores the reality that the world, through the lens of Kunhaman's memories, acknowledges and honours the substantial societal resilience experienced by the marginalised.

P. Sanal Mohan's doctoral theses "Imagining Equality: Modernity and Social Transformation of Lower Castes in Colonial Kerala" and the work "Modernity of Slavery" mentions the sufferings of the lower castes.

The term slave body is used to emphasis the bodily sufferings that slaves endured on their mortified selves. In other words the significant point here is to attempt at an understanding of the pain that lower caste slaves endured and an exploration of it is necessary to understand their social world. (Mohan, 2005, p.318 )

Sanal Mohan primarily addresses the pain and sufferings of the lower castes continuing within the caste system. The focal point of Kunhaman's narrative is the pain and sufferings of those who try to escape from their caste identity. In his writings, Kunhaman portrays the physical and mental agony suffered by the lower castes, highlighting their painful journey to overcome the societal oppression. He describes the experiences of those who, due to economic dependency, become vulnerable and find themselves subjected to fear. Kunhaman narrates instances where individuals, seeking shelter from others for sustenance, end up facing various forms of exploitation, leading to a sense of helplessness. He states:

We used to be skeletons then, drained of blood and colour, meant only to receive insults without any rhyme or reason whatsoever. Fear takes shape from economic dependence. Depending on others for food gives rise to many other kinds of dependency. That is when one starts fearing everything around. There develops this feeling of 'Otherness', which makes one think that even one's shadow is not one's own. (Kunhaman, 2022, p.31)

This otherness, as perceived by Kunhaman, is a consciousness that may develop when one is trying to live according to humane values that are against the established norms of the caste system. Fear, arising from the effort to live in accordance with humanitarian values, is the predominant human dilemma according to Kunhaman. This fear is a result of one's attempt to live a life adhering to the principles of human dignity. This awareness, in the perspective of social life, is, in itself, an endeavour towards self-realisation. Kunhaman articulates that the most recurring human dilemma arising from the social transformation efforts is the fear emanating from the attempt to live by human values and resist the established norms of the caste system. This self-awareness, described as a consciousness of living in accordance with humanitarian values, forms the central theme of Kunhaman's reflections on social life. Habermas writes:

The methodological framework that determines the meaning of the validity of critical propositions of this category is established by the concept of self-reflection. The latter release the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers. Self-reflection is determined by an emancipatory cognitive interest. (Habermas, 2004, p.316)

The self-reflection of Kunhaman's fear is attributed to the prevailing circumstances. This is a social scenario where the Dalits, who have autonomously attempted to understand and analyse the caste system, find themselves at the forefront of social change. The empowerment of both Dalits and women through knowledge acquisition push them towards a heightened experiences of stresses. Kunhaman elaborates on the social structure, stating:

It is when one is faced with a stumbling block to one's progress that the capacity to retaliate springs forth. The Dalit Adivasi students are prey to constant harassment. They come from poor families. At the same time, they

have high goals. There emerges a conflict between students with desires, hopes and expectations and a system that places hurdles in their way.(Kunhaman, 2022,p-69)

In essence, Kunhaman's reflection underscores the societal phenomena occurring in the backdrop of the assertion that knowledge will liberate society. It is not just a general concept but a social manifestation happening directly. Behind liberation lies the terrifying experience of social stress too. In this experiential world, Dalits need to surmount this frightening experiences of stress in each of their steps. The augmented stress inherent in the pursuit of knowledge significantly impact the social lives of the underprivileged and it demand cultivation of resilience to effectively navigate through these experiences.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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