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Between Coercion and Agency: Abolition and the Afterlives of Slavery in Kerala (1843–1941)

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Abstract

Modern-day Kerala, or the Malayalam-speaking region of southern India, contained some of the most extensive systems of caste-based agrarian slavery in the Indian subcontinent. Prior to abolition, communities such as the Paraiyars and Pulayars were tied to agricultural labour through hereditary forms of servitude that contemporary observers frequently described as slavery. While the formal abolition of slavery in Travancore-Cochin in 1855 and earlier legislative measures in British Malabar removed the legal basis of slave ownership, the extent to which these reforms altered the everyday lives of former slave castes remains contested.

This article examines the aftermath of abolition in the Malayalam-speaking region between the mid-nineteenth century and the final decades of colonial rule. Drawing upon missionary writings, travel accounts, district manuals, and administrative reports alongside colonial census data from Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar, it investigates patterns of occupational continuity and living conditions among former slave castes. Particular attention is given to the Paraiyar and Pulayar communities, who constituted a substantial proportion of the agrarian labour force before abolition.

The evidence suggests that although abolition transformed the legal status of enslaved communities, many of the material structures that had sustained slavery persisted. Census data indicate that former slave castes remained overwhelmingly concentrated in agricultural labour decades after emancipation, while descriptive sources continue to record severe social exclusion, segregated settlements, and poor housing conditions. The article argues that abolition in the Malayalam region did not constitute a sharp transition from slavery to freedom, but rather a reconfiguration of existing relations of dependency within a changing colonial and princely-state framework. By combining quantitative census data with contemporary qualitative accounts, the study contributes to broader debates on caste, labour, and the afterlives of slavery in South Asia.

Keywords: Slavery abolition; caste-based slavery; agrarian labour; colonial Kerala; post-emancipation unfreedom; South Asian labour history.

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Introduction

In 1855, the princely state of Travancore formally abolished slavery. Similar measures had already been introduced in the neighbouring Malabar region of the Madras Presidency following the Indian Slavery Act of 1843.¹ On paper, these reforms appeared to mark a decisive rupture with older systems of caste-based bondage. Men and women from the enslaved castes were now legally free. Yet the significance of this transition remains far from self-evident. If slavery disappeared from the legal framework, did it also disappear from everyday life? How did the lives of the formerly enslaved change in the decades and the century after the abolition? In this paper, I address these questions through a comparative study of modern-day Kerala between abolition and the end of the colonial period. Its central research question is: To what extent did the abolition of slavery alter the agrarian lives and social conditions of formerly enslaved Paraiyar and Pulayar castes in Kerala between 1843 and 1941? To answer this question, I combine qualitative and quantitative evidence. Descriptive sources such as missionary writings, district manuals, gazetteers, administrative reports, and travel accounts are used to reconstruct the conditions of slavery before abolition and to provide qualitative evidence for the decades that followed. These sources are supplemented by colonial census reports, which allow tracing broader patterns in occupation, demographic composition, housing conditions, and social classification over time. Although colonial census data present significant methodological challenges, including changing classifications, administrative biases, and the formalisation of caste categories, they nevertheless provide one of the few sources for examining long-term developments across multiple decades.

I have divided the paper into three substantive sections. This introduction examines slavery in southern India within its broader historiographical context and surveys debates surrounding the nature of Indian slavery, explores the relationship between caste and bondage, and situates abolition within the wider history of British imperial anti-slavery policies.

The second part reconstructs conditions before abolition. Drawing primarily on missionary accounts, district manuals, administrative reports, and other contemporary descriptions, this chapter examines agrarian labour arrangements, social conditions, patterns of exclusion, and the position of enslaved and semi-enslaved communities prior to abolition.

The third section investigates the period after abolition, while discussing the colonial census, district

1 Theobald, *The Acts of the Legislative Council of India*, p. 585.

manuals, and gazetteers as both sources and objects of analysis, paying particular attention to debates surrounding classification, enumeration, and the construction of caste categories. The chapter then examines each linguistic region separately, combining census evidence with qualitative sources in order to assess developments in occupation, housing, demographic change, and social position among the formerly enslaved castes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The quantitative data presented in this chapter do not exist in a single published source. They were compiled from individual census reports issued between 1875 and 1921. As the categories employed by census officials changed over time, particularly in relation to occupation, religion, and caste, the data required standardisation before meaningful longitudinal comparison could be undertaken. The graphs and tables presented in this section therefore represent my reconstruction of caste-wise demographic and occupational trends from the original census material.

Finally, the concluding part brings together the findings of the regional chapters and evaluates the extent to which abolition altered everyday life in southern India. Rather than treating abolition as a singular event, I approach it as a historical process whose consequences unfolded unevenly throughout the decades. In doing so, I seek to contribute to wider discussions concerning slavery, caste, labour, and social change in colonial South Asia.

Slavery has never constituted a single, uniform global institution. Rather, it has taken diverse forms, shaped by historical context, whether social, economic, or political. In the ancient Mediterranean, especially in Greece and Rome, slavery functioned as a central economic institution, with enslaved persons treated as commodified labour within what historians term “slave societies.”² In contrast, Atlantic slavery in the modern United States was racialised and plantation-based, integrating chattel slavery into the development of capitalism.³ In imperial China, forms of slavery existed alongside other systems of dependency and bonded labour. Enslaved persons were employed in elite households, state institutions, and agricultural production, but slavery never became the dominant mode of production comparable to that of the Roman Empire or the Atlantic plantation complex. Rather, it coexisted with a large peasant population and various forms of tenancy and servitude.⁴ In the medieval Mediterranean and West Asian worlds, enslavement often followed religious and military boundaries, with systems structured around warfare, trade, and conversion.⁵ For this reason, general definitions, such as that of the Slavery Convention signed at Geneva in 1926, and approved by United Nations

2 de Ste. Croix, *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, p. 24.

3 Genovese, *The World the Slaves Made*, p. 65.

4 Watson, *Chattel Slavery in Chinese Peasant Society*, p. 293–294.

5 Barker, *The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves*, p. 125.

protocol in 1953, which defines slavery as ‘the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised’, can hardly explain the processes or experiences that might characterise slavery in different regions.

In southern India, slavery was embedded in caste-based agrarian relations, where hereditary status tied certain communities to land and labour.⁶ It was, therefore, a specific form of slavery rooted in a particular historical and social context. Southern India, much like the rest of the subcontinent, had an agrarian society, in which rice formed the staple crop, and social structures evolved around labour-intensive paddy cultivation from the early modern period onwards.⁷ Given the labour-intensive nature of paddy cultivation, Viswanath, in her book on slavery in the Tamil-speaking parts of the Madras presidency, argues that control over labour, which manifested in the form of slavery, determined the productive capacity of the land, and that rights to labourers were often included when land was sold.⁸



The British Raj in 1909

Note: The Princely States are shown in yellow.

Source: Edinburgh Geographical Institute; J. G. Bartholomew and Sons. - Oxford University Press, 1909.

- 6 Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, p. 8.
- 7 Habib, *Economic History of Medieval India*, p. 194.
- 8 Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, p. 24.

In addition to these agrarian structures, the expansion of the British East India Company (EIC) and the onset of the colonial era introduced new forms of slavery and coerced labour.⁹ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European merchants trafficked Indian slaves to South-East Asia and the Cape of Good Hope.¹⁰ South India witnessed an increased commerce in slaves, while the coastal regions of Bengal were also subject to slave raiding by Europeans and their agents. Major, in *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire*, traces both the historiography of the Indian Ocean slave trade and diverse forms of slavery within the Indian subcontinent.¹¹ She argues that slave-trading was widespread in Bengal and Madras Presidencies until the end of the eighteenth century.¹² Similarly, in his work on colonial regimes, Ahuja notes the frequent references to practices such as ‘pressing coolies’ or ‘catching coolie carpenters’, suggesting that these did not merely represent continuities of pre-colonial, traditional practices of tribute in labour, but rather their transformation into a different form of involuntary labour under a military despotic state.¹³ If slavery in southern India was thus embedded within colonial, agrarian and caste structures, the question of its abolition must be situated within a broader imperial context. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a powerful abolitionist movement across the British Empire, which presented slavery as a moral and political problem demanding intervention.¹⁴ However, the application of this discourse was far from uniform. While slavery in the Atlantic world was condemned as a system of extreme exploitation, forms of bondage in India were often reinterpreted by colonial officials as “milder,” customary, or integral to existing social arrangements.¹⁵ Subsequent research about this topic largely ignored the Indian Ocean slave trade or slavery within the Indian subcontinent until the recent trend in scholarship, exploring the complex relationships between caste, class, kinship, indenture, debt bondage and slavery within India itself.¹⁶ In his study, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, Davis argues that early British abolitionism was shaped primarily by anxieties surrounding labour discipline, and that this tension is evident in schemes to establish “free” plantations in Africa, which aimed to undermine slave-based economies in the Atlantic world while simultaneously opening new avenues for commercial expansion.¹⁷ Coleman illustrates this contradiction through the case of Henry Smeathman, who, while presenting himself as an opponent of the slave trade, proposed co-

9 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 43.

10 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 50.

11 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 18.

12 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 52.

13 Ahuja, *Labour Relations in an Early Colonial Context*, p. 2; “Coolie” is a term historically used for low-wage labourers, typically those of south Asian descent. In the 18th century, it referred to migrant south Asian indentured labourers.

14 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 5.

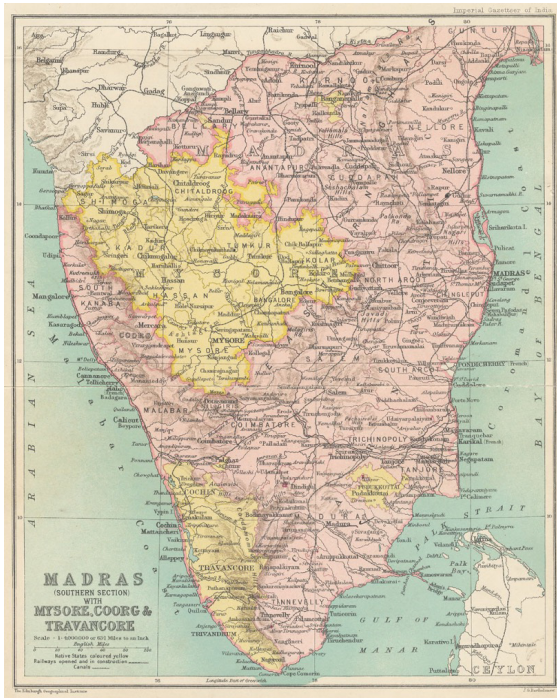
15 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 313.

16 Major, *Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India*, p. 19.

17 Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, p. 30, 358, 455.

lonial schemes in Sierra Leone that involved the purchase and “redemption” of enslaved people, who would then be settled as nominally free labourers.¹⁸ In this sense, abolitionist thought did not necessarily reject coercion, but instead sought to reorganise it within new imperial economic framework.

These tensions within abolitionist thought became even more pronounced in the context of British India. Prior to 1833, many British abolitionists took an ambivalent position towards Indian slavery, often emphasising the supposed mild nature of it compared to the trans-Atlantic slavery.¹⁹ However, by the late 1830s, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS) passed resolutions, asserting that as the EIC had failed to act decisively, it was now the duty of “the British nation to direct their immediate attention to this important subject, and seek the immediate and entire abolition of personal slavery throughout the whole of British India.”²⁰ This was followed by mobilisations organised by the BFASS to force the EIC to legislate against slavery,²¹ resulting in the Indian Slavery Act of 1843.²²



Southern part of the British Raj in 1909 Note: The princely states of Travancore and mysore are shown in yellow.

Source: John George Bartholomew - The Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909.

18 Coleman, Discourses of Slavery and Abolition Britain and its Colonies, p. 142.

19 Major, Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, p. 323

20 British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, Minutes of the Proceedings of the General Anti-Slavery Convention, p. 17.

21 Major, Slavery, Abolitionism and Empire in India, p. 325.

22 Theobald, The Acts of the Legislative Council of India, p. 585.

In southern India, the Slavery Abolition Act was immediately adopted by the Madras Presidency and the Bombay Presidency, and a decade later by the princely state of Travancore.²³ However, the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, which promised non-interference in the matters of religion, complicated things.²⁴ The European missionaries who had established themselves in the region in the preceding decades had framed the question of caste-based slavery in theological terms, calling it spiritual degradation, thereby situating the agrarian caste order within the domain of religion.²⁵ The colonial state adopted this theological framing, and, in line with its commitment to religious neutrality, was often unwilling to enforce abolition measures in ways that would disrupt caste-based social relations.²⁶

Life Under Slavery: Agrarian Labour and Social Conditions before Abolition

In the early sixteenth century, regarding land grants bestowed by the kings of the Malayalam region upon priests and other influential figures, Barbosa²⁷ observes:

The king of the country gives them²⁸, in order that their masters may be supported by their labour, and these protect and shew favour to these slaves.²⁹

This passage underscores how entrenched and indispensable slavery was in the region by the early modern period, if not earlier. Royal land grants of this period included slaves as a matter of course to ensure that recipients had sufficient labour to work the land. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the Malayalam-speaking region had been divided between the princely states of Travancore-Cochin and the Malabar region, which came under the Madras Presidency. Three centuries after Barbosa, Samuel Mateer³⁰ writes:

Slavery in the most unmitigated form, that is, united with caste restrictions, prevailed. A large proportion of the population were actual slaves of the soil, while others of the pro-

23 Theobald, *The Acts of the Legislative Council of India*, p. 585.

24 Watson, *East India Proclamations*, pp. 1-4.

25 Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, p. 6.

26 Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, p. 7.

27 Duarte Barbosa (1480 – 1521) was a Portuguese writer and officer from Portuguese India (between 1500 and 1516)

28 Land along with slaves.

29 Barbosa, *East Africa and Malabar*, pp. 137-138.

30 Samuel Mateer (1835 –1893) was a British missionary who worked in Travancore for the London Missionary Society for 33 years, from 1859 to 1891

scribed classes were in a condition but little removed from this. The rajah might sell into slavery persons of various castes who had committed any crime by which they lost caste, or were liable to capital punishment. They also laid hold of vagabonds and sold them. Slaves were sometimes exported to other parts of India.³¹

[...] he is at liberty to let or transfer his servants as he pleases—to separate the children from the parents, and the wife from the husband—to give them as presents to his friends, or allot them as the wedding dowry of his daughters—to assign them over as a payment for his debts [...] Many fell victims to fever, rheumatism, and other diseases; and very few lived to old age.³²

Mateer's account makes it clear that slavery in Travancore was neither peripheral nor incidental. It was widespread, encompassing, in his words, "a large proportion of the population." He notes here that the form it took was shaped by the region's social structure, with caste restrictions binding enslaved status to hereditary communities. His description of "slaves of the soil" in this passage presents a picture where slavery was deeply embedded in the agrarian and political order of Travancore, resonating with Barbosa's account of royal land grants³³, in which land came with slaves to work it and . His observations extend beyond documentation of Travancore slavery to include a comparative assessment that throws the region's practices into sharper relief:

The condition of the predial or rustic slaves of Malabar cannot bear a favourable comparison with that of household or domestic slaves among the Mahommedans. The latter are received with them into a fraternity; and are no longer kept at a suspicious distance. In Arabia their treatment is said to be like that of children, and they go by the appellation of sons with their masters. They often rise to the most confidential station in the family, and the external appearance of the master and slave is hardly distinguishable; they are so much upon a par.³⁴

The comparison emphasises the harshness of slavery in Travancore. In this passage, Mateer contrasts it with forms of slavery from the West Asian Islamic world, characterised by integration, trust, and even kinship-like bonds. The distinction he draws turns on the social distance between master and enslaved. In the Islamic contexts he describes, however idealised his portrayal may be, the enslaved are "received into a fraternity," rise to positions of confidence, and become indistinguishable in appearance from their masters. The Travancore system, by contrast, was de-

31 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 291.

32 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 304.

33 Barbosa, *East Africa and Malabar*, pp. 137-138.

34 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 298.

defined precisely by the maintenance of distance and social hierarchy, enforced through religiously codified caste restrictions that marked enslaved communities as perpetually subordinate. As to which communities constituted the enslaved population, Mateer identifies and describes them explicitly:

As to the classes of soil slaves, the lowest were the Pulayars [...] The condition of these unhappy beings is, I think, without a parallel in the whole range of history. They are so wretchedly provided with the necessities of life that the most loathsome things are a treat to them. They are bought and sold like cattle, and are often worse treated. The owners had formerly power to flog them and enchain them, and in some cases to maim them, and even to deprive them of their lives. [...] The slaves are chiefly composed of two races—the Pariahs and the Pulayars—of whom the latter form the more numerous class.³⁵

Mateer identifies the two castes, namely Pulayar and Paraiyar,³⁶ as the lowest among the slaves who worked on the land. These accounts establish the baseline against which post-abolition changes must be measured. The lives of Pulayar and Paraiyar communities were defined by forced labour, material deprivation, physical vulnerability, and a legal status that treated them as property transferable across households and regions. Saradmoni's study of the Pulayars seeks to reconstruct the history of caste formation in Kerala through a combination of folklore, oral traditions, and selective archival interpretation. He traces the Pulayar community's origins to early medieval social formations, suggesting they were originally part of the indigenous or aboriginal population. In his account, these communities are positioned as having once occupied a dominant position in the social order before being progressively subordinated. By the sixteenth century, he argues, they had been "reduced to a state of slavery."³⁷ Francis Day, writing from within the British administrative gaze of nineteenth-century Cochin, provides a more directly observational description of enslaved labouring communities. He refers to Pulayars and Paraiyars as part of a broader category of "soil slaves," noting:

The soil slaves are sometimes called Churmurs³⁸ as a whole, and are rather a numerous race... they are divided into four classes Pulayars, Pariahs, Oolahdurs and the Kanckas.³⁹

35 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 302.

36 The caste names are not consistently spelt in the nineteenth-century sources. Pulayar, Poleyar, Puliya among others refer to the same caste and Pariah, Paraiar, Paraiya, among others refer to the same caste.

37 Saradmoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste*, pp. 44–47.

38 "Churmur" is a spelling variation of "Cheruman". The term "Pulayar" and "Cheruman" are synonymous today but, in the early part of the nineteenth century, they were not. Pulayars were the most numerous among the Cheruman and over the years, the Cheruman was dropped from usage.

39 Day, *The Land of the Perumals*, pp. 326–27.

His observations on linguistic and ritualised practices among Pulayar communities further illustrate the extent to which caste subordination was encoded in everyday life:

They are obliged to call their children “calves,” their silver “copper,” and their paddy “chaff.” They commence speaking by saying, “your slave has received permission to observe.” Nairs they must call “Kings,” and Brahmans they may not approach: they are not allowed to draw near a Temple to pray, and must leave the public road to permit those of higher caste to pass undefiled.⁴⁰

The passage is best read as an index of how caste hierarchy was naturalised through language, bodily discipline, and spatial restriction. Day’s account of marriage practices among Paraiyar communities similarly foregrounds their incorporation into a system of hereditary servitude:

[...]the marriage ceremony is very simple. A man brings a woman to his master, and states that he wishes to keep her as his wife, subsequently she receives her allowance of rice, but she may leave her husband when she pleases, and is not particular in changing one spouse for another. The husband’s master by the old law, maintains his wife and children, until they are able to work, when the eldest son becomes his property, and the others that of the mother’s master.⁴¹

The situation in Malabar, the northern part of the Malayalam-speaking region, was no better. Writing in the early nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan, an official of the EIC who travelled through and surveyed a large portion of southern India, observed:

By far the greater part of the labour in the field is performed by slaves, or Churmar. These are the absolute property of their Dévarus, or lords, and may be employed in any work that their masters please. They are not attached to the soil, but may be sold, or transferred in any manner that the master thinks fit; only a husband and wife cannot be sold separately, but children may be separated from their parents, and brothers from their sisters. The slaves are of different casts, such as Parriar, Vullam, Canacun, Erilay⁴²

This account from Buchanan suggests strong continuities between slavery in Malabar and that practised further south in Travancore. As in Mateer’s description of Travancore, enslaved labour

40 Day, *The Land of the Perumals*, p. 327.

41 Day, *The Land of the Perumals*, p. 328.

42 Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras Vol II*, p. 370.

in Malabar was deeply embedded within agrarian production and structured through caste hierarchy.⁴³ Buchanan likewise identifies Paraiyars and Pulayars, among the enslaved communities. As with Mateer and Day, Buchanan's observations must be read critically in light of his position within the expanding colonial state. His surveys were undertaken partly to render agrarian society legible to Company administration, particularly in matters relating to land, labour, and revenue extraction. The classificatory language he employs reflects this administrative intention to enumerate and categorise populations into fixed social types. Nevertheless, his account is significant because it documents the extent to which slavery formed a central component of agricultural labour in Malabar at the beginning of the nineteenth century, shortly before the consolidation of British rule in the region. Having identified which castes were slaves that worked on the land, it becomes possible to examine whether the abolition of slavery altered their circumstances in any meaningful way. To do so, I will draw on occupation status and housing conditions among the Paraiyar and Pulayar communities as recorded in census data from 1875 onwards. Before turning to that data, however, it is necessary to establish the baseline conditions of occupation and housing for these communities under slavery. Mateer offers two observations on this subject:

Their houses are of the simplest nature; and at night they rest on the bosom of mother earth, and have but few comforts.⁴⁴ Their dwellings are miserable huts formed of sticks cut out of the woods, with walls of reed or mud, and thatched with grass or cocoa-leaf, situated by the sides of the rice swamps, or on mounds in their centre, to be out of the way of polluting respectable people. They were discouraged from having comfortable huts, in order that they might be willing to move about as required for the work of cultivation. [...] The work of the Pulayars lies almost exclusively in the rice fields—pumping them dry, making up the embankments, hedging, digging, manuring, ploughing, weeding, transplanting, and reaping. Yet the grain is not considered as polluted, but used by the Brahmans and nobles, offered in temples, and carried into the most exclusive kitchens. Men, women, and children work together at harvest and other times.⁴⁵

Mateer's description of housing reveals a pattern of marginalisation that operated on multiple levels. The dwellings themselves were temporary structures, deliberately kept rudimentary so that their inhabitants could be moved as cultivation required. Their location on the edges of rice swamps or on mounds placed them at a physical remove from the settlements of higher castes. The same logic of exclusion

43 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 298.

44 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 37.

45 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 41.

extended to markets, where they were denied admission and forced to transact from a distance. Yet Mateer notes a striking contradiction, where, while the Pulayars themselves were deemed polluting, the grain they cultivated was not. It was consumed by Brahmans and nobles and used in temple offerings, suggesting that the exclusion of the labouring castes was not rooted in the nature of their work but in the maintenance of social hierarchy. The housing conditions of the slave castes were similar in other parts of the Malayalam region.⁴⁶ This combination of material deprivation, spatial marginalisation, and ritual exclusion formed the fabric of everyday life for the Pulayar and Paraiyar communities under slavery. Before turning to the census data, a methodological question must be addressed. The Paraiyar and Pulayar communities, as Mateer documents, were the primary enslaved slave castes of Travancore. Yet his observations also reveal that the institution of slavery intersected with religious conversion in ways that complicate the analysis of post-abolition social change:

[...] twelve years ago, most of these Christians were zealous heathens and oppressed slaves. They lived in huts some ten feet long by ten broad, worth about seven rupees each; huddled together in filthy villages rendered disgusting by the remains of dead animals on which the people fed, and other foul refuse. Carpenters and masons dared not work for them, even if some one possessed the means to employ such. Eleven years ago one of these men, who had become a Christian, undertook to employ carpenters in building a decent abode.⁴⁷

Many among the Paraiyar and Pulayar communities converted to Christianity in the late nineteenth century and beyond. However, not all who converted came from the formerly enslaved castes, and crucially, most of those who did convert continued to work on the land and lived in conditions similar to those who remained within the Hindu caste order.⁴⁸

The Christians of Foreign Nationalities were asked to enter the name of their race in addition to their sects while no provision was made to find out the former castes of Native converts to Christianity. This item of important statistical value was omitted on the special request of the Christian Missionaries who represented that “In accordance with our principles which exclude all caste distinctions in the Christian Religion our converts assume that it will be sufficient for them to designate themselves in Form No. V. column 5, as Protestant

46 Francis Day offers a similar description of the Paraiyar and Pulayar housing conditions in Kochi: “...They have small huts, in which the Deity is represented by a rude stone...” in Day, *Land of the Perumals*, p. 329; Buchanan observes in Malabar: “...They erect for themselves small temporary huts, that are little better than large baskets. These are placed in the rice fields...” in Buchanan, *A Journey through Madras Vol II*, p. 370.

47 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 313.

48 Viswanath, *The Paraiyah Problem*, p. 75.

“Christians.”⁴⁹

In the census data, converts are enumerated under religious and confessional categories and not under their former castes, unlike the earlier, nineteenth century district manuals where converts were enumerated explicitly under their former castes. This presents a limitation of having no reliable means to distinguish which of the converts were Pulayar or Paraiyar in the twentieth century, and hence they cannot be accounted for in the analysis that follows. The data, therefore, captures only the “Hindu” portion of these communities. What the census cannot show is whether the experiences of recently converted Christians after abolition diverged from those who remained Hindu, or whether conversion served primarily to reclassify the same population without fundamentally altering its position within the agrarian order. These questions lie beyond the scope of this paper, but Mateer’s observations suggest that they warrant further inquiry.

After Abolition: Continuity and Change among Former Slave Castes, 1875–1941

The decades following the formal abolition of slavery present a different kind of evidentiary challenge. Unlike the pre-abolition period, where much of the available material consisted of missionary writings, travel accounts, administrative reports, and gazetteers, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries generated a growing body of statistical material through the colonial census. These reports form the principal source base for my study. At the same time, however, they cannot be treated as neutral records of social reality. The colonial census was also an instrument through which the colonial state sought to classify, order, and render Indian society legible for administrative purposes.⁵⁰ The Malayalam-speaking region was administratively divided between the Malabr district of the Madras Presidency in the north and the Travancore princely state in the south. Before 1875, there were three attempts to conduct censuses in Travancore: in 1816, 1836, and 1854, respectively.⁵¹ However, the accuracy of these censuses was disputed even as early as 1875.⁵² G. A. Ballard, the British Resident⁵³ observed in 1875:

49 Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 62

50 Historians have extensively debated the consequences of this process. One influential interpretation argues that the census contributed to the rigidification of caste by transforming flexible and locally specific social identities into standardised administrative categories. See Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, pp. 7-9; Dirks, *Castes of Mind*, pp. 198-204. Reflecting on decades of census operations, B. R. Ambedkar observed in 1947 that the census had ceased to be merely a demographic exercise and had become a profoundly political affair.

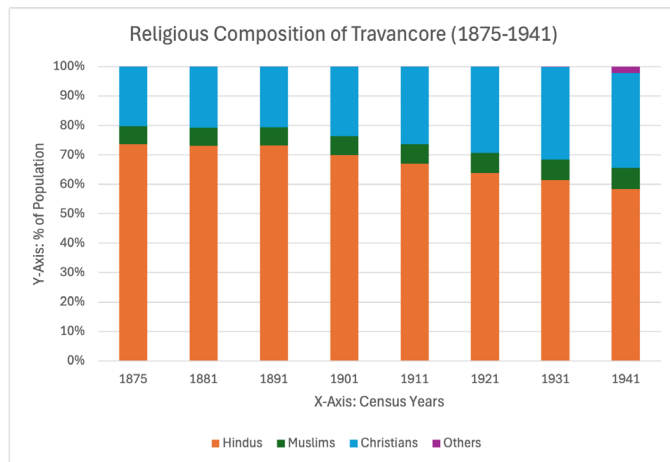
51 Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 1.

52 Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 2.

53 The official post of ‘Resident’ was appointed by the British Crown to oversee the rulers of the princely states.

It is well known that the returns of population in Travancore are exceedingly inaccurate [in the earlier censuses]. The generally quoted returns for Cochin were taken in 1857, those for Travancore in 1854. Probably, when taken, they were not very correct, and from the progress made and prosperity enjoyed since, they have now become simply misleading if relied on at all [...] Considering, however, how very false the and now usually accepted figures are, I think it would be undesirable to wait till the next Madras Census to obtain more accurate information in Travancore and Cochin.⁵⁴

1875 was when the first “systematic” census of Travancore was conducted.⁵⁵ Paraiyar and Pulayar, along with other castes were categorised as belonging to an overarching ‘Hindu’ religion in the censuses.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is first essential to trace the evolution of the Hindu demographic between 1875 and 1941.



Evolution of the Religious Composition of Travancore

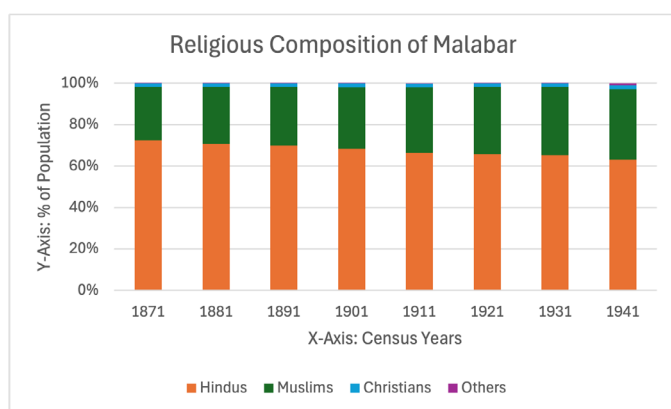
Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken. The vertical axis refers to the religious demographics of the population.

Source: Compiled by the author from the Travancore Census Reports of 1875, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941. Population figures were extracted from the original census volumes and standardised to permit comparison across census years.

⁵⁴ Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Report on the Census of Travancore, 1875, p. 2.

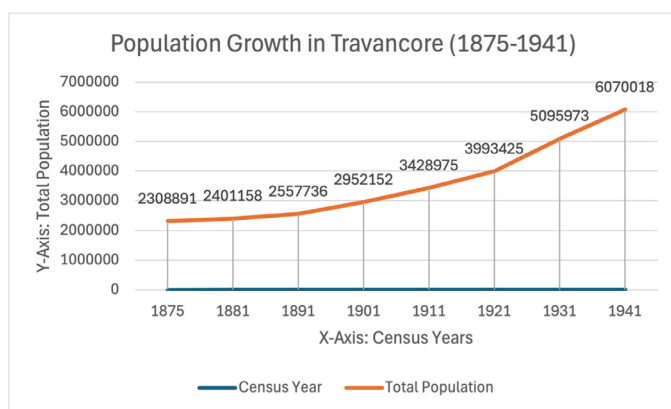
⁵⁶ Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 185, and Report on the 1881 Census of Travancore, p. 177.



Evolution of the Religious Composition of Malabar

Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken. The vertical axis refers to the religious demographics of the population.

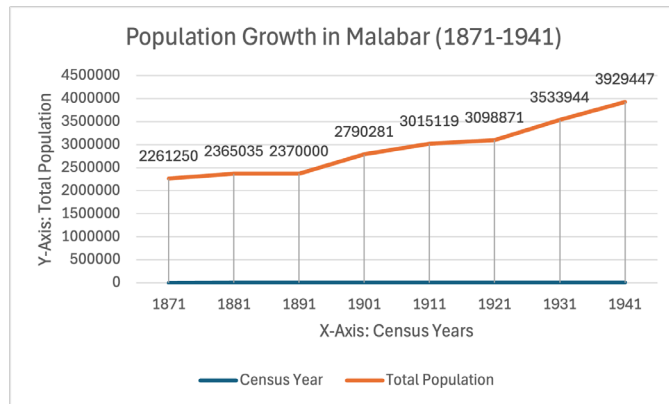
Source: Compiled by the author from the Madras Census Supplementary Tables of 1875, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941. Population figures were extracted from the original census volumes and standardised to permit comparison across census years.



Population Growth in Travancore between 1875 and 1941.

Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken. The vertical axis refers to the total population.

Source: Compiled by the author from the Travancore Census Reports of 1875, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941.



Population Growth in Malabar between 1871 and 1941.

Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken. The vertical axis refers to the total population.

Source: Compiled by the author from the Madras Census Supplementary Tables of 1875, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941.

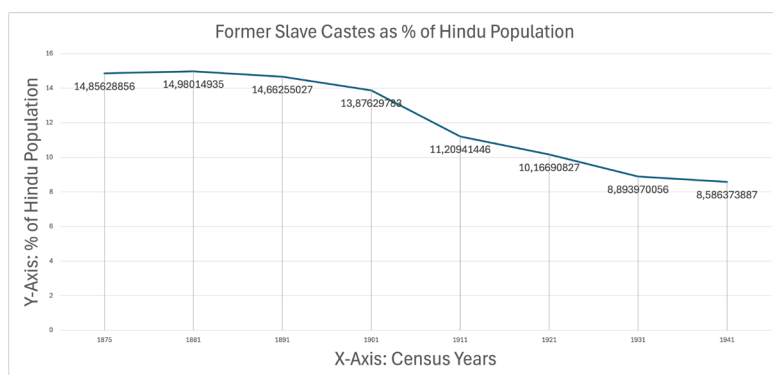
Over the years, as shown in Figure 3 above, the share of Hindus in Travancore's population declined from being about three quarters of the total population to being just over half the population, while the total population, as represented in Figure 5 above, increased. This can be attributed to the Christian missionary work and conversion to Christianity, especially of those belonging to the Paraiyar and Pulayar castes.⁵⁷ Confirming this, in Figure 7 below, a decline in the percentage of the Paraiyar and Pulayar castes within Hindus can be seen. In the Malabar region, Islam was more influential than Christianity but a similar trend as in Travancore, is apparent. In the 1875 census, women and children were not included within the recorded working population.⁵⁸ However, textual sources indicate that both women and children, from approximately the age of eight, were extensively engaged in agrarian labour in various capacities.⁵⁹ Adjusting for this, Figure 8 below shows that more than 90% of the working-age population among the Pulayars and Paraiyars were recorded as agricultural labourers in 1875.

⁵⁷ Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 313.

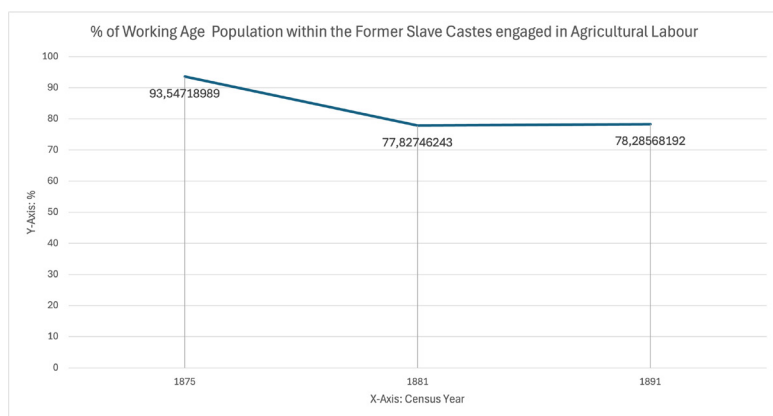
⁵⁸ Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 253.

⁵⁹ Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 305.

Between Coercion and Agency: Abolition and the Afterlives of Slavery in Kerala (1843–1941)



Paraiyar and Pulayar Castes as % of the Total Hindu Population between 1871 and 1941. Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken. The vertical axis refers to the total Hindu population. Source: Compiled by the author from the Travancore Census Reports of 1875, 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911, 1921, 1931 and 1941. Population figures were extracted from the original census volumes and standardised to permit comparison across census years.



Working Age Population among the Paraiyar and Pulayar Castes as % engaged in Agricultural Labour between 1875 and 1891

Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken. The vertical axis refers to the total working age population within the two castes.

Source: Author's calculations based on data extracted from the Travancore Census Reports (1875–1891). Figures were reconstructed from caste-wise population and occupational tables contained in the original census publications.

In the 1881 and 1891 censuses, women and children were included within the working population.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, it is likely that certain forms of agricultural labour performed by women were classified as domestic work rather than agricultural labour, thereby introducing a degree of distortion into the data.⁶¹ Despite this, Figure 6 indicates that approximately 80% of the working-age population among the former slave castes remained employed as agricultural labourers. In summary, between 1875 and 1891, which was already three decades after the abolition of slavery in both Malabar and Travancore, the census data reveal a persistent concentration of these same former slave castes in agricultural labour. Accounting for the changes in census methodology, such as the omission of women and children in the working population in 1875, the omission of certain agrarian labour likely reclassified as domestic labour, a large majority of the working-age population among the Paraiyars and Pulayars remained confined to the very same agrarian work they did back when they were enslaved. In 1901, the census did not tabulate specific occupations by caste, necessitating a different analytical approach.⁶² The next passages, therefore, turn to this shift, using aggregate figures for agricultural labourers alongside working-age population estimates for the former slave castes to reconstruct their continued presence in the agrarian economy.

The 1901 census describes the Pulayars as having “The occupation of the Pulayas from time immemorial has been field-labour [...]”.⁶³ It also records 172,443 people of the Paraiyar and Pulayar caste as productive workers, of which 144,092 worked in their “traditional profession”, meaning agricultural labour.⁶⁴ It should be noted that the number the census records as the total working population is likely an underestimation due to the mis-categorisation of certain agrarian work as domestic work and the exclusion of the latter from productive work.⁶⁵ Despite this, 83.5% of the working population among the Pulayars and Paraiyars were still employed in agriculture. The total population of the Pulayars and Paraiyars was recorded as 282,468 in the 1901 census.⁶⁶ Of these, 71,860 were children under ten years of age, and 31,665 were over sixty, leaving 178,943 working-age people.⁶⁷ The census also recorded 269,034 people from the total population as agrarian labourers.⁶⁸ This means that Pulayars and Paraiyars constituted 66.5% of all agrarian labourers,

60 Report on the 1881 Census of Travancore, p. 354. and Report on the Census of Travancore, 1891, p. 305.

61 Work such as separation of rice from the paddy happened and continues to happen within the veranda of homes instead of the paddy fields.

62 Report on the 1901 Census of Travancore, p. 381.

63 Report on the 1901 Census of Travancore, p. 342.

64 Report on the 1901 Census of Travancore, p. 435.

65 see earlier

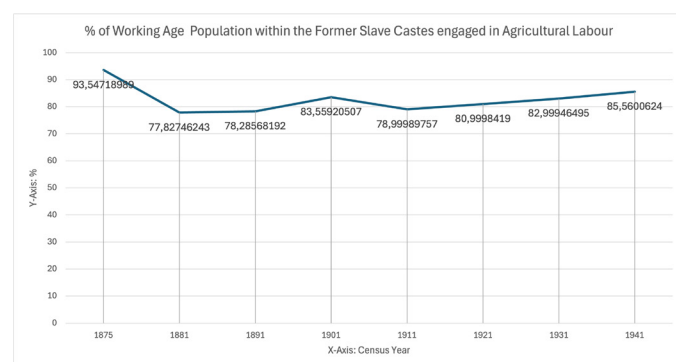
66 Report on the 1901 Census of Travancore, p. 186.

67 Percentage of children under ten among Hindus: 2,544 per 10,000 people, that is 25.44%; percentage of those over sixty: 1,121 per 10,000, that is 11.21%. Extrapolating from these percentages yields 71,860 for under-tens and 31,665 over-sixty.

68 Report on the 1901 Census of Travancore, p. 420.

despite forming only about 12% of the population. Based on the previous censuses as well as textual evidence, a large majority of the Pulayars and Paraiyars still worked as agrarian labourers in 1901.

In the 1911 and 1921 censuses, Paraiyars are described as “An important caste of agricultural and industrial labourers” and Pulayars as “one of the labouring castes”.⁶⁹ The 1921 census further records 259,222 of those belonging to these two castes as being “traditionally” employed as labourers.⁷⁰ More specific statistics are given in these two censuses, recording ca. 88% of the two castes working as agricultural labourers in 1911 and 82% in 1921.⁷¹



Working Age Population among the Paraiyar and Pulayar Castes as % engaged in Agricultural Labour between 1871 and 1941
 Note: The horizontal axis refers to the years in which censuses were taken, namely 1875, 1881 and every 10 years since until 1941. The vertical axis refers to the total working age population within the two castes.
 Source: Author’s calculations based on data extracted from the Travancore Census Reports (1875–1941). Figures were reconstructed from caste-wise population and occupational tables contained in the original census publications.

The censuses from 1901 to 1941 thus allow for a more complete picture of occupational continuity among the former slave castes. Despite methodological changes and the cessation of caste-wise occupational tabulations after 1901, it is still possible to reconstruct their presence in the agrarian economy using caste-wise population figures, working-age estimates, and aggregate data on agricultural labourers. Across these three decades, the proportion of Pulayars and Paraiyars engaged in agricultural labour remained consistently high, confirming the persistence of caste-based occupational rigidity

69 Report on the 1921 Census of Travancore, p. 113-14.
 70 Report on the 1921 Census of Travancore, p. 109.
 71 Report on the 1921 Census of Travancore, p.125.

into the early twentieth century, as illustrated in Figure 7 above.

Occupation was not the only marker of social position recorded in the censuses. Alongside questions about employment, enumerators also documented the materials used for housing, distinguishing between tiled roofs, cadjan leaf thatch, and straw thatch. These categories, when read alongside textual sources, reveal the extent to which pre-abolition living conditions persisted among the Paraiyars and Pulayars in Travancore.

Mateer describes the dwellings of Paraiyars and Pulayars as “miserable huts formed of sticks cut out of the woods, with walls of reed or mud, and thatched with grass or cocoa-leaf”⁷² Similarly, the census of 1875 classifies houses according to their roofs, and counts 499,740 thatched huts, of which 102,056 huts are thatched with straw, matching Mateer’s description.⁷³ Based on the estimated number of families per hut, this figure roughly corresponds to the total population of the Paraiyars and Pulayars at 252,604.⁷⁴ Likewise, in 1881, the number of huts thatched with straw stands at 117,954, again corresponding to the slightly increased population of the two castes at 262,993.⁷⁵ This trend can be traced up to the 1941 census, where the number of huts thatched with straw corresponds to the number of families belonging to the former slave castes.⁷⁶ The patterns seen in the census data are also attested by further textual sources:

The liberated slaves also have been, as a body, slow to avail themselves of their freedom, and in many instances remain in their former condition. This is not without its advantages. A sudden revolution in the social condition of such multitudes is not desirable—especially as other Hindus are unwilling to educate them—or a complete upturning of the arrangements of society ⁷⁷

Mateer’s observation that the liberated slaves remained “in many instances” in their former condition aligns with the data’s indication of continuity in occupation and housing. The constraints that perpetuated this continuity are detailed further in Mateer’s description:

In some places they are not allowed on the public roads; in others, they are driven from them to seek shelter in the jungle on the approach of a high-caste man; hence it is most difficult for

72 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 41.
 73 Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 120.
 74 Report on the 1875 Census of Travancore, p. 135.
 75 Report on the 1881 Census of Travancore, p. 108.
 76 Report on the 1941 Census Travancore, p. 30.
 77 Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p. 307.

them to travel from place to place. Should they be engaged in work in or near the roads, they are compelled to place leaves, as a mark to warn the high-caste of their presence, who, on seeing it, shout for them to retire while they pass. They may not approach within 64 feet of a high-caste man. They are still not allowed to enter any public markets, and hence stand at great disadvantage in selling any little produce they may happen to possess; and consequently are kept in a state of poverty. They are not permitted to build their houses near the public roads; nor are they, as a rule, allowed to avail themselves of the Sirkar ferry-boats to cross swollen rivers. As a rule, though nominally allowed to possess property, they possess none. Should they clear a little waste land, their rich masters generally get the land registered in their own names, and thus they are deprived of the fruit of their industry.⁷⁸

This passage makes clear that pre-abolition conditions persisted, enforced through spatial restrictions, market exclusion, and the appropriation of land and labour. The prohibition on approaching public roads, the requirement to signal their presence to higher castes, and the bar on market access, all referred to in this passage, served to maintain the social distance that had defined slavery itself. Even the nominal right to own property was rendered meaningless by wealthy landlords registering cleared land in their own names. These restrictions, rooted in the same caste hierarchy that had sustained slavery, continued to shape the lives of former slaves long after abolition.

Conclusion

This paper set out to examine what the abolition of slavery changed in the lives of formerly enslaved castes in modern-day Kerala. More specifically, it asked whether the legal abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century altered the agrarian occupations and living conditions of communities such as the Paraiyars and Pulayars between abolition and the final colonial census of 1941.

The evidence I presented suggest that abolition produced a significant change in legal status, but a far more limited transformation in everyday material conditions. Prior to abolition, the sources examined in this study consistently describe the Paraiyar and Pulayar communities as slaves or as communities occupying a position indistinguishable from slavery. Across the Malayalam region, they appear as hereditary agricultural labourers, subject to restrictions on mobility, residence, property ownership, and social interaction. Missionary accounts, district manuals, and administrative reports all point towards the existence of an agrarian order in which caste and slavery were closely intertwined.

⁷⁸ Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, pp. 308-09.

The formal abolition of slavery removed the legal recognition of slave ownership. Individuals could no longer be bought and sold as property under law, and the language of slavery gradually disappeared from official administrative practice. Yet the evidence examined here suggests that many of the underlying structures that had sustained slavery remained largely intact. Former slave castes continued to be concentrated in agricultural labour decades after abolition. Census data from these regions indicate that the overwhelming majority of Paraiyars and Pulayars remained employed within the agrarian economy well into the twentieth century agricultural labourers, farm servants, or landless workers several decades after emancipation. A similar pattern can be observed with regard to housing and living conditions. The descriptions provided by Mateer, Buchanan, and other contemporary observers portray former slave communities as residing in segregated settlements and occupying some of the poorest forms of housing available. Census evidence from Travancore suggests substantial continuity in these conditions. Although precise measurements remain difficult, the available data indicate that the housing occupied by former slave castes continued to closely match the conditions described in late nineteenth-century textual sources.

The persistence of caste also complicates any straightforward narrative of emancipation. Despite conversion to Christianity, caste identities often persisted. Missionary writings and census reports continued to classify converts according to caste origins, while former slave castes often remained concentrated within the same forms of labour. Neither the disappearance of legal slavery nor conversion automatically dismantled the social distinctions upon which slavery had previously rested.

The findings of this thesis, therefore, support the broader argument advanced by scholars such as Rupa Viswanath that abolition in southern India should not be understood as a complete rupture. Rather than marking a sharp transition from slavery to freedom, abolition appears as part of a longer process in which older forms of coercion and dependency were reconfigured within new legal and administrative frameworks. The former slave castes ceased to be slaves in law, but many remained tied to the same agrarian economy, occupied similar positions within the social hierarchy, and continued to experience the consequences of caste-based exclusion.

The history of abolition in southern India, therefore, raises a broader historical question. If freedom is defined solely as the removal of legal ownership, abolition may be regarded as a success. If, however, freedom is understood as meaningful access to land, resources, mobility, and social equality, then the evidence presented here suggests a far more ambiguous outcome. The abolition of slavery

transformed the legal status of former slave castes, but many of the structures that had sustained their subordination survived long after slavery itself had formally disappeared.

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Appendix: Tables

All of the following tabulated data are compiled from the census reports of Travancore 1875-1941) and census reports of Madras (1871-1941).

Religious Demographics of Travancore compiled from the Censuses

Census Year	Total Population	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Others
1875	2308891	1700317	139905	468518	151
1881	2401158	1755610	146909	498542	97
1891	2557736	1871864	158823	526911	138
1901	2952152	2063798	190566	697387	401
1911	3428975	2298390	226617	903868	100
1921	3993425	2549664	270478	1172934	349
1931	5095973	3134888	353274	1604475	3336
1941	6070018	3544399	434150	1960209	133262

Religious Demographics of Malabar compiled from the Censuses

Census Year	Total Population	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Others
1871	2261250	1637914	581609	41642	151

Census Year	Total Population	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Others
1881	2365035	1669271	652198	43196	370
1891	2370000	1680000	680000	43196	400
1901	2790281	1904474	832970	51493	1344
1911	3015119	2008082	953381	53015	9071
1921	3098871	2039333	1004327	54650	561
1931	3533944	2303754	1163453	65894	843
1941	3929447	2478654	1337780	75052	37961

The Paraiyar and Pulayar Caste Population in Travancore

Census Year	Hindus	Pulayar (P1)	Paraiyar (P2)	P1 + P2	% of Hindu Population
1875	1700317	188916	63688	252604	14.85628
1881	1755610	196539	66454	262993	14.98014
1891	1871864	202616	71847	274463	14.66255
1901	2035615	212494	69974	282468	13.87629
1911	2282617	185314	70554	255868	11.20941
1921	2549664	196184	63038	259222	10.16690
1931	3134888	208132	70684	278816	8.893970
1941	3671480	237865	77382	315247	8.586373

The Paraiyar and Pulayar Caste Population in Malabar

Census Year	Hindus	Pulayar (P1)	Paraiyar (P2)	P1 + P2	% of Hindu Population
1871	1655918		300612	300612	18.15379747
1881	1669271		300000	300000	17.97191708
1891	1680000		300000	300000	17.85714286
1901	1904474		300000	300000	15.75238097
1911	2008082		320000	320000	15.93560422
1921	2039333		320000	320000	15.69140498
1931	2303754		350000	350000	15.19259435
1941	2478654		370000	370000	14.9274566

Paraiyars and Pulayars Employed in Agriculture

Census Years	Agricultural Labourers in the Paraiyar and Pulayar Communities	Working age Popiulation in the Paraiyar and Pulayar Communities	Percentage of Working Age Paraiyars and Pulayars employed in Agriculture
1875	75617	80833	93.55
1881	102340	131496	77.83
1891	110566	141234	78.29
1901	144092	172443	83.56
1911	123401	156204	79.00
1921	128081	158125	81.00
1931	141163	170077	83.00
1941	164532	192300	85.56