

Being Less Equal: Narratives of Poor Waste-picking Women in Kerala on Inequality

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This paper examines how the poor themselves perceive and react to their situation in an unequal world. It attempts to understand class and caste as lived experiences of the poor through the narratives of poor women in Kerala. Two main findings emerge in the paper. First, the narratives on inequality from the bottom show that the process of adaptation is never complete. Resentment and criticisms against inequality do come up in the minds of the deprived along with feelings of humiliation, helplessness and sadness. However, they are not clearly protesting also. Resentment against inequalities seems to be bounded or contained. Second, the absence of stark forms of ill-treatment or discrimination along with some positive attributes of the rich go a long way towards smoothing the felt aspect of the class divide despite the wide objective segregation of the rich and the poor. Similar to the class experience, some positive interactions and good experiences from the higher castes smoothed the felt experience of caste. The limited nature of the interactions with and help from the higher classes and castes are not questioned.

Keywords: *Narratives, Poor, Inequality, Class, Caste, Lived experience, Kerala*

INTRODUCTION

Quite often, the discourses on poverty and inequality are essentially made by the non-poor, by academics, policy-makers, and social action groups. In a context of widening inequalities, this paper examines *how the poor themselves perceive and react to their situation in an unequal world*. The attempt is to move from an abstract entity of class and caste to the more concrete lived experience of the poor individuals. This research is undertaken in Kerala, a state in India where significant importance is accorded to discourses on inequality. The state is celebrated nationally and internationally for having delivered some basic capabilities to a majority of the people. Public action or agency by the people themselves is given much credit for this achievement. Kerala had an early history of caste-based movements, which were subsequently followed by class-based movements, both involving mobilization of the lower strata. Ideas of justice and the challenge of existing systems of hierarchy and inequality were present in these movements. The history of public action, the dominant presence of the Left parties, and the several pro-poor agendas of the

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political parties and governments gave the impression of Kerala being a class-conscious state. Ironically, one could see inequalities widening and the state having one of the highest scores in inequality indices (Himanshu, 2007; Jayadev, *et al.*, 2007). In such a context, this paper examines the experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the poor on inequality. Both class-and caste-based inequalities are considered in this paper.

DIFFERENT REACTIONS TO INEQUALITY: A GLANCE AT THE LITERATURE

A major explanation of reactions of the poor to inequality was given by Antonio Gramsci. According to him, the absence of resistance results from the internalization of subordination, hegemony of the consciousness of the poor by the dominant values and penetration of the worldviews of the elite into the worldviews of the poor (Gramsci, 1971).

Amartya Sen's observation on the reactions of the poor to inequality is also similar. He has explained the reactions of the poor to an inegalitarian system as a case of adaptive preferences, where "discontent is replaced by acceptance, hopeless rebellion by conformist quiet and most relevantly, in the present context suffering and anger by cheerful endurance" (Sen, 1984, p. 309).

An altogether different proposition has been made by James Scott in his path-breaking work, *The Weapons of the Weak*, which points to the *everyday resistance* by the poor, as seen in their everyday negotiations for improved wages, the inefficient ways in which work is done by them, small pilfering, and the comments, gossips, character assassination and jokes on the elite, among other things (Scott, 1985).

Susan Gal, in a critique of Scott's propositions, points out that a straitjacketing of consciousness of the poor into one single aspect of resistance might be problematic (Gal, 1995). Citing several evidences, Gal notes that different reactions to marginality are possible even within the same individual.

Another aspect brought out in literature pertains to the distinctions and hierarchies within the lower class and castes; at a more horizontal level. In a study on the Dalits in Tamil Nadu, David Mosse found agency and resistance in the efforts of Dalits making use of the educational and employment opportunities, and caste and political associations. Ironically, they also attempted to prove that it is not they but the castes lower to them in the hierarchy, which fall under the inferior position (Mosse, 1994).

Age, gender, and the particular historical, socio-economic and political contexts seem to play a crucial role in determining the reactions of the poor to inequalities. While examining the social critique made by the poor, Weis and Fine observe that the adolescent stage is one wherein people make a strong critique of the structural injustices (Weis and Fine, 1991). However, this phase soon changes over to a realistic resignation. In the life history narrative of Viramma, a Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu,

one could see that her position was largely that of internalization of subordination (Viramma, *et al.*, 2000), but her husband and son were found to be protesting against the exploitative positions of the landlord for whom they worked as serf labourers. This is also due to their political exposure, especially during the time of the historical transition in the situation of the Dalits in Tamil Nadu that had been brought about through political mobilizations and government action. All in all, the literature shows the reactions to inequality as being multi-layered.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Taking cues from the literature cited above, this study examines the voices of poor women on their being less equal in the context of Kerala. The study is based on a census of 146 waste-picking women workers, organized in the self-help project of Kudumbashree, the flagship poverty alleviation programme of the state government, coming under the Clean Kerala Mission and operating in the Cochin Corporation and municipalities in the Ernakulam district of the state. These women belonged to households officially identified as poor, according to the Below the Poverty Line (BPL) list of the state government. The methodology of the study involves a combination of survey and in-depth interviews. The study arrives at quantitative results from pre-defined questions. However, since the study was interested in capturing the subjects' own perceptions and interpretations of their lives, all the variables could not be strictly defined ahead of time. Therefore, the study has also drawn inferences from the narratives of the poor women about their lives, which deepen the understanding of how they perceive their lives on the margins of an unequal society.

PERCEPTIONS OF POOR WOMEN ON INEQUALITY

The poor women were asked different questions to find out their perceptions of and reactions to 'being the less equal' in an unequal society. The first question was about what they think about the division of people into two main strata, one who have it all and the other who struggle in life. The questions were open-ended and were asked discreetly by way of discussions. The effort was to capture their most spontaneous responses. Where the narrator was highlighting only her absolute sorrows and could not connect with the question, the question was not pursued. Clear responses to this question, therefore, came only from 95 respondents.

The responses fall broadly into the following six types: being conscious of inequality and expressing resentment; being positive as they cope with inequality; responses akin to internalization of dominant norms; being satisfied with their own progress or stressing their association with the upper class; being more concerned horizontally and being more concerned about worries of an absolute nature and the need for improvement. These responses are explained with illustrations below.

Type 1: Being Conscious of Inequality

Type 1 refers to those responses wherein the women recognized inequality and expressed their feelings as they faced an unequal world. Box 1 contains illustrations of these reactions in their own words.

The responses in Box 1 show that an unequal world has clearly not escaped the notice of these poor women. They live accepting this social reality; nevertheless there is some unhappiness, criticism and resentment about the prevailing social order. They report their feelings of being ill-treated as well as their internalized feelings of inferiority or discomfort in places frequented by the well-off. There are also responses which indicate their feelings of anger, heaviness and sadness about the situation of inequality. Some others feel that there is no point in thinking about these differences. This again indicates a process wherein they consciously try to adapt to a choiceless situation.

As mentioned earlier, Amartya Sen observes the reactions of the poor to be that of adaptive preferences and presents them in expressions such as “making allies out of the deprived and exploited”, “(oppressed) overlooking the burden itself”, “conformist quiet (of the oppressed)” and “cheerful endurance (of the oppressed)” (Sen, 1984, p. 309). The responses in the study show that the process of adaptation is never complete.

Box 1

Being Conscious of Inequality

“When I was studying, the differences in the background of classmates were not known so much. But today, wealth is flaunted and one can make out the difference between those who have and those who do not have.” [*Recognizing increasing inequality*]

“Yeah, the rich are getting richer. But the problem is when we are not getting even little.” [*Resentment at widening inequality when they are not able to achieve even the minimum level of sustenance*]

“I do think about it. But there is no point in feeling tense about all these.” [*Helpless perceiving of an unequal world*]

“Yes. I do think about it. I feel sometimes angry and sometimes sad.” [*Feeling both sad and angry*]

“Their courtyard is better than my house.” [*Recognizing stark inequality*]

“People look at me as though I am nothing or treat me with sympathy.” [*The feeling of being treated as insignificant*]

“I live in a better neighbourhood now. But the people here isolate our family because I came from the colonies of the poor.” [*The feeling of being isolated and stigmatized*]

“Places like Seemati?¹ I don’t feel comfortable. I have no capacity. Would it not be expensive? Then these are big shops and what if we can’t afford it and we come off, would they not mind it?” [*Feeling uncomfortable in places frequented by the rich*]

“My daughter says that my job is a shame to her. She has got rich friends and she generally does not invite them home because of shame.” [*Feeling of stigma*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

Resentment and criticisms against inequality do come up in the minds of the deprived along with feelings of humiliation, helplessness and sadness.

Type 2: Being Positive, as They Cope with Inequality

Here, while the respondents were conscious of inequality, there were attempts by them to see their situation positively and optimistically. Box 2 illustrates this phenomenon in their own words.

Box 2

Being Positive, as They Cope with Inequality

"I generally compare my situation to those who are worse off and think that at least our case is much better". [*There are people less fortunate than us*]

"She, a very religious person says, "Those who live a life of struggle have peace and happiness in mind'." [*Finds something positive in this negative situation*]

"I think and feel sad. Then I think that the well-off might not get peace of mind. Their wealth makes them worried. We can leave our property and walk in peace but they cannot". [*The rich have their set of problems*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

Type 3: Responses, Akin to Internalization of Dominant Norms

There were responses wherein the women denied feeling 'angry' or feeling 'jealous' against the well-off or instead suggested that the poor had only themselves to blame. While admitting to feeling sad, they denied feeling angry. A few added that they were not greedy. Box 3 illustrates this.

Box 3

Responses, Akin to Internalization of Dominant Norms

"Thinking that they have so much and we are not able to get even a little, there is sadness. I have no jealousy, only sadness. There is no anger. I tell it to God." [*Denying anger*]

"No point in becoming greedy for I will not get like that." [*Do not have greed*]

"I don't have anger against them. They also work hard and earn. But that we are not able to attain is a source of grief. I do feel angry with those people who show stinginess in giving, despite our hard work." [*Denying anger against inequalities per se*]

"What is the point of feeling jealous? Then we will only go down." [*Denying jealousy*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

What is happening here is that it is not just that the poor are relatively deprived but they also feel that harbouring any negative emotions against the rich is not appropriate. One may read these statements of their *beings* as similar to the internalization of dominant norms, the proposition made by Antonio Gramsci, discussed above, which says that an unequal society is not just about the domination of means of production by the rich over the poor but also about the ideas of the dominant class which dictate what is right (or appropriate) and wrong (or inappropriate) (Gramsci, 1971).

There are mixed responses wherein a woman who clearly notices inequality would go on to add that she is not angry or jealous. This means that while the internalization of dominant norms does not operate at the level wherein inequality escapes her notice or fails to bring some resentment, it does operate by keeping the resentment in check.

Type 4: Being Satisfied with Their Own Progress or Stressing Their Association with the Upper Class

Another type of response indicated a different interpretation of their situation, wherein the women highlighted and stressed their own mobility or absolute improvement or highlighted the aspect of associating or mingling, limited as it is, rather than difference and divergence with the better-off class. In their statements, the 'emphasis is not on inequality'. Some instances of these are given in Box 4.

In the set of responses delineated above, one can see the possibility of an oppressed subject giving a different interpretation or laying emphasis on an aspect that is different from what an objective interpretation of the situation may suggest. Here again there are women who have given both types of responses. There is a woman who mentions her sadness while thinking about an unequal world. At a later stage, she talks of how her family dresses up like *others (the well-off)* and how others cannot make out from her appearance that she is from a poor family. Here she is stressing on her participation in the society. Thus, she experiences mixed reactions, at times feeling sad and at other times feeling that she is participating in the mobility of the society.

Type 5: Being More Concerned, Horizontally

The issue of hierarchies and distinctions within the horizontal group is another dimension involved in understanding reactions to inequality. When asked the question on inequality, some of the women narrated more about their feelings of relative deprivation within their own group. Responding to the question I asked, the women would slip into a discussion on the horizontal plane wherein discussion on the better-off people turned out to be more about the better-off amongst their relatives. Some women specifically mentioned how they do not have issues with those vertically above them in the social ladder but have issues with those in their group. It appears that these distinctions become more important than the vast differences with another class. Some examples are given in Box 5.

Box 4

**Being Satisfied with Their Own Progress or
Stressing Their Association with the Upper Class**

"I go by the big houses in Aluva (a town in Ernakulam district) but do not really think, 'O! My God these people have got such big houses.' Rather, when some boys from those houses speak to us and ask our names, I feel happy that people from such big houses are speaking to us." [*Happy about association with the well-off*]

"Our unit (Clean Kerala Mission) works in the 'VIP (Very Important Person) colonies' and everybody has got a good approach and helps us when a need arises." [*Happy about the association with the well-off and their kindness*]

She refers to herself as 'common woman' and describes herself as someone with good living conditions, during the interview. On several occasions, she mentions about her appearance being respectable and nice. For instance, she says "I always make it a point to dress well that they even call me Madam in the government offices". In another context, she says, "In my daughter's school, there was an identification of who are poor and my daughter mentions that she is rich". [*Stressing their own progress or participation in mobility characteristics*]

"When invited to functions by our affluent neighbours, we too give gifts and that too expensive ones." (That she lives well is some thing which she says repeatedly). In another context, she says, "When I conduct my NHG (neighbourhood group) meetings, I give lavish treats to the guests". [*Stressing their own participation in mobility characteristics*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

Box 5

Being More Concerned, Horizontally

She speaks about the difference existing between herself and her family members. "Among my family members, I am the poorest. I was feeling very reluctant to go for my sister's daughter's wedding." [*Relatively deprived amongst family members*]

"I don't like the work in Kudumbashree where women distribute these wages. There would be some discrepancies whereas if the officials give, it is better." [*More frictions arising within one's own group*]

"It is not the rich people, but *medium* level people like me, who, sometimes will not talk, when meeting on the road, while I am at work." [*Within group distinctions*]

"I was hesitant initially when considering marriage from the Laksham Veedu."² [*Within group hierarchies*]

"It is people of our own group who tend to show superiority when they move up. As for the rich, it does not matter that they get crores (of rupees). God has given wealth knowingly." [*More frictions arising within one's own group*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

This finding is similar to that of David Mosse's observations in the study discussed in Section 2, wherein the process of vying for distinctions and hierarchies was done at a more horizontal level.

Type 6: Being More Concerned about Worries of Absolute Nature and Need for Improvement

While responding to the question on inequality, some women slipped into discussions of their absolute worries and the absence of improvement in their lives, though the question was on relative deprivation. This may be because of their being more pre-occupied with their absolute worries. Some examples of this type of responses are given in Box 6.

The over all pattern of the responses is presented in Table 1.

A majority of the respondents were certainly conscious of the inequalities surrounding their lives. The responses wherein they spoke about perceiving an unequal world and their feelings as they faced this inequality showed that the process of adaptation is never complete. Feelings of humiliation, helplessness, sadness, resentment and criticisms of inequality continue to come up in the minds of the deprived. However, among the 59 respondents who were conscious of inequality, 42 respondents go on to make other categories of responses as well, like dealing with inequality by giving positive consolations to oneself, stressing their association with the rich, being more concerned with the disparities at the horizontal plane, and being more concerned with absolute worries and need for improving one's own situation. In nearly one-third of the replies, one could see that the women were denying having protests or any hard feelings towards an unequal world. Only four women mentioned that they were angry with the situation. Further, their resentment is not translated into any sort of political action. The women covered in this survey showed only limited participation in political parties, be

Box 6

Worries of an Absolute Nature and Need for Improvement

"Not really comparative; my worry is about not having a proper house to stay in." [*Absolute worry and need for improvement*]

"I don't think that way. All I want is a house for myself and that some good comes to my children." [*Absolute worries and need for improvement*]

"Not any big desires for a bungalow or anything like that but just small desires like having some land for ourselves". She is staying in an unauthorized house in the government land at present. [*Absolute worries and need for improvement*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

Table 1
Perceptions on Inequality-I

<i>Types of Responses</i>	<i>Number</i>
<i>Type 1</i> —Being conscious of inequality	59 (62.1)
<i>Type 2</i> —Being positive as they cope with inequality	19 (20.0)
<i>Type 3</i> —Responses, akin to internalization of dominant norms	31 (32.6)
<i>Type 4</i> —Being satisfied with their own progress or stressing their association with the upper class	18 (18.9)
<i>Type 5</i> —Being more concerned, horizontally	27 (28.4)
<i>Type 6</i> —Being more concerned about worries of an absolute nature and need for improvement	28 (29.5)
Total number of respondents	95

Notes:

- 1: The total number of responses could be more than the total number of respondents because a respondent could give more than one response.
- 2: The figures given in parentheses denote the percentage of respondents who have given a particular response to the total number of respondents.

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

it in terms of membership or leadership. Only three women were members of any political party and only one woman held a leadership post. Similarly, their activities with regard to trade unions and other organizations with political affiliations like the Democratic Youth Federation of India and Youth Congress were also found to be low. Only eight women were found to be members of these organizations and there were no leaders. On the whole, the responses of the women showed multiple layers within them. It was not a single reaction of protest or anger against an unequal world.

COMPARING TYPES OF RESPONSES ACROSS SOCIAL GROUPS

This section examines whether the differences in caste, education levels and age would make a difference to the responses on inequality. Comparisons are made between the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and non-SCs and non-STs; between the lower education group comprising illiterates, just literates, primary and middle level education (below 8th standard), and the relatively higher educated comprising those having acquired secondary level, matriculation, higher secondary and vocational education; and the younger age group (up to 39 years)³ and the older age group (40 years and above). The analysis shows that similar to the general analysis reported above, a major proportion of the respondents gave multi-layered reactions to inequality, of it being neither a case of adaptive preferences nor a case of clear protest, regardless of the different groups compared (SC/ST—52 per cent and Non-SC/ST—74 per

cent; Low Education—66 per cent and High Education—60 per cent; Younger age group—68 per cent and Older age group—59 per cent). However some differences could be seen in the different types of the responses across groups. These are presented in Table 2.

A comparison across SC/ST and non-SC/ST groups shows that in both the groups, a higher proportion of the respondents had given Type 1 response. However, one could also see that there is some difference between the SCs/STs and the non-SCs/STs in the four types of responses. A higher proportion of non-SCs/STs gave Type 2 (being positive) and Type 4 (being satisfied with their own progress or stressing their association with the upper class) responses. This means that the non-SC/ST women are

Table 2
Perceptions on Inequality: Comparison across Groups

Types of Responses	Caste		Education		Age	
	SC/ST	Non-SC/ST	Low Education	Relatively Higher Education	Lower Age (0-39)	Higher age (40 and above)
Type 1—Being conscious of inequality	26 (63.4)	33 (61.1)	38 (63.3)	21 (60)	32 (62.7)	27 (61.3)
Type 2—Being positive, as they cope with inequality	5 (12.2)	14 (25.9)	13 (21.6)	6 (17.14)	10 (19.6)	9 (20.4)
Type 3—Being, akin to internalization of dominant norms	14 (34.1)	17 (31.5)	24 (40)	7 (20)	16 (31.4)	15 (34)
Type 4—Being satisfied with their own progress or stressing their association with the upper class	5 (12.2)	13 (24.1)	9 (15)	9 (25.7)	9 (17.6)	9 (20.4)
Type 5—Being more concerned, horizontally	8 (19.5)	19 (35.2)	16 (26.7)	11 (31.4)	14 (27.4)	13 (29.5)
Type 6—Being more concerned about worries of absolute nature and need for improvement	14 (34.1)	14 (25.9)	21 (35)	7 (20)	16 (31.4)	12 (27.3)
Total number of respondents	41	54	60	35	51	44

Notes:

- 1: The total number of responses could be more than the total number of respondents because a respondent could give more than one response.
- 2: The figures given in parentheses denote the percentage of respondents giving a particular response to the total number of respondents in a group

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

dealing with inequality in a more 'positive' manner than the SC/ST women. As for the Type 5 response, which is about being more concerned with the horizontal plane, more non-SC/ST women have stated this, probably because they have a wider range of upwardly mobile people coming within their group, as a result of which the feelings of relative deprivation among themselves in the horizontal plane could be more acute for them. This explanation is based on the macro statistics, which indicate that there is a higher proportion of SCs/STs among the poor and non-SCs/STs among the non-poor groups (Centre for Development Studies and Government of Kerala, 2006, p. 65). Again, one finds a higher proportion of SC/ST women saying that they are more concerned about absolute worries and the need for improvement (Type 6), probably because they are poorer or have more vulnerabilities than their non-SC/ST counterparts.⁴

A comparison across two groups based on different education levels does not show much difference between those with low education and those with a relatively high education with regard to being conscious of inequality. A notable difference can be seen only with regard to the Type 3, Type 4 and Type 6 responses. A higher proportion of those with relatively higher education reported a Type 4 response, that is being satisfied with their own progress or stressing their association with the upper class than those with lower education indicating either their relative prosperity or the possibility of their better association with the general society. A higher proportion of those with lower education reported responses akin to internalization of dominant norms (Type 3) and being more concerned about absolute worries and the need for improvement (Type 6). An analysis across two age groups does not show any striking difference in any of the types of responses between both groups.

On the whole, non-SC/ST women and more educated women report a more 'positive' response to inequality, whereas SC/ST women and less educated women report a less 'positive' response of absolute worries and need for improvement, probably indicating that their sense of participation and association with the general society is lesser than those of their more educated and higher caste counterparts. Those who are less educated have a higher likelihood of internalization of dominant norms, indicating their questioning of unequal society as being further muted. At the same time, the dominant pattern of those with higher education is also that of a more multi-layered response than a clear conscious perception on inequality. Having stated these differences, one finds that what is striking is the commonality of a majority of the responses being multi-layered.⁵

PERCEPTIONS ON THE ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOUR OF THE RICH TOWARDS THE POOR

Widening inequalities and shrinking common space for the rich and poor characterize the development experience of the State. It is in this context that one seeks to understand how *class* is actually being felt by those in the lower strata of society. The specific

Table 3
Perceptions on the Attitude and Behaviour of the Rich towards the Poor

<i>Types of Responses</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Positive responses	33	34.0
Negative responses	31	32.0
Mixed responses	33	34.0
Total number of respondents	97	100.0

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

question asked is about the attitude and behaviour of the rich towards the poor in society, and whether it is positive or it is one of 'distance'. Proper responses to this question came only from 97 respondents. Table 3 presents the responses of the women.

Positive Responses

Positive experiences from the upper class were reported by one-third of the respondents. In order to understand further what the positive experiences are, the definitions given by these women are being listed. These are: being treated without any 'superiority' attitude or behaviour by the children of the well-off families during their school days; not experiencing any scorn or discrimination in general from the well-off; the well-off inviting them for functions; behaving well and speaking cordially; showing affection or friendliness; talking to them; enquiring about their well-being; listening to their difficulties; helping them or giving them some gifts (including used second-hand items); offering small tips especially for festivals or giving some extra cash for extra work; and giving tea once in a while. One of the respondents mentioned about people showing them gratitude because they were doing the service of disposing their wastes for them. Some women were more emphatic about the happiness they felt in associating with the well-off. Some of the women interviewees said that the behaviour of the rich towards them was dependent on their own attitude and behaviour towards the rich. For some women, the initial problems in mingling later dissipated and they found it easy to mingle. A few also added that it is not the rich but people like them in the *medium class*, (how they refer to people of their own class) who showed a superiority attitude. Box 7 presents some of the responses in the respondents' own words.

One can note that these women are not speaking about major integration across classes. They do not really speak of being invited into the drawing rooms of the well-off and speaking on equal terms (one woman did speak of being invited to the dining table and eating along with her well-off neighbours), but about some small interactions and small help. Although inequality in consumption expenditure and wealth is growing in Kerala and public spaces like schools and hospitals common to both the rich and poor are shrinking, there are still some positive interactions and some help across classes, which is appreciated by the poor.

Box 7

Positive Responses

“In my school, there were some rich girls. Although they kept a distance initially, later on they mingled, when they saw my behaviour.” [*Initial problems in mingling later turning easy*]

“Nobody really treats me with disdain. We work in the ‘VIP colonies’ where there are doctors, teachers, etc., and here people treat us with friendliness. Some of them are nice enough to give us free medical treatment. Also when occasions like Vishu (a festival in Kerala) come, they give tips. We get a lot of connections.” [*Emphatic about the happiness and usefulness they felt in associating with the well off class*]

“Now there are no such rich–poor divide, now it is fine and amicable and loving. Earlier when we started work, people looked down upon us with scorn. Now they invite us for social functions and when we attend the functions, even if our dress cannot match that of others, they come, speak to us and attend to us properly.” [*Loving and good behaviour*]

Source: Fieldwork (February–August 2008).

Negative Responses

Negative experiences in interactions with the upper class were cited by an equal number of respondents. The women’s own descriptions of their experiences include: there is indeed a distance in the association of the rich and the poor; it is not natural to have any friendships with the well-off; the rich don’t smile back, don’t speak, don’t ask about our well-being, don’t give much attention, show a superiority attitude, ill treat us, look at us demeaningly or with scorn; the rich are tight-fisted, don’t help the less privileged much, waste so much, but do not give to those who don’t have and do not cooperate even when there is a dire need.

Some women mentioned their experiences pertaining to their work: that they are looked down upon as waste-pickers, like some people covering their noses with their kerchiefs when they go beside them in roads; being intolerant and scolding when they take leave; treating them trivially or without respect when at work; making them take extra waste and not paying extra; reducing even their meagre wage of Rs. 30 if they do not come for work even for a few days; were the various descriptions of the negative work experiences that they encountered in their interactions with the rich. Some women, however, added that they do not really bother about all these negative experiences from the rich since they are busy in their own activities. Some instances of negative experiences in the respondents’ own words are given in Box 8.

Their perception of society as one with impenetrable distances and identifying the limitations of help show a keen social acumen of some women to the stratified society. Fifteen women mentioned distances in society and eight women talked of the tight-fistedness of the rich.

Box 8

Negative Responses

"Those who have will not give even alms to the beggars. They will close the gate. I have seen this when going for waste-taking. I then tell that beggar to go to some unfinished thatched or sheet-roofed house, they will give you." [*Finding the rich to be tight-fisted*]

"Instead of expecting any help from the rich, one can call God." [*Finding the rich to be unhelpful*]

"I do feel a bit inferior or small in front of them." [*Internalized feeling of inferiority*]

"It is not natural to have friendships with them. Those who have money will behave like that only." [*Identifying differences within the society*]

"In my school, we were kept aside by the rich people. Teachers also had different treatment for different strata. They (rich children) used to sit as a group and treat us like we don't know anything." [*Identifying discrimination within the society*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

Mixed Responses

Another group of respondents gave mixed responses, wherein they said that some of the rich behave well while others do not. Some examples of these responses are presented in Box 9.

On the whole, the negative experiences were seen in three forms. One was a reference to the distances and limitations of help. The second points at the well-off not even engaging in the small but positive interactions like smiling or talking to them (these small interactions had defined the positive experiences for many, as seen earlier). The third set of negative experiences shows more active forms of discrimination like showing a superiority attitude, ill-treatment, refusal to pay extra money for extra work, and so on.

The analysis in this paper indicates that though there is an awareness of the segregation of society, to some extent, the absence of active forms of discrimination and the presence of some desirable attributes like some mingling between the two groups and some cooperation or extension of help go a long way towards smoothening the felt aspect of the class divide. The rest of the distances and 'understandings' are not tested and are not trespassed upon by either the poor or the rich. The stricter segregations in society remain almost naturalized. Since it does not come within the frame of expectation, it is not disapproved of or challenged or even mentioned by most of the respondents.

EXPERIENCE OF CASTE IN KERALA

On the issue of caste, there are two types of narratives in Kerala's development literature: one considering caste inequalities as not a major issue in Kerala in recent

Box 9

Mixed Responses

“Different people behave differently. Some treat us well, speak well, give tea, etc. Others do not bother or stop to speak.” [*Some behave well; others do not*]

“Overall many of them treat us kindly and are friendly, some give tea, some give old clothes, some give gifts on festivals, etc. But there are some households which look at us with scorn.” [*Many of them behave well; but some do not*]

“There are two types of people—those who behave well and treat us as human beings, and those who show a superior attitude and impose the fact that we are just waste pickers.” [*Some behave in a superior fashion; others do not*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

times, and another highlighting the persistence of caste-based inequalities. Some scholars have pointed out that most of the lower castes still remain poor labourers (Omvedt, 1998; Sanalmohan, 2002). Both stark and subtle forms of discrimination and distances maintained by the upper castes towards the lower castes have been pointed out by scholars (Osella and Osella, 2000). What the lower caste people themselves have to say about these forms of discriminations was the question asked here. The respondents were asked as to whether they had faced any discrimination or teasing or insulting or demeaning treatment in the name of caste in any of the public places like government offices, political parties, other associations, workplaces, public transport, and hospitals, among other places. This question was posed only to 64 SC women and one ST woman in the sample. This main question was followed with probes like reminding the respondents of their childhood, and differences in the behaviour towards them, and so on. Table 4 presents the responses to these questions.

The highest proportion of respondents stated that they experience caste differences even in the present times. However, they also saw such experiences as declining or rare or as co-existing with positive experiences of mingling among castes. Quite a high proportion of the respondents said that they did not experience any caste difference. A small number talked more assertively about their experiences of caste-based discriminations even in the present times. These broad responses have been probed further in order to provide an understanding of the exact nature of their experience.

DESCRIBING CASTE EXPERIENCES IN THE PRESENT TIMES

Here, the experiences of those who have assertively stated experiencing caste discriminations in the present times are combined with the experiences of those who have said that while caste experiences exist even at present, they are declining or are becoming rare. Their statements of caste experience in the present times can be divided into

Table 4
Experience of Caste

<i>Types of Responses</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Assertive statements that caste exists even today	9	13.8
Stating experiences of caste but see them as declining	36	55.4
No caste experience	20	30.8
Total number of respondents	65	100

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

two: one by the society at large, and the other within their own neighbourhoods or workplaces.

Their negative experiences within the larger society were as follows: higher caste, especially of the older generation, maintaining distance; looking at them with disdain in the name of caste; making demeaning statements about their caste and colour; showing superiority of being of fair complexion; facing demeaning comments on being married to a higher caste man; and serving food in the backyard when invited for functions. There seem to be caste distinctions even among the lower castes. For instance, some Pulaya women noted how the higher castes, including Ezhavas (a backward caste above the rank of Pulayas) do not attend their weddings when invited and even if they attend, do not eat the food they serve. One woman cited an example of a woman from a higher caste stating how in her native place, they would not let lower caste people near them. One woman mentioned how the lower caste individuals are not able to achieve the threshold qualifications and are thereby unable to take advantage of the benefits given to their caste. Another woman complained of not having a proper burial ground and the usurpation of the only burial ground they had by others.

They recall experiencing caste distinctions while at work. These experiences consist of some higher caste women holding out the waste kit in a manner so as to prevent pollution; not giving money in the hand and not taking receipt from their hands; and telling them that waste is kept outside and asking them not to enter the houses or to touch their washed clothes since they are going to the temple.

Within their own groups, neighbourhoods and work places, there are incidents of women experiencing caste differences. There are instances of strong opposition to marriages with a higher caste member within their economic group and the couple facing hostility because of that. Other instances of such experiences include calling of caste names in a fight, telling people that while they like all the benefits of being SCs/STs, they would not like to be called so; and a higher caste co-worker avoiding touching an SC woman while at work. A Tamil woman mentioned how some of her co-workers referred to her by her Tamil identity in a derogatory manner. A few women mentioned how other castes refer to them as *patti-poocha*, the literal translation of which

means 'dog-cat'. The words are short forms of the Malayalam translation of SC/ST, which is *pattika jathi* and *pattika vargam*. Some experiences of caste in the women's own words are given in Box 10.

Box 10

Caste Experiences in the Present Times

"I will tell you of an incident in the corporation office, where, there was an officer of our caste. When he acted somewhat rudely, the person who came to meet him murmured while going out, '*such a dark looking Pulaya he is and look at the way he is behaving*'." [*Caste and dark complexion*]

"Yeah, such experiences are there. The higher caste people are reluctant to have anything from our houses when we invite them for some functions. They give gifts, etc., but then do not even have tea." [*Distances maintained by higher castes*]

"For a social function of my neighbour, the hosts made me sit in the backyard near the kitchen whereas all other people were made to sit in the front hall, after happily putting away the money which I gave. After that, I never went for any functions which they invited. I would give the money to my father for buying gifts, etc., but will not go there myself." [*Demaneaning instances*]

This response is given by a respondent's daughter: "In my plus two class, when teachers call out SC/ ST students for some purpose, other higher caste girls look at us with contempt." The respondent adds that "even my sons faced such kinds of problems. When they had to stand up for getting the scholarship, they faced teasing and all that." [*Benefits for their caste come with their share of 'stigma marking' and resentment*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

DESCRIBING 'CASTE AS DECLINING'

What the women meant when they said that 'caste is declining' needs an explanation. Some women explained that this is not a common experience. Some others expressed that today only a small number of people maintain distance and have the tendency of looking down upon the lower castes. Others saw it as an improvement from earlier days. Their definitions of declining caste experiences in recent times include: their getting invited for social functions; being able to work for higher castes at present and being treated in a friendly manner at work; being allowed inside the kitchens of higher castes to cook or to collect waste (earlier it was not allowed); giving things in the hand (earlier it was not so); and the higher caste co-worker avoiding touching her in the beginning but then amending her ways.

Some of the women said that they worked in caste-neutral spaces like Christian or Muslim homes earlier. To some, their larger work experience consisted of working in

modern sector jobs like construction, where they did not experience differential caste treatments. Another important aspect was that since the interaction of most of the respondents is within their neighbourhood, comprising largely their own groups, caste experiences become rare. A few mentioned not being immediately identified as lower caste because of their fair skin complexion. Besides, the force of caste is declining, in general, since even the lower castes are being careful about their appearance. Some said that they take the taunts lightly and retort teasingly. When fights happen, people refer to their caste in a demeaning manner but nevertheless fights do not last long. A few said that they have heard about caste experiences in other places, but where they live, such experiences are rare. Some illustrations of such experiences are given in Box 11.

Box 11

Caste as Declining

Recalling the earlier days, she says: "My employer, when giving tea, will not mix sugar in the glass, rather than give them separately in hand. I retorted saying that I am of a lower caste and I do slave work for you people. Yet, we don't lick sugar and eat. I threw the sugar away." All the dirty work we do, like sweep away the saliva spits and all, it fills me with sadness even today. Today, it is not there, I worked in another Nair household and did not face such an experience there." [*Coming across acute demeaning practices earlier but not in recent times*]

"In my native place, before eating food at functions, the higher caste people will enquire who cooked the food. Now all these things have reduced." [*Not coming across acute demeaning practices at the place of current residence*]

"I have felt the difference in conduct towards us in school. Now, if I am meted out with such behaviour, I will react". [*Of discriminations in the earlier times and of the ability to react in recent times*]

"Konginis⁶ still maintain a distance. However today, it is only 3 out of 100 who keep such distances." [*Only few people show distances in recent times*]

When asked if she gets teased for being a Tamil or being a Chakilliyar, she says, "I like that teasing and I answer back: 'Yes, I am a Tamilian and a Chakilliyar woman, a very honourable Chakilliyar woman.'" [*Taking taunts in a light spirit*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

DESCRIBING 'HAVING NO CASTE EXPERIENCE'

The study found that some of the women did not have any caste experiences. Some did not give any explanations but merely said that they do not have any experiences. Those who mentioned not having any such experiences gave the following explanations for the same: their pleasing and likeable personality; being fair in colour; and not being identified as lower caste. The fact that most of their interactions were within

their neighbourhood, which consists mostly of their own caste or class people, insured them against any caste experience for it is often their immediate neighbourhood which forms the ground for everyday experiences.

Some respondents mentioned having friendships with higher castes and mingling with them, and receiving good treatment from their higher caste employers. Tamil Dalits have said that there is no caste experience in Kerala because some extreme forms of caste discriminations existing in Tamil Nadu are not really prevalent in Kerala. Some illustrations in their own words are given in Box 12.

Box 12

Having No Caste Experience

“Since I am of a pleasing nature, nobody shows any discrimination. Then, I have generally stayed in and around our own relatives, etc. So I don’t really know so much.” [*The role of one’s personality in caste experience. Also, having only limited interactions outside their neighbourhood.*]

“Even in schools, there were Nair friends, who used to come home, eat with us, etc.” [*Friendships irrespective of caste*]

“Never had such experiences. We were working with the members of the royal family for a long time. They never used to let many other lower castes into their house, but they used to let us in, give food, etc. They used to send hot cooked rice for taking home with my mother who used to work there.” [*Caring and preferential treatment from higher caste employer*]

“In Tamil Nadu, it is quite prevalent, but not here. There we cannot even go to the houses of higher caste people. Here, there are no problems in entering into the houses of the higher castes. There is tumbler discrimination (giving the SCs water in tumblers set aside for them) in hotels in Tamil Nadu whereas here in places where I stayed as a house maid, I was taking food from the same rice pot”, said a Tamil Woman. [*Differences between caste experiences in Tamil Nadu and Kerala*]

Source: Fieldwork (February-August 2008).

INTERPRETING THE CASTE EXPERIENCE

The broad picture of caste, as revealed from the responses of the lower caste women in this survey, appears to be positive. Many have not mentioned encountering any caste experience. Many mentioned about declining caste experiences in their lives. This may be partly due to the social and political reforms in Kerala. It may also be due to the dependence of the higher castes on lower caste women for manual and other lower work. A close examination of their definitions of caste experiences, however, shows that the achievement of the State in tackling the issue of caste is far from complete. Some of their statements are indeed positive but some responses clearly point at the limitations. Some

of their statements appear to be emanating due to the lower threshold of their expectations and limited scope for experiences. For some, it signifies just an improvement from the starker forms of discrimination in the past, such as that of now being able to enter the houses and kitchens of the upper castes for cooking and cleaning. To some, it is a comparative improvement from the experiences in states like Tamil Nadu, where the discriminations are starker. The fact that the lower castes are allowed into the homes of the upper castes for working and are treated amicably now is positive, but these instances are nevertheless limited. For some, moving into caste-neutral places or moving largely within their own groups seems to have helped. Some have escaped discrimination by sheer luck, of fitting into the dominant norms like having fair skin colour.

At the same time, a majority of the respondents mentioned caste experiences as declining or having no caste experience, which meant that amidst their several other struggles, caste-based discriminations are not felt as a serious problem. Lower expectations, limited experiences, together with some positive aspects like mingling across castes and good treatment by high-caste employers have smoothed the negative experience of caste. Sometimes, other factors like pleasing personality can also determine the nature of these interactions. Caste as a felt experience might become more problematic when experiences and expectations rise, like their getting into middle class spaces. Some studies have reported struggles of the lower castes among the middle class for real inclusion and for escaping discriminations (Valmiki, 2003). It could also become a serious problem if it comes up in relationships, beyond 'small interactions' such as marriages.

DISCUSSION ON THE FINDINGS

The attempt in this paper was to understand class and caste as the lived experiences of the poor women. Two main findings emerge from the study. First, narratives on inequality from the bottom show that the process of adaptation is never complete. Resentment and criticisms against inequality do come up in the minds of the deprived along with feelings of humiliation, helplessness and sadness. However, they were also not clearly protesting. Resentment against inequalities seems to be bounded or contained. A comparison across social groups showed that regardless of the social groups, the dominant pattern is of women giving multi-layered responses.

Second, the absence of stark forms of ill-treatment or discrimination along with some positive attributes of the rich go a long way towards smoothing the felt aspect of the class divide despite the wide objective segregation of the rich and the poor. Similar to the class experience, some positive interactions and some good experiences from the higher castes smoothed the felt experience of caste. The limited nature of the interactions with and help from the higher classes and castes are not questioned.

It is worthwhile to examine whether a discourse challenging inequalities and subtle divides of the society *per se* could really emerge. In literature, there are instances of more penetrating critiques against an unfair social order like those of the Afro-Americans

protesting against stereotyping them as criminals (Weis and Fine, 1991) and Tamil Dalits protesting against exploitative labour practices and untouchability (Viramma, *et al.*, 2000). However, these critiques emerged in a context of more acute and active forms of discrimination. Political movements also generally tend to rally against extreme forms of discriminations and not disparities *per se*, even when they are widening.

As compared to the criticisms cited above, the criticisms of the women in the sample show that acute forms of discrimination are on the decline, which is a positive statement on Kerala's development experience. The state has been able to remove stark forms of discrimination on the basis of caste and class to a large extent due to its social and political movements and due to increased dependence of the higher classes and castes on the lower castes and classes. But even today, Kerala's society shows a reluctance to include the poor and the lower caste as equals. Here, however, there is a sense of ceiling and inevitability in the narratives of women on their being less equal, probably due to an absence of strong political discourses, movements and policies on the issues of widening inequalities and continuing exclusions in the state.

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NOTES

1. Seemati is a very popular textile shop in Ernakulam which is frequented by the well-off people.
2. Those poor who did not benefit even from the 10 cents of land under land reforms were brought under the 'one lakh' housing scheme, wherein the government built houses for them. These crowded settlements of the poor, however, have a negative tag associated with them.
3. Classification of age groups in much younger age groups was most desirable but not feasible as there were very few people in the young age groups like those below 25 years (only 2 such women were there in the whole sample). The number of women falling below 30 years was also few. An analysis of those below 30 years (with their number being few) did not reveal any pattern of responses; almost an equal number of respondents were found giving different responses.
4. The paper is not able to examine relative material deprivation within the BPL households as it did not focus on their material deprivation.
5. It could be because in terms of these broad social indicators like age and education, these women were more homogeneous than heterogeneous. In the case of age, for instance, most of the women were found clustered in the 30-39 and 40-49 age groups. In the case of education, most of the women were clustered in the middle (classes 5-7) and secondary groups (classes 8-9).
6. Konkani-speaking people belonging to the Brahmin community.

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