

# **A Micro-Historical Analysis of the Ooruttambalam School Entry Struggles and State Responses (1915)**

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## **Abstract**

In early twentieth-century Travancore, the classroom became a fiercely contested frontier against caste-based agrarian servitude. Despite a progressive 1907 state mandate, officially released in 1910, allowing Dalit children to attend public schools, upper-caste officials sabotaged the policy's local implementation through systemic interference.

This administrative friction reached a boiling point at the Ooruttambalam Government UP School in 1914. Revolutionary Dalit leader Mahatma Ayyankali forcibly enrolled a five-year-old Dalit girl, Panchami, deliberately challenging the spatial boundaries of untouchability. This act provoked intense hostility from the upper caste, leading to retaliatory mobs burning the school and sparking widespread violent riots against the local Dalit community.

Realising that moral appeals against state and police inaction were ineffective, Ayyankali initiated the “Kandala Lahala”, the first organised agricultural strike by oppressed labourers in Indian history. By collectively withdrawing their physical labour from upper-caste paddy fields, Pulaya farmhands weaponised their essential economic role, issuing a historic ultimatum that halted all farming activities.

Faced with prolonged socio-economic disruption and the looming threat of severe agricultural collapse, the Travancore government was forced to intervene decisively. The state conceded to the labourers’ demands, strictly enforcing the removal of schooling restrictions for marginalised communities. Ultimately, the Ooruttambalam micro-history demonstrates how subaltern assertion dismantled administrative complicity. By transforming a localised educational dispute into a macroeconomic siege, marginalised communities demonstrated that securing civil rights in a feudal state required both legislative manoeuvring and the strategic disruption of captive labour.

## **Introduction**

In the history of early 20th-century South Asia, Travancore is often praised for its progressive administrative reforms and rapid educational expansion. By the early 1900s, it had a strong network of state-sponsored schools, making it the most literate region in the subcontinent. However, beneath this facade was a deeply stratified agrarian society with rigid caste-based segregation, untouchability, and forced labour. The democratisation of education in Travancore was not a benevolent concession by the enlightened monarchy, but a fiercely contested process led by subaltern social reformers who used the classroom as a platform for civil rights.

This research report examines the Ooruttambalam school entry struggle of 1914-1915, a pivotal event in modern Kerala’s socio-political development. Led by Dalit leader Mahatma Ayyankali, the attempt to enrol a five-year-old Pulaya girl named Panchami into a government-

funded upper-caste school sparked extreme social violence, administrative paralysis, and unprecedented agrarian resistance. The ensuing clashes escalated into the “Kandala Lahala” (Kandala Riot), the first organised agricultural strike by oppressed labourers in Indian history, which crippled the agrarian sector and forced the Travancore state to act.

This analysis examines the immediate administrative consequences, the friction between central policy and local enforcement, and the socio-economic impact of Ayyankali’s activism to show how marginalised communities dismantled caste hegemony. It demonstrates that Travancore’s educational landscape underwent a structural transformation through strategic economic disruption, legislative manoeuvring, and spatial transgression, not just moral petitioning. The events of 1915 provide a critical lens to understand the complex interplay of state power, bureaucratic resistance, and subaltern agency in the colonial era.

### **The Political Economy of Agrarian Servitude in Travancore**

To fully understand the Ooruttambalam school entry struggle and the ensuing administrative crisis, we must examine the socio-political economy of Travancore at the turn of the twentieth century. The society was structured around the Janmi-Kudiyan system, where upper-caste Hindus, mainly Nairs and Namboodiri Brahmins, controlled most of the land and dictated economic production. At the bottom were the Avarna castes, mainly Pulayas, Parayas, and Kuravas, who were essentially soil slaves.

Despite the abolition of slavery in 1855, the Pulayas’ conditions remained unchanged. They were bound to the land and landlords through debt bondage, poverty, and violence. The agrarian economy depended on this captive labour force. The 1836 census recorded 164,864 ‘soil slaves’ in Travancore, mostly Pulayas. By 1891, they still made up 8.18% of the population, representing a large group of impoverished agricultural labourers in strict client relationships with landlords. This client relationship gave them the right to claim bare maintenance and a small share of the produce, ensuring perpetual destitution.

The Pulayas were economically exploited through an elaborate ideology of ritual purity and spatial segregation. The caste system in Travancore, characterised by untouchability, ‘unapproachability’, and ‘unseeability’, dictated precise spatial distances for lower castes to prevent atmospheric pollution of the upper castes. Namboodiri Brahmins mandated a distance of 128 steps from Pulayas and Parayas, enforcing absolute unapproachability and a strict prohibition from entering temples. Nairs, who functioned as landlords or Janmis, required a distance of 64 steps or approximately 90 feet, coupled with strict prohibitions against marginalised groups using public roads, marketplaces, and bullock carts.

Furthermore, Avarna communities were strictly prohibited from wearing clean or tailored clothes, donning upper-body garments, or using any form of transportation. A shared public classroom represented an existential threat to the feudal order as it required physical proximity, which would instantly annihilate the 64-step distance rule and unravel the spatial logic of the caste hierarchy. Education was the primary mechanism for upward socio-economic mobility, and for the Janmis, an educated Pulaya was perceived as a lost agricultural labourer. Therefore, the denial of education to Dalits was not merely a matter of ritual prejudice; it was a highly calculated economic imperative to ensure an uninterrupted supply of free, compliant, and subservient agrarian labour for the paddy fields.

### **The Spatial Geometry of Caste and Early Subaltern Defiance**

Mahatma Ayyankali, born on August 28, 1863, in Venganoor, Travancore, emerged as a revolutionary force against socio-economic oppression. Despite his family’s better life compared to other Pulayars, Ayyankali lacked formal education due to the barriers faced by untouchable communities.

Ayyankali’s acute understanding of power dynamics emerged during his youth. He recognised the village’s physical boundaries as mental enslavement. Influenced by contemporaries like Narayana Guru, who reimagined Kerala as a model abode of fraternity,

and Ayyavu Swamikal, who established a branch of his Brahma Nishta Matam in Venganoor, Ayyankali chose direct confrontation against Brahmanical dominance.

In 1893, at 27, Ayyankali defied caste laws by buying white bullocks, a cart, bells, a white dhoti, a turban, and a dagger. He drove the cart on public roads reserved for the upper castes, shattering their unapproachability and triggering the Chaliyar Riots. After the 1893 ride and violent encounters, Ayyankali realised individual acts alone couldn't dismantle caste. He founded the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham (SJPS) in 1907 to unite marginalised communities and campaign for civil liberties, especially public education. He believed that until the Avarnas conquered the classroom, their socio-economic subjugation would persist.

### **Institutional Ambiguity: State Policy vs. Peripheral Sabotage**

Travancore's early twentieth-century administrative environment was marked by a complex duality. At the centre, the monarchy, led by Sree Moolam Thirunal, and the executive Dewan aimed to project enlightened, modernising governance to the British. Simultaneously, the state faced demographic shifts due to the mass conversion of Pulayas to Anglicanism, sponsored by Christian missionaries as a social protest against caste inhumanity. To counter this, the central government initiated progressive legislative reforms.

However, the peripheral bureaucracy, dominated by orthodox upper-caste officials, viewed these reforms as a threat to their traditional privileges. This friction created a gap between legislative intent and local enforcement, especially in education.

A decade of friction defined this period. In 1904, Ayyankali's private school for Pulayas in Venganoor was burned down by upper-caste arsonists. By 1907, the Travancore government allowed Dalit school entry, but local bureaucrats hid the order, sabotaging its enforcement for three years. Even after the Travancore Education Code published the decree in 1910, local headmasters and school managements refused compliance, fearing caste pollution and riots.

This hostility culminated in 1914 when Ayyankali forced Panchami's admission at Ooruttambalam, triggering the Kandala Lahala, violent mob retaliation, and the school's arson.

The state's inability to enforce the law revealed the Janmi class's absolute hegemony over the rural administrative apparatus.

### **The DPI's Paradox: Alexander Crichton Mitchell's Administration**

The stark contrast between the central administration in Thiruvananthapuram and the localised violence in the rural peripheries is evident in the tenure of Alexander Crichton Mitchell, the Director of Public Instruction (DPI) in Travancore during this turbulent period. Mitchell, a Scottish physicist born in Edinburgh in 1864, arrived in India in 1890 to teach at the Maharaja's College and became DPI in 1909, during the period of fierce contestation of education codes.

Mitchell advocated for rapid educational expansion and personally visited schools across his jurisdiction, reportedly riding a motorcycle to inspect educational facilities. In his official reports, he expressed optimism about state capacity, stating that Travancore's circumstances made educational administration easier and progress more possible than in other parts of India. He argued that government control over education enabled the Department of Public Instruction to lead and compel compliance. Mitchell and his contemporaries strongly advocated for an independent Travancore University, producing reports between 1914 and 1919 emphasising the need for localised higher education to replace the distant University of Madras.

Mitchell's optimistic view of the bureaucracy clashed sharply with the reality faced by Ayyankali and the SJPS. While the DPI believed the state could force educational progress, the government couldn't compel upper-caste headmasters to admit Avarna children. Mitchell's reports often missed the violence at the village level. From the capital, the educational system expanded; from the Pulaya's perspective, schools were fortified by hostile mobs and

bureaucrats. Realising that decrees alone wouldn't work, Ayyankali saw integration as needing direct, physical force.

### **The Micro-History of Ooruttambalam: The Spark of 1914-1915**

The theoretical debates over educational policy erupted at Ooruttambalam, a rural location in Thiruvananthapuram. The Government UP School at Ooruttambalam, established in 1882 by Velloorkonam Parameshwaran Pilla, had been an exclusive institution for upper-caste students for over three decades. Armed with the 1910 Travancore Education Code and the SJPS's support, Ayyankali challenged this educational apartheid.

In 1914, Ayyankali arrived at the school with a five-year-old Dalit girl named Panchami, the daughter of Poojari Ayyan. He invoked the government order as a guarantee of her right to attend. Ayyankali's presence, along with his supporters, led to a volatile standoff at the school gates.

The headmaster of the school openly declared in public that admission for Panchami would be denied. Undeterred, Ayyankali argued with the authorities and forcefully entered the classroom. He led Panchami inside and physically seated her among the upper-caste students.

This single act was a huge breach of caste rules. The upper-caste students and local Nair elites saw it as a terrible violation of ritual purity. The upper-caste children panicked and ran out of the classroom in a mass exodus. News of the 'defilement' spread quickly through the village, and within hours, a large group of upper-caste people and hired thugs arrived at the school. A violent fight broke out between Ayyankali's supporters and the upper-caste mob.

The upper-caste mob couldn't physically defeat the Dalit activists during the day, so they decided to symbolically and materially destroy the school. Under the cover of darkness, they set fire to the Ooruttambalam school. This act was a strong ideological statement. In the Brahmanical worldview, fire is the ultimate purifying agent. By burning the school, the mob wanted to ritually cleanse the space of the pollution they thought Panchami brought. The

wooden bench where Panchami sat was partially burned, but it survived and became a central relic of Kerala's subaltern history.

The destruction of the school was not an isolated act of vandalism. It was the beginning of a long campaign of retaliation against the Dalit community in the surrounding areas. The riots, known as the Ooruttambalam Lahala or the Pulaya Mutiny, lasted for days and were very violent. They included attacks on Dalit settlements, physical assaults, and widespread bloodshed during the 1090 ME (Malayalam Era) period.

### **The Kandala Lahala: Weaponising Agrarian Labor**

The upper-caste elites believed that destroying the school and unleashing mob terror would intimidate the Dalit community into submission, restoring the feudal status quo. However, they underestimated Ayyankali's strategic acumen and the SJPS's organisational depth. Recognising local bureaucrats' complicity, the police's ineffectiveness, and the futility of moral appeals against economic interests, Ayyankali pivoted. He transformed a local civil rights dispute into a macroeconomic siege by weaponising Dalit physical labour.

In response to the burning of the Ooruttambalam school and the violence, Ayyankali issued a historic ultimatum to the Janmis of Travancore: *"If you didn't let our children acquire education, we wouldn't work in your fields."* This declaration initiated the Kandala Lahala, the first-ever organised agricultural strike by oppressed labourers in the Indian subcontinent.

The mechanised strike was devastating. Across Travancore, Pulaya and Paraya farm labourers withdrew their labour from the paddy fields owned by the upper castes. The strike's timing and execution were economically lethal. Kerala's agriculture is highly time-sensitive, governed by the monsoon. The sudden cessation of planting, weeding, and harvesting threatened the Nair and Namboodiri landlords with crop failure, famine, and financial ruin.

The Janmis responded to the strike with extreme brutality. Landlords tried to starve the Dalits into submission by denying them their customary maintenance. Physical assaults against

striking labourers escalated, leading to a prolonged period of rioting that lasted for nearly a year, resulting in numerous casualties and bloodshed. The Travancore government deployed state police and military forces to suppress the uprising, but these coercive state apparatuses proved ineffective against a decentralised, mass non-cooperation movement fuelled by centuries of repressed trauma and highly coordinated by the SJPS.

Ayyankali's followers, many of whom were well-trained in martial arts, held the line. They staged marches and refused to return to the fields until their demands for unhindered educational access were met. The Kandala Lahala exposed the inherent vulnerability of the caste system. The Janmis relied on a paradox: they viewed the Dalits as ritually untouchable, yet their socio-economic survival depended on the intimate, physical labour of those very same bodies. By severing this labour supply, Ayyankali forced the feudal lords to weigh the ideological cost of caste purity against the material cost of complete economic annihilation.

### **Administrative Capitulation and the Reconstruction of the Dalit Classroom**

The prolonged agricultural strike disrupted Travancore's socio-economic equilibrium. The agrarian sector, crucial to the state's economy, was paralysed, leading to plummeting revenues and food supply disruptions. Driven by economic necessity, the Travancore government intervened. The central administration could no longer tolerate the peripheral bureaucracy's insubordination or the feudal elites' intransigence, as their actions caused the state's economic ruin.

State mediation led to a total capitulation by the landlords and the government. Marginalised communities' schooling limits were explicitly lifted, and ironclad guarantees were issued to remove caste-based restrictions for public school admission. The strike concluded when Ayyankali secured tangible, enforceable educational rights for the Pulaya community, marking a victory for subaltern organising.

However, the state's intervention revealed the complexities of implementing radical social reform in a prejudiced society. While schools were officially integrated, legislative decrees couldn't instantly erase deep-seated social stigma. Many government schools remained hostile environments for Dalit children, who faced psychological and physical intimidation from upper-caste peers and teachers.

To overcome local hostility and ensure uninterrupted education, Ayyankali used his victory to get permission from the Department of Education to set up state-recognised schools for Dalits. The first Dalit school in Venganoor faced new administrative and social challenges. Finding qualified teachers was hard because teaching Dalit children was stigmatised. Historical accounts say no one who valued their lives wanted to teach there.

To counter this boycott, the Travancore government offered a high salary of Rs. 9 per month to encourage upper-caste teachers to teach in Dalit schools. After searching, a progressive teacher named Parameshwaran Pillai of Kaithamukku in Trivandrum accepted the position.

Pillai's tenure was tense. The presence of an upper-caste teacher in a Dalit school angered local Nairs. When he arrived, the school was surrounded by hostile mobs, creating a terrifying atmosphere. Pillai was reportedly 'shivering like a leaf', and thugs tried to physically assault him. The school was destroyed at night but rebuilt by Ayyankali's supporters. The state and the SJPS had to provide security, and Pillai had to commute to the school daily with Ayyankali's bodyguards.

Despite these challenges, post-1915 Travancore saw unprecedented democratisation of education. State incentives, independent Dalit infrastructure, and the legal right to enter public schools led to dramatic changes in literacy.

### **Demographic Shifts in Educational Enrollment**

A statistical analysis of the period after the Kandala Lahala and the strict enforcement of the education code shows that Ayyankali's dual strategy of economic strike and educational institution-building was very effective. In 1875, out of 188,916 Pulayas in Travancore, only 183 were literate, showing a period of marginal literacy before organised reform and state exclusion. By 1913, the pre-Ooruttambalam baseline for Dalit school enrolment was 2.01%, showing how the 1910 order was suppressed and limited access. However, after the Kandala Lahala and the state's capitulation, enrolment rose to 10.91% by 1916.

This five-fold increase in Dalit school enrolment between 1913 and 1916 was one of the fastest and most significant educational expansions for an oppressed community in early twentieth-century India. The data proves that the barrier to Dalit education was not a lack of interest or capacity, but an artificial barrier maintained by the state's agents, which was dismantled at Ooruttambalam.

### **Legislative Transgression: Ayyankali in the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha**

Ayyankali's organisational prowess during the Kandala Lahala fundamentally changed his relationship with the Travancore state. He was no longer seen as an agitator, but as the political representative of a large, economically important demographic. To prevent future economic disruptions, the Travancore government nominated Ayyankali to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly (Praja Sabha) in 1912, making him the first Dalit to serve in a legislative body in the region.

Ayyankali's tenure in the Praja Sabha marked a shift from street-level activism to sophisticated legislative advocacy. He dismantled the legal and bureaucratic structures of caste oppression. On February 27, 1912, he delivered his maiden speech, demanding the civil rights of his people.

Throughout his time in the assembly, Ayyankali expanded his demands beyond primary education to include the socio-economic emancipation of the Pulayas. He understood that

education without economic independence would force Dalits back into agrarian servitude, so he lobbied the state for land redistribution. He became the first leader in the assembly to argue that the adimai (landless labourers) should be granted their own plots for independent farming. In response to his advocacy, the Dewan of Travancore allocated 500 acres of outlying state land in Nedumangad Valapilsala for the landless poor.

Ayyankali used the legislative platform to challenge the systemic exclusion of educated Dalits from state employment. The Travancore government historically justified excluding Avarnas and sometimes non-Hindus like Christians and Muslims from lucrative departments like the Land Revenue Department because these departments administered Hindu temples, thus invoking the fear of ritual pollution. In 1913, Ayyankali reminded the government of its promises and demanded that the state actively recruit Pulayas into the civil service. He argued that educational rights won at Ooruttambalam were meaningless without equal employment opportunities.

Ayyankali's dual approach-maintaining the militant, grassroots mobilisation capability of the SJPS and the Ayyankali Pada on the ground, while simultaneously leveraging his position in the Praja Sabha to extract binding legal concessions from the Dewan proved effective. He transformed the existential desperation of the Ooruttambalam struggle into enduring legislative frameworks that slowly eroded the foundational pillars of the Travancore caste state.

### **Somatic Autonomy: The Kallumala Agitation of 1915**

The victory at Ooruttambalam and the success of the Kandala Lahala inspired broader cultural and social change. The classroom represented intellectual frontiers, while the human body symbolised dignity. In late 1915, Ayyankali organised the Kallumala Agitation, a massive anti-caste demonstration in Perinad, Kollam, after the educational strikes.

The agitation targeted the restrictive dress codes imposed on Avarna women. Dalit women were forbidden from wearing blouses and were forced to wear *Kallumala*, heavy necklaces made of carved stones and glass beads, as a perpetual marker of their slave status. Just as Panchami challenged intellectual subjugation, the Kallumala agitation challenged somatic subjugation.

Ayyankali organised gatherings and urged Dalit women to publicly remove their stone jewellery and wear tailored blouses. This assertion of bodily autonomy angered the upper-caste Nairs, leading to the Perinad Revolt, a wave of violence similar to the Ooruttambalam riots. The sheer numerical mobilisation of Dalit labourers and the threat of further agrarian strikes forced the state and feudal lords to back down. The Kallumala struggle culminated in a historic assembly where thousands of Dalit women discarded their stone necklaces, successfully securing the right to dress with dignity.

Between 1914 and 1915, Ayyankali and his followers launched a multi-pronged attack on the caste system in Kerala. They targeted the three main pillars of Brahmanical power: education, the agrarian strike, and dress codes.

### **Historiographical Silences and the Politics of Commemoration**

Despite the significant changes brought about by 1914–1915, the Ooruttambalam struggle and Ayyankali's activism were largely ignored in mainstream Indian history for decades. The Dalit poet Poyikayil Yohannan lamented in his poetry that his race's history was erased, drowned in darkness.

The Kandala Lahala was largely omitted from early historical texts because post-colonial Indian academia prioritised the anti-British independence struggle. Nationalist historians considered the localised, anti-caste agitations in princely states as secondary. Early Marxist historiography in Kerala, while focusing on class struggle, often subordinated the caste

question to the broader concept of ‘peasant uprisings’, diluting Ayyankali’s anti-Brahmanical and Dalit-centric nature in favour of class unity theories.

The true significance of Ayyankali’s contributions was only fully recognised in the late 20th century, thanks to subaltern studies and dedicated Dalit biographers. T.H.P. Chentharassery’s biography, based on extensive oral interviews in Ayyankali’s village, broke the silence and brought back memories of the burning bench and the bullock cart ride. Historians like P. Sanal Mohan have since considered Ayyankali the most important leader of modern Kerala, due to his success in mobilising the oppressed against the state. Contemporary Dalit intellectuals like K.K. Kochu and Sunny Kapikad have further celebrated Ayyankali as the ultimate icon of knowledge and equality.

In recent years, the state and civil society have worked to preserve this contested history. The charred remains of the wooden bench where Panchami briefly sat in 1914 are now a sacred artefact of the Dalit liberation struggle within the rebuilt school.

In a significant act of historical closure, the Kerala government hosted a major reparative gesture in 2017. Athira Sreejith, a five-year-old direct descendant of Panchami, was formally admitted to the Ooruttambalam Government UP School during the ‘Pravesanotsavam’ (school admission festival). Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, Education Minister C. Raveendranath, and local legislator I.B. Satheesh welcomed her, contrasting sharply with the violent mob that greeted her great-aunt a century earlier.

In July 2022, the state government officially renamed the institution the ‘Mahatma Ayyankali Panchami Memorial School’. A dedicated Panchami Memorial Museum was also inaugurated on the school grounds to house the half-burnt bench and educate future generations about the Kandala Lahala. The official state communication accompanying the renaming emphasised the importance of remembering history, not erasing it. By embedding the names of Ayyankali and Panchami into the state’s educational infrastructure, the government

acknowledged that Kerala's educational indices were built on the blood, ashes, and relentless defiance of the Avarna communities.

## **Conclusion**

The micro-historical analysis of the Ooruttambalam school entry struggle of 1914-1915 demonstrates the mechanics of subaltern resistance against a caste-feudal state. The attempt to educate a Dalit girl, Panchami, exposed the fragility of the Travancore social order, linking untouchability to unfree labour. When education threatened this supply, the state's peripheral apparatus reacted violently.

Ayyankali's brilliance lay in his multidimensional strategic vision. When the bureaucratic state failed to enforce progressive laws and upper-caste mobs resorted to violence, he engineered the Kandala Lahala, exploiting the contradiction of the agrarian economy: feudal lords' reliance on untouchable bodies. By withdrawing agricultural labour, he applied economic pressure, compelling the central administration to intervene and dismantle barriers to public education.

The immediate administrative fallout government capitulation, funding of Dalit teachers, increased Pulaya enrolment, and Ayyankali's elevation to the Praja Sabha altered modern Kerala's trajectory. The burning of the Ooruttambalam school, intended to erase, illuminated a path of radical assertion, transforming a contested classroom into the crucible of South Asia's earliest and most effective intersectional struggles for civil rights, labour equity, and knowledge democratisation.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of all the authors, declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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