

SUBALTERN CHRISTIAN GROUPS AND THE CRISIS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

A Case Study Of Christian Pulaya of North Kerala

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I Subaltern Christian Groups

Subaltern cultures are ways of life at home on Earth and affirm the experience of body and emotion. In general they have an ecological spirituality, a somatic philosophy, an egalitarian value system and a feminine world view. They do not denigrate the body or the ordinary, mundane, everyday facts of life but rather they celebrate these things and in doing so, intersect with many of the most vital interests of the post modern culture.

Subaltern is synonymous to the modern usage of *dalit* in the wider sense. While subaltern is a military term meaning, "inferior rank", dalit, as we know, is a political term denoting the powerless, exploited and subdued groups in India. Subaltern Christian groups thus means the Dalit Christians in the wider sense. In other words, those converted Christians from the tribals, scheduled caste and fishermen.

II Pulaya Conversion – A Case Study

The Pulayas of north Malabar, considered to be the lowest of untouchables, have been oppressed for centuries by the caste Hindus and deprived of their land and culture. Enslaved for generations and owning nothing, they lived in eternal insecurity and in conditions worse than their master's domestic animals. The very sight of them was believed to be defiling and so in all aspects they led literally a marginalized life, both from the mainstream culture and society.

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A reply, as it were, to this rejection and humiliation was their religious conversion to Christianity. For that was the only way that was left them to retaliate against the age long caste discrimination and deprivation. The conversion of *Pulayas* or *Chirackal taluka* on 2nd October 1937 is the last known mass conversion in South India. Today there are about twenty five thousand Pulaya Christians in this area and the missions is known as **Chirackal Mission**. It is also unique because while they became Christians they were tribes and now they are treated as Schedule Caste and as a result they lost the government reservations and privileges. According to Government records the Pulayas of North Malabar, were considered to be tribals until they were officially declared a caste in 1977 during the time of National Emergency for the obvious reason of discouraging their further conversions to Christianity.

The 'enticement theory' of conversion was not quite true in the early stage of the *Pulaya conversion*. The conversion movement is historically developed as a progressive fight against the oppressive system. Three historical as well as cultural factors accentuated the process. First, the ownership of land. The first converts were families of small land holdings. They were, understandably, less dependent on the landlords. Secondly, the first converts were people who used to go to Coorg in South Canara for work during off-seasons. In Coorg the landlords were more just and humane in their dealings with the workers. The taste of dignity and freedom at Coorg seemed to have intensified their yearning for it in their own situation. According to Paulo Freire(1970: 51-53)¹, the first step towards liberation is the awareness of the oppressed through the development of a critical consciousness that they are exploited. The annual exposure to the situation in Coorg served as an occasion to develop their critical consciousness. Thirdly, their own *theyyam* rituals which are basically a social critique of the unjust situation through the *ritual status reversal*.

¹ Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York, Penguin, 1970 pp51-53

The story of the first conversion still circulating among the people runs like this : A group of youth from the present Thavam parish opposed under the leadership of Panayan Kunjiraman the oppressive caste system. To get out of it, they considered different ways such as mass migration and even mass conversion to Islam. Finally they came to the conclusion that a change of religion was the only viable alternative before them. While actively considering to become Muslims they came to know about the Basil Mission and the group preferred to invite the latter, because the former along with the Hindu high caste formed the oppressors of the Pulayas of North Malabar.

How they became Catholics is an accident of history. One day Panayan Kunjiraman visited one of his relatives at Badakkepuram where he happened to meet Fr. Caironi, SJ. Thinking that he belonged to the Basil Mission he was invited to see their place now known as Vadakkebhagam at Thavam.

There was severe opposition to conversion from Hindus and Muslims as well. Under the leadership of Swami Ananda Theerthan the high caste Hindus tried to incite some section of Hindus including Pulayas, to challenge the minority Christian Pulayas(CP). "We have become Christians to live as human beings", was the answer given to the Swami. The immediate reason for increase of number of converts was the removal of untouchability on becoming a Christian, and the second reason, the life saving heroic works of Fr. Caironi during the flood of 1940 followed by the epidemic of cholera. The entire Pulaya community was poised to become Catholics and it was stifled by the sudden transfer of Caironi due to a difference of opinion with the Bishop.

In the beginning, it is said, that there was no plan of giving land and house to the Pulaya Christians. It started with an incident. One Sunday a certain Christian Pulaya woman who was a tenant of a Muslim could not get to work in time as she had gone for fulfilling her Sunday obligation. On account of it the woman was ousted by Muslim from his property. This incident led Fr. Caironi to conclude

that for the Christians to practice their religion they should have their own land and house.

Theyyam, the Life Style of Pulayas

The *Theyyam* is a religious form of worship consisting of special combination of ritual and art forms: dance and drams. Manifestations of spirits in subhuman animate and inanimate beings, legendary figures of great value, exotic powers and endowments are appeased and honored. This is done by dressing up in the intended form of their respective effigy and performing artistically through dance and music, and also according to the prescribed rites and rituals, developed through folk traditions. (Pallath, 1995:4)².

The *Theyyam* celebration has a central place in the life of Pulayas. They find meaning for their hopes and aspirations, success and failures, joys and sorrows in the *Theyyam*. It is through *Theyyam* they appease their deity, find material and spiritual gains, face danger to life, bring calamity and destruction on the enemy; in short, significant events in the life of a pulaya are celebrated either with the *Theyyam* dance or in the context of it³.

The shortest celebration of *Theyyam* is of 24 hours. It appears that the *Theyyam* ritual is organized to spend at least one sleepless night. All through the night there will be some performance going on for those who want to spend their time without sleep. Loss for sleep in rhythmic movements such as drumming, dancing and singing, relaxes the performers and that leads to a catharsis. The participants slowly go through a process of getting in touch with themselves and their hidden areas of emotions. What modern people achieve artificially, the Pulayas get through ritual means: getting in touch with their unconscious.

² Pallath J.J. *Theyyam*, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1995 p.4

³ Ibid, p.5

The CP's break with their original culture was total and the separation was ensured under mortal sin. The cultural insulation was so perfect that the present generation of Christians know practically nothing about the customs and practices of their Hindu ancestors. They are even ashamed of their original culture which they had left behind. The Christian Pulayas have internalized all the prejudices and misunderstandings of the foreign missionaries who had little or no knowledge about the great symbol system that is *Theyyam*⁴.

III The Conflicting Traits of Subaltern Cultures And Christianity

Emotional Vibrancy vs Rigidity

The subaltern subcultures are found to be maintaining an emotional genuineness and transparency. They use their emotions to be in tune with the rhythm of nature. The unedited and unstylized expressions of emotions, even to the extent of outbursts and abusive words make them psychically relaxed, genuine persons and warm personalities. They spontaneously express the *rasas* according to the stimuli and they maintain a correspondence as well as a balance between the stimuli and the emotional response. Most of the aggressive and abusive expressions are ritualized and made community celebrations to avoid offense and hurt feelings. For example, the *Theyyam* celebrations of the subaltern people of north Malabar. In the day-to-day life all the *Theyyam* dancing castes should keep the prescribed distance away from the caste Hindu. Pulaya being the lowest, their prescribed distance was 64 feet from the Brahmin. At the time when such detested human beings as the Pulaya, becomes a *Theyyam*, not only was the untouchability temporarily foregone, but the high castes took even *prasadam* from him and asked for his guidance and counseling to solve their problems. Such temporal status elevation of lower caste through rituals is called **ritual status reversal**. During the performance of status elevation, the *Theyyams* abuse, revile and even physically maltreat the highest authority with unusual aggressive temper.

⁴ Ibid, P5.

Whereas in Christian emotional rigidity is a key value and the rasas are either suppressed or encouraged to promote this value. Priests and religious are the embodiment of emotional rigidity. The ritual celebrations are designed in such way to affirm the status of different classes. It is an occasion for the **affirmation of the status** of the priestly class who are the models for the Christian community.

Feminine/Lunar vs Masculine /Solar

Subaltern cultures are feminine in nature. We know in almost all food gathering cultures women played the central role in the society. The role of men in child bearing was a comparatively recent knowledge. Women, therefore, were considered to be the source of new life and so she was to supervise the planting and the entire farming activity.

The moon has been popularly associated with feminine attributes. The lunar cycle resonates with woman's menstrual cycles, with wider cycles of growth, maturity, decline and those of birth, death and rebirth. The Moon is believed to be the receptacle of menstrual blood by which each mother formed the life of her child. Subaltern cultures revere the moon more than the Sun, reasoning that the Moon -mother gives them light at night, when it is needed, whereas the Sun shines only by day. The ancient calendars were based on phases of the moon and menstrual cycles. The annual feasts of the subaltern cultures are determined by the lunar calendar. The moon ruled the sexuality of women, it was also thought to be a symbol of dynamism. One never sees the moon in the same shape and size, hence the crescent meant "to grow". Naturally the feminine quality became the Almighty, the Goddesses. Among the subaltern people of North Malabar the Goddesses are known under different names but more or less of same status and function. Kurathi, Podi, Bhagavati, Chamundi are some of their names and most of them are prefixed or suffixed by their local village such as Nalini, Kurathi, Makkapodi, Muchilot Bbagavati, Malayil Chammundi etc.

Christianity as it is organized today is a patriarchal religion and its value system is predominantly, feudal and male dominated. Its vocabulary is masculine and its morality is in favor of man. The

female dimension doesn't appear in the community of god called Trinity. The 'Father' dominates the religious scene. Devotion to Our Lady is a later addition and she doesn't enjoy a status equal to goddess in the subaltern religion. The characteristics of Sun which are closer to masculine values such a static nature, permanence, linearity are highly esteemed values of Christian religion. Sun and its rays represented by lamp and flames dominates the Christian symbolism.

Material vs Spiritual

The ethos for the subaltern cultures is to create a common cultural ethic, one that reenergizes the masses so that they can engage in productive activity. The image of God is built around the production process. These images are institutionalized through the imagination of the subaltern people which is rooted in their day to day human existence and in the relations between productive forces and nature⁵. (The subaltern people of North Malabar approach their goddess without the mediation of a priest and they talk of Her as they talk among themselves using their household mundane language. 'Mother', they say, 'we have seeded the fields, now you must ensure that the crop grows well, one of our children is sick it is your bounden duty to cure her etc'⁶. The people bring some cooked rice and other food stuff which they eat every day and offer to the Goddess. Finally the chicken which is their most valued food item is slaughtered in front of the deity and the young people dance and make merry. Subaltern celebrations are an annual feature unlike the daily offering of the *Saravana* Caste.

Christianity somehow abhors the material dimension of human reality. It eulogizes the spiritual aspect. The transcendent God who dwells in the skys is a Father Spirit. According to the poplar beliefs material world is anti-spiritual and so anti-God. Holiness is said to be

⁵ Ilaiiah Kanja, *Art and Imagination of Christian Life*(Unpublished thesis) Jnanadeep Vidyadeeth, Pune, 1983, P 91

⁶ Ibid, P91

a life unaffected by the material . Satan entices the fragile human beings through the medium of material attractions. A true Christian is thought to be one who is a pilgrim on earth and lives unaffected by material attraction of the world.

Ephemerality (Liminal) vs Permanency

According to the understanding of subaltern cultures, nothing is permanent, like the moon the reality is changing. The manifestation of God in the human trance is ephemeral, morality, priesthood, in short every reality is ephemeral. For example, in the *theyyam* celebrations of the Pulayas of north Malabar, several devices are used to relax the social norms and to give the whole celebration an air of enchantment to shed all inhibitions and controls. The Kolam becomes a *theyyam* only when he is possessed and goes into a trance and out of the trance he is treated as an ordinary person, one among the crowd.

In Christianity everything is permanent , priesthood is permanent, morality is unchanging, the understanding of God, value system and world view, are all permanent. "For ever" is the underlying message in every aspect of Christianity.

Ludic vs Serious

The subaltern cultures are a blend of playfulness or seriousness. Their rulers and priests carry within them such interior freedom that they exude creative humor in their life. In social and religious gatherings and celebrations they get the people relaxed with their humor and playfulness. In the *theyyam* celebrations of North Malabar, the jokes of some the *theyyams* are penetrating social criticisms. The *theyyam* is found to be teasing women and freighting children, yet he is considered to be the protector of them. In serious moments of the celebration they get his blessing and take *prasadam* from him. The devotees come drunk for the celebrations and they have their own uninhibited 'performance'. The children are allowed everywhere, dogs and other domestic animals wander about in 'holy' place.

Playfulness, the Ludic element, is almost unknown to the church dealings and much less in its ritual celebrations. The eucharistic celebration is an exercise in rigidity, other than the recital of the priest and the monotonous response to the prayer by the people no other sound is permitted during the celebrations; even the cry of an infant is frowned at.

Body Affirmation vs Body Negation

Subaltern culture is a body affirming culture. It is fact that we 'know' through our bodies i.e. through our senses. There are other extra sensory ways of knowing through our bodies for examples, intimate relation. The way of knowing of the subaltern people is through the experience and sense. "Rational" intellectual knowledge is not valued as highly as the experienced knowledge. The subaltern people celebrate the changes in their bodies through the life-cycle ceremonies. There are about eighteen life cycle-ceremonies for the Pulayas of North Malabar.

In Christianity the body is mistrusted as in the material dimension. The human body is thought to possess all the vices of human frailty. The soul is thought to be imprisoned in the body and liberation from the sinful body is salvation. To abandon the body and to unite with the spirit of Jesus was the greatest temptation of St. Paul who championed the body soul distinction to the present level of obsession. According to the Christian morality and world view, there is a lingering mistrust of the body which can at any moment get out of control and so the saintliness of a person is declared only after ensuring the death of the body.

Cosmic vs Individual

Subaltern people live one with Nature and it decisively influences their character. The cycles of the seasons and relationships between all the related inhabitants of the Earth dictate regular occasions for subaltern people to celebrate and to contemplate the life, environment and the whole earth. The emotive aspect comes before the intellectual, the celebration before the contemplative, the

ceremony before the meaning. The festivals reveal the cyclical nature of time and the facts of life - change, growth, maturity, breeding, decline, decay and provide the context for explorations of the joys and sadness that embody life. They are directed to fit their individual and social lives into a "scheme of things" dictated by what the planet, the moon, sun and stars are doing. The individual human life encapsulates Nature's life. It reveals the place of humanity as part of the cosmos, and reminds them that they are not the sole inhabitants of the planet, but are linked to it physically, emotionally, spiritually, ecologically and in every other way⁷.

The God in Christianity is a supreme ruler of the universe, its creator, sustainer and preserver⁸. This God becoming human assumes the supreme authority over other created being such as the plants and animals. Man becomes the ruler, thus assuming a separate identity for himself over the cosmos. Christianity thus lost the nature mysticism, a respect for other created things other than man. The ultimate aim of the man is understood as his individual salvation, Christianity has become a poor religion in comparison with the cosmic religions which embrace the entire universe.

Mythic vs Historical

The mind of subaltern people is intensely mythic. To start with, the consciousness, whether mythic or rational, has an outside object to encounter. Even in the mythic, the sense of objectivity remains, but it exists in a different way, the object is identified with the subject in greater sense of immediacy almost to the level of presence. There is a merging of objective truth and subjective appearance without limits and demarcation. From the point of view of the subaltern cultures, the mythical becomes a synonym of mysticism.

Myth operates at different levels of human interaction. First of all, it has a basis either in nature or in history, that is, in the

⁷ Harvey Graham, *Listening People Speaking Earth*, Hurst & Company, London, 1997, P 143.

⁸ Zaehner, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Living Faiths*, Hutchinson of London, London, 1959, p17.

phenomenal world. It has secondly a psychological meaning, and an application of human experience, both individual and social. Thirdly, it has a spiritual meaning, reflecting some aspects of ultimate truth or reality⁹.

History is understood in the Christian circle even today in opposition to myth. Mythic is supposed to be about the world of fantasy whereas historical consciousness belongs to the world of reality. By reducing the myth in the Bible to history, Christianity has opted to remain in the superficial realm of the phenomenal world. It fails to attain the other levels of depth dimensions that the mythical offers.

Social Catharsis vs Individual Fulfillment

The ritual celebrations in the subaltern cultures are designed to induce a social catharsis. The **loss of sleep** in rhythmic performances such as drumming, dancing and singing, relaxes the performers and leads to the unleashing of an energy that is hidden in the unconscious. The rising crescendo of chanting, the sound of jingling anklets, the rhythmic deafening musical accompaniment comprising drum and *thudi* punctuated by shouts and yelling of the *theyyam*, the spirited expression of the trance from head to foot, makes the entire crowd erupt in frenzy of rhythmic fervour and which create a social catharsis in the people and thus they become emotionally vibrant and capable of exuding human warmth in their day to day life.

Whereas Christian celebrations, particularly the key celebration like Eucharist is short, instant and repetitive and it is not designed to create a social catharsis. The social sharing dimension of Eucharist is lost today, and it has become a private ritual for individual fulfillment of earning merit to get to heaven. The thrill of losing sleep which provided the people with total relaxation is denied to Christians. The Christmas and Easter celebrations are originally designed to provide the exotic spiritual experience by **losing sleep** today those celebrations have become very mechanical in the hands of people who lack spiritual and aesthetic experience.

⁹ Griffiths Bede, *The Marriage of East and West*, Collins Paper Backs, 1982, P 105.

These and many other opposing cultural difference created an unusual physical and psychic tension within the people who got converted from the subaltern cultures to a mainstream religion/culture like Christianity. Often enough the converted Christians became less human showing tendencies of aggression and criminality and who have taken easily to all the vices of the modern world.

IV The After-Effect of Conversion

Discrimination Against Priestly and Religious Vocations

The first religious priest from the Chirackal was ordained in 1996 and he is a religious. There are only less than half a dozen formed women religious from Chirackal so far. "Nobody is coming", the religious authorities mourn, and "Nobody takes us", the youth from Chirackal mission complain. The fact is that there is grave neglect from the part of the Church in promoting vocations from the converted Christians due to its 'caste' prejudice.

Discrimination in Employment in Catholic institutions

The Chirackal Mission Catholics form more than 50% of the people of the Calicut diocese. But in the case of appointment in diocesan and religious institutions the percentages appeared to be less than ten. The gravity of the situation becomes more clear when we know that they are not appointed on the basis of certain irrational fear that dalits are inefficient and incompetent, despite the fact that there are numerous qualified and competent candidates.

Second Class Members in the Church

It is interesting to compare the treatment given to the new members in the two converting religions, Islam and Christianity. In Islam the new convert is treated as special gift with respect. The convert gets straight away integrated into the mainstream and becomes a privileged person in the community. The convert is given the chosen partner for marriage and economic security is ensured by way of land and work.

Whereas a Christian convert is treated as a second class member in the Church and the stigma of being a new comer continues. The new convert is made to feel that he is an alien and is ridiculed in words and action. The benefits are accorded half-heartedly and marriage partnership is not socially sanctioned from the mainstream, if at all allowed it is only from the financially marginalised section. No wonder in situations where Islam and Christianity come face to face the people spontaneously prefer Islam.

Struggle for Constitutional Rights

Till 1977, the Pulayas of Chirackal region were treated in the Government records as Pulaya tribe. They had been rescheduled as caste under the cover of emergency. Apparently, though the change was simple, it had far reaching consequences to the CP. According to the constitution, unlike the caste, when tribals change their religion, they are entitled to get their constitutional privileges in terms of reservations.

The concerned Church leaders didn't take any interest to bring this up in proper forums such as KCBC or CBCI. A legal solution could have been possible, had it been challenged in the court in time. Today, this problem got submerged in the national agitation for reservation of backward class Christians. Ever since they had been declared as caste, only one of the Chirackal Catholics managed to get into Government jobs.

Neglect of Pulaya Culture and Inculturation

Today the Dalits are proud of being known by their caste however debilitating it may be. But, strangely enough, the Pulaya Christians are ashamed of their identity. Mistaking this identity crisis as their loyalty to Christianity, the Church encourages this hostile attitude to their culture and identity.

To be ashamed of ones cultural heritage is said to be the most intense form of alienation. Growth in self respect is impossible without acknowledging ones cultural identity. As a first step towards

their cultural liberation, the Pulaya Christians should accept that they are Pulayas first, then Christians. Research studies to improve the sense of history and culture and thus to change the superficial knowledge about one's own heritage, are very essential. Along with these efforts, attempts also should be made to inculcate into Christianity the myths, symbols and rituals of Pulaya culture. Incorporation of their cultural elements into the liturgy can help to bring them into the mainstream of Catholic Church.

Christian Pulayas Becoming Aggressive

Being denied the opportunity to go into ritual trance and the accompanying social catharsis, the Pulayas are directing their unexpressed pent up emotions first to themselves and secondly to the community, which is represented by the priestly class. One of the Christians who was a *gurukul* before conversion said that he finds it very difficult to live the Christian life without stories, myths, fairy tales, music, drumming and dancing¹⁰. Having lived the Christian life for more than half a century, the mythic, creatively passive, emotionally rich Hindu Pulayas, became an exteriorized people emotionally rigid and aggressive. Quarreling in families and fighting between parishes for trivial matters have become very common in Chirackal region. The youth is becoming aggressively defiant and practically in every parish the parish priest, the symbol of authority, has been either manhandled or driven away from the parish one time or other in the recent past.

V The Task Ahead

Economic

With the introduction of colony system of housing for the CP, they are subjected to a double uprooting: cultural uprooting due to change of religion and a geographic one owing to change of residence. The latter is going to bring in long-range economic consequences. Even today people from colonies are travelling long

¹⁰ Pallath J.J. *Theyyam*, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1995, P124.

distances to their original place for work. As no work is available some are refusing to occupy the houses allotted to them in the new colonies. But they are generally happy that they have a house of their own due to conversion.

The global financial depression has its effect in Chirackal too. The construction works for the Muslims have been the major work opportunity for the converted Christians. The general financial slump and the tight watch over Muslim black money by the LDF government brought the construction works to a vital stand still. Consequently the Pulaya Christian men were rendered jobless. A recent survey shows that a good percent of sex-workers who serve in Kannur and Thaliparamba are Pulaya Christian women.

The approach of the Basil Mission is found to be more viable and liberating and can be adopted as a model. The Basil Mission didn't built any houses for their converts, but provided them with permanent jobs in their tile factories. Today, the Basil Mission Christians in Chirackal have their own houses and property and also exude a better self-respect and confidence in facing the problems be it economic communal or cultural

One way of doing it in the modern economic context of globalization and liberalization of market economy is to organize the parishes of Chirackal region into production units of a cooperative net-work. The clusters of units can make different products that can be sold out in Sunday markets organized in parish level. Once such a steady consumption is ensured large scale production can be attempted. The present Credit union can be updated and used as a banking system to prevent the outflow of money from the cooperatives.

Cultural

We have seen that the people of Chirackal are capable of protesting and they heave already started blaming non-dalits for destroying their cultural traditions. The Government has initiated the process of declaring the *Theyyam* and the Serpent Groves, etc. of North Malabar as Living Cultural Traditions. In the ensuing studies

of UNESCO, Christianity is blamed as an agent that destroyed the cultural diversity of Asia. In this context, more cultural studies in view of inculturating the Chirackal Catholics should be undertaken. Research and study into inculturating *pulaya* culture should be an important task of the people who are interested in the Church in this region and the Church in Asia at large.

VI Conclusion

It is a fact that human beings are generally very reluctant to change even a small item of their habits. Human nature being such, we understand the seriousness of religious conversion of *dalits*. It is doubtful whether the Church authorities, particularly the priests working, and the so-called traditional Christians living in the region have understood the magnitude of the sacrifice the *pulayas* have made to assert their dignity and freedom through conversion.

The approach of the Church to the rich cultural traditions of Chirackal too was not very different. After fifty years of Christian presence, when we look back, a culturally rich people have become impoverished and their life style languished and their symbol system was extinguished. It is true, their material condition temporality improved which enabled them to resist the humiliating treatment of the high caste half a century ago.

There is a feeling among some people that the *Pulaya* cultural expressions are tools used by the high caste to oppress them and so it should not be promoted. Though cultural forms may contain a hegemony of oppressive components, they are the integral elements of *Pulaya* personality. In itself, they are not oppressive symbols, the oppressors made them so; one has to rediscover the liberating values in them and unleash the positive energy in them for the humanization of the CP.

The rescheduling of Tribe *Pulaya* was a calculated move made by the Hindu fundamentalist politicians of the Congress party. The vested interests are so powerful even now that they are capable of misleading a community and get away with what they want. In order to establish dalit solidarity and to strengthen their bargaining power an organizational leadership should emerge from among the people.