



A STUDY OF SOCIAL REFORMERS IN KERALA

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Introduction

Kerala society, even after the assumption of direct administration of Malabar by the British and centralization of administration in Travancore and Kochi continued to be dominated by the upper castes. They became more powerful than before as the British wanted their active support in sustaining their own authority. There was deep chasm between the high and low caste people. The existing system of laws, which was not at all equalitarian, did not favour the lower castes. The judicial system was caste ridden and iniquitous. The Janmi system prevailed. Slavery in the most primitive form existed. Women of lower castes; Sudras etc were denied certain social privileges and amenities. There were a series of taxes and cesses, which imposed a heavy burden on the lower castes. The spread of Western education and liberal ideas made them restive and eager for reforms. The mounting agrarian unrest among the tenants produced everywhere a feeling of unrest. The British and Indian administration had already introduced a series of administrative and social reforms to redress the grievances. The abolition of slavery was one among them. There was overhauling of the entire administrative system of the three units in Kerala in accordance with the modern principles of governance.

The late 19th and the early 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of powerful social reform movements in Kerala. The traditional feudal society began to disappear and in its place a new socio-economic order evolved in Kerala. The all India organisations like the Arya Samaj, Theosophical society and Rama Krishna mission had their activities in Kerala, but their influence was limited and influence marginal. The social reform movements, which made an impact on Kerala, were indigenous in origin and led by individual reformers.

SRI NARAYANA GURU (1856-1928)

Sri Narayana Guru was an Ezhava Saint who made a solid contribution to the social change in Kerala. He was born in the village of Chempazhanthy near Trivandrum and showed keen interests in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy. He took to the life of a Sanyasi and led the life of a wandering mendicant. Like Chattampi Swamikal, he too revolted against Brahmin ascendancy and worked for a new social order. He consecrated shrines in several parts of Kerala for the worship of the lower castes. The most famous of such shrines are those of Aruvippuram, Ochira, Varkala and Thalassery. As a religious reformer, he advocated the abolition of animal sacrifices. As a social reformer he campaigned against the observances of Talikettu Kalyanam and other customary rituals and rites. He simplified the procedures and ceremonies for Ezhava marriages. He appealed to the Ezhavas to give up toddy tapping and to take to learned professions and industrial pursuits. The Guru had a highly eclectic outlook in religious matters as is shown in the saying 'one caste, one Religion and one God'. He died at Varkala in 1928.

Sri Narayana Guru was the founder of the SNDP yogam (1903). He personally guided its activities. He became the rallying point for the Tiyyas and the Ezhavas to organise and unite. The Sangham developed a brilliant band of dedicated workers like Dr. Palpu and Kumaran Asan. Their activities helped the lower castes a consciousness of their own dignity and strength. It also prevented the rising tide of conversion to Christianity. Narayana Guru was no sectarian philosopher and leader. His philosophy was the Advitha and he saw all humanity as one. As a literary luminary, Narayana Guru penned Darsanamala in Sanskrit, Jatimimamsa in Sanskrit and Malayalam and Siva Sathakom in Malayalam. In short, the work of Narayana Guru for the cause of social reform resulted in a silent, but far reaching social revolution in modern Kerala.

VAGBHATANANDA (1885-1939)

Vagbhatananda was a great social reformer, organiser, journalist, writer, and philosopher of Kerala. He founded the Atma Vidya Sangham, a major force of social change in Kerala. Kunjikkannan Gurukkal, as vagbhatananda was known in early life, was born at Patyam village of Kannur district in an Ezhava family in 1885. He was educated in the traditional Gurukula system. After studying philosophy, logic and Hindu scriptures, he travelled extensively and propagated the teaching of Universal non duality. He took active interests in the Brahma Samaj and founded a Sanskrit school at Calicut. As a great orator of the time, he was conferred the title Vagbhatananda by Sivananda Yogi of Alathur.

The Orthodox Hindus found in him a rebel fighting against established religion and caste hierarchy. Vagbhatananda based his argument in the ancient wisdom of Hinduism, not on its dogmatism. He composed an Advaita treatise 'Atmavidya' which became the manifesto of the Sangham. A great admirer of Ram Mohan Roy, Vagbhatananda rejected idol worship, propagated Nigunopasana, rejected all rituals and formalities. He criticised the Arya Samaj for its policy of conversion to Hinduism. Like Sri Narayanagu, he rejected caste system. He was a humanist and a liberal and started a journal Abhinava Keralam in 1921. Vagbhatananda was a great social reformer, who advocated reforms among the untouchables. He was a champion of inter caste marriage and inter caste dining. He was a great nationalist. He supported the civil disobedience movement of Gandhiji. His journal 'Atma Vidya Kahalam' stood with the nationalist cause. He also supported the constructive programme of Gandhiji. He favoured temple entry for the Avarnas. He was also associated with the peasant movements in the country. In the words of E.M.S. Nambudiripad, "Though he could not obtain a universal name or fame like Narayana Guru, Vagbhatananda was one who had greatly contributed to the growth of society. He was even superior to Narayana Guru in his scholarship and eloquence. He initiated programmes against casteism and played a significant role in the growth of society of North Malabar.

MANNATH PADMANABHAN (1878 - 1970)

Mannathu Padmanabhan was born in Perunna village in Changanacherry, Travancore, British India on 2 January 1878 to Eswaran Namboothiri of Nilavana Illam and Mannathu Parvathy Amma. He was a social reformer and a freedom fighter from the State of Kerala, India. He is recognised as the founder of the Nair Service Society, which claims to represent the Nair community that constitutes almost 14.5% of the population of the state. Padmanabhan is considered as a visionary reformer who organised the Nair community under the NSS. He began his career as a teacher in 1893 in a Government primary school. After a few years, from 1905 he changed his profession and started practising law, in the Magistrates Courts.

Nair Service Society

On 31 October 1914 with the help of a few others, he established the Nair Service Society. His main ambition was to uplift the status of the Nair community. From 1915 onwards, he gave up law practice and became full-time secretary of the Nair Service Society. He fought for social equality, the first phase of being the Vaikom Satyagraha, demanding the public roads near the temple at Vaikom be opened to low caste Hindus. In 1924 he took

part in the Vaikom and Guruvayoor temple-entry and anti untouchability agitation. He opened his family temple for everyone; irrespective of caste distinction. He became a member of the Indian National Congress in 1947 and took part in the agitation against Sir C. P. Ramaswamy Iyer's administration in Travancore. As the first president of Travancore Devaswom Board he revitalised many temples which had almost ceased to function.

In 1949 Padmanabhan became a member of the Travancore Legislative Assembly. In 1959 he along with Christian Churches led a united opposition against the State Communist Ministry, which became known as the Vimochana Samaram (liberation struggle) Padmanabhan was involved with the Nair Service Society as its Secretary for 31 years and as its President for three years. He was honoured with the title Bharata Kesari by the President of India. He also received Padma Bhushan in 1966. He died on February 25, 1970 at the age of 93. Mannam memorial (or Samâdhi) is located at NSS Headquarters Changanacherry.

CHATTAMPI SWAMIKAL (1854 -1924)

Chattampi Swamikal was one of the most outstanding reformists who revolted against the existing social order in Kerala. Even as a young man, he made a deep study of the religious literature of the Hindus and won a high reputation for his scholarship. He wanted the major communities of the land like the Nairs and the Ezhavas to play their legitimate role in society. However he concentrated mainly on the uplift of Nair community. He believed that a social awakening among the Nairs would inspire the Non Brahmin for greater social change. He worked in close co-operation with Narayanaguru in the cause of Hindu religious regeneration. He undertook social and religious activities that aimed at the eradication of untouchability and other social evils. He advocated that Sanyasam should not be mistaken for asceticism and proved by his personal example that Sanyasis could do great help to the people. His learned discourses and works on religion, philosophy and history had won for him wide acclaim. His speeches, writings and social activities gave the reform movement in Kerala an intellectual appeal, a social bias and a practical turn.

A great scholar and man of letters, Chattampi Swamikal came to be called Vidyadhiraaja. He wrote poems, devotional songs, essays, reviews, commentaries, letters and research papers on a variety of subjects. Though not an academic historian, Chattampi Swamikal had his own original perspective of History. In his work '*Prachina Malayalam*', he has challenged some of the traditional theories of Kerala History. He rejected the Parasurama legend and projected the picture of a casteless society in ancient Kerala. As a contributor to the literary heritage, Swamikal authored *Adi Bhasha* a research

work on linguistics. He also contributed much to the religious literature of the age. Thus both as a social reformer and literary luminary, Chattampi Swamikal had a great place among the reformers of Kerala.

V.T. BHATTATHIRIPAD

The Nambuthiri caste produced some of the outstanding social reformers in Kerala. V.T. Bhattathiripad was one among them. His main sphere of activity centred around the Namputhiris. He wanted to eradicate the evil customs and practices of the Namputhiris. His motto was "make the Namputhiri a human being". He was co-founder of the Yogakshema Sabha and its youth wing Namputhiri Yuvajana samajam. He wanted to uplift the Namputhiri women folk. He worked for widow remarriage and education of Namputhiri women. For this purpose he wrote a famous literary work - Atukkalayil Ninnum Arangatheykku. (From kitchen to the stage). This play helped the growth of awareness about the evil customs prevailed among the Namputhiris.

SAHODARAN AYYAPPAN (1889-1968)

Sahodaran Ayyappan was another social reformer of modern Kerala. He started what is known as Sahodara Prasthanam. K. Ayyappan started the movement against the social inequalities propounded by the caste system. For this purpose, he adopted a new method known as 'Misrabhojanam' (Mixed feast). The Cherayi convention of 1917 conducted inter dining for the lower and upper castes together. Ayyappan was not against religion as such, but against the evils of the religion, 'no God,' thus modifying the doctrine of Narayanaguru.

Ayyappan organised a literary association called Vidyaposhini. A newspaper called 'Sahodaran' was also started. Ayyappan wrote a series of articles against the caste system. He worked with the Atma Vidya Sangham also. His programmes were resisted by the upper caste who ridiculed him as 'Pulayan Ayyappan'. In 1928, he became the editor of the magazine 'Yuktivadi'. Ayyappan also plunged in to politics. He became the leader of the Socialist Party in Kochi. He was also associated with the trade union movement. He became a member of the Cochin legislative Assembly. Later he became a minister in the congress government in Kochi.

Conclusion

We have discussed in detail about the most important social reformers in Kerala. The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed the emergence of a new social order in Kerala. The traditional social structure began crumbling. The political shake up by Marthanda Varma, Sakthan Thampuran and the Mysoreans gave the coup de grace to the old order in Kerala, yielding place

to the new. Vestiges of grand past had been wiped out or modified, ushering in to a new social order.

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