

Dalit movement and Ayyankali – a study

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Abstract:-- Mahatma Ayyankali was a popular leader of Dalits of Kerala who carried forward many reform movements for dalits (low caste people). In 1937 he was praised by Mahatma Gandhi when he visited Venganoor, Ayyankali's home town. He was the first labour leader from India who fought for equal rights of Dalit workers in Kerala. Yet he led in front a movement for democratizing public places and asserting the rights of workers even before the formation of any workers organization in Kerala. He belonged to Pulaya Community who were regarded as dalit. Till middle twentieth century, Kerala was a place filled with strange customs and discrimination based on caste and creed. Dalits were not allowed to pass through public places nor could their women cover their breasts in front of high caste people. Ayyankali himself was an illiterate person similar to Manu Script and fought against these discrimination. He was inspired a lot by Ayyavu's teachings. Ayyaguru was the harbinger of many social reform leaders of Kerala.

Key words: - Dalits Movement, Ayyankali, Kerala, Middle Twentieth Century, Pulaya Community.

INTRODUCTION

Reform movement are organized and led by great men to carry out reforms in some specific areas concerned to the immediate requirement of the society. The reform endeavor to change elements of the system for better. For example Civil Right Movement, Women's Liberation Movement, AryaSamaj Movement, Brahma Samaj Movement etc. The last decades of the 19th century saw the rise of powerful social and religious reform movements in Kerala. These movements aimed at the eradication of untouchability, promotion of inter-caste marriages, changes in the Marumakkathayam System of inheritance and the abolition of many costly and wasteful social practices like ThalickettuKalyanam etc. Even though all the Indian organizations like the Ramakrishna Mission, the AryaSamaj and Theosophical society has their branches in Kerala their influence was limited and marginal. The reform movements which brought about social changes in Kerala were of indigenous origin and were led by individual social reformers and communal or caste organizations.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND TRADITIONAL POSITION OF DALITS IN KERALA

The history of Kerala before the Christian Era is shrouded in legends and traditions. The caste system in Kerala has a history of centuries. But there is no unanimity of opinion among the historians regarding the period of its origin. The commonly accepted version of the ancient past of Kerala is that castelessness was the essence of Dravidian culture. Sangam literature does not testify a caste system based on chaturvarnya nor does it make mention of caste during the Sangam period.

The origin of caste in Kerala speaks a different story from that of North India. The schedule castes of today claim to have had a predominant position in the early society of Kerala. Their status was one of free man in the casteless society. They seem have had their own government and ruling dynasty. During the second Care Empire the Pulayas, the largest among them was a powerful and dignified community.

The Pulayas had occupied a very low rank in social scales. Pulayas were treated as class of soil slaves. In Malabar and Cochin they were known as Cherumakkal (children of soil), Malayan and Valliyal. In Travancore they were designated as Pulayar. The word 'Pulaya' is derived from the Malayalam term 'pula' meaning pollution. This class caused greatest impurity by approaching the higher classes. They were supposed by some to be the descendants of the aborigines who preferred slavery in the plains of freedom with starvation in the jungles. Others say that they were Dravidian immigrants. The tradition current among the Pulayar themselves points to their having been an influential community in the ancient past.

There are enough records which are yet to be thoroughly examined to prove the once dominant position of the Pulayar. The legends and folklore and some of the beliefs and practices remain the main source from which glimpses of their early history could be attained. On the suburbs of Trivandrum city is a place called 'Pulayanarkotta' which means the fort of the Pulaya chief of king. Though there is no fort in existence now, the name of the place strongly points out to the existence of one in older days. A Pulaya princess named Kotha was said to have ruled over Kothamangalam in Vellanadpakuthi of Nedumangadtaluk near Trivandrum. In the census report of Travancore 1931, it was stated that the Kothamangalam and Ulamalakkal in Nedumangad, Chattannur in Quilon and Aillaranad in Kunnathunad referred

to the pulayas holding sway over those areas at a previous period.

But by 1800 AD all the old glory of the Pulayar had vanished and they were reduced to a state of slavery. Slavery was very strong in Kerala in the beginning of the laws and customs of the upper castes, persons belong to the upper castes especially women who were convicted of serious caste offences, were declared to outcastes and condemned to be slaves. It was also a custom to sell criminals liable to capital punishment as slaves.

The Pulayas are a variety of Cherumar as also the Kanakkars, but the latter can approach a high caste man more closely than the other two without polluting him. These later share the racial characteristics of the Cherumar and Pulayas and are a purely agricultural class living and working in the fields. The Kanakkars shave their heads clean like nation Christians, whereas the other two retain the frontal tufts like the Nairs. All three are an extremely loyal class of people. devotedly attached to their masters whose interests they watch and protect most jealously. On the death of any member of the master's household their families collect in the vicinity of the house and mourn in loss by beating their aloud till their sorrow is assuaged, quite as naturally and unaffectedly as if the loss were personal to them.

The existence of these three races furnishes an instance of practical slavery in our midst, even in these days of advancing civilization. They are believed to be the slaves of their masters, who frequently subject them to in human punishment in case of disobedience or negligence and their masters commands and leads are invested with certain sanctity and invariability in their eyes. They are the master's property and can be sold away or otherwise dealt with at his will. The fact is that these slaves, or their ancestors more correctly, were purchased in days of yore by the masters or their ancestors for a fixed price, and hence originates the latter's unchallengeable authority over them. Any slave running away from his legitimate owner and joining the working ranks of another master, if caught, is subjected to brutal punishment at the hand of the former master.

In Kerala the concept of pollution was refined to a unique complexity and was capable of being transmitted not merely on touch, but from a distance. The Pulaya had occupied a very low rank in the social scale. He cannot use public road. He should never approach a Brahmin nearer the 96 paces and must remain at about half the distance from the Sudras. He cannot enter a court, no employment is open to him, except that of labour. They had no access to the bazaars and markets even to purchase their necessaries. The slaves were not

allowed to wear any avaluabale ornaments, nor use upper garments to cover their nakedness. Women of any status who refused to expose their breasts before Brahmins were looked upon by them as immoral and immodest.

Pulayar in the beginning of the 19th century did not have life of their own. If a Pulaya wanted to marry, he had to convey his desire to his master, who however was bound to meet the expenses connected with the marriage. As long as the wife remained with the husband she worked for her children till they maintained her and her children till the end of life depend on the master. They did not touch even their children. They were denied permission to wear shoes or use an umbrella. It was considered improper to allow them to use metallic utensils. They could not build substantial or tiled houses. Nor could they acquire landed property. Infact, those unfortunate lower castes used to be treated as quite inferior in the order of creation.

They worshipped demons and evil spirits or deceased ancestors called chavu. The spirits of persons who had died before sixteen and of virgins, received special attention. Madan (Satan) and other healthen duties, the sun and the snakes were viewed as sacred by them. They had no temples raised squares in the midst of groves which were used as places of worship. They were worshippers of nature. They were not allowed to worship in Hindu temples. If they desired so, they could pray by standing at a distance of about half a kilometer from the Hindu deity without polluting it.

Burdensome taxes were imposed on the socially backward class. Fees were levied on their marriage. There was tax for hair they grew and even for the breasts for the women called breast tax. The language used by the untouchables was objectionable and degrading. The Pulayan dare not say 'I', but 'adiyan' yours slave. He dare not call hi rice 'choru' but 'karikadi'. He ask live not to take food by to drink water. Their habitation which were generally called 'madum'. The children of Pulaya and Parayas called 'Mandey's or 'Claves' and their women folk were pulakkalis and parakkallies. Whin speaking he must place his hand over the mouth, least the breath should go forth and pollute the person 42. The Ezhava and the Nadar population should remain at least 12 feet away from the Nairs. A Nair who within a 36 feet of Brahmin would attain heaven. A Nair should not touch a Brahmin but he could go near to him.

The caste system and its operation of which at it worst has been described above has now broken down in Kerala. Owing to a variety of causes. The lower classes themselves under the influence of western liberal education became conscious of their rights and started organized agitation for freedom.

In the latter half of the 19th century Kerala produced a host of socio religious reformers. The work and contribution of SreeNarayana Guru for dismantling the communal discrimination of caste Hindus and bringing up the untouchables and the oppressed classes to the level of self respecting individuals of modern period is commendable. In the mean time there was also an increasing awareness among the upper caste Hindus about movement for eradication of untouchabilities and inter caste barriers gradually received the attention from more enlightened section among them. The India National Congress under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership also adopted resolution eradication of untouchability and Harijan uplift as the main item in their socio-economic programme and this also had its impact on the Kerala society also. The VaikomSatyagrah and the Guruvayoor Satyagraha were important landmarks in the eradication of untouchability in Kerala. The movement for getting civil and democratic rights in the matters of admission to schools, employment in Government service and representation in the state legislator gathered momentum in Travancore.

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