

Socio-Religious Reformers of Travancore and the Engendering of New Social Space

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Abstract: The second half of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century, the society of Travancore underwent a great change. The social change ultimately resulted to the abolition of various social evils in the society. The social reformers of that period identified various socio-economic disabilities of the downtrodden sections of the society.

Keywords: Oozhiyam, nizhalthangals. Agrestic slaves. Kallumala agitation. Villuvandi samara. Adima santhathikal

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to understand the system of *oozhiyam*, the bonded labour system and its various features in Travancore. The study also aimed to understand the role of socio-religious leaders and their activities in Travancore. It also focused to understand various steps initiated by the socio-religious leaders to abolish the system of *oozhiyam*.

I. METHODOLOGY

The article is being prepared as theoretical, descriptive and analytical method.

II. INTRODUCTION

Social reformers of Travancore strongly fought against caste and slavery, which categorized the people of Travancore into various compartments. They denied the supremacy and domination of the Brahmins and the meaningless religious practices. The social reformers upheld the idea of equality and pleaded for the basic human rights for the depressed classes in Travancore. Vaikunda Swami, Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and Poykayil Yohannan were some of the prominent social reformers of Travancore during the 19th century.

Vaikunda Swami (1808-1874) was born in a poor Nadar (Shannar) family at Swamithoppu near Nagercoil. In his childhood, Vaikunda Swami suffered huge oppression from the caste Hindus and the government. Though he was an ardent follower of God Vishnu, he strongly criticized the activities of the Brahmins. He wanted his people to avoid all elaborate and expensive religious ceremonies. For maintaining equality, Vaikunda Swami consecrated mirror for the purpose of worship.

As a leader of social equality, Vaikunda Swami contributed a great deal towards the modernization of the Hindu society of Travancore. He encouraged the low castes to lead a fearless life. Besides the prohibition to wear dress below the knee and above the waist, the low castes could not use turban, when carrying luggage on their head.¹ Vaikunda Swami asked the low castes to wear turban on their head at all times.² He believed that the wearing of turban was the symbol of self-respect and confidence.

Vaikunda Swami encouraged inter-dining with various castes for the eradication of untouchability. According to Samuel Mateer, the men and women of a house would not eat the meals prepared by the members of another, nor sit for eating together in the same row.³ There were separate wells for each caste in Travancore. The upper castes did not allow the low castes to draw water from their wells. Vaikunda Swami dugged a well at Swamithoppu, popularly known as *munthirikinaru*. It was used by all people irrespective of their castes.

Vaikunda Swami vehemently criticized the administrative policies of the rulers of Travancore, which was totally against the downtrodden sections of the society. He strongly condemned the *oozhiyam* services and the illegal taxes imposed upon the low castes.⁴ Therefore he started a campaign against the forced labour system. But the government and the upper castes tried to suppress his activities. He was arrested and imprisoned. After 110 days of imprisonment, Vaikunda Swami was released in 1839.

¹Robert L. Hardgrave, *op.cit.*, p.59.

²T.K.Velu Pillai, *op.cit.*, Vol.I, p.856.

³Samuel Mateer, *Native Life in Travancore*, p.111.

⁴P.Sarveswaran, "Sri Vaikunta Swamikal: A forgotten Social reformer of Kerala", *Journal of Kerala Studies*, Vol.VII, 1980, p.1.

Vaikunda Swami founded the *Samattuva Samajam* on 12 September 1836 as a platform to protect the rights and privileges of the low castes.⁵ Thousands of low castes joined the organization for creating an equalitarian society. He also started a number of *nizhalthangals* or *inalthankals* to propagate his faith and feed to it the people.⁶ *Nizhalthangals* were small huts, which gave *nizhal* or shadow to the poor people. In the *nizhalthangals*, people collected and cooked food and interdined. The people considered the *nizhalthanals* as the abode of dharma. Vaikunda Swami founded *nizhalthangals* at Chettikudyiruppu, Agesteeswaram, Paloor, Sundavilai, Vadaililai, all in modern Kanyakumari District, Kdambankulam and Pambankulam, in Tinnelveli District. Vaikunda Swamikal used the *nizhalthangals* as an institution for socio-religious harmony of the low caste people. He gave more importance to love and charity in social life. Therefore, he adopted a flag for his movement, known as *anbukodi* or flag of love and his followers were known as *anbukodimakkal* or people of love flag.

Vaikunda Swami always advised his followers to observe personal hygiene and led a life of *tapa* or meditation and conducted *thuvayalpanthi*. He trained his followers in the importance of purity of thought and action. Vaikunda Swami was a strong pleader of women's freedom because their social condition was miserable.

The socio-reform activities of Vaikunda Swami produced a far-reaching effect on the social life of the lowest sections in the society of Travancore. His teachings and activities gave rude shock to the feudal social order of Travancore. His services for the social uplift of the lowest sections of the society earned him the affectionate title "*Aiya*", which means 'father'.

Sree Narayana Guru played an important role in the social renaissance of Kerala. He was born in an Ezhava family at Chempazhanthi, Thiruvananthapuram. As a social reformer, Sree Narayana Guru fought against the social evils such as caste system, untouchability, unapproachability and pollution. He openly challenged the supremacy of the Brahmins. In his works, *jathinirnayam* and *jathilekshanam*, Sree Narayana Guru questioned the authority of caste and exposed its meaninglessness. He always stood for the casteless society of human beings. According to him there is only one caste, one religion, and one God for men. He promoted the idea that nobody ask caste, speak caste and think caste. In a true sense, Sree Narayana Guru was a champion of humanism and equality.

For the demolition of a system such as caste and pollution, he consecrated a temple at Aruvipuram, dedicated to God Siva in the presence of a large number of people. The higher castes questioned the Ezhava consecration of the temple. Sree Narayana Guru gave a befitting reply that he consecrated the Ezhava Siva and not the Brahmin Siva. The reforms of Sree Narayana Guru eventually acquired the dimension of an anti-caste movement.⁷ All his activities remained as the embodiments of his religious reforms.⁸ His activities unleashed a strong of protest from the custodians of Hindu religion.⁹ It radically re-oriented the socio-religious sphere of Kerala.

As a promoter of education, Sree Narayana Guru encouraged the educational activities of the depressed classes. He promoted vocational education. In 1903, Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam) was founded under the leadership of Sree Narayana Guru. It aimed at the socio-religious uplift of the depressed class.¹⁰ Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan were the first President and General Secretary of the SNDP Yogam respectively. The SNDP Yogam started a magazine named *Vivekodhayam* for creating social awareness among the downtrodden sections of the society, which ultimately modernized the Travancore society.¹¹ After the death of Sree Narayana Guru, Kumaran Asan and Dr. Palpu continued the socio-religious activities of the SNDP Yogam.

Ayyankali was born in a poor Pulaya family. The Pulayas were the pillars of agriculture and were the major agrestic slaves in Travancore. Ayyankali succeeded in creating a stir in the social life of Travancore by organizing a numerically strong movement. But intellectually, socially and economically, his movement was the lowest in the estimation of others not capable of developing into a potent force.¹²

Ayyankali did not get proper education, but he strongly pleaded for the education of the slave caste students. During this time, the higher castes did not allow the school entry of low caste students. They created troubles to prevent the entry of the Pulaya students in the school. There occurred a tragic event following the Pulaya entry to the schools leading to the blazing of a school at Ooruttumbalam in the Thiruvananthapuram

⁵R.N.Yesudas, A people Revolt in Travancore; A Backward class Movement for Social Freedom, p.136.

⁶R.Ponnu, op.cit., p.56.

⁷Rajan Gurukkal, op.cit., p.95 and E.Kumar, op.cit,150.

⁸V.T. Samuel, One Caste, One Religion, One God – A Study of Sree Narayana Guru, p.54.

⁹E.Kumar, op.cit., p.151.

¹⁰Cover File No.8338/1903, Kerala State Archives. Trivandrum.

¹¹News Letter, Vol.III, No.4, Kerala State Archives, Trivandrum.

¹²M.J.Javernesa Begom, "Ayyankali and the Social Awakening among the Pulayas", Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol.VII, 1980 p.111.

district. The high castes set fire to the school.¹³ But Ayyankali succeeded in his effort and a number of public schools were opened to the slave caste students. In 1904, Ayyankali opened a new school for the Pulaya students. His educational activities led to the steady growth of slave caste education a number of Pulaya students entered the public schools.¹⁴

Ayyankali held the first agricultural strike in Travancore not for the problems faced by the agrestic slaves but for the entry of the slave caste students into the schools. Ayyankali wanted the agricultural labourers to keep away from the agricultural work in the fields.¹⁵ The struggle was a success and as a result, 292 vernacular schools were opened and students from Pulayas and Parayas were admitted in to these schools for the first time in 1917.

Ayyankali also led a struggle for the low castes to enter public roads. For the purpose, he organized a group of able bodied Pulaya youths and walked along the prohibited roads in the native villages.¹⁶ In 1893, Ayyankali and his friends travelled in a *villuvandi* as an open protest against the denial of freedom of travelling. Subsequently several clashes took place in different places between the 'privileged' and the 'unprivileged'. Facing stiff resistance from the upper castes, the Pulayas dared to fight back for the first time. The Pulayas under the leadership of Ayyankali freely walked on the public roads in the 'prohibited' areas of Travancore.¹⁷ The *Kallumala* agitation of Ayyankali was a landmark in the social history of Travancore. During this period, the women of the slave castes were not permitted to wear gold or silver ornaments. They often wore stone necklace, which was a symbol of the caste system. Ayyankali organized a meeting at Perinad, Kollam and he asked the women to discard their *kallumala*. Hundreds of women broke their *kallumala* and threw them on the meeting ground.

As a gifted leader with social insight, Ayyankali founded an organization on the model of SNDP Yogam named Sadhu Jena Paripalana Sangham in 1907. The Sadhu Jena Paripalana Sangham played a spectacular role in propounding the Pulaya community in the path of action and agitation. They also started a monthly called *Sadhu Jena Paripalini* and it acted as the organ to create consciousness among the Pulayas about their rights and privileges.

Ayyankali was nominated to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly for meritorious services to the low castes in Travancore. Ayyankali's entry into the assembly gave him the much awaited opportunity to present the plight of the Pulaya community before the authorities and seek remedy.

Poykayil Yohannan was born on 17 February, 1879 in an untouchable Paraya family at Eraviperoor, in the present day Pathanamthitta district. Parents of Yohannan were slaves of a noble Christian family in that locality. The early name of Yohannan was Kumaran. In those days the slave castes could not select a fair name to their children, therefore he was called Komaran.¹⁸ In his childhood, Komaran did hard work in the agricultural fields of the master along with his parents. With the introduction of Christian missionary activities, Komaran and his family were converted into Christianity and his name was changed to Yohannan.

After the conversion, Yohannan studied the Bible thoroughly and was sent to preach the Bible in different parts of the state. He joined various Christian's organizations such as Marthoma sections, Verpadu Sabha, and the Brothern mission. Later Yohannan realized that Christianity would not give a final solution to the miseries of the slave castes. Within Christianity, the converted Christians faced discrimination like their Hindu counterparts. Realizing this, Poykayil Yohannan left Christianity and founded an organization named the Prathyksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS) in 1910, which strived for the ultimate liberation of the slave castes.

Poykayil Yohannan always preached the idea of *rakshanirmayam* or liberation through and with the help of the PRDS. He was also promoted the idea of 'Adi Dravida Theory'. It later became the cardinal principle of the PRDS.¹⁹

Yohannan strongly fought against the system of caste and slavery. He adopted a rational approach to the tradition and tried to evaluate the contemporary socio-religious practices from the stand point of social unity. At the age of ten, Yohannan openly revolted against the social evils such as untouchability and slavery. Once he broke the *pattapala*, the symbol of slavery, when his master gave him meals in the *pattapala*. It was the first reaction of Yohannan against the system of slavery. For removing untouchability and pollution, he promoted the idea of interdining among the slave castes.

Poykayil Yohannan was twice nominated to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in 1921 and 1931. As a member of the Popular Assembly, he used the platform for the socio-economic uplift of the lowest sections of

¹³T.H.P.Chentharaserei, *Ayyankali*, p.74.

¹⁴T.A.R,1916, p.60.

¹⁵E.Kumar, *op.cit.*, p.160.

¹⁶Velayudhan Panikkazeri, *Ayyankali Muthal VT Vare*, p.11.

¹⁷K.Saradhamony, *Emergence of a Slave Caste;Pulayas of Kerala*, p.148.

¹⁸P.C.Joseph, *Kumara Guru Devan*, p.46.

¹⁹T.H.P.Chentharaserei, *Poykayil Sree Kumara Guru Devan*, p.25.

the society.²⁰ In the Assembly, he explained that the slave castes of Kerala were the real inhabitants and were the actual tillers of the soil. Several times, he demanded in the assembly that the government should grant landed property to the depressed classes in Kerala for agricultural purposes.²¹

The educational activities of Poykayil Yohannan were remarkable. He always demanded that the government should grant fee concessions to the students belonging to the low castes. He started schools in different parts of Central Travancore for the slave castes. He had very great concern about the unemployment problem of the depressed classes in Kerala. He demanded that the government should create opportunities and appoint the depressed classes, those who studied up to IV and VII standards as clerks, peons, guards and policemen in various public services the state.

Yohannan initiated to hold an inter caste marriage between a Syrian Christian girl and a newly converted Christian boy. But later, it was abandoned because of the stiff resistance of the Syrian Christians.²² But the process of conversion was accelerated under the leadership of L.M.S and C.M.S. Their activities brought a far-reaching change in the life style and thought pattern of the people of Travancore. There were a number of converted people who were used for the evangelization activities in Travancore.

Poykayil Yohannan was a real humanist, social reformer, an apostle of world peace and a true redeemer of the downtrodden sections of the society. The PRDS started a magazine named *Adiyar Deepam*, which was the ideological organ of the PRDS. The ideology of Poykayil Yohannan was based on “the Power of Now”, which is both material and spiritual incessancy. The philosophy of Yohannan is not a post-dated guarantee of salvation to be achieved in the other world but salvation in the world itself. Therefore, Poykayil Yohannan and his organization PRDS played a major role in the liberation of the slave castes in Travancore.

Along with these social reformers, the native Christian missionaries, who were the early converted people, also contributed to the eradication of social evils. Though their main aim was evangelisation, they took up the issues of lower caste people and urged for their freedom from bonded labour. Men like Vedamanickam, Arulanandam Walsalam, Moses Walsalam Sastriyar and Devasahayam Nadar played crucial a role in this regard.

Among such converted Christians, Maharasan, later known as Vethamanickam, was one of the first native men converted into Christianity. He played the leading role to spread the Protestant Christianity in Travancore.²³ He was a native of Mylady and after the death of Ringeltaube he started the campaign of evangelization among the depressed classes. He also constructed several churches for the depressed classes. With the help of the Christian missionaries, he severely criticized the social evils such as slavery and *oozhiyam* services. His preaching and activities provoked the caste Hindus and they attacked him at different places. But till his last, Vethamanickam continued his efforts in a fearless manner.

Arulanandam Walsalam was a converted Christian from in Tiruppuram, in the Neyyattinkara taluk of Travancore.²⁴ He was a member of the Cherukari family and his original name was Arulappan Asan. He was firstly converted into the Roman Catholic faith and accepted the name Antony. When he was attracted by the missionary activities of Rev.John Cox, Arulappan changed his faith to the Protestant religion and accepted the name Arulanandam. He was appointed as an evangelist-cum-teacher in different missionary schools.

As a converted Christian, he raised his voice against the social evils such as *oozhiyam* and other inequalities which were faced by his communities. Though the *oozhiyam* services in Sunday were exempted for the Christians, the government and caste Hindus forced the converted Christians to perform bonded services. Arulanandam wanted his followers not to perform *oozhiyam* services on Sundays. He also wanted to put an end to the violation of civil rights. He severely criticized the uncivilized custom of uncovering the upper parts of the women. For the meritorious service of Arulanandam, Rev.John Cox honoured him by awarding the title ‘*Walsalam*’ meaning ‘the beloved’.

Moses Walsalam Sastriyar was the son of Arulanandam and was born in the year 1847. He was named as Moses by Rev. John Cox that he believed that the child would become the liberator of the oppressed. From childhood, Moses learned different languages such as Tamil, Malayalam, Sanskrit, etc. He also learned foreign languages like English, Greek and Latin. After his education from the seminary, he started his career as the Bible teacher. He wrote several poems, which upheld the social equality of the people. He was used to preach the gospel in different places of Travancore. In his evangelization programme, Moses preached the importance of moral, mental and spiritual transformation of the converted Christians.

In 1891, Moses was appointed as the evangelist in Kattakada, where he started his campaign against the denial of public roads to the depressed classes. He walked on the public roads. During that time, the holdings of the poor converted Christians were being forcibly evicted by the government or the feudal lords. Moses

²⁰Cover File No.141/1915, Bundle No.23.State Archives, Trivandrum.

²¹PRDS, Souvenir, 1990, p.6.

²²K.C.Alexander, *The Problems of the Neo Christians of Kerala*, pp.317-330.

²³Joy Ganadasn, *op.cit.*, p.41.

²⁴Jois Rasangam Sanyasini, *Ente Jeevitha Samarangal*, p.116.

sought the help of the missionaries at Neyyor to the permanent solution of this problem. Therefore, the landless peasants received *puthuval* lands by the efforts of the missionaries. Moses Walasalam Sastriyar was a great leader of the social renaissance of the 19th century in Travancore.

Rev. John Cox, Abbs, Samuel Mateer etc. played an important role in the social awakening of Travancore during the 19th century. All of them were not only engaged in evangelization but also worked for the removal of social evils. They influenced the administrators of Travancore to introduce several socio-economic reforms for the development of the depressed sections of the society.

Devasahayam Nadar was a Christian convert, who strongly fought against the *oozhiyam* services in Travancore. In the second half of the 19th century, W. Cullen, the British Resident and Dewan Krishna Rao strictly maintained the existing caste-based social order without any change. He severely suppressed the movements against the government and adopted strict measures against the activities of the Christian missionaries. The period also witnessed maladministration, corruption and torture.

In Tirumala, a place nearby Thiruvananthapuram, large number of Nadars lived and they suffered different kinds of caste-based oppression and exploitation. All of them were *oozhiyam* servants and forced to hard work to the government and the higher castes. In 1854, Devasahayam Nadar and his fellow *oozhiyam* labourers were deputed to work in the garden of Tirumala Palace, but they were not paid proper remuneration. Devasahayam Nadar decided to put an end to the socio-economic oppression. He declared that, they would not do any kind of *oozhiyam* services without proper payment in cash. Along with his fellow *oozhiyam* servants, Devasahayam refused to receive the usual grain as the wage.²⁵ Devasahayam denied the repeated demand of the *adhikaris* to receive the grains as wages.²⁶ On another occasion, he threatened a caste Hindu teashop owner for giving tea in the coconut shell.²⁷ But the government suppressed severely the activities of Devasahayam Nadar. Devasahayam and his fellow men were captured by the palace guard and beaten cruelly. All of them were imprisoned, where they died of cruel torturing. The demand of Devasahayam Nadar such as cash wages for labour found a prominent place in the annals of the history of labour agitations in Travancore long before the Chicago agitation of 1886.

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