



Colonial Modernity and the Struggle against Untouchability in Central Kerala

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Abstract

Since the end of the 18th century, several events have been affecting the socio-religious life in Kerala. Society of Kerala witnessed the British colonialists initiating through-going changes in the ideological and altered in the living conditions of most social groups and classes. Modernity goes along with the formation of the nation states and the establishment of the social organizations that are referred to as capitalism, deepening of urbanization, and the transnational movements of human beings and materials. Untouchability was the greatest curse of Kerala society; Hindu society was featured by the predominance of the upper castes and the relatively subordinate positions of the lower castes. The principles of social freedom and equality found no place in Hindu social organization. The social evils of untouchability, inapproachability and unseeability continued to be a disgrace to the Hindu society. The result was that there was the complete segregation of the Hindus of one caste from their brethren belonging to the other castes in society. The important struggle for temple entry was the famous Vaikom, Paliyam and Guruvayur and *Kuttamkulam*.

Keywords: Downtrodden, Homo Hierarchies, Unseeability, Satyagraha

Introduction

Since the end of the 18th century, several events have been affecting the socio-religious life in Kerala. Society of Kerala witnessed the British colonialists initiating through-going changes in the ideological and altered in the living conditions of most



social groups and classes. The impact of the western culture on the traditional way of life and thought pattern of Kerala was an important factor. Social reformers were an attempt to liberate the suffers from the superstitions and caste discrimination and make them aware of their legal rights and privileges, (Remani K K, 2020).

Modernity goes along with the formation of the nation states and the establishment of the social organizations that are referred to as capitalism, deepening of urbanization, and the transnational movements of human beings and materials. And also refers to the socio-economic and intellectual transformation of early twentieth-century was embedded in regional and global relationships Some scholars have spoken of modernity in non-European societies that have undergone colonial experience-often referred to as colonial modernity.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, (*Habitations of Modernity*, 2002), observes that: The term modernity involves industrialization, urbanization and political democracy on rural and autocratic societies, the changes in progress by contrasting the modern with the traditional. The notion of modernity S.L. Doshi, (*Post Modern, Perspectives on Indian Society*, 2010) articulates the fact that: Modernity will be equated with a rational, scientific and secular view of life. Modernity believes in rationality and the castes which are equipped with education, technology and resources, thus availing of all the benefits of modernity. Modernity has been identified with progress and all sections of society.

The downtrodden people of India have been fighting for the equality and worked for the civil rights and freedom of the lower castes people. He wanted to transform the basic structure of Indian society, by replacing caste based social oppression, economic exploitation and political domination by the upper castes (Eva Mariya Hardtmann, *Dalit Movement in India*, 2009). He revolted against the inequalities in Hindu social structure in terms of his anti-caste struggles and attacks on the oppressive and exploitative ancient institutions and practices.

Dr. B.R Ambedkar emphasized the aspects of the ideal society and social movements: An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. Ideal of Hindu society without caste and untouchability has not been achieved so far. Religion and caste continue to play havoc in the minds of the masses in villages. He asserted that the Hindu was morally unconcerned about the untouchable. The untouchable does not belong to the society of the Hindus and the Hindus do not feel that he and the untouchable belong to one society. The reformers aim was to revolt against the untouchability and restructuring of society based on justice and equality



(Padmanabhan, A., *Dalits at the Cross-Roads their Struggle-Past and Present*, 1996).

One of the significant pioneers of the anti –caste movements in India was Jothi Rao Phule. Phule, Panditha Iyothee Thas, Periyar Ramaswamy Naiker, and in Kerala Sree Narayanaguru, Ayyankkali, Poyikail Yohannan, K.P Karuppan, Sahodharan Ayyappan, K.P. Vallon and P.K. Chathan Master among the others, fought against the caste system. However, their ideological premise and strategies against the caste system varied from person to person. In Kerala the plight of absolute sufferers of inequality that constitute various dalit communities and other depressed communities continued unabated even in the middle of the 20th century notwithstanding so much hailed social and religious movements.

Movements against Untouchability

Untouchability has received more attention from sociologists and social anthropologists rather than historians. The disciplines of sociology and social anthropology offer a detailed description of untouchability. In political science, economics and philosophy untouchability faces marginalization if not a complete overlooked.

One of the influential books on untouchability is Louis Dumont's (*Homo Hierarchies: The Caste System and its Implications*, 1980) He says that: 'Impurity of the untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of Brahmin. Dumont focuses exclusively on the concept of purity and pollution as determinants of the entire hindu caste system. Untouchables are necessary for the purity of Brahmins. Untouchability will not truly disappear until the purity of the Brahmins itself radically devalued'.

The view of Dr. B R Ambedkar is that the roots of untouchability lie in the deliberate policy of the Brahmins, who were full of contempt and hatred towards those who continued to eat beef and isolated themselves from brahminical traditions by embracing buddhism (P. K. Baskhi, *Dalit and Human Rights*, 2010) When brahminism became dominant in the 4th century A.D, untouchability has intensified. Ambedkar's ultimate objective was to annihilate caste system. He was of the view that untouchability is : 'One of the heinous manifestations of the essence of caste should be fought through social struggles. For Ambedkar the solution lies not in morality, on the contrary, it is fundamentally political. However, for Gandhi, the solution lies not in political but in the moral. Gandhi chooses the moral route that does not centrally take on the essence of untouchability-that is caste. He does not



seek to attack the roots of the problem: instead, he chooses to prune its rough edges. In Gandhi, it is pruning rather than uprooting, while in Ambedkar the reverse is the case. In other words, Gandhi finds the solution of untouchability through moral changes of the mindset of the people while Ambedkar suggests the annihilation of caste, of which untouchability is one of the most abominable and humiliating practices.

A novel and different approach to the study of untouchability is enunciated in the book (Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarakkai, '*Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*', 2012), a noted scholarly work co-authored by Gopal Guru, a social theorist, and Sundar Sarakkai, a philosopher. This book is an exploration of the politics of experience and the ethics of theorizing. One of the interesting characteristics of this book is that it is a philosophical attempt to understand untouchability.

In the chapter titled Archaeology of Untouchability Gopal Guru employs archeological method to unravel untouchability. He distinguishes the Brahmins as *deferential* or *ideal* untouchables and the dalit as *despicable* or *real* untouchables. The aim of archeological method is to unearth subtle form of untouchability which is more prevalent than ever before. He explains what archeological method is and why it is relevant for understanding untouchability.

Let me begin by arguing that archeology as a method of discovering the essence of caste becomes intelligible only in certain contexts. For example, archeology may become redundant in the rural context; where caste hierarchies play out openly through resorting to blatant untouchability practices, and hence caste does not require untouchability to adopt subtle forms for its own expression..... archeological method requires a spatially ambiguous context for its success. Archeological method becomes intelligible in the social context where every other person appears a stranger to every other person of social relations. The urban context makes it difficult for the pure untouchable to remain in touch with despicable untouchable. The public sphere provides space for archeological investigation. Put it differently public sphere is where archeological method is most effective because subtle forms of untouchability are most expressive but hidden in the public sphere.

Untouchability was the greatest curse of Kerala society; Hindu society was featured by the predominance of the upper castes and the relatively subordinate positions of the lower castes. The principles of social freedom and equality found no place in Hindu social organization. The social evils of untouchability, inapproachability and unseeability continued to be a disgrace to the Hindu society.



The result was that there was the complete segregation of the Hindus of one caste from their brethren belonging to the other castes in society (A Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala History and its Makers*, 2008).

Gandhiji was the greatest fighter of their cause. He started a crusade against the curse of untouchability. His aim was to uproot the present practice of untouchability from the country (S C Ray Choudary, *Social Cultural and Economic History of India*, 1978). Gandhi organized a network of societies throughout the country to serve the cause of the untouchables called 'All India Anti Untouchability League', which later came to be known as the Harijan Sevak Sangh. Their goals were to open out public wells, roads, schools and temples to the untouchables. Gandhian ideas influenced the Satyagraha movements in different parts of Kerala. A number of struggles took place against the inequities of the caste system during the colonial period, which helped the lower castes improve their social status. (Nambeeshan, T. P. *R Keralathile Harijanagalude Nila*, 1976). The important struggle for temple entry was the famous Vaikom, Paliyam and Guruvayur and Kuttankulam.

Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25).

Vaikom was selected as the center of inaugurating the anti-untouchability programme of the avarnas. With the satyagraha began on march 1924, a truly glorious fight to establish the dignity of man and his right of free movement had begun. The temple authorities of Vaikom exhibited notices prohibiting the entry of 'polluting castes' (S. Ramachandran Nair, *Freedom Struggle in Colonial Kerala*, 2004). The lower castes could not use the temple roads or even the paths leading to these roads. They had to take devious and lengthier routes from one point of the town of Vaikom to another. The leaders of the agitation contended that the roads around the temple were public and were used by Christians and Muslims. But the roads were closed to Ezhavas, Pulayas and Parayas. The satyagraha finally ended in successfully in 1925, thanks to the intervention of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi visited Travancore and held discussions with the Rani and state officials and he also met Sree Narayana Guru at Varkala. Finally on 23 November, 1925 all roads around Vaikom temple were thrown open to all Hindus, irrespective of caste. Vaikom Sathyagraha of 1924 gave people more confidence and enthusiasm to start similar sathyagraha in other places of Kerala.

Guruvayur Satyagraha [1931-1932]

Another major event was the Guruvayur Satyagraha which was under the leadership of Kerala Provincial Congress. The Satyagraha was started on 1st



November, 1931 to gain entry for all Hindus to the temple. Led by K. Kelappan and A.K. Gopalan, it attracted countrywide attention, people from all parts of India came to Guruvayur in support of the satyagrahis (A. Sreedhara Menon, *Kerala Samskaram* 2007).

The Vishnu shrine at Guruvayur in south Malabar is one of the most famous temples in Kerala. The temple was managed by the zamorin of Calicut and was closed to all non-caste Hindus. The upliftment of the depressed sections of the Hindu community had always formed an important aspect of work of the Indian National Congress in Malabar. The social disabilities from which the depressed classes like Pulayas, Parayas, Kannakkans and Nayadies suffered for centuries assumed vast proportions and the nationalist leaders Like Manjeri Rama Iyer and K. Kelappan had constantly sought to make the people realize the denial of elementary rights of citizenship to them amounted to a great social justice. Kelappan as well as other leaders felt that untouchability could be wiped out only if the depressed classes were permitted to enter the public temples.

On 9 July 1931, Kelappan submitted a representation to Gandhiji and the Congress Working Committee regarding the need for temple entry movement in Malabar. Finally on 2 August, 1931 the Kerala provincial congress committee passed a resolution on the question of temple entry. Meanwhile, the temple entry campaign was vigorously started in Ponnani Taluk, in 1931 the Kerala provincial congress committee decided to launch a Satyagraha to get the temple opened to all Hindus. The congress, under the leader of K. Kelappan organized a march from Cannanore in North Malabar to Guruvayur to mobilized public support for the sathyagraha, and volunteers and political workers from all over the country flocked to Guruvayur to participate in the struggle (*P.K.K. Menon, The History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, 1972).

On 1 November, 1931, the Satyagraha was inaugurated under the leadership of K. Kelappan at Guruvayur. T. Suramanian Tirumumb, captain of the temple entry campaign was arrested at Guruvayur on 7 November. Unnikrishnan, a Harijan boy of twelve who was observing satyagraha along with other volunteers was beaten by a person. (*K.K.N. Kuruppu*, 2001). From this time onwards gradually physical force came to be used against the satyagrahis. P. Krishnapillai, one of the founders of the communist movement in Kerala walked into the inner sanctum of the people reserved for Brahmans and tolled the bell which was an exclusive privilege of the Brahmans. There was an uproar among the conservative sections. As a result, the temple was closed for a month and the puja suspended. Though it continued for



ten months, the Satyagraha failed to make any impact on the zamorin or on the caste Hindus. Protesting against the immovable attitude of the temple authorities, Kelappan began a fast unto death at the temple gate from 21 September, 1932. (R. Vinodkumar, *Keraleeyam*, 2008). This quickly created solidarity throughout Kerala and outside. Later Gandhiji telegraphically asked Kellappan to end his fast, which he did on 2 October, 1932. A limited referendum was held among Hindus of Ponnani. About 70% of the people supported the temple entry for Avarnas, which facilitated the creation of a climate favorable for the eradication of untouchability, (A. Sreedthara Menon, *A Survey of Kerala History*, 2007).

The movement for temple entry resulted in the overwhelming victory of the reform movement in the history of Kerala when Sri Chitira Tirunna Balarama Varma, the Maharaja of Travancore, issued his famous Temple Entry Proclamation on November 12, 1936. This proclamation in Kerala society sowed warm hopes in the hearts of the downtrodden.

Temple Entry Proclamation 1936

On 12 November, 1936 the Maharaja of Travancore, Sri Chittira Tirunal Balarama Varma issued the famous temple entry proclamation, profoundly convinced of the truth and validity of our religion believing that it is based on divine guidance and on an all comprehending toleration, knowing that, in its practice, it has throughout the centuries adapted itself to the needs of changing times, solicitous that none of our Hindu subjects should by reason of birth or caste or community be denied the consolation and relief of the Hindu faith, we have decided, declare ordain and command that subject to such rules and conditions as may be laid down and imposed by us for preserving their proper atmosphere and maintaining their rituals and observances there should hence forth be to restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering or worshipping at the temples controlled by us and our government. Temple entry proclamation gave a message of hope and good spirit to the down-trodden harijans and other backward classes, (*The Temple Entry Proclamation Memorial Souvenir*, 1942).

However, it took more than a decade for such a reform to be introduced in Cochin and Malabar. In 1946 and 1948 two important samaram were conducted in Cochin State. That is the Kuttamkulam Struggle and Paliyam Struggle.

Kuttamkulam Struggle [1946]

Kuttamkulam struggle for the 'right of using public roads or 'Vazhinadakkal Samaram', was a fierce protest against untouchability in the premises of the temple.



Temple entry struggle began on 6th July 1946, was held in Ayyankau ground in Irinjalakuda.

P.K. Chathan Master, leader of *Cochin Pulaya Maha Sabha* and his followers demanded for the right of the untouchables to walk along the public road to Kudalmanikyam temple (*Chathan Master Smaranika*). The district Magistrates of Cochin had issued an order on 1911, as follows: (1) The low castes people are not permitted to use roads open to the public of higher castes. (2) They are not permitted to enter or approach within a certain distance of many courts and public offices. (3) They are excluded from public service, (*Report on the Administration of Cochin*, 1919). The untouchables were prohibited to walk through Kuttamkulam road to west and prohibition was exhibited on a notice board, (*Theendal Palakas*) on the Kuttamkulam road to Kudalmanikyam temple. In 1929, this order was questioned by the members of the *Cochin Pulayar Mahajana Saha* in the Cochin Legislative Assembly. The president of Cochin Legislative Assembly clarified that there was no objection to the people of any castes passing through the high ways and other public road (*Report on the Administration of Cochin*, 1930). However, he added that certain minor restrictions remained as part of the custom in very few localities.

Panampilly Govinda Menon, the leader of *Prajamandalam* council, remarked that the 1911 order had no legal validity and that even the government had no authority to order permanent restrictions. During the 1930's as a result of the efforts taken by the S N D P, the lower castes were allowed access to public roads except some important ones relating to temples and palaces. Sahodaran Ayyappan was the president of the Cochin S N D P branch at that time and a resolution was passed in a meeting presided over by him in which stated 'this meeting vehemently opposes the move which restricts the freedom of movement of the lower castes during the festive occasions which ignore all the existing protests all over the country. Also we appeal to the government to put an end to this practice' (*History of Freedom Movement in Kerala*, 1938-1948, Vol.III).

Two major factors had led to the Kuttamkulam Samaram in 1946. One of them was the Cochin Pulayar Mahajana Sabha's annual convention which was held at Irinjalakuda. Pulaya girls came in large numbers to attend the convention and all of them had broken the established traditions and wore blouses to cover their upper body. The upper caste people did not like this and they openly abused them and a clash ensued between the lower castes and upper castes (S.K., Vasathan, *Namal Nadanna Vzhaikal*, 2006). Besides, the temple authorities were adamant that the lower castes people should not walk through the temple roads. The restrictions were



strictly implemented in the year 1946 during the time of Kudalmanikyam festival.

The communist party and Cochin Pulaya Mahasabha led by P. K. Chathan Master protested against the injustice and held a procession. The people who hailed from different social and political organizations of the state formed an action council to protest against the policy of Kudalmanikayam authorities. They wanted to get the road open to all people, irrespective of caste or religion. The popular pressure in support of the agitation compelled the government to interfere. Many meetings were held in Cochin under the leadership of the *Cochin Pulayar Mahajana Sabha* and the Cochin government had no options left but to pass a resolution in favour of temple entry.

Later the 'Temple Entry Authorization Proclamation of Cochin' was issued by Sree Kerala Varma, Maharaja of Cochin in an unusual gazette on 20th December 1947. But this act did not come into force at that time. It came into force only on the first day of Medam 1123 (April 14th 1948), (*The Cochin Government Gazetteer*, 1947). The provisions of the Act are as follows. "whereas it is our desire that the disabilities imposed by custom or usage on certain classes of Hindus against entry into Hindu temples in Cochin State should be removed; the practice of pollution or Theendal should be removed; public tanks used for bathing purposes should be thrown open; public wells should be thrown open." (*Report on the Administration of Cochin*, 1949).

Paliyam Struggle (1947)

Paliyam Struggle was organized as a struggle against untouchability at Paliyam in Chennamangalam. Paliath Achan was the minister of the Maharaja of Cochin and the avarna castes were denied entry along the road in front of his residence and temple. The hundred-day long struggle was organized by the Communist party and other community organizations like SNDP Yogam, Pulaya Maha Sabha etc. In the meantime, the temple entry proclamation of the Maharaja of Cochin was made on 20th December 1947 and thereby free access along the Paliyam road was established for all Hindus irrespective of any caste distinction, (K.V. Kunjhikrishnan, 'Paliyam Samaram: Paschathalavum Pradhanyavum', *Deshabimani Varika*, 2009)

One of the most important struggles connected with the campaign for the eradication of untouchability was the Paliyam Samaram. In 1947, Paliyam satyagraha was organized as a struggle against untouchability at Paliyam in Chennamangalam, their demand was not for the right to entry in to the temples in Cochin, but for the right of the untouchables to walk along the public road in



the Paliyam, (Balan Payyappili, *Paliyam Samaram*, 1988). The Paliyath swarupam being the headquarters of the traditional prime ministers of Cochin played a significant role in the political and administrative affairs of the state and the biggest land lords of the state. They opposed even the slightest social reforms and strictly clung to the principle of casteism and untouchability. They did not permit the non-caste Hindus and non-Hindus to walk along the Paliyam roads; nor did they permit the untouchables to enter their temples. They firmly believed that if the non-caste Hindus got entry into the temples, the temples would be polluted.

The people who hailed from different social and political organizations of the state formed an action council to organize a Satyagraha to force the Paliyam family to throw open the road to all people, irrespective of caste or religion, (Ravi Kuttikkad, 'Paliyam Samaram', (Mal.), *Mathruboomi Azhchapathippu*, 1982).

The Sathyagraha went on for hundred days during the period December-April 1948. The volunteers who took part in it were subjected to repressive measures like arrest, lathi-charge etc. One of the major incidents connected (the hundredth day) with satyagraha, was that a freedom fighter by name A.G. Velayudhan met with tragic death in a police lathi-charge. A.G. Velayudhan who played a very vital role in the organization of the factory and harbor workers courted martyrdom in March 1948. It is significant that a communist leader of the harbor workers of Cochin, comrade A.G. Velayudhan died at the hands of the police while leading a squad of working-class volunteers to the scene of the Satyagraha. The Satyagraha was suspended; meanwhile in April 1948 all temples in Cochin were thrown open to all Hindus, irrespective of caste (A. Sreethara Menon, *Political History of Modern Kerala*, 1987). At last, the temple entry proclamation promulgated by Sri Rama Varma, the Maharaja of Cochin on 20 December 1947 with the effect from 14th April 1948, put an end to the historic Paliyam Satyagraha. As a result, the avarnas and non-Hindus got the right to walk along the Paliyam road and it had helped to create a climate in favour of the eradication of untouchability.

Conclusion

The transition of the traditional society and the emergence of the modern age had its impact on Kerala society. The movements against untouchability were due to structural changes in the position of lower caste people. A modern outlook which came to light among the depressed class marked not only by changes in the material domain of life, but also the realm of self-awareness of social groups that led to the creation of new identities.



The government order that, the high streets of all towns were the property, 'not of any particular caste, but of the whole community, and that every man, be his caste or religion what it may, has a right to the full use of them'. The *theendal* or pollution from the near approach of an individual of a lower caste not to exist, and where persons of different castes have no great objection to live in houses adjacent to each other. Scale of distances within which persons of different castes may not approach each other without one of them polluting the other and they never live in houses situated within a certain distance of each other, (*Archives News Letter*, 1950).

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