



From Reform to Reconstruction: Vagbhatananda's Vision and rise of ULCC

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Abstract

The paper examines the interrelation between social reform and economic empowerment in twentieth century North Malabar through a focused study of the life and mission of Vagbhadananda. Situated within a period marked by rigid caste hierarchies, social exclusion and economic deprivation, the study explains how Vagbhadananda emerged as a significant reformist figure who sought to transform society through spiritual awakening, education and collective self respect. Drawing on historical sources, reformist literature, and socio economic analysis, the paper highlights his efforts to challenge caste based discrimination, promote rational thought and encourage communal organization as tool for social mobility. By contextualizing Vagbhadananda's mission within the boarder reform movement of Kerala, the study demonstrates that social reform and economic advancement are deeply interconnected process. The paper argues that his vision played a crucial role in shaping the socio economic consciousness of marginalized communities in North Malabar.

Keywords: Socio-religious reform movement - Kerala Renaissance - Advaita philosophy - Caste abolition - Economic empowerment - Participatory democracy



Introduction

In the 19th century, Kerala was a highly stratified society, divided on caste lines which largely corresponded to class division as well. The system relied on untouchability and at worst a form of discrimination. As a result, Kerala witnessed cultural and ideological struggle against the backward elements of traditional society and the hegemony of Brahmins. This struggle was due to certain structural changes in the society and the consequent emergence of a new educated middle class. The new society which was developing in India since the advent of British rule had distinct needs differing from those of the old society. The new intelligentsia, which imbibed the liberal western culture, recognized these needs and launched movements to reform the respective social institutions, religious outlooks and ethical conceptions inherited from the past, since they felt that these were obstacles to natural advance. The result was the beginning of several reform movements which represented the striving of the conscious and progressive sections of the Indian people to democratize social institutions and remodel old religious outlooks to suit the new social needs. In the social sphere, there were movements of caste reform or caste abolition, equal rights for women, a campaign against child marriage and a ban on widow remarriage, a crusade against social and legal inequalities. In the religious sphere, there sprang up movements which combated religious superstitions and attacked idolatry, polytheism and hereditary priesthood. These movements, in varying degrees, emphasized and fought for the principles of individual liberty and social equality and stood for nationalism. A significant feature of the socio-religious reform movement, widely acclaimed as Kerala Renaissance is that no community or region in Kerala was left outside its purview. So, we have reformers from all caste groups and regions in Kerala, though only very few among them like Sri. Narayana Guru has attained a mass followers and pan Kerala fame. This study examines the life, mission, and legacy of Vagbhatananda (1885–1939), and his role in advancing social reform and economic empowerment in North Malabar. The progressive ideas took an organizational form in the 1920s with the establishment of the Atmavidya Sangham. Through Atmavidya Sangham and cooperative initiatives like the Uralungal Labour Contract Society(ULCC), Vagbhatananda challenged caste oppression, superstition, economic exploitation, and colonial subjugation. This paper explore his philosophical influences, organizational strategies, and the tangible socioeconomic outcomes of his movement.

Early Life

Vagbhatananda was a social critic and value setter whose standpoint was rooted in *advaita* philosophy. His original name was Kunhikannan. He was born at



Pattiam near Thalasseri in 1885 as the son of Koran and Cheeru Amma. His father Koran Gurukkal was a well known scholar in Sanskrit and traditional medicine. He was a progressive thinker who opposed the evil customs of that time¹. He had founded Sanskrit schools at places like Kaitheri, Chookkad, Pattiam and Panoor². Kunhikannan learned formal Sanskrit learning and spiritual ideas from his father. He also studied dramas, poetics, puranas and *Ithihasas* from his father. Soon he began assisting his father in teaching Sanskrit and at the age of 13 he came to be known as Vayaleri Kunhikannan Gurukkal or V.K. Gurukkal. Kunhikannan did not get an English education since his father was not able to send him to an English school at Tellicherry. But he continued his studies in Sanskrit Grammar and logic from two renowned scholars, M. Korappan Gurukkal (M.K. Gurukkal) and Parambath Ryuru Nair. Under the guidance of these two efficient teachers he got knowledge in all the important Sanskrit texts. His meeting with Ganapathi Sastrikal, a well-known scholar in Sanskrit literature, was a turning point in his life that cleared his doubts on important Sanskrit texts³. V.K. Gurukkal had a good memory and spent much time reading important texts on various subjects. It helped him to widen his intellectual horizon. His deep knowledge in *shad darshana*⁴ logic and *sastras* had been reflected in his writings and speeches.

His Philosophy

Vagbhatananda was a good combination of a scholar, reformer, organizer, journalist and nationalist. The anti-caste songs and philosophical thoughts of Vayatha Swamikal or Vishakananda Swamikal had deeply influenced his career and thoughts⁵. In the beginning, he was influenced by Brahma samaj which had started functioning at Kozhikode and the teachings of Brahmananda Sivayogi. He was specifically impressed by the yogic practices of Sivayogi like Rajayoga and his opposition to idol worship and caste exploitation and discrimination⁶. He once visited Sivayogi's Sidhasramam at Alathur and had long discussions with him. It led to the beginning of a teacher-student relationship between them. In 1911, Gurukkal started Rajayogananda Kaumudi Yogasala at Kallai and later at Nadakkavu in Kozhikode. He delivered speeches explaining Sivayogi's doctrine of Rajayoga in different parts of Malabar. He also conducted a three month long *Bhagavat Gita Jnanayajna* at the Yogasala at Nadakkavu and a series of speeches on Epics like Ramayana and Mahabharatha at West Hill and Cheruvannur. When he was speaking on Sivayogi's doctrines at Nadakkavu Yogasala, the opponents of Sivayogi raised criticisms against his doctrines and Sivayogi's work, *Mokshapradeepam*. V.K. Gurukkal very intelligently defended the criticism of the opponents. Sivayogi was



deeply impressed by the oratory skill and scholarship of his disciple. He wrote an auspicious verse by giving the name, Vagbhatanandan⁷ to V.K. Gurukkal to express his gratitude in defending him against criticism⁸.

Establishment of *Atma Vidya Sangham*

But subsequently there emerged certain differences over the radical ideas of Sivayogi and he founded his own *Atma Vidya Sangham* in 1917 in order to propagate his teachings. His social life was very much associated with '*Atmavidyasangam*' founded to spread the progressive ideas aimed at reforming the Hindu mental world. The organization's motto was "awake, remember the creator, arise and fight against injustice". He denounced caste barriers and idol worship and exhorted his followers to abjure such practices. He also campaigned vigorously against addiction to liquor and championed the cause of prohibition.

According to him, the world is unreal but it appears to be real and the life in this world is to be made happy and meaningful. It should be made useful for oneself and others. Excessive indulgence in worldly pleasures would not bring happiness. That is a form of vulgarized happiness. Real happiness is to be achieved through a detached life. Detachment is not escapism; it means only control of mind that helps to lead a cautious life and makes one brave to face the problems of life. He followed the path of Advaita of Sankaracharya⁹. He aimed to eliminate all kinds of evil customs and superstitions in the Hindu religion and to spread a way of life based on the Advaita Philosophy¹⁰. He began to oppose the social evils of that time through speeches and writings. For example, the offering of *Ilaneerattam* performed in connection with the Kottiyoor Festival had increased the financial problems of ordinary families at that time. He wrote a song titled '*Koottiyoor Ulsavapattu*' to criticise the exploitative customs like *Ilaneerattam*, *Neyyamiritu*, *Avalabhishekam* etc. He also established a musical troupe and performed these songs at the important streets of Malabar. The songs in a way helped to create consciousness among the people against an exploitative custom.

His charismatic personality and oratorical skill attracted towards him a large number of followers including those of the savarna castes. He denounced the concept of varna and caste as an artificial creation of the evil traits in man, like ego and jealousy, and propagated by some wicked fellows, as caste could not be detected in any part or organ of the human body. He was an ardent critic of idol worship, and other rites and rituals, for two reasons. Firstly, they are of no use in securing happiness and secondly wealth created by the starving millions is wasted in the



name of these. Accumulation of wealth and knowledge without inner development would only lead to degeneration and vulgarity, he pointed out. The essence of his ideas can be condensed like this: A moderate life leading to moral and material well-being of the individual and society is the ideal one.

He treated Sanskrit education not merely as an education in language but as a way to learn the precious thoughts. He viewed Sanskrit language as the tongue of Hindu philosophy and morality¹¹. He was interested in religious and spiritual discussions and considered Advaita philosophy as a doctrine which was suitable to his reason. In the beginning years of the 20th century V.K. Gurukkal started Sanskrit schools for teaching primary lessons of Sanskrit at Pathayakunnu, Mokeri, Makkoolpeedika and Panoor. Like his father V.K. Gurukkal also earned fame among his natives as a scholar and an excellent orator. Gurukkal with M.K. Keluvaidyar visited Sri Narayana Guru when he came to Tellicherry in March, 1906. Gurukkal expressed his interests in Sri Narayana Guru's thoughts and deeds except idol worship and temple construction. The school was opened to all without the discrimination of caste and age. The students belonging to socially and economically backward castes got free education, food, and accommodation in the school. So the economically backward people belonging to Vannan, Velan and other low castes got an opportunity to receive Sanskrit education¹². The school also worked as a centre of serious discussion and ideological disputes.

Anti-feudal and anti-Imperialist activities

Vagbhatananda was not only a social reformer but a person who worked for economic reforms also. He responded to the economic problems of contemporary society. He raised his voice against the economic inequalities that existed in society. He argued that any rich person directly or indirectly is responsible for poverty. He had an overwhelming interest in the welfare of poor peasants as well as proletarians. He criticized the many sided exploitation of poor peasants in Malabar by the landlords with the help of the British authorities. He believed that the caste system and the related social evils were in part responsible for the slavery of peasants. He advocated the unity of peasants against exploitation of the upper classes. He asked the peasants and labourers to wake up and be conscious about their rights. Vagbhatananda wrote several articles in '*Abhinavakeralam*' and '*Atmavidyakahalam*' against the cruel exploitation of feudal lords as well as capitalists and supporting the rights of the poor peasants. In 1932, when the owner of the Calicut Commonwealth inflicted a blow on the labourers, he wrote an article, "Thozhilalikalude Dhuravastha" (Misfortune



of the labourers) in *Atmavidyakahalam*. The article criticised the authoritative and exploitative policy of capitalists towards the labourers¹³.

Vagbhatananda criticised and wrote about the colonial policy of the British government. In *Atmavidyakahalam* he pointed out that the door to India's economic salvation through industries, commerce or anything else had been completely blocked and the people have been reduced to poverty. Those who tried to remedy this gross injustice were shut up in prisons or were kicked and beaten, sometimes even to death¹⁴. The *jenmis* (landlords) attacked the organization by denying work to those agricultural laborers who had become its members. The Atma Vidya Sangham challenged feudal customs and caste rituals, resulting in physical abuse and severe social and economic boycotts. In response to this adversity, a credit cooperative society known as Aikya Nanaya Sangam was formed in 1924. Vagbhadanda decided to address their grievances and resist the threats from landlords by forming the *Uralungal Koolivelakarude Paraspasa Sahaya Yogam* (Uralungal wage labourers' mutual aid and cooperative society) in 1925. The membership to this *yogam* was restricted to workers from the region of Uralungal. Every member was allowed to take a minimum of one share, but not more than ten, and initially an entrance fee of four annas was charged. The first project they undertook was resilience to rebuild bunds on farmlands that collapsed in the 1924 flood. The stock yards of Fisherman that collapsed in the flood were also rebuilt.

Achievements of ULCCS

Now the Uralungal Labour Contract Co-operative Society (ULCCS), one of the oldest labor cooperatives in India owned and managed by workers. They have a Total Solution Provider (TSP) for infrastructure development and management projects. Having completed 7500+ projects over the last century, they have evolved, diversified and won international accolades¹⁵. They have a strong foothold in the construction sector and have completed many prestigious projects for Kerala State government departments like finance, co-operation, local self government, labor department, information technology, tourism and public work department (PWD). Beyond its economic activities, ULCCS has a strong commitment to social welfare. Their success in uniting workers from different backgrounds and empowering them economically and socially has been a significant achievement. The Uralungal Labour Contracting Cooperative Society, which is celebrating the hundredth year of its founding, is making forays into newer arenas, even as it continues to take on a large number of big-ticket infrastructure projects.



Uralungal Society was forged in the crucible of social and political movements at the turn of the 20th century. Before the reorganization of States in 1956, the present-day Uralungal and its surrounding areas were part of Malabar—the most populous district in the erstwhile Madras State. British archival records show that Nairs constituted the landholding caste in Malabar; the Thiyyas, who formed 87 per cent of the population, held only 6 per cent of the land. Customary land rights in the feudal structure offered them limited economic opportunities, and caste discrimination erected social walls around them. As T.M. Thomas Isaac and Michelle Williams say “Even though the Cooperative was registered under the Cooperative Act legislated by the British, its formation was clearly an initiative from below.” Trust and loyalty were the building blocks of ULCCS. When it faced a financial crunch while submitting tenders, individuals pitched in with anything from 25 paise to Rs.100. These were returned with interest on completion of the project. Some of them even pledged their land deeds to secure a loan to support the society.

ULCCS is steadfast in its commitment to promoting gender equality too. In the 1980s, it changed the bylaws to allow women to become A Class members. Membership in ULCCS is classified into A, B, C, and D classes. The original members with share capitals are denoted as A Class members. Starting with 16 members, the society had 2,000 members by 2016. The government’s shares are categorised as B Class; recently, the Kerala government filed an affidavit in court that it has 82 per cent of the shares. C Class members are mostly migrant labourers with one share per member. This became necessary because of a shortage of labour caused by the migration of workers from Kerala to the Gulf region. There are over 200 of them. Deposit holders from whom the society receives fixed deposits are called D Class members. ULCCS operates in a non-credit manner. “This approach was adopted from its early stages and was strengthened on the basis of UNDP-guided visits to Italy and Spain, which host the world’s best cooperatives. Our team visited well-known cooperatives in the Spanish city of Mondragon where the cooperative model is adopted for a wide range of industries,” the ULCCS website proclaims. The excellence of this model leads ULCCS to sustainable development. It is a model for other labour contract societies in Kerala to emulate. ULCCS can serve as a model for cooperatives not just in Kerala or India, but in the world, with its unique labour processes, membership categories, ownership, modernization, and diversification. Soman is a former labourer who became a schoolteacher with the support of ULCCS. Post-retirement, he has taken it upon himself to educate younger workers about “ULCCS’s long history of resisting social inequality, discrimination,



and oppression of the caste-feudal forces in this area” and of its stand against neoliberal ideology and politics.

ULCCS owes its success to participatory democracy. Workers elect the board of directors, and site leaders are chosen from among the workers based on managerial ability. Each worksite is overseen by a board member. At the end of each working day, the director board evaluates that day’s work. Every project is on the radar of the board of directors at every moment. This is one institution that has a daily review of projects by the board chairman with members.

Conclusion

Just as Amul symbolizes milk and dairy products, Uralungal does labour contracts and construction. Today, it is the second-largest workers’ cooperative in the world and the largest of its kind in Asia. Having over 18,000 direct employees and generating employment for many more indirectly, it is the fourth largest job provider in Kerala, after the State government, the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation, and the Kerala State Electricity Board. It is a “people’s alternative” to today’s “capitalist, corporate development model”. Apart from its office complex in the State capital of Thiruvananthapuram, it has to its credit various notable projects, such as the UL Cyber Park, the Sargaalaya Arts and Crafts Village, the ULCCS Charitable & Welfare Foundation, the UL Technology Solutions, a material research and testing lab, and more. “They know the value of selective diversification. From a basic infrastructure building activity, they made a grand horizontal diversification into owning cyber park infrastructure, which was not only adventurous but unimaginable. A construction agency owning a quarry with enormous rock deposits has a great advantage over its counterparts,” Ramachandran Nair says.¹⁶ Isaac and Williams note how mainstream economists argue that it is very difficult for a cooperative to survive and prosper. If at all it survives, they say, it will lose its lofty principles of worker control and worker ownership. “It is against these arguments that the actual performances of worker cooperatives such as ULCCS stand out as beacons of inspiration and as experiences that can yield valuable lessons for future practice,” they sum up. Regarding the criticism that ULCCS is pro-left and enjoys the patronage of LDF government in Kerala, ULCCS chairman Rameshan Palery said even the earlier UDF government headed by Oommen Chandy had awarded it project with over Rs 1000 crore.¹⁷ ULCCS serves as a national benchmark or cooperatives. It has developed a unique fund-mobilization model by partnering with other cooperatives to finance large infrastructure projects.



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