



# Anti-Caste Movements and Social Change in Kerala: The role of Reformers and their Organizations

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## *Abstract*

Caste system is a special phenomenon seen only in India. The racial discrimination started in India when the Aryans and the former inhabitants started living together as one community. Caste system in Kerala has not existed anywhere else as the Arya Brahmins invaded and gained all the power here, they created the caste system to keep the society completely united under their leadership. As the Brahmins gained spiritual ascendancy and increased influence in the social and political arenas Chaturvarnyya became an inviolable custom. The castes from Nair to Namboothiri treated as privileged class and they exploit all the castes below them. A political section emerged here to support the Brahmins and protected the social and economic conditions of that time.

**Key words: Casteism, Untouchability, pollution, Community.**

## INTRODUCTION

The socio religious movement in Kerala has been able to put an end to the sufferings of the backward classes in Kerala for century's. Recognizing the caste domination that was a part of Brahmin supremacy in India and Kerala, the reformers worked hard to put an end to it. The land based Brahmin domination later led to the transformation of the caste based society in Kerala. The Brahmins the owners of the land and the adiyalar became the workers on it. Caste hierarchy formed in several layers. Among them the lower castes like Pulayar, Parayar, Cheruman and Nayadis pushed back to the lower strata of the society. They have no right to experience any kind of human rights that other human beings experience. They did not have the right to walk through public roads, to worship in temples, to live in comfortable houses or to eat properly. At the same time they were subjected to various forms of work and persecution from the people above them. In this kind of social context that a social awakening took place here. This was due European occupation and the reforms introduced by them. This social consciousness took place among upper and lower castes also. The leaders worked hard against the untouchability, pollution, temple entry bans experienced by the lower castes. All of them who received western education strongly criticized the social evils that were practiced in our society.

## Social Change and the role of Reformers and Organizations

Pollution, the evil existed in our society was destroyed by British colonialism and changed the material structure of Kerala society without disturbing the existing systems. The English education brought liberal thinking among individuals and

the Pulayans and Ezhavas tried to bring social mobility in Kerala. The socio religious movement in Kerala were all caste movements. The abolition of social distances benefited the lower sections of the society to rise themselves<sup>1</sup>. When Col. Munro was the Diwan of Travancore brought some changes in social practices, granted conversion to any religion, and the people were aware about the conversion would give them some social opportunities and rights<sup>2</sup>.

The social and religious reform movements that modernized Kerala began in the 19th century and the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, Theosophical Society which started in many parts of India had very little influence in Kerala. Swami Agamananda established Ramakrishna Advaita Ashram in Kalady and worked for social renaissance and Harijan upliftment in Kerala. The leaders from upper castes came to the forefront of social renaissance and helped to bring about significant change in the social fabric of Kerala<sup>3</sup>. K. Ayyappan established 'Sahodara Sangham' and introduced 'Misrabhojanam'. His aim was to socially revive the castes like Ezhavas, Pulayans and Araya's. Facing many opposition from the conservative section and they called him as 'Pulaya Ayyappan'. He modified the dictum of Sree Narayana Guru as "No caste, No religion and no God"<sup>4</sup>. Vaikunda Swamikal was a fearless social reformer who came forward to solve the problems of avarnas and formed 'Samatwa Samajam'. It was the first organisation for the socio religious movement in Kerala. Inspired by the work of Vaikunda Swami the Nadar women of South Travancore fought against social evils and for wearing upper clothes. Vaghdananda Gurudeva formed an organisation called 'Atmavidya Sangam' which opposed idolatry and caste thinking. Brahmananda Sivayogi founded Siddhasramam worked against caste thinking and opposed idolatry<sup>5</sup>. He worked for the equality of the society and led the Travancore women to fight for the right to wear upper clothes.

Twentieth century was a period of social emergence in Kerala among Thiyya community, the educated group urged the need for changing the traditional customs, beliefs and rituals like donating blood and toddy to the deities and decided to reform this situation and brought a change through sanskritization. Sree Narayana Guru attained proficiency in Sanskrit and tried to reform his community and did the most significant task that is the consecration of Shiva linga at Aruvippuram. Those days worshipping of Shiva was allowed only to upper castes and the consecration was done by only Brahmins. This was the beginning of Guru's reform activities for his community and also for the society. Guru informed the people about the need for living in harmony and brotherhood without any religious distinction. He stressed the importance of Liberty equality and fraternity among humanity<sup>6</sup>. A new organization called Sreenarayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam was formed in Travancore. "Sri Jnanodaya Yogam" was organized to examine the progress of the community and a temple was constructed at Tellicherry and the idol of Jagannath was consecrated by Guru. The caste dominance was also followed by the orthodox Ezhavas so they were not allowed to enter other untouchable castes to this temple but Sree Narayana Guru and other progressive leaders decided to give entry to other untouchable castes to this temple as they did at Aruvippuram<sup>7</sup>. To spread the ideologies of Sree Narayana Guru and Vivekananda a magazine called 'Vivekodayam' started under the SNDP Yogam<sup>8</sup>. The inspiration got from SNDP similar organisations were formed in Kerala like SadhuJana Paripalana Yogam under Ayyankali and the Pariah community organised under Kandan Kumaran with the aim of freedom of education and travel to lower castes.

The Namboothiri community is considered as the most upper caste in Kerala but within that community several problems were existed. Because of their conservatism they denied English education, by the fear of pollution they were reluctant to go to school. At the same time Nairs got education and challenged the existing social practices like Sambandam, and hereditary rights. They demanded legal validity for Sambandham it was a great blow to Namboothiri community. So they decided to organise themselves and then came the Namboothiri Yogakshema Sabha in 1908 To purify the Namboothiri community 'Yogakshema Sabha' was formed with the aim of 'make Namboothiri a human being'. Kuroor Unni Namboothiri the leader who fought for English education among the community, the Namboothiri Yuvajana Sangam' was formed with radical ideals under V.T Bhattathiripad and K.N. Kuttan Namboothiri. With the aim of revolutionising the society a magazine called 'Unni Namboothiri' was published. Leaders like B. Brahmadathan Namboothiripad and EMS Namboothiripad actively involved in politics and the activities of Yogakshema Sabha. As a result of the activities of Yogakshema Sabha 'the Malayali Brahmin Regulation of 1931 was passed. Through this regulation some modification was happened in Namboothiri illams and law of inheritance<sup>9</sup>.

To eradicate the evils existed in Namboothiri community V.T involved in Yogakshema Sabha and started two publications called "Yogakshemam" and "Unni Namboothiri" to inspire young generation about his revolutionary ideas. He wrote the miseries facing Namboothiri women in 'Rajini Rangam'. To propagate modern education VT and his friends conducted 'Yachana Yathra'. It was a successful march ended with 38 days. VT wholeheartedly supported Vaikom and Guruvayur satyagraha. Reform his community through widow remarriage and marriage among his community. He wrote an article titled 'burn down the temples' as a part of reforming temples, but it created an alienation from his people<sup>10</sup>.

As a part of the Nair reform movement of the 19th century "Keraleeya Nair Samajam" was founded in 1905 under the leadership of C. Krishna Pillai, but it failed to create a deep root in the community and later with the same objective Nair Service Society was formed. The community reform movement first spread among Nairs. They tried to end the rivalries

between Thavazhis and Matrilineal system of inheritance .As a result Nair societies sprang up in various parts of Travancore, Kochi, South Malabar and North Malabar.The North Kerala Nair Samajam was established in North Malabar under the leadership of Kesari Nayanar and Rairu Nambiar as Secretary and under the leadership of Krishna Pillai .The Nair Samajam reformed the inheritance system among Nairs<sup>11</sup>.

Ayyankali,the reformer from Pulaya community tried to the entry of Avarnas to schools.He found a way to do this by setting up a school of its own. Despite many conflicts the school functioned smoothly.In 1910 there was a violent clash in connection with the admission of lower castes to Pullat school .Vaider Varikkanamala Narayana Panikker ,a Nair leader ,expressed his condolences to the underprivileged. Thus the tense situation eased and school admission became possible there. During this period ,Ayyankali called for the abandonment of the primitive ornamental stone necklace of untouchable women. A meeting was held on December 19,1915 at the circus tent set up at the Kollam ground and was presided over by Thalassery Parameswara Pillai.The meeting was attended by about five thousand people . In their presence, on Ayyankalis instructions more than 2000 women of his tribe cut off the traditional stone necklaces and bangles they wore.

Ayyankali was vigilant in shaping the movements of the lower castes in various parts of the country.Their renaissance movement began with his time. In order to protect the interest of the community there were some groups operating under his control in the model of the suicide squads .The “Sadhujana Paripalini” a newspaper started in 1916 under the editorship of Trikkodithanam Kali Chodi Kurup as a result of the efforts of Ayyankali, became the mirror of all these activities.In 1921 under the leadership of John Joseph Cheramar Sangam was formed.In 1923 under his supervision and under the editorship of P.J.Joseph started a news paper called “Cheramar Doothar”<sup>12</sup>. He worked tirelessly day and night to uplift his community, which was deeply in decline by abandoning all his comfort and health.Ayyankali became the undisputed leader of the lower castes after overcoming the ordeal of public service.<sup>13</sup>

T.K.Madhavan and C.Raman Thampi were the derivatives of temple entry in Kerala.The temple entry resolution was passed in 1916 at Kolkata in the 132 conference of the Bharata Sabha and in 1918 at Bombay All India Removal of Untouchability resolution accepted.The temple entry was not the objective of Aruvippuram consecration but it is included in its impact.The temples consecrated by Sreenarayana Guru considered as Ezhava temples and the influx of devotees to them increased and the fear of loss of the richness and splendor of Savarna temples persuaded Raman Thampi for a resolution of temple entry<sup>14</sup>.

The Nair Namboothiri relationship was the main impetus for writing Indulekha ,inspired community reform.The Malayali Memorial dedicated to Maharaja of Travancore in 1891 as a result of the efforts of GP Pillai ,CKrishna Pillai and CV Raman Pillai and the Bill introduced by GP Pillai ,an early activist of the Malayali Sabha and the Malayali Press,the Keralite Nair Society had a strong influence on the Nair community.On October 31,1914,14 Nair Youths formed the Nair community servants association at Mannat house in Perunna.In the same year the group was renamed as Nair Service Society.The objective of the organisation was to foster unity among Nairs all over Kerala and to promote unity with other communities<sup>15</sup>. An organisation called Malayali social Union was formed for the upliftment of the Nair Community.In 1884 C.Krishnapillai revived the union and changed it’s name as ‘Travancore Malayali Sabha’. The aim of the Sabha was to stimulate the Nair Community in the light of modern education.Not just in Travancore the Malayali Sabha is the first community organisation in Kerala and the community newspaper is ‘Malayalie’<sup>16</sup>.

EV Ramaswamy Nayakar, an important leader from Tamilnadu, actively entered into the national politics as a Congress leader after 1919. In 1924 when Vaikom Satyagraha was going on EVR entered this campaign, it was a Satyagraha for the entry of untouchables like Ezhavas to Vaikom Temple. After the Khilafat movement the Congress leadership was eager to take measures for the reform of untouchables and the Congress considered Temple entry as an important part of the Congress activity. After 1920 the movement for the eradication of untouchability came into the forefront<sup>17</sup>.T.K Madhavan the Congress leader from Kerala attended the Kakinada session of the Indian National Congress held in 1923 and introduced a resolution for the temple entry .The untouchables were the majority people in India and the minority communities were avoiding them with number of reasons .Gandhiji gave a call to the Congress to fight against untouchability and after being a Hindu problem, the Hindus alone need to involve in it and Congress leadership take it as a national problem. Temple entry was the major constructive programme of Indian National Congress in the 1920 and 1930s. The Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 was instrumental in resolving the embarrassment of the Congress after the Mappila rebellion of 1921.<sup>18</sup>The renaissance leaders of Kerala like getting freedom from British colonialism and get rid from casteism and inequality existed in Kerala society.The congress leaders were fought for the establishment of democratic form of government.Satyagraha held at Vaikom andSuchindram ,civil rights movements in Kalpathi,Khadi and Harijan movement,spread of Hindi all these constructive programmes led to the emergence of 1930s.The death of Sreenarayana Guru,Chattampi Swamikal and Brahmananda Sivayogi led to the end of first phase Kerala renaissance.This led to the emergence of socialist,communist and Congress movements.Renaissance politics led to a new horizon<sup>19</sup>.

Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924, Guruvayur Satyagraha of 1931, the movements started by Yogakshema Sabha against the evils of Namboothiri community were the continuation of renaissance movement. In 1930, the formation of Jointed Political Conference and the Nivarthana Movement under its control is basically a political movement, but it had some aspects against savarna dominance and can be considered as a part of renaissance.<sup>20</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The social reformers of Kerala managed to end centuries of caste supremacy and slavery in Kerala. The reason for this was the social awareness and realization that both lower castes and upper castes have experienced. The knowledge acquired through western education enabled them to develop democratic thinking and humanistic values. They understood that the people from all sections of the society have the right to live equally in the society. Both upper and lower castes formed various organizations and through this they ensured social revival and tried to bring the society from darkness to light.

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