

Women and Social Life in Travancore

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Received: May 9, 2018

Accepted: June 3, 2018

ABSTRACT

The role of women in the freedom movement of Travancore cannot be viewed in isolation from their general position in the society, as socio- cultural factors of their period have an impact on their life. The spread of socio- religious reform movements and the establishment of modern educational systems were the two important factors which prompted the people of Travancore to think rationally and independently. The women became aware of the danger of the existing social evils like untouchability and caste feeling. The society of Travancore witnessed tremendous change particularly in the social dimensions during the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of nineteenth century. The main aim of the present study is to evaluate these social changes and understand the progress of women in the society of Travancore during this period.

Keywords:

There emerged an awareness among the people of Travancore that the need to reform, the social and religious life of the people was necessary for the progress of their life. The participation of women in the vaikom sathyagraha was one of the important signs of the social change in Travancore. The fight against untouchability in general continued after the Vaikom sathyagraha.

There also emerged a powerful social and religious reform movement among the womenfolk in Travancore. The Catholic movement, the Upper cloth movement, the Pulaya movement, the Muslim movement and the Brahmin movement deserve special mention¹. All these movements were aimed at the eradication of caste discrimination and establishment of an egalitarian society. During the period social reformers such as Chavara Kuriakose (1805-71), Sri Vaikunta Swamikal(1809-51), Sri Narayana Guru (1855-1932) Chattampi Swamikal (1854-1924), Ayyankali (1866-1941), Maulavi Abdul Khadir(1873-1932) and V.T Bhattatiripad etc injected a new vigor in the minds of the people. All these movements became a source of inspiration and provided a sense of direction to all sections of people².

The beginning of modern education in Travancore was made by the Christian missionaries particularly the protestant missionaries. Their educational system created a new direction to the women of Travancore. The aim of missionaries in setting up female schools was to raise the social status of women and to liberate them from the clutches of caste prejudice which was a strong barrier to the progress of Christianity in Travancore³.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century a Prussian Missionary named Ringletaube was active in the areas of Trivandrum and Nagercoil.⁴ During the period female education was limited to the royal and few rich families alone, while its value was unknown to the rest. Rev Mead, who came as a missionary took the lead in spreading educational institutions in the state ⁵. He believed that right type of education was the only available tool to make the youth into self respecting and adventurous individuals. He made an effort to start a Girl's School at Nagercoil in 1820⁶. The school began with 14 girls and it helped the dawn of a new era of school education to the girls in Travancore.

The missionaries also appointed lady teachers to attract non-christian girls into their schools. They provide training to develop the habits of order and cleanliness and hard work. Sir T. Madhav Rao, Dewan of Travancore gave much importance to the female education of the state⁷. He is remembered in Travancore history because of his role in the passing of Jenmi-Kudiyan regulation of 1867 and the Pattam proclamation of 1865. The Pattam proclamation praised as the magnacarta of the land revenue history of Travancore. He knew that without the progress of women, we cannot achieve our goal of modernization. In order to achieve his goal in the 1860's.

Shanar Agitation

Shanar otherwise known as Nadars played an important role in developing social awareness among the people of Travancore. They had been agitating for the right to cover the upper part of the body of their women even before the advent of European missionaries as they

considered this restriction unbearable as well as uncivilized⁸. The missionaries encouraged the Nadars in their agitation. The imitation of the mode of dress of caste Hindus by Nadars created jealousy among caste Hindus. The government issued an order permitting the low caste women converts to Christianity to wear jackets as was worn by Mappilas in 1814⁹. But the restrictions on the low caste women continued. This is primarily differentiated to caste Hindu women from low caste women appearing in public places.

The area particularly different parts of South Travancore witnessed breakdown of peace and security. The disturbances started on 8th October 1858 when a Christian woman was assaulted in the public market at Neyyattinkara in South Travancore and it continued for several months¹⁰. The upper castes made an attempt to insult the Shanar women in many places. The upper castes argued that wearing upper cloth was against the traditional custom that they were following. The agitation of the Shanars finally led to the Royal proclamation in 26 July 1859 which removed all the restrictions regarding the use of upper cloth by the Shanar women¹¹.

Kallumala Agitation

During the early periods of the twentieth century, there were increasing conflicts between the upper castes and Pulayas on the question of public space, mode of dressing and use of ornaments. There were several critical remarks in Travancore against the Dalits. The most important among them was that women had to wear a sort of bead called Kallayum Malayum¹². This particular ornament of the Pulaya women was recognized as a sign of slavery. They even used kunukku a sort of earring made of iron along with bead and bangles.

Kallumala Agitation was one of the multifaceted reforms introduced by Ayyankali. This agitation took place during 1915-16¹³. During the period, he was also one of the members of the Sri Moolam Praja Sabha. Ayyankali considered wearing of bead necklaces as a sign of slavery and he persuaded the Pulaya women to cast off these ornaments. He was personally involved in its implementation in South Travancore and Pulayas of South Travancore took his advice very seriously. His efforts became fruitful in 1914 Pulaya women stopped wearing Kallumala their traditional cheap necklaces of bead¹⁴. Ayyankali exhorted all the Pulaya women to cutting off their ornaments in a meeting held at Neyyattinkara. The symbolic act of cutting off the beads was followed and thus endorsed by the thousands of Pulaya women who were gathered there¹⁵.

Gopaladas persuaded the Pulaya ladies to discard their bead necklaces¹⁶. The attitude of Pulayas towards their age old custom was criticized by the Upper castes. They coerced the Pulaya ladies to wear these ornaments once again. This also paved the way for the confrontation between them and the Pulayas. The Upper castes set fire to the huts of the Pulayas. As a result of the violence many were wounded. The Pulayas organized themselves and set fire to the houses of upper castes. In relation to this they also demolished the huts of Pulayas at Mangad, Kilikollur and Perinad¹⁷. At the encouragement of Changanasseri, a Pulaya woman threw away their bead necklaces. At the end of these riots they succeeded in getting permission to wear ornaments of their choice. This rebellion was known as Kallumala Agitation¹⁸.

ROLE OF WOMEN IN VAIKOM SATYAGRAHA

The Vaikom Satyagraha, one of the most significant of the Gandhi inspired and Congress led temple entry movements, had created unprecedented enthusiasm among the women in Travancore. One of the novel gifts of this movement was that the upper strata of the society came in the front of this agitation. It was with the Vaikom Satyagraha that social movement and nationalism got coalesced, ushering in a new phase in the women's participation in the struggle. Large scale participation of women was witnessed for the first time during Vaikom Satyagraha.

Vaikom was chosen for starting the anti-untouchability work because it was the worst spot where the evils of untouchability and unapproachability were preserved in the pristine purity¹⁹. There situated a famous temple dedicated to Lord Siva. Around the outer prakara lay the roads which were used for ceremonial processions of the temple, where access to Ezhavas, Pulayas and other non-caste Hindus had been restricted to particular points fixed by notice boards (Tindal Palakas). It was alleged that 'tindal palakas' or prohibitory sign boards on public roads in the vicinity of temples prevented the avarnas from enjoying their natural right of walking along them and that public inns were not accessible to them.²⁰

The Congress opened a camp for volunteers at Vaikom where young men flocked in large numbers actively inspired by ardent workers like Mr. Gopala Krishnan and T.K. Madhavan.²¹ The historic

Vaikom Satyagraha began on 30th March 1924. It attracted the attention of the whole of India. Women who participated in Vaikom Sathyagraha included Mrs. Alummoottil Channar, Mrs. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, P.K.Kalyani, Karthookunju, Laksmi etc²².

Thus a Savarna Jatha (procession) under the captaincy of Mannath Padmanabha Pillai set out from Vaikkom to Trivandrum in November 1924.²³ Madhavan took much strain to make arrangement for the smooth conduct of the jatha from Vaikom to Trivandrum.

Gandhiji's involvement, his giving direction to the agitation, the large- scale support received from the nationalist all over India, all these made the Vaikom Satyagraha, a part of the freedom movement. Gandhi was not only in favor of the continuation of the Sathagraha but also advised them to start it at other places.²⁴

Intellectual enlightenment followed by English education strengthened the desire for a fair share in the administration of the state. All the events of nineteenth and twentieth century in Travancore influenced the women of Travancore. The history of women in Travancore is not different from the common history of Travancore. In spite of warnings, threats, lathi charges, firings and imprisonments, women progressively participated in the freedom struggle of Travancore. Both the socio-religious reform movements and the introduction of the western educational system changed the attitudes of the women of Travancore, which gave a new direction to them and made them capable to fight for the country.

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