

THE ROLE OF PAMPADY JOHN JOSEPH IN ORGANIZING THE NON CASTE CHRISTIANS OF KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Due to caste system the substantial social groups generally known as non caste people in Kerala, were subjected to different types of disabilities. Non caste Christians are scheduled caste people converted to Christianity and were excluded from the Scheduled Caste list, by the Presidential order of 1950. They are socially and economically backward educationally low, politically and religiously powerless. Such socio, economic environment of these people is not conducive to achieve a better standard of living and subsequently they enjoy a very low position in the society. But after conversion the caste discrimination existed within the church also. In this context Pampady John Joseph, a non caste Christian took efforts to organize the low caste Christians. For this purpose he established an organization called "Cheramar Mahasabha". Through this organization he fight against the caste inequalities which prevailed in the Christian church.

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The substantial social group generally termed as, Dalits or Non castes were subjected to different types of discrimination due to caste system. Under colonialism these marginalized groups began to achieve the social transformation and tried to crossroad the disabilities imposed upon them. There was a social and political awakening among the Non caste converts as well as their Hindu counterparts. The Non caste Christians began to protest against the caste discrimination within and outside the church with the assistance of social space created by colonial modernity.

The mid nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of protestant missionary work among the Non caste and in the subsequent decades, thousands of them joined missionary church. But in the church also they had to experience the bitterness of caste discriminations. Apart from the socio economic aspirations the non caste people embraced Christianity as part of a religious quest. In Kerala one of the realms of conflict between non caste and caste Hindus in this period was religion¹. In this context, new movements originated in Kerala in order to organize the people. The emergence of social reformers accelerated the process of social change and created a most conducive climate for the protest struggles.

Non castes Christians are scheduled caste people converted to Christianity and were excluded from the Scheduled Caste list, by the Presidential order of 1950. Large numbers of Dalits were converted to Christianity because it was a casteless religion. But the non caste people were subjected to caste discrimination within the church. Conversion to Christianity really affected a perceptible change in the daily life, the customs and cultures of the Indian adherents. Yet conversion did not virtually encourage the development of the identity of the non caste Christians. The social difference between the non caste Christians and the Syrian Christians date back from the days when the former group joined the mission in the mid nineteenth century and it continued to post colonial period Pampady John Joseph who belonged to the non caste Christian community realize the inequalities existed in the church on the basis of caste. In this context John Joseph fight against the difference between non caste and caste Christians and efforts were taken to organize them in order to acquire the identity.

John Joseph noted in history through his actions which oriented for the liberation of the non caste Christian community especially the Cheramar Christians. He was born in a Pulaya family at Manjoor, north of Kottayam in 1887. Under the influence of the CMS missionaries John Joseph's family members were converted to Christianity. This was happened when they settled down at Pampady, near Kottayam and joined the Catholic Church. Though he was a Christian, others treated him as untouchable since he was originally a Pulaya. He was educated up to sixth standard at Thrikkakara Mission School. In 1910 he came to Kottayam and then in Travancore in 1918. During his life time he engaged in different types of profession. He had worked as a teacher in Mission school at Pampady, as a military man during the First World War, who travelled widely in different nations of the world and as a zealous missionary engaged in evangelical and other medical mission services².

John Joseph belonged to the Pulaya community and fought for the achievement of their liberation in different levels of life. At the same time he took efforts to generate the awareness about the rights and privileges in the minds of the people of his community. He got an opportunity to work with various Christian missionaries. From this experience he felt that he had to work within the Christian religion. Through conversion they changed from tribal traditions to organized practices and worship such a change was the first that they had to undergo. But the egalitarian concept of Christianity did not produce any result regarding the case of non caste Christians. Because after conversion they were also treated as untouchables in the church and this attitude towards his brethren hurts the mind of John Joseph consequently there arose a crisis regarding their identity. It was the context of the identity crisis and the growing discontentment among the non caste Christians prompted him to launch a new movement against the inequalities that suffered by his community.

John Joseph had a deep sense of history and realized its importance in identity formation. He tried to construct the history of the polluted castes based on their ancient heritage and glorious memories of the past. The turning point in the life of John Joseph was his association with Jhana Joshua. As the chief Accounts Officer of Travancore state, Joshua had in his custody a rich collection of government records³. From the source provided by Joshua, John Joseph learned that the Pulaya lineage was linked with the ancient Chera dynasty of Kerala. The ancient name of Kerala was Cheranadu and its first inhabitants were a tribe called Cheramar who were also known as Cheramans, Cheramakal or Cheras. In the earlier period they were the rulers, landlords, agriculturalists poets and educated people of the land. He even located a family called 'Aykara Yajamanans' then living in a village called Kunnathunadu in central Travancore belonging to this lineage⁴. Thus he developed a view that the Cheramar were the original inhabitants of Kerala and hence they should not be suppressed in their homeland. This created a feeling of pride in the minds of the people of the Pulaya community. On this basis he even changed his caste name from Pulaya to Cheramar which means son of the soil⁵.

John Joseph made an attempt to organize the non caste Christians under a banner and decided to acquire their rights and liberties. In 1921 John Joseph organized a grand meeting of the Christian converts to launch a movement by the name Cheramar Mahajan Sabha, Pampady John Joseph and Parody Abraham Isac were elected as the General Secretary and President of the Sabha respectively. A large number of Pulayas both Hindus and Christians of Changanassery and Kottayam became the members of this organization. The slogan of this organization was "to organize through lineage and not through religion". A section of the Pulayas joined the Cheramar Sabha were attracted by the slogan.

Soon the movement established by John Joseph flourished in Thiruvalla and spread to other places like Changanassery and Kottayam. He articulated that the Cheramar, Pulayas, Parayas and Kuravas, all belong to the Adi Dravida race. In fact it was a new attempt in constructing a separate identity and providing self confidence and pride among the marginalized section. In order to popularize his critical views on the existing social situations and to awaken his fellowmen, he started a magazine called Sadujana Doodan in 1914 and wrote many articles which awakened the minds of the people. John Joseph was elected as a member of Sree Moolam Popular Sabha in 1931. He submitted a memorandum to the British Parliament on April 24, 1935 requesting to accord all the civil rights to the entire subaltern section which enjoyed by the elite section of the society. He actively associated with Ayyankali, the pioneer of Dalit liberation movement in Kerala⁶. He passed away in 1940 at the age of 53. The intervention of Ayyankali, were brave and dynamic but the problem of the non caste Christians was not directly connected with Ayyankali movement. Here John Joseph viewed the problem of the converted Christians as an important issue. He advocated identity politics on the basis of historical facts and sense of identity. The contribution of John Joseph was remarkable in awakening the consciousness and identity of the non caste Christians during the first half of the 20th century.

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