

Impact of British Paramountcy on Women in the Princely State of Travancore

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Abstract : *Travancore is one of the Princely state of India. It is came under the British Paramountcy since 1800. In 1800 Colonel Macaulay was appointed as the British Resident. By the treaty of 1805, the British Resident exercised considerable authority in the maintained of internal order in Travancore. For all importance decisions, the Rani or Raja, should get the permission of the British Resident. Thus Travancore came under the sway of the British government. In that time the traditional caste system was observed with all its rules and regulations like rigidity, rigour and social exclusiveness in Travancore. It was a caste rigid society. On the basis of caste, the society was divided in to the Savarnas(the high caste)(Brahmins, Nairs, Vellalas) and the Avarnas (the Low caste) (Nadars, Ezhavasetc).The Lowest section in the social hierarchy was the slave caste (Pulayas, Parayas). Untouchability was so much deep rooted that even the voice of the low caste was thought to pollute. In the traditional Travancore society women were oppressed in all possible means women were not only confined to the four walls of their homes, but also all the public places were denied to them.*

Key Words: *Travancore, Paramountcy, Low caste, Namboodiri, Nair, Christian, Western, Education.*

Introduction

The impact of caste and religion, the family structure among the different communities, the family status, the familial and social role of women among these communities etc. On the nature and degree of political participation of women in the regions was very marked. An overview of the traditional, social and political status of women in Travancore in the British Paramountcy period helps to bring out the nature of the difficulties that lie behind an active and significant role for women in the Economic and political process of the state. The European travelers and the Christian missionaries who visit Travancore between the 16th and 19th centuries have left interesting records about the condition of women during this period. One such writer Jacob Canter Visscher wrote about the living conditions of women in Travancore in the middle of the 18th Century as follows:

“The women marry at a very early period of life and are to be seen sitting with babies on their knees at an age when in our country they would be playing and running about with children. A girl is considered marriageable when she has attained her 13th year, and then all the suitors begin to flock around her. As she obtains womanhood earlier, her bloom is proportionately sooner over than in our country”.

Society in Travancore during the British Paramountcy the 19th and 20th Century were based on the predominance of the upper castes and the relatively subordinate position occupied by the lower castes. The Brahmins were dominant and they declared that the duty of a woman was to serve her husband and be confined to the kitchen. The outcome was that the status of women became one of favoured slaves. Wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of a minority. The society became a closed one, where a minority enjoyed all rights and privileges. People of the lower castes were condemned to lifelong slavery.

Low Caste Women

The lower class women were even prohibited from clothing themselves properly. They were prohibited from covering the upper part of their body. It was taught that every man and woman must die in the caste or religion in which he or she was born. It was caste that generally decided the nature of social relationships and status of individuals. Excommunication from his caste for a caste Hindu was worse than death. The ‘upper castes enjoyed several immunities and privileges which were denied, over the centuries, to the members of the lower castes like the Ezhavas, Harijans and other backward or lower caste groups. The structure and character of the Hindu society in Travancore during the 19th and the early part of the 20th centuries was "the higher (caste), the more were its rights and privileges; the lower the caste, the more bitter were its sufferings of slavery and bondage". Society was broadly divided into two groups: a powerful minority having access to religious learning and political power and the vast majority with no real right to religion and no power in society and politics. They were a condemned lot and were called "Avarnas" or the casteless or the outcastes. In the erstwhile princely state of Travancore the high caste people would not even sell their land or buildings lying adjacent to the upper caste residential area to lower caste people, even at a price higher than what was offered by members of the higher caste group, probably because of the fear that such proximity may lead to some intermingling of castes. The virtual monopoly of administrative jobs that the higher caste Hindus enjoyed till the 20th century in the Travancore area.

The British administration at least outwardly insisted that entry to the civil service should not be based on caste. But the social, educational and economic status of the individual even here was still determined by his position in the caste hierarchy. Until the 20th century governmental positions were denied to member of the lower castes and non-Hindus. But, everywhere, there was not much difference in the status of women. They were treated inferior to men opportunities for attaining higher positions in life were open only to members of the higher castes. But even within the higher caste groups, women mostly lived without education, training for a profession or any real knowledge of the world. The majority of women spent their time mainly within the four walls of their homes.

Namboodiri Women

The Namboodiris practiced a peculiar traditional set of marriage and inheritance system not in evidence among other caste groups. Within the Namboodiri household, only the eldest male members was allowed to marry a Namboodiri girl, while the younger members maintained a sort of marriage called 'Sambandhams', with girls belonging to the immediately lower caste of Nairs. These children born out of such a wedlock did not have any right of inheritance to their father's property, as in the case of the children born out of the marriage of the eldest male member to a Namboodiri girl. The devadasi system prevailed throughout Travancore in the 11th century about this time, the priest began to propagate new doctrines of morality. One such law was that all the beautiful girls should be socialized and assigned to the temples for the service of Gods. In Travancore, women who took the livery of the Gods became the public property of the Namboodiris and came to be regarded as honoured members of society. The practice of marriage among Namboodiris also implied that many Namboodiri women could never marry at all. The caste system prevented them from marrying men from outside their own caste or sub caste group. If a Namboodiri wanted to get his daughters married he had to be rich enough to give each of them a heavy dowry.

The seclusion of these privileged women meant that they could not get into any profession, go to markets or schools or to be even seen outside their family compounds. On those rare occasions when they went outside their sheltered homes to a neighbouring temple or so, they were enveloped in clothes all over and covered by a cadjan umbrella. After their names, almost as a Namboodiri women's surname, they were called Antharjanam, or an "inside person", a reference to their being inside their large homes all their lives. The status of the women of the Nair caste, next in the hierarchical order of the caste system in Travancore, was however quite different from that of the Namboodiri women. They enjoyed a large degree of social freedom and, perhaps influence, than the women of the Namboodiri caste. Marumakkathayam (Matrilinearity) and Tharawad (joint family) have been associated with Nairs. It is also stated that they also had the freedom to end their marriage or Sambandham at any time they wanted. Widow marriage was an accepted practice. All these were something unheard of in most of the other parts of India. They did not show any reluctance to enter into Sambandhams with Namboodiris and that this often enhanced their status in the family. The prestige of a Nair girl went up often on the number of Namboodiris she was able to court.

Nair Women

Though the Nair women enjoyed considerable social influence, they also suffered from certain disabilities. The proper form of presenting themselves before an honoured or respectable person was to be, by custom, 'with uncovered breasts and those who acted contrary to the custom were punished severely. The Tali rite and the Sambandham were two cardinal features of the traditional Nair marriage system. Nair women were free to have Sambandhams with Namboodiris or men of their own caste, but not with men below their caste. In certain parts of Travancore, during certain months such as of the South West monsoon of June-July-August, the members of the lower castes like Pulayas, Mannans etc. may even permit themselves to abduct a Namboodiri or Nair woman. This was known as Pulappedi or Mannappedi. The social conditions of the Nadars in the southernmost Taluk and of the Eazhavas in the erstwhile Travancore area were deplorable in the beginning of the 19th century. The Nadar and the Eazhava women, who were untouchables but were considered above the outcastes such as the Pulayas and Parayas in social position, were even forbidden to wear any clothing above the waist. The local rulers regarded this practice as ordained by religion and they, therefore, implemented it with rigidity and harshness. This was to establish the superiority of the higher castes over them and to distinguish them from women of the higher castes. This compulsion on the part of the Savarnas or the upper castes sowed the first seeds of open discontent among the lower castes. This resulted later in the outbreak of the upper caste revolt in Travancore.

The interesting part of it was that the revolt was over the question of the modesty of their women. They were able to wrest the right to wear tops or upper clothes only after undergoing great sufferings. This revolt brought about important changes in the social and political attitudes of the lower caste people in the erstwhile South Travancore area. It marked the beginnings of a series of protests of the backward communities for equality before law and equal protection of laws. Although the royal proclamation granting women the right to dress properly contained certain reservations, the 'Nadar' and Shannarwomen sometimes ignored these reservations and exercised their full freedom in these matters at their own risk, viz., to dress decently and freely move about in the streets and market places in spite of strong opposition from the privileged classes. It was in one sense this outburst of the suppressed classes that were echoed later in the 'Malayali Memorial', the 'Vaikom Satyagraha, the Guruvayoor Satyagraha and other similar socio-political movements for equality. As a result of these social changes the women of the Avarna (outcaste i.e., those who were outside the varna or caste system) were now allowed to carry umbrellas, use open roads, wear shoes or gold ornaments, carry pots of water on the hip, build houses higher than a single story, milk cows or even use the ordinary language of the country.

The government officials who, by and large, belonged to the upper castes are reported to have shown unusual diligence in exacting payment of taxes from the lower caste families. Ringeltaube, the first protestant missionary in Travancore, has recorded many instances of such harsh treatment meted out to people of the lower castes for non-payment of 'taxes on their property. He says, "The women, in the absence of their husbands, are tortured by having rice pestles twisted into their hair or a great stone placed on four small pebbles on their backs standing all the time in an unnatural posture". It has also been reported that chastity was considered a cardinal virtue by the Nadar and Eazhava women and that they proved to be good wives and affectionate mothers.

Christian Women

Christian women were the first to come out into society and seek education and employment as nurses, doctors, and teachers and also as social workers to serve the needy people. Though fewer taboos existed among or about Christian women, the basic concept of their inferiority to man was beyond dispute. Irrespective of whether a woman belonged to the Hindu, Christian or Muslim religion or to the higher castes or lower castes, they had to suffer more as women than men. There was little pride in being a woman in those days.

Western Education

The process of modernisation, initiated in part through the introduction of English education and western liberal thoughts and the consequent efforts of the local rulers and social reformers to bring about social changes, went a long way in shaping the present day social and political status of the women of Travancore. With the spread of education, the liberation of women from the traditional social order was initiated in

Travancore. Direct state activity in the field of education began in 1817 when Rani Gouri Parvati Bai, who was acting as the Regent of the Travancore State, with the assistance of Col. Munro, introduced free and compulsory education at the primary level in government schools in Travancore. Margaret Mead, a missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), started a boarding school for girls at Nagercoil in South Travancore in 1819. This was the first girls' school in the southern part of Travancore. The girls' schools, founded at the missionary stations, trained the girls in western concepts of order, cleanliness, and work. It also educated them in the English language. This helped them to move up the social scale. The LMS missionaries concentrated their activities in the Travancore area and worked especially for the uplift of the female population. In North Travancore, the work for female education was undertaken by the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The missionaries drew the attention of the government to the need for educating the females and got schools opened for them. With the missionary activities in the field of female education Travancore, and especially its southern part, began to excel other parts of the country in this respect.

The erstwhile State of Travancore was ruled by three princesses on different occasions - two in the 19th century and the third in the 20th century. Rani Gouri Lakshmi Bai (1810-1815) assumed the reigns of government in 1810 after the demise of Balarama Varma, His Highness Swathi Tirunal. Slavery was abolished in Travancore by a royal proclamation in 1812 though the total abolition of slavery and the enfranchisement of slaves took place only in 1855. The regency of Gouri Parvati Bai was an era of administrative and social progress in the history of the Travancore State.

The women of the Eazhava and other lower caste communities were permitted to wear ornaments of gold and silver, which were forbidden before. It was Rani Gouri Parvati Bai who relieved the females from the burden of carrying torches during the royal processions. All persons, irrespective of caste and status, were permitted by a royal proclamation to have tiled roofs for their houses. Christian missions were given all facilities to carry on their evangelizing activities. Thus her regency was an epoch of liberal administration. The regency of Sethu Lakshmi Bai was also a very remarkable period in the history of Travancore. She also introduced some progressive social reforms like the abolition of the Devadasi System in the temples of Travancore and of the primitive custom of animal sacrifice in temples. The early decades of the 20th century witnessed the beginnings of powerful social reform movements in Travancore. In the context of certain economic changes and the spread of education, strong social reform movements against certain disabilities and evils associated with the operation of the caste system, took shape. The demand for social equality initiated by these social reform movements can, in a larger historical sense, be described as the earliest steps towards democratic mass movements in Travancore.

The Yogakshema Movement among the young Namboodiris was started in 1908. It agitated for the right to marriage of all the junior Namboodiri males from within their own community itself, to popularize the study of English among them and to abolish the purdah system among the Namboodiri females. The religious and social reform movements in Travancore played a vital role in arousing a new social consciousness among women in the state under various castes and helped them to be more active participants in the National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma. Gandhi. The general political awakening in the nation, due to the independence struggle, had its response in Travancore also in the first quarter of this century.

The seeds of women's political activism in Travancore had already been sown in the social reform movements of the early 1920s. Struggles that developed along with the independence movement, such as the temple entry struggle, Yogakshema movement, struggle for reservation of jobs in public services for backward castes, this helped to improve the social position of women also. Attention was drawn to the social conditions of women also, even though the above were mainly social reform movements for the uplift of the lower caste people. The increasing participation of women in various socio-political movements enabled them to widen their interests and opened up new vistas before them. This led, in course of time, for a demand for free, universal and compulsory women's education. It was realised that women's education was a necessary precondition for women's improved position and status in society.

The Vaikom Satyagraha (1924-25) was organised to agitate for the right of the untouchables to temple entry. The agitation attracted active women's participation. They arranged "*Pidiyari fund*" (a handful of rice movement, as contribution from each family, every day) to feed the Satyagrahis. They also organized a public meeting under the president ship of N. Meenakshi Amma. The involvement of these women in such public activities provided them enough training to take part in the freedom struggle which followed.

Women who took active part in the Swadesi movement generally hailed from respectable middle class families, mostly of the higher castes, and were educated. Their participation in the movement enhanced its appeal and respectability. The women had originally started their political work through the Khadi and Swadesi movement. But soon, many of them entered into more direct and active politics, courting arrest and imprisonment. It is also to be noted that most of the women who entered politics belonged to the middle class or the upper middle class families.

Conclusion

In Cochin and Travancore also almost all the women, who were active in politics in those days got the support and encouragement of their male relatives as was seen in the case of women in the Malabar region. Thus, even in the matter of women becoming active in politics, an indirect male domination or decisive male influence.

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