

Christian Missionaries and the Oozhiyam services in Travancore

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Abstract

Oozhiyam was a bonded labour system in Travancore during the medieval period. The low caste Hindus such as Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas and Nadars or Channar communities were the major sections used for the oozhiyam services. They were forcibly worked for the temples and the higher caste Hindus like Brahmins. The caste rules are also against the low castes. Therefore nobody can question about it. But after the introduction of Christianity in Travancore, number of challenges faced to this evil system. The Christian missionaries strongly fought against the bonded services and finally they created a consciousness among the people. The rulers of Travancore were compelled to introduce certain ameliorative steps to improve the condition of the depressed classes in Travancore.

Key words

Oozhiyam, bonded labour, agrestic slavery

Introduction

The most distinctive feature of the caste system in Travancore is that it is hierarchical nature. Caste system presents the basis of social exclusion under which groups identified as 'low' caste in the hierarchy of Hindu society have been placed at disadvantaged social, economic and political position through ages. Social exclusion based on caste is by far the most common among its various forms practised in Travancore. It identifies castes as higher and lower, and superior and subordinate. Therefore, caste has long been an important dimension of social articulation and political mobilisation in Travancore. The social history of Travancore is historically marked by a rigid form of social stratification on the basis of caste.

Objectives

The main objective of this study is to understand the system of *oozhiyam*, the bonded labour system and its various features in Travancore. The study also aimed to understand the role of Christian missionaries and their activities in Travancore. It also focused to understand various steps initiated by the Christian missionaries to abolish the system of oozhiyam.

Methodology

The article is being prepared as theoretical, descriptive and analytical method.

In Travancore, during the second half of the 19th and the early decades of the 20th century caste controlled all activities of the society. Further, through its well defined hierarchical structure – broadly divided into the *avarnas* and the *savarnas* – it underlined the rules and a norm for the society. By linking caste with religion, a divinity of the rule of law was established. The *savarnas*, who controlled education, economy, polity, and all other structures, owned the social capital and this further induced consent of the *savarnas* by the ideological hegemony thus helping them to frame caste-oriented labour structure and thereby establish labour bondage. Oozhiyam was such form of bonded labour system practiced in Travancore.

The system of Oozhiyam or bonded labour was an institution of social oppression, discrimination and exploitation that existed in Travancore since the early medieval period. In such a social set up, bonded or forced labour became an inseparable feature of slavery in Travancore. Further, the system of bonded labour is associated with the feudalism. Therefore, land-based social relations were formed in the state. The feudal lords and the royal persons required bonded services from the lower sections of the society.

The system of *oozhiyam* was forcibly imposed on the low castes of the society such as Ezhavas, Nadars, Pulayas and Parayas. They performed imperative services to the temples, higher castes and to the government. The *oozhiyam* servants were subjected to merciless oppression from the higher castes and government. There were two types of *oozhiyam* services in Travancore. Firstly, they were forced to do manual services such as constructing roads and bridges, canals, carrying *srikar* loads and thatching sheds. In times of royal tours, the *oozhiyam* servants carried luggage of the royal persons and rowed the royal boats. Secondly, the *oozhiyam* servants supplied vegetables and provisions to the *uttupuras* and the royal palace. All of their services were not rewarded by cash or in kind. The *oozhiyam* servants were also obliged to perform various gratuitous services on the occasion of temple festivals and palace ceremonies. The higher castes freely utilized the labour capacity of the *oozhiyam* servants and exploited them in many ways.

Under the most baneful system of *oozhiyam*, the low castes suffered from the arrogance and brutality of the feudal lords and the government. On the days of services, the *oozhiyam* slaves were given food to keep their body and soul together. In the forced labour system, the slaves did not have any freedom and on several occasions, the *sirkar* officials misappropriated the fruits of the *oozhiyam* services. The most important evil of the forced labour system was that it furnished every subordinate officer or peon throughout the land with a pretext of supplying himself with what he demanded on behalf of the government.

The pre-dominance of commercial crops in the agricultural production gave some unique features to the system of feudalism in Travancore. It reached its zenith after the establishment of the British supremacy in Travancore. The Britishers successfully transformed the traditional economy of Travancore with their ability to release land, labour and capital from the feudal and caste-oriented labour on an extensive scale. They exploited the existing circumstances to benefit them economically. In their early period, the Britishers encouraged the evil practice of the bonded labour system in Travancore. They largely used the *oozhiyam* servants for their personal services and therefore directly or indirectly supported the system of forced labour.

In Travancore, there was a custom that allowed the landlords to enjoy a part of labour carried out by the tillers and the practice was known as *velapathivu*. It is rightly said that the agrestic slavery in Travancore was hereditary and it was deeply cemented and practiced in the region for generations.¹ Transfer of slaves was a common practice and different kinds of slave transfer prevailed in Travancore such as

In the early stages of the European colonization in Travancore, nobody took interfere the problems of the slaves. In Travancore, slavery was a recognized institution and an integral part of the existing social order. Neither the native government and nor the Europeans interrupted the system of slavery. The Government of Travancore strictly followed the existing caste rules and customs, whereas the Europeans concentrated only the trade activities in the state.

But after the arrival of the Christian missionaries, the process of the emancipation of slaves was started. The missionaries perform a laudable task to educate the slaves and create a new consciousness among the slave castes about their rights and privileges.² The crusading spirit of the missionaries for the eradication of slavery and forced labour or *oozhiyam* gave a green signal to the authorities to introduce certain ameliorating measures to the slaves. In 1789, Lord Cornwallis issued an order against the slave trade in India. The Madras government also issued another Proclamation, which also condemned the slave traffics. But none of this proclamation gave a final solution to the basic problems of the slaves in Travancore.³ In 1812, Col. John Munro issued a proclamation, which prohibited the existing slave trade in the state.⁴

The first concrete effort of the Christian missionaries for the abolition of slavery in Travancore was the Slavery Abolishing Act of 1843. General Cullen, the British Resident took keen interest abolish slavery in Travancore. The missionaries demanded to pass a law similar to the law passed by the Government of Bengal.⁵ The Christian missionaries frequently requested to the Governor of Madras for the immediate intervention in the problems faced by the lowest sections of the society.⁶ After an enquiry, the government of Madras demanded the ruler to remove all impediments faced by the low castes.⁷ On April, 1850, the government of Madras passed the 'Caste Disabilities Removal Act'. The Act declared that the change of religion will not deprive a man of his right to the property. It also ensured the right of inheritance.⁸ Therefore, the activities of the Christians missionaries put forward the idea of equality and freedom of human being. V.Nagam Aiya opined that "it is a glory reserved to this century of human progress, the epoch of the happy commingles of the civilization of the West with that of the East".⁹

In 1835, the slaves of the Munro Island were liberated. It was the first charter of freedom to the slaves in Kerala. Under the leadership of both the LMS and CMS, a joint petition was submitted to the ruler of Travancore on 19th March 1847. The petition was signed by twelve missionaries (four C.M.S and eight L.M.S) and they pleaded for the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of the *sirkar* slaves.¹⁰ In 1848, the missionaries again submitted a petition, which pointed out that the legal recognition of slavery in British India had been withdrawn by the Act V of 1843.¹¹

In 1849, General Cullen prepared a memorandum, in which he concluded that slaves in Travancore were generally degraded and lived in a more miserable condition than in any other country. He also suggested that the children of the *sirkar* slaves should be free and laws should be framed for the protection of slave welfare.¹² During this time, the Government of Travancore granted certain concessions to the slaves. Bowing to the frequent pressure of the Christian missionaries, a Royal Proclamation was issued on

15 September 1853, which emancipated the children of the *sirkar* slaves, who were born after 1853.¹³ But the Proclamation did not produce any fruitful result because it liberated only 6000 children of the *sirkar* slaves out of the 130000 slaves in the state.¹⁴ Besides, the second clause of the Proclamation insisted that the emancipation could not liberate a low born person from the features of caste and untouchability.¹⁵

The missionaries were disappointed with the Proclamation of 1853 because it could liberate only a very small percentage of the enslaved. The missionaries continuously pleaded for the complete eradication of slavery. For this purpose, they sought public opinion through magazines and periodicals. In 1854, the C.M.S magazine published the pathetic condition of the slaves.¹⁶

Frequent demand of the missionaries finally compelled the government of Travancore to issue a Proclamation on April 1855, which totally abolished slavery in Travancore. The Proclamation also abolished the agrestic slavery and a number of feudal levies imposed upon the low castes.¹⁷ Besides the physical torturing, the depressed classes had to pay any number of taxes such as poll tax, breast tax, cottage tax etc. After a long struggle and also as a result of the interference of the missionaries, the Royal Proclamation was issued on 29 July 1815, which exempted capitation tax from the converted Christians.¹⁸ The Proclamation also liberated the *sirkar* slaves and exempted their taxes. Besides, all the slaves who belonged to the *sirkar* by escheat of estates without heirs were also freed by the Proclamation.¹⁹ In course of time the Government of Travancore abolished various illegal taxes imposed upon the lowest sections of the society.

The Christian missionaries pleaded for the right of inheritance of the converted Christians and they brought it to the notice of the Government of Travancore. In 1815, another Proclamation was issued, which granted permission to the Ezhavas and Nadars converted into the Christianity, to inherit property. Though slavery was abolished, the higher castes created obstructions and difficulties before the low castes. They closed public roads, markets and public offices before the slaves. The Government of Travancore could not effectively follow up the abolition of slavery by adequate social and economic reforms. On the other side, the slaves were ignorant to realize the newly gained freedom. They had neither land no money to support themselves and freedom became a new burden for them.²⁰

The Christian missionaries continued their task. The social condition of the women of the slave castes was deplorable. According to the Europeans, the women of Travancore were miserable, uneducated, mere animals and kept for burden or slaughter.²¹ The women were not permitted to cover the upper parts of their body. With the help of the missionaries, the Nadars of South Travancore started several protests against this practice. The struggle was known as *melmundu samaram* or breast cloth struggle. It was an important event in the social history of Travancore. It also shook the very base of caste-based deprivations and the assertive criteria of social status.²² After a series of struggle, the Government of Travancore issued an order in May 1814, which permitted the female converts of the low castes to cover their breasts. But the higher castes did not approve of this change and they forced the ruler to issue an order to maintain the existing social system in Travancore. Therefore, the Government of Travancore was compelled to issue

another proclamation on 3 February 1829, which condemned the Christians for breaking the existing customs and using the upper cloth. The Proclamation also insisted that the Nadars, whether Hindu or Christian, should perform the *oozhiyam* services to the temples and the state.²³

The missionaries restlessly worked for the welfare of the slaves. They offered employment to the slaves. They pressurized the Government of Travancore to adopt several measures to improve the living condition of the slaves.²⁴ The Christian missionaries were also responsible for the liberation of the low castes from the *oozhiyam* services. Both the L.M.S and C.M.S missionaries submitted several memorandums to the authorities for the abolition of *oozhiyam* services. Thanks to the endeavours of Col. Munro, Christians were exempted from *oozhiyam* services on Sundays in the temples. In 1815, Rani Lekshmi Bai, the ruler of Travancore issued a Proclamation, which exempted Christians permanently from the *oozhiyam* duties connected with the temples and *uttupuras* on Sundays.²⁵

The efforts of the missionaries were unique for the abolition of slavery. “It was their drive and initiative, which shook the conscience of all; it was their enthusiasm and zeal which was later championed by the British Resident”.¹ Besides, the missionaries played a crucial role in safeguarding the right of the slaves.²⁶

Notes and References

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