

Colonialism, Social Reform and Social Change : The Socio-Economic underpinnings of Vaikam Sathyagraha in Travancore

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Abstract

Vaikam Sathyagraha was a notable historical event in the history of Travancore. It was a part of antiuntouchability agitation initiated by Indian National Congress in 1924. In Travancore the Sathyagraha was led by T.K.Madhavan. Various historical factors influenced the Sathyagraha. The social structure of Travancore was organised on the basis of cast prejudices and obnoxious caste practices. The feudal economic system emerged in the medieval period was the base of such a society. The colonial penetration and the expansion of capitalism destroyed feudalism in Travancore. The change in the structure of economy naturally changed the social structure. It was in this context so many social and political movements emerged in Travancore. One of the most important social movements was Vaikam Sathyagraha. The British introduced free trade and plantations in Travancore by the second half of nineteenth century. Though it helped the British Government to exploit the economy of Travancore, it gave employment opportunity to so many people who belonged to *Avarna* caste. More over lower castes like the Ezhavas, Shannars etc. economically empowered through trade and commerce during this period. These economically empowered people were denied of basic rights like education, mobility, employment in public service etc. So they started social movements. A number of social movements emerged in Travancore in the nineteenth century and the first half of twentieth century. Through Vaikam Sathyagraha a regional social movements was linked with pan Indian freedom movement.

Key words

Social Reform, Colonialism, Sathyagraha, Capitalism, Untouchability

Introduction

The past is a permanent dimension of the human consciousness, and inevitable component of the institutions, values and other patterns of human society. For the greater part of history we deal with societies and communities for which the past is essentially the pattern for the present¹. In shaping the present pattern of Kerala society the role of its past was so pivotal and crucial. The nineteenth century Kerala witnessed far reaching ideological struggle for social change. It was mainly due to the transition of Kerala economy from feudalism to capitalism coupled with the rise and growth of many indigenous social dissents. Vaikam Sathyagraha was one of the social struggles put by the depressed sections in Travancore against the

theocratic and caste centric political economy of Travancore. Here at first, it is tried to contextualise Vaikam Sathyagraha in the changing context of the economic structure of Travancore, mainly due to the impact of European metropolitan capitalism. The capitalist intervention in Travancore economy was facilitated by the British colonial agent. British colonialism in India intertwined Travancore economy with the metropolitan capitalist economy of the Western World. The process of world capitalism entered an altogether new phase in the mid nineteenth century with knitting together of the world economy when metropolitan capital began to directly intervene in the sphere of production, moulding these frontiers to meet the needs of the world market². The intervention of metropolitan capital in Travancore brought about two pronged impact. The first one was Travancore became a periphery of western world and the second one was it destroyed the feudal economic structure in Travancore. On the whole the British economy thrived through the appropriation of natural resources in Travancore. This expropriation is accomplished through the action of immanent laws of the capitalist production itself; through the centralization of capitalist³. The British introduced free trade and finance capitalism in Travancore. It shook the very foundation of the feudal mode of production in Travancore. The economy of Travancore was predominantly feudal in nature until the second half of nineteenth century. The jannmi system or landlordism emerged in Travancore during the medieval period as a mode of production reached its highest level of exploitative nature in the nineteenth century. The *Uralar* (Brahmin landlords) and *Karalar* (Nair intermediaries) exploited the *Paniyalar* (Tenants). In the relations of production the first two groups lived on the efforts of the last group. The medieval temple culture gave ideological support to this feudal system.

The Free trade policy and finance capitalism gave immense profit to the British both from trade and industry. It adversely affected the economy of Travancore. However, large scale intervention by the British in the economy of Travancore by and large began after the 1850s with new tariff policy and the emerging plantation sector which was dominated by British capital⁴. The Chief items of export from Travancore were coir, copra and other coconut products. There was a great demand for coir products in European markets. As far as Travancore was concerned the community which mainly engaged in industries related to production from coconut tree was the Ezhavas. In coir factories, Ezhavas formed sixty five per cent and Christians about twenty five per cent of the work force⁵. The rise in demand of coconut tree products attracted the attention of European capitalist and they invested a lot of capital in the industry. As a result, between 1871 and 1891, the price of copra doubled and coir tripled. The total value of export of coconut tree products like copra, coconut oil and coir in the year 1906 alone carries a value of Rs.91,08,141 against the total value of export during the year Rs.2,86,32,766⁶. The steady demand for coconut products in western market gave great opportunity to the Ezhavas for industrialisation and naturally it economically empowered them. Once they economically empowered they started questioning the social taboos and social discrimination in the society.

The expansion of plantation industry in Travancore ever since the second half of nineteenth century gave a powerful blow to landlordism in Travancore. The British capitalists who invested money in plantation sector in different parts of Travancore needed a sizeable number of labours in the plantations. In

southern India, the labour power of Dalit women and children was particularly sought because these formed yet cheaper source of labour⁷. In Travancore majority of the labours in the plantation sector constituted from the Pulaya, Paraya and shannar communities. In plantations wages were given to the labourer in cash not in kind. Thus they were opened to a cash economy. It gave a setback to feudalism. In feudal economy the Janmi gave wages in the form of kind. Thus, most of the labourers left their landlords and secured employment in plantation. This change in relation of production adversely affected feudalism in Travancore. Many Parayas and Pulayas became labours in plantations. The spread of English education in South Travancore under the auspices of the London Mission Society gave employment opportunity to many number of Shannar covert. They got employment not only in the plantations of Travancore and Madras but also in the plantations of Ceylon. One explanation might be that the situation of 1870 many people were able to survive without the help of the mission, as large scale employment was offered by the public works departments and coffee estates in the neighbouring hills⁸. This changing economic scenario economically improved the Nadars and the Dalits. Their cost labour had been tremendously increased. Yet the estates, coupled with the public works department, helped to increase the cost of labour, while educated Malayalis, especially Christians, took up most of the clerical and managerial posts⁹. The newly started Public Works Department during the period of Dewan Madhava Rao gave many numbers of opportunities to the labours to do menial jobs. Thus by the end of nineteenth century both Nadar and Dalits were freed from the shackles of landlordism to a certain extent mainly due to these economic changes. Then they fought for their social emancipation.

As in the field of plantation and free trade, there were foreign capital investments in other areas such as banking, trading companies etc. Capital had been invested more than fifty enterprises including banks, trading companies, Harrison and cross field company plantations etc¹⁰. Simultaneously with foreign capitalist, there emerged an indigenous capitalist class in Travancore. Gradually there emerged indigenous banks and trading companies in Travancore. In trade, industry, transport etc., the Christian, Ezhava and Muslim communities surpassed the Nayar community¹¹. In textile industry, shipping, transport, railway, hydroelectric power station etc all menial jobs were done by Pulayas, Parayas, Nadars and Ezhavas. Even though they were exploited by the foreign capitalists, they had regular employment and income from these industries. The changing economic scenario gave them opportunity for mobility and freedom from feudal exploitation.

The agrarian reforms introduced by Travancore government by the end of the nineteenth century had tremendous impact upon the economy of Travancore. In Travancore the lion's share of land was in the hands both Nambudiri and Nayar land lords until the first half of nineteenth century. Administrative reforms introduced by colonial agents in Travancore wanted some changes in the agrarian sector. The first step in this direction was taken by Col. John Munro, the first Dewan Resident of Travancore. In Travancore, the government had imposed so many taxes and dues upon the depressed sections. The imposition of exorbitant taxation naturally reduced their interest in production process. It was to mitigate this laxity in production; the government issued two royal proclamations to abolish some taxes and dues. In 1815, two Royal

proclamations had been issued, through which dues and taxes like *Talayara*, *Valayara*, *Kettilakkam*, *Velapative etc* imposed on castes like Exhava, Shannar, Vannar, Kaviti, Mukkuvar, Parayar, Pulayar, Chettiyar, Vanikal etc. and the special rights and privileges conferred to collect these dues to certain individuals of these castes had been abolished¹². Another important legislation introduced by Col.Munro was to cut the power of Nayar and Namboodiri landlords who possessed vast estates of land. He brought out the decision in 1812 shortly after the Kollam Revolt. In Thiruvithamkur, the 1812 decree which confiscated the extensive landed properties of 378 biggest temples was certainly aimed at cutting the Nambudiri and Nayar chiefs down to size¹³. The new revenue measures adopted by Col.Munro brought about two third of the total cultivable land under the direct ownership of the state. In the remaining one third of land, the tenants were exploited by Janmis. Eviction became common and many depressed caste people became landless labourers. The government issued a royal edict in 1823 to prevent eviction. The state was quite alert to the interest of the cultivators, and even as earlier in 1829 a royal edict was promulgated directing that ‘in all suits of this nature (for eviction) decided, field or which may hereafter be preferred, the courts maintained the established usage in the country, viz, that the tenant should pay the Janmi his usual ordinary and extra ordinary dues, and that the janmi received the same and let the tenant remain in possession and enjoyment of the property¹⁴. The impact of the royal edict was so great that followed by this tenant in government land also demanded ownership right. It caused the Pandarapattom Proclamation of 1865¹⁵. Until then, the holder of the Pandaramvakapattom land had no ownership right nor they had the power to transfer the occupancy right, and the legal concept was that the state was the Janmi. The state demand from these tenants was only land-revenue; whether one call it tax or rent, the assessment was very light compared to the Malabar revenue assessment, and much less than even the rents demanded by the Janmis of Travancore from their tenants¹⁶. The serious crisis around after the proclamation was the glaring disparity between the tenants of Janamom lands and Pandaramvaka land. The adverse situation instilled the Travancore government to issue the Janmi – Kudiyan proclamation in 1867 which brought about fixity of tenure to the land. In 1867, the sircar issued a second proclamation effectively curtailing powers of the state few thousand janmis who had become more demanding of their tenants as a result of the increasing population and value of land¹⁷. Even after the proclamation, eviction continued unabatedly. The reason was the high caste officials in the beaurocracy were not ready to implement it. This alarming situation compelled the government to pass the Janmi Kudiyan Act in 1896. The land reforms not only won the approval of the British government but made Travancore an area of many thousand small proprietors and secure tenants¹⁸. The Janmi Kudiyan Act passed in 1896 by the Travancore legislature took away most of the arbitrary powers from the all powerful Janmi giving to thousands of tenants in Travancore securing of possession and freedom from illegal eviction¹⁹. The legislation paved the way for the rise of large number of peasant proprietors in Tiruvitankur, the land policy, by the end of the nineteenth century was “pro-tenant”, it resulted in the emergence of a significant group of peasant proprietors²⁰.

The path breaking economic changes and land reforms in the nineteenth century became the base of so many social dissents and political struggles emerged in Travancore. The Travancore society in the beginning of nineteenth century was built upon a feudal economic system. In the system the principal actors were Namboodiri Brahmins and Nayars. It is asserted that feudalism in Travancore was emerged in the medieval period mainly after Aryanisation in Kerala. The Brahmins introduced iron technology in agriculture. The application of iron technology increased agricultural production, naturally vast area of land was brought under cultivation. It necessitated the availability of huge labour force. This situation compelled Brahmins to introduce caste system in Kerala. The position and influence of Aryan Brahmin settlements were also responsible for the emergence of traditional type of caste system in Kerala²¹. They used Bhakti and feudalism to control the majority of the people in Travancore and the king. The newly emerged socio-economic system in the middle ages brought about so many social taboos, unhealthy social relations and evil caste practices like untouchability and unapproachability. Clothing, jewellery, hair style, food etc are matter of caste differentiation. Clothing and jewellery were the most visible signs of caste on the body and they were instrumental in identifying infringements to the system of distance pollution²². The kings and landlords took food which having at least fifteen dishes. But the poor people did not have lunch always. The ruling class took every possible step to feed the Brahmins. The Travancore government maintained more than hundred and fifty *Oottupuras* to feed Brahmins. The speeches of all lower communities had to refer to themselves as *Adiyan* (slave)²³. The Kshatriyas had to keep a distance of two feet away from the Namboodiri. The distance stipulated to Nairs was 16 feet, Ezhavas 32 feet and Pulayas 64 feet. As far as the freedom of movement was concerned these low caste people were denied of mobility through public roads. The avarnas used special languages to refer their possessions. For instance, the residence of lower caste man had to be described by him as *Kuppamadam*. Muslims and other lower caste men were prevented from entering the fort during *Murajapam*²⁴. *Murajapam* is a ceremony performed in Padmanabha Swamy temple during the festival season. The lower caste people were under the crushing weight of taxation. They had to pay different kinds of taxes like house tax, tax on growing hair, breast tax for women, tax on oil mills, bows, boats, hunting etc. The condition of pulayas and parayas were highly deplorable. The Pulayas, the lowest of the slave castes; reside in miserable huts on mounds in the centre of rice swamps, or on the raised embankments in their vicinity²⁵. Their women were forbidden to wear any cloth above their waist. Slavery was also existed in Travancore during this period. Buchanan who visited Malabar in 1800 gives us a descriptive account on slavery in Kerala. Buchanan speaks of three modes of transferring the usufruct of slaves²⁶. The high caste families possessed a number of slaves. They were bought and sold like cattle in the market. The land owners had all rights to punish the slaves including murder. No complaints were preferred or heard by government in this regard²⁷. *Uzhiyam* meant 'forced labour without remuneration', was a kind of conscripted labour prevailed in Travancore in the nineteenth century. The government utilized the labour force of Ezhava, Shannar, Pulaya and Paraya for *Uzhiyam* works. All these caste centric and obscurantist socio-economic system was maintained by Travancore government which basically functioned under Brahminical hegemony.

The nineteenth century was a period of social reform movement in India. In Travancore social reform movements started in the first half of nineteenth century. Backward class movement of Kerala in general and Travancore in particular belonged to the transitional category. The clearest determinant of transitional movement was an absence of anglicized individuals among its leaders and a lack of concern with adjusting its concepts and programmes to the colonial world²⁸. The backward class movements in Travancore were indigenous social dissents which were led by social reforms like Vaikunda Swamikal, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Vakkam Maulavi, Poykayil Yohannan etc. One of the important features of backward class movement is the opposition, conflict and protest that mark the relationship of the backward classes with the forward classes²⁹. In Travancore if some of the social reformers used philosophical and ideological mode of struggle, some others followed the method that was physical force for social changes.

In Travancore, the socio-reform movement was inaugurated by Vaikundaswamikal. He founded an organization called *samatvasamajam*. He was very much critical in his approach towards Travancore rulers and colonial agents. What he wanted was a caste less society. His activities very much influenced in the upper cloth rebellion in southern Travancore. One of his disciples was Thycadu Ayyaguru. He was more as a saint than as a social reformer. Though Ayyaswamiklal was not directly involved in the socio-religious reform movement of Kerala, he played an important and decisive role in this regard by preparing the ground work for the activities of Sri Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal and Ayyankali³⁰. Chattampi Swamikal and Sri Narayana Guru learnt yoga from Ayya Guru. It is quite evident that the popular principle of Sri Narayana Guru 'Oru Jathi, Oru Matham, Oru Daivam Manushyanu' (One caste, one religion and one god for man) was the translation of Ayya Swamikal's doctrine 'Ulakathil ore oru Jathi Thaan, Ore oru Mathamthan, Ore oru Kadavulthaan'³¹. Sree Narayanaguru initiated social reform movement in Travancore through the consecration of Siva idol at Aruvipuram. This act shook the very foundation of Brahmin orthodoxy and religious hegemony in Travancore. He worked for the education of the depressed caste people and emphasised the need for industrialization. He founded the SNDP Yogam for the uplift of Exhavas in 1903. In most of the socio-political struggles in the twentieth century the Yogam played a decisive role in Travancore. It was under the auspices of Sri Narayana Guru Dr.Palpu initiated the Ezhava Memorial in 1896. The Malayali Memorial of 1891 was only beneficial to the Nayar community. What Dr.Palpu demanded was education and government employment for Exhavas in Travancore. But Travancore government did not act favourably. One of the important results of these social struggles was creation of so many public spaces for discussion that gradually paved the way for the expansion of public sphere in Travancore.

Caste assertion was the notable feature of various depressed communities in Travancore in the early decades of twentieth century. Followed by the SNDP Yogam of Ezhava community, Sri.Ayyankali founded the Sadhujana Paripala Sangam in 1907. The main activities of the Sangam was to organize meetings on some hill side and educate people their rights and duties. By bravely violating the caste rules which denied lower caste entry into public roads and market places, the movements sought to subvert the symbolic world of 'jati mariyada'³². Caste assertion and the rise caste organizations compelled the Travancore government

to take some favourable steps for the depressed sections. As a part of it, the Travancore government nominated Kumaran Asan as a member to represent the Ezhavas in the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly. In 1912 Ayyankali was nominated to represent the Pulayas. In the Assembly Kumaranasan pointed out the disabilities of the Ezhavas and requested more opportunities in education. In response to it separate schools for Ezhavas had been opened by the government. The untiring efforts of Ayyankali bore fruit in 1907 and in 1910 two orders were issued by Travancore government permitting the Avarnas' entry in schools. Even though the government issued two orders favourably for avarnas, the savarna officials were reluctant to implement it. So it remained in red tape. This resulted in so many clashes between Pulayas and caste Hindus in places like Ooruttambalam, Pullad etc. At the same time the number of Avarna children who got admission in government schools tremendously increased.

The changing economic scenario and the social struggles enhanced both the economic and cultural capital of the depressed section in Travancore. Though the Travancore government introduced some reforms for the education of the avarnas, the social taboos like untouchability remained unabated. It remained as a great impediment in their forward march towards civic rights. The SNDP Yogam was the first organizations which stood against untouchability and demanded temple entry. T.K.Madhavan who took up the lead of the Yogam criticized the moderate policies of SNDP Yogam. He initiated the anti-untouchability agitation in Travancore. The Civic Rights Movement was the first movement led by Madhavan in 1919. It was to get employment in Revenue Department. It should be noted in this context that apart from the Avarnas in the Hindu community, the Christians and Muslims too were denied of appointment in the Land Revenue Department in Travancore state on the pretext that it administered temples or Devaswams to which non-caste Hindu and non-Hindu were denied the right of entry³³. E.J.Johns was another leader of the movement. The SNDP Yogam succeeded in launching a wide propaganda for the movement. The leaders of the movement organised the Civic Right League. The Civic Right League submitted a memorial signed by 21 members from the three different communities. In response to the representation made by the leaders of the league two separate, Revenue and Devaswam Departments were created in Travancore in April 1922 by a Royal Proclamation which provided for the bifurcation of the existing Land Revenue Department³⁴. The success of the movement increased the popularity and charisma of T.K.Madhavan.

T.K.Madhavan who led the anti-untouchability agitation in Travancore linked the social struggle in Travancore with Indian National Movement. The finest example of anti untouchability agitation in Travancore was the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924-25. Even before this, T.K.Madhavan and Sahodaran Ayyappan made some attempts against untouchability. For example, in 1920 Madhavan himself went beyond the restrictive notice boards on a road near the Vaikom temple and announced it to the district magistrate. Similarly Sahodaran Ayyappan and Kumaran Asan walked along the approach roads at Vaikom in 1922. In 1921, T.K.Madhavan met Mahatma Gandhi and conveyed his idea of temple entry. Though he was not a congress member, he attended the Kakinada Congress Session of Indian National Congress to popularize his activities against untouchability. In the meeting, he discussed the issues of temple entry and

untouchability with Congress leaders like Maulana Muhammed Ali, C.R.Das, Motilal Nehru and Acharya Ray. A resolution was passed for the removal of untouchability. It was after the Kakinada Congress Session that Madhavan had great faith in congress and became a member of it³⁵. The Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee met at Eranakulam in 1924 and formed an anti untouchability committee to work for the removal of untouchability. In the meeting, it was decided to launch Vaikom Satyagraha. A committee was formed under the leadership of K.Kelappan. It was the Vaikom Satyagraha which was launched in the year 1924 and which went on until the end of the year 1925 that drew the attention of the whole of India to the problem of untouchability in Travancore³⁶. After a month long propaganda on 30th March, 1924 the launching of Satyagraha was decided. In the mean time some of the leaders in SNDP Yogam preferred conversion as a deterrent for combating untouchability. C.Kesavan, C.V.Kunhiraman, Sahodaran Ayyappan and Ayyakutti Judge were prominent among them. C.Krishnan and Sahodaran Ayyappan were in favour of conversion to Buddhism. C.V.Kunhiraman expressed his willingness in favour of conversion into Christianity³⁷. But T.K.Madhavan was against conversion.

The Vaikom Satyagraha which was launched in 1924 got the support of so many caste Hindus. K.Kelappan, K.P.Kesava Menon, Mannathu Padmanabhan, Changanasery Parameswara Pillai, C.V.Kunjiraman Nair, A.K.Pillai etc were prominent among them. Such social cohesiveness appeared in the Hindu order much before 1932 and the best manifestation of it was the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 -25, when at the call of Gandhiji, upper caste Hindus who used to observe rigidity of the caste rules began to admit the social claims of the lower castes in a humble, penitent and religious spirit³⁸. On the very first day of the Satyagraha, Kunhappi, a Pulaya, Bahuleyan, an Ezhava and Govinda Paniker, a Nair were sent by the committee to walk along the approach road of Vaikom temple. Except Govinda Panicker, the other two satyagrahis were arrested by the police. T.K.Madhavan toured all over Kerala and collected a large number of volunteers and funds for the satyagraha³⁹. T.K.Madhavan and K.P.Kesava Menon offered satyagraha on the ninth day but both of them were arrested. Soon satyagraha gained all India fame and leaders like E.V.Ramaswamy Naicker, the leader of Dravida Kazhagam and Akali leaders from Punjab came to Vaikom. One of the highlights of the satyagraha was the savana Jatha organised under the leadership of Mannathu Padmanabhan, by the caste Hindu who supported the movement⁴⁰. They submitted a memorandum before the Regent Sethu Lakshmi Bai. As per the request of T.K. Madhavan Mahatma Gandhi came to Vaikom in 1925. He held discussions with the conservative groups who opposed the struggles like Indanthuruthi Nambudiri. But the discussion did not bring out any positive result. Unfortunately Gandhiji made a statement that it was a struggle to remove evil practices in Hindu religion so the non Hindus should refrain from it. This statement discouraged the efforts of pioneer congress leaders like Barrister George Joseph. This decision reduced the scope of the satyagraha. But Mahatma Gandhi's charisma gave great fillip to the satyagraha. The police and the reactionaries followed a policy of suppression. Many satyagrahas were wounded and some among them were imprisoned. Mahatma Gandhi held discussion with Regent Sethu Lakshmi Bai. As a result the avarnas got permission to walk along the approach roads except the road along the Kizhakkenada⁴¹. Then the satyagrahis continued satyagraha in the Kizhakkenada. But later Mahatma

Gandhi advised the leaders to repeal satyagraha and then Vaikom Satyagraha came to an end. Nevertheless, the unvarnished story of the problems encountered during the Vykom campaign—a major and early effort to develop a practical technique for groups collectively to fight for justice without violence—discloses insights more useful than the enthusiastic, roseate tale that mistakenly spread to North America, Europe and elsewhere.⁴²

Conclusion

Vaikam Satyagraha was a popular struggle occurred in Travancore in 1924 which received all India attention. The movement was started as a part of Indian National Congress' anti-untouchability agitation pursued after the Kakkinada Congress session in 1923. It was the first movement in Travancore which was linked with Indian freedom struggle. Mahatma Gandhi directly involved in the Satyagraha. The transition from feudalism to capitalism occurred in Travancore mainly due to colonial intervention brought about great structural changes in the social fabric of Travancore in the nineteenth century. The decline of Nair dominants started and depressed community like Ezhavas, Nadars etc. economically empowered. Once they economically empowered, they started agitation for securing their basic rights like education, employment in public service, mobility through public road etc. Vaikom Satyagraha got all India support particularly from the people of Tamilnadu, Punjab etc.

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