

Socio – Economic Basis of Nationalism in Travancore

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Abstract

Nationalism in Travancore compared to pan Indian Nationalist movement emerged only in a later period. Though there are traces of sub-nationalistic tendencies in the eighteenth and nineteenth century in Travancore. Nationalism in the modern sense of the term emerged since the second decade of twentieth century. Great development in the field of both English and vernacular education, the spread of social reform movements, the rise of a new working class, the rise of an indigenous capitalist class and the growth of print media were responsible for the sprouting of nationalism in Travancore in the nineteenth century social reform movements became a strong force for social change throughout India. The decadent, archaic and caste ridden social structure underwent a remarkable change during this period. Social movements paved the way for caste assertion and the formation of caste organisations. Mention may be made in the context about the role of SNDP Yogam one of the pioneer caste organisations in Travancore in the Indian national movement. The penetration of British capitalism in Travancore gave impetus to the beginning of trade union and working class movements. Side by side with the working class movements' leftist movements also developed in Travancore. Both Indian national congress and Communist party spear headed National movements in Travancore.

Key words:- Nationalism, Colonialism , Capitalism, Public Sphere, Freedom.

Introduction

The Indian National Movement was one of the greatest mass movements in World History. It was fully committed to a polity based on representative democracy and civil liberties. From its beginning in the last quarter of nineteenth century, it struggled for the introduction of representative government in India and paid nearly as much attention to the defence of civil liberties, especially the freedom of speech and the press, as to the promotion of its other economic and political policies¹. Similarly, the sprouting of nationalism could be seen ever since the beginning of nineteenth century in the princely state, Travancore. As in all India context, the nationalist movement in Travancore was mainly focused against colonial domination. But in Travancore people also raised the banner of revolt against princes. The princes as pillars and the supporters of the British Raj came in to conflict with the people of the state who wanted to over throw both the monarchical and colonial order². The British colonialism began in Travancore mainly after the establishment of a trading factory at Vizhinjam. Ever since the arrival of Captain Martin Pring at Vizhinjam in 1618, the English East India Company had been evincing an intense desire to secure for themselves trading settlements on the coast of Travancore and more active participation in the pepper trade³. Gradually British trade expanded throughout Travancore and Angengo Factory became their strategic point in Travancore. This was many years before Job Chernok began to entertain dreams of securing Calcutta for his masters⁴. One of the remarkable features of

British trade in Travancore was expansion of Capitalism up on a feudal society. Travancore economy was intertwined with the international capitalist economy during this period. It led to the appropriation of resources from Travancore. This appropriation is accomplished through the action of the immanent laws of capitalist production, through the centralization of capitals⁵. Thus the capital penetration paved the way for an economic transition in Travancore from feudalism to capitalism. Gradually Travancore became a periphery of British Colonial capitalist system

The capitalist penetration was basically contradictory to the feudal economic structure routed in cast hegemony in Travancore. This led to a number of conflicts between the agents of British capitalism and native landlords in Travancore. The most important among them was a revolt occurred at Attingal in 1721. In the revolt the feudal lords succeeded in defeating the British military. Marthandavarma who was then the prince of Neyyatinkara signed a treaty with British in 1723 to avoid future conflicts. It was the first important negotiation between Travancore and the British. The defeat of Dutch in the battle of Kolachal in 1741 became a boon to the expansion of British colonialism in Travancore. The continuous threat of Tippu Sulthan up on Travancore compelled her to sign a treaty with English East India Company to avail protection in 1795 A.D. In 1805 another subsidiary treaty was signed with the British. Veluthampy Dalava played a crucial role on behalf of Travancore in signing the treaty. As per the treaty Travancore had to pay eight lakhs rupees as per annum as tribute to the Company. Coln. Macaulay who became the resident of Travancore used this subsidiary treaty to minimize the political sovereignty of Travancore. As a part of it he modernised Travancore militia, the Nair brigade. He appointed a number of new British officials as commanders of the Brigade. It was a humiliation to the Nair brigade and they decided to fight against the British. In Kerala, a similar revolt with more popular orientation and content was piloted by the sepoys of Travancore in 1804⁶. The revolt was mainly against British military domination and subsidiary alliance. On 16th November 1804 an open mutiny of the Brigade broke out and their object was the assassination of The Diwan and the British Resident. But the mission failed and the conspirators were caught and executed. Veluthampi who was then the Diwan of Travancore extended full support to the Resident. The mutiny in the Nair Brigade was the first resistance against British imperialism in Travancore. One can trace the beginning of a kind of sub-nationalism in the mutiny. Colonial oppression gradually raised its ugly head against its ally Veluthampi. The policies of Diwan and Resident were typically contradictory which compelled the Diwan to unfurl the banner of revolt against colonialism. Veluthampi tried to get the support of the people through the Kundara Proclamation in 1809 but his attempt against colonialism met with a tragic end. But his revolt became a catalyst in the development of nationalism in Travancore. It declares, Veluthampi as a man of deep patriotism and exceptional ability⁷.

The mutiny in Nair Brigade and Veluthampi's resistance movement occurred at a time when British capitalism expanded its tentacles in Travancore economy. The existing feudal administrative structure always stood as a barrier for the capitalist penetration. As a result Coln. Munro, the new Resident introduced a number of reforms to modernise the administrative system. Common administration, laws and judicial structure and the common system of education further contributed to the country's unification⁹. These reforms were undertaken in a period when, still a colonial regime operated within the centralised regime's creation of trade monopolies. As a part of the first step in destroying feudalism he confiscated the land of 378 temples in Travancore and converted it in to sarkar land. After that he conducted surveys to locate natural resources for exploitation. In the first quarter of the 19th century the imperialist government occupied itself with two major concerns (1) An enquiry in to and a detailed survey of the biotic resources of the various colonies of the empire and a quest to establish the means by which these resources could be rendered accessible to the European capitalists for further capitalist accumulation¹⁰. Thus Coln. Munro's administrative reforms shattered the feudal economy of Travancore and it facilitated the Capitalist ventures of British colonial agents. Moreover Munro abolished so many cast dues and extended full support to the LMS and CMS Missionaries in

their proselytization activities. The London Mission Society (LMS) established their head quarter at Nagarcoil in Southern Travancore, now in Tamil Nadu. They always maintained a good rapport with the British residents and the colonial government. There are so many correspondences, which are even now available in Kerala State Archives reveal the political nexus between missionaries and British colonial government. The CMS had its head quarter at Kottayam. Both these missionary groups persistently worked for the abolition of slavery in Travancore. Slavery was an in human practice in Travancore started in the medieval period and continued up to the second half of nineteenth century. When the missionaries were busy with their proselytization mission, the colonial agents were busy in opening plantations in Travancore. As slavery existed in such a way that the tenants were tied to the land of landlords.

There was a shortage of labour force mainly due to the relations of production in the feudal system. It was in this context the missionaries' compelled British colonial government to interfere in this matter to abolish this inhuman practice. But the landlords in Travancore were powerful enough to prevent it the support of the State. It continued until the second half of nineteenth century and after that the mounting pressure from the part of both the missionaries and the colonial government became more and more powerful and finally the Travancore Government issued a proclamation for the abolition of slavery. The result was many number of slaves who were already tied to the land got freedom and they got employment in British plantations. Later, the exploitation in plantations gradually compelled the workers to involve in trade union movements and Indian national movement.

The processes of World Capitalism entered an altogether new phase in the mid nineteenth century with the 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 market¹¹. The colonial masters brought technology, technocrats and capital to the colonies. In 1865 Travancore entered in a trade treaty called the Inter Portal Trade Convention. The essence of the treaty was that Travancore was required to follow the British Indian tariff rates for all its imports and exports¹². It gave powerful blow to the indigenous trading class and the Travancore state lost the substantial amount of revenue. The British capitalists invested huge capital in plantations in Travancore. Out of 74616 acres of tea more than 70000 are owned by the Europeans and only about 4000 acres by Indians, and out of 61986 acres of Rubber, about 45000 acres in the hands of the Europeans and 17000 in the hands of Indians¹³. The very process of the expansion of the World economy accentuates the process of peripheralisation, compelling the majority of the people to participate within the global division of labour¹⁴. Thus British capitalist penetration led to the 'development of under development' in Travancore. This adverse economic condition instilled nationalism in the minds of the people. Moreover, terribly oppressive condition in modern plantations and factories, a fourteen hour working day, low pay, miserable housing and complete absence of social security-for long kept their attention focused on the trade union struggle against their employers, Indian or foreign¹⁵.

The intervention of capitalism not only altered the economy of Travancore but also it brought about lasting impact in the society of Travancore. It was the British Missionaries who struggled hard for the abolition of slavery in Travancore. They introduced the English education and the medical aid to attract the converts. These measures indirectly liberated some sections of the people in Travancore. For example, the English educated Shannar from the schools of LMS missionaries got employment in the plantations in Travancore and Srilanka. One explanation might be that in the situation of 1870 many people were able to survive without the help of mission, as large scale employment was offered by the public works department and the coffee estates in neighboring hills¹⁶. Similarly among the Ezhavas of Travancore the demand for coir and coir products in foreign markets economically empowered them. The British Capitalists opened a number of companies in Alapuzha for the production of coir. The finance capitalism also gave opportunities to the

people from Pulaya and Paraya communities. They got employment in plantation industry and it exposed them to a money economy. Thus they were gradually freed from the shackles of feudal lords. The European contacts brought the Syrian Christians nearer a capitalist economy¹⁷. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the collapse of feudalism in Travancore. This compelled the Travancore Government to pass land legislations like *Pandara pattam* Declaration and *Janmi kudiyan* Declaration. The Nairs who were a prominent feudal class began to decline during this period because they were not fully linked with finance capitalism. In trade, industry, transport etc. the Christians, Ezhavas and Muslim communities surpassed the Nair community¹⁸.

The introduction of English education produced an intelligentsia in Travancore in the last quarter of the 19th century. For example Changanacherry. Parameswara Pillai, Dr Palpu, T. K. Madhavan, Swadeshbhimani Ramakrishna Pillai etc were a few among them. The spread of modern ideas created a new intelligentsia imbued with modern Democratic, rational and national outlook¹⁹. Apart from the impact of English education numerous indigenous dissents emerged in Travancore. For example, the revival activities of Vaikunda Swamikal, Sri Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, Vakkam Maulavi, Poikayil Yohannan etc. not only weakened the cast centric society but also imbibed civic sense and democratic values among the depressed sections. The people who were imbibed with these new ideas later actively involved in freedom struggle and nationalism. Mention may be made in the context about the publishing of many number of newspapers and journals in Travancore. These Newspapers criticised the autocratic activities of the Government and popularized the idea of Nationalism and freedom. As a reaction against it the Government followed a policy of suppression up on the Press. For instance, Swadeshbhimani Ramakrishna Pillai was exiled from Travancore for writing an article against the misrule of Diwan Rajagopalachari.

The structural changes both in the economy and society gradually expanded the public sphere in Travancore. It was due to the spread of liberal ideas and the influence of social reformers people clamored for social and political freedom in the beginning of twentieth century. The Indian National Congress and the Communist Party which were already involved in national movement gave space to the people of Travancore. But the emergence of nationalism as culture and the desire for integration with the British Indian main stream national life prompted the people of the state to demand the extension of political activities of Indian National Congress in their states also²⁰. The S N D P movement which had already started democratization activities welcomed the initiatives of the Congress and linked the movement with the national freedom movement. Madhavan relied on the activities of Indian National Congress and the National movement in order to mobilize hundreds and thousands of Ezhavas (approximately 6.5 lakhs) in Travancore and to make them assert their community²¹. They also started Anti-Untouchability agitations and temple entry movements under the leadership of Mahathma Gandhi. For example, Vaikam satyagraha, Guruvayoor satyagraha etc. The Abstention movement led by the Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims against the Travancore Government expanded the horizon of political freedom in Travancore. The Leftist movements in the state absorbed people mainly from the so-called slave castes. The party gave space to these people and organized them through Peasant movements and Trade Union movements. The victory of Communist Party in Punnappra Vayalar against autocracy was mainly due to the efforts of the depressed sections. The Travancore government followed the same line of repression as the British Government followed against freedom fighters. The victory of secular credentials was another notable aspect of the national upsurge in Travancore. All sections of people without having any caste or communal discord fought against both the Government and the British.

Conclusion

The Indian nationalism was the by product of so many regional national movements. In Travancore there were sub- nationalistic tendencies since eighteenth century against British colonialism. Veluthampi Dalwa piloted a revolt against British like Kerala Varma Pazhassi in Malabar. The Attingal revolt of 1721 was the first organised struggle against British colonialism in Travancore. After signing the subsidiary treaty of 1805, the British government opened the Travancore economy for capitalism and society for missionaries. Plantation Industry, free trade etc. helped the British to drain huge profit from Travancore. The social movements in Travancore indirectly helped the growth of national consciousness. Travancore was the top most princely state in British India in the publishing of print media. The linkage of social movements with national movements helped a lot in popularising movements like Vaikam Sathyagraha, Abstention movement, the struggle for responsible government in Travancore and Punnapra Vayalar agitation throughout India.

Notes

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