

Stratification and Evils in the 19th Century Kerala Society

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Introduction

Stratification is the most fundamental characteristics of human society and no society is completely homogenous one. The difference among individuals and racial groups is the common feature of the society. It does not imply that one group or an individual is superior to the other, or that it enjoys more privileges than the other. In other words, difference does not imply ranking or inequality. The structure of Indian social system is very complex. Caste, religious identities, various ethnic diversities and linguistic varieties are responsible for the complexity of Indian social system. Among them caste dominated as an important force and became the basic institution of the society. Caste is treated as an institutionalized system and it is the unique feature of the Hindu religion. Caste also influenced all socio-economic activities of the people. It is everywhere as the unit of social action and controlled all public and private activities. The institutionalized inequality and its cultural and economic co-ordinates are indeed the factors which render caste, a unique system of social stratification in India.

Social Stratification

Kerala, as an entity distinct from the rest of South India, came to acquire its socio-cultural identity at the beginning of the 9th century. Ideas and institutions typically Kerala started crystallizing themselves and a single state structure presided over most of the present day Kerala.¹The social formation of Kerala evolved from a semi-tribal system, which developed multiple forms of subsistence such as hunting and food gathering, animal husbandry, primitive cultivation, plough agriculture and primitive commodity production.² The plough agriculture was the superior form of

¹ J.S. Grewal, (ed), *The State and Society in Medieval India*, p.248.

² Rajan Gurukkal, "Forms of Production and Forces of Change in Ancient-Tamil Society" *Studies in History*, pp.159-175.

production in terms of technology and productivity.³ The society of Kerala became class structured and the dissolution of tribal chiefdom began anticipating formation of the state with a new agrarian system articulating its polity.⁴ The relations of production dominated the society, which was a long institutional process involving the proliferation of occupational specialization and its ordering into a hierarchy.

The role of the Aryan 'element' in transforming Kerala society cannot be exaggerated. The Aryan migration of the South complicated the entire structure of the society of Kerala. Many strands can be identified there; they also interacted among themselves and with the elements they came across in the process of their migration and settlement. Therefore the term "Aryan" used occasionally in the sources should not be understood in a racial sense at all. It is more important in South India, where the Aryan/Dravidian question is more a matter of political passion than of academic interest. The term Aryan is used to mean the groups of people who came originally from North India with the Sanskrit/Prakrit language and the Sanskrit way of life.⁵

In addition to that, the hierarchical social structure of Kerala was also formed strictly on land-based occupations. In the hierarchical social order, the landlords, who consisted of the ruling class *patanayar* who varied as *naduvazhies* of degree of prominence) on the top of the social hierarchy. The Brahmins and the corporate body *ur/sabha* were at the top, their leaseholders known as *karalar*, who were mainly artisans and craftsmen in the middle, the primary producers or *adiyalar* were at the bottom of the society.⁶ Therefore, in the social structure of Kerala, the non-cultivating landlords were at the top, whereas the tillers of the land were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The actual tillers constituted the major servile group in Kerala and their privilege was only the *adiyanma* or servility. The servile groups were always attached to the agricultural lands and they were transacted along with land as things. The landlords ideologically and physically suppressed these servile groups and accumulated the surplus wealth from the *adiyars*.⁷

The society of Kerala was stratified into various gradations like 'udayavar', 'uralar', 'karalar' and 'adiyar' etc. Important factor in the social organization of Kerala appears to have been the rise and growth of several Brahmin settlements known as *Ur* and *Grammam*, which had sprung up

³ *Ibid.*, p.306.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.133.

⁵ Kesavan Veluthat, *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala*, p. 22

⁶ Rajan Gurukkal, "Forms of Production and Forces of Change in Ancient-Tamil Society", *op.cit.*, p.71.

⁷ *Ibid.*

in the post-Sangam period.⁸In the 8th century A.D, vast areas of land had been brought under the plough for the cultivation of rice, and a huge chunk of tribal population was transformed into peasants. It resulted in the production of unprecedented surplus and through its unequal distribution, a crystallization of social stratification.⁹ The Brahmin corporations and organizations around the temples initiated the process, which influenced the economy and society of Kerala.

The Brahmins were organized into four *kalakams* or *ghatka* under the leadership of Perumcellur, Payyannur, Paravur and Chengannur.¹⁰ Each of the four *grammoms*, there appointed a *rakshapurusha* or protector for three years. When the Brahmins realized that the system became corrupted or broken down its arrangements, the Brahmins assembled at Tirunavay and decided that they must have a king and entrusted the work to the four *kalakams*. Therefore the Brahmins brought the Kshatriya Prince and Princes from outside and made the Prince to the *Perumal* or King of *Malanatu* and married the Princes to a Brahmin and decided that the offspring shall be a Kshatriya. The ruler was under the habitual tutelage of the Brahminical establishment. The ruler had a council of Brahmin advisors called '*nalutali*'. The references to the *nalutali*, show the power and influence of the Aryan Brahmin settlements and it is further elucidated by the reverential attitude shown by these Kshatriya kings towards Brahmins and orthodox Hindu institutions.¹¹

The Namboothiris of Kerala were mainly divided into Vedic and non-Vedic, on the basis of their occupation. There are a number of references about the Vedic and *Luakika* Brahmins in the Sangam period.¹² Among them, the Vedic Brahmins were intensely religious and their profession was strictly temple-oriented. The non-Vedic group performed several ordinary professions. There should have been social or caste distinctions at the base, otherwise exogamous character of their social relationship would not have originated the non-Vedic group. They were not obliged to study to the Vedas or to lead a life of Vedism.¹³ It is believed that the non-Vedic group among the Namboothiri might have belonged to the first set of Aryans. The non-Vedic group also constitutes the physician class of the eight '*illoms*' called '*Ashtavaidians*', Sastrangkar and the Gramini Namboothiri.

The scheme of division and sub-division of the Namboothiris is significant and it helped the Namboothiris to organize themselves into a powerful aristocracy or oligarchy. The Brahmins

⁸M.G.S.Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala.*, p.262.

⁹Kesavan Veluthat, *op.cit.*, p.251.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, p.20.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid*

tactically re-organized the system of knowledge and resources, which helped them to remain the dominated sections of the society. The ideological hegemony of the Brahmins made them as the determinant force in the political system of Kerala.¹⁴ Politically, the Brahmins enjoyed an important role and always advised the rulers in administrative matters.¹⁵

In Kerala, even before the rise of monarchy, the Namboothiris might have established their settlements and also became the real owners of the land, which they occupied. The epigraphic records also describe the land grants to the Brahmins by the rulers of Kerala. In this, land was known as *devadhanam* or a gift to the God and *brahmasvam* or the Brahmin property.¹⁶ Therefore, the Namboothiri Brahmins were one of the early settlers of Kerala.¹⁷ After receiving the land as *bramadeyas* and *devadanas* and other privileges, the Brahmins established themselves as a considerable force in the society and the economy of Kerala.¹⁸

There were three phases of habitation found in Kerala. The first phase was from 4000 B.C to 1800 B.C; during this period, the aboriginal classes lived in Kerala. In the second phase from 1800 B.C to 700 A.D, it was the mixed groups of aborigines and the Dravidians that lived there. In the last phase which started from 700 A.D, the Aryans mingled with the natives, but it was not like the mingling of the aboriginal classes with the Dravidians.¹⁹ Therefore it can be safely assumed that the society of Kerala is the product of a long and complex historical process.

Various evil practices in the Kerala society

The caste system achieved its highest degrees of elaboration in Kerala, while at the same time ritual ranking prevailed and the social evils like untouchability, unapproachability, pollution and slavery were well established in the state. Therefore, Vivekananda described the state as the mad house of caste. E.M.S. Namboothiripad compared the caste system with the European slavery, because both stratified the society into different categories.²⁰

The society of Kerala was segregated on the basis of caste and untouchability. The root cause behind the idea of segregation was the idea of *teendal* or pollution. There were several social evils

¹⁴Rajan Gurukkal and M.R.Raghava Varier, *op.cit.*, pp.255-256.

¹⁵Kesavan Veluthat, Organization and Administration of the Brahman Settlements in Kerala in the later Cera Period- A.D-800-1100,-*Journal of Kerala Studies, Vol.IV, 1977, Part II&III*, p.1870.

¹⁶Kesavan Veluthat, *op.cit.*, p.122.

¹⁷P.P.Narayanan Namboothiri, *op.cit.*, p.122.

¹⁸Kesavan Veluthat, *op.cit.*, p.63.

¹⁹N.K. Jose, *Pulaya Lehala*, p.33.

²⁰E.M.S Namboothiripad, *Keralam Malyalikalude Matribhoomi*, p.65.

such as untouchability, unapproachability, unseeability, pollution and slavery that existed in the society of Kerala. In Kerala, the concept of pollution was refined to unique complexity and was capable of being transmitted not nearly on touch, but from a distance.²¹ Pollution was in two way-untouchability and unapproachability. The first was the prevention to touch another person and the second was to keep certain distance to the high caste people. If a high caste was polluted by the *avarnas*, the *savarnas* had the right to kill the *avarnas* whereas the high caste can purified by the bath.²² The untouchables had to cover their mouth with one hand while speaking to the caste Hindus; otherwise it would cause pollution to the higher castes.²³ If any low caste violated the law of distance, otherwise he must kill on the spot with impurity.²⁴

Untouchability was a unique phenomenon of the Hindu society. The term untouchability meant *teendal* in Tamil and *pula* in Malayalam, which generally meant 'pollution'. The untouchability was legitimized by the Dharmasastras, therefore the practice was followed by each and every member of the society in their day-to-day life.²⁵ The Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas, Vedas, Nayadis were the important untouchable castes in Travancore. They were denied from all fundamental rights of the human beings.²⁶

Untouchability is not simply a caste reflection or caste phenomenon but is one of the underlying socio-economic factors of semi feudal relations. The social oppression of the untouchables had religious sanctions. They have been the victims of brutal exploitation, local isolation, residential segregation, economic deprivation, political subjugation and cultural degradation.²⁷ In the pre-Capital agriculture society, untouchability was used to maintain the exploitative relation between the feudal lords and the serfs, the tenants and the slaves, the croppers and the bonded labourers.²⁸

Unapproachability was another social evil rigidly practiced in Kerala. There was an unwritten law about the approachable distance of the people. Different travelers of Kerala have given detailed accounts of the system of unapproachability. Each caste had their approachable distance to other castes. The Ezhavas must keep 36 paces from the Brahmins and 12 paces from the Nairs, while a

²¹J.H.Hutton, *op.cit.*, pp.79-85.

²²N.K.Jose, *Pulaya Lehala*, p.77.

²³Samuel.V.T, *One Caste, One Religion, One God*, p.23.

²⁴B.Sobhanan, *Ramavarma of Travancore*, p.72.

²⁵M.Nisar and Meena Kandasamy,*op.cit.*,p.270.

²⁶A.R Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, p.263.

²⁷Manu Bhaskar, 'Dalit Movement in Kerala', *Journal of Kerala Studies*, p.139.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p.143.

Kaniyan would keep the distance to a Namboothiri at 24 paces.²⁹ Samuel Mateer mentions that the Shannars must keep 36 paces from the Brahmins and 12 paces from the Nairs. The Pulayas must keep 96 paces from the Brahmins.³⁰

Among the higher castes, according to Wilson, Nairs must not come within 3 paces of the Namboothiri Brahmins.³¹ In the Malabar Gazetteer, C.A. Innes writes that the artisans must keep 24 feet from the Brahmins and the Nayadi must keep 74 paces from the Brahmins. A. Ayyappan gives a scale of distance to the pollution for various castes. According to him, a Nair keeps 32 paces, Cheruman 64 and Nayadi from 74 to 124 paces from the Brahmins.³² All of these references show that the untouchables had to stand at a prescribed arithmetical distance from the higher castes. Even the law of justice was totally against the slaves. The untouchable could not enter into the courts for justice; he had to shout from the appointed distance and take his chance of being heard and receiving attention. A policeman sometimes stood halfway between the untouchable witness or petitioner and the high caste magistrate to transact questions and answers.

Unseeability was also practiced in Kerala, which swept away the low caste from the mainstream of the society. The high castes always used the term 'po', 'po', in times of their travel on the public roads which was the warning to the low castes to move away from the public road. When they heard the sound 'po', 'po', the low castes used to run away from the roads and hide in the bushes of the roadsides. Some of the low castes were not allowed to appear before the public in the day time, because they feared that their sight would cause pollution to the higher castes.³³ In some places, they had to go seeking shelter in the jungles immediately on seeing caste Hindus. M.S. Appadurai Iyer writes that the unpleasant sound 'hoi', 'hoi', used to be repeated in order to avoid pollution from seeing the caste Hindus.³⁴

The polluting castes in Kerala are Ezhavas, Shannars, Pulayas, Parayas etc. The low castes also practiced pollution among themselves. The different castes of slaves kept a distinction between each other and did not marry or eat together. The Pulayan was to remain 10 paces from the Vettowan, the Parayan, the same distance from the Pulayan and the Nayadee, who was not a slave, but of a caste

²⁹Francis Day, *op.cit.*, p.322.

³⁰Samuel Mateer, *Land of Charity*, p.32.

³¹Wilson, *Indian Caste*, Vol.II, p.74.

³²A. Aiyappan, *Social and Physical Anthropology of the Nayadis of Malabar*, p.18.

³³J.H. Hutton, *op.cit.*, p.82.

³⁴Edgar Thurston, *op.cit.*, vol.VI, p.51.

lower than the lowest of the slaves, 12 paces from Parayan³⁵. “They meet and work together on all working days, but on leaving work the Vettowans invariably bathe before they return to their houses or taste food. After bathing they utter the usual cry and warn the coming Pulayan to quit the road and retreat to the prescribed distance³⁶. The Ezhavas and Pulayas kept distance from each other like that and the Pulayas and Parayas also followed the rules of pollution among themselves.

The social evils such as *pulapedi*, *parapedi* and *mannapedi* that existed in Travancore were closely connected with the system of pollution. It is believed that the evil system was practiced once in a year in Kerala. *Mannapedi* was practiced in the Southern part of Kerala, whereas *pulapedi* and *parapedi* were practiced in the Northern part of Kerala. In this system, during the night of the Malayalam month *Karkidakam* (July-August), if a high caste woman, especially the Nair women, may touch or loudly said that she saw the higher caste woman, the woman would be polluted and she would be outcasted. She would have to go either to the Pulayan or Mannan, otherwise, she would be killed by her relatives. The first reference of *pulapedi* and *mannapedi* was found in the descriptions of Durate Barbosa. In 1696, Unnikerala Varma, the ruler of Venad, issued a Royal Proclamation ending the social evils of *pulapedi* and *mannapedi*.

In addition to these evils, the most degrading forms of caste-based and forced labour occupations in Kerala were *oozhiyam* and *viruthi*. 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 Kerala. 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.

³⁵K.Saradamony, ‘Slavery in Kerala in the 19th Century’, *Journal of Kerala Studies*,1974,p.456.

³⁶P. Sanal Mohan, *Modernity of Slavery*, p.128.

Viruthi also connotes the same practice under a different name. It was purely a land oriented system. *Viruthi* is an important tenure under the sirkar lands. Under this tenure, the holder did not have any permanent right over his land. The *viruthi* holders were known as *viruthikkars* and their service was known as *oozhiyam*. The *viruthi* holders paid several taxes to the government. During the times of exigencies, additional services were demanded from the poor ryots. Those *viruthikkars*, who failed to do the service, were severely punished. If a *viruthikkaran* failed to perform the prescribed duties for three times consecutively, without genuine reasons, he was irrevocably expelled from the land he possessed. The social status of the *viruthikkars* was in a better position compared to the low caste *oozhiyam* labourers. In the early period, the *viruthikkar* were obliged to render military services to the society because, they were primarily a military class. In lieu of their services, the *viruthikkars* were assigned tracts of land. But in the later period, the *viruthikkars* became mere suppliers of provisions and materials to the temple *uttupuras* and royal palace. In return of their services, the *viruthikkar* were paid certain *pathivu* or fixed rates which were below the market rates. There were different types of *viruthis* for different services in Travancore. The *viruthikkar* formed the lowest rung of the official hierarchy in Travancore. In the beginning stage, the system of *viruthi* was a fair contract, but later it lost its old vigour and elasticity. The socio-economic condition of the *viruthikkar* became worthless and miserable and therefore the system degenerated into a contract of semi-serfdom.

Conclusion

Therefore the society of Kerala during the 19th century stratified in different categories. The social evils such as slavery, bonded labour system, untouchability, unapproachability, unseeability and pollution prevailed in the Kerala society. In the early decades of the 20th century, the evil practices were questioned by the socio-religious reformers of Kerala. Finally, with their efforts, the social evils were abolished by the laws.

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