

# PERINAD MUTINY : GLIMPSES OF A FORLORN BUT NEVER FORGOTTEN HISTORICAL EPISODE

Lalini M, DR. KRISHNAKUMAR. A

## ABSTRACT

Perinad revolt is otherwise known as Kallumala Samaram, is a social movement or agitation led by the women of lower caste communities in Perinad region of Kerala. Perinad Mutiny has a significant position in the history of Kerala. The agitation was the direct response to the age long tradition of denying lower caste women to wear ornaments made of stone and broken glasses. Under the leadership of Ayyankali a group of women gathered in Perinad and showed the anger by throwing their stone ornaments. These stone ornaments were seen as the symbol of slavery and inferiority. This Paper focused on the Historical importance of Perinad Revolt.

**Key words :** Kallumala, Perinad, Ayithajathis, Kalland Mala, Slavery.

## Introduction

The various castes and communities of Kerala differentiated themselves by the peculiar dress they wore. The chief motive behind the furtherance of such practices as this was to the polluting distance and to reflect the symbolic power relation. In the case of women, this was more explicit, unlike the women of the lower caste, the Brahmin women were well dressed and they had an upper cloth. The barbarious and inhuman customs relating to the dress of women applied only to the lower castes. Brahmin women were wore collared blouses tied in front. Along with it, a lower garment was brought up across the breast and over the shoulders. They also enjoyed the privilege of wearing gold bracelets and ornaments. The Nair women had to content with a light cotton cloth which was worn loosely across the breast and over the shoulders. They also enjoyed the privilege of wearing gold bracelets and ornaments. The Nair women had to content with a light cotton cloth which was worn loosely across the breast and over the shoulder. But they had to remove the upper cloth in the presence of member of royal family front of the temple diety. There are several agitations took place against the caste ridden society. It was a larger agitation against the Brahmins and Nairs for the covering of the upper body of Pulaya women. Ayyankali as the Pulaya leader announced to the Pulaya Women to throw away their ornaments made of iron and glass pieces which were considered as the symbol of slavery during those days.

Perinadu revolt of south Travancore is an episode of great significance in the social history of Kerala. It was a struggle for achieving the right to wear a dress of one's choice. It was one of the first revolt of an untouchable community against the evil social customs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the first time in the history of Kerala, people fought bitterly and earnestly, and succeeded after shedding sweat and blood, in winning their rights and privileges to dress decently. The revolt for the right to cover bosom of low caste women of Travancore especially one of the Pulayas.

The cultural renaissance in Kerala actually began with the upper cloth rebellion like Perinadu revolt, which gave for the first time an ideology based on equality, social freedom and rationality to the untouchables to organized and agitate for their rights. It became a source of great strength for the backward classes to organize together and fight for their basic rights.

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the condition of the lower castes were extremely miserable and pathetic. They were forbidden the right to cover upper part of their body and were subjected to heavy taxation. Such burden some taxes as the poll taxes and head tax were levied on them.

Upward mobility of backward class could be achieved not only through education and breaking into the realms cordoned off by the hierarchical operations of caste system. A planned disruption of boundaries is made possible through a conscious mimesis of dominant caste life styles and thus approximating those very privileges unique to them. At the same time, discarding certain customs, traditions, and ways of dressing and adornments that symbolize the servitude and inferiority of a caste is another strong possibility of resistance and protest. Subordinate castes tried to fulfil their social aspiration by using an adornment sanctioned only for the use of dominant caste women. But discarding the Kalla and Mala, which is also known as Kallumala samaram shows the viability of a different strategy for articulating dissent and social aspiration. The women of pulaya caste discarded the Kalla and Mala, a caste symbol which they were expected to wear, thus inviting the ire of dominant castes.

Pulayar, Parayar, Kuravar, Malayar, Vedar and many such aythajathis or polluting castes were in the habit of wearing Kalla and Mala. There could be many reasons why they started using Kallumala. The use of Kallumala may have ritual reasons and it perhaps substituted the function of an upper garment.

People of these lower castes were treated as slaves and the masters could buy and sell them. Slavery was abolished in theory after a royal proclamation, prohibiting the purchase and sale of persons, was issued in 1811 by Rani Lakshmi Bai. But in practice, Pulayas, Parayas and such downtrodden castes were treated like cattle. They were not allowed to use new or clean clothes. Before wearing on, new clothes had to be smeared with soot to make them look dirty. As evident from the Royal proclamation of 1818, they could not use ornaments made of expensive metals such as gold and silver. Smooth stones and glass pieces were pierced and strung together to make the Kalla and Mala. Sometimes, this stone necklace even served the purpose of covering the breasts, since women of lower caste were not allowed to use any upper garments. Pulaya women used to wear earring shaped out of thin iron rods and iron bracelets and rings were their other adornments.

The accounts about the discarding of Kalla and Mala are found in many biographical works on Ayyankali. Ayyankali a social reformer and leader of Pulaya community found these ornaments to be explicit signs of slavery and subservience. He instructed the Pulaya women to stop wearing Kalla and Mala and to start wear blouse. Women in various places of Perinadu, Neyyatinkara, Cherumoodu, and nearby places removed these ornaments from their body and started using blouses. The discarding of Kalla and Mala provoked the dominant castes and triggered many atrocities against the pulaya women. Kollam and Neyyantinkara became storm centres of the conflict between Pulayas and dominant castes, especially Nairs and it led to a violent agitation in Perinadu.

The reports about the Perinadu incident in newspaper Mitavadi, blamed Pulayas for their violent incident. It became the need of the hour to bring about a change in the chaotic situation and pacify the conflicting caste groups in the region. Moreover, Pulayas under the leadership of Ayyankali wanted to get rid of the negative image of the community as perpetrators of violence which was an aftermath of the agitation in Perinadu. A Savarna Samudaya Sammelanam (a meeting of representatives from all communities) was suggested as panacea for the crisis in the region. At the same time, this meeting also was intended to be a clarion call for overcoming caste disabilities. The Sammelanam was meant to provide a platform for voicing the concerns and asserting the social rights of the downtrodden masses. It was during the meeting that Kalla and Mala was formally and somewhat ceremoniously discarded by the Pulaya women. The historical accounts of this meeting unravel various facets, strategies, aspects and nuances of protest and social aspiration.

The Savarana Samudhaya Sammelanam is a significant incident to be analysed with great sensitivity. The meeting which had a reconciliatory air about it was scheduled on December 10, 1915. Ayyankali suffered many hardships to make the meeting a reality. The police circle inspector of Kollam, Gopalaswami Pillai helped Ayyankali for obtaining the Dewans sanction. Finding a place for conducting this meeting was not an easy task. People refused to provide a venue for a meeting to be attended by untouchable Pulayas. Earlier, Ayyankali had to convene a meeting at Ernakulam in 1912 on a platform made by boats tied together in the backwaters. But at Kollam, he was luckier. Tarabhai, who owned a circus company allowed him to use the tent situated in the big carnival ground at Kollam. More than five thousand people belonging to subordinate castes crowded the tent, neatly dressed and apparently fearless. Many people of dominant castes had also come to participate in the grand event. The meeting was presided over by Changanaserry Prameswaram Pillai, one of the founder member of Nair Service Society and Mr. Raman Tambi gave an inaugural speech on the theme of unity and fraternity between communities and necessity of maintaining fellow-feeling and mutual empathy. The strong savarna presence among the audience and on the dais was noteworthy and indicative of the inclusive strategy of Ayyankali as far as avarna reforms were considered. He could elicit support from enlightened people belonging to dominant castes that had upheld a hostile stand against the Pulaya community from every early time.

Ayyankali's speech on the occasion is a significant manifesto of his reformative agenda. After mentioning the discrimination suffered by the subordinate castes, he announced them to fight against the social evils of upper caste and to become civilized by the way through dressing and education according to him this were the stepping stone to progress. Avarnas were requested to be 'civilised' and 'modern'. He asked them to patient even if some intolerant people confronted them. Ayyankali's plea to savarnas was to encourage and not to obstruct ayithajathees or untouchables. When they tried to be modern and civilized in terms of customs and dressing. He then emphasised the need to discard Kalla and Mala which in his view were signs of subservience. Ayyankali could understand the significance of changing the attire and adornments in order to construct new identities and self-images. The reason given by Ayyankali for discarding Kalla and Mala are indicative of a new social consciousness about being civilised and modern.

The demands presented in the form of request reveals the discrete policies of Ayyankali. Perinad revolt proved that bloody protest and agitation would only tarnish the social image of Pulaya community and support

the sympathies of people of all castes could be gained only through reconciliatory and nonviolent strategies. In this aspect, Ayyankali differs from Velayudha Panicker who took an aggressive stand against social oppression and evils.

As soon as Ayyankali's speech ended, Changanassery Parameswaran Pillai sanctioned the discarding of Kalla and Mala on behalf of all those who were present there. Amidst applause, two Pulaya girls were called into the stage. They were clad in Rouka (A kind of Blouse). Ayyankali told them to remove their Kalla and Mala since all dignitaries in the dias and among the audience have permitted them to do so. The girls then took the sickles that was tucked in to their waist cloth and cut off the Kalla and Mala. The sickle asserted indirectly that pulaya community is essential in the sustenance of society. To serve as a symbol of slavery and inferiority worn on the body, an assertive symbol of their indispensability in agricultural labour was used in this incident.

Though many Pulaya women had already discarded the Kalla and Mala as a result of their interactions with Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam, they all wore it again for the meeting for a ceremonial discarding. After the two girls discarded it on the stage, all Pulaya women among the audience followed it. In little time, there was a heap of Kalla and Mala on the stage. The mock ceremonial air of this incident is noteworthy.

The attack on Pulaya women did not stop after this reconciliatory meeting. Perindu witnessed another unpleasant incident following the Sarvasamudhaya Sammelanam. A Pulaya women was stopped on the road and a savarna questioned her. On receiving a replay that Kalla and Mala had been discarded during the meeting at Kollam, the infuriated savarna cut off the women's ear. Mithavathi, reporting this incident, expressed sorrow and shock because it took place the British imperial control. The faith expressed by the reporter in the abilities of the British administrative system in maintaining law and order situation may sound ironic. This report in Mithavathi definitely indicates the changing attitude of people towards the oppression and resistance by the upper caste.

Accounts of Fawcett, Thurston, and Mateer undoubtedly show how the use of adornments and access to many other privileges were the lower castes in specific. From these accounts, it is evident that the use of nose stud was the special privilege of Nairs. The primary function of Kallumala as articles of adorning the female body with all the implicit notions about the enhancement of beauty and attractiveness of who uses it, and the social function of adornments as caste markers that help in distinguish women of different castes throw light on the nuances of meanings an object takes. Later Kallumala became a matter of shame and a sign of being aparishkrita (not civilised or modern), and thus signified social inferiority.

Ayyankali tried his best for the upliftment of downtrodden masses especially women. Changanasseri Parameswaran Pillai addressed the women of the unthouchables as 'our sister', Protesting those words was the idea that all human beings are one and all are brothers and sisters based on humanity. That conference was a new experience to the kerala society.

As a result of the perinadu revolt, the climate of Perinadu became worst due to the clashes between Nair and Pulayar communities. With the help of Nair Chattambi 'Nateri Koorinair' thousands of pulaya women were murdered and hundreds of them was wounded. The rebellion was lasted for seven days, in Perinadu,

Mangadu and Kilikollor , the newspaper reported that the houses of the untouchables are burnt. At last Ayyankali took a step to compromise the clash between Nairs and Pulayas. It was under diwan Krishnan Nair and Changanaserri Parameswaran Pillai. The two conditions in the compromise letter were;

1. Any person who try to make any attempt to injure the lower caste, should face criminal action taken by the police.
2. The women should have the right to wear jewellery on any metal.

According to the conditions in compromise order, so many upper caste men were arrested for the violation of the order. The case of Pulayar was taken by T.M. Varghese . The members of the pulayar community were not able to pay lawyer fees. He told them that it was enough to cut a large pond in the north side of his home. The pond is known as ‘Kamman Kulam’, now it is located at the centre of Kollam where the District Panchayath is working.

Arattupuzha Velayudha Panicker was one of the important influential personality in Perinad revolt. He was the centre of nonviolent agitation and source of strength to avarnas in their agitations for social justice. He successfully fought for the avarnas in breast cloth controversy. In Kayamkulam Arattupuzha secured for Ezhava women, the right to wear upper clothes and clothes covering their knees. He emboldened dalit women to wear nose ring without any fear of complex. His action had invited many enemies and in 1874 his enemies conspired and stabbed in to death at Kayamkulam Lake. He became martyr to the cause of social justice in Kerala. His martyrdom inspired the Dalit workers in their agitations for social justice.

Even though he died in 1874, his nonviolent agitation proclamation influences the Pulaya community a lot and it became a boost up for Perinad revolt. But sometimes the revolt become violent and Ayyankali still remembers the wordings of Velayudha Panicker for nonviolent agitations to the Pulaya masses.

## Conclusion

Even though the Perinad revolt firstly takes a nonviolent atmosphere and later it becomes bloody and violent attack of masses. This revolt was a transformation of Dark Age to modern. In short, Perinad revolt was one of the important chapters of social reformation. It awakened the whole society to fight against the caste rotten society and to upliftment of the lower caste. The important peculiarity of Perinad revolt, it was the participation of thousands of Pulaya women. Perinad revolt regarded as a fire in the social reformation and it eliminated the darkness of caste system.

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