

Role of Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar as a Social Reformer in Central Travancore

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Abstract

Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar was a social reformer and he rendered useful service by utilizing his ability for the upliftment of his community from its traditional bonds. In his social reform activities, he kept Sree Narayana Guru as his model and guide. His reform activities helped to bring changes in the lives of the downtrodden class especially the Ezhavas of Central Travancore. He was actively participated in establishing SNDP Yogams in different parts of Central Travancore. His main aim was to organize all the members of the community into a single unit in order to make a strong front. He started a policy of constructing temples for the lower caste people. Under his initiative many schools both vernacular and English medium were started and these schools were open to all students irrespective of their religion. This paper is an attempt to analyse the role of Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar in emancipating the downtrodden community especially the Ezhavas in Central Travancore from its traditional bonds.

Keywords

Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar, SNDP Yogam, Ezhavas, Pulayas, Central Travancore

Introduction

During the second half of the nineteenth century, there evolved a powerful social reform movement in Kerala. The reform movement which made the greatest impact on the public life of Kerala was led by Sree Narayana Guru. The new spirit of the age was remarkably illustrated by the life and thought of Sree Narayana Guru, who began his reforming activities by preaching the universality of all religion. The contribution of Guru in creating a social awakening was significant and was a turning point in the history of Travancore. He worked as a powerful magnet for the downtrodden classes especially the Ezhavas, who were attracted by his spiritual integrity. He attracted many eminent personalities like Kumaran Asan and Dr. Palpu who had dedicated their entire life to spread his gospel and worked for the downtrodden masses. Mooloor S .Padmanabha Panikkar was yet another ardent follower of the Guru. His contact with Sree Narayana Guru, was a turning point in his life and that of the history of Central Travancore.

Mooloor as a Social Reformer

Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar known popularly as Mooloor, was born and brought up in a middle class Ezhava family of Central Travancore. Mooloor met Sree Narayana Guru when he attended the second annual meeting of SNDP Yogam¹ conducted at Kollam in 1905. This function and his meeting with Guru marked a turning point in the life of Mooloor. The indignity and humiliation suffered by his community aroused his conscience and he decided to dedicate his life for the cause of his community's development .Mooloor was a great organiser too. He actively participated in almost all the SNDP annual meetings during his life time. He was selected as a member of the Director Board of SNDP Yogam from its twelfth session onwards. In 1928 he was selected as the Vice-President of SNDP Yogam². Mooloor travelled the length and breadth of Central Travancore to organize branches of the SNDP Yogam.

Mooloor had to awaken the masses who were steeped in ignorance and were not quite conscious of the rights denied to them. Majority of the Ezhavas seemed satisfied with the existing conditions and did not want to

question it. Mooloor tried his best to break this inertia and to whip up a passion for enlightenment and equality. His area of work were in Central Travancore especially in Thiruvalla, Pathanamthitta, Chengannur and Mavelikkara Taluks³.

Mooloor had sympathy towards his own caste men who offered money as *kanikka* in the *savarna* temples, where their entry was prohibited. He was of the opinion that this was a kind of self-humiliation and waste of money, which they earned through hard work. He also wanted to stop the evil practices such as sacrifices of animals and the offering of toddy and arrack to their deities. As a first step to reform and modernize his community he adopted the temple construction policy of Sree Narayana Guru who initiated this by consecrating a Siva idol at Aruvippuram. Mooloor remained the main force behind the construction of numerous temples for Ezhavas in Central Travancore.

In 1911, on the request of Changanacherri Vazhappallil Kochuveetil Kunjan Panikkar and other community leaders, a large meeting of Ezhavas was organized under the presidentship of Mooloor at Kochuveetil house. In this meeting a decision was taken to start an organization and its rules were framed. This organization was registered and Mooloor named it as 'Sadachara Prakashini'. Under the auspices of this organization, a Gurumandiram and an ashramam was established at Vazhappallil and was known as Ananda Ashamam⁴.

Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar took initiative to solve internal problems of the community within itself. In places like Kalluppara and Kulathur in Thiruvalla Taluk, there existed a difference of opinion about caste hierarchy between the Ezhavas and the Thiyyas. Mooloor tried to solve the problem peacefully. According to the suggestion made by Mooloor, they jointly constructed the Somasekhara Temple at Kulathur in 1921. Mooloor organized the Ezhavas of Mezhuveli and informed them about the need for their own temple. As a result a memorandum was drafted and signed by thousands of Ezhavas at Mezhuveli, proclaiming their intention to build a temple there. In 1914 in the presence of Mooloor and others, the foundation stone for a Siva temple was laid and on completion, it was known as Ananda Bhooteswara Temple and following this, the Mezhuveli Ezhava Samajam was named as Ananda Bhooteswara Kshetera Yogam. Mooloor was elected as the adviser of this Kshetra Yogam⁵. It was under his supervision that the construction of Nagambadam temple at Kottayam was completed. He took particular care to open these temples to all communities for worship. In these temples the new method of worship was adopted. Through these activities, he effected sweeping changes in the religious attitude of the people of Central Travancore.

Sree Narayana Guru took particular care to avoid divisions in the community and effectively worked for its solidarity on a sound basis. Mooloor also adopted this view of Guru and tried to implement it among the Ezhavas of Central Travancore⁶. In certain areas in Central Travancore, there was a small sub-sect of Ezhavas called 'Kurup', who were considered to be inferior to other Ezhavas. Because of the discrimination towards them, this small minority thought of embracing Christianity. When Mooloor came to know about it, he approached Sree Narayana Guru to adopt measures to include them also into the fold of the Ezhava community. For this a great function was arranged in the presence of Narayana Guru. The daring feat showed by Mooloor in organizing such a function was congratulated by Sree Narayana Guru. Guru commented that taking into consideration the importance of that day for the Ezhavas, it should be written in a poem to be kept in the Aluva Advaita Ashram⁷. This incident shows the revolutionary attitude of Mooloor and which was the only one of its kind with no precedent in Kerala History.

An ardent disciple and true follower of the principles of Sree Narayana Guru, Mooloor popularized Guru's views among the members of the Ezhava community. It was at a meeting of Ezhavas, held at Paravoor near Kollam on 16 October 1905, under the presidentship of Sree Narayana Guru, Guru advised the community to put an end to the unwanted customs like *talikettu kalyanam*, *thirandukuli*, *pulikudi* etc⁸. Mooloor campaigned against these meaningless observations. The practice of these unnecessary customs struck at the very vitals of the community, financially and otherwise. Mooloor succeeded in implementing Guru's programme of social reforms in Central Travancore. He tried to popularize the new method of conducting marriage as suggested by Guru. The marriage should be a simple ceremony of *tali* tying by the groom and mutual garlanding by the couple.

Guru advised the Ezhavas to be quite frugal in their marriage expenses and wanted only ten persons to attend a marriage including the couple. Mooloor popularized these views through a poem by name *Parishkharichcha Vivaharithi*⁹.

Mooloor had a strong sentiments towards his community and worked hard for its upliftment from age old bondages. His main aim was to organize all the members of the community into a single unit in order to strengthen the community. When Dr.Palpu¹⁰ prepared a memorandum, the Ezhava Memorial¹¹ in 1896, some Ezhavas were reluctant to sign it fearing the after effects. They feared that they would be treated badly by the ruling class and *janmis*. Mooloor contacted them personally and made them understand about the necessity of the memorandum and got their signatures¹². This showed the dedication of Mooloor for the cause of the development of his community.

Sree Narayana Guru gave his whole hearted support to Mooloor in his community development programme. Dr.Palpu, KumaranAsan, C.V Kunjuraman, T.K Madhavan etc. also recognized the services of Mooloor. His service to the Ezhava community was recognized by the SNDP Yogam in their annual function held at Kollam in 1916 and presented a Rajatha Keerthi Mudra to him¹³. During that period there existed a controversy regarding the law of inheritance-whether *marumakathayam* or *makkathayam* should be followed in Travancore. He favoured the *makkathayam* system of inheritance among the Ezhavas, the Ezhavas of Central Travancore showed their allegiance to Mooloor by accepting the *makkathayam* system in confirm with the opinion of Mooloor¹⁴. This incident shows his calibre and the respect and recognition he gained from his community.

Sree Narayana Guru had the vision of a casteless society and developed a philosophy which shows the uselessness of caste. Guru admitted Pulayas and Parayas in his ashramam. This influenced Mooloor and turned himself into a protector and guardian of the low caste people, who were forced to undertake bonded labour¹⁵. He tried to uplift them from their age long sufferings. Mooloor concentrated on the welfare of the Pulayas of Central Travancore. The work of Ayyankali among the Pulayas in South Travancore, created a new spirit among the Pulayas in Central Travancore also. Making use of this situation, Mooloor tried to organize the Pulayas and to bring up a leader for them from among themselves. Kurumban Daivathan and Kesava Sastri were two Pulaya leaders brought up under the guidance of Mooloor.

When Sree Narayana Guru visited Ananda Bhooteswara temple in 1914, he suggested Mooloor to take the guardianship and educational expenditure of a Pulaya boy, Kesavan. Mooloor took up the responsibility. Kesavan was admitted in the school associated with Aluva Advaitashramam. Mooloor permitted Kesavan to make a speech in the courtyard of Ananda Bhooteswaram temple and it was an epoch making incident for the Pulayas to make a speech in the vicinity of a temple¹⁶. Later Kesavan held many positions in government service and he became the Deputy Speaker of Travancore Legislative Assembly. Kurumban Daivathan also got the patronage of Mooloor. It was through Kurumban Daivathan that Mooloor did most of the work for the upliftment of the Pulayas. He spread revolutionary ideas among the Pulayas by conducting meetings throughout central Travancore. Mooloor participated in the meetings of Pulayas and conducted speeches in order to create self-respect and self-reliance in them. Kurumban Daivathan sought the assistance and suggestions of Mooloor for their policies and programmes. It was due to the recommendation of Mooloor Kurumban Daivathan was nominated to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in 1915. In the Assembly he fought for securing rights on property, freedom to join the schools and to get fee concessions for Pulays. Mooloor took special interest in arranging annual meetings of the Pulayas, presided by the Diwan in the Jubilee Hall at Trivandrum, side by side with the concluding session of the Popular Assembly¹⁷. In these meetings Pulaya children used to sing songs compiled by Mooloor in Pulavrutham metre. The theme of the poems were mostly the grievances faced by the Pulayas. The efforts of Mooloor produced good effects among the Pulayas of central Travancore.

Sree Narayana Guru prohibited the Ezhavas from toddy-tapping because the caste was associated with this traditional occupation, creating a traditional bond of inferior position on them. Mooloor worked for the abolition of toddy tapping in Central Travancore under the guidance of Sree Narayana Guru. Under the auspices of

Mooloor, a committee was organized for the campaigning of abolition of toddy tapping and distribution. With the cooperation of T.K. Madhavan, he organized meetings against the use and manufacture of toddy¹⁸.

Mooloor encouraged women to participate in the meetings conducted by the Yogam. He organized a samajam for women along with the Ananda Bhooteswara Kshetra Yogam. He actively participated in the function of the women's organizations. He also conducted speeches about the role of women in the society. He was the guiding force behind the starting of SaradaSarika Sthree Samajam in 1917¹⁹.

Mooloor realized the importance of education and its effect on social reforms. The spread of education would help to modernize the downtrodden classes and would make them conscious of their dignity as human beings. At that time Ezhava children were not admitted in schools along with the upper caste children. The members of Ezhava community in Central Travancore consulted Mooloor to solve the problem. He helped them to start schools at different places in Central Travancore. Like Thalachira Balachandra Vilasam School, Vaikom Sree Narayana Tharaka School, Puthusserimala Sree Narayana Vilasam School, Mezhuvelli Ganagadharan Vilasam School, Pathanamthitta Shanmugham Vilasam School, Kuriyannoor Sanmarga Dayani School, Narenganam Padma Vilasam School, Karykkad Kerala Varma Vilasam School etc. All these schools were started as Lower Primary School. He also started an English Medium School at Mezhuvelli - Paadmanabhadrayam School. Apart from all these, he was the guiding force behind the establishment of forty other schools²⁰. Though the schools were started for the Ezhavas, the beneficiaries included members of other castes and creeds. He started weaving schools to popularize technical education among the local people. He also tried to get grants from the government to these schools.

Mooloor fought against the superstitions that existed in his own family circle. His brother-in-law Kochu Krishnan Thandar died of small pox. After sometime, one of the sons of Kunju Sankaran Thandar, who was the younger brother of the dead person began to show certain signs as if he was haunted by the spirit of the dead person. Under its influence he began to predict things by visiting the houses of his relatives. The person who died of smallpox was referred to as *pandarachavu*. The people made offerings like meet and toddy to please *pandarachavu*, this system was called *vellam kudi*. Mooloor was totally against this blind belief and he criticized it. He wrote about this in the weekly newspaper *Desabhimni*²¹ under the title *Ayathile Pandarachavum Vellam kudiyum*. Ayathil Kunju Sankaran thandar considered it as an insult and he filed a case against Mooloor in the Chengannur First Class Magistrate Court. The court punished Mooloor with a penalty of seventy rupees. Mooloor appealed against this verdict in the Special Court at Kollam. The court made a verdict in favour of Mooloor by cancelling the earlier verdict of the Magistrate court²². Court declared that Mooloor wrote the article with good intention to abolish the superstitious beliefs of the community. This incident increased the popularity of Mooloor.

Another important attempt made by Mooloor against the caste discrimination and in which he succeeded was the opening of the approach roads to the Aranmula Parthasarathy Temple to Ezhavas. The Ezhavas were prohibited from using the approach roads to the temples in Travancore. Mooloor and Neelakantan Channan, a wealthy and powerful Ezhava in Central Travancore challenged this. They organized the Ezhavas of the locality and created a spirit of unity among them. They also tried to get the support of Nairs of this region in this attempt. Under the leadership of Neelakantan Channan and Mooloor, hundreds of Ezhavas marched along the approach road to the temple without any obstructions and thus the ban imposed on the Ezhavas to travel through this road was forced to be lifted²³. The importance of this revolutionary step lay in the fact that it occurred in 1917 i.e. seven years before the Vaikom Satyagraha. The lower castes triumphed in securing their first victory in the cause of Temple Entry.

Conclusion

Mooloor's view of social reform was influenced by the teachings of Sree Narayana Guru. Mooloor was of the view that in order to reform the society, caste system and other evil practices should be annihilated. He conceived the task of reforming the society, socially and politically through different stages. By championing

the cause of the downtrodden communities to get their fair share in the government and to secure for them equality in their social position, Mooloor had rendered a meticulous service. He strived for the establishment of the social and political equality of the people. His efforts to eradicate caste distinctions by means of freedom of travel, use of public offices, admissions to educational institutions and temple entry for the low castes, pressing for legislation for the introduction of *makkathayam* system of inheritance were part of achieving that end. Though he worked mainly for the upliftment of Ezhavas, he was not a sectarian. He aimed at the complete transformation of the entire society.

Mooloor S Padmanabha Panikkar tried to produce a change of mind among the social groups by means of incessant preaching, social analysis and criticism and also through admonitions. The most important aim of Mooloor's social work was that of creating a good and solid position for the Ezhava community in the social circle of Travancore. The activities of Mooloor in association with the contemporary socio-religious reformers ultimately contributed to a change in the socio economic order of the day in Travancore in general and Central Travancore in particular. It also paved the way for the recognition of the educational and economic rights of the low classes, finally leading to the collapse of the joint-family system and emergence of a novel socio-economic concept in Central Travancore.

Notes and References

1. The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was formed under the inspiration of Sree Narayana guru became the great force in the consolidation of the scattered and dissipated community and in the work for its social and economic emancipation. The organization came into existence on 15 May 1903.
2. Damodaran, N.K. (Ed.), *Pulavrutham* (Mal), Elavumthitta, 1990, p.33.
3. Kumaran, N.K., 'Sree Narayana Guruvum Mooloorum', *Mooloor Janma Sathabdi Smaraka Souvenir*. Mezhuvveli, 1969, pp.79-83.
4. Damodaran, N.K., n.2, p.34.
5. Kumbalamchirayil Vasava Panikkar, C., *Biography of Sarasakavi Mooloor S. Padmanabha panikkar* (Mal). Kollam, 1977, p.255.
6. Achyuthan, K.R., 'The Social Spectrum of Kerala', *Journal of Kerala Studies*, Vol.X, December, 1983, pp.11-62.
7. Kumaran, N.K., n.3, pp.79-83.
8. Achyuthan, K.R., n.6, pp.11-62.
9. Kumaran, N.K., n.3, pp.79-83.
10. Dr.Palpu was a relentless fighter for the cause of the Ezhavas in Kerala. It was the efforts of Dr Palpu marked the beginning of the long drawn out struggle to be waged by the backward classes within the Hindu community in Travancore for securing social equality and justice. He was the first medical graduate from Ezhava community in Travancore. He took initiative to establish Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam.
11. The Ezhava memorial was a memorandum submitted to the Maharaja of Travancore on 3rd September, 1896 under the leadership of Dr. Palpu. The Ezhava memorial requested the Maharaja to confer on the Ezhavas the right of admission to government schools and entry into public services.
12. Kumbalamchirayil Vasava Panikkar, C., n.5, p.352.
13. Diary of Mooloor, 1916, p.270.
14. Diary of Mooloor, 1923, p.250.
15. Omana, S., *Philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru*, Varkala, 1984, p.39.
16. Damodaran, N.K., n.2, p.10.

17. Govindan, P.C. 'Adhkrutodharakanaya Sarasa Kavi' *Mooloor Janma Sathabdi smaraka Souvenir*. Mezhuvelli, 1969, pp.109-114.
18. Diary of Mooloor. 1922, p.45.
19. Sathyaprakasam, M., *Sarasa Kavi Mooloor S.Padmanabha Panikkar*(Mal),Tvpm,1988,p.134.
20. Sathyaprakasam, M., p.137.
21. The Desabhimani mentioned here was a publication started by T. K Madhavan in 1915 and it rendered yeoman service in pin-pointing the grievances, political and social, of the Ezhava community and seeking redressal.
22. Sathyaprakasam,M., n.19,239.
23. .Kochukunju, P.R.,'Njungalude Panikkar Asan', *Mooloor Janma Sathabdi smaraka Souvenir*,Mezhuvelli,1969,pp.123-128.

