

THE FIFTH ALL KERALA POLITICAL CONFERENCE : A TURNING POINT IN THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT OF MALABAR

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Abstract: Malabar has been a core area of nationalist activities in Kerala. It was under the direct rule of the British and experienced much bitterness of the exploitative rule of the colonial powers than the princely states of Cochin and Travancore. The national consciousness grew in Malabar during the beginning of the 20th century itself. However the organized political activities and the national ideas introduced by the Indian National Congress spread in Malabar only in the second decade of the 20th century. The political conferences, especially the 5th All Kerala Political Conference held at Vadakara in 4th and 5th May 1931 was successful in creating an intensified political consciousness among the masses of Malabar. Many of the prominent national leaders in different parts of the country had participated in the conference and they enriched it with their political ideas and programs. One of the important political developments in the Vadakara conference was passing of the resolution urging temple entry of lower castes. The conference exerted the people of Kerala to work for the removal of all social inequalities and caste rigidity. The anti untouchability campaign launched by this conference exerted far reaching influence in the social history of Kerala. Another important aspect of this conference was the large scale participation of women and youths. Many other politically and the socially significant resolutions were also passed in this historic conference of 1931.

Index Terms:- Nationalist ideas- Malabar- political conferences- political impact- participation of women- changes in social structure- anti-untouchability campaign -Temple entry-

1. Introduction

The Indian National Movement was one of the biggest mass movements in modern society. The era of Indian freedom struggle against British imperialism is a memorable event in the long history of India. Malabar was the centre of political and social activities in Kerala during the colonial period. Malabar District was formed in 1800 and placed under the Madras Presidency. Unlike the princely states of Travancore and Cochin, Malabar was under the direct control of British rule. Malabar became the nerve centre of British supremacy and the political consciousness in Malabar was entirely distinct from that of Travancore and Cochin.

The Provincial Congress committee was formed at Calicut in 1910. However organized political activities and the nationalist ideas introduced by Indian National Congress began in Malabar only towards the second decade of 20th century. The 5th All Kerala Political conference was an important event in the history of the freedom movement in Kerala. It was held on 4th and 5th May 1931 at Narayana Nagar in Vadakara. The Provincial Women's Conference, Kerala Students Conference, Hindi Prachar Conference and the Kerala Political Sufferers Conference were also held on the same platform set up for this conference.

The Conference was held amidst the changing political situation of Kerala. There were certain initial hurdles for the easy penetration of patriotic sentiments in the region. The political division of Kerala in three separate political units i.e Travancore, Cochin and Malabar stood as a barrier to provide a joint fight against the British. Travancore and Cochin were ruled by the native Kings while Malabar was under the direct control

of the British. Caste and communal equations in these regions were not in favor of effective human interaction and active involvement of people in the routine political activities.

Malabar, a territory directly ruled by the British had experienced the pros and cons of colonial exploitation. It was under this situation that the historic Vadakara conference was held. It revealed the strong intention of the people not to accept any settlements other than self-government. On the morning of 3rd May 1931 when M. Kartyayani Amma unfurled the tricolor flag, the venue of the conference was crowded with delegates and visitors.¹ A C Kannan Nair, a prominent freedom fighter in Malabar states that about one lakh of people had participated in the Conference.²

It was a spectacular scene when the distinguished national leaders like J N Sen Gupta, K F Nariman, T Prakasam and Padmavati Asher arrived by train at Vadakara railway station. The booming of 31 guns announced their arrival. The leaders were taken to the conference in a procession headed by richly caparisoned elephants.³ The whole town was decorated. Red shirts⁴ volunteers worked feverishly under their leaders. V Rairu Kurup, A. K Krishna Varma Raja, and Moyyarth Sankaran organized and supervised the entire function. P K Narayanan Nair was the Chairman and E K Sankara Varma Raja and Rairu Kurup were the Secretaries of the reception committee. The Conference was started on the evening of 4th May 1931, J N Sen Gupta from Bengal was invited with a guard of honor. He gave a clear exposition of the Congress program and policy which the people of Kerala should stand through and pleaded for the removal of all social disabilities and caste restrictions.⁵ He unambiguously declared that nothing other than Poorna Swaraj is acceptable to the nationalists.⁶ Though many political prisoners reached there, they were prevented from participating actively in the conference. Hence they met K Kelappan, to become a part of this conference. After half an hour unanimous opinion was formed that all political prisoners who reached there had the right to vote and they got free tickets for food.⁷ Red shirt volunteers were organized by the youth for the protection of the conference. The leaders of the Red Shirts were E C Kunhikkannan Nambiar and Ponnara Sreedhar. The volunteer organization of congress called Hindustan Sevalal was formed under the leadership of Dr. Hardikar.⁸

The Conference requested the Government of Madras to release M P Narayana Menon from jail.⁹ It also demanded the release of 'mappila' prisoners convicted during the Malabar Rebellion of 1921. The conference was directed to take steps for the propagation of Hindi on a large scale in Kerala. It was resolved to organize peasants and workers in factories. For this purpose, a committee was appointed, consisting of Mrs Margaret Pavamani, U Gopala Menon, K Damodara Menon and Mohammad Abdur Rahman. On the initiative of U Gopala Menon the demand was put forth that Kerala should be constituted into a separate province¹⁰. It was decided to conduct elections into the Local Boards on party basis. The conference also passed a number of resolutions. It congratulated all the men, women, and children of Kerala who had sacrificed and suffered much in the course of the freedom struggle and affirmed that Kerala would stand behind congress and Gandhi until independence. A resolution to this effect was moved by K Madhavan Nair and LS Prabhu. Another resolution urged the government to regulate the time for the sale of liquor in shops. Another resolution moved by Narayanan Nair made an appeal to the press and newspapers not to publish the news that ignited communal feeling in the country. On K Kelappan's initiative it was resolved that the propaganda in favor of Temple entry should be organized on a wide range in Kerala.¹¹ The conference set up a separate committee for the temple entry satyagraha.¹²

Besides, the conference decided to write the history of satyagraha movement which would bring to light those heroes who had fought, suffered and died and yet remained unknown, un honoured and unsung. A memorial for the Satyagraha was to be erected and a fund was to be raised to help the families of those who died in the course of freedom. The conference gave full support to T. Subramanyam Thirumumb's resolution that fundamental rights and economic programs passed at the Karachi session of Congress should be implemented in the princely states along with British presidencies and a resolution was passed demanding to build a memorial to commemorate Wagon Tragedy.

The national leaders were impressed by the activities of the Congress in Malabar and the programmers of the conference. F M Nariman was much impressed by the spontaneity of the national movement in the towns and in interior villages in Kerala. He found young volunteers in remote villages picketing the shop at late hours in the night, holding tricolor flags in their hands and was very happy about the beauty of the land and the hospitality of the people. Sen Gupta also gave an account of the efficient picketing, even the secret sale of liquor or foreign clothes was a rare phenomenon in the area. He further adds that Kerala would lead

the other parts of India for another Civil Disobedience Movement. In the Political Sufferers Conference, T Prakasam delivered an inspiring speech. He spoke about the harsh treatment meted out by the political prisoners from the hands of the British and the division of political prisoners into three classes of A,B,C in the jail without any justification.¹³ The authorities are cruelly behaving towards prisoners and the people should oppose this and fight against them.¹⁴

The Provincial Women's Conference was held under the president ship of Padmavati Asher. The conference signaled the entry of women in the public space to be inspired by the ideology of freedom movement and the preaching of social reformers of Kerala. The women originally started their work with Khadi and Swadeshi propaganda, but soon many of them courted arrest and imprisonment. When Padmavati Asher reached the conference she was given a guard of honor by the smartly uniformed volunteers of the 'Balika Sangh'. Dakshayani Kettillamma was the chairperson of the reception committee. Padmavathi Asher in her presidential address called on women to keep the tricolour flag flying and until the attainment of independence. The conference resolved that all Hindus, irrespective of caste differences, should have free needs in all public places and demanded equal rights for women, consistent with their number in all administrative Institutions. It was decided to organize the Kerala Mahila Desa Sevika Sangh for carrying national work and serving the cause of women in the country and to set up schools and handicraft training centres for providing education at employment for poor women.

There were quick responses to the Conference from Malabar. In connection with the Civil Disobedience Movement women were in the forefront of the Gandhian program of boycott and picketing at various places of Malabar. Women belonging to middle class Hindu families, orthodox Brahmin families and affluent Christian families were also actively participating in the picketing of shops selling foreign goods and liquor courted arrest.¹⁵ They also participated in the movement for eradication of untouchability. A large number of women leaders like A V Kuttimalu Amma, P Yesodha, Kadathanatt Madhavi Amma, Gracy Aron, Mrs. L.S Prabhu, Kaumudi Teacher, C. Kunhikkavamma, Margret Pavamani, Pavamani, Kunhilakshmi Amma, etc. actively participated in the national activities. There were immediate reactions from Malabar whenever the rights of women were threatened by the state in any part of India. For instance, harthal was observed on 17th November 1931, protesting against the arrest of women leaders in Bombay.

There were attempts to form a unified organization for students to fight against the British imperialism and feudal system that prevailed in Malabar.¹⁶ Schools and other educational institutions became an ideal site for evolving reformist ideas and popular programs to attract a large number of people to the nationalist movement. The youth of the region was moved by the new slogan of Congress Socialist Party in Malabar that 'death to landlordism, death to capitalism and death to imperialism'. A new wing of educational youth named Abhinav Bharath Yuvak Sangh was formed in the 1930s. Under the organization, reading rooms and night schools were started. Nariman demanded the participation of students in the temperance movement especially in the rural areas.¹⁷

The presence of national leaders in the All Kerala Students Conference at Vadakara indicates the gravity of political work conducted by the students in the region. The student conference was presided over by KF Nariman of Bombay.¹⁸ It symbolized the great upsurge and yearnings for freedom. In his presidential address Nariman exhorted the youth to fight against all obstacles that hinder progress. The students must show interest in Khadi propaganda, prohibition and anti untouchability programmes and must lead our nation.¹⁹ The Hindi Prachar Conference was also presided over by K F Nariman.

The Fifth Political Conference held at Vadakara in 1931, created far reaching consequences in the history of the freedom movement in Kerala. Being influenced by the socialist ideals, the Conference passed various resolutions. One among the prominent resolutions in the conference was connected with the temple entry and passed unanimously.²⁰ The Guruvayur Satyagraha of 1931-32 was an offshoot of his resolution. A V Kunjambu opined that the temple entry strike was not only against the temples but also against British imperialism.²¹ Presidential address of J N Sengupta gave a clear exposition to the Congress program and exhorted the people of Kerala to work for the removal of all social discrimination and caste restrictions.²² The most important leaders of the anti untouchability campaign were A K Gopalan, K.Kelappan, Moyyarath Sankaran, P Krishna Pillai etc. The conference requested the temple authority and caste Hindus to open the entry in the temple to all Hindus irrespective of caste.²³ The Vadakara Conference provided much incentive to the political struggles connected with the Civil Disobedience Movement.²⁴ It offered a new political

platform to be occupied by local Rajas, feudal lords, peasants, workers, middle class intelligentsia, women, students and others.

2. Conclusion

The Fifth All Kerala Political Conference of Vadakara in 1931 was an important landmark in the history of the freedom movement in Malabar. The conference was a remarkable one in its political and social significance. The Conference attained all India fame. It decided to take active steps towards the eradication of untouchability. It passed a resolution urging temple entry to all sections and the Guruvayur Satyagraha was the net result of this move. The conference exhorted the people of Kerala to work for removal of all social inequalities and caste restrictions. The conference was really successful in changing the social conditions of Kerala.

The conference decided to launch an anti untouchability campaign as one of the programs of the Congress in Kerala for the subsequent years. The conference requested the temple authorities and caste Hindus to open all temples to all Hindus irrespective of caste. Another significant aspect of the conference was the large scale participation of the women. Women belonging to middle class Hindu families, orthodox Brahmins and affluent Christian families had actively participated in the conference. The conference resulted in the formation of several women organizations like Mahila Desa Sevika Sangh for carrying on nationalist work and serving the cause of women in the country and to set up night schools and handicraft training centres for providing education and employment for the poor women. As a whole the Vadakara Conference provided much incentive to the freedom movement in Malabar.

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