

MOVEMENTS TOWARDS SOCIAL EQUALITY WITH THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN TRAVANCORE

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ABSTRACT: *Social stratification refers to the way society is structured into a hierarchy of strata that are unequally ranked. Stratification involves inequalities between groups in the distribution of socioeconomic resources such as wealth, income, status and power. These inequalities persist or continue over time. The origin of the institution of slavery is allied with this social inequality. The History of the abolition of slavery in Travancore is closely associated with the tireless and constant efforts of authorities in Travancore.*

Keywords: *Oozhiyam, Namboothiri, Dewan , Virichikam, Adiyalar, Janmi,Sircar,Panam*

INTRODUCTION

Slavery was not something new to Travancore. The underlying concept was to have a lower caste and gender enslaved by high class. The available inscriptions and the copper plates are evidences to indicate the slave trade in medieval Kerala. The Tharisappalli Copper Plates of the King of Venadu , Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal is a proof for the exchange of a plot of land to the Syrian Church at Tangasseri. It also provides a special privilege for Christians as an exemption from the slave tax to the Government. It reflects that slave trade was very prominent in Venad. Its impact was felt throughout Travancore. The origin of the institution of slavery is closely associated with the beginning of the caste system in Travancore. By 1847, there were 1, 65,000 slaves in Travancore.

Nature of Slavery in Travancore

The area of Travancore witnessed the supreme power position of Brahmins with the latter's socio-religious dominance. This in turn it led to a segregation of the system into different caste groups. The poor and the destitute were dominated by the high caste group. And those belonging to the supposed lower castes were under the plight of slavery. Pulayyas, Parayyas, Paravas, Kuravas and Vettuvans were the general categories casted as slaves. A deep system of segregation with the burden of slavery started prevailing. Nayars enjoyed power with their close connections with the Namboothiri Brahmins. They could become the chief land-holders and owners of slaves. *Oozhiyam* service was mandatory for the group. It was made compulsory for every slave to work on certain days in a year in the land of the upper class and that too without pay. It was named *oozhiyam* and those who excused themselves were punished severely. A villager, byname, Arumainayamgam refused to do *oozhiyam* service and he attended the Sabbath worship. In consequence he was cruelly beat and tortured by his masters. Slave became the property of the master. The value of the slave was given and the property of the slave was transferred to a new master. It was the duty of the new master to look after the slaves in the same manner as done by the former master. In some case, possession of slave was by letting them for *Pattom* or rent. The annual hire was eight *Panams* for a man slave and four *Panams* for a woman. The slaves received no education. The house of a slave was called 'Madam'. He could not look at the face of his master and speak freely. When he wanted to speak, he had to place the hand over the mouth lest the breath should go forth and pollute the person. The slaves were compelled to pay for the hair they grew, and moustache they had. Women were compelled to pay a tax called the breast tax. The slaves underwent great hardships and social disabilities under the high caste.

Efforts for the Abolition of Slavery

With the coming of missionaries the practice of slavery began to decline. As the missionaries got more converts from the slave castes the deplorable condition of slaves agitated their minds from the very beginning. Missionaries tried to end the plight of the slaves through various memorandum and propagandas.

When Col. Munro became the Resident of Travancore, he influenced Rani Lakshmi Bai to introduce several social reforms which helped the slaves to get certain privileges which were hitherto denied to them. By the Proclamation of 1812, Rani Lakshmi Bai issued a notification to the abolition of slavery. This proclamation was published on the 21st *Virichikam* 987 ME as;

...with reference to the natives and foreigners who for the sake of profit buy at a cheap rate, the boys and girls of several low caste people of this country and sell them for a higher prices, take them to distant places and pay tolls at sea ports and thus make a regular bargain of them. As this is really a inhuman and disgraceful custom, which ought to be checked, we hereby notify that no person shall, for purpose of cultivation buy or sell Kuravars, Pariahs, Pulayahs, Malayars, Vetars and others in mortgage, janmam or pattom, as is done in many places or get title deeds with the prominent landholders of the place concerning them or engaged such people for cultivation and that no people of any other caste shall beyond this natural customs, buy or sell children of their own caste or pay toll to the sircar. Any one that acts in opposition to the notification given above and has a regular dealing of the slaves shall be subjected to severe punishments, their property confiscated and they themselves banished from the country.

The proclamation of 1815 A.D also led to the abolishment of taxes like *Talayara* and *Valayara*. The same year also witnessed the removal of restrictions of the lower castes especially the Ezhavas to carry umbrellas, lights and knives chained with gold and to wear earrings. On 1861 Travancore government issued a notification regarding the prohibition of the sale of children and also declared that anyone who violated the rule will be under criminal punishment.

The Royal Proclamation of 1815 had played its part in putting an end to the oppressive situation of the peasants. Missionaries Mr. Athanasius and Vedamonickam forwarded petitions to the Government regarding the handicaps associated with the feudal taxes and services. As a consequence the Christians of Travancore got exceptions from compulsory labour. Pounding of rice and oil supply were some of such labour activities. It was with the Proclamation on 29 December, 1815 by Her Highness the Maharani, Gouri Parvathi Bai that Christians got exemptions from *oozhियam* duties connected with Hindu Temples. This Proclamation was considered as the first major attempt relating to the abolition of *oozhियam* in Travancore. The next measure of importance was the Royal Proclamation dated 18th September, 1821 which relieved the Nadar Christians of Nanchilnadu from Sunday *Oozhiyam* services. This was a setback especially to the high caste as they had been for ages enjoying free service from the low caste. *Oozhiyam* services had demanded people from the low castes to do various works like digging tanks, carrying leaves of palm and plantain trees to various destinations. Travancore state also took away the restrictions in using wheeled carriages by the common people and they were granted the privilege to use it. This new steps can be taken as a move that shows the revolutionary change happening in the society. Also the Namboothiris started paying money for the works that others do for them at their households. This was a situation that was quite unimaginable ages back.

However, all these Proclamations had nothing to do with the absolute abolition of slavery. Slaves continued to be bought and sold. For completely stopped the slavery, Maharajah Swathi Thirunal was presented with a petition by the Christian missionaries on the 19th of March 1847 through the Resident William Cullen. But the complete emancipation of slaves was taken to be a daring task by the king which needs extreme caution to carry out. The Resident could not be satisfied with the reply and he sent a memorandum to the *Dewan*. The Resident wanted the *Dewan* to observe the provision of the Act V of 1843 passed by the Indian Government. This in turn resulted in the Proclamation of 1853 by which slavery was legally abolished. However, the Proclamation of 1853 had its own loopholes and drawbacks. Slavery continued to exist and the English noticed it. The Resident was dissatisfied with the working of the controversial second and fifth clauses in the Proclamation. The drawbacks of 1853 Proclamation were so glaring. On 24th June, 1855 Maharajah Utram Tirunal issued a royal proclamation banning slavery altogether in Travancore.

Although legally emancipated, the condition of slave population very pathetic than before. The slaves were in the same condition of dependence on their masters and the primordial traditions of the land and the physical configuration of the soil prevented them from contact with the outer world. The children of the slaves were sale in the Travancore. In this situation, the spectacular innovations introduced by the then Dewan Sir T.Madhava Rao. He introduced a notification regarding the prohibition of sale of children in 1861. He also takes reformatory measures to improve the condition of slaves. In the year 1865, Sir T.Madhava Rao issued an order regarding the abolition of *Oozhiyam* service by Ezhavas and others except for Government.

As part of liberalizing the slave castes of Travancore, *oozhियam* or forced labour demanded by the Government was completely stopped in 1865. As an added blessing the missionary institutions provided the slaves with skilled expertise in carpentry, weaving and metallic works.

Conclusion

The resolution and assurance that the *adiyalans* showed upon conversion was great. There was a subversion of the power of the Brahmin community. The *adiyalas* started becoming rebellious. They not only had themselves converted disregarding the warning of the *janmis* but even had the courage to skip the work on Sundays. Upon conversion they could get at least a day off from doing *oozhiyavela* as Sunday was taken to be a day of holy duties in the Christian faith. This rebellious conduct spread even to other spheres of their lives. The *adiyalas* who were hitherto afraid to be present in front of the upper castes started forwarding themselves in the public as speakers and preachers. They started to visit the homes of the *janmis*. The practice of untouchability was questioned. Christianity provided them with courage to challenges inequalities.

The History of the abolition of slavery in Travancore is closely associated with the constant and determined efforts of English missionaries in Travancore. The British Residents of Travancore like Colonel Munro and General Cullen explicitly interfered in the administration of Travancore. Their force and influence practically persuaded the authorities into action. The Travancore high caste people knew that the abolition of slavery would definitely upset the social equilibrium paved and equipped by age old customs and institutions. Yet Travancore authorities succeeded in realizing their object with the abolition of Slavery.

Key Words:

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| <i>Oozhiyam</i> | : | Free Service |
| Namboothiri | : | Hindu Brahmins from the Indian state of Kerala |
| <i>Dewan</i> | : | Chief Minister |
| <i>Virichikam</i> | : | Name of a Malayalam Month |
| <i>Adiyalar</i> | : | Agrestic slaves |
| <i>Janmi</i> | : | Feudal lord |
| <i>Sircar</i> | : | Government |
| <i>Panam</i> | : | Rupee |

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