



MOVEMENTS TOWARDS SOCIAL EQUALITY WITH THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY IN 19TH CENTURY TRAVANCORE

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Abstract

Cause and effect situation in Travancore begins with the study of the peasantry who were under the oppressive hold of landlords and colonial regimes. In Travancore, particularly under the *janmi* system of the Namboothiris, their status deteriorated into slavery and serfdom. A change was unavoidable, according to the mounting pressure of the caste-based social system's economic and social disparities. The study focuses on these elements that carried the seeds of future change.

Key Words: Namboothiris, *janmi* system, *Oozhiyam* and *Adiyalar*

Introduction

Slavery was not something new to Travancore. The fundamental idea was that a lower caste and gender would be held captive by a high elite. The copper plates and inscriptions that are still in existence are proof that Kerala in the middle ages engaged in the slave trade. Ayyanadikal Thiruvadikal, the King of Venadu, exchanged a plot of land for the Syrian Church at Tangasseri, as shown by the Tharisappalli Copper Plates. Additionally, it grants Christians a particular benefit by exempting them from paying the government's slave tax. It illustrates how prevalent the slave trade was in Venad. Its effects were felt all over Travancore. The inception of the caste system in Travancore is intimately related to the birth of the institution of slavery.

There were 1.65,000 slaves in Travancore in 1847. Brahmins held the position of absolute control in Travancore due to their socioreligious domination. This in turn caused the system to be divided into many caste groupings. The high caste group ruled the underprivileged and needy. And those who belonged to the so-called lower castes suffered from slavery. The general categories designated as slaves were Pulayas, Parayas, Paravas, Kuravas, and Vettuvans.

A deep system of segregation with the burden of slavery started prevailing. Because of their close ties to the Namboothiri Brahmins, Nayars benefited from authority. They can end up becoming the largest landowners and slaveholders. The group was required to partake in *oozhiyam* service. Every slave was required to work for free on specific days throughout the year in the territory of the higher class. It was known as *oozhiyam*, and those who left early faced harsh punishment. Arumainayamgam, a villager, choose to attend Sabbath worship instead of performing the *oozhiyam* ritual. As a result, his masters brutally beat and tortured him.

The slavery system in Travancore was closely related to the caste hierarchy structure. Slavery was a hereditary practise that spread more widely in South Travancore. The lowest classes in society, such as the *Pulayas* and *Parayas*, were treated like slaves and had to endure the most unpleasant and unhygienic living circumstances. Gopalakrishnan said that a *janmi* kept 200 Pulayas for the labor-intensive tasks on his farm and gave hundreds of them to others. Some papers have been found in Travancore's numerous locations. The first known example of this type of document was one that S. Desivinagom Pillai, a renowned historian, found in South Travancore in 1431. This record claims that certain *vellalas* and *pariahs*, together with cows, rice fields, and copper and bronze objects, were presented as dowries. The Kongerattu mansion in Thiruvella included an unpublished *kolezhuthu* selling deed from 1591. This paperwork makes the sale of a slave quite apparent. According to this text, the *janmis* of Travancore have been given "the right to kill if necessary" rather than the owner, who is not allowed to kill his

slave. Except for Brahmins, it was standard practise to openly sell persons to those who desired them, regardless of their caste.

The use of slavery started to wane when missionaries arrived. The dreadful state of slaves stirred up the missionaries' minds from the outset as they converted more people from the slave classes. Through a variety of memos and propaganda, missionaries attempted to end the misery of the slaves. When Col. Munro was appointed Resident Dewan of Travancore, he persuaded Rani Lakshmi Bai to enact a number of social reforms that enabled slaves to obtain rights that had previously been denied to them. Rani Lakshmi Bai announced the abolition of slavery through the Proclamation of 1812. 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.

Taxes like Talayara and Valayara were also abolished as a result of the decree of 1815 AD. In the same year, restrictions on lower caste members, particularly *Ezhavas*, wearing jewellery and carrying lamps, knives, and umbrellas were also lifted. The Travancore government issued a notice prohibiting the sale of children in 1861, along with a warning that violators would face legal repercussions. The terrible plight of the peasants had been ended in part thanks to the Royal Proclamation of 1815. Mr. Athanasius and Vedamonickam, two missionaries, petitioned the government on the disadvantages brought on by the feudal taxes and services. The Christians of Travancore thus received exemptions from forced work. One example of this kind of labour was the delivery of oil and the pounding of rice. Christians were exempted from the *oozhiyam* obligations associated with Hindu temples according to a proclamation made by Her Highness the Maharani, Gouri Parvathi Bai, on December 29, 1815. This Proclamation was regarded as the first significant effort to outlaw *oozhiyam* in Travancore. The Royal Proclamation of 18 September 1821, which exempted the Nadar Christians of Nanchilnadu from Sunday *Oozhiyam* worship, was the next significant development. This was a blow, particularly for the high caste, who had been using the low castes' free services for years.

Low caste individuals were required by *Oozhiyum* Services to do a variety of tasks, such as excavating tanks and transporting plantain and palm tree leaves to various locations. The state of Travancore also removed the prohibitions on the use of wheeled carriages by the general populace and provided them the right to do so. This new course of action might be viewed as a demonstration of the social revolution now taking place. The Namboothiris also began paying individuals to perform tasks for them in their homes. Back then, a situation like this was virtually unthinkable. But none of these Proclamations addressed the outright abolition of slavery.

Slaves were still being purchased and traded. On March 19, 1847, through Resident William Cullen, Maharajah Swathi Thirunal received a petition from Christian missionaries asking him to end slavery permanently. However, the monarch considered the total liberation of slaves to be a risky undertaking that required much prudence to achieve. The resident addressed a memo to the *dewan* after being unsatisfied with the response. The Resident requested that the *Dewan* abide by the clause of the Indian Government's Act V of 1843. Slavery was subsequently declared illegal by the Proclamation of 1853 as a result of this.

However, the Proclamation of 1853 had certain drawbacks and inadequacies. The English were aware of the continued existence of slavery. The implementation of the disputed second and fifth clauses of the Proclamation raised concerns for the Resident. The 1853 Proclamation had a number of clear flaws. Maharajah Utram Tirunal issued a royal proclamation on June 24, 1855, making slavery totally illegal in Travancore. According to this decree, slavery was totally abolished, and anybody who made a suggestion to do so or to ameliorate the conditions of slaves was accepted and agreed not to interfere with the system of economic production.

In 1865, as part of the liberalisation of the Travancore slave castes, the government's demand for *oozhiyam*, or forced labour, was also completely abolished. The missionary institutions also provided instruction in metalworking, weaving, and carpentry for the *oozhiyars* in case they misplaced their *oozhiyavela*. Upon

conversion, the *adiyalans* shown outstanding resolve and confidence. The influence of the Brahmin community was abused. The *adiyalas* began acting out in rebellion. They had the guts to skip work on Sundays in addition to having converted themselves despite the *janmis'* warnings.

As Sunday was considered to be a day of sacred obligations in the Christian religion, people may take at least one day off from doing *oozhiyavela* after becoming Christians. This rebellious behaviour even permeated other areas of their lives. *Adiyalas* who had previously been intimidated to speak in front of upper castes began putting themselves forward in the public as speakers and preachers. They began to go to the *janmis'* residences. Untouchability was questioned as a practise. Their faith in Christianity gave them the confidence to confront injustices.

Travancore witnessed the enactment of a series of legislations and reformist policies. Changes in the society were expedited by the arrival of missionaries and their educational institutions. Conversion to a new religion resulted in the subversion of previously accepted social norms. Slavery suffered a setback, ending the free and obligatory services provided to Namboothiris. The position of Namboothiris was negatively impacted by these modifications. The wings of revolution, freedom, and equality were adopted by the *adiyalans*.

Key Words

Namboothiri : Malayali Brahmin who rank high in the caste order

Janmi system : Feudal System

Oozhiyam : Free Service

Adiyalar : Agrestic slaves

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