



# CASTE- BOOM OR CURSE, A PRECISE QUERY IN THE HISTORY OF TAXATION IN TRAVANCORE

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**Abstract :** The caste system in India based on four-fold varna system, means, divided the caste into to four significant divisions such as Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras while in Kerala the system was based on Brahmin- Sudra system, they were called the *savarnas* and treated them as ‘privileged’ and the lower castes, majority in numbers only, they were called *avarnas* and treated as ‘unprivileged’ and submissive groups. This dominant-submissive relationship based on caste was the yardstick to determine the tax of a person in Travancore. Caste in Kerala had two sharp edges as a boom and curse, the system was a boom to the upper castes and a curse to the lower castes.

**Keywords:** Humiliation, power, subjugation, tradition

## INTRODUCTION

As like every creature in this world, man born free with natural qualities and physiognomies but the society limit the value and grade of him on the basis of caste, colour, creed, gender and region. This inherent tendency of the society made the people stratified and put them into the consciously manufactured ‘brackets’ which gradually crumbled the generic identity of a large group of people. Simultaneously, they were culturally evicted and morally degraded through altered machineries, predominantly in the form of exploitation, humiliation and traditional protocols. Caste, among all of this discrimination performed and performing a cunning role in all over the world, most commonly in Oriental countries like India.

Travancore, one of the Princely States hailed as the ‘Model State in British India’ ruled by the Travancore Royal Family from 1729-1949 A.D. Even though it was a prosperous state had the experience of two centuries of existence, its prosperity and fame were erected based on caste hierarchy. Travancore was such a crucial caste-oriented society in which the whole subjects of the state was divided into privileged and unprivileged or worthy and unworthy. The Brahmins, Kshatriyas, *Nayars* are categorised as privileged section, commonly called as the *Savarana* Hindus while the *Ezhavas*, *Pulayas*, *Parayas*, *Kuravas*, etc. are stratified as the unprivileged or the *Avarnas*. Caste and related problems are common in all times but when the condition of Travancore taken into consideration, there caste materialised as a bi-facet figure because it emerged as a divine boom to someone whereas it also taken the position of ferocious curse to the rest. From the earlier times onwards, the victims of wealth and power were the lower strata of the society, it was also followed by the rulers and society of Travancore.<sup>1</sup>

If more precisely say that caste became a blessed boom to the *savarna* Hindus termed as the upper castes and it became horrible curse to the lower castes. This form of caste system was more common and visible in the system of taxation of the Princely State. The ruling class and the upper castes were joined together for exploiting the lower castes, consequently, a majority culture of the lower castes was evicted, and they began to face exploitation, humiliation, eviction and different kinds of impositions.

When come to the taxation in Travancore, the rulers imposed more than three hundred forms of taxes to its subjects, but the real fact is proven by the sources that the upper castes were excluded from this system while the lower castes were destined to pay. Unauthorised and institutional form of exploitation were faced by the subalterns here because this division based on caste was a deliberately fabricated and executed by the professed elites for their economic, political, cultural and social benefits. Tax is the progressive symbol of every civilized society, and it should be for the welfare and development of its people is the general fact about the taxation in all over the world while it could not be visible in any tax forms of Travancore because it always

acted as welfare and well-wisher to the upper castes only. All these discriminations and related atrocities were the product of the society and its complex norms like untouchability, caste hierarchy, ignorance, unnecessary rituals, beliefs, etc. Unity is the foremost pillar for every political entity's strength but here the mankind was always followed a distance from each other based on their sense of caste purity and pollution. The upper castes feared that if they approach or communicate with the lower castes, then their state of purity will ruin, and they were culturally harmed so the elites always keep a distance from the lower castes. For this safe zone, the *savarnas* implemented a protocol of distance to the lower castes from them such as 12ft, 32ft, etc. The society's stratification was set up based on caste in hierarchical order from the sacred to unworthy.<sup>2</sup> The Travancore society was strictly separated and censored through clear cut margins and social interactions was strictly limited. Each caste, sub-caste and communities had followed their own culture in their diet, worship, rituals, beliefs and marriage.

Freedom and education are the major noble factors forbidden from the lower strata of the society by the dominant caste for making the place of elites as unquestionable and comfortable. The lower caste had no right to education, and they were completely expelled from all the progressive measures, treated identical to the status of beasts. The real fact is that in its earlier stages the lower castes did not find any mistreatment in it, they enjoyed these types of moral degradation because of ignorance and fear they were not capable of realizing what is right and what is wrong?

Look at the core matter, taxation as a boom or curse, before that it should be time to evaluate caste as a boom version of taxation and caste as a curse version. Tax system of Travancore was obviously a boom to the castes including the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Ambalavasis* and *Nayars*, in which, the Brahmins enjoyed perfect social, economic, political and cultural status in its maximum and they enjoyed the complete religious freedom. They followed a great influence upon society because of the age-old tradition of *chathurvarnya* system of the Vedic period. Accordingly, the Brahmins were originated from the head of Brahma, the Creator. So, they were treated as equal to God or the spokesmen of God. Above all, the Hindu Texts were also given superior status to the Brahmins like the *Manu Dharmasasthras*. All these fabulous positions were misused by the Brahmins for fulfilling their economic as well as other needs including luxuries life. As a mental back up, they always wanted a special respectful position among the mass, they were the priests in the temples and they themselves declared as the symbol of purity. They enjoyed the glazing positions of themselves and the special treatment of them by the rulers too. Due to this boom, they were simply exempted from the horrible and unnecessary taxation, any ruler in Travancore was not able to tax and punish the Brahmins. Their economic status was sounder with acres of land and sometimes so many villages were owned by these Brahmins, gradually they were becoming the complete power socket in Travancore and their land were called as the *Brahmaswom*. The land tax was the lion share of income in Travancore while the *Brahmaswom* land never came under the survey of taxable lands. The *jenmi-kudiyan* system, a simple version of the Feudalism in European countries were very common in social and economic arena of Travancore because all of the *Brahmasowm* land was cultivated by the lower caste under different types of *pattams* or rent policies, the tax of these land was the responsibility of the lower castes and in those lands the *Nayars* were appointed by the Brahmins as the care-takers, in such a hierarchical or pyramidal form of land acquisition, the exploitation also followed the same pyramidal and hierarchical structure. The rulers of Travancore never tried to bring an end to this system of exploitation because the rulers belonged to the typical Hinduism and there had lots of temples in which the *pujas* were done by the Brahmins, so many expensive *pujas* and offerings were conducted, the sources revealed the expenses of all those *pujas* and what are the valuable items were awarded to the Brahmins as an appreciations to theses *pujas*. Most of the *Brahmaswom* lands, cows and villages of the Brahmins once belonged to the *Pandaravaka* lands or the land of the Royal family.

There is no caste in all over the world but it prevalent in India because of the system of *chathurvarnya* but the society always wanted a change from this system but even now its intensity is in its zenith. When approaching with the historical sources, the class and caste of yesterday are the best awareness and index of the historical roots and acceptance of social stratification in the society of Travancore besides expressing the social dynamics. In short, tax means a benefit of the higher castes and it always acted as a boom to them because they were economically, culturally, politically, socially and religiously elevated in all times, they became the dominant groups who hold every form of power, and they are always successful in utilize all of beneficial resources. The condition of the women of the higher castes was extremely better when comparing with the lower castes. The women of the Brahmins were treated as the symbol of purity and called them as *Antharjanams*. The house of the Brahmins are *Illams* or *Manas*. Their women, house, animals, profession, land, food, dress, rituals, marriages, etc. were strictly exempted from taxation.



Now, the space is for discuss the alleged history less, unprivileged, unworthy, polluted, commonly called the *avarnaas* or the lower castes and how the taxation of Travancore became a curse upon them and how their caste became a polluted one. The lower castes of Travancore never ever enjoyed any type of concessions, privileges, and luxuries, at least they never ever lived as the status of a human being. The complete responsibility of the plights they had faced was only because they were born in a lower caste section. It's a common trend in all over the world, the victims of all types of exploitation including financial, physical and psychological belonged to the ignorant, poor, women and downtrodden. The real fact is that in everywhere, the exploited group are the majority and the privileged are the minorities, the minority hold all hegemonies and domination, the mass power were curtailed here with appeasement, iron machineries of suppression, etc. It was more fertile in the soil of Travancore.

Hundreds of taxes were imposed upon the lower castes in different names especially upon their caste, profession, gender, head, breasts, moustache, education, food, dress, rituals, culture, hut, agriculture, seeds, animals, festivals, agricultural and professional tools, grazing lands, cattle, etc. Dozens of taxes were paid to the exchequer by them in one time. Now entering to the major taxes imposed upon the lower castes at a glance, it should be in the name of *ankam*, *chunkam*, *ezha*, *kozha*, *thappu*, *pizha*, *pulayattu pennu*, *menipponnu*, *kodapirathi*, *ponnarippu*, *aymula*, *mummula*, *enikkanam*, *thalakkanam*, breast tax, *panamadi*, *kuppakazhcha*, *adimappanam*, *valappanam*, *kathi*, *chatti*, *chemkompu*, *thura*, *tholu*, *valu*, *kazhcha*, *kottaippanam*, *kannalakkanam*, *thattarappattam*, *vannarappattam*, *thulakkooli*, *poovala*, *pativaram*, *polichezhuthu*, *azhivulkkam*, *kudanazhi*, tree tax, *polipponnu*, coconut tax, river tax, Stamp duties, *anchal* tax, industrial tax, commercial tax, forest tax, *thadivila*, *rajabhogam*, handloom tax, *kudi vila*, garden tax, *nila nikuthi*, *ilavania pattam*, *nir otti*, *verumpattam*, warehouse tax, import duties, export duties, *choukies* tax, *rakshabhogam*, *chekkira*, *meen pattom*, temple tax, sea tax, tax on weapons, tax on umbrella, tax on lamps, vehicle tax, tax on titles and privileges, tax on moustache, etc.

The above-mentioned taxes are different in their names only but the after all intention and features were vested in the inherent exploitation of the lower caste through oppression. Every occasion of the lower castes were used as a medium to squeeze the lower castes of the society.<sup>3</sup> It's time to discuss some of the taxes with their features. Breast tax collected from the lower caste women itself proven the humiliated character of the system of taxation and lights upon the treatments of women by the government. The real meaning of humiliation is that of the complete or the extreme degradation.<sup>4</sup> This tax is also known as *Mulakkaram*, of course, it was collected for the breasts of the *avarna* women. The *Ezhava*, *Paraya*, *Pulaya* and other unprivileged sections of the society were once destined to pay the tax but now this tax is differently interpreted by different sections of the society for their convenience to close or disclose the facts. The treatment on the lower strata of the society was faced numerous problems and degradation, taxes were collected from the people quite inhumanly<sup>5</sup> their women were treated as beasts, after getting puberty of a lower caste woman, the *Pravarthiyar*, the officer in charge of tax collection reached their house and fixed the rate of breast tax. The morality and standard of the society is revealing through these types of taxes. In later discussions, conducted by scholars belonged to different fields treated the economy of Travancore as a 'Breast Tax Economy' because the government squeeze everything from the poor people for fulfilling their economic needs. The breast tax should be incomplete without mention the sacrifice of Nangeli, she was an *Ezhava* lady belonged to *Cherthala Taluk*, she committed suicide with cutting their breasts in front of the tax collector and other officials from government because she was not able to pay the breast tax on time because of famine and poverty but the officials were not ready to give concessions on her so she was forced to done this horrible suicide. After cut-off her breasts, presented to the *Pravarthiyar* in a banana leaf. Then died because of bleeding from the wound, her husband also committed suicide on her pyre. This incident has two features, the first one is that, may be it was one of the first women liberation movement in the world and the second one is related with her husband because he committed a type of Sati, male form of Sati, it is also rare in the world. But the government was not ready to withdraw these types of taxes because they always interested in pleasing the Brahmins and the *savarnas* through grant feast in *uttupuras* or feeding centres. The curse of the caste system of the lower caste women were transformed boom of the Brahmins in the form of delicious feast and valuable gifts.

The foremost aim of tax collection is to enhance the standard of living of the people in general, *kuppakazhcha* a type of tax imposed upon the hut of the lower strata of the society which is enough to prove the quality of tax collection and status of society, hut is the best sign of their financial condition, instead of uplift them from those huts to the houses, the authority tried to tax on their sufferings. Obviously, the term hut synonyms their status as not luxuries and big but they were destined to pay tax to the government only because they belonged to a lower caste. At the same time, Travancore was filled with *Agraharams*, these are

the residential areas of the Brahmins and their houses called *Manas* or *Illams*, are the symbols of luxury and situated during acres of land, which explains the prosperity of themselves. The administrative hold of the Brahmins or their boom and privileges can understand only from this because these houses were not under taxation. The social space between the *avarna-savarna* castes expressed through the form of tax.

*Menipponnu*, a tax form, under which the government tried to tax on the jewellery of the lower strata because the lower caste had no right to wear golden and silver ornaments and even had no right to imitate the model of the ornaments of the higher castes, if they do the same will punish or taxed. But it got changed after the proclamation in 1802, which permitted the lower castes to wear jewellery.<sup>6</sup> After the Proclamation, *menipponnu* became more popular because the lower castes began to wear the ornaments, the authority-imposed tax on golden ornaments worn by the *avaras*, especially in their festive and marriage occasions. Palppu, the social reformer and the first Doctor in Travancore from the lower caste had experienced the demerits of *menipponnu* because before the proclamation, the lower castes used golden ornaments after mixing copper or other metals in it. So, the value of the gold of the lower castes in Travancore was very low and this prejudice had been passed through the age and after the proclamation too, the *savarna-jenmies* did not ready to buy the gold of the lower castes. Palppu, during his study time, faced such problem and he discussed this in later.

*Kodaparathi* is also a tax on ornaments of the lower castes, which was imposed upon the silver ornaments. Here also the value of the silver of them was under misinterpretation. This form of tax is mentioned in the Therissappalli Copper Plates.<sup>7</sup> The age old *Nayar-Namboothiri* alliances seemed to have reflected the ideological and power hegemony of them upon the lower castes. The caste of a person was the yardstick to determine the tax and status of a person in the Princely State of Travancore. The purity-pollution structure has seen in the agricultural and allied activities and its reflections had fallen in the arena of taxation. The *Nayar-Namboothiri* alliance had influenced and gained lots of privileges from these agricultural taxes because the government had imposed taxes on every minute aspects in agricultural fields, within the strong protective shade of the *savaras*. The profession of most of the people in Travancore was agriculture because Travancore was one of the agricultural countries in which the majority of the peasants were the lower castes. That's why, most of the agricultural taxes had the nature of professional taxes. *Kathi*, a form of tax enacted upon the *Ezhavas* of Travancore for their knife used for toddy-tapping, *chatti* imposed upon their pot had been using for toddy collection. The *Ezhavas* of Travancore was the majority population in Travancore. So, the government intruded different types of taxes upon them because through this taxation the exchequer became more and more rich.

These atrocities related with the collection of taxes and caste system got changed with the reign of Gouri Parvathi Bhai and she prohibited different forms of anti-human and anti-women taxes from Travancore.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Caste, one of the age-old systems which classifies the society into different sections and put the people under specific system of culture, tradition, beliefs and rituals. It has made different types of atrocities in the society from its earlier times to the contemporary society especially it became the premier cause for the emergence of divisions among the people. The society of Travancore was the best example for such a division based on caste was followed. Caste as a boom or curse, it depends on the circumstances, and treatment of the society, when analysing the situation of Travancore, caste played a predominant role in which sometimes caste determined the tax of a person, caste was a boom as well as curse, it was obviously a curse to the society of Travancore, analysing the nature, forms and after effects of tax system in the Princely state. It was unequal, inhuman, humiliated and subjugated in character and the base of the tax system was caste and thus caste was a curse in Travancore society.

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