



AYYANKALI: THE VOICE OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE IN KERALA

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Abstract

Ayyankali (1863-1941) was a Dalit social reformer who worked for the advancement of deprived, untouchable people in the princely state of Travancore, British India. His efforts influenced many changes that improved the social well being of those people, who are today often referred to as Dalits. Mahatma Gandhi called him the 'Pulaya king'. Indira Gandhi described him as 'India's greatest son. He challenged the caste system and its discriminatory practices, and advocated for education, land ownership, and labour rights for the Dalits. He also became the first Dalit member of the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly, the legislative council of Travancore. He was born on 28 August 1863, belonged to the Pulayar community, one of the lowest castes in the caste hierarchy, who faced severe discrimination and oppression from the upper castes. The Pulayars were treated as slaves, denied access to public roads, education, temples, and basic human rights. Ayyankali witnessed the atrocities committed against his people and decided to challenge the unjust social order.

Key words: - social reformer-Dalits- untouchability- Bullock cart Strike - Agricultural Labour Strike-SJPS-Women's Movement

Introduction

Kerala society in the 19th and early 20th century drowned in multiple social problems such as Social stratification of caste system, religious superstitions, inequality in every aspects of Kerala society¹. Not only for the men of the lower caste but also for the women and children suffered a lot by the upper caste dominators. People belonging to the upper castes enjoyed many privileges while the lower castes were neglected and oppressed. The principles of social freedom and equality found no place in Hindu social organization². The upper castes enjoyed several privileges which were denied over the centuries to the Dalits. The upper castes constituted the land owning class who freely oppressed the members of the other castes and considered inferior to them in the social scale. The law administered by them was not equalitarian in any sense. The social evils of untouchability and unapproachability continued to be a disgrace to the Hindu society. The result was the complete segregation of the Hindus of one caste from their brethren belonging to the other castes in the society. The lower castes were denied access to schools, temples, and places of public resort, and there were restrictions even on their freedom to walk without fear along the public road. The practice of pollution was widely observed³. Ayyankali was one of those renowned social reformers who played a vital role in cleansing the Hindu society of social evils. This research article attempt to give a brief glimpse of his momentous life.

Early Life

Ayyankali was born on 28th August 1863 in Venganoor, Trivandrum, Kerala as the son of Ayyan of Pulaya caste. He grew up to be a tall, well built and handsome young man. He was known for his physical prowess and proficiency in the martial arts. One particular childhood incident made Ayyankali aware of the caste prejudices prevalent in Kerala society⁴. While playing football with children of his age the ball kicked by Ayyankali fell on the roof of a Nair house. The Nair warned him not to play with Upper caste young men. Deeply hurt, he took oath never to play with them. Then he went into a period of deep thought and came out of a month of contemplation with a secret agenda - civil liberties for the untouchables⁵.

Bullock cart Strike/Villuvandi Samaram

The modern age is also the age of Dalit rebellion against Upper Castes. In this era, wave after wave of Dalit rebellions kept rising in different corners of the country and even today its process is going on in some form or the other, because the dream of social equality with which these rebellions started has not yet been fully materialized. This rebellion has been more widespread and effective in Kerala. Ayyankali brought a radical change in the social relations there to a great extent and trampled the pride of caste superiority of the upper castes with his bullock cart⁶.

Sri Narayana Guru was the first person to lay the foundation of modernity in Kerala, but the Dalit rebel Ayyankali has a decisive role among those who built the huge edifice on this foundation. He extended the modern consciousness of equality and justice to the lowest level in Kerala. It may be difficult for many to imagine that a person who could neither write nor read could lead a movement for the right to read, perhaps unparalleled in the world, by someone who could somehow sign. Learned, he should stand in the front row among the builders of modern Kerala⁷.

Upper Castes had imposed restrictions on the Dalits in Kerala, which is difficult for any civilized society and human being to imagine. Dalits who could not walk on the main roads, could not enter the markets, the doors of the schools were closed to them, not allowed to enter the temples, not allowed to set foot inside the court, their cases were heard outside the court. Men and Women could not wear clothes above the waist and below the knee. If women tried to cover their breasts, they had to pay tax⁸.

Dalits shadow could defile the Brahmins from a distance of several feet. Seeing this situation, Swami Vivekananda⁹ called it caste madness. The first attempt to break this situation was made by Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala, but his efforts benefited more from the middle castes above the Dalits, especially the Ezhava caste. Yes, he definitely gave birth and expanded that consciousness, due to which a rebellious personality like Ayyankali was born among the Dalits. He experienced caste humiliation as a child, when his soccer ball landed in the yard of a Nair family. The humiliated child may be like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, but before him he resolved to get rid of this caste insult.

Though Ayyankali, was told by his father that this was the norm that it would have to be accepted, that is, one would have to learn to accept and tolerate caste humiliation, but he decided otherwise¹⁰. Unlike Dalit rebel like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Ayyankali did not go to school and was not able to read and

write. He chose a path of direct rebellion against Brahminism, and this led him and his comrades to face violent attacks from the Nairs. Perhaps one of the reasons for this outright rebellion was that the Travancore state was not directly under British rule, it was a Hindu state and its king ruled according to the Brahminical system¹¹.

At the age of 27, Ayyankali took such a step, which became a record in the history of Kerala. When Dalits were not allowed to walk on the main roads in Kerala, he decided in 1893 to run bullock carts on roads barred for Dalits. He prepared a bullock cart and made it run on those paths, on which his forefathers could not even think of walking. The Nairs, who considered themselves the best after the Brahmins felt as if this bullock cart was trampling their chest instead of trampling the roads and they broke down on them with sticks and rods¹². But he also came out prepared and took out the dagger already kept with him and jumped into the field to deal with the attackers. The cowardly attackers ran away¹³. In this way, he mixed the pride of caste superiority of the upper castes into the soil. He challenged almost every system of Brahminism, which denied Dalits the status of being human and humiliated them.

Chaliyar Riots

Though Ayyankali could ride in a cart through the streets, other lesser beings were not allowed to walk there. Therefore he mobilized his people and took a 'walk for freedom' to Puthen Market and reached the Chaliyar Street of Bala-rama-Puram¹⁴. The Chaliyar riots were a series of violent clashes that erupted in the princely state of Travancore in 1893. The riots were triggered by the defiant act of Ayyankali who rode an ox-cart along a public road forbidden for the lower castes. The upper caste Nairs, who considered themselves the lords of the land were outraged by his challenge to their authority and privilege. They attacked him and his cart, but he fought back and defended himself. This sparked a chain of events that led to widespread violence and bloodshed between the Nairs and the Dalits, especially the Pulayas. The riots lasted for a year and resulted in the death of many Nairs and Pulayas¹⁵. The Travancore government tried to suppress the riots by deploying police and military forces, but they were ineffective. The British government also intervened and mediated between the conflicting parties. The riots finally ended in 1894, after a compromise was reached between the Nairs and the Dalits. The Chaliyar riots were a turning point in the history of Kerala, as they marked the beginning of the Dalit movement for social justice and equality¹⁶. Ayyankali's courage and resistance inspired many Dalits to join his cause and demand their rights.

Education of Untouchables

Before Ayyankali's movement, education in Kerala was highly unequal and discriminatory. The education system was dominated by the Brahmins and other upper castes who had access to traditional schools of learning called kalaris and ezhuthu pallis. These schools taught subjects such as astronomy, astrology and Ayurveda literature, and mathematics. The lower castes, especially the Dalits, were denied the right to education and literacy¹⁷.

The colonial missionaries and the British government introduced the modern school education system in Kerala in the 19th century and established schools for the lower castes and the Christians, but they faced resistance and hostility from the upper castes and the Hindu orthodoxy¹⁸. The government

tried to improve access to education for the lower castes by opening public schools and providing state funding. However, implementing these policies was slow and ineffective due to the opposition and corruption of the local officials and the upper castes.

During Ayyankali's younger days, the Dalits were not allowed to enter into schools. He wanted at least the next generation of Dalits to have education. In 1904 the Pulayas under his leadership made efforts to start their own schools since they were denied entry into government schools. These schools had no black boards. Sand on the floor was the book and fingers the pencil. Thus Dalits challenged the rule that they cannot even study in secret¹⁹. The first school in the history of Dalits was established in Venganoor by Ayyankali. But it was destroyed. Ayyankali formed an organization called Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangham that submitted many petitions to the government to allow Dalit children to study in schools. In 1907 the government passed an order to admit Dalit children to schools. But the officials at the periphery sabotaged the order. The school management consisting of landlords also refused to implement the order. Still Ayyankali knocked at the doors of schools and tried to force the management to honour the government order and admit dalit children. But they were adamant in not letting dalits in the schools²⁰.

The landlords were humbled but bureaucracy was still not relenting. Three years after the order to allow Dalits entry into schools was signed, it was released to public in 1910. The waves of joys erupted from the dalit masses. But the path to school for dalits was still not free from thorns. When Ayyankali reached the Ooroot Ambalam School in Balaramapuram with Panchami, the 5 year old daughter of Poojari Ayyan, for admission, accompanied by his supporters, diku thugs were waiting there. An intense fight followed with both parties getting injuries²¹. Around the same time, there was a riot going on in the road junction between Pulayas and Nairs. Nairs attacked Pulaya huts, destroyed many and took away fowls, goats and bullocks. They molested women and belabored the men folk. Many ran and hid in the fields to escape the wrath. Those who fought back were destroyed. After seven days of rioting, the smoke and dust settled down. Though riots ended, temporarily albeit, in Ooroot Ambalam created grave repercussions in Kunathukal, Marayamuttam, Perumbazhuthoor, Venganoor, etc. After this riot, known as Pulaya Mutiny the struggle of Dalits for a free society became acute²². Then to pressurize them Ayyankali thundered, "If you don't allow our children to study, weeds will grow in your fields". He cut asunder the last strand of kinship between the landlords and labours and paved the path for a historic first ever agricultural labour strike²³.

Agricultural Labour Strike

Ayyankali gave a call to Pulayas and other agricultural workers for strike in 1907. His was a historic call, for he had heralded the first agrarian strike in the history of the world. He added one more demand: 'make the employees permanent' by giving pay during off season when there is no work²⁴. The other demands were:

1. Stop Victimization on whims
2. Stop Involving workers in false cases
3. End whipping of workers
4. Freedom of movement and
5. Admission for children in schools.

The landlords didn't agree²⁵. The polarization had gone too far to be reversed. No processions. No jeeps. No microphones. No pamphlets or banners. Yet, in the fields of

Kaniyapuram, Kandala, Pallichal and Mudavooppara to Vizhinjom, no worker was seen. Initially the landlords laughed at the workers. They calculated that when the food grains run out, the workers will be back.

Landlords formed groups and tried to intimidate the workers by beating them up at random. They failed. They tried to use some backsliders among workers in the fields but met with resistance from Ayyankali pada. This led to violent encounters between the workers and landlords' men. But dalits remain steadfast in their actions. The fields turned into jungles. Starvation stared workers in the face. The landlords planted rice seedlings. Since it was already out of season, plants didn't sprout grains. Landlords unused to working in hot sun suffered health problems. When some landlords tried to adjust, the workers demanded high wages²⁷. With food grains running short, both landlords and workers suffered. Destruction faced both exploiter and exploited. The kitchen fires had stopped burning. Prolonged hunger made many a workers to waver.

Now Ayyankali played his trump card and approached the fishermen community of Vizhinjom and came to an agreement with them. One person from each family was to be put in each fishing boat and given a share of the days catch till the strike was over. Landlords saw impending defeat at the hands of their dependants. This sent them into helpless rage. They committed atrocities on many dalits and set fire to their huts²⁸. The commandos of Ayyankali set fire to many houses of landlords in the interior and sent shivers down their spines, not knowing when and where the attack will come from. Soon, the mood of land lords changed to one of compromise. Ayyankali wanted the landlords to come to him, which they did with peace proposals. Land lords agreed to rise in wages. School entry and travel rights were accepted in principle²⁹. There followed a lot of bloodletting on both sides. But he walked tall at the head of his group.

Dalits Own School

In spite of the best efforts of the government, dalits were not given admission to the extent desired. Ayyankali found a way out--to build his own schools. He hoped that one could study without dependence on the Upper castes. The permission to start such a school was received from the Department of Education. Thus the first school of Dalits was established in Venganoor³⁰. No one who loved his life came forward to become a teacher in this school. Among Dalits there was none educated enough to be one. To encourage teachers to teach Dalits, the government offered Rs nine per month. After intense search one Parameshwaran Pillai of Kaithamukku in Trivandrum decided to join the school³¹.

The new teacher entered the school reluctantly, as though he was entering a garbage dump. His socio-cultural reflexes took over when his progressive intellectualism came face to face with societal reality. He was afraid and shows it. The situation was also quite tense. In no time hooting started from all around the school. The opponents were in no mood to stop the cacophony. There followed pushing and jostling between the opponents and supporters of the school that turned to a riot³². Some came to assault the 'master'. The 'master' was shivering like a leaf. Still the classes continued in spite of the fear stained atmosphere. That night the school was destroyed. In no time a new school structure came up. The opposition to the school increased, but the efforts to continue the school was not sacrificed. The

master came to school and went to his home in Kaitha-mukku³³ escorted by bodyguards. This went on for some time though the school was destroyed at least five times. Each time the school was destroyed, riots ensued. When the master perceived danger to his life, he wanted to give his resignation. But Ayyankali pacified him and assured him security by giving body guards to him³⁴.

Women's Movement

Ayyankali was a champion of women's rights and fought against the oppressive practices that discriminated against Dalit women. One of the most notable achievements of him was the Dalit women's right to cover their upper bodies. Until the early 20th century, Dalit women were forced to leave their breasts bare as a sign of low status and servility. They were also subjected to sexual harassment and violence by the upper caste men³⁵. He challenged this inhuman custom and led a mass agitation similar to Maru Marakkal Samaram. The revolt began in 1895 when his wife Chellamma and his sister-in-law Kuttiamma wore upper clothes and walked along a public road. They were attacked by a group of Nairs, who tore off their clothes and beat them up. Ayyankali rushed to their rescue and fought back the assailants. This incident sparked protests and clashes across Travancore, involving thousands of Dalit women who defied the ban on covering their breasts³⁶. The revolt lasted more than two decades, until the Maharaja of Travancore issued a proclamation in 1936 that allowed all women to wear upper clothes regardless of their caste.

The other rule was to wear necklaces of carved granite. The stone necklaces were a sign of slavery and lay on the naked breasts of women like a serpent. The order of the day for women was 'not to cover the upper body'. Necklaces of glass beads and marbles strung together filled their necks in large numbers. Similar stuff was wound around the wrists. Ayyankali organized an agitation in Perinad against these 'ornaments' and asked the dalit women to give up the habit of wearing necklaces of carved granite³⁷. He told them to wear proper blouse instead. Riots broke out at various places in Kerala. But dalits including their women were in no mood of compromise and soon the inhuman dress code became a thing of past.

Another essential aspect of Ayyankali's movement was the right to education for Dalit women. Ayyankali realized that education was crucial for empowering and liberating Dalit women from ignorance and oppression. He established schools for Dalit girls and encouraged them to pursue learning. He also supported the education of his daughter Kalyani, who became one of the first Dalit women graduates in Kerala³⁸. He also organized mass meetings and cultural events for Dalit women, where they could express their grievances, aspirations, and talents. He encouraged them to participate in the political and social activities of his organization, the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam.

The temple entry Movement

The Temple Entry Proclamation was a historic declaration issued by Maharaja Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, king of Travancore on 12th November 1936. It abolished the ban on the so-called 'lower caste people' from entering Hindu temples in the Princely State of Travancore, now part of Kerala. Ayyankali had been campaigning for temple entry since 1895 when he led a group of Dalits to worship at the Balaramapuram temple. He faced stiff opposition from the orthodox priests, who considered him a polluter of their sacred space³⁹. He persisted in his efforts and gained support from

other reformers like Sree Narayana Guru. After four decades of agitation, he witnessed the historic proclamation that opened the doors of temples to all Hindus. It was a milestone in the history of Travancore and Kerala as it marked the end of centuries of caste-based discrimination and oppression. It also paved the way for a more inclusive and egalitarian society where all people could enjoy their religious freedom and dignity.

Formation of SJPS

With the support he received from his well-wishers, Ayyankali established Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam (hereafter SJPS) to help the Dalits by providing them education, finance and legal support. During that period, after Sree Narayana Guru's SNDP, the next most powerful welfare organization was his SJPS with the slogan 'Progress through education and organization.' Within a short period it had close to a thousand branches in all parts of Kerala⁴⁰. Even the upper-castes now came forward to donate land for SJPS to setup offices.

Ayyankali administered the matters of the Sangam with great managerial acumen. The office bearers of the organization were given elaborate powers by the community. The brave leaders of SJPS were the 'branch managers'. There was no place for cowards in this post. They worked closely with him in all the day to day activities and freedom struggles. They were the real captains of his 'army'⁴¹. Strength and unity were the hallmark of the organization. After laying solid foundations of his organization Ayyankali decided that SJPS should have its own magazine. The communities' whole hearted support to the endeavour gave the organization strength to set out. The monthly '**Sadhu Jana Paripalini**' began publication with Kali Chodikkuruppan as the editor. It was perhaps the first magazine to be brought out by untouchables⁴².

Death

By 1941 he was a very sick man. He died of Asthma on June 18, 1941. Dalits in Kerala especially Pulyas will remain grateful to him for giving them civil liberties and breaking the chains of slavery forever. It is a great shame that nobody is aware of his great deeds outside Kerala⁴³.

Conclusion

Ayyankali pioneered a movement for democratizing public places and asserting the rights of workers even before the establishment of any workers organizations in Kerala. He soon became a voice for the untouchables in Kerala and associated himself with genuine social reformers who were aiming to restructure the decadent Hindu society. The spirit of his spontaneous revolt was his bold attempt to lay claim for, or to make a forceful entry into, the public space which he believed will enable the oppressed people to brave all forms of oppressions and brutalities. Ayyankalippada, the small band of revolutionary youths organized by him, spearheaded an all out war against all forms of exploitations. His life and message inspired and motivated the dalit community and the oppressed sections of society to fight for their rights and dignity. He symbolizes hope and resilience for all those who dream of a casteless and egalitarian society. He left behind a legacy of social justice and human dignity for millions of Dalits in Kerala and beyond.

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