



AYYANKALI AND HIS STRUGGLE AGAINST CASTE HEGEMONY IN COLONIAL KERALA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BULLOCK CART STRIKE

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Abstract

The historic Bullock Cart /Villuvandi Yatra was organized by the reformist leader Ayyankali in 1893 against the various forms of oppression suffered by the lower castes. The caste walls had forbidden the lower castes from even walking through public roads, dressing themselves up properly, getting educated etc. Ayyankali protested against the inhuman practices by travelling in a 'villuvandi' or a belled bullock cart owned by him, at a time when the lower castes were not allowed even to own a bullock cart and the higher castes used the bullock cart as a show of pride and strength. He walked well-dressed, with an overcoat and a turban at an age when Dalits were not allowed to dress themselves up properly.

Keywords:-Dalits- Ayyankali-Caste hegemony - Oppression-Social Reformer- Bullock Cart.

Introduction

History may hold a mirror up to a civilization but it only captures the surface at best. That is why history encapsulates only the stories of the opulence of the kings and queens, the battles between the rulers, strategies and statecraft and conspiracies and back-stabbings. It is unconcerned with the beads of sweat on the forehead of the farmers and the labourers, whose toil not only filled the coffers of the kings and the emperors but also ensured that the faces of their ministers and lieutenants were always beaming with joy. But oppression in the name of caste and religion somehow escapes its notice¹. Invariably, it is the people at the very bottom of the social pyramid who are the victims of this oppression. No wonder, historian Eric Hobsbawm suggests that we should remember history only through the questions we can raise about it. "In a form which we historians believe in – as an objective truth, which can be tested through questions – just the way we want to test it."² The so-called scholars, who talk of equality and freedom day in, day out, ignore the major contributors in the making of the modern Kerala state. That is only because the latter did not belong to their caste or community. They play down the role of Phule and Ambedkar and frown at the mention of Periyar. And they have almost forgotten Ayyankali, the harbinger of renaissance in Kerala.

Three kingdoms were merged to form Kerala: Travancore, Kochi and Malabar. In the Travancore kingdom, Dalit women would be barred from covering their breasts.They were treated almost like serfs

and required to wear necklaces of granite stones. The necklaces, made up of beads of glass and black granite, looked like snakes dangling from their necks. It symbolized their status as slaves³. They resented this system. When the officials of the Maharaja of Travancore reached a village to collect the Breast Tax, a woman called Nangeli refused to pay. Then, when the officials mounted pressure, she chopped off both her breasts and presented them to the officials on a plantain leaf. Nangeli died the same day due to excessive bleeding. Her sacrifice sent a wave of resentment across Kerala and from it was born a movement called “Channar Lahala”⁴. Her village was named “Mulachiparambu” in her honour. Ayyankali also waged a successful battle for securing the right of the Dalit women to cover their breasts. It was one of the several battles he undertook to build a modern Kerala and for the rights of the women and the Dalits. His role in the making of the modern Kerala state and in awakening a consciousness of self-respect among the Dalits and the Backwards was no less important than that of B.R.Ambedkar⁵, Sree Narayana Guru⁶ and Periyar⁷ and Phule⁸.

Historical Background

Dalit politics in Kerala didn't arise during colonial modernity; rather it has been around for centuries. Since the medieval period, it has encountered and resisted Brahmanism. It waged a war against them and white colonialism in the last century and continues to do so. Though there aren't enough records about other Dalit movements before the 19th century, there are several literary works, including *Pachalloor Pathikam* and *Chenganooraathi Paattu*, which give us an explicit idea about cultural resistance against the Brahmanical societal system⁹. However, in the long history of Dalit resistance and politics, it was the movements started during the last decades of the 19th century led by Ayyankali that wreaked the most havoc on the Hindu system of social inequality. Unlike other contemporary social movements, these were fundamentally systematic, strong and concerted.

Ayyankali (1863-1941)

Ayyankali was one of the first in the history of Kerala to fight against exploitation and social oppression. His historic movement for Dalits' rights to walk on public roads, known as “Villuvandi Yatra” and his use of all public services became an everlasting example for the marginalized sections of Kerala. In Kerala members of lower caste communities were not allowed to use public roads as these roads were controlled by the members of higher caste communities. The Villuvandi Samaram was the direct result of this social discrimination¹⁰.

Ayyankali was born on 28th August 1863 in Venganoor, a small village about 13 km to the south of Trivandrum. He was the eldest of the eight children born to Ayyan and Mala. His parents named him “Kali” which became Ayyankali after prefixing his father's name. They were members of the Pulaya community¹¹. Before moving to Venganoor, their family lived in Palawar Tharawad. In Kerala, Pulayas were at the lowest rung among the untouchable castes. They were rural slaves. The landlords, mostly Nairs, could force any Pulayar to do their work. Even after toiling from morning to night, they did not get anything more than 600 grams of rice, and that too of poor quality.

Ayyankali married Chellama when he was 25. The couple was to have seven children. He used to work hard. Once, a landlord asked him to clear a piece of forestland to make it fit for farming. The landlord happened to be large-hearted and let him have a five-acre plot of land. This was a big achievement for a

Pulaya. Ayyankali and his family started tilling the land and soon were better off than other members of their community. At the time, the Pulayas had to work without wages in the fields of others. This system was known as “Ujhiyam Vaala”¹². Among the untouchable castes in Travancore, Pulayas were numerically the smallest and thus too weak to organize themselves. That was one of the reasons for their vulnerability and exploitation.

Pulaya children were not supposed to study. They had to labour, too. When he was a child, Ayyankali was permitted to play with the children of only his caste. But still, his childhood was somewhat better than that of the other children of his caste. His family was relatively free from oppression and his father did not have to do forced labour. Therefore, he had friends from the so-called upper castes, too. However, one day, he saw the brutal face of the caste system. He was playing football with his friends. He kicked the ball and it landed in the courtyard of a Nair house. The house owner lost his temper and sternly warned Ayyankali against playing with the upper-caste children. Hurt and humiliated, he vowed never to be friends with a savarna¹³. The vow proved a boon for him and his community both. He began mobilizing the boys of his community and formed a team. From his childhood itself, he thus developed leadership qualities.

Another incident from his childhood deserves recounting. During a quarrel, he thrashed a boy from an upper-caste. A Pulaya – whose social status was no higher than that of a slave – beating up an upper-caste boy was unheard of. His parents panicked, expecting retribution from the upper castes. And, it would have come, but for mediation by some persons. But Ayyankali did get a sound scolding and thrashing from his parents. The diku, who had brokered peace, advised Ayyankali never to get involved in brawls. But neither the advice nor his parent’s anger could subdue his rebellious spirit. He started questioning the misery and the pain the members of his community were subjected to. That ultimately led him to the idea of their emancipation¹⁴.

When Ayyankali was in his teens, he developed interest in music and songs, particularly folk songs. He discovered that he had a creative bent of mind. During his youth, his strong, athletic body also started drawing praise. Ayyankali had a healthy body and a healthy mind. That boosted his self-confidence. But both these were disqualifications for a person of his caste. There was a code for the Untouchables. They were not supposed to wear clean clothes and move about on public streets. Speaking in a loud voice was considered impertinent¹⁵. But Ayyankali would have none of it. He wore clean clothes and roamed about aimlessly with his friends. All this was a clear violation of the *Manusmriti*, which had laid down the code of conduct for the Shudras and was the basis of their centuries-old servitude¹⁶.

As he grew up, his creativity also blossomed. He not only sang folk songs but also started penning songs. With his younger brothers and other teenagers of his caste, he sang songs that he wrote and staged plays that had a message he wanted to convey. His friends started addressing him as “Urpillai”¹⁷ and “Moothapullai”¹⁸. His songs and plays assailed the prevailing social order and called for freedom. His language was Malayalam, mixed with Tamil. His songs and plays thus earned him audience not from Travancore but also from Kochi and Malabar. He spread his message of emancipation through his songs and plays and made people aware of how they were being exploited. Ayyankali’s parents were concerned about him but he was a born rebel. An organization needs discipline and should know how to put its

strength to proper use¹⁹. Hence, Ayyankali hired a person to train the members of his organization in martial arts. His activities were not to the liking of members of other communities but he didn't care.

Ayyankali did not believe in treading the beaten track. By the time he turned 25, he had forged a strong organization of youth, whose members were ready to do anything at his command. The first challenge before Ayyankali was to secure the right of using public roads to the Pulayas. In 1893, Dalit youths agitating for their right to walk on public roads were assaulted by some savarnas in Kazhakkootam, Kaniyapuram, Manakadavu, and many other areas. The savarnas were out to terrorize the Dalits.

Bullock Cart Strike/Villuvandi Yatra

Ayyankali was a social reformer of the high order and fighter for social justice for the Dalit and other backward communities. His 'Villu Vandi Yatra', demanding right for the backward communities to walk on public roads without fear of attacks from upper caste aggressors, was an epoch-making struggle in Modern history of Kerala. His ornamental bullock cart used until then by the upper caste zamindars, as also his disposition -- headgear, heavy moustache and overcoat -- were a challenge to the social evils practiced in those time, when Kerala was witness to casteist violence against and denial of rights to backward, dalit and tribal populations²⁰. The success of the Villu Vandi Yatra heralded the arrival of a new Kerala, where saint social reformer Sree Narayana Guru, Chattambi Swamikal and in later years Mannathu Padmanabhan have made stellar contributions for social change. Like Guru, Ayyankali exhorted his people to increasingly concentrate on education as a means of emancipation of the community²¹. His struggle later found Perinad and Kollam as stages for Dalit struggle for social justice.

Born in the untouchable Pulaya community, Ayyankali started his emancipatory mission by questioning a range of purity-birth based atrocities through a multi-layered resistance model in Travancore, a princely state that remained highly conservative in the hands of caste oligarchy. In 1893, he rode a bullock cart (villuvandi) with brass bells, draping a white lungi, white vest, a matching shawl, a white turban, along with a thick moustache. As riding animal carts was considered as an upper-caste prerogative in Kerala, Ayyankali's "Pulaya cart" attracted the wrath of caste oligarchs who tried to stop him at many places, leading to violent clashes²².

His direct action against caste atrocities also shook the docility of Dalit communities that heavily depended on upper castes for jobs and food. With the bullock cart, Ayyankali appears to have designed a revolutionary act, challenging a set of caste codes concerning dress, ownership, mobility and visibility in the late 19th century. His choice of dress challenged the sartorial exclusivity of caste Hindus who did not allow the Dalits to wear anything except knee-length loincloths. Similarly, the loud sound from the silver bells defied the acoustic regulations that were forced upon the Dalits who were not permitted to speak before their caste masters²³.

His thick and trimmed moustache was a forceful assertion of masculine Dalit body. And, riding the cart all alone showed the power the Dalits for ownership and their right to possess wealth. His multiple defiances was reenacted throughout Travancore by other Dalit activists, consistently attracting the anger of caste-oligarchs. This act of riding to freedom was a prelude to a series of "walking to freedom" events that he inaugurated through Travancore from 1893. These acts were designed to force the entry of Dalits into public space, irrespective of the fact they would attract conflict with the members of the upper castes

in Travancore²⁴. As distance-based pollution norms continued to determine social relations and corporal interactions in the region, upper-caste oligarchs tried to stop these acts of valour.

Ayyankali emphasised physical culture and martial training to prepare Dalits for this physically demanding campaign. This focus seemed to have emerged from the fact that most of their confrontations were with the Nairs, the traditional martial caste that largely protected the religious and social order of this princely state. In his imagination, martial arts and physical exercise were an inseparable act of being an aspirational Dalit in Kerala in the late 19th century. He emerged as the first Dalit reformist-activist who identified the value of counter-physicality as a deterrent against caste atrocities and humiliation²⁵. Subsequently, like his contemporary, Tamil Dalit intellectual Iyothee Thass²⁶, Ayyankali delineated the politics of “body” in the caste discourses in colonial Kerala. He re-imagined the body of slave castes like the Pulaya in the region by encouraging them to dress differently and remove body markers that signified their slavery-past.

However, unlike Iyothee Thass who brought the idea of religious conversion to the centre of caste discourse, Ayyankali did not recognise conversion as the primary instrument of social emancipation in the conservative princely state. For him, any form of conversion had the potential of being divisive and to weaken the kinship feelings among the Dalits. His removal of religion as the centre of emancipatory discourses was also influenced by the condition of post-conversion Dalit Christians in colonial Kerala who remained tied up with the land and social systems around caste oligarchy²⁷. When other Dalit reformers like Poykayil Yohannan identified the emancipatory role of Christianity in colonial Kerala, Ayyankali decided to challenge the absolutism of caste by remaining within the larger Hindu fold, while consistently challenging the Brahmanical elements within it.

It was their uprisings that fought for the freedom to wear clothes, eradicate untouchability, and for a democratic society with equal opportunities and justice. Ayyankali led his famous bullock cart ride across Travancore roads for the right to travel on public roads. Dalits and people belonging to the lower castes were not even allowed to walk on the roads or own bullock carts at the time. The reformist leader's protest journey made the roads accessible for not only Dalits but for all castes, which placed everyone on an equal footing. This is why Ayyankali's journey on the *villu vandi* is hailed as the transition point of Malayalees from mere subjects to citizens²⁸. However, the emergence of Britain as a colonial power also must be acknowledged since it played a role in the formation of a space that served as a catalyst for the sudden upsurge in Dalit interventions that occurred during the aforementioned Renaissance.

The crowded marketplace in Trivandrum thronged with people in the late 19th century. Men and women clad in white mundu teemed about the busy street buying oil and salt, horseshoes and iron farm implements, coarse cloth, coir rope, jaggery, and palm toddy. The men were mostly bare-chested, though some, unmindful of the sweltering heat, wore white long shirts or an upper-body cloth. While a few young women wore printed blouses, many, particularly the older women, wore no upper-body clothes except for large, beaded necklaces made of red-colored stones. Most people, with the exception of the men who clothed their upper body, walked along the sides of the road, leaving the path clear for the occasional bullock cart. These bullock carts, also known as *villuvandi*, carried young men-about-town, almost exclusively landowning, upper-caste Nairs. Dressed in a spotless white shirt, white mundu, and matching white turban, the Nair riding his *villuvandi* assumed the haughty air of a master surveying his

subjects; out to observe his inferiors as much as be seen as a superior²⁹. These Nairs, and other upper-caste men and women, had the exclusive right of way, on bullock cart or on foot, the right to wear clean white clothes, and, of course, the right to ride a villuvandi. These rights were codified through caste-based rules or norms known as jati maryada, which governed all aspects of social behavior.

Hitting back

Ayyankali was prepared for this. As soon as they started closing in on him, he bent down a little and whipped out a sickle. His face was red with anger. Brandishing the sickle, he threatened the savarnas that if anyone tried to block his way, the sickle would deal with him. No one had imagined such an aggressive behaviour from a Pulaya, who was a slave and was expected to meekly carry out the orders of the upper castes. The savarnas were too shocked to react. They retreated and allowed Ayyankali's bullock cart to pass. From that day onwards, his bullock cart became a regular sight on the village streets. The incident created a sensation, not only among the savarnas but also among the Dalits. It became the talk of the town. Gradually, his fame spread to the neighbouring areas. Ayyankali soon emerged as the leader of the oppressed classes³⁰.

But this was only the beginning. Ayyankali could muster the courage to ride a bullock cart because his family was relatively well to do. Other members of his community could not dare even walk on public roads and the savarnas were not ready to let them. Ayyankali felt that he should try to restore the self-confidence of the Dalits, which they had lost due to their oppression for generations. He geared up his organization for this task. He decided to take out a "freedom procession" in Trivandrum from the Dalit settlement to Puttan Bazar³¹. But it was easier said than done. His opponents were waiting for an opportunity to get back at him. As soon as the procession reached the main road, it was attacked. Under the leadership of him, hundreds of Dalit youths grappled with the assailants. Many were injured. This incident inspired Dalit youths of other areas to stand up and demand the right to walk the streets. A lot of blood was spilt as the savarnas clashed with the Dalits. But their opposition only served to make the resolve of the Dalits stronger. His influence was growing and the Dalit revolt was gaining ground. Other Dalit castes also joined hands with the Pulayas to demand their rights. It appeared that a civil war was in the offing.

Mahatma Gandhi met Ayyankali

Gandhiji visited the place of Ayyankali in Venganoor, while he came to attend the Temple Entry Proclamation at Travencore in January 14, 1934. Gandhiji said that he understood that as a result of Ayyankali's efforts, considerable progress had been made in the condition of suffering people. Ayyankali was an untiring warrior. With the Temple Entry Proclamation, the untouchability was almost out from Travancore³². Though the proclamation was able to create wonders, efforts should be made to wipe off the custom from the country as whole. He also advised people to utilize the time allotted to visit the temple, religiously with intellect. While visiting temples, one should keep his mind and body clean, and they should enter with minds filled with prayer.

Conclusion

Ayyankali passed away on 18th June 1941, leaving behind a better and more inclusive world for lower caste communities in Kerala. He has left us with a shining example of what organised resistance can

achieve against all forms of oppression and exploitation. He will always remain as an inspiration in our fight against discrimination, oppression and injustice in this unjust world. Without his work on social justice and equality, the situation of Dalits in Kerala would have been much worse³³. Dalits will remain indebted to Ayyankali for giving them civil liberties and breaking the chains of slavery forever. His historic movement for Dalits' rights to walk on public roads, known as "Villuvandi Yatra" and his use of all public services became an everlasting example for the marginalised sections of Kerala. Even today, the Dalits who are at the forefront of various land struggles evoke his name for inspiration. He has been remembered as one of the most influential anti-caste Dalit activists in colonial Kerala who effectively challenged caste-based restrictions in education, public space and social interactions in the late 19th century.

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4. The Channar Lahala or Channar revolt, also called Maru Marakkal Samaram, refers to the fight from 1813 to 1859 of Nadar climber women in Travancore kingdom of India for the right to wear upper-body clothes covering their breasts.
5. He was a fighter in the cause of Annihilation of Caste, was born in a low-caste Mahar family on 14th April, 1891, at Mhow cantonment, where his father served in the Army. He was born in a caste which was considered as the lowest of the low. But this very man framed the Constitution for the country. His life was one of struggles, as his radical proposals to deal with the Caste System met with overt hostility from the Upper Castes.
6. He was a saint, philosopher, spiritual leader, and a social reformer from Kerala, India. Driven by the strong desire to break superstitions and taboos that were holding back the Indian society from progress, the Guru underwent years of strict penance and meditation before attaining enlightenment.
7. He is known as the 'Father of the Dravidian movement'. He rebelled against Brahmin dominance and gender and caste inequality in Tamil Nadu.
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