



AYYANKALI AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRATIZING DALIT WOMEN'S RIGHTS INKERALA

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Abstract

The Kallumaala Samaram (Stone Necklace Protest) was a protest in Kerala led by Ayyankali against the oppression of Dalit women. It took place in December 1915 marked a historic event in the history of anti-caste struggles in Kerala. It was a women's movement from lower caste in Kerala. The upper class people in Kerala were not allowed the lower class people to wear the ornaments of Gold and Silver. The people belonging to the Dalit community protested against them for getting the right to wear the ornaments of their choice. It took place at Perinad and nearby villages such as Cherumoodu, Kanjavelly etc. in, Kollam district. Therefore it is also called the Perinad Mutiny. After the agitation the lower class people got the right to wear the ornaments of gold, silver or of their own choice.

Keywords:-Ayyankali- Dalits women -Pulayas-Parayas-Slavery-Perinad-Kollam- Kallumala

Introduction

Dalits were subjected to all kinds of discrimination which prevents their entry into the main stream of human activity. Caste oppression was in its heyday, in the 18th and 19th centuries in Kerala, a fact observed by the colonial administrators and the archival records alike. Caste practice in Kerala was indeed inhuman and deplorable, including practices of both untouchability and unapproachability as well as various practices of ayyitham (pollution by contact) and theendal (caste-transgression).¹ One such practice was that of maintaining caste distance from the Pulayas, regarded as one of the lowest castes in Kerala, having to walk at least 66 paces behind a Namboothiri Brahmins as per the caste norms followed in the then state of Travancore.

Meaning of the Term Dalit

In Kerala the story of Dalit women explains the intensity of their backwardness. The pre-independence period was quite horrible. The word Dalit has its route both in Sanskrit and in Hebrew. In Sanskrit the route 'Dal' means to crack, to split open, to break etc. In Hebrew, the route 'Dal' which means low, weak, poor etc. The term 'Dalit' is a Marathi word literary meaning 'ground' or 'broken to pieces'. It was first proposed by some Marathi-speaking literary writers in Maharashtra in 1960s in place of terms like 'Harijan'.² Before the use of this term, B.R. Ambedkar himself had used alternative terms like 'Depressed Classes', 'exterior' or 'excluded' caste, to refer to the poor and downtrodden. The British

administration tried to replace the term 'untouchable' first by "Depressed Classes" in 1919 and later by "Scheduled Castes" (SCs) in 1935. Gandhi, an ardent champion of removing untouchability, also appealed to caste Hindus to use the term 'Harijan' meaning man of god. Many SCs also begun to call themselves so hoping that the caste Hindus would change their behaviour towards them. But Ambedkar and his followers did not find any difference whether they were called Harijan, as the new nomenclature did not change their status in the social order.³ In such a context, the alternative term Dalit became popular. It has now been recognized that the term 'Dalit' has attained hermeneutic ability to refer to the exploitative past of the Scheduled Castes. The term has the ontological ability to encompass within itself all the oppressed and exploited sections of society including Adivasis, minorities and women.

History of Dalit women in Kerala

In Kerala, Caste system compartmentalized the society into various segments like, castes, sub-castes and sub-sub-castes etc. Earlier there were restrictions on with which groups of people one could interact take what kind of food or drink etc. Recruitment to these groups is closed to persons who are outside the groups as membership is ascribed by birth only.⁴ Caste/sub-caste endogamy is the rule of mate selection, which, even today is not violated very often. A section of the society is excluded from all kinds of social interactions, having been attributed a high degree of 'impurity' due to their 'polluting' occupations. These groups are also identified and recognized as Dalits. Dalit is a modern term for the untouchables of Kerala, who have been exploited and subjected to atrocities due to the stratification of Kerala society. They constitute one of the largest social groups and account for about one fifth of Kerala's total population⁵. Throughout the centuries they have been victimized religiously, socially and most of all economically. They were not allowed to enter religious and public places. Even, their children were not allowed to receive education along with the children of caste- Hindus.

An extract from Dr. B.R Ambedkar's speech may befittingly quote here 'we are human beings like all others. And yet we have to exist like animals. This is a shame. You are Hindus but you cannot take water from the village well, you cannot walk upright in the town. Dogs, cats and mice can enter then the temples but if we enter then God is polluted. Therefore if you want to live as human beings, you must not suffer any injustice in future. Give up eating the flesh of dead animals, wear clean cloths, and send your children to school. Don't accept slavery for a piece of bread. We have to raise a storm. The battle must be continued even if we have to suffer starvation, lathis blows and imprisonment. Does not retreat under any circumstances unite and fight. I am with you and shall always remain with you. Sufferings and relentless struggle that is our path to salvation'⁶. These words provide an exact picture of the life of dalits and dalit women in Kerala.

They are one of the most marginalized segments in the society. The condition of them is more

vulnerable than non- Dalit women. More over they are considered as slaves of slaves. They face triple burden of caste, class and gender. The vast majority of them are impoverished; they are landless wage labourers; and they lacked access to basic resources.⁷ The hardship of them are not simply due to their economic status, poverty, lack of education but are a direct result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper classes. They are subjugated by patriarchal structures, both in the general community and within their own family. Violence and inhuman treatment, such as sexual assault, rape, and naked parading, serve as a social mechanism to maintain their subordinate position in society. They are targeted by dominant castes as a way of humiliating entire Dalit communities. Human rights abuses against them are mostly committed with impunity⁸.

This shows that they are easy targets for any perpetrator. Upper Caste considers them to be sexually available. The vulnerability of them as depicted by many writers can be taken as an example on how these women are oppressed in the social and family context. Crime and violence are the crucial experiences that Kerala Dalit woman confronts in her day to day life. It is not the cruelty which is limited to domestic violence but laid wide open in the society. They are discarded and pushed away in the name of their caste and creed. They are not left with much choice of occupation but to become scavengers in the upper-caste houses, sweepers the Bails or maid servants; or given into body trade or prostitution for the sake of their livelihood⁹. They are threatened by rape as part of collective violence by the higher castes. However, sexual assault and rape of Dalit women and girls also occur within their own communities. The efforts of social reformers, such as Sree Narayana Guru, Chattampi Swamikal, Brahmananda Guru, Ayyankali etc., and adoption of various constitutional measures, legal and governmental policies and programmes have helped bring about a certain amount of development and change of socio- economic status as well as empowerment among the Dalit and Dalit women in Kerala.¹⁰

The overall status of dalit women is very pathetic condition when compared to total population of the state. Ayyankali have been made to improve the conditions of dalit women in Kerala. Efforts are also on to see that the Dalit women have become socially, educationally and economically sound. As a result they have better opportunities for inter mingling with the larger society. Educational enhancement also has been initiated to change in attitude to life and social problems and has paved the way for emancipation and public life.¹¹ It is hoped that in the near future the dalit women will be able to occupy high positions in all the offices due to reservation policy. They can redress their grievances in the legislature of which they are members. They can come to fore front of politics in the democratic set up and develop cordial relationship with other sections of society. Gradually, they will occupy high socio-economic positions in our larger society. To fulfil these dreams dalit in general and dalit women in

particular need to get very high support from the government which will ultimately bring them in to the main stream of the society. In December 1915, hundreds of pulaya and paraya women cast off their stone necklace which was a marker of their lower caste status in a symbolic and literal act of defying the caste system. This event came to be known as the Kallumala Samaram which marked a historic event in the history of anti-caste struggles in Kerala.¹²

Kallumala Samaram/Perinad Mutiny

The case of the Pulaya women in particular was one which speaks volumes about the caste oppression that the then untouchable community was subjected to. They were tied to the soil¹³ as several inscriptions¹⁴ from the 9th century AD onwards attest. Along with the gifts of lands, they worked on them as well as their services were also gifted to the donees by the rulers. They were deemed as the lowest in the caste hierarchy, were also prohibited from wearing new clothes or lower body garments which were longer than their knees. They were not allowed to wear gold ornaments or blouses. One of the worst forms of oppression was that they were disallowed from wearing upper body garments particularly in the presence of upper caste landlords. They were made to wear garlands and necklaces made out of stone to signify their lower caste status. It is against this backdrop, that the Kallumaala Bahishkarana Samaram¹⁵ led by Ayyankali, the revolutionary Dalit leader from Kerala, becomes significant not only as an anti-caste protest, but also as a challenge to Brahmanical patriarchy and a historical struggle for human dignity. However the struggle has not yet found its place in the history of Kerala text books.

On 24th October 1915 a riot broke out between the lower castes and the upper castes at a place called Perinad in the district of Kollam in Kerala. The cause of the riot was the defiance of caste rules by Pulaya and Paraya women who had started to cast off the Kallumaala¹⁶ which they had to wear as part of their caste System. These women were inspired by the rebellion of women in Shanar (1858-59) asserting their right to wear the melmundu (breast-cloth), which had angered the upper caste who attacked them.¹⁷ Ayyankali, who was by then a prominent leader of the Dalits in Kerala raised a slogan of ‘oru adikku randu adi’ (two slaps for one) against the threat.¹⁸ The upper castes unleashed violence against the lower castes and the latter retaliated leading to a riot-like situation. It came to be known as the ‘Perinad Mutiny’.

In December, a meeting which witnessed the gathering of hundreds of Dalit women at the Peeranki Maidan at Kollam in a circus tent, Ayyankali issued a declaration for the Dalit women to cast off their stone-garlands and upholding their right to wear the melmundu (upper body garment)¹⁹. He also asked the upper castes to accept the above mentioned rights of Dalit women. Hundreds of women who were gathered at the meeting broke their stone garlands and threw them away as a mark of liberating

themselves from the shackles of caste. What is to be understood is that this was not just a historic event in the anti-caste struggle, but a milestone in the gender history of Kerala and also the history of human rights.²⁰ While there has been some discussion on the story of Nangeli and the breast-tax in the public domain in the recent past, the Kallumaala Samaram remains underrepresented though it has comparatively more evidence than other such incidents.

Prof. K.S.Madhavan, prominent historian from Kerala argues that “mainstream history, in which dalits are treated as passive subjects, has led to an organized move for the de historicisation of dalit life and experiences.”²¹ The historian’s words ring true if we consider the near absence of professional history writing on the historic anti-caste struggles by the dalits in Kerala other than that of the brilliant exception of works by Professor Sanal Mohan and K S Madhavan.

Conclusion

Ayyankali was a rebel with a cause. He firmly stood rooted in ensuring Dalits had their share of representation. But he did not play the role of a disruptor by going against the State. At a time when there was no space for Dalits in the public sphere, Ayyankali brought in revolutionary steps that sowed the seeds of future Dalit-led empowerment. Ayyankali was indeed a pioneer in Kerala and the act of breaking of Kallumala was symbolic resistance²². Even though the Perinad Mutiny firstly takes a non-violent atmosphere and later it became bloody and violent attack of masses. This revolt was a transformation of Dark Age to modern. In short, it was one of the important chapters of social reformation. It awakened the whole society to fight against the caste rotten society and to upliftment of the lower caste. The important peculiarity of it was the participation of thousands of Pulaya women. It regarded as a fire in the social reformation and it eliminated the darkness of caste system.

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