



POIKAYIL YOHANNAN AND ANTI-SLAVERY SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION IN KERALA

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Abstract

Poikayil Yohannan was a revolutionary Dalit leader and social reformer who hailed from Eraviperur near Tiruvalla, Pathanamthitta District of Kerala. With the co-operation of people from various Dalit communities, Yohannan led a movement to uplift them. They were subjugated by the upper-caste. Though at birth he was named Komaran, later he was renamed Kumaran. Being a slave to a Christian family, Kumaran had to follow Christianity and have a Christian name Yohannan. In that period, Dalit communities practiced untouchability among themselves. Recognizing the commonalities among the Paraiyar, Pulayar and Kuravar communities, Yohannan sought to create a sense of unity among them. With this thought, he joined the Marthoma church, a reformist sect among the Syrian Christians, but realized the church treated Dalits as an inferior class and left the church. He then joined a new sect called the Brethren Mission where he faced similar instances of caste-based discrimination. In 1909, Yohannan left Christianity and started his own Dalit liberation movement named Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS).

Keywords: -Social reformer of Kerala- Dalits - Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS)

Introduction

In the 19th and early part of the 20th century, Kerala witnessed an ideological struggle against the hegemony of the Brahmins. This struggle was due to certain structural changes in the society and the consequent emergence of a new educated middle class. The new society which was developing in Kerala since the advent of the British had distinct needs differing from those of the old society. The new intelligentsia, which imbibed the liberal western culture, recognized these needs and launched movements to reform the respective social institutions and religious outlooks inherited from the past.

The attitude of the members of the emerging middle class towards traditional institutions, beliefs and social relations was quite critical. While opposing the feudal values they favored the introduction of values characteristic of contemporary western bourgeois order. They were convinced that the new society could politically, culturally and economically develop only on the basis of liberal principles such as the recognition of individual liberty, freedom of expression and social equality¹. The result was the beginning of several reform movements which represented the striving of the conscious and progressive sections of the people of Kerala to democratize social institutions and remodel old religious outlooks to suit the new social needs.

The subordinated social groups generally termed as ‘dalits’² who have been subjected to social discrimination due to caste system. In order to ameliorate their socio-economic conditions, as well as their cultural, religious and other deprivations and disabilities, the dalits have been engaged in struggles and protest ‘movements’ of several types for a long time. Their protest ideology involves resistance opposition, confrontation and conflict with the dominant groups in order to achieve their desired goal of social equality, social dignity and social identity. Thus it is in this context that the role of Poikayil Yohannan of the 20th century colonial Kerala, acquires immense significance.

Early Life

Poykayil Yohannan³ was a Dalit activist, a poet and a social reformer from the erstwhile Princely state of Travancore. He was born in a poor illiterate and untouchable Paraya family called Manikkal Poikayil in Eraviperur, a village in the Pathanamthitta district of Kerala. His parents were labourers attached to a Syrian Christian landlord family belonging to the Marthoma Church. The family joined the Church. He had been named Kumaran by his parents, but at the age of five he was baptized, and thereafter went by his Christian name, Yohannan. Like any other child of the agricultural slave castes, Yohannan was expected to perform daily work on the landlord’s estate, such as herding cattle and working in the paddy fields⁴. Meantime he acquired a certain amount of elementary education under the guidance of Muthoottu Kochukunju Upadesi in a slave school.⁵ The Christian Sankaramangalam family was not against the move to send their slaves’ children to this school for teaching them to read the Bible. As he turned a literate man, Yohannan was enthusiastic in studying the Bible and availed the opportunities to read the Bible in the religious gatherings of the Church⁶. Considering his knowledge in the Bible and talents for composing songs and lively verses Yohannan was appointed as an ‘Upadesi’ of the Marthoma Church⁷. However, dissatisfied with the caste based discriminations prevailing in the Church, Yohannan left the Marthoma Church and joined the Brethren Mission⁸. He left it due to the contempt and inequality faced by the untouchable members of the Church and joined another Christian sect, Verpadu Sabha⁹. He was critical about the functioning of the Church; consequently left the Church and became an independent preacher. He soon attracted a small group of followers.

Burning the Bible

Poikayil Yohannan critically viewed the Bible and often challenged the Christian teachings. He argued that it was irrelevant to his caste because it did not address the concerns of his own people. Yohannan assumed a new prophetic role among them. By revolting against Christianity, he was opposing the existing structure of caste inequality within the Church¹⁰. Often conversion was considered as an immediate way for dalits to escape from the cruelties of caste oppression. Besides, it was too a search for a new identity for a

race who were marginalized in all spheres of life. They tried to flee their past and risk a new and liberated future away from centuries of caste and class oppressions. However, within the Church, the social status of dalits remained the same¹¹.

Though Yohannan revolted against the Christian Church and the Bible, he extensively used the Christian teachings, and symbols in preaching his new religion. He took his authority from God and made it locally relevant through a reinterpretation of Christian themes. Thus, the influence of Christian life-world remained in Yohannan, together with his antagonism against the Churches¹². Later Yohannan himself gave leadership to burn the Bible. In his endeavour to search the identity and thereby to lift the status of dalits, Yohannan strived to construct a history of polluted castes in Kerala.

Formation of Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha (PRDS), 1909

The *Dalits* in Kerala were a highly differentiated lot. Conversion to Christianity further compounded the matter. Therefore, one of the serious issues which *Dalit* Movements had to face itself pertained to identity. In fact, conversion itself was the product of such a search for identity outside Hinduism. They tried to flee their past and risk a new and liberated future away from centuries of caste oppressions. But paradoxically identity still remained elusive. For, within the Church they remained the same Scheduled Castes of the past years¹³. This forced many to search elsewhere for this ever eluding identity, and the more enlightened among them even attempted to come out of the Christian order. Yohannan was clear example in this regard.

Poikayil Yohannan was a *Paraya* convert who, after a brief flirtation with Christianity, deserted it due to caste-based discrimination with it. Once he went out of the congregation, he thought of propagating his own vision of religion which was prophetic and social in character¹⁴. His was not an attempt at establishing a different Church within the Christian fold but one of establishing a new *Dalit* religion of which he was the prophet and the preacher. The result was the establishment of the *Prathyaksha Reksha Daiva Sabha* (PRDS) in 1909¹⁵. From this time onwards, he was known as Poikayil Appachan or Kumara Gurudevan. After the formation of a neo-reformist organization, he met people from different communities personally and educated them about the need for living in a dignified way. For this purpose, Yohannan exhorted his followers to liberate themselves from the clutches of caste equation through the twin powers of education and enlightenment¹⁶. It was a unique religious movement that arose in Kerala in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Simplicity is the core of the new faith conceived by Poikayil Yohannan. Truth and tolerance is the foundation stone on which the structure of the new organization he built. Habits like smoking and use of intoxicating drinks are in-tolerable to PRDS. He insisted to its followers to maintain mental as well as physical cleanliness for attaining revealed salvation¹⁷. Eating of beef is regarded as impure but did not give any particular sanctity to the animal, cow. Yohannan banned luxury of any sort and ornaments to his people. Adultery was punishable with excommunication. Neither polyandry nor polygamy is allowed. Second marriage is allowed if one of the spouses is dead. He banned dowry and divorce¹⁸. To strengthen his movement, Yohannan threw open the gates of PRDS to all Dalits irrespective of their religious affiliations. Thus, Dalit Christians and Hindu Dalits became the valuable members of his organization. The kingdom of God and Heaven cannot be attained through any religion. The concepts of 'moksha' and 'heaven' could be experienced on earth while living. These concepts after death are meaningless. Raksha always be direct and in life time; 'sabha' would be for its purpose. It is meaningless to say soul would enter Heaven¹⁹. Practices and rituals in the name of God are useless and meaningless. He set up a moral code and hence he could become a model to his men and lead his men from savagery to civilization. In short, Yohannan led a passive movement for the deliverance of the depressed classes²⁰. Yohannan tried to create a *Dalit* identity through constructing a history of his people. In other words, through the instrumentality of history, he tried to make his people feel the pinch of their current deprivation.

The goal of PRDS is the upliftment of all exploited sections in society from all spheres of life. One can derive three pillars on which Yohannan founded his religious movement. They are: claiming of the past traditions, affirming present identity and a salvation concept which aims at the liberation from present miseries. Through this organization, Yohannan wanted to unite all the dalits irrespective of their caste loyalties. It stood for the total unity of dalits of various castes²¹. The downtrodden castes found in him a new spiritual and social reformer. His charismatic leadership and unique oratory skills attracted large number of followers to the organization. Subsequently the movement marked a rapid growth in the state. Eraviperoor, the birth place of Yohannan became its headquarters. He was very much concerned about the fragmentation of *Dalits* on the basis of caste. That was also one of the reasons why he sought to establish a new religious order for the community²². Thus, he had a sense of history and had an idea about its utility in identity formation. However, his success in this regard remained limited.

Theology of PRDS

During the period, missionaries largely propagated Christianity among the slave castes and encouraged them to embrace it. They built number of schools for them where they were taught Biblical texts and subjects related to Christianity²³. Children in those schools were given Christian names while enrollment, even when many of them were not actually officially baptized. This practice of changing the name without baptizing was also widely accepted among the dalits because it helped them to present defiance in the face of the fact that they had not been allowed to have 'good' names before²⁴.

There were a large number of his people who understood this particular language of Christianity. And Yohannan felt that Christianity was insufficient for the range of spiritual problems they faced and he began to use the Abrahamic framework almost as a disguise to present a theology of a newer religion — PRDS. Even the term PRDS is not easily explicable because it is not to be taken literally²⁵. For example, 'Prathyaksha' can be taken to mean Visibility and 'Raksha' implies Salvation. However, the notion of salvation here is different from the salvation of the Bible, or *moksha* mentioned in other religious theologies²⁶. Instead, it refers to salvation which promises deliverance from the four last things- Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. PRDS denies any after life and *believes that salvation has to be attained during the life you were living*. In these ways, Biblical salvation was used merely as a model to explain Yohannan's concept of salvation. The salvation proposed by Yohannan dealt with the *notion of slavery*. In fact, this is the core subject of PRDS²⁷. Yohannan said that in all religious theology, there were outcasts who were denied salvation. For them, salvation had been invisible. That is why the Visibility of Salvation becomes important in PRDS which questions *the classical concept of God*. It denies God's existence. There was no one who loved, cared, guided and enlightened them the way Yohannan did²⁸. He himself did not proclaim God but his followers found *a whole new notion of God itself in Yohannan*. They accepted Yohannan as their God.

Retaliation against PRDS

Poikayil Yohannan often congregated separately for Dalits and asked them to realize that the Bible is not for them and enlightened them with a new notion of spirituality which offered salvation from slavery. Convinced, and in acts of protest, many of his followers burnt their Bibles during a congregation²⁹. Syrian Christians came to know about the secret gatherings and they labeled Yohannan as an anti-Christ and attacked PRDS gatherings. To prevent religious persecution, PRDS members co-opted certain ways. A kind of shroud was created during public discourses by establishing a unique world of parallel narration and nomenclature. Biblical symbols and events were used during discourses and within PRDS songs³⁰. But this was all a disguise used to protect themselves.

Status of Women in PRDS

PRDS gave importance to the status of women in all sectors. It had women priests. This is a radical practice not only for that time but even for today. Yohannan said that men and women are equal therefore; women must never be considered as inferior³¹. In 1930, PRDS submitted a memorandum to the Travancore government demanding women representation in the Sree Mulam Praja Sabha.

In the Legislative Assembly

Considering his remarkable efforts in mobilizing and empowering the untouchable castes, Yohannan was nominated to the Sri Mulam Praja Sabha³² for two times in 1921 and 1931 respectively as a representative of the dalits. He represented their problems in an impressive and polite manner, so he could receive positive response from the rulers³³. He was a strong advocate of entire dalit community and raised their various demands in the Assembly such as the right to land, free education and provision for noon-meals for their children. As a section of society who is mainly engaged in agricultural work, he wanted the extension on generous terms of agricultural credit for them³⁴. Thus he was keen to raise the varied concerns of lower castes in the legislature as the strong voice of the lowest strata of society.

In 1937, he was able to start a weaving school for depressed classes at Eraviperoor in Pathanamthitta district with the grant of Royal government of Travancore, was a commendable gain on the part of Yohannan as the representative of the untouchables in the legislative assembly³⁵. He believed that self-reliance is a necessary condition for slave communities. In the same, he started one lower primary school at Amara and another English Medium upper primary residential school at Vengalathukunnu in Pathnamthitta district. These schools were opened to all, irrespective of student's birth or social status. In the next year he started another weaving school at Amara near Changanacherry³⁶.

Yohannan was the president of PRDS till his death in 1939. After his demise, his wife Janamma led PRDS. During this period, witnessed a crucial change in the history of the organization³⁷. It was marked by the reformulation of the ideology and functioning of the movement. Instead of Christian themes, Hindu mythology came to be adopted as the subject of discourse. Similarly, the name Yohannan disappeared and in its place Kumara Gurudevan came into being. This transformation 'from Yohannan to Kumara Gurudevan' created a divine and mythical image for him³⁸. Consequently a total reconstitution of the rituals, sermons, prayers and dress codes of the movement was effected which culminated in the pronouncement of the movement as a sect of Hinduism.

Conclusion

Yohannan's whole effort was directed towards the elimination of caste, and the building of a welfare society. Just like many other lower caste social theorists, he too dreamt of an age of equality and freedom from exploitation³⁹. His movement highlighted the socio-religious foundation of the dalit emancipation process and it played an important role in the empowerment of the polluted castes⁴⁰. Yohannan acted as a crusader of dalit unity and worked for the mobilization of them as a single community. He infused a spirit of self esteem and dignity among the untouchable castes. As such, the contribution of Poykayil Yohannan was remarkable in awakening the consciousness and identity of dalits in Kerala.

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