



TEMPLE ENTRY MOVEMENTS IN KERALA- A STUDY

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Abstract

The struggles against untouchability and unapproachability were very important in the social reform movements in Kerala during the last century. The untouchability was very strongly observed in Kerala also, like in any other places in India during the beginning of the twentieth century. The lower caste people had no permission to walk on some of the public roads in Kerala. This tendency was stronger than the southern part of the state. In the later period the communal organizations, progressive minded individuals and the Congress joined together to work for the right to travel for all, irrespective of their caste. One of the important movements that led to temple entry was Vaikam Satyagraha. It was encountered in order to get the permission to use the roads near temples for the deities. The Guruvayoor Satyagraha was yet another important landmark in the history of social Reform movement in Kerala.

Key words: Avarnas, Casteism, Savarnas, Untouchability.

INTRODUCTION

The beginning of the 19th century witnessed the influence of the new culture of the European on the course of the history of Kerala. The humanism, individualism and rationalism of the Europeans exerted tremendous influence of Kerala society. The most powerful source of this cultured influence was the work of the European missionaries introduced rational, popular and secular education. The low caste people got an opportunity to receive English education. Inspired and encouraged by foreign missionaries they began to challenge the social restrictions of feudal society of the medieval period. The Temple Entry Proclamation of 1936 by the King of Travancore Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma, which opened state owned temples to non- caste Hindus, was a result of this¹.

In the 20th century, there started a powerful socio-religious reform movement in Travancore. This time Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma was ruling the princely state of Travancore. After the death of his adoptive maternal uncle, Maharaja Sree Moolam Thirunal Balarama Varma on August 7, 1924, Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma succeeded to the throne of Travancore as Maharaja Chithira Thirunal was a minor, his maternal aunt, Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi was appointed as a regent to rule instead, till he attained the maturity age. During the period the social and religious awakening of the leading communities in Travancore encouraged the low caste Hindus to fight against social injustice. They had been forbidden to education. They had been to use roads and ways near temple. The restrictions were imposed by the high caste Savarnas against the low caste Avarnas because casteism and untouchability were created by them and prevailed in society without any challenge. The low castes were disorganized and they did not receive any support from outside till the first quarter of the 2nd Century.

When Sree Chithira Thirunal attained the age of 18, regency was terminated on 6th November 1931, Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma ascended as the throne as the Maharaja. In his speech on the eve of coronation as the Maharaja of Travancore, he declared; "it is my hope that I shall be enabled by God's grace to earn the affection and esteem of all communities and classes amongst my people whose advancement in every department of life will be my perpetual pre-occupation and my sole aim"².

TEMPLE ENTRY MOVEMENTS

VAIKAM SATYAGRAHA (1924-1925)

The political and social atmosphere of Kerala in the 1920s and 1930s grew tense with the Indian National Congress upholding the cause of temple entry. In 1924 the Congress organized the vigorous 20 month long Satyagraha at the Vaikam temple with the simple aim of securing the right to use the approach roads of the temple for the untouchables. While the upper castes and non-Hindus including Christians and Muslims freely used the temple roads, the untouchables like the Ezhavas and Pulayas were forbidden to pass through them. One of the most important impacts was felt in the social realm, in the form of efforts at reforming customs and democratizing social relationships. It was the (Protestant) Christian Missionaries who took the pioneering steps in promoting social reforms, they actively engaged in spreading the message of reform by imparting modern education to the untouchables and encouraging the new converts to openly question symbols of caste oppression and rules of ritual pollution³. The Ezhavas were on the verge of a revolt over the question of caste pollution and viewed it as an obvious act of social injustice and open violation of human rights. The SNDP Yogam (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) was seriously discussing the means to overcome this social stigma. Since the Ezhavas had their own temples in which they themselves acted as officiating priests, their eagerness to get access to savarna temples was more a matter of civil rights than a question of freedom of worship. T. K. Madhavan, the prominent leader of the SNDP Yogam and the true spirit behind the Satyagraha, managed to get a resolution passed at the Congress session in 1923 at Kakinada on the question of the removal of untouchability. The KPCC (Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee) decided to launch a satyagraha at Vaikam on this basis⁴. Mahatma Gandhi blessed the satyagraha but cautioned against non-Hindu participation and non-Savarna leadership in it as it was strictly a Hindu cause and a golden opportunity for caste-Hindu to atone for a heinous sin. The Satyagraha attracted country wide attention and people from all over India reached Vaikam to support the struggle. The Savarna jatha (Upper caste march) organized under the leadership of Mannathu Padmanabhan (founder of Nair Service Society) to the capital Thiruvananthapuram, to impress upon the king of the urgency of the demand, truly reflected this spirit. The prolonged campaign and the direct involvement of Gandhi forced the authorities to come to a settlement according to which all the approach roads, except the eastern one, of the temple were thrown open to all people irrespective of caste and community. The modalities of the agreement was a subject of intense debate and the Congress was blamed for deserting the struggle halfway and for effecting the agreement only to the Vaikam Temple⁵. Due to reason, several similar struggles had to be waged for the same purpose subsequently. As a result, in 1928, approach roads to all temples in Travancore were thrown open to all people⁶.

GURUVAYOOR SATYAGRAHA (1931-1932)

The second struggle under KPCC against caste based pollution, but now to get the temple open to all Hindus was organized in 1931-32, in the course of the C.D.M, at the Guruvayoor temple in Malabar. While the struggle at Vaikam was a social reform measure divorced from any political movements, at Guruvayoor it was integral to a political program nevertheless, in Kerala, the zeal for social reform overshadowed the rising countrywide political enthusiasm; for the KPCC the temple entry issue was more important than the C.D.M. and leaders like K. Kelappan concentrated heavily on the question of untouchability⁷. Gandhiji also asked the Satyagrahis to detach the struggle from all its political affiliation and from the organizational links of the Congress in order to rescue it from government repression and to ensure its success. Though the temple entry agitation was perceived as tantamount to the 'struggle against imperialism' by some of its leaders as its kept vigil against disunity and factionalism, what really prompted the Congress to confine the struggle to temple entry were the bitter experiences. The Zamorin, who was the trustee of the temple, however, refused to step down to negotiate a settlement which led K. Kelappan to start a fast unto death which, however, was withdrawn under the advice of Gandhiji⁸. The Satyagraha as a whole was finally terminated before achieving any of its declared objectives. A period of three months was given to the Zamorin to affect temple entry, failing which Gandhi would himself offer Satyagraha; but it was postponed and did not take place at all. A referendum was held among the caste Hindu of Ponnani taluk, where the temple was situated, which revealed that 70% of them supported the cause of temple entry⁹. N. P. Damodaran, one of the leaders of the Satyagraha, later recollected that through the agitation failed to meet its immediate objective, it created a climate in favor of temple entry. The movement of temple entry registered its crowning victory when the Travancore government made the Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936 by which all temples in Travancore were thrown open to all Hindus¹⁰. Nevertheless, the temples of Cochin and Malabar remained closed before the avarnas till 1947.

Though there are plenty of literature on the civil liberties movement, the nationalist struggle and the 1921 Rebellion, and a few attempts at connecting the temple entry movement with the conversion issue, there are practically no attempts at linking it with the 1921 rebellion. The Census reports of Travancore and Cochin from 1871 to 1941 as well as the manuals of Travancore and Cochin contain rich data on the condition of the untouchable castes.

Academic studies on the social and religious reform movements of Kerala in general and the Ezhava reform movement in particular placed them against the existing 'context' (of caste, social evils, deprivation) and the impending forces of modernity (new education, missionary activity, colonial agency and the rising middle class consciousness) and analyzed the varied factors which helped or obstructed the potential of different social groups to appropriate reformism as a means to overcome their state of deprivation. There were also attempts at examining the factors for the radicalization of the Ezhava caste movement and its later inclination towards left-wing ideology. Some scholars considered missionary presence as instrumental in the gradual radicalization of the Ezhava movement and the slow expansion of its emancipation agenda. There were also attempts at analyzing the ideological foundations of the reform movements and to identify the unique features of the 'Kerala renaissance'. The temple entry movement was important for several reasons. Firstly, it was a conscious effort on the part of the Congress to integrate the various castes and communities under the Hindu fold through social and religious reform, which represented a powerful domain of the nationalist movement. Temple could rally diverse sections together without dislodging the existing power relations and a symbolic unity could pacify lower caste radicalism, sowing the so-called "Essentials of Hinduism" and in seeking to forge a (Hindu) "community of equals"¹¹ through a common bond of religiosity and uniformity of religious worship around temples. In that sense the temple entry movement marked a definite stage in the process of the disjunction of folk religion and other currents of religion. Religion is no

longer divided into lower religion and higher religion, but into religion and superstition. Hence it was a Shuddhi movement- to cleanse religion of blots identified incompatible with modernity and the essentials of nationhood.

The temple entry satyagraha attains significance against the dual task taken up by the Indian National Congress – to construct a modern nation-state and to mould a national (Hindu) religion. But it had its disastrous consequences – in driving religious minorities away from the organizational fold and ideological appeal of the Congress. The bitter experiences of 1921 followed by the conscious involvement of the Congress in the affairs of religious nationalism forced the Mappilas (Muslims) in keep away from nationalist politics and slowly drift towards a marked sectarian identity. The slow but steady drift of the Mappilas into communal politics became inevitable¹². Thirdly, the struggle for temple entry helped in delivering the Congress from the moral setback t faced after the Malabar rebellion, but in the unique social context of Kerala where reform movements had succeeded in shaping an ideological environment in favor of social equality, its withdrawal from direct politics to engage with socio-religious issues, disregarding more important question of material deprivation and class disparities, transcending caste/religious affiliations, reduced its political constituency and created a fertile ground for the proliferation of left political ideology in subsequent times. Moreover, in the 1930s, the strong communal and caste consciousness let loose by the agitation against caste disabilities could lead the poor towards class consciousness (as caste roughly coincided with class in Kerala). But the political excitement awakened among the poor and low caste could not be made to go away; it lay ready to be developed into class consciousness. The movement for temple entry registered its crowning victory when the Travancore government made the Temple Entry Proclamation in 1936 by which all temples in Travancore were thrown open to all Hindus¹³.

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CONCLUSION

One of the important movements that led to temple entry was Vaikam Satyagraha. It was encountered in order to get the permission to use the roads near temples for the deities. The right for untouchables to enter the temple roads and use other space which were exclusively meant for the upper caste people was the initial demands of the agitators who later on raised the demand for temple entry. The movement was not confined to a single event. It was through a number of stages in the form of Vaikam Satyagraha which took place in Travancore, the Guruvayoor Satyagraha in Malabar, and the declaration in Cochin gave the lower castes access to temples.

Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma in 1930 appointed a committee to examine the question of temple entry for the dalits. The committee expressed their opinion that a panel of learned persons, well versed in the theory and practice of Hinduism, should be summoned, and that the reform might be affected by the ruler with their approval. They also suggested certain methods by which the rigor of the custom excluding the dalits from the temple might be softened but Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal was in favor of full temple entry. The Temple Entry Proclamation issued by Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal Balarama Varma and his Dewan Sir C. P. Ramaswami Iyer in 1936 abolished the ban on low caste people or awareness from entering Hindu temples in the State of Travancore. The Temple Entry Proclamation (November 12, 1936) was one of the important landmarks in the history of Kerala.

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