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## Revolution Through Resistance: Ayyankali's Social Reforms

Dr AMBILI S  
Assistant Professor  
Department of History  
VTM NSS College  
Dhanuvachapuram  
Thiruvananthapuram  
Kerala

**Abstract** - The last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social customs and practices of Kerala were largely guided by rubric of caste. The caste Hindus of Kerala insisted certain customs and practices that could augment their social prestige and predominance. They turned into the privileged section of the society while the non-caste Hindus were suppressed as unprivileged. The latter were deprived of their primary rights as human beings. However, in Malabar, since the establishment of British power, the situation underwent a thorough change. The British afforded equal opportunities to all, irrespective of caste culture and caste considerations. But in Travancore and Cochin, which form the major portion of modern Kerala, the wheel of traditionalism continued to roll on the old track.

**Key words** – Untouchability, Savarnas, Avarnas

### INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kerala was under the grip of feudalism and various social evils. The caste - ridden Hindu society was broadly divided into two- the Savarnas who enjoyed all privileges and the Avarnas who were denied all privileges. The Avarnas were treated as untouchables. The Avarnas were subjected to all sorts of social discriminations and humiliations. The social reformer Ayyankali found that his community was in the lower rank of the social order in name of religion and caste and receiving much humiliation in the social, educational, economic and religious life of the country. They had no right for going education and right to enter in the public roads.

The whole of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were marked by a series of relentless social contests, sometimes they were peaceful. But there were several instances when the untouchables and the caste Hindus clashed in a violent manner. As Dr. T.K. Ravindran observes, “The most degrading of these disabilities sprang up from the evils of untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability of the exterior castes which were practised with fanatical rigour unknown in other parts of India.” By the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century all communities in Kerala have been affected by powerful reform movements of one kind or other. The initiative for this change, as mentioned earlier, came from Sree Narayana Guru whose efforts were supported and supplemented by Chattampi Swamikal. In addition to them modern Kerala produced a lot of other social reformers who applied themselves to the task of the moral and social regeneration of the Hindu community.

Ayyankali was in the vanguard of the movement which awakened the pulayas from their social, educational and cultural - backwardness, may, he was the unquestioned leader of the movement. It was he who went deep down into the miseries and sufferings of the depressed and united them under his leadership and personality fought for their rights which had been usurped by the so called superiors. unorganized and unguided the plight of the untouchables was highly deplorable. It was in this social backwardness that Ayyankali had to start his career as a social reformer dismantling the feudal edifices and challenging the caste rules and conventions of the privileged classes. To the untouchables, he was nothing short of a saviour. Ayyankali was born at Vengannore, 13 Kilometers away from Thiruvananthapuram on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1863. His parents were Ayyan and Mala who belonged to Pulaya family.

Low caste have been legally forbidden to use the public paths and as such Ayyankali though it proper to challenge this obsolescent custom with all his might and at his disposal. Delineating the social customs of the period, prof. T.K. Ravindran observes, "These and many other serious disabilities like denial of right to walk along public roads, to enter public schools law courts and government offices and services, plagued, the untouchable classes in Travancore even during the early decades of the present century.

Though roads were constructed and cleared by the low caste men, they had no right to walk along it. Hence Ayyankali could not but challenge this vile system. He united his fellow men force show down with the authorities and the orthodox people. They began to walk along the roads in groups. The caste Hindus strongly reacted against this move. They resisted their appearance on the roads but were retaliated by Ayyankali and his supporters. Moreover, Ayyankali bought a bullock cart in 1893. Buying a bullock cart for them was an act of defiance. He also bought two bullocks and hang bronze bell into their necks. He dressed neatly with a banian and a dhoti. In those days, the untouchables could not wear good dress. Knowing the consequences and seriousness of his acts he boldly drove his cart along the road. Having heard the ringing sounds of bell from the bullock's necks the Savarnas gathered round him with weapons. The infuriated Savarnas asked him to remove his upper garments. He reared and drew up his dagger from the sheath and said that they could not do anything to him, so long as his life existed in history. He was prepared to face any eventuality to realise his cherished goal i.e., to secure the right to walk along public paths and high ways without intimidation and harassment from the caste Hindus. Those who obstructed him received violent reaction from his followers. The good start made by him by using the bullock cart had its impact throughout the country. A leader of unusual courage and determination was emerging from the untouchables. Petty squabbles and competitions among communities like the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas etc. were directly settled by him. He insisted much confidence and self-respect among the untouchables which enabled them to rally against the rigid rules and customs of the caste Hindus.

In 1898, a group of young men under the leadership of Ayyankali walked along the road at Aralumood near Neyyattinkara. When they reached Balaramapuram, a group of people surrounded them and attacked Ayyankali and his men faced it courageously. Thus "the blood of blackmen" flowed on the public roads This news also spread far and wide. Events of these kinds were repeated at several places like Manakkadu, Kazhakkuttam, Kaniyapuram etc.

During this period, the L.M.S Missionaries tried to spread the gospel of Christ. Those missionaries had already made a good impact on the untouchables. It was these missionaries tried to high light the disabilities of the slave classes by bringing the issue before the governeemnt. Hence christianity was accepted by many of slavery and several other disabilities by qutting Hindu religlion. Seeing the mass exodus of non- caste Hindu to Christianity, some Hindu religious reformers tried to reverse the trend. One of the reformers Sadananda Swami arrived at Thiruvananthapuram and made a speech on the cruelties of the caste Hindus and advised them to behave decently towards the untouchables. While he arrived at Thiruvananthapuram, Ayyankali invited him to Vengannore and was given a warm welcome. Swamikal advised the pulayas to unite and inspired Ayyankali to continue his work. Swamikal started there a branch of the organization Brahminstmad Sangha with the help of Ayyankali and his friends. Ayyankali continued his reform works under the shadow of this organization.

Ayyankali sought the help of Swamikal in uplifting the untouchables and freeing them from social disabilities. The untouchables had not right to see the king and to submit their grievances for redress, custom had forbidden to do so. Ayyankali and Sadananda Swamikal decided to prove that there was no harm even if a white king met his black subject. The untouchables had no right to see their king was for bidden to them. A group of young men gathered under his leadership and decided to visit the king on the day of Pooja Festival in 1905.

On the day of Pooja Festival in 1905, a procession started under the leadership of Ayyankali to East Fort in Thiruvananthapuram. Apart from seeing the King they had a plan to reassert their right to walk along the roads and high ways. The procession was carrying the picture of the then King Sri Mulam Thirunal. Some Savarnas bid on the way and pelted stones. They stood at one corner of Putharikantam and saw the king when he was on the march in connection with the Pooja Festival. Thus, their cherished goals of seeing their return journey to Vengannore, they had to face an attack from the Savarnas at Manakkadu. They fought vigorously and managed to escape.

Owing the weakness of the Sangha, Ayyankali started another organization on the model of the SNDP Yogam (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) known as Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam in 1905. The members of the organization constituted of Christians and the untouchables. The organization had a written constitution to guide its activities. Ayyankali gave importance to hygiene, discipline, right to way and the freedom of education etc. The Yogam met on each Sunday and discussed the matters of the untouchables. The Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam gained strength day by day. Its branches were opened at several places. Ayyankali had secured the support of many ardent and devoted workers like Chempunthara Kali, Chothikkuruppan, Kuttathara Pappan, Mechari Tharappan. P. Vasudevan, V.M.Parameswaran etc. whose co-operation was immensely useful to implement his programmes.

Inorder to intensify the works of the Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam, Ayyankali thought of starting publications. Thus in 1914, the first issue of the Monthly Sadhujana Paripalini came out as the master piece of the organization. He stressed the importance of education and unity through the columns of this monthly. His slogan was to secure progress through education and unity.

Inspite of all these activities and persuasions, the Travancore Government and the caste Hindus still remained uncompromisingly. The children of the untouchables continued to be kept off from the Governement Schools. The Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam therefore concentrated on this area. In 1907, the Government had decided to issue a proclamation permitting school entry for the untouchables. But the savarnas, it is said, persistently protested against this move. They could not imagine a situation when their own children had to sit shoulder to shoulder with the children of the untouchables. Ayyankali advised the labourers of his community not to do work for their masters until their demands were to be accepted. There was a rift between the farm workers and their masters. The farm labourers united for the first time and put forward their demands. There was no Trade Unions in Travancore during this period. They proclaimed the non- co-operation with the landlords. They restored to a strike in Vizhinjam. The workers in Kaniyapuram, Pallichal, Kandala etc. also took part in the strike. Ayyankali reminded his followers that they had nothing to lose and they had too much experience in starvation. The strikers were known as Ayyankalipada. The leaders also remind united and refused to come into terms with the striking workers. They even made an attempt to work in their farm, but the Ayyankalipada resisted it. The fields were filled with weeds and become barren. However, the workers were in utter poverty.

To make matters worse, starvation was followed by epidemics. The land lords were also put too much difficulties. In order to save his people from further starvation, Ayyankali reached an understanding with the fishermen in Vizhinjam a coastal village near Vengannore. His men associated with the fishing community and engaged in fishisng . At last the land lords were forced to come into terms with Ayyankali. They were prepared to meet the demands of the workers. Ayyankali was also not in favour of aggravating the situation further. Thus, the first strike of the untouchables was howling success. The landlords

promised the right way, right to education, increase in wages etc. Thus, the first strike came to an end in 1908.

By the year 1912, the savarnas who were dwelling near the Nedumangad market. Having heard the news that Ayyankali collected a group of men and forcibly stepped into the market. They did not wait for the charity of the savarnas. They were not unaware of the consequence of their deeds. Suddenly a group of savarnas gathered round a small group with deadly weapons. They began to attack the untouchables. All, except Ayyankali took to heels. But Ayyankali did not lose his presence of mind and remained unmoved by the shameful performance of his followers. He fought the savarnas with considerable courage. This incident proved the way for the entry of the untouchables into the market. Such events had also occurred in other places like Kazhakuttom, Kaniyapuram etc.

To activate the followers, Ayyankali was in the habit of visiting such troubled spots and delivering speeches. Once a meeting was organised at Kazhakuttom by his followers Ayyankali and his close associates were proceeding to meeting place. When they reached at Kazhakuttom, a group of Savarnas began to attack them. But the timely intervention of the police, the tension was eased.

Ayyankali's activities were always guided by one supreme object uplift of the down trodden. He was always at their disposal whenever they were in need of him. He understood their grievances and shared their sorrows. His physical presents and directives had an electrifying effect upon his followers. Actually the down trodden people were on the war path for attaining social equality. They were not even allowed to assemble freely, for meetings were invariably disturbed by the savarnas. For instance, on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1915 there was a ghastly attack on the untouchables. Viz Visakham Devan was attacked and he fell unconscious. In the struggle that followed both the Savarnas and Avranas were warranted. Avarna ladies were raped, their houses were set on fire and considerable properties were also destroyed.

On the very next day Ayyankali was informed of the event by the organisers of the meeting through a memorandum. They gave him a full picture of the actual events. He wanted his followers to retaliate the Savarnas, but cautioned against taking away their lives. He also agreed to visit Perinad.

The then Dewan, Krishnan Nair was watching the situation closely. Ayyankali offered him to control the people from committing any atrocities. He also appealed the Dewan for the withdrawal of the police from the area. He stood bail to many of his people and saved them from the severe punishments of the police.

The activities of Ayyankali and his followers opened the eyes of the government. Hence in 1911, P.K. Govinda Pillai, the editor of the daily 'Subhashini' had been appointed to report on the disabilities of the untouchables. P. K. Govinda Pillai argued in the Sri Mulam Praja Sabha that a member from the untouchables (pulayas) should be nominated to the assembly for presenting their problems. In his report, he pinpointed the various hardships and disabilities of the untouchables on the right to way admission into hospitals, educational institutions etc. He proceeded that government lands should be allotted to the pulayas.

As per the report of P.K. Govinda Pillai, Ayyankali was nominated to the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly in December 1911. He made his speech in the Assembly on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1912. Kumaran Asan, the well-known Malayalam poet, had already been nominated to the Assembly to represent the Ezhava community. Ayyankali was highly conscious of the grievances of his community. He prayed in the assembly that Sirkar (Government) wasteland should be granted to the pulayas for cultivation and settlement. He pointed out in the Assembly that over a thousand pulayas were homeless in the pakuthies (half) of Pallipuram, Kazhakuttam etc. He demanded that orders should be issued to the authorities concerned to expedite the registration proceedings and assign the lands to them and there by redress the grievances of the community. Then he brought the attention of the government to the matters of the pulayas

in general. He said that even though the government registered 500 acres of land in the names of the pulayas in the Vilappil and Neyyattinkara pakuthies, only 242.48 acres were available for registration in locality. The balance being under the occupation of others. He appealed to the government that the rest of the area promised to them be granted in the Uzhamalakkal and Aryanad pakuthies of the Nedumangadu Taluk and from the wastelands in the other pakuthies of the Neyyattinkara Taluk. Thus, the landless pulaya community got 500 acres of land for themselves by the persistent arguments of Ayyankali in the Sri. Mulam Popular Assembly.

Ayyankali continued his plea for land for his community. His arguments for the granting of Sirkar (government) wastelands did not confine in his places only he felt that this benefit should go to the community throughout Travancore. The pulayas had no permanent dwelling places. They very often lived in the lands of the caste Hindus and were always under the spell of eviction. He submitted in the Assembly that it would be a great boon if lands could be granted to the pulayas in other parts of Travancore also for dwelling sites and requested that the grievances of the pulayas on his issue might be redressed as early as possible.

Though the government granted Sirkar (government) wastelands to the pulayas, the caste superiors were in the habits of encroaching upon such lands. But the pulayas should pay tax for the same. So Ayyankali reported the government that many of the lands registered in the names of the pulayas in the Vilappil pakuthi, Neyyattinkara Taluk, had already been occupied by other people and they did not get permissions of any other kinds although they were paying tax for the same.

Ayyankali depicted the plight of the untouchables in the social life of the country by printing out the custom and conventions of the past which prevented from entering schools, law courts, government offices. Ayyankali tried to break up the hereditary customs by appealing the government that pulayas should be given job opportunities in the government department. On the 9<sup>th</sup> session of the Assembly in 1913, he said that government had promised him, at the last session of the Assembly to consider favourably the question of appointing the pulayas as in the subordinate ranks of the state services. So, he prayed that the pulayas should be freely appointed in the various departments.

Even in 1920s Travancore was under the grip of unapproachability and unseeability. It was in this background as mentioned earlier, that many Pulayas and Parayas thought of embracing christianity. The phase of conversion to Christianity Ayyankali said in the Assembly in 1923 that 50% of the members of the Avarna communities had embraced other religions, the main causes being poverty and untouchability. The treatment meted out to the Pulayas was worse than given to cattles and disability was removed as soon as they were converted to christianity, or Mohammadanism. He added that the existing untouchability was not based on spiritual grounds and the help of government and the caste Hindus was essential for the advancement of his community. He repeatedly requested that they might be given more than that given to other communities. Government might give a few wells and temples for their use. He reminded the Dewan that there were Government also helped them by supporting timber and land to build temples for their communities. In this background the pulayas were also entitled to get their due share with the submission of Ayyankali, the government nominated to the Assembly four more members from his community.

The ladies of the untouchables were not allowed to cover their bosoms, and the untouchables were not allowed to wear white dress. Ayyankali boldly asked who were the custodians of these unwritten laws. He advised the members of his community to wear white and good dress. He tried to civilize his people by giving inspirations and showing specimens. He stressed the need of education for the ladies of his community and advised them to remove the stereotyped dress and ornaments who bore caste marks. The ladies were in the habit of wearing ornaments made of stones which were the symbols of slavery. Ayyankali persuaded the pulaya women to cast off their bead necklaces. Gopal Das a pulaya youth of Perinad, Quilon (Kollam), was able to persuade the women of this area to discard their necklaces. At a public meeting held in this locality a pulaya was beaten up by a Nayar. The Pulayas did not lag behind and retaliated in the same coin. Clashes between the Nayars and Pulayas took place at several places. The

Nayars began to haunt the Pulayas and the latter had to flee. Ayyankali rushed to the spot with the help of Cannanasseri Parameswaran Pillai, he organized a mass meeting at Quilon (Kollam) town. At the encouragement of Cannanasseri, the Pulaya women threw away their bead necklaces. This rebellion was known as the “Kallumala Agitation” Here also, his exhortations did not go unrewarded. They obeyed his words implicitly. Ayyankali was conscious of the evil effects of drinking. On this issue he sought the co-operation and initiative of the ladies of his community. He wanted them to deny food and shelter to their makes if the latter were drunkards.

Ayyankali tried his best to elevate the pulaya community through Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam. He started local courts under the auspices of the Sadhujana Paripalana Yogam. It had its own judges and lawyers for arguing and deciding cases among the pulayas. Ayyankali was the Chief Justice of the court. He often visited the branches of the court and heard cases. If the person who committed guilt, refused to come to the court warrants would be sent to arrest him. The defendant must be present at the time of trial. Thus Ayyankali could check his persons from committing crimes and other mischiefs. They were always warned to be have decently.

## CONCLUSION

Though uneducated Ayyankali sprang up as the unquestioned leader of the pulaya community and exercised great influences upon his own community as well as in the government. He dedicated his mental resources for the uplift of his community. The landless pulayas became landowner. They could use the public paths and high ways on a par with the caste Hindus. The civil services of the state were no longer inaccessible to the low castes. With unruffled courage and determination, Ayyankali continued his social work till he breathed his last (18<sup>th</sup> June 1941).

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