



SWAMI ANANDA THEERTHAN AND HUMANIST MOVEMENT IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Born in a rich Gowdasaraswath Brahmin family of Tellichery, Aanantha Shenoy was the last disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. He was known for his adamant fights against the social injustices in Kerala. In August 1928 he accepted the ascetic way of life. The Guru gave him the name Anantha Theerthan. Despite encountering continuous threats from the upper class people he spared his entire life for the welfare of the lower class of people. He started the Sree Narayana School and hostel for Harijan children at Payannur.

KEYWORDS: - Kerala- Social Reformer- last disciple of Sree Narayana Guru- upliftment of the Harijans - Jathinashini Sabha

The wave of social reform movements surged over Kerala in the late 19th and early decades of 20th century. The colonial domination, the spread of western education and rationalism brought changes in the 19th century Kerala society. The newly emerged educated middle class followed a critical attitude towards the traditional institutions, beliefs and social relations. They supported the struggles for bringing structural changes and urged the people to fight against the caste-based social discrimination, social injustice, superstitions and other evils deeply rooted in the society.

Swami Ananda Theerthan¹ occupies a high place in the history of the social reformers of Modern Kerala. His uncompromising crusade against the inhuman practice of untouchability left an important mark in the history of social reform movement in Kerala. He was a veteran freedom fighter, a true follower of Mahatma Gandhi and a devoted disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. Ananda Theerthan tried his level best to make the Harijans of Kerala particularly North Malabar realize the esteem values of non-violence, truth, love, equality, fraternity and liberty. He spearheaded struggles against untouchability, exploitation and oppression of slavery, injustice and inequality².

The condition of the untouchables of Kerala during the period of Ananda Shenoy was deplorable. They were illiterates, poverty stricken and considered to be an inferior human race. They were regarded as

agricultural instruments in the hands of the landlords and used to tie merely one piece of cloth around their waist as their dress. They had nothing to protect themselves from rain and cold³. Ananda Shenoy's friendship with them created chaos and confusion in his family. He was attracted by the principles of Arya Samaj⁴. He also established contacts with the activities of the Ramakrishna Mission⁵ and Theosophical Society⁶. His knowledge of Sanskrit helped him to get acquainted with the Bhagavat Gita and Upanishads. His reading of Young India and other books helped him to acquire knowledge about the evils of contemporary society. He read the works of Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda and realized the importance of social work. The words and deeds of Swami Vivekananda made a deep impact on his mind and he decided to fight against untouchability. Ananda Shenoy came to read the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924⁷ and realized the fact that the approach roads were not opened to the Avarnas in Malabar as in the case of other temples in Travancore. He directly experienced the harshness of caste system and untouchability at the temple city of Guruvayur⁸. When he approached the shop for buying a few articles, the owner of the shop repeatedly asked him to mention his caste. He was again asked to reveal his caste when he entered the temple pond for taking bath. Ananda Shenoy declined to reveal his caste and was severely beaten up by the caste Hindus and taken to the Devaswam office. The officer recognized Ananda Shenoy and thus he was saved. Narayana Guru's slogans "One Caste, One Religion and One God for Man" and "Don't ask, tell or think Caste" made a deep influence on him⁹.

Ananda Theerthan was attracted by the social reform activities of the Sabari Asram¹⁰ and reached there and started his Harijan uplift programme in 1926. He joined the agitation of the Arya Samajists for opening the Kalpathi¹¹ road to all people irrespective of caste. The caste Hindus mercilessly attacked him but the road was opened to the Avarnas. The Kalpathi struggle was the beginning of his life long struggle for the eradication of untouchability. Ananda Shenoy led a small group of lower caste people to the Kallekulangara temple Sivarathri festival fair in Palakkad in 1927. But the caste Hindus ruthlessly beat the Harijan children and Ananda Shenoy¹². Ananda Shenoy's first meeting with Sree Narayana Guru at Coimbatore in the presence of C. Achuthan¹³ was a turning point in his life.

In 1927 Mahatma Gandhi visited Sabari Asram and demanded the inmates to eradicate untouchability and produce and wear khadi clothes. At the request of Ananda Shenoy, Gandhiji wanted the authorities of the Ashram to stop the practice of separate feeding of Brahmin children in the Ashram and to treat all the inmates in the Ashram in equal manner¹⁴. In order to explain the harshness of casteism in Kerala, Ananda Shenoy visited Gandhiji's Sabarmati Asram¹⁵ in 1928. He met Sree Narayana Guru at Sivagiri in 1928¹⁶ and extended his full support to the authorities of Sradhananda Vidyalaya¹⁷. He participated in the Guruvayur¹⁸ Satyagraha. He raised the banner of revolt against caste System and marched with a group of Nayadis, through

the Brahmin Street in Payannur to realize for them the right of movement in 1930. He actively engaged in the Salt Satyagraha started by Gandhiji on 12th March 1930¹⁹.

Members belonging to lower castes were not allowed to pass through main pathways, and they were deprived admission to temples and other public places. They were not allowed to wear dress above waist, wear chappals, or caps and were treated as animals. Even their presence within a distance of 64 feet from caste Hindus invited grave punishment. All schools closed their doors to harijan students²⁰. Shenoy understood that the rights of the oppressed cannot be gained without imparting proper education to them.

Ananda Theerthan considered education is the most important medium in bringing progressive ideas, self confidence, permanent change and emancipation of the lower caste people. On 21st November, 1931, he started the Sree Narayana School in Payannur ²¹ to adopt children of the untouchable communities and educate and develop them to be equal citizens of the country. He opened Sree Narayana hostels for Harijan children in places like at Pazhyangadi, Tellicherry, Kannur etc. He had to shift the school and its hostel thrice from one place to another due to the persistent hostility of the caste Hindus. He visited the houses of lower caste people like Pulayas and Paniyas, in order to recruit children to his Sree Narayana Vidyalaya²². Ananda Theerthan organized struggles for the entry of Harijans in schools, temples and other places. He was brutally attacked by the caste Hindus.

Ananda Theerthan formed 'Jatinasini Sabha'²³ in 1933 at Kannur. He published a pamphlet 'Jathinasanam Navayugadharmam' which proclaimed the destruction of castes as the dharma of the modern age and the emancipation from casteism as essential to build a modern India. The sabha promoted inter-dining and inter-marriages. Ananda Theerthan was openly assaulted at some temples and schools by caste Hindus for conducting propaganda among the Harijans. He was particularly determined to get the temples of Gowda Saraswath Brahmins opened to all irrespective of caste²⁴. He gave savarna names such as Thampuran, Embrandiri, Sharma, Marar, Nambiar, Shenoy, George and Muhammed to Harijan students. He worked hard to solve the problems of the tribal people like Kurichiyar, Kurumbar, Paniyan and Irular of Wayanad. He worked among the tribal people such as Mavilar and Koagar settled in the rural areas of Kasaragod. In association with Syamiji Sunderlal Seth, he started a movement in 1945 for the emancipation of the tribals²⁵. His aim was to free the tribals from the hands of landlords. He raised his voice against the slave trade in the Valliyoorkavu temple during the Andukettu festival. His activities stirred the minds of the people of Wayanad. On several occasions he utilized the service of the judiciary to face the moves of the upper castes²⁶.

Eventhough Ananda Theerthan had some differences of opinion with the authorities of the Sivagiri Ashram²⁷; he continued to maintain contacts with the 'Sree Narayana Dharma Sangham'²⁸ As one of the leaders of the Harijan Sevak Sangh, he organized propoganda in favour of Harijan upliftment and the eradication of untouchability in Tamilnadu from 1952 to 1958.²⁹He worked in 30 villages in Melur of Tamilnadu against caste system and untouchability. He was awarded 'Thamrapatra' and freedom fighters pension in 1972. He founded the Swami Ananda Theertha Trust In 1984 and worked as its first president. The most important aim of the trust was to popularize the message of the swami and to continue the social work initiated by him. In 1987 he fell ill and was hospitalized. He breathed his last on 21st November 1987³⁰.

Swami Ananda Theerthan had a lasting place among the social reformers of Kerala. His reform works contributed much to the eradication of untouchability and uplift of the Harijans. The fondness of a father, the commanding power of an administrator, self-courage of a fighter, the teaching skill of a master, and sincerity of a friend combined in the dazzling individuality of Swami Ananda Theerthan. Being a humanitarian he never showed hesitation to do whatever services he could do to uplift the Harijans. He conducted struggles against untouchability without desiring any fame and honour. He was not a mere man of vision and ambition but a sincere as well as a practical-minded and dedicated servant of the Harijans in their struggle for existence. Swami Ananda Theerthan's humanist activities contributed much towards the modernization of the Kerala society.

Notes and References:

1. The early name of Swami Ananda Theerthan was Ananda Shenoy. He was born on 2nd January 1905 in a Gowda Saraswath Brahmin family of Tellicherry. Gowda Saraswatha Brahmins are popularly known as Konkans. The two main sub castes within this community are Shenoy and Kammaths. His father Ramachandra Shenoy was a port conservator at Tellicherry. His mother Devu Ammal was a great devotee.
2. A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, Swami Ananda Thirth– Untouchability: Gandhian Solution on Trial, Delhi, 1987, p. 12. Also see Kishore and P.C. Ray, The Pioneering Social Reformers of India, New Delhi, 2001, p. 156.
3. V.K. Kunhiraman, Swami Ananda Theerthan (Mal.), Tellicherry, 1971, p. 16. Also see Confidential Files No.4248/1944 Bundle No.132; Directorate of State Archives, Trivandrum.
4. The Arya Samaj was a socio-religious reform movement of pan Indian character which made its entry into Malabar during the early decades of the 20th century. Dayananda Saraswathi, the founder of the Samaj, argued that the practice of untouchability had no scriptural basis. The Samaj organised Suddhi movement to check the flow of untouchables to Islam and Christianity and to bring back those who already deserted the Hindu identity.

5. The educated people of Malabar were also attracted to the teachings of Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission. While, on his journey through Malabar, Cochin and Travancore, Swami Vivekananda described Kerala as a madhouse of caste, a 'lunatic asylum'. He denounced the morbid non-touchism of the Hindus and actively campaigned against it.

6. Theosophical Society was a spiritual movement aimed at the revival of Hinduism. It preached universal brotherhood of man irrespective of the distinctions of caste, creed, race or sex. It laid special emphasis on the greatness of Hinduism and other oriental religions. In India, Mrs. Annie Beasant was the chief exponent of the Theosophical Society.

7. It was led by T.K. Madhavan and others.

8. P.K. Suresh Kumar, 'Ananda Theerthante Vazhikal', Madhyamam Weekly (Mal.), Kozhikode, September 15, 2006, p. 24.

9. A.M.Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, n.2, p.12. Also see Confidential Files No. 4464/1944 Bundle No.134; Directorate of State Archives, Trivandrum,

10. It was founded by Shri T.R. Krishnaswamy, a follower of the Mahatma, was named after Sabari, a Dalit friend and follower of Sri Rama of Ramayana. Gandhiji stayed at Sabari Ashram on two occasions with his wife Kasthurba Gandhi.

11. Kalpathy is a village in Palakkad district which has a cluster of Tamil Brahmin settlements, called 'agraharams.'

12. M. Swaminathan, 'Swami Ananda Theerthaji', Swami Ananda Theertha Shastiabdapoorthi Souvenir (Mal.), Payyanur, 1965, p. 86.

13. He was the president of Sree Sundareswara temple, Talap, Kannur

14. Malayala Manorama Sunday Supplement, 3 July, 1988. Also see Vanidas Elayavoor, Theerthaprayanam, (Mal.), Kannur, 2006, p.25.

15. It is (also known as Gandhi Ashram, Harijan Ashram, or Satyagraha Ashram) located in the Sabarmati suburb of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, adjoining the Ashram Road, on the banks of the River Sabarmati, 4.0 miles from the town hall. This was one of the many residences of Mahatma Gandhi who lived. It was from here that he led the Dandi march also known as the Salt Satyagraha on 12 March 1930.

16. This time Sree Narayana Guru said "You are Ananda Theerthan from today onwards". Thus he became the direct and last disciple of Sree Narayana Guru. Guru gave him the message "Do not fear, there is plenty of work to do".

17. It was at Payyoli near Vatakara

18. It is situated in present Thrissur district.

19. 'Swami Ananda Theertha', Smaranakal (Mal.), Tellicherry, 1980, p. 10.

20. Ibid.

21. In 1934 Gandhiji planted a mango tree in the compound of the Sree Narayana Vidyalaya. Today this is known as 'Gandhimavu'.
22. S.N. Sadasivan, A Social History of India, New Delhi, 2000, p. 578. Also see E.M. Ashraf, Swami Ananda Theertha- Biography, (Mal.), Kannur, 2003, p.22.
23. It was an association for the abolition of caste in Kerala.
24. P.F. Gopakumar, Keraleeya Navodhanam (Mal.) Thiruvananthapuram, 2007, p. 56.
25. V.K. Kunhiraman, n.3, p.15
26. Ibid., p. 23. Also see Confidential Files **No. 4271/1944 Bundle No.132**; Directorate of State Archives, Trivandrum,
27. Sivagiri is a pilgrimage centre in Varkala, India where one of its social reformer and sage Sree Narayana Guru's tomb is located and place where guru was enlightened and got the salvation.
28. It was a small organization of sanyasins whose members belonged to different castes.
29. A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, n.2, p. 21.
30. P.F. Gopakumar, n.24, p. 56. Also see K.P. Karuvan, 'Thyagamennathe Nettam' in Swami Ananda Theertha Shastiabdapoorthi Souvenir, (Mal.), Payyannur, 1965, p.27.
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