



Ayyankali – The Uplifter of the Dalits

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Abstract

The condition of Kerala before 20th century was more than pathetic. Kerala society then was not based on the principles of freedom and equality.¹ Travancore was also not an exception. The Travancore society was a caste ridden society. The low caste people were suppressed in almost all realms. They were the victims of untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability. The mere sight of them was considered as polluting by the upper castes.² They were even not permitted to enter the temples, public roads and the roads leading to temple premises, courts, and markets and so on.³ Now, Kerala is hailed as a development model. But the path of caste ridden Kerala to a model of development is not a straight and simple one. It was the actions and activities of reformers and missionaries, which created a modern Kerala along with the able assistance of governments. Among the reformers, the role played by Ayyankali is significant. He was a man from the downtrodden community. Through his fearless actions, he played a vital role in the upliftment of lower caste people in Kerala, particularly the Pulaya community. This paper tries to analyse the contributions of Ayyankali.

Keywords – Ayyankali, Pulaya, lower caste, Kallumala etc.

Ayyankali – The Uplifter of the Dalits

Ayyankali, the leader of the down troddens of Kerala was born on 28 August 1863⁴ at Venganoor near Thiruvananthapuram. He belonged to Pulaya community, which was one of the most depressed classes. Caste oppression was at its peak when Ayyankali was born. The upper castes tortured the lower castes and their life was miserable. From his early life itself,

¹A Sreedhara Menon, A Survey of Kerala History, DC Books, Kottayam, 2017, p. 306.

² J. H. Hutton, *Caste in India*, Bombay, 1963, p.82.

³ Samuel, V.T., *One Caste, One Religion, One God (A Study of Narayanaguru)*. Delhi, 1977, p. 23.

⁴Chentharasseri, T.H.P., *Ayyankali*, Trivandrum, 1979, p.42.



he began to question the unreasonable and humiliating practices in Kerala society in the name of caste.

Ayyankali and his followers forced their way into the roads which, despite a Government circular of 1884, had remained inaccessible to them.⁵ That was the starting of a social revolution in Kerala. He and his followers also took part in struggles aimed at the elimination of humiliating customs and traditions. The higher castes used force to suppress Ayyankali and his followers. In several places, clashes broke out between the Pulayas and the powerful landed classes.⁶ But they followed the same violence and retaliated.⁷ It was a rude shock to upper castes. By 1900, despite the opposition of the upper castes, the Pulayas in most parts of Travancore had won the right to walk on public roads. Ayyankali experimented new set of community practices such as 'samudayakodathi' (community court) to settle internal issues of the community as well.

Ayyankali started Sadhu Jana ParipalanaYogam in 1907 in the lines of Sree Narayana Dharma ParipalanaYogam of Narayana Suru.⁸ It is aimed at the socio-economic empowerment of Pulayas.⁹ He bought a bullock cart which was a clear cut luxury to Pulayas in those days¹⁰.

By 1907, the Travancore government began to nominate members from lower castes to Srimoolam Popular Assembly. Thus Ezhavas and Parayahs with the consent of the King got representation. P.K. Govinda Pillai, who belonged to the Nair caste was appointed as a representative for the Pulayas in 1910.¹¹ He pleaded for the cause of the Pulayas very strongly and a representative was nominated from the Pulaya caste in 1911. From 1912 Ayyankali, as Secretary of the 'Sadhu ParipalanaSangham' represented his community in the

⁵ Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore, 1858–1936*, Delhi, 2006, p. 160.

⁶ K. Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste*, p. 148.

⁷ Chentharasseri, T.H.P., *op.cit.*, pp.61-62.

⁸ Filippo Osella, Caroline Osella, *Social Mobility in Kerala – Modernity and Identity in Conflict*, Pluto Press, Sterling, 2000, P.196

⁹ Kusuman, K.K., *Slavery in Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1973, p.12.

¹⁰ Sivarajan, K., *Ayyankali*, Trivandrum, 1979, pp.29-30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.78.



Sri Mulam Popular Assembly.¹² He continued to be a nominated member for the next 28 years. In the Assembly he argued for the overall welfare of his community and put forth their demands. His main concerns were providing education, employment and land.

In 1904, he started a school for Pulayas in Venganoor.¹³ Though the government announced to give financial assistance to the school, it failed mainly because of the inability of Pulayas to send their children to school. Because their children also had to work for their daily bread. Only a very few Pulaya parents can send their children to school then.

It was in 1909 that the first farmer's struggle happened in Kerala. It was Ayyankali who led the movement. The government has allowed to admit students of the lower castes. But this order was placed in dark by the high caste officers mainly because of the opposition of Nair landlords. Because they were reluctant to give admission to Pulaya children. That is they affirmed that they cannot even think of the lower caste children studying with their own children. Thereupon the lower castes under the leadership of Ayyankali made it clear that they will not work in their farms. Ayyankali encouraged his community to strike against those landlords. In spite of their poverty, the strike continued for more than a year and at last the Nair landlords were forced to agree the demands of them. Thus children of Pulaya community were admitted to government schools.¹⁴ In 1915, Ayyankali took Panchami, a Pulaya girl to a school at Oorottambalam near Thiruvananthapuram. The school was set to fire by the upper castes.¹⁵ That was the attitude of them. But Ayyankali's efforts bore fruit and later more students began to join schools from his community. Thus he made education an inevitable part of community development.

In Sri Mulam Popular Assembly, he raised the demand of opening up of all government schools to Pulaya community.¹⁶ Schools situated nearby to temples were exempted from it and generally, there were many practical issues for the government to open up schools for

¹²*Proceedings of the Sri Mulam popular Assembly*, 1912, p.82.

¹³Chentharasseri, T.H.P., *op.cit.*, p.52.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp.69-70.

¹⁵THP Chentharassery, Ayyankali, p.74.

¹⁶*Proceedings of the Sri Mulam Popular Assembly*. 1912, p.82.



this lower caste. In many places, separate schools were started.¹⁷ Thus his activities, acted as a strong base for the upliftment of Pulaya community.

Ayyankali also launched the 'Kallumala' agitation which was popularly called the Perinad agitation, to protect the social dignity of the Pulayas in 1915-16 in Travancore. It was primarily organised to protest against the humiliations to which the Pulaya women were subjected to in matters of dress, particularly the insistence that Pulaya women were not permitted to wear blouses, and had to wear bead necklaces as a sign of their caste. Ayyankali undertook campaigns to persuade the Pulaya women to throw away these necklaces, and to wear garments to cover their breasts. These campaigns, gave rise to confrontations, as when Gopal Das, a Pulaya leader from central Travancore, exhorted the Pulaya women to discard the bead necklaces. The socially orthodox Nairs physically disrupted the meetings of the Pulayas. The Pulayas sometimes retaliated by attacking the Nairs. Ayyankali was ultimately able to end the hostilities by working out an agreement between the two contending groups. Subsequently, in a mass meeting held at Quilon, hundreds of Pulaya women discarded their bead necklaces in the presence of Ayyankali and a Nair social reformer, Changanasseriparameswaran Pillai.¹⁸ The Christian Missionaries, N.S.S, S.N.D.P, Arya Samaj etc. gave moral support and physical help to them in giving up out dated social practices.

He also started a weaving factory at Venganoor for the upliftment of his community. He trained youths in mat making. The movements launched by the Pulaya leaders in Travancore particularly Ayyankali, inspired the Pulayas of Cochin and Malabar to start agitations against caste inequities. In Cochin, though the Pulayas had been freed from slavery, the custom of untouchability or 'Tindal' continued to be practised against them by the upper castes. They were barred from public roads and were often denied entry into the courts of justice and public offices. Almost all public places were confined to the upper castes. Despite the promises of government in Cochin to disseminate education among the 'untouchable' communities, there was hardly any attempt to improve the literacy rates of the

¹⁷ *Report of the Administration of Travancore*, 1912, p.63.

¹⁸ K. Saradamoni, *Emergence of a Slave Caste*, p.153.



Pulayas.¹⁹Pulayas, as freed slaves, began to escape from their old masters to escape maltreatment, and send petitions to the government.

By 12th November 1936, Sri ChitiraTirunalBalarama Varma, the King of Travancore had made a proclamation which allowed the temple entry of all Hindus. It was considered as a miracle of 20th century. The proclamation says – “There should henceforth be no restriction placed on any Hindu by birth or religion on entering or worshipping at the temples controlled by Us and Our Government.”(Travancore government)²⁰There was no doubt that such a proclamation occurred in Kerala, mainly because of the activities of Ayyankali, who was hailed as the Pulaya Maharaja by our father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi. The historian P. Sanal Mohan has described Ayyankali as "the most important Dalit leader of modern Kerala".²¹

To conclude, in the pre-independent period, the condition of Kerala was more than pathetic. The Dalits were suppressed and oppressed by the upper castes in a merciless manner. Their condition was more pathetic than the condition of dogs and cats. It was through the missionary activities, the activities of social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Pt. K. P. Karuppan, ArattupuzhaVelayudhan, ChattampiSwamikal, ThaycaudAyyaVaikundar, BrahmanandaSivayogi, PoikayilYohannan, SahodaranAyyappan and the like and the spread of education that Kerala changed from a lunatic asylum to the present God’s own country. Among the reformers, the role of Ayyankali is remarkable. He was the leader of the downtrodden and also was a member of the downtrodden community. He was unparalleled that he questioned the caste hierarchy and inflicted among fellow people the courage to oppress inhuman practices.

In short, he was one among the torch bearers of this glowing Kerala’s socio-cultural transformation. In other words, today’s Kerala with all its developments owe not a little to this mighty historic figure – Ayyankali. He through his activities, transformed the society of Kerala.

¹⁹ Koji Kawashima, *Missionaries and a Hindu State*, p. 210.

²⁰ Travancore Administration Report, Travancore, 1938, p.7.

²¹Mohan, P. Sanal (2013), "Religion, Social Space, and Identity: The PrathyakshaRakshaDaiva Sabha and the Making of Cultural Boundaries in Twentieth Century Kerala", AGE Publications India.