



HEALTH STATUS OF TRAVANCORE BEFORE THE ADVENT OF MEDICAL MISSIONS: A HISTORICAL REREADING

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ABSTRACT

The advent of Medical Missions into the Travancore region ushered an era of reforms into the Health sector of Travancore. The influx of these missionary activities revolutionized treatment protocols that were in vogue during the time. The existing form of treatment that was available for the natives were obsolete and needed up gradation. Epidemics were on the loose claiming innocent lives. Diseases from smallpox to malaria were freewheeling in the country. The Travancore rulers understood the need for immediate action and hence welcomed these missionaries. The condition of Health sector in Travancore before their arrival was pathetic. The royal family of Travancore fearing a public backlash introduced western medicine in the native state.

Even though the missionary activities in the health sector were a cover for mass conversion, their contribution to the sector cannot to be forgotten. They showed sympathy to the people of Travancore and hence started new medical institutions in the state. This paper tries to identify the status of the health sector before the arrival of Medical Missions in Travancore.

Keywords- *Health, Western Medicine, Medical Mission, Travancore*

INTRODUCTION

Travancore has a long history of providing good treatment to its population irrespective of caste and creed. She played the role of a pioneer in this realm compared to its contemporaries.¹ Cochin and Malabar were lagging behind in health sector even though modernization was introduced in their state



first. They were unable to take advantage of the head start they were presented with. Thus the introduction of Western Medicine in the state of Travancore was an epoch making event in the annals of Kerala History. Progressive attitude of the rulers in Travancore played a pivotal role in the advancement of the health sector in the state. They knew the importance of public health and made sure that common people are benefited by the same.

SOCIAL STATUS OF TRAVANCORE BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF MEDICAL MISSIONS

Travancore was a powerful native state in British India which initiated numerous social legislations for the betterment of its inhabitants. Even though the rulers of the state were magnanimous and believed in a welfare state, they were derided by an ailing social structure. Caste system in the state was rigid, hence intermingling and intermixing was not allowed. Untouchability remained a reality and those who violated this were punished with extreme prejudice. Bhraminical dominance reigned supreme while the authorities lay prostrate before their demands. But this didn't affect the health sector of Travancore as treatment was available for all castes even before the introduction of Western Medicine in Travancore.

Ayurveda the native medicine of India which has its origin in the Vedas, was the available form of treatment to the ailing population.² Spread of Buddhism and Jainism into the subcontinent was critical in spreading this form of treatment among the people. Local practitioners of Ayurveda didn't discriminate while treating patients. Another factor to be noted here is that, most of the Ayurveda practitioners in Travancore belonged to the *Ezhava* community. (*Ezhava* community in Travancore was an untouchable caste). Hence caste system didn't become a hindrance for providing treatment to the lower castes.

Health status of lower castes especially the *Adivasis* were also not affected by caste distinction as they had their own forms of treatment. They used herbs and animal extracts for curing diseases. It was effective and well grounded. Most of the treatment methods followed by them were passed down through oral tradition. Majority of this was lost in time and due to the lack of conservation.

Superstitions that were prevalent in Travancore had its impact on the health sector. Diseases like leprosy were seen as an outcome of transgressions in the past life. Hence they were kept in isolation and treated in an inhumane way. They were lodged far away from public places and were not allowed to mingle with their loved ones. Lack of advanced treatment and care led to numerous deaths in the state. Most of the backward castes in the state believed that their deity 'Mariamman' could cure this



disease and hence wouldn't resort to medical assistance to cure the ailed. This was applicable for almost all incurable diseases.

Illiteracy played a key role in the increased number of incidence in the state. Uneducated masses in the state were unaware of the diseases that were freewheeling in the society. They didn't know what to do when they were infected with diseases. They were slow in identifying the symptoms and hence were vulnerable to ailments.

Poverty was another factor that promoted diseases in the native state. Majority of the people in Travancore belonged to the economically backward section of the society. Forced labour was in vogue and the remuneration for the workers was low. Land was owned by the upper class and tenants were forced to work under them. Hence they were at the mercy of their land lords. Feudal elements in the society were not sympathetic to the cause of these downtrodden sections of the society. There was no fixed remuneration for the tiller. As a result the common man in the society became insolvent.

Sanitation in the state of Travancore was poor and deplorable. Correspondingly she became the birthing pod of many communicable diseases. Diseases like Malaria, Cholera, Typhoid and Chickenpox spread in the area because of the laxity shown by the authorities to sanitation. Lower castes and middle class people who lived in poor conditions were the victims of these diseases. The need for a separate sanitary department was only realized in 1895.³

Malnutrition in Travancore played a pivotal role in degrading the health status of the people. Majority of the population in the native state were underfed. This had a negative impact on the immune system. They became susceptible before the diseases. Anemia was common among women and children. Lack of proper food coupled with monsoon climate was responsible for the spread of many diseases. Heavy downpour during the monsoon season increased the scope for the spread of communicable diseases. Vector borne diseases and water borne diseases were common in Travancore during the period.

Lack of adequate housing facility during the time had a negative impact on the health sector of Travancore because the common people in the state were exposed to the elements of nature. Extreme heat during summer followed by heavy downpour during June left the homeless people at the mercy of nature. Travancore being a centralized native state was not able to cope with this threat.

Economic condition of both state and individuals were poor. Hence they were not able to move forward in the realm of Health. But that didn't stop epidemics in spreading havoc around the state. Deaths due to various diseases showed a growing trend. Vector borne diseases and other



communicable diseases spread fast claiming innocent lives. The existing system of treatment available in the native state was not able to deal with these new threats. The rulers of the land understood the need of the hour. As a result they adopted Western Medicine as a response to thwart these threats.

INTRODUCTION OF WESTERN MEDICINE IN TRAVANCORE

Initiation of Western Medicine in Travancore ushered a new era of change into the forefront of Health Sector. The foreign traders who became the masters of the land were not keen in providing their technical knowhow to the subjugated state. But the spread of epidemics and its aftermath made them rethink their stand. British officers were the many among who got infected with diseases. This alarmed the authorities to do something.

The Travancore royal family was also keeping track on the situation at hand. They were ready to adopt modernity to tackle this crisis. The initial conceptualization to modernize the sector bore fruit in the year 1811.⁴ This was followed by the adoption of vaccination which was initiated in the state under the guidance of Gouri Lekshmi Bhayi. This epoch making event ensued in the year 1813.⁵ Col. Munro who was the resident of Travancore at the time foresaw the need of a modern public health sector along the British lines. Initially the luxury of treatment was restricted to the authorities and high caste people. Later it was made available for the inmates. Unlike in education, government institutions dominated medical activities in Travancore from the beginning.⁶

RESISTANCE AGAINST WESTERN MEDICINE

The reaction to modern medicine in Travancore was different from caste to caste. This is because cow lymph was an integral part of inoculation. The higher castes especially the bhramins saw cow as a sacred animal. It was given equal status of a mother. Hence they believed that they would lose their bhramniyam if they atone to western medicine. Nairs and Ezhavas were also skeptical about the alien form of treatment. The educated masses in the state were not keen to get vaccinated as they were afraid of its side effects.⁷ Furthermore they understood that without proper sanitation these diseases couldn't be controlled.

Government's decision to force vaccination on the people was received with stiff resistance. This led to several protests in the streets. Hence they were forced to change tactics. As a result a local practitioner in the indigenous medicine was placed along the physician who was in charge of inoculation to gain confidence of the people. Then they made it mandatory to all government officials, students and prisoners.⁸ The rulers of the land inoculated themselves to boost confidence in the people.



ADVENT OF MEDICAL MISSIONS

Travancore being a charitable state was trying its best to cater the needs of the people. But the centralized administration and the laxity in the part of the government officials played a crucial role in blowing the situation out of proportion. Government with its fiscal constraints was lagging behind in providing good treatment at low cost to the people. Epidemics were on the loose while poverty and malnutrition reigned supreme. Streets were dirty and unclean. This was too much to handle for the authorities.

It was during this time Medical Missions arrived to the scene. They acted as a third hand providing advanced treatment to the needed. They took the ailing population of the state under their wing irrespective of their identity. They setup hospitals and dispensaries in almost every part of the state. Even though the medical missions were magnanimous, they had a hidden agenda. They provided these paraphernalia's to the higher caste Hindu's with the idea of conversion in mind.⁹ They were specifically looking to convert *Bhramins* and *Nairs* to Christianity. They showed special consideration to these castes by providing them with separate wards in hospitals. Lower caste people were not allowed to enter this area. Furthermore they wanted the Hindus to be loyal to the services provided to them by the missionaries. The educational institutions started by both the erstwhile rulers of Travancore and missionaries inculcated the concepts of individual rights into the minds of the masses. This made them capable of questioning the system that was prevailing in the country. The new found consciousness positively impacted in the health sector of Travancore. The people of the land demanded better facilities in the health sector. Hence many representations were given to the ruling class for providing superior infrastructure to the common man of the state. The facilities provided in the missionary hospitals were also upgraded as a result of this activities.

CONCLUSION

Even though the idea of these Medical Missions was centered on the concept of conversion, the contributions made by them cannot be forgotten. They were a big help to the authorities in keeping epidemics under check. Government institutions became more flexible and relaxed with the advent of Medical Missions. The Royal Family was magnanimous enough to provide grants to these institutions for the services rendered by them.¹⁰ Travancore being a welfare state accepted people who came to land without any prejudice. They were able to create a rapport with the rulers of the land. This attitude of the royal family laid the foundation of a plush health sector which would later become the widely acclaimed 'Kerala Model in Health'.



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