

Kalpathy: Trajectories of Social Movements in Kerala

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ABSTRACT: Malabar, a region ruled by the British since 1792, underwent significant changes in socio-political and cultural spheres due to Mysorian rule. The British government's administrative measures restructured society, leading to the establishment of early socio-political organizations like the Indian National Congress, Home Rule Movement, Brahma Samaj, and Arya Samaj. The Kalpathy movement in 1925 marked an epoch-making incident in the struggle for social equality in Kerala. These movements emphasized individual liberty, social equality, and democratic rights, aiming to build national unity and achieve political freedom, socio-economic, and cultural advancement. The British's domination of Malabar weakened the influence of caste organizations, but the movement paved the way for revolutionary changes in social life. Sri Narayana Guru's social reform movement in the early 20th century initiated spiritual and social regeneration in modern Kerala, advocating for internal reform within the untouchable and lower caste Ezhava communities. The Kalpathy movement in Malabar was a landmark in Kerala's social history, but its importance has not been properly accounted for.

KEYWORDS: *Brahmins, Arya Samaj, Malabar, Kalpathy, Social Reform*

Malabar was a region ruled by the British directly since 1792 with Sreerangapattanam Treaty signed by English East India Company with Tippu Sulthan. As a consequence of this development, the local chieftains, who had great privileges in the society, lost their status as independent

rulers and forced to accept foreign domination. The Mysorian rule in Malabar was a great blow to the traditional social system culminates in the significant changes in socio-political and cultural spheres that reflected in different ways. The administrative measures taken by the British government were able to restructure the society which created a critical spirit in to the assessment of traditional order in an introspective mood, visible as elsewhere in India. This critical spirit also disseminated in the form of the social reform movements started from the eighteenth century set the seal of presence in heart of India also get currency in the British ruled Malabar. The educated middle class, as expected, drifted away from the traditional obnoxious and obsolete practices, majority of them had shown remarkable capacity for change and adaptation. A microscopic minority used colonial education to look inward and they stood for self-assertion of culture and humanization of society.¹ This repercussions was visible through establishment of early socio-political organizations includes Indian National Congress, Home Rule Movement, Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj etc. The leaders of these movements took initiatives in the social reform initiatives in Malabar.

The Kalpathy movement for freedom of travel in public places initiated in 1925 was an epoch making incident in the struggle for social equality in Kerala. The centre of Kalpathy movement was Palakkad which belonged to the Malabar district of Madras presidency. The movement that started in Kalpathy was an initial attempt to get equal right in society and enjoy the human rights for depressed sections of Malabar. The social discrimination on the basis of caste was reached its zenith and the destructed communal harmony as an outcome of the Malabar rebellion was not restored the situation of peace and security feeling during this period. So as the Muslims of Malabar especially the fundamentalists did not accept any social reform initiatives took by their alleged counter parts. Due to the social disabilities many of the people belonged to the lower sections of the society believed that religious conversion is a panacea to do away these discriminations. At the same time the initiatives to fetch the converted from their new religion to parent religion welcomed serious tensions in the society. The major threat against this was emerged from upper caste Hindus and Muslims. Here existed suspicion among

different communities especially the Hindus and Muslims viewed the activities even in their own community with great distrust. This paper tries to uncover details of a rare movement that had occurred in 1925, for the freedom of travel along the premises of the temple of Kalpathy conducted by the depressed classes from the region and its importance in the of social movements in Kerala.

The socio-religious reform movements initiated by various agencies during the colonial period were in a way the expression of new awareness based on western liberal ideas. They were radical in its spirit, but on the whole peaceful and non-violent in action.² In the social sphere these movements conducted restless campaign for the abolition of caste, equal rights to women, against child marriage, widow re-marriage and crusade against social inequalities. These social movements in varying degree emphasized the principle of individual liberty, social equality and democratic rights. They sought to establish equal rights for all individuals irrespective of caste or sex.³ The reformers believed that such democratization of institutions and social relations were necessary for building up national unity and to achieve political freedom, socio-economic and cultural advancement. The awakening found expression in all fields of national life. In politics it reflected as the demand for administrative reforms, self government, Home rule, Dominion status, independence, etc. In social field nationalism adhered to the principle of individual liberty, equality, freedom of travel and self advancement. It attacked anti-democratic principles that existed on the basis of caste.⁴

The new socio- economic and political situations that emerged in Kerala paved the way for the emergence of social organizations in different parts. The princely states, Travancore and Cochin, were the nerve centre of their activities. By using their organizational strength they claimed a fair share in government services and Legislature. The struggle of unrepresented and under-represented communities for their legitimate claim met with stiff resistance from the privileged sections of the society. It is observed that, "Our world as far as politics is concerned, will be a desert and we will wither away without a bomb, that is to say, without community deprived of our finite existence".⁵

The working of colonial political and administrative institutions and representative bodies provided opportunities to the people to involve themselves with the administration and law-making. The ruling powers made conscious efforts, not injurious to their interest, to encourage the sectarian tendencies for preventing socio-political unity. The membership in the legislative bodies was considered as the status symbol and recognition of various social groups. But the political authorities used the legislature and electoral politics as a device to divide the people on communal line. The people of Travancore were given the opportunity to associate themselves with legislative work since the last decade of the nineteenth century.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed various social reform movements in Kerala. The society of Kerala was awakened from its age old slumber by activities of reformers and it started showing the symptoms of progress. The co-operation given by the colonial rulers, though as part of their hegemony, provided a new impetus for the social reforms in Kerala. The most important aspect of these movements in Kerala during this period was the awakening of the lower caste people and their struggle against evils in the society and movement for social equality. This period marks an important turning point in the history of modern Kerala as it paved the way for the revolutionary changes in the social life of the people. The complexity of caste system of Kerala had made the lower caste people untouchable and unapproachable. The domination of the British though had kept away the caste from the administration, the social status of a person was still determined according to the caste hierarchy. The influence of caste system was more rigid and powerful in the native states of Travancore and Kochi. Malabar was under the direct control of the British. So here, the influence of caste organizations was nominal.

The social reform movement of Sri Narayana Guru at the beginning of twentieth century must be credited with having initiated the spiritual and social regeneration that resulted in modern Kerala. Sri Narayana Guru had effected a fundamental change in attitudes towards untouchability, unseeability, and other caste customs.⁶ Significantly, he advocated internal

reform within the untouchable and lower caste Ezhava communities before seeking to persuade Brahmins and their rulers. He worked for more than forty years in Kerala touching some two million people with his message of education, equality and industry. Within less than a decade, he had established over one hundred temples for untouchables. He supported worldly material achievement (*artha*) as a necessary adjunct to education and spiritual progress and demanded social reform as a prerequisite to political awakening.

The struggle against unsociability and unapproachability were very important in the social reform movements in Kerala during the twentieth century. The social inequality was very strongly in Kerala also, like any other places in India. The lower caste people had no right to walk on some of the public roads in Kerala. The initial struggle for getting the right to travel through the public roads for the lower castes was led by Ayyankali.⁷

It was at the Kakinada Session of the Indian National Congress of 1923 that T.K.Madhavan moved a resolution requesting the Congress leadership to take the initiative to work for the eradication of untouchability in Kerala.⁸ The struggle against untouchability in Kerala gathered momentum during the Vaikom Satyagraha in 1924. In October 1924 a resolution was moved in the Legislative Council requesting the government to open all roads similarly situated in Travancore to all sections of the people irrespective of caste or religion.⁹ In the course of discussion on the resolution, the members pointed out based on the letter from the president of the Municipal Council to the Chief Secretary of the Travancore Government “the road outside the temple boundary is being swept and lighted by the Municipality.”¹⁰ But the Government was obstinate and opposed the resolution due to their stand on this issue that they were not able to do the work of social reformers and change belief by government order.¹¹ The joint memorial of the people Vaikom stated: “the road around the temple were public roads and were used by Christians, Muslims, as well as the lower castes like *Kakkalans* and *Kaniyans* but the roads were closed to *Ezhavas*, *Arayas*, *Parayas* etc.”¹² It was pointed out that 1.7 million lower caste Hindus were denied the right

to walk along the temple roads.¹³ Regarding the object of the *Sathyagraha* movement at Vaikom, Gandhiji wrote: "In Travancore the *Sathyagrahis* are not attacking the entire system. They are not attacking it at any point at all. They are fighting sacerdotal prejudice. Let it be remembered that *Sathyagraha* is a most powerful process of conversion. It is an appeal to the heart. Such an appeal cannot be successfully made by people from other part of India flocking to Vaikom".¹⁴ The *Sathyagraha* lasted for twenty months and called off 23rd November 1935. With the exception of two roads leading to eastern approach road, the Government agreed to open all the roads around the Vaikom temple to all castes and communities.¹⁵ Travancore During the course of the movement similar struggles were conducted in Thiruvarp (Kottayam) and Kalpathy (Palakkad).¹⁶

One of the earliest leaders of the anti-untouchability movement in Malabar was C.Krishnan the editor of the *Mithavathi* published from Calicut.¹⁷ In Malabar 1917, C. Krishnan openly defied order of the Malabar Collector denying the freedom to the Tiyyas and other backward castes to walk along the approach road to Tali temple.¹⁸ The incident served to focus possible attention on the need for the early eradication of untouchability.¹⁹ In the later period the caste organizations, reform movements, progressive minded individuals and the Indian National Congress joined to work for the right to travel, for all irrespective of their caste.

The campaign for freedom of travel and struggle for social equality in Malabar geared into a new vista with the commencement at Kalpathy movement.²⁰ Members of low caste joined Arya Samaj and entered Kalpathy village, where the people belonged to the upper castes were given permission to travel, as Arya Samajists had freedom of movement. This led to fierce atmosphere which disturbed peaceful situation of the village in which the local Brahmin residents and activists of Arya Samaj were involved. Anyway, reformist tendencies gradually began to prevail over the forces of reaction.²¹ The social reform movements like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, and Theosophical Society and so on were organized outside the state had only marginal effect on Kerala society during this period.²²

Kalpathy is a small village in Palakkad district in Kerala. It has a unique position in the socio-cultural history of the region. The Kalpathy Viswanatha Swami temple,²³ the *agraharas*,²⁴ the particular life style of the orthodox Brahmins, their cultural engagements and Tamil influence in their day-to-day life attracted the attention in many ways. They enjoyed certain rights and privileges and kept aloof from the social discourses. Because of this, their social customs and practices were more rigid and intolerant than other sections of the society. They did not permit other sections to enter in to their village because of the norms of purity and pollution. The rule of the Kalpathy Viswanatha temple was under the strict control of the Brahmins. Participation in temple festivals and other occasions were prohibited to other communities.

In the evening of 29th October 1925, some Arya Samajists including recent Ezhava converts to Arya Samaj attempted to enter the New Kalpathy temple village and just when they reached in front of the Viswanatha Swami Temple, they were prevented from going further by the Brahmin residents and rioting took place there.²⁵ Palakkad Sub Divisional Magistrate apprehends further trouble, especially during the chariot festival days, (*Radholsavama*) he requested further instructions by executive orders.²⁶ The Madras Government asked clarification on this matter. The District Magistrate reported to the Government of Madras: "so far as Government was concerned, be permitted to enter the Kalpathy *Agraharam* on the occasion of Car Festival."²⁷ It was not known that time whether, in fact, the Arya Samajist converts would attempt an entry during the festival, on the other hand; from about the 8th November onwards it began to be evident that the Brahmins of Kalpathi were stiffening in their determination to oppose any entry that might be attempted. For reasons, however, which are known to Government, after the 8th November it became impossible on the one hand to oppose either by persuasion or by threat of executive action the presentation of the Brahmins or on the other hand to maintain towards the Arya Samajists the attitude that they would be protected in the event of their entering the *agraharam* and meeting with opposition."²⁸ In these circumstances, the Sub Divisional Magistrate found it necessary to inform the local representatives of Arya Samajt to minimize the tension that occurred in the region.

At the same time, he advised the Arya Samajist leaders to use their influence to dissuade their followers from attempting an entry during the car festival. The Samajist leaders though much disappointed tolled the Sub Divisional Magistrate that they would instruct their followers not to attempt an entry in the *agraharm* during the festival. Thus, there appeared to be very prospect of peaceful solution of the difficulty and it was believed that no necessity would arise for the issue of any prohibitory order. The next day, however, Pandit Rishi Ram, the local Arya Samaj leader, went to the Sub Divisional Magistrate and practically asked for an order under section under 144 C.P.C. His object apparently was to obtain material on which the base a public protest against the attitude which the officers of the government had taken in this matter. Realizing this Sub Divisional Magistrate suggested to Rishi Ram that his requirements might be met and the necessarily for an order under section 144 C.P.C. This proposal satisfied Rishi Ram, and once more, it was felt that no need for any magisterial order would arise. Subsequently, however information reached the Sub Divisional Magistrate that the Samajist leaders intended to go back on the assurance which they had previously given, and it was at this point that the Sub Divisional Magistrate acting in close consultation with the superintendent of police, decided to issue an order under section 144 C.P.C. The order was issued in the early morning of 13th and prohibited the entry into the Kalpathy *agraharam* during a period of four days of “*Ezhavas, Tiyyas, Panons, Cherumas, Parayas, Nayadies* and converts to the Arya Samajam from these classes of people”.²⁹

The public meeting of Cannore strongly condemns the attitude of the Brahmin and Government which they have taken against their own brethren in not allowing them a free passage on the roads and they are warned that disastrous results will follow if they continue this harmful policy, most harmful to religious practice. The resolution was moved by Sadhu Sivaprasad and supported by Achotha Achuthan.³⁰ In the Sub Divisional Magistrate’s report warned the government that the Muhammadans of the place, in their antipathy to the Arya Samaj were showing an inclination to range them on the side of the Brahmin opposition. Actually a few days later a certain local Muhammadans society issued a printed notice warning the Ezhavas against joining

the Arya Samaj, and at the last moment there was a reason to believe that certain Muhammadans rowdies were prepared, if necessary, to backup the Brahmin resistance with force. The fear of conversion to Hinduism from Islam may be the cause of disturbance in this occasion. The Arya Samajist's initiative in the social reform and their interest in *Sudhi Movement* caused protest from both Brahmins and Muslims. But large scale conversion to Hinduism was not the Arya Samaj programme in Kerala. If it happened so, it was not by the compulsion of the Arya Samajists but to escape from the social tyranny existed here. The number of persons had converted to Arya Samaj in Palakkad since August 1925 was about 70, Christian converts since November 1924 i.e., the time of last year's Chariot Festival, amount to 14 of whom one has since joined the Arya Samaj.³¹

After passing the emergency order under section 144 C.P.C, a meeting of protest was held at Palakkad. However, none of the leading men of the place took part in it. A slight disturbance occurred in the *agraharam* between some Arya Samajist and one or two local Brahmin; a Brahmin filed a complaint and the police had charged both parties. Until then the Arya Samajists had been using the street without any show of resistance being made.³²

The movement against untouchability and for social equality that occurred in Kalpathi is a landmark in the social history of Kerala. As a consequence of the nature and method adopted by the activists was not fully appreciated by the scholars this caused for arresting to reach consensus over the content of the movement so that different perspectives can be seen in the interpretations of the Kalpathy movement.³³ Even though the Arya Samajists took initiative in this matter, it had attracted popular attention all over Kerala. In addition, it was a fresh rendezvous into the case of depressed class. Nevertheless, except some rare archival documents; the importance of this movement has not been accounted properly in the history of the movements for social equality. Malabar, a direct ruled British region in Kerala, the social customs and tradition were more or less similar and controlled by the upper castes. Their attitude towards the common people was reactionary and suppressive. In

this context, without great courage and readiness to face the challenges such a movement would not been possible.

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Notes and Reference

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4. *Ibid.*
5. Jean Lue Nancy, *The Inoperative Communities*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990, p.vi
6. "Untouchability existed in a virulent form of unapproachability for some centuries. it is worthy of mention that the idea had infiltrated even among the wild jungle tribes like the Malampantarams, who though only in the hunting stage civilization considered that they were superior to the Parayas, the Pulayas, the Kuravas and the Pallars." see for more details L.A. Krishna Iyer, *Social History of Kerala*, Vol.I., p.62
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23. *Kalpathy Viswanatha Sawamy temple* is the oldest Siva temple in Malabar. It was build around first quarter of the fifteenth century by Kombi Achan, a local ruler of Palakkad. Legend has it that a Brahmin widow named Lakshmi Ammal went to Banaras and brought Siva Lingam (Phallus of Lord Siva) and installed in the present site on the southern bank of river Bharathapuzha. Hence this temple is called "Kasiyil Pakuthi Kalpathy" The three satellite temples (Upakshetras) in the village of new Kalpathy, old Kalpathy and Chathapuram also celebrate the festival this period. Kalpathi Ratholsavam (Kalpathy Chariot Festival) is an annual Hindu temple festival in the Kalpathy village of Palakkad district in Kerala state, south India. The festival is at the Sri Visalakshi Sametha Sri Viswanatha Swamy temple where the deities are Lord Siva (Lord Viswanatha) and his consort Visalakshi, another name for Parvati. The annual ten-day chariot festival conducted here during the month of November is one of the most remarkable festivals of Kerala. Vedic recitals and cultural programmes are held in the temple during the first four days of the festival. This is believed to be over 700 years old. On the last three days, thousands of devotees gather to draw decorated temple chariots through the streets.
24. Agraharam is a village or Tamil Brahmin settlement
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26. *Ibid.*
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28. *Ibid.*
29. *Letter from H.R. Pate*, District Magistrate to the Chief Secratory to the Government of Madras.
30. *Resolution No.2*, File No.82 Confidential Section Files
31. G.O.No.82 Confidential Section Files, Regional Archives, Kozhikode
32. *Ibid.*
33. See for more details Muhammed Ali T. 'In Service of the Nation: Relief and Reconstruction in Malabar in the wake of the Rebellion of 1921' in Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 68th session, New Delhi, 2007, pp789-805