

Social Reforms of Gowri Parvathi Bai

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Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai was recognized as Regent in 1815 A.D. Being very young, she was without any experience of the country and its affairs. The political and economic development of a country is mainly associated with the social system which prevails in society. The period of Rani Parvathi Bai was a breakthrough for the social transformation of Travancore. She was very eager to uplift society particularly the downtrodden people. She took necessary steps to abolish the oppressive taxes imposed on the oppressed people. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai made arrangements to this effect and every caste was to be treated according to their respective usages. Permission was given to Ezhavas, Shanars, and such other castes to inherit their property and to act according to their tradition. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai abolished unnecessary taxes. Free services rendered by the low caste people to the temples and the government called Oolium were abolished. She directly interfered to end caste rigidities and practices. She made reforms in almost all the fields. Therefore, Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai was undoubtedly called as one of the shining lights in the galaxy of India's ruling chiefs.

Keywords: Travancore, Downtrodden, Social Reforms and Rationalism.

Introduction

Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai was recognized as Regent in 1815 A.D. Being very young she was without any experience of the country and its affairs. The political and economic development of a country is mainly associated with the social system which prevails in society. Travancore had plunged into chaos and confusion in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The most important problem in the feudal structure was the division of society in terms of caste. The caste system in all its severity and rigidity divided the Hindu Society into several groups mutually hating and co-operating only to degrade the other. Its principles made a major section of the people mere slaves of the dominant or privileged classes.

Social Reforms

The caste Hindu predominance created a condition of general degradation causing social stagnation for centuries. The unprivileged or oppressed classes of the population composed of the Nadars, the Ezhavas, and the Parayas were kept by them in perennial subservience, poverty and ignorance. They were systematically excluded from all positions of power and were subjected to exploitation and humiliation. The establishment of political relations with the English East India Company was a turning point in the history of Travancore. The social order prevailing in Travancore at the beginning of the nineteenth century was favourable for the advent of the Protestant Missionaries. The arrival of Protestant Missionaries was a landmark in the history of Travancore. They ushered in a new era of thinking based on rationalism and liberalism. This endeavour certainly helped people to improve knowledge of the world and imbibe modern western ideas. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai was very eager to uplift society particularly the downtrodden people. The period of Rani Parvathi Bai was a breakthrough for the social transformation of Travancore.

Abolition of Oppressive Taxes

The whole system of taxation was arbitrary, unscientific, and barbarous in Travancore at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The burden of taxes mainly fell on the unprivileged classes, who suffered very much from the oppression of the government and the caste Hindus. With the advice of Col. Munro, Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai took necessary steps to abolish the oppressive taxes imposed on the oppressed people.

Poll Tax

The poll tax was one of the few taxes that helped the rulers of Travancore to fill the coffer of the state. It was a capitation tax first imposed in 1754, on the Nadars and the Ezhavas by Marthanda Varma to meet the increased expenditure of the military. The backward classes suffered under the pressure of a severe poll tax. The Nadars had to pay poll tax not only for those who were alive but also for the dead. Therefore, several Nadar families migrated to Tirunelveli to escape from the oppressive taxes. The tax collectors compelled the representatives of such migrated families to pay the tax. The amount of poll tax collected from the backward community was higher than that of the high caste people. Col. Munro took a keen interest in the matter and a proclamation was issued exempting the Christians from paying a poll tax. And also fresh incentive was to be given for the unprivileged classes to embrace the Christian religion. Generally, this benefit was conferred on all people belonging to backward communities. The proclamation also stated that everyone should be happy and prosperous without any grievance. And another proclamation was also issued by Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai permitting people to have tiled roofs for their houses.

Adiyara Tax

Adiyara was another tax paid to the king to wear ornaments. Ezhavas, Shanars, Washermen, Cavady, Mukkuvars, Parayas, and Pulayas had to pay this tax to the government. In 1815 a proclamation was issued to abolish the severe tax. According to the proclamation the

low caste people were, for the first time, allowed to use ornaments of gold and silver without paying the adiyara tax. This proclamation brought respect and relief to the people.

Shettupautam

A tax called Shettupautam was collected in the town plan department and surveyed by the district servants under the superintendent of the Revenue department. Col. Munro told the Rani that the town plan department collected the tax unjustly from the poor people. Many times they doubled the amount when they failed to pay the tax. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai issued an order to abolish the tax completely. Kuppakazhcha was a house tax. It was collected for each hut from Parayas, Pulayas and Shanars in the taluk of Thovalai. When they failed to pay the tax, the tax collectors severely punished the people and put wrong entries in their accounts. Weavers had to pay for their looms. In the event of the death of a weaver, his widow had to continue paying taxes of about a rupee per annum. Similarly, the tax was levied on oil mills, boats, nets, etc.

Gowri Parvathi Bai ordered the immediate abolition of unjust taxes. Thali Erai was a tax that married women were required to pay for the wedding. By this tax, the poor women were suffered much. Many times marriages were stopped because of the disability of the tax payment. Moreover, several taxes called Tallarah, Vallarah, Kallylacum, and Velapadivoo were levied upon the poor classes Ezhavas, Shanars, Washermen, Cavady, Mukkuvars, Parayas, and Pulayas. These taxes were collected under the names of Rupavaree, NillaVaree, and Ayyzurvaree. Rani Parvathi Bai felt that it was a major handicap in the development of a section of people of the state. So she issued a proclamation and cleared it for the good of the people and justice, noted that these taxes on the people hereby discontinued from this day with such arrears as were due up to the present date. This proclamation brought untold relief to the people.

In 1822 some heathens went to Kottanavilai congregation of Kadiapattanam asked the Christians to contribute some money to celebrate a festival to their village idols just as they were used to do before their conversion. Neethiyudayan and Yesudian at the head of all the Christians refused to pay the customary offerings to the idols. Thereupon the headman wanted them at least to pay some money as present to the newly appointed Kalalvisarippukaran. They further argued that such a present Visarippukaran would secure his special favour to exempt them from their usual services to the idols. The Christians did not accept this request. When the heathens found that the Christians were not inclined to heed even to their second request, the Visarippukaran tied Yovan, one of the Christians of Palankary to a tree and severely beat him and he forced him to write a Kychit (receipt written by hand) to pay tax for toddy or padani (sweet liquid from palm tree). The Christians thought that it was an act of violation of the orders of the Sirkar to collect tax.

The Rani issued an order that tax should be collected only from those who wished or chose to sell toddy or padani and not from those who took it for their use and also not to extort kychits from the people. Yovan was not able to bear the ill-treatment of the Visarippukaran who forced him to pay the tax. But the other two Christians Neethiyudayan and Yesudian were imprisoned for several weeks for not consenting to comply with the request of the enemies. Rev. Mead appealed to the court on the cause. The tribunal released the Christians and ordered them not to pay the tax to the heathens. The Nadar people were also forced to pay the tax regularly to the Government. Because they did not

have a suitable market to sell huge quantities of the produce of Padani, they had only very little income. The rulers of Travancore allowed these people to pay the various taxes in monthly installments.

When they had no money to pay taxes they were obliged to borrow from others and promised to pay them back when they got a good yield from padani. When the yield was uncertain they failed to pay back the money they got from the money lenders. But the money lenders tortured and punished them. When they failed to pay it back the Nadars appealed on the matter to Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai. The Queen ordered the tax collectors to collect the taxes only at the time of yield. By this order, the Nadars escaped from the torture of the money lenders. The Christian Missionaries had to pay tax for the mission lands to the government of Travancore. In 1821 the failure of crops especially those of Pattankulam and Vellamadam fields caused much trouble to Rev. Mead. In fact, since their purchase in 1818 these lands proved a source of loss rather than of profit to the mission. This loss was especially due to the enormous tax payable to the government. Rev. Mead suggested that these fields had to be placed on the same footing as the other mission lands which paid a small rent to the Sirkar. The Government placed these fields on the same footing as the grant fields in the matter of tax.

Right of Inheritance

The people who converted to Christianity were denied the right to inherit the property of their parents. It was permissible to the people who were not converted. Therefore, the Ezhavas and Shanars who had embraced Christianity petitioned for permission that their children should inherit their property. Her Highness Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai made arrangements to this effect and every caste was to be treated according to their respective usages. Permission was given to Ezhavas, Shanars, and such other castes to inherit their property and to act according to their tradition.

Abolition of Oolium Services

Oolium was one kind of feudal exaction prevailing in the state. The Government strictly enforced the feudal regulation and nobody was allowed to resist the authority of the state. The poor ryots according to the regulation had to supply provisions for the use of Oottupuras and temples and also to work free of the wage for the requirements of the palace, repair of roads, etc. During temple festivals, they were expected to do Oolium for the temples. And then they were expected to bring firewood for Oottupuras. These services demanded from the people indicated the state of civilization in the country which afforded the least opportunity for lower classes to live a decent life. Many belonging to the depressed classes became converts to Christianity on the ground that under the European Missionary they need not serve the government and were at liberty to refuse the age-old obligation of Oolium. The converted Christians began to revolt against the government by disobeying the rules and not going for Oolium Services. Ringletaube received several complaints about these services and this caused him great trouble.

He represented the matter to the government to exempt the Christians from Oolium service. In 1816 Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai issued a proclamation. According to that order the Mappolaymars and Margagars were given much relief. Everyone under that domination was

exempted from Sirkar Oolium duties and not called upon to furnish provisions, to the Pagoda public victualling houses. Such of the Mappolaymars and Margagars who held viruthi lands were alone to be called upon to perform. In consequence of the Proclamation, the Mappolaymars who held viruthi lands refused to perform Oolium duties. Dewan Venkata Rao wrote about the matter to Resident Col. Munro who asked Dewan to write to the Vicar general of Veerapoly. The Dewan received their answers stating that Mappolaymars holding viruthi lands ought to perform Oolium duties. If they were not inclined to do so, they arranged for others to do the duties. Consequently, on receipt of this order, a particular list of those who were unwilling to do the duties was sent to the Huzur court.

Finally, the court gave orders to abolish the Oolium service. Col. Munro published an order that no one should take any of Protestant Christian subjects for doing any duties relating to Pagodas and temples. Yet the Christians had petitioned to Rani Parvathi Bai upon their grievances. They said that they were compelled by the Sirkar officers to do free duties. Rani Parvathi Bai granted permission to every people to live according to their religion. And Christians should not be constrained to do free duties related to the Sirkar works. This exemption of the Christians from Oolium service brought many non-Christians to come to the fold of Christianity. And also the proclamation stated that Christians were exempted from any kind of Oolium to the government and the temples. Moreover, Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai declared that the officers should oblige those Christians who had obtained freehold lands did duties as the others of the same work. But if they were unwilling to do so, Tahsildars took certificates from them and sent both the certificates and the men to the Huzur Court.

Their lands were taken from them and were given to others who were willing to do their duties. Subsequently, another proclamation was issued by Gowri Parvathi Bai in 1818. It completely exempted every person who was a Christian convert from all duties connected with heathen temples. In the event of anything contrary to this proclamation happened the religious heads of all the denominations were instructed to report the matter to the concerned Col. Munro, Resident of Travancore, who asked the Most Rev. Mar Thoma Metran Vicar General of Veerapoly to inform anything contrary to the Proclamation immediately. The Brahmins themselves were divided into several groups in the early days. Of them, Nambuthiri Brahmins or Malayali Brahmins were the most powerful. Next to the Nambuthiri Brahmins were the Pothis and Tamil Brahmins. They enjoyed almost all the privileges and perquisites enjoyed by the Nambuthiris.

The King or Queen invited the Brahmins and entertained them with free feasts and gifts after a long prayer by the Brahmins. During Murajebam⁵⁶ festivals all were equally feasted. Even at other times, no Brahmin was allowed to starve. The word Murajebam signifies a course of prayer. 'Mura' literally means a course of recitation, each taking eight days to go through. Jebam means prayer of chanting of Vedic hymns. For the special benefit of the Brahmins Ottupuras or feeding houses were set up attached to temples in different parts of the state and any Brahmin inclined to accept a free meal could go there and appease his hunger. The Christians were compelled by the government officials and the high caste people to do free duties in the feeding houses. People complained about it to Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai. An order was issued that Christians need not do duties in the feeding houses. The Sirkar officials were strictly warned by Gowri Parvathi Bai and said if they compelled them to do so, the

officials would be severely punished.

Conclusion

The social reforms thus established by Parvathi Bai enhanced the social status of women in Travancore. She directly interfered to end caste rigidities and practices. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai was undoubtedly the shining light in the galaxy of India's ruling chiefs. She belonged to that select group of women who not only had visions and dreams but also strove valiantly to realize them. She was neither impetuous in action nor unpractical in the policy. She planned wisely, executed bravely, loved greatly, and in turn and was dearly loved. She was in every inch a queen imbued with the noble endeavor. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai abolished unnecessary taxes. Several taxes imposed on the Native Christians were also reduced. Free services rendered by the low caste people to the temples and the government called Oolium were abolished. Queen Gowri Parvathi Bai spent most of the time on the development of the state. She made reforms in almost all the fields. The support of the Rani to women to use upper garments was responsible to bring about certain changes like equality and freedom in social life. Her kindly consideration about over-taxation helped the people to improve economically and socially in their life.

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