

## The Social Background of the Depressed Classes in Kerala in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Dr. S. AMBILI

Assistant Professor,

Department of History,

N.S.S Hindu College, Changanassery, Kottayam, Kerala, India.

*In the early decades of the 20th century, Kerala was under the grip of feudalism and various social evils. The caste - ridden Hindu society was broadly divided into two- the Savarnas who enjoyed all privileges and the Avarnas who were denied all privileges. The Avarnas were treated as untouchables. The Avarnas were subjected to all sorts of social discriminations and humiliations. The restrictions imposed and the segregation maintained for the Avarnas were so odious that Swami Vivekananda was prompted to comment upon Kerala as 'lunatic asylum'. As Prof. T. K. Ravindran put it "The whole of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th centuries were marked by a series of relentless social contests, sometime peaceful at times violent against a long array of social disabilities which beset the like of the lower castes in this tiny state. The most degrading of this disability sprang from the evils of untouchability, un approachability and unsuitability of the exterior castes which were practiced with fanatical rigour unknown in other parts of India. "The pulayyas, parayyas and kuravayas were considered as the most backward classes in the community whose touch and physical presence had been considered to carry pollution (Thindal- the colloquial word used widely at that time) both to the caste Hindus as well as the deities in the temples.*

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### Introduction

Their presence within a prescribed distance caused pollution to a caste Hindu. The prescribed limit also varies in accordance with the ranking of castes on pollution. The pulaya had to keep a distance of 60 feet from the Nair while the Namboothiri would consider himself polluted even if he is seen by a pulaya or Nayadi. The failure on the part of the members of the lower castes to make way for those of the higher would have invited even the death penalty. The upper castes (Savarnas) like the Brahmins, the Nair's etc. enjoyed several immunities and privileges which were denied to the lower castes. Consequently, the non-caste Hindus had not been allowed to use the roads within a certain distance from the temples and houses of caste-Hindus. Tindal was observed even among the lower castes. There was gradation among them too and higher among them observed pollution at the approach of lower ones.

The pulayas suffered much from the community. The conditions of the pulayas in the 19th century continued to be very miserable. The pulayas and other scheduled castes who observed pura or pollution formed 10.1% of the Hindu population of Travancore as per 1910 census. They were farmers from time immemorial and they are not addicted to any of the untidy habit attributed to the chandalas by the Dharmasastras. As early as the 11th century they were engaged in agricultural labour as testified to by an inscription in the Parthivasekharapuram Temple in South Travancore.

While British Malabar they are more generally known as cherumar meaning a short- sized people. Despite the numerical strength of the pulayas or cherumars, the caste Hindus denied many of the basic social rights like freedom to enter roads, schools, offices, temples and other public places until recently.<sup>4</sup> In some parts of Kerala, the term cheruman was applied to slaves in general but in some other parts it was a synonym for pulaya. According to Buchanan, the pulayas were divided into different clans, but all these could eat together and intermarry. According to William Logan, the divisions among them were of a basic nature and the pollution rules which related to them also were different.

The social reformer Ayyankali found that his community was in the lower rank of the social order in name of religion and caste and receiving much humiliation in the social, educational, economic and religious life of the country. They had no right for going education and right to enter in the public roads. They were also disallowed to possess and, wear gold and silver ornaments and construct houses with bricks and tiles. They had to keep prescribed distances from the higher castes. They also had to observe untouchability and unapproachability, may even unsuitability. In Kerala the pulayas were mortgaged. The word pulaya is 'polluted men' and expresses the idea of caste impurity. The Pulayas were considered as slaves in the community.

The pulayas are small and short in stature, and dark in complexion due to much exposure in field work. Their women are smaller still mostly quite diminutive and very plain looking but a few of them are passable looking when young Bunches and strings of beads being worn around. Their dwellings were in small huts, stick woods, reels of bamboo, mud, grass or coco-leaf were the raw materials used for the construction of huts. Most of their huts were found by the sides of the rice swamps. The pulaya women were forbidden to wear the gold or silver ornaments. They also had no right to cover their breast. To cover their bosom with cloth is forbidden, in order to the easy recognition and avoidance of the lower castes by their masters. This rule of going uncovered above the waist as a mark of respect to superiors is carried thought all grades of society, except the Brahmans.

Each caste and class had its own-ornaments and style of dress, differing in the upper part of the body only and silver, as being less honorable on the lower members. Pulayas could only wear brass, and Hill people, Vedas, Kuravars etc. and a large number of strings of glass beads around the neck and hanging on the breast. The low caste people who wished to present petitions were thus kept away from the court and were made to stand day after day in the hot sun, their beads not being permitted to be covered, or they were exposed to merciless rain until by some chance they come to be discovered, or the Thahasildar was pleased to call for the petition.

Slavery was another evil which prevailed in Kerala. Slavery as a universal social evil had

its origin in time immemorial and it had its proponents and defendants throughout the world<sup>7</sup>. There were several factors contributing to the emergence of this vile system. In the early stages of human life, slavery might have had its crude inception owing to the unconscious application of the rule of the State of Nature where might alone was right.

In India the origin of slavery was closely associated with the inception of the caste-system which in turn was based on hierarchical social order. The terms Jati (caste) and Varna (Colour) were used as synonyms. The whole structure was given a religious background and holy grab mainly there were two varnams viz, Mukhyavarnam and Avantaravarnam. According to Indian tradition there were four castes viz, Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. The first three constituted the Mukhyavarnam and the last group was included in the Avantharavarnam.<sup>8</sup>

A notable feature of caste system was the legal sanction given to the men of 'superior' castes for intermingling with the low castes women. For instance, a Brahman could approach Kshatriya women and the Kshatriya likewise could go to a vaisya woman and the Vaisya, again, to a sudra women. In Travancore there were several slave classes like the Pulayas, Parayas, Vettuvons etc.; but the first constituted the bulk of the total slave population. In Kerala a curious system prevailed which endangered very these-called highest castes and reduced them to slavery.

The first step towards the emancipation of the lot of the slave castes was adopted by Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Ruler of Travancore in 1812 A.D. By issuing a proclamation she abolished transaction on slave castes like the Pulayas, Parayas, Kuravas, Malayars, and Vedas etc. But slavery as a social institution still continued. The Travancore Maharaja Uttram Tirunal was forced to issue a proclamation, abolishing slavery in 1853. Subsequently in 1855 another proclamation was issued rectifying the deficiencies and loopholes that had crept into the previous proclamation.

But abolition of slavery by a proclamation alone could not bring any security to the slave castes. Their disabilities, in almost all walks of life, continued unabated. For, instance, they were disallowed entry in public market, public roads, judicial courts etc. It was under this backs that Divan Ramiengar issued a circular in 1884 for entering the lower caste people in all public places. But proclamations and circular of this kind could not bring any substantial change in the plight of the aggrieved communities.

Pulapedi was another feature found in the Kerala society in the 19th centuries. Pulapedi kalam (the period of the pulaya terror) was a nightmare to the high caste ladies. During this period (February and March) if a pulaya met a sudra woman, he might seize her and she would lose her caste as well as the connections with her relatives. This kind of terror was in "the month of Karkadakam (15th July to 15th August) during which high caste women may lose caste if a slave happens to throw a stone at them after sunset". Mateer has recorded the practice of high caste women, being taken away by the low caste men, by which action the women forfeited their caste.

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If a pulaya wanted to marry, he had to convey his desire to his master, who, however, was bound to meet the expenses connected with the marriage. A pulaya could not view the paraya on an equal footing but the latter thought that he was superior to the pulaya. The Nayadis who were the lowest of the castes would not partake of the food prepared by the pulaya and paraya. A noticeable feature of the pollution rules of slave classes was their inability to take revenge on or punish those who transgressed the established boundaries of such customs. If a slave had any grievance, he might purify himself by taking a bath that was all that he could do. In the relation with the castes, the violation of such rules by slaves was always followed by severe punishments.

The traditional socio-economic life was seriously affected by the arrival of European Trading Companies and the Missionaries were interested primarily in protecting their trade interests their work indirectly gave encouragement to the resistance movement of the lower castes. The conversion of lower castes to Christianity was the first challenge that the Hindu society had faced after the arrival of the Europeans. T.K. Velu Pillai wrote, "The first step at ameliorating their condition was due to the spread of Christianity was the first challenge that the Hindu society had faced after the arrival of the Europeans."<sup>12</sup>

Once the members of the lower caste renounced their religion, the disabilities attached to their former status vanished. The missionaries were always to their side to espouse their cause and it was chiefly through their instrumentality that they secured many of the concessions. Which were denied to their Hindu brethren of the same caste.<sup>13</sup> More over they were keen on providing the necessary educational facilities to the backward classes as a first step towards their social uplift.

The caste Hindus, however, viewed with considerable suspicion the social reformatory measures of the missionaries. Christianity made rapid progress with the socially backward classes. The caste Hindus especially the Nairs feared that the spread of Christianity would destroy the caste system and along with it their political power and influence.

In other words, they were unable to tolerate the social changes and the progress of the suppressed people. Hence even to enjoy the small doses of social reforms, the depressed classes had to face the challenges posed by the caste Hindus. "Monstrous inequalities and unjust laws and hampering practices had to be attacked and removed from the path of life". The missionaries attacked caste system and agrestic slavery which restricted the socio-economic mobility of the lower castes. The lower castes who were anxious to get rid of caste rules with the encouragement of missionaries violated the caste rules."

The Government of Travancore prohibited the sale and purchase of slaves abolished poll tax from different castes and removed restrictions imposed on wearing dress, ornaments and construction of houses. The converts were also exempted from doing compulsory labour. The non-caste Hindus except the agrestic slaves were to any kind of work they liked. The lower-class people were very highly suffered from the higher caste Hindu. The Avarnas could not enter into the temples of the Savarnas. The Avarnas could not reach the temple roads. This was the

condition of the Avarnas during the 19th century. It was this historic mission that was silently fulfilled by the saint and social reformer of Kerala Sree Narayana Guru (1856-1928). Born in an avarna caste, the Guru by virtue of his learning and peace had philosophical and logical solution to all social problems of his time. Drew inspiration from the works of Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, born in an avarna caste, made his efforts for the uplift of the down trodden people of Kerala. His works were for the uplift of the pulayas. The leadership that was filled by Ayyankali whom Gandhiji delineated as the “Raja of the Pulayas”.

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