

---

## Ayyankali as a Dalit Leader

Dr. S. PRATHIKA

Assistant professor in History  
Sree Ayyappa College for Women,  
Chunkankadai.

*The emergence of Ayyankali as a leader of 'lower' castes of Travancore, a princely state of south Kerala, during the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is a land mark in the social history of Kerala. The first ever reformer that the Kerala society produced from the Dalit society was Ayyankali. He was the first Dalit revolutionary who organised the untouchable masses and fought for their human dignity and rights. As a youth he started his rebellion against ban on the entry into public streets by the Dalits. From there he moved on physically organizing the untouchable masses. He succeeded in facing the rash of the Kerala upper castes and in achieving at least some basic rights of the poor and untouchable masses that society. He more important given to education also. He demanded in the assembly that government schools should be thrown open to the Dalit children. The government was slow to move in this direction but it was not totally indifferent to his aspirations. He was changing the social structure of Dalit people.*

Keywords: Dalit, Rebel, Legislative and Children.

### Introduction

Even during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the living conditions of the Dalits in Travancore had not undergone any fundamental change. The powers had always squeezed and extracted the labour of the Dalits whose bonds with the soil went back to several centuries. These sons of the soil were always at the bottom of the social hierarchy during both the colonial and pre-colonial times, never acquiring material resources or power. Consequently, they could never gain economic or social status.

Though the Dalits were the primary producers in agriculture they had no rights over the land. The public sphere formed in Kerala during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century raised its voice against caste and social inequalities.

These voices of dissent came primarily from the upwardly mobile middle class of the Ezhavas, Syrian Christians, and Nairs. They strived hard to create public opinion for the protection of their vested interests. The articulators of the public sphere were not even ready to consider the Dalits as a part of the entity called 'public'. Consequently, Dalits could not find representation in the emerging public sphere nor generate public opinion. It was in such a situation that Ayyankali became the Dalit voice of rebellion in the social milieu of Kerala.

### Early life of Ayyankali

Ayyankali was born to Ayyan and Mala on August 1863 in Venganoor, a small village 13km north of Thiruvananthapuram. He was the eldest of eight children. His father Ayyan was the Adiyalan of Panangott Ottilathu Parameswaran Pillai and would spend all his time for his Janmi (landlord). In appreciation of his loyalty, Parameswaran Pillai benevolently gave five acres of land to him, and thus Ayyan could lead relatively a better life than most other Pulayars. Yet, he too persuaded his children to engage in agriculture.

Since his childhood he had experienced its brutalities firsthand and this made him think about subjugation made him take a stand against the oppressors, especially against the powerful nairs. Ayyankali had the boldness to face any type of threat from the caste-Hindus. This boldness and courage earned him many friends from his own caste. He made use of this small band of friends and created a 'public sphere' among the Pulayar youth.

At the end of a day's job, Ayyankali and his friends would gather a public place and spend their time singing folk songs of social protest and dancing to it. Because he was an energetic, bold youth Ayyankali became highly popular among his friends within a short time- span. They called him Urpillai or Moothapillai with respect. In 1888, Ayyankali married Chellamma, with whom he had seven children.

#### Ayyankali Pada

Ayyankali behaved like a rebel. He organized a group of Pulayar young men and wandered about with them. Whenever they got an opportunity to attack, challenge or threaten the 'upper' castes they did it well. Ayyankali even invited Asans from outside of Venganoor to provide martial training to his men. Thus, he formed a small group of energetic youth who were ready to take any risk and bear the consequences for the sake of their people. They were popularly known as Ayyankali Pada.

### Villuvandi Violation

A notable event of his early social activism was his forceful entry into the caste-Hindu 'public sphere'. The 'lower' castes and the Dalits were denied entry into public roads and streets that were reserved for the 'upper' castes. Anybody violating this caste code (jatimaryada) was punished severely. In such a social milieu, Ayyankali wilfully violated this diktat in 1893 by travelling through a public road in a Villuvandi (bullock cart) that was used only by the upper castes. The act of a Pulayar buying a Villuvandi was in itself a violation of the social codes of his time. One morning he set off from his home in the Villuvandi. Nairs came to know that Ayyankali was traveling by a new cart and he was dressed like a Nair at the time of his entry into the public road.

This irritated the Nairs because dress was a powerful signifier of the jati identity. Some furious Nair men tried to block his cart but those detractors ran away when he jumped out of the cart with a dagger in his hand. Thus, he continued his historical journey through all the 'forbidden' roads and returned home. Moreover, he could redefine the Dalit body in the changed social

milieu of 19<sup>th</sup> century. This shows the immense influence enjoyed by the rebellious ideas of Ayyankali and its widespread welcome and success among the downtrodden masses. The Establishment of the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam: (sjjj)

The formation of the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, the Nair Service Society, the Namboodiri Yogakema Sabha and the Muhammodiya Sabha influenced Ayyankali. The Ezhava movement or the eloquent speeches and humanitarian activities of a lower caste organisation named Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam (SJPS), on the model of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. The Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam (SJPS) was formed under Ayyankali's leadership in 1907.

The organization was not meant for any single caste but it unified all depressed servile people (sadhu janam). Thus, Ayyankali was successful in creating a platform for the Dalits for the first time. Ayyankali established the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam with a view of activating his community to seek the path of progressive change and reform. He enlisted some began the first step towards the social emancipation of his brethren.

There were violent clashes on several occasions but Ayyankali was bent upon putting an end to the obsolescent practice of social discrimination. The militant attitude of this fearless fighter had telling effect, and the case Hindus were forced to move in accordances with the social change of the time.

The Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam also played an important role in the contemporary social movements. The SJPS and its activities can be considered the genesis of the emergence of modern Dalit consciousness in Kerala. But after the death of Ayyankali, there were differences of interest among his followers, which invited split in the organisation.

This led to the formation of the Pulayar Maha Sabha, Cheramar Sangham, Ahakrita Varga league and the like. The SJPS brought solidarity among the depressed castes and unified them under the title of *sadhu janam* their welfare. One of the first things that Ayyankali achieved through the Sangam was the enforcement of six-day work in a week for the untouchables, a revolutionary step in those days.

Ayyankali as a member of legislative assembly

Ayyankali political career as a member of the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly. Owing to the efforts of Ayyankali, the Pulayas and other backward classes became conscious of their political and civil rights. In recognition of Ayyankali leadership as a virulent social activist, he was nominated to the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly by the Travancore Government.

As a member of the Assembly, Ayyankali incessantly demanded measures for the uplift of the Dalits. He entered the popular assembly of Travancore with the intention of submitting a long list of demands drafted and signed by the members of the SJPS.

The list contained demands such as right to obtain and possess land, due share in the government entry into schools, and prohibition of social evils such as untouchability, unapproachability, unseeability and slavery, apart from securing the right to enter public offices, courts etc.

Ayyankali stated that the real cultivator should be the real owner of the land. Ayyankali was the first leader among the social reformers and political thinkers in Kerala, who raised the slogan 'land for the tillers.

As a result of endeavours, various backward communities organized under their own caste organizations and demanded political and civil rights. In contemporary Kerala, untouchability and unapproachability have practically disappeared. The Dalits are enjoying freedom of worship. Special protection is afforded to them to come up in the social scale. They have been completely freed from the caste restrictions of the past. By availing themselves of those opportunities, the Dalits have slowly, but steadily, come up. His efforts did not go unrewarded. The government very often took a lenient attitude towards his demands and suggestions.

### The Ayyankali led struggle for Education

Even though Ayyankali was an uneducated leader among the Pulayas, he knew that education was a deciding factor for the development of the social progress of the Dalits. Ayyankali decided to put forward the SJPS demand for the right to education. He gave importance to the struggle to acquire the right to education because modern education was the passport to enter into the public sphere that dominated by educated 'upper' castes. Ayyankali with the support of the SJPS, led a number of agitations to gain the right to education and to make the Dalits also benefit because of the liberal space created by colonial modernity.

Dalits had to undergo several challenges from the 'upper' castes in order to attain these goals. Soon after the government order of 1910 that provided for the education of the Dalits, Ayyankali went to Uruttambalam School in Balaramapuram seeking admission for Panchami, daughter of Poojari Ayyan. But the headmaster was not willing to admit her. This led to clashes between the Pulayars and Nairs which escalated into a major riot.

The Nairs set fire to Pulayar homes, took away their livestock, molested the Pulayar women and inflicted injuries on the men. Even the Ezhavas joined hands with the caste Hindus against the Dalits. Almost as a culmination of the riot, the Uruttambalam School was set afire. The riot spread to nearby places such as Marayamuttam, Venganoor, Perumbazhathur, Kunnathukal and so on. These struggles for human rights were rendered in the state manuals and historical records as the "Pulaya riots". Finally, his hard work so many schools were permit to Dalit people. The number of Pulayar children going to school had almost 60% increase within a year. He also important given to Women Education also.

### Conclusion

In the concluding the whole work of Ayyankali is evaluated. The impact of Ayyankali's work is felt throughout Kerala. He was the source of inspiration for the Millions of Dalits was a symbol of institution for a social equality. He was the Great Son of India who dedicated his whole life for social virtue. He was so great that he could not be compressed within the limits of Kerala. Even today, his ideas and activities have much relevance than before. He was not only the leader of the untouchable but also uncompromising commander-in-chief of the struggle of the labouring classes.

---

He was the most progressive and powerful leader among the great leaders of that time. Ayyankali created a situation which made the Dalits to get access to education. Education being the road to progress, he gave due importance to this aspect and won the battle after sustaining many set-backs he tried to inject a sense of self respect among them, and the educated youth were the first to relies it. The leadership and initiative of Ayyankali, and the whirl wind campaign that the undertook for the social elevation and modernization of the Dalit community, are core factors in the social history of Kerala.

#### Reference

- Abhimanyu, C. *Ayyankali (biography) (Mal)*TVM.,1990.
- Chentharassery, *T.H.P. Ayyankali (biography) (Mal)*TVM.,1979.
- Chentharassery, *T.H.P. Ayyankali The First Dalit Leader, TVM.*,2005.
- Dalit Bandu, N.K. Jose. *Ayyankali Oru Padanam Samagrapadanam (Mal)*, Kottayam, 1989.
- Kusuman, K.K. *Slavery in Travancore*, TVM.,1973.
- Kumaran, M.K. *Sree Narayana Guru Prabhavam (Mal)*, Varkala, 1978.
- Nisar and MeenaKandasamy. *Ayyankali A Dalit leader of Organic Protest.*
- Pattom G. Ramanchandran Nair. *Tiruvananthapurathinde Ithihasam*, TVM.1996.
- Peter Rob. *Dalit Movements and the meanings of labour in India*, Delhi, 1993.
- Rajaopal. *Ayyankaliyude Charithra Prasakthi (Mal)*, Kottayam,1994.