

Community Organizations for Self-Improvement

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ABSTRACT

The cultural history of Kerala is significantly influenced by the first quarter of the century. During this period, numerous communities that have been classified as underprivileged for centuries established community organizations to facilitate self-improvement. Thus, the period was reinforced by the social progress that was attained. Sree Narayana Guru could be regarded as a mentor for these communal organizations. In 1903, he established the SNDP in recognition of the necessity for a communal organization for Ezhavas, who had endured social disabilities for centuries. All other communities were stimulated by this organization and its activities. Mannath Padmanabhan acknowledges this and asserts that the Ezhava community's status was elevated by the SNDP and its activities, which in turn facilitated the establishment of other communal organizations. In a brief period of time, a variety of caste organizations were established. That is, in 1907, Ayyankali established the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam for untouchables. In 1909, the Yogakshema Sabha was established for Namboothiris. In 1910, K. Kelappan established the Vela Samudaya Parishkarana Sabha in Thevara. Krishnathi Ashan established the Pulaya Sanghadana, and Mannath Padmanabhan organized the NSS. The rigorous maintenance of certain ascribed statutes and roles is the result of the observance of a rigid caste hierarchy. This hierarchy served as the foundation for economic access, educational opportunity,

rituals, political authority, and so forth.

INTRODUCTION

By the late 19th century, a significant resurgence occurred among the majority of caste groups in Kerala. The colonial mobilization of caste communities provided the impetus for their self-reform. The mobilizations mostly involved the Ezhavas and other marginalized groups in Kerala, specifically the so-called Avarnas. Notable reform movements of this nature were begun by Narayana Guru, Ayyankali, and others. Nonetheless, the involvement of the in these reform movements was limited; although, the contributions of Mannath Padmanabhan and V. T. Bhattathiripad are very commendable. The initial half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of numerous social reform initiatives in Kerala. The caste reform movements and community formation have positioned caste as a historical injustice in modern Kerala. A considerable number of upper caste and middle-class individuals were endeavoring to resurrect traditional practices in response to the challenges posed by Western religions and modernity.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The cultural history of Kerala is significantly influenced by the first quarter of the century. During this period, numerous communities that have been classified as underprivileged for centuries established community organizations to facilitate self-improvement. Thus, the period was reinforced by the social progress that was attained. Sree Narayana Guru could be regarded as a mentor for these communal organizations. In 1903, he established the SNDP in recognition of the necessity for a communal organization for Ezhavas, who had endured social disabilities for centuries. All other communities were stimulated by this organization and its activities. Mannath Padmanabhan acknowledges this and asserts that the Ezhava community's status was elevated by the SNDP and its activities, which in turn facilitated the establishment of other communal organizations. In a brief period of time, a variety of caste organizations were established. That is, in 1907, Ayyankali established the Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam for untouchables. In 1909, the Yogakshema Sabha was established for Namboothiris. In 1910, K. Kelappan established the Vela Samudaya Parishkarana Sabha in Thevara. Krishnathi Ashan established the Pulaya Sanghadana, and Mannath Padmanabhan organized the NSS. The rigorous maintenance of certain ascribed statutes and roles is the result of the observance of a rigid caste hierarchy. This hierarchy served as the foundation for economic access, educational opportunity, rituals, political authority, and so forth.¹

Sree Narayana Guru (1856 -1928)

Sree Narayana Guru, the first revolutionary leader to voice out against the caste system, was born in Chembazhanthi, Thiruvananthapuram, to Maadan Ashan and Kuttiamma. Vayalvarathu Veedu is the name of his residence. He was referred to as Nanu, despite the fact that his parents had named him Narayanan. Krishnan Vaidyan, his father and uncle, instructed him in Sanskrit and Ayurveda. From a young age, he was a man of faith. Karunagappally Raman Pillai Ashan was the source of the higher education in Sanskrit. Additionally, he served as a teacher for Sanskrit school and 'Kudi pallikoodams'. Henceforth, referred to as Nanu ashan. When Guru encountered ChattampiSwamikal, they formed a profound rapport. Narayana Guru acquired yoga knowledge under ThycaudAyya, as per Kunjan Pillai Chattampi. Narayana Guru even regarded ChattampiSwamikal as his elder sibling and teacher.

The dictum of Sri Narayana guru was that, 'one religion, one caste, one god'.ⁱⁱ He felt compelled to establish a shrine to pray for the impoverished in society who have been denied the right of worship. In 1888, on a Shivaratri day, he erected a Shiva shrine on the banks of the river at Aruvikkara. This constituted a revolution in the social history of Kerala. In response to those who challenged the right of an Ezhava individual to consecrate a deity's image, he asserted that he consecrated Ezhava Shiva. Consequently, he became known as Narayana Guru Swami. He inscribed "Jathibhedam" on the walls of the Aruvippuram temple. MathadveshamEthumillathe Sarvarum SodarathvenaVazhunnaMathrikasthanamanith. The lines indicate that this is an exemplary location where individuals coexist without distinctions of caste or religion. Narayana Guru subsequently dedicated numerous temples around Kerala, with notable ones including those in Varkala, Thalasseri, Kannur, Mangalapuram, Kozhikode, and Thrissur. He recognized the necessity for an organization to enhance the secular and spiritual lives of Ezhavas; hence, with Dr. Palpu's backing, he established the temple committee at Aruvippuram, naming it Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam. SNDP was registered on May 15, 1903. In these circumstances, he stated that "Vidya KonduSankhadanaKonduShaktharakuka," which translates to 'to achieve independence via education and to gain strength through organizations.' During that period, numerous social injustices such as Thalikkettukalyanam, polygamy, polyandry, Thirandukuli, and Pulikudi prevailed. The financial burdens of these ceremonies severely undermined the economic status of the common populace, prompting social reformers to prioritize their abolition as a fundamental responsibility. Guru regarded the temples and SNDP organization as instruments for social reform. The enlightenment fostered by the SNDP organization among the Ezhava community inspired leaders from other communities. Guru allowed

individuals from the Avarna community, such as Pulayas and Parayas, to access the temples and schools he established.ⁱⁱⁱ

Narayana Guru, who dedicated numerous temples, is reported to have ceased the construction of temples, advocating instead for schools to serve as temples and for information to be disseminated to foster development. The S. N. Thrust was developed based on specific criteria, leading to the formation of different educational institutions, including schools and colleges, throughout Kerala. S. N. Thrust plays a significant part in the educational advancement of Kerala. He was born during an era characterized by pervasive racism. The era saw Avarnas or the underprivileged as inferior. They were prohibited from entering temples or engaging in worship. They were prohibited from approaching Savarna or making contact with them. His participation in the Vaikom Satyagraha invigorated the volunteers of the movement. He received special recognition from Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore recounts the visit of the Guru, stating, "I have been touring various regions of the world." Throughout my travels, I have had the privilege of encountering numerous saints and Maharshis. I must candidly acknowledge that I have never encountered someone spiritually superior to Swamy Narayana Guru of Malayalam, nor anyone who matches his spiritual accomplishments. Sree Narayana Guru's significant contribution is in his provision of moral leadership to formulate and execute the universal ideology of humanity in Kerala.

Ayyankali (1863-1941)

Ayyankali, the preeminent leader of the Harijans and a prominent advocate for social reforms in Kerala, was born into a Pulaya family in Venganoor, Thiruvananthapuram, as the son of Ayyan and Mala. Having witnessed the enduring miseries and societal injustices faced by a disadvantaged community, he resolved that change was imperative. In 1905, he established the SadhujanaParipalana Sangham, an organization aimed at unifying and implementing community-based projects for the Pulaya community. This organization was influenced and guided by the Sanathana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, established under the direction of Sree Narayana Guru in 1903. During that period, Harijans were prohibited from use public transportation. Ayyankali initially addressed this inequity as a social reformer. A group of Pulaya adolescents from nearby areas staged a demonstration in a public space. This revolutionary occurrence at that time encouraged social awakening and unity among the Harijans. Ayyankali derived his inspiration from Narayana Guru.^{iv}

This organization primarily advocated for the right to access educational institutions. Ayyankali's primary motto advocated for the accessibility of education to the impoverished, despite his own denial

of formal educational opportunities. In his words: AdhasthitharkkuVidhyabhyasamAbhigamyamakuka. In 1908, an order was secured from the Maharaja permitting the disabled to enroll in the school, following numerous appeals for this initiative. Dewan Rajagopalachari's positive position on this matter had a considerable influence. However, the Savarna responsible for managing the schools were unwilling to accept Avarnas into the institution. This injustice compelled Ayyankali to rebel against it immediately. Their strike involved the cessation of agricultural labor. Initially, Savarna resisted it; nevertheless, they subsequently became amenable to compromise. Access to schools was authorized. Pulaya women advocated for the abolition of kallumala as a caste practice. The upper classes have vehemently opposed these societal developments. During a time when Harijans were prohibited from wearing sandals and white attire, he advocated for the right to education. Ultimately, due to his persistent endeavors, the government was compelled to acquiesce to Ayyankali's demands in 1914. Ayyankali gained prominence in Travancore as the unequivocal leader of the Harijans. He received a nomination to the Sree Moolam Praja Sabha in 1910. He occupied that post for 25 years. He made several efforts to improve the conditions of Harijans.^v Ayyankali is a prominent social reformer who campaigned against the social injustices that have plagued Kerala society for ages. Ayyankali and the SadhujanaParipalana Sangham significantly advanced social change in Kerala by fostering an environment conducive to the temple entry proclamation and advocating for proportionality in bureaucratic appointments and parliamentary representation.

V. T. Bhattathiripad (1896-1982)

Yogakshema Sabha is the organization established for the welfare of the Nambudiri community. Despite occupying the highest caste and landlord class, the people faced numerous difficulties. In contrast to other cultures where disabilities were imposed externally, the Nambudiris put disabilities onto themselves. The community's distress stemmed from the unique familial structure of the Nambudiris in Kerala. The marriage arrangement permitted only the eldest men of the family to wed women from their own community, while the remaining men might engage in Sambandham relationships with women from other Savarna castes.

In this context, the number of men eligible to marry Namboothiri women diminished, resulting in an increase of unmarried girls within Namboothiri families. This created a scenario in which older males may marry multiple women, regardless of the age disparity. A 60-year-old guy could enter into his third or fourth marriage with a girl aged 14 or 15. It has been observed that when parents were unable to finalize their daughter's marriage, they resorted to taking her to other locations and selling her. Despite

marrying and moving to their husband's residence, the women experienced little change in their lives, as they were confined inside the confines of their husband's household. Many ladies became widows at a young age due to the advanced age of their husbands. The plight of Namboothiri women was largely uniform, regardless of their marital status—unmarried, married, or widowed—most women found themselves in a dire predicament. The situation of Namboothiri males is distinct, as only the eldest member is permitted to marry, and all property rights are exclusively vested in him. Young males possessed neither rights nor a designated role within their family structure. They possessed neither a residence nor a familial unit. The children they had with women from other communities could not be recognized as their own. Children also cannot exploit their father. It may be noted that when the bulk of Nambudiri women were confined within the family without a male spouse, the circumstances of Nambudiri males were similarly affected, as they too lived without a female mate.

Social reforms among the Nambudiris emerged significantly later than in other societies. While numerous other tribes sought reform and advancement, the Nambudiris were enforcing chastity within a guarded stronghold. That is Smartha Vicharam. The Yogakshema Sabha was established by a committee led by Deshamangalath Sankaran Namboothiri in March 1908 on Shivarathri in Aluva in the Illam of Cherumukku Vaidyan. The organization's objective was to transform the lives of Nambudiris while preserving their clerical and feudal traditions. Initially, it was led by several renowned figures who attended the organization's annual session, including Paliyath Achan, Ulloor, Mannath Padmanabhan, Sahodaran Ayyappan, and M. C. Joseph. A committee of Nambudiri women convened, featuring notable participants such as Parvathy Nenminimangalam and Arya Pallam. Their focus was mostly on the establishment of banks and estates, neglecting the issues faced by humanity. By the 1920s, a number of young individuals saw that the Yogakshema Sabha was misaligned and sought to address the organization's limitations and deficiencies. The individuals who recognized that the status of women was the primary cause of their community's decline. This insight was not attained by any privileged Brahmins or aristocracy. A group of young guys established Yuvajana Sangam and began a publication titled Unni Nambudiri. The head of this young movement was V. T. Bhattathiripad, commonly referred to as V.T.^{vi}

He was born in 1896 at Vellithiruthi Thazhathillam, situated in Mezhatthoor village of Ponnani. He served as a journalist and educator. He opposed the majority of the ancient customs and practices of the Brahmins. He engaged in the Guruvayur Temple entrance movement. An arrest order was issued to him by the ruler of Cochin for distributing pamphlets regarding the destruction of temples. V. T.

Bhattathiripad led the movement organized by the Kerala Mishra Sangam from Kanjanghad to Chembazhanthy. During the 26th annual meeting of the Yoga Kshema Sabha, a resolution enabling widow remarriage was passed, at which his sister-in-law Uma, a widow, was married. Thus, it was the first instance in history of a Namboodiri widow's remarriage. On that occasion, he stated that the Nambudiris had attained independence, so the Yogakshema Sabha could be dissolved. He also took the effort to organize Mishravivaha, in which his sister was wed to a man from a different community. Upon the death of V. T.'s father in 1940, not even relatives attended the funeral, indicating that the orthodox community at the time deemed his actions disrespectful and unethical. Nambudiri women were confined to their homes, although Nambudiri males were afforded limited rights within the household. This was the initial alteration V. T. sought from the Nambudiri community. The leaders who spearheaded the projects were primarily younger male members of Nambudiri illams, including V.T. Bhattathiripad, E.M.S, Premji, and M.R.B. They asserted that all male members of the Taravad should receive certain rights as the eldest male member. They advocated for the emancipation of Nambudiri women from polygamy and the plight of early widowhood, among other issues. They also attempted to liberate women from the constraints of the taravadu. Girls were permitted to attend school starting in 1930.

V.T. utilized drama as a medium to convey his concepts to Nambudiri women. His renowned drama, AdukkalayilNinumAranghathek, played a pivotal part in the advancement of Nambudiri women. Women emerged from their residences and began participating in public activities. Transformations transpired in nearly all facets of Nambudiri women, including their religious beliefs, perspectives, and attire. V.T.'s endeavors are regarded as a female reform initiative led by a male figure. The efforts of Yogakshema Sabha have left a profound impact on the Nambudiri community. The role of V. T. Bhattathiripad is significantly essential in this context. Sabha workers progressively engage in nationalist and avant-garde creative movements.^{vii}

Mannath Padmanabhan (1878-1970)

By the conclusion of the 19th Century, Nair youths educated in English began to scrutinize numerous rituals and detrimental habits inside their community. Indulekha, a text addressing the issue of Nair-Nambudiri relations, exerted a significant influence on communal reforms among the Nairs. The Malayali memorial, submitted to the king of Travancore in 1891 via the efforts of G.P. Pillai, C. Krishna Pillai, C. V. Raman Pillai, and others, also played a role in reforming the Nairs. The legislation introduced by G.P. Pillai in the Travancore Legislative Assembly in 1897 also facilitated communal



advancement. An association for community development among Nairs was established in 1907. The Keraleeya Nair Samajam and the Malayali newspaper established by C. Krishna Pillai also impacted the Nair community. Keraleeya Nair Samajam was an organization established to disrupt practices such as Nair Nambudiri connections, Thalickettu Kalyanam, and ThiranduKuliyadiyandiram, which undermined the financial and marital standing of the Nair family. The group also sought to unify the sub-castes within the Nair community. However, the operations of this group soon diminished. The NSS, established on 31st October 1914, aimed to create Samajams across the state for Nairs to improve their education, morals, faith, industry, money, and peace.

The group sought to foster cohesion among Nairs and between Nairs and other communities. A considerable effort by numerous individuals has contributed to the development of an organization like NSS, which began as a modest company and has evolved into its current form. The names of Changanassery Parameshwara Pillai, Ambalappatt Damodaran Asan, and Kelathil Velayudhan Nair, among others, were significant. Although there were other contributors, the most significant figure behind the NSS is Mannath Padmanabha Pillai. In that regard, one may assert that the biography of Mannath Padmanabhan and the history of the NSS are synonymous. The administrative framework of NSS comprises Karayogam, Taluk Union, Board of Directors, General Secretary, President, among others. Mannath Padmanabhan's altruistic community service, tenacity, transcendentalism, and dedicated disposition have distinguished NSS today.^{viii}

Sahodaran Ayyappan (1889-1968)

Ayyappan, a social reformer, thinker, and journalist, was born in Cherayi on Vyppin Island. Following his education in Cherayi, Paravur, and Kozhikode, he proceeded to Madras for advanced studies but returned prior to their conclusion. He collaborated with Athmavidhya Sangham in Kozhikode. He soon embarked on modernizing the Ezhava community by eliminating superstitions and customs. In 1917, he established Sahodara Sangam with the objective of dismantling the caste system. He organized a mixed supper, or Misrabhojanam, involving the participation of Pulayas and Ezhavas. He also advocated for interracial marriage. He successfully influenced societal change. Thus, he became Sahodaran Ayyappan. He faced hostility from orthodox individuals as he advocated for responsible governance and the right to vote in Cochin. He became a member on two occasions. Upon the establishment of Thiru-Kochi in 1949, he also became a member of the Pattom government. The contribution of Sahodaran Ayyappan to the social development of Kerala is significant.^{ix}

CONCLUSION

The paper examines the challenges posed by the caste system and the contributions of various social reformers in revitalizing their own castes. The caste system negatively impacted the daily existence of individuals with keratitis. The lower layers of society, specifically the Avarnas or so-called untouchables, were the most adversely impacted by the caste system. The majority of castes were overshadowed by various traditional customs they adhered to and by the decline experienced by numerous communities due to the foundation of the caste system. During this period, some educated youths from various castes sought to implement reforms within their communities to alleviate longstanding oppression. This established the groundwork for numerous caste and communal groups that advocated for the welfare of their own communities. The social advancements attained by Kerala through the efforts of these community organizations and the prominent persons who spearheaded them are also examined.

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