

Dalit social situation and Lincoln of Kerala: A page from the Subaltern History of erstwhile Cochin

Vinayan M C

Research scholar Department of History Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit Kerala India
Corresponding Author: Vinayan M C

ABSTRACT: *The paper entitled **Dalit social situation and Lincoln of Kerala: A page from the Subaltern History of erstwhile Cochin** is an attempt to analyse the history of Dalit social movements in Cochin, one among the provincial state of Kerala and with special reference to Pandit K P Karuppan, a real social reformer, poet and philosopher known as The Lincoln of Kerala. The present study is an attempt to explore the historical importance of the social mobilization of subalterns, the Dalits of Cochin. It is an empirical study on the basis of both primary and secondary sources. Through a positivist approach, wide and the scientific arrangement of maximum available facts are incorporated with the study. Textual analysis and field study are the major operations adopted to collect data. The present study is an analytical, interpretative and critical in nature and it is a narrative, descriptive account of dalit movements of Cochin an erstwhile princely state of Kerala.*

KEYWORDS: *Dalit, Subaltern History, Depressed Classes, Untouchability, Pulayas,*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of Aryans into South India changed the social life and tribal culture of Thamizhakam which is including modern Kerala. Dominance of Brahmins segregated the society on the basis of caste, before it was just a classification followed the society purely on the nature of profession. Brahmanical ideology forcefully imparted new norms and conditions on the social life of the people and labour groups were changed as different caste and class. Later, emergence of Naduvazhi system and Brahmin domination channelized the society to the development of the caste system. Consolidation of Brahmin domination and suppression of production classes are the basic reason of the caste system of Kerala¹. The medieval period of Kerala witnessed the institutionalisation of the caste in society. Naduvazhism, a form of feudalism strengthened the caste system.

As a result of the consolidation of power of the hegemonic group, the social order of Kerala was quite complex than any part of India. A notable instance to substantiate the above statement is nothing but the anomalous slavery prevailed in Kerala from centuries back. Slavery a corollary of uncompromised caste consciousness and its hierarchy turned to the formation of a working class as slaves comprised the downtrodden castes especially the Pulayas, the Parayas and other lower castes peoples. The pivotal idea of slave practice made by caste society was very inevitable for their existence particularly in an agriculture based economy. Land granting culture of medieval Kerala made Brahmins as land owners. Feudal nature of the society demanded the engagement of lower caste peoples as the slaves of upper feudal landlords

II. SOCIAL SITUATION OF DALITS OF COCHIN

The history of princely state Cochin is not different from this situation. Along with other religion Hinduism also developed with a complex nature of caste consciousness itself and it was resulted for the division of society into two section that the upper and the lower division of the society according to the social position of caste. The situation of dalits of Cochin was the most deprived among the people of the state. Socially and economically they were hardly moved to the extreme dark side of the Cochin State. Brahmanical ideologies and feudal mode of administrative system made the life of dalits more suppressive. By the beginning of 20th Century the lower caste peoples of Cochin became conscious about their civil liberties and started to be organised themselves. As far as the history of Cochin is concerned, the period from 1900 to 1947 is an era of social transformation of Dalit communities of the State. Colonial interventions and universal educational policies adopted by the Christian missionaries were the major reasons for the social changes among the dalits of Cochin.

Government of Cochin categorised them under a specific title called The Depressed Classes. They were eight in number including two sections of hill tribes named Malayans and Kadars. Pulayas, Parayas, Kanakkans, Vettuvass, Ulladans, and Nayadis are the castes included in this category. They were the part of the Cochin society but in the lowest rugs of the social ladder and hardly marginalised from the main stream society.

Owing to the untouchability and unapproachability they were not permitted to walk on roads and restricted to use public facilities like schools, hospitals wells etc. They must keep themselves away from the place where the upper caste Hindus appeared. So even from the centuries back these landless peoples were in a condition of darkness and lived beside the paddy fields as the agrestic slaves of their masters in their houses which are generally called *madams*.² Some of the communities lived in the separated parts of the state especially in the outskirts of the forest or inside the forest by collecting materials for lively hood.

Usually *Madam* was a thatched single room hut which is made of grass and other cheaply materials. They had no any legal right over the land which madam is situated. One of its corners is being used as kitchen with limited number of utensils like clay pots and bamboo made objects. They had no right to construct elaborate form of houses by using other hard materials like wood tiles etc. They compelled to use such cattle house like shelters to live and there was no sanitary facility. In the beginning of the 20th century tile roofed houses are only allowed to the Nair communities only after the consent from the Raja of Cochin State.³ Straw, grass, coconut leaf etc. are the materials used by the lower caste peoples to construct their shelters. Sometimes they were evicted from their huts without any reason by the landlords.

The lower caste peoples were lived in a poor condition. They were confronted with their social disadvantages. Even though they worked for 12 hours continuously was impossible to meet their requirements with very less resources that the raw paddy of 1½ Edagazhi as their nominal wage.⁴ Number of family members is too big and compelled female members also to work hard together with male members in agricultural field. It was the responsibility of elders among the children of lower castes to look after young ones and it denied them to learn even to write and read.⁵

Even though slavery was abolished in the state, the conditions of depressed classes were remained as same situation. They were not free from an intangible form of mental servitude to their landlords because they did not believe that they have no a life apart from the clutches of upper caste Hindu landlord. That much they depended and believed their masters. There were no regulations and working time to low class labourers. The landlords had the complete right and authority upon their workers to assign any work at any time as their wish even after the Sun set. The orthodox Hindu upper class landlords hardly used the toil of out castes of Cochin. The forceful obedience and fear for physical ill treatment compelled them to serve the masters without consider their physique and health.⁶ Even they were not aware about personal hygiene too due to their bad living conditions. Female members are not allowed to cover their breasts and upper portion of body with cloth. They used a piece of cloth known as *Ottamundu* to cover lower portion of body just down to the knee. They used ear rings known as *Thoda* and some other ornaments made off shells and it is called *Kallumaala*. Male members were also used *Mundu* but it was very old and not cleaned. They were not cropping hair usually.⁷

III. PROBLEM OF UNTOUCHABILITY AND UNAPPROACHABILITY

Untouchability and Unapproachability is the product of deep rooted caste system of Hindu society even from the centuries back in India. The word *Untouchable* applies to the despised and degraded section of Hindu population. Untouchability is a practice in which some lower castes are kept at a distance, denied of social equality and made to suffer from some disabilities for their touch is considered to be contaminating or polluting the higher caste people. According to Dr. D.N Majumdar, the untouchable castes are those who suffer from various social and political disabilities many of which are traditionally prescribed and socially enforced by higher castes.⁸

The Hindu society of Cochin State was clearly arranged in the order of social precedence. Census report of the state shows the details of social stigma like untouchability and unapproachability which was followed by the Cochin society based on caste. The castes after lower caste Nair in the caste hierarchy had to follow a distance which is fixed traditionally to avoid pollution by touch and approach to higher castes. Different communities come under a category known as Kammalans had to maintain 24 feet distance from upper class peoples. The Illuvans or Ezhavas were also maintained a distance of 32 feet away from the higher castes. The fisher men boat men communities like Mukkuvan, Arayan, Valan etc. were the next also had to follow 36 feet distance to the upper caste peoples. The Kanakkans and Koodans had to keep themselves away from upper castes by 48 feet distance. Pulayas or Cherumans had to follow s distance of 64 feet to avoid the pollution to higher castes. The Parayas and Vettuvas had to maintain 72 feet and Nayadis and Ulladans had to keep 78 feet distance from the higher castes.⁹ The rigidity of caste system of the state severely affected the social life of the depressed classes of people. They were denied to access public roads, schools, hospitals, wells etc. The life of lower class people were in a panic situation at every time due to the fear about the punishment on the violation of social order which is traditionally imposed by the upper caste with support of Brahmanical ideology.

As a social being, individual freedom is highly required to move where ever he or she wants to go. Owing to the untouchability and unapproachability in public places, the lower caste peoples of Cochin were restricted such basic freedom to walk freely accordance with their wish. This was simply caused by the barriers

of caste and creed of particular sections of the society. Inaccessibility of public places was the major reasons for the backwardness and disadvantages of lower caste people and it became the primary cause to pull back them to the most neglected peripherals of the society. The life of this underprivileged category of the peoples were hardly restricted by the society with in the premises of the paddy field as agricultural serfs or in the forest areas where a place is very secure to keep them to avoid the pollution to the upper castes by seen, touch and approach. They worked hardly in agricultural field from dawn to dusk and lived in a specific geographic area with starvation. They could not understand anything which was happening around them. Curb to the proximity to public, shrank them into a single point of total ignorance.

Owing to the problem of untouchability and unapproachability, the dalits of Cochin prohibited to enter public places. Public roads, Hospitals, Hotels schools etc. were the places of discrimination toward the low caste peoples. They were also not allowed or restricted to enter the towns of Cochin like Ernakulam, Tripunithura etc. Inside the town of Ernakulam there was a clear structure of inhabitation of people on the basis of caste and entry to this area was also restricted by the same. The area from Chittur to Ravaipuram was a place occupied by prominent Nair families. Ezhazvas were resided around the market and other nearby places. Coastal areas and backwater regions were used by fishermen boatmen communities of Cochin. Black Jews were the majority nearby Broad way.¹⁰ The lower caste peoples of Cochin were not allowed to be inside the town and they were lived the remote areas of the state especially in the villages and hard geographical stations. They were avoided by the caste customs to enter Ernakulam town till the second decades of 20th century.¹¹ This historical event can be considered as the successful first phase of Dalit movement to enter the entry of towns of Cochin State.¹²

Both villages and urban places of Cochin was the centre of caste domination. The higher caste peoples subjugated the lower caste peoples in all the possible way to keep caste superiority in the society. Travelling through roads, foot paths near to paddy fields etc. were very difficult at that time. In order to avoid pollution to upper castes they kept themselves away from the presence of upper castes. In some places separate roads were constructed exclusively for lower castes. Such roads are known as Pulaya roads or roads for depressed classes.¹³ All the public roads maintained out of general revenues were made available to the lower caste peoples. Government also opened and maintained separate roads for depressed classes. Even though road was common for all, depressed classes, along with some others were not allowed to use public roads when *Para* processions from Caste Hindu Temples passed through the roads.¹⁴

IV. K P KARUPPAN AND JATHIKUMMI.

Among the leaders of oppressed peoples of Cochin, Pandit Karuppan was the most prominent personality who to stimulates the dalits to protest against the social order of Cochin. He was a writer as well as a social reformer. He could understand the miseries of dalit communities of Cochin including his own Vaala community due to the social stratification on the basis of caste. Pandit K.P Karuppan was born to Pappu or Ayyan popularly known as Athopoojaari and Kochupennu belong to Kandathiparambu family near Cheranelloor in present Ernakulam district on the 24th May 1885. After his elementary education, he studied Sanskrit. In January 1905 he joined Ernakulam St. Teresas Convent High School as Sanskrit Munshi. About five years later he joined as a clerk in newly formed Fisheries Department but might be in June 1911, he was appointed as Sanskrit Teacher in the Caste Girls High School, Ernakulam by the Government of Cochin¹⁵ It was a school exclusively for the girl students belongs to upper caste. Later he became an Assistant Protector of Depressed Classes, Secretary to the Elementary Education Committee, Superintendent of Cochin Vernacular Education and in January 1935 he was made as a lecturer in the Maharajas College Ernakulam a post in which he continued his death on 23rd March 1938.

Even from Karuppan's early life he realized the bad condition of his own community and other outcast peoples of Cochin. Pulayas, Parayas, Valas etc. were lived in a very miserable situation during that time. It is very bold and challenging one that to raise a single hand against caste system. The main stream society strictly tried to follow the caste consciousness in the society. Even in such a social condition, Karuppan continuously tried to raise his voice against social evils. Karuppan himself considered that he was a representative of entire outcaste people of Cochin. He always tried to motivate Pulayas, Parayas and other dalit communities of Cochin. He wanted to create a co-ordination among the dalits of Cochin to fight against untouchability and other form of social evils. Karuppan as a heterogeneous person from the lower cluster was very interested to work among the weaker sections of the society. He was a well-known Sanskrit scholar and composed many literary works. One of the poems written by Karuppan named *Jathikummi* played an important role in the history of dalits of Cochin. It was written by Karuppan at the age of 20 in 1905 and published in 1912.¹⁶ *Jathikummi* is a work depends on Sankaracharya's *ManishaPanchankam*.¹⁷ Thread of this work is the dialogue in between Sankaracharya and an outcaste. Meaninglessness of caste and its aftermaths which negatively affected to society and Hindu religion etc. are the major facts discussed in this great work. Each line of *Jathikummi* reflects the rigidity of caste consciousness of society. Peoples of Cochin especially the outcaste were very much interested in these songs and used to sing in various occasions. They were tried to meet the author of this great work and met Karuppan.

It resulted to the formation of Pulaya Mahasabha in Cochin. In the middle of 1930's Government of Cochin instructed Karuppan to write a report to Gopala Krishna Deodhar, a well-known social reformer and the president of Servants Society of India about the social conditions of lower castes of Cochin.¹⁸ Malayalam translation of this report is also available in *K.P Vallon Smaranika* published in August 1981.¹⁹ It is a detailed report from Karuppan about the social condition of dalits of Cochin as well as the starting of their effort to form an organization among them.

Even before the availability of published form of Jathikummi, it was very popular among the downtrodden peoples of the society and they learned it by heart²⁰. The song was composed by Karuppan in the form of *Kummi* songs. *Kummi* is one of the most important and ancient form of folk dance performed by the women of Tamil Nadu and Kerala villages. They stand in circle and dancing with claps rhythmically. One of the women leads the singing with a favorite song while the rest take up the refrain. It was also free from the clutches of Sanskrit and followed a Dravidian style of literary composition.²¹ Simple form of these *Kummi* songs reached maximum and spread among the laymen and they used to sing the songs from Jathikummi in different occasions. Each of the lines of Jathikummi tried to question the complex form of caste system and also pointed out its worthless hierarchical structure and its implications. It criticized the intolerable effects of caste system such as untouchability, unapproachability and unseeability.²² The songs from Jathikummi orally spread and stimulated the lower caste peoples very much even though they were illiterate. The idea which highlighted through the songs deep rooted in the minds of people and sown the seeds of resistance. The retrospective thoughts of them sparked fire in their mind. They could realize their deplorable social condition and understood the necessity of resurgence.

Report by Karuppan is very clear about the enthusiastic approach of a group of Pulaya youngsters those approached poet Karuppan at his residence. It was near to the Diwan's Bungalow at Ernakulam.²³ The gentle approach of visitors impressed him and asked about their visit. Politely they informed to Karuppan about the purpose of their visit that all of them wanted to be as the disciple of Pandit Karuppan and also demanded more songs and poems. Karuppan became very happy and impressed on their attitude of self-realization. Karuppan accepted the demands of Pulayas with great pleasure and wrote and gave some compositions to them. He took initiative to do something to wipe out the ignorance enveloped them and also encouraged an idea of an organization among them. The first day which they met the Karuppan has changed the vision of Pulayas. They became very interested in the words of Karuppan. It was a close and meaningful communication. They became very conscious about the caste based discrimination of Cochin State. Karuppan had some plans and instructed them to come another day for a meeting.

After few days they came again and Karuppan tried to make awareness among them about the importance of an organization to attain the freedom to enter public places, education and other social well-being of the Pulaya community. Karuppan was a well-known leader and experienced with social organizations.²⁴ He wanted to start such an organization among the Pulayas to eradicate their social backwardness. But the social situation was not favorable for them even to conduct a meeting to discuss about an organization for Pulayas. They were denied to conduct a meeting on land which is prohibited to them due to caste discrimination. They could not access a place in land for a meeting. The meetings before the formation of an organization was a Himalayan task in front of them due to the absence of a place to assemble. The lower castes were not allowed to use any place in land to make a gathering.

Under the guidance of Pandit Karuppan the dalit leaders of Cochin realized the strength of organized resistance. Kayal Sammelanam, (Backwater conference) a meeting organized by the Pulayas of the state in the backwaters of Cochin was first kind of such a meeting organized in the water instead of land. In 1913, Pulayas started their organization by overcoming a lot of barriers. The first and second Pulaya conferences which are conducted at Ernakulam formed an organization and constituted committee along with its by-law. After the formation of association, the leaders of this movement tried to organize campaign among the outcastes. Such activities could help them to create a consciousness about the unity among the downtrodden people. Through the organized protest movements, Dalits of Cochin succeeded to capture a position in the society partially.

In 1925, he was nominated into the newly formed Legislative Council of Cochin State. Among the 15 nominated members to the Cochin Legislative Council, Pandit K.P Karuppan deserves a special mention by the consideration of his effort to ameliorate the pitiable plight of the depressed classes of Cochin. He was nominated as a member of council in August of 1925. His service to down trodden was a remarkable one and helped him to make his entry as the Member of Legislative Council of Cochin State. Karuppan got represented from Vala community of the state but he actively participated in the council activities for entire weaker sections of the society as well as other political affairs of the state.²⁵ He used the platform of council to protest against the social inequalities against the marginalized communities. He paid special attention to the amelioration of under privileged communities like Pulayas Parayas, Vettuva etc. Long speeches made by him in assemble invited the attention of authorities to understand the plight of such groups. Untouchability, unapproachability and all other forms of social evils stood against the humanity was questioned by him.

In one of the speech he made in assembly was against the practice of maintaining separate kitchens for various communities in the Maharajas College, Ernakulam. Karuppan severely criticized such a practice of maintaining separate kitchens for Nairs, Ezhavas and Pulayas. And he also mentioned about the working of hostels which are running under British administrated territories where there no discrimination among the students belonging to the different castes.²⁶ Karuppan tried to make an ambience in assembly to create a concern about the education of depressed classes and backward classes among the members of the council. He argued for separate school for Pulayas and other under privileged communities. He pointed out the difficulties which faced by the lower class peoples in the educational institutions. Karuppan complained in the council that Pulaya and Ullada students were not allowed to use the bench and desk which high caste students used. The upper castes prevented the entry of lower castes students in schools and it made to open their own schools.²⁷ Merit based representation was not given to lower castes in high of Government. Some of the concession granted by the Government for lower castes remained in the paper because of upper caste interference.²⁸ The problems and issues which is faced the dalits were brought by Karuppan to the notice of the Cochin Legislative Council. His ability to articulate the problems in assembly as a responsible member of the council made a lot of appreciation and acceptance. But he did not accept his second term on the ground that there were Pulayas who could champion the cause of the dalits and suggested the name of P.C Chanchan. Chanchan was made a social reformer of Cochin and he was well trained by Karuppan.²⁹

V. CONCLUSION

The beginning of the 20th century is the beginning of an epoch of social awakening of outcastes too. There was started mobilization and resistance movement against the social evils practiced in Cochin. The contribution made by K P Karuppan for the emancipation of dalits of Cochin can consider a great turning point in history of Cochin State. Pandit K P Karuppan is one of the great personalities of the 20th century among the Renaissance leaders of Kerala. His heterogeneous character helped the downtrodden of Kochi to capture a good status. But deliberately or not, the achievements and contributions which made by Karuppan is not considered properly in modern times. Academic institutions of Kerala are in some trouble to treat the life and achievements of Karuppan as a poet as well as a social reformer. It would like to suggest adding the epic life of Pandit K P Karuppan into the syllabus of our universities and other educational institutions to create consciousness among the new generations about the past of our social formation in a historical sense.

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