SAHODHARAN AYYAPPAN AND RATIONALIST MOVEMENT IN KERALA

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ABSTRACT

Sahodharan Ayyappan occupied the most prominent position in the Rationalist Movement in Kerala. The spirit of rationalism germinated in his mind out of the socio-religious restrictions and disabilities imposed upon the non-caste Hindus. He was totally against untouchability, and unapproachability. Ayyappan never wanted to discriminate people in the name of caste, creed, and colour. He was a staunch advocate of the universal brotherhood. The term Sahodharan itself speaks that he is a brother to all. The journal entitled ‘Sahodharan’ was the mouthpiece of his radical ideas. He was one of the outspoken followers of Sree Narayana Guru. Sahodharan Ayyappan was born at cherai in Vypin Island. He formed an organization called Sahodhara sangam and arranged ‘Misra Bhojanam’ in 1917 to give the opportunity to every human being to eat under one roof. He was the founder editor of the magazine ‘Yukthivadhi’. A social reformer, revolutionary, rationalist, poet, a faultless administrator and a legislator who brought in several landmark legislations, Sahodharan Ayyappan is considered as one of the foremost figures in the history of Modern Kerala.

INTRODUCTION

Kerala Society was parcelled out among innumerable castes and sub-castes in the beginning of the 19th century. It was based on categorization of superior and inferior and was marked by pollution attached to touch and approach with one another. Therefore casteism kept the society fragmented into exclusive groups. The social status of a non-Caste Hindu remained unchangeable by education, wealth and power. Several irrational customs and practices prevailed in the society which was dominated by the upper castes, especially the Brahmins. The lower caste people were in a subordinate position and were denied social freedom and equality. On the other hand the upper castes/savarnas were the land owning class and all political power and authority in the land were under their control. But the lower caste people had no voice or position in the society and government oppressed, suppressed and marginalized by the upper castes.

The Brahmins dominated all the means of production. The Nairs occupied a higher position in the society, were the chief tenants of them. The twin role of the Nairs as a serving class of the Brahmins and the protectors of land enabled them to enjoy a respectable position in the society. All other groups below them like the Ezhavas, and the Pulayas were considered as inferior. Though the British made some changes in the 19th century, conditions of them did not change basically. They were the victims of social tyranny for centuries. The social evils like untouchability and unapproachability led to segregation of Hindus of one caste from another. The practice of pollution was widely observed in the Hindu society. The Avarnas were denied access to schools, temples, public places and were subjected to social humiliation.

Apart from being one of the untouchable castes in the Hindu society, the Ezhavas were socio-economically and educationally backward. Majority of them were illiterate. A few of them constituted an elite section within the community like Ayurveda physicians, soldiers, scholars, traders, and martial artists, but majority of them were engaged in cultivation and other labours like toddy tapping, manufacturing of country sugar etc. In this context, many social reformers like Sahodharan Ayyappan emerged in the society with revolutionary ideas.

Early Life

Sahodharan Ayyappan was born into a traditional Ezhava family of Cherai in Vypin Island of Ernakulam district of Kerala on 21st August 1889. His father, an Ayurveda physician by profession had keen interest in literature, particularly Hindu Puranas and epics and had passion for Sanskrit language, which motivated Ayyappan to become a renowned writer. He lost his father at an early age and was brought up under the guidance of his elder brother Achuthan Vaidyar who was a progressive thinker taught Ayyappan English language and gave him progressive education. By virtue of his brother, Ayyappan...
acquired good association with Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan²⁰.

After having his school education primarily in Cherai and North Paravoor, Ayyappan did his pre-university course at Malabar Christian College, Calicut. He had to discontinue his further education for the time being while at Madras due to ill health. During his studies at Calicut he attended the speeches of Brahmananda Swami Sivayogi and Vagbhatananda Guru. Vagbhatananda’s eloquent speeches on caste and discrimination further widened the mental horizon of Ayyappan. According to Sivayogi religion and god are sources of sorrow and suffering and man is enslaved by them. Emancipation is possible only by discarding them. Man has to realize that his friend or enemy is his own mind. Neither God nor the devil is responsible for the actions that spring from the mind which brings good or evil to man. Caste and the associated evils like in equality are the creations of the mind. Sivayogi was an intellectual of the modern type, who advocated freethinking and rationalism. These ideas of Sivayogi had a tremendous role in the shaping of the rationalist outlook of Sahodaran Ayyappan.

Ayyappan was the first Ezhava to become a graduate in the Cochin State. The financial burden forbade him from getting higher education further. However, with the support of Sree Narayana Guru, he joined Maharaja’s college, Trivandrum for B.A., which was a turning point in his life. During these days he used to visit the SNDP office at Trivandrum. His constant association with Sree Narayana Guru and Kumaran Asan helped him to get sufficient internal and external strength to herald a new social revolution in Kerala.

Sahodhara Sangam (Association of brotherhood)

In Kerala, untouchability and un-approachability made the life of people deplorable. The idea of oneness of all humanity and universal brotherhood could not be easily comprehended by the Hindu rulers of Cochin and Travancore. This made the eradication of untouchability a Herculean task for Ayyappan. In his opinion caste had to be eradicated for the attainment of brotherhood. Sahodaran Ayyappan wanted to eradicate the caste discrimination and inequality in the Hindu society. He upheld the anti-caste principles of Sree Narayana Guru. As part of the social struggle, Ayyappan advocated the inevitability to get rid of caste by the twin means of inter-dining and inter-marriage, for which he launched the modern phase of the Ezhava movement started by Guru. He preached and practiced the concept of equality among the castes. For the fulfillment of his aim he founded the ‘Sahodhara Sangham’. Throughout his life he fought against caste and social inequalities and was against caste hierarchy and Brahmin supremacy.

Ayyappan viewed inter-dining as a means to achieve the destruction of caste system, which undermined the ideal of brotherhood. In his opinion, demolishing the caste was essential for the welfare of the human being. He was putting emphasis on the dictum “ask not, say not and think not caste”, given by guru. He said further, caste was an evil and a superstition, and inter-dining and inter-marriage was the only means to bring an end to caste competitions and hatred. The abolition of untouchability was the birth right of the lower communities.

Sahodaran Ayyappan intensified his activism in 1917 by launching the anti-caste agitations and organizing a movement for inter-dining (a grand feast of all castes sitting together under one roof) at Cherai. The feast was attended by about 200 people including the so-called untouchable Pulayas. This was opposed forcibly by conservative sections of society, including Ezhava Lords. It marked the beginning of a social revolution. In a meeting held at Thundiparambu at Cherai on 29th May 1917, Ayyappan recommended inter-dining as a means to eradicate caste system. Though it was a success it created controversies that had far reaching impact in the society. Initially he received reverse response from his people as it was a new one for them and they opposed and criticized him. The organizers were out casted. It earned him the derogatory title ‘Pulayan Ayyappan’. Ayyappan was labeled an outcaste and rebel. From then onwards Ayyappan came to be known as Sahodaran Ayyappan.

The movement began at Thundiparambu continued in different parts of the state. Later it received wide appreciation and many joined in it. Though it was partially successful it could reduce the disparity between different castes like Nairs, Ezhavas and Pulayas. On 15th May 1921, Narayana Guru sent a message of support to Sahodara Sangham during their annual conference, supporting “inter-caste marriages and community feasts”. Sahodaran Ayyappan conducted speeches and circulated pamphlets and articles to popularize his vision. He got many followers who propagated the ideas of Ayyappan. He published some revolutionary writings through the newspapers. Later on, some newspapers rejected his revolutionary articles. Realizing the situation Ayyappan decided to launch a publication of his own, which resulted in the beginning of a journal and a newspaper in the same name Sahodharan in 1917 and acted as its editor till its end by 1956. This was a turning point in the history of Sahodhara Sangham and social reform movement of Kerala.

Ayyappan advocated inter-caste marriage for several reasons. It was essential for promoting friendship and co-operation among different communities. On the very first issue he stated the vision and mission that “Sahodharan doesn’t have any caste or religion”. He further stated that “everyone should think and act above the caste and should love and respect each other”. It covered diverse topics which show his wide knowledge over various subjects and his aim of bringing social equality. He advocated secularism through Sahodharan. To stir up the logical level of the readers he published articles like ‘Rajaram Mohan Roy’, ‘Chaturvarnya’, ‘Hindu Daivangal’, and ‘Kerathile Hindu Matham’.

Sahodharan laid stress on the greatness of principles of truth, liberty, equality, and fraternity. The Daily also popularized the principles of inter-dining and inter-caste marriage and asked to practice it. Personalities like Sree Narayana Guru and E.V. Ramaswamy Naiker were admired through the newspaper. Sahodharan criticized caste and social issues like untouchability and superstitions. In his editorial Ayyappan envisioned Modern Kerala through the abolition of the Zamindari system, granting of titles for farmers and tenants, equal wages for men and women, and compulsory free education till the age of 16.
In his search for values to bring about an egalitarian society, Sahodharan Ayyappan was more fascinated by Buddhism than the teachings of guru. To him, Buddha was the ‘herald of universal brotherhood’29. No wonder that the Ashthanga Marga and non-injury as preached by Buddha and his denunciation of the authority of scriptures and casteism, the silence on the existence of god, and the emphasis on universal brotherhood made an appeal to men like Ayyappan in the context of an awakening against the evils and superstitions and the struggle for democratic values30.

Ayyappan believed that Buddhism would bring great moral benefits to man as a religion that inculcated a higher moral consciousness based on the values of humanism. He felt that the Buddhist dharma capable of leading man to achieve international co-operation and peace and the establishment of human greatness and human freedom31. It was against this background that Ayyappan was induced to Buddhism as an ideological base for his struggle against casteism and discrimination. The challenge of Buddhism to Hinduisim and its negation of casteism was the base of his rational approach. He reformed culture and society of Kerala through his radical political democratic interventions and rationalist practices and questioned the social evils existed in the society and even challenged it32.

Yukthivadhi (The Rationalist)

Ayyappan was one among the pioneers of the rationalist movement in Kerala. ‘Sahodhara Sangam’ begun by him was a rationalist organization in a true sense. Even the Sahodharan published some writings against superstitious beliefs and evil practices in the society. He took initiative to start another rationalist journal Yukthivadhi, along with C.V. Kunjuraman, C.K. Krishnan and M.C. Joseph in 192933. The journal was continued till 1960. Ayyappan launched the anti-caste discourse against Hinduisim and its society. By challenging Hindu religion he indirectly rejected the discourse of Guru. As against the meta-physical nature of Guru, Ayyappan, was a revolutionary, created by modernity, turned against Hinduisim34. While he criticized Hindu religion for its anti-human aspects, Guru upheld the humanitarian and ethical role of religion across culture and society. He modified the message of Guru, ‘one caste, one religion and one God for man’ into ‘no caste, no religion and no God for man’35.

The first target of Ayyappanwas to fight against the Bharani festival36. He led a campaign against the obscene songs and animal sacrifices at ‘Bharani Fest’. Ayyappan, along with hundreds of followers marched towards it with a slogan “don’t go to Bharani”. He made a speech against it and blocked them. The angry devotees tortured them by throwing the blood and pieces of the animals upon them37. Even after the incident he continued this mission and also gave a petition to the King of Cochin to pass legislation against it.

Through Yukthivadhi Sahodharan Ayyappan attacked the religious perceptions of Gandhi and Tagore38. He was against Gandhiji for his positive attitude towards the Varna system. Ayyappan vehemently criticized the ‘Hindu Mahamandal’39 formed by Mannath Padmanabhan40 and R. Sankar. He wrote some poems on rationalism and published it in the first volume of Yukthivadhi. He used pen as a weapon against inequality and social evils. Poetry was his medium to spread his message of equality and wrote many poems to propagate it. From 1917 to 1940 he wrote about 70 poems, half of dozen of which were on freedom like Swathantra Gadha, Ujivanman etc. His poetry covered variety of topics like Drarma, Kingship, freedom, Rationalism, and Buddhism40. Through these works Ayyappan shaped the literary culture of Kerala.

The revolutionary move launched at Cherai was the beginning of his political career. Through several hardships and criticisms Ayyappan emerged as a strong activist. He regarded SNDP Yogam as the platform for his social reform movements. In order to strengthen the organization he decided to expand the activities of Yogam in different parts of the State. As a part of his activities Ayyappan decided to construct orphanages, old age homes, hospitals, schools, and libraries which made him more popular. He advocated that the political activities should be free from religious activities. Ayyappan cautioned his followers not to have blind faith on him41.

In the opinion of Sahodharan Ayyappan, granting of jobs to the Avarnas was not merely to reform those communities but to reform the whole society. Ayyappan was pointing to the real issue namely, a share in the governance. In his opinion, communal representation was not antagonistic to nationalism, but would foster nationalism by eliminating communal discrimination, by providing equality of opportunity for all in the government services42. In other words, the argument of Ayyappan was that natural justice would be ensured to all only when all communities would get representation in the administration. According to him, communal representation was required till the communal system was eliminated. The ideal system of casteless society could be achieved only through the elimination of caste differences after strengthening all the communities by providing temporary safeguards. Communal representation was such a safeguard43.

Political Activities

While he was the leader of the SNDP Yogam, Sahodharan Ayyappan organized the abstention movement and called it as non-co-operation movement. He spread the activities of Yogam among the farmers and labourers and organized unions like AdiVaipin Thozhilal Sangham”, Ochanthuruth Thozhilal Union, Thiruvilamkoot Labour Association and Cochin Labour Union. Ayyappan was one of the founding fathers of the trade unionism in Kerala. He contributed much to the development of trade unionism and literacy movement among the working classes. In 1933, he started a newspaper called Velakkaran (The Labourer) for the labourers at Alappuzha44. In this tri-weekly paper, Sahodharan Ayyappan set forward the views of Marx and Lenin and wrote of the success of Russian revolution. In his speeches to the workers, he asked them not to accept charity relief from either the factory owners or the Government but demand higher wages as a matter of right. He attempted to organize an Allepey Trade Union through his speeches and a year’s newspaper campaign45. However, he did not advocate or encourage strikes and pickets as he had done earlier. He was of the opinion that social change could come about only through democratic means and not through violent revolutionary action46. While he used Marxist ideas of exploitation and class conflict to create a social awakening among the workers and the poor, he was not committed to a violent revolutionary path as this went against his belief in the
non-violent path of Buddhism and of Sree Narayana Guru’s teaching. In this sense, he was not a full Marxist. The Velakkaran issued at the rate of three per week had a very short period of life. After eight months its publication came to an end.

Sahodharan Ayyappan always shared the feelings of the working class and therefore he argued for their cause in the legislature. He played a vital role in the course of the struggle for responsible government in the princely state of Cochin. He was elected to the legislative assembly of Cochin and became a member of Cochin Prajamandal and a minister in the ministry of Parvoor T.K. Narayana Pillai. Thus he became the voice of the depressed classes. Very soon he became a popular politician and got continuously elected to legislative assembly without opposition.

During his first tenure in the Cochin legislative council Ayyappan showed his commitment to progressive programmes. On one occasion he demanded that registration be given to all love marriages. Many constitutional reforms of Cochin were the results of his hard work. He became instrumental in the enactment of a series of legislations including the Adult Franchise in the Panchayats and the Civil Marriage Act.

Ayyappan served as a minister two times in Cochin Legislative Assembly and one time in Thiru-Kochi Assembly. He was appointed to the ministry by the Maharaja on 9th September 1946. He later resigned from the Cabinet, along with Panampilli Govinda Menon and C.R. Iyyunni, when Home Minister, T.K. Nair used the police force to put down labour struggles and popular agitations. In popular elections in October 1949, the Prajamandal party secured overwhelming majority and Ikkanda Warrior was elected leader of the party. Sahodaran Ayyappan was one of his colleagues in the cabinet. Ayyappan was minister for a brief period in the Parvoor TK ministry, but soon resigned from active politics and concentrated his energy into socio-cultural activities.

After his retirement from active political life, Sahodaran Ayyappan dedicated more on social welfare measures. He founded the ‘Sree Narayana Sevika Samaj’. He constructed a Gurumandir at the hilltop and started a school for the poor children. Later on, it became a major pilgrim centre. Ayyappan passed away on 6th March 1968. His body was taken to Sreenarayana Giri and buried there. Then His social service was continued by his wife Parvathy Ayyappan and his followers.

CONCLUSION

Ayyappan was widely respected by all sections of people across the society because of his selfless social work and also on account of his impeccable personal integrity. Sahodaran Ayyappan was the great humanist in modern Kerala. He was inspired by the ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity as well as rationalism, secularism and humanism. Ayyappan succeeded to carve out an immortal niche for himself in the annals of socio-religious and political movement in Kerala by the revolutionary changes he effected and the sufferings he underwent for the uplift of the people in general and of the lower class in particular.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

3. S.R. Jincy, n.1:167; see A. Sreedhara Menon, Kerala History and its Makers, Madras, 1990:222
4. He was the son of Kumabalathuparambil Kochavu Vaidyaramma and Unnuliyamma
5. Shornur Karthikeyan, Sahodaran Ayyappan (Biography), Kottayam, 2012:45
6. He was a saint, philosopher and famed social reformer from Kerala
7. He was a social reformer, philosopher and poet of Malayalam literature.
8. M. Sahadevan, n.2:292
9. He was also known as Alathur Shivayogi or Alathur swami, was an atheist sanyasi from Kerala who founded the Ananda Maha Sabha in 1918 and Ananda Madham in 1919.
10. He was a social reformer in Malabar and the founder of the Atmavidya Sangham, which was fundamentally a group of professionals and intellectuals who sought change.
11. Pavan, Shodaran Ayyappanum Yuktivadi Prasthanavum, Kollam (n.d.):8
13. G.Priyadarshanan Sahodaran Ayyappan, Kerala Sahitya Academy, Trissur, 2008:42
15. Puthuppalli Raghavan, Kerala PathrapravarthanaCharithram (Mal.), Trissur, 2008:141
16. Ibid.
17. K.N. Panikkar, Culture and consciousness in Modern India: A Historical Perspective, New Delhi, 1992:4-5
19. C.K.Gangadaran, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Ernakulam, 1984:8
23. Joseph Mathew, Ideology, Protest and Social Mobility, Inter India Publications, New Delhi, 1986:63-65
24. K.A. Subrahmanyan, Sahodaran Ayyappan (biography), Cochin, 1973:46
27. He was commonly known as Periyar. He was an Indian social activist and politician who started the Self-Respect Movement and Dravidar Kazhagam. He is known as the 'Father of the Dravidian movement'.
34. K. Ayyappan, „Matatinteyum Dharmatinteyum Vyathiasangal” in Mithavadi Viseshal Prati, 1924, Calicut: 75-78.
36. Itwas in the KurumbaBhugavathy temple at Kodungallur.
39. He was an Indian social reformer and freedom fighter from the south-western state of Kerala. He is recognized as the founder of the Nair Service Society, which claims to represent the Nair community that constitutes 12.10% of the population of the state.
42. M.Govindan(ed.), Kumaranasan Birth Centenary Volume, Sameeksha, Madras, 1974:16
55. It is a charitable organization situated at Thottumugham, Aliva, Ernakulam District, Kerala, India which is also known as Sree Narayana ssssGiri. It was established in the year 1965 under Societies Registration Act, Travancore, 1955.