

Vol 3 Issue 2 March 2013

Impact Factor : 0.2105

ISSN No : 2230-7850

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Monthly Multidisciplinary  
Research Journal

*Indian Streams  
Research Journal*

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2230-7850**

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## THE COLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF CASTE ORGANISATIONS IN KERALA

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### Abstract:

*This paper focuses on the circumstances that led to the rise of caste organisations in Kerala, South India during the 19th century. It also analyses the socio cultural practices existed in the pre- colonial Kerala and how the so called colonialism implemented its world view upon the life of the people of Kerala and brought about a drastic transformation in the social, cultural and political life of Kerala in the 19th and 20th centuries.*

### KEYWORDS-

Middle Class, public sphere, caste, social reform, Colonial Modernity,

### INTRODUCTION

There have been number of studies on Colonialism and its impact upon colonized societies all over the world. Several theoretical formulations have been made for understanding this phenomenon. It is obvious that the societies in the colonised region were transformed and it has been argued that colonialism as a world view and method of exploitation had a significant impact on the indigenous life of colonized societies. The present paper tries to analyse the socio political change happened in Kerala during the 19th century especially in the particular social milieu of colonial modernity. It was in the second half of the 19th century number of caste organisations came up in Kerala.

### SOCIETY IN THE PRE MODERN KERALA

During the pre- colonial period the social system of Kerala was hegemonised by the Brahmanic ideology which was characterised as caste-ridden society. Even though the political condition of Kerala was divergent in nature the social structure within the three regions- Travancore, Cochin and Malabar- were one and the same. The Jati system that existed in Kerala had its own peculiarities. For this system that evolved here was the form of hierarchy based on rigid codes of purity and pollution and where the Varna ideal was invoked only with respect to the upper castes. 1

As a material as well as ideological force caste system was a specific form of power relation connected with agrarian system. Therefore it could be stated that the 'Jatisambradayam'(caste system)in Kerala was a by-product of the development of an agrarian society and economy.2 The Jati system of Kerala was interlinked with the complex socio-economic relations. Moreover it was also directly related with the suppression and appropriation of surplus from the primary producers of Kerala with the consolidation of Brahmanic supremacy and the subjugation of producing caste groups. This process of dominance and subordination brought the hierarchical structure of caste system in Kerala. This structure during the pre-colonial period was characterised by the existence of an exploitative class relation between the state

nobility exercising customary authority and primary producers. The social position of the primary producers of Kerala was at the bottom and the non-cultivating land lords were at the top of the society.<sup>3</sup>

The complexities of caste system had prevailed over all the spheres of life in Kerala. The clashes, contradictions and social divisions in the society, during the medieval period, were the real manifestation of the mature state of caste system in Kerala. During this period all the social relations and responsibilities within the society was controlled and directed by the locally developed 'maryadas' i.e., Jati maryadas. All these maryadas and keezhvashakkam etc. were consciously formulated for exploiting the whole society by the upper castes who constructed a feudal system of relationship in Kerala both materially and ideologically. Thus, during the pre-colonial period a systematised hierarchical order had been formulated by which surplus was appropriated by the Naduvazhi landlords.<sup>4</sup> Moreover the Naduvzhis and landlords imposed their hegemony over the primary producers and other people of the lower strata with the practices of cultural forms, rituals, keezhvashakkam etc). Adiyar the primary producers did substantial part of labour on land. But these people were treated as untouchables and were tied up with soil as bounded labours. This gradation of rights and privileges on the basis of ones position in the jati hierarchy resulted in the development of ties of dependence among the members of the same society. This state of dependency was cunningly exploited by a group of people who occupied the upper strata in the body of caste. Consequently, the agricultural labour force like pulayas were made as slave castes who were bought and sold along with land and they were considered to be a mere instrument of production. At the same time the upper castes and intermediary caste groups enjoyed the fruits of every possible opportunity in the society.

It shows the fact that the power over the resources was kept under the control of a microscopic group in the society during the pre-colonial period. In order to legitimise their power and dominance in the society they imposed certain cultural symbols and signifiers over the everyday life of the society. As the Dharmasasthras were the legitimising force behind all these things, one should realise the indirect presence of the Brahmanic ideology in the society of Kerala. In short a complex social system and relationship had been prevailing in the traditional Kerala during the pre-colonial period. For the caste system that proliferated in Kerala had too much intricacies compared with caste system prevailed in other part of India. The strong institution of Maryada of pre-British Kerala cannot be treated as legitimising through landlord-tenant relations alone, though exploitation was the ultimate aim behind the role played by the ritual practices of traditional Kerala. The complex caste system of traditional Kerala could dominate over the Kerala society till the advent of colonialism. The system of knowledge and power that existed in the pre-colonial Kerala was the product of Brahmanic ideology. Brahmanic discourse was so powerful that it could influence the whole society cutting across caste and creed.<sup>5</sup> However during the 19th century the traditional Brahmanic order of Kerala underwent a historical transformation as result of colonial intervention. This led to the opening of a new regime of knowledge and power and it has sometimes been referred as 'discourse of colonial modernity'.

#### **The impact of Colonial Modernity in the socio cultural landscape of Kerala:**

The first wave of cultural invasion brought about by colonialism on Kerala's traditional society dates back to Portuguese times. However, it was during the 19th century with the hegemony of the Britain, that the cultural invasion arrived at a decisive point. Under the impact of British colonialism, the pre-colonial social set up underwent radical transformation during the 18th and 19th centuries. <sup>6</sup>

As an agency of transformation of socio-political and cultural life of Kerala, colonialism had used several strategies for attaining its goal. Education, technology, administrative machineries and colonial economy were the most significant tools used by colonialism to overpower the traditional political economy and world view. This resulted in the creation of new system of knowledge and power that helped to bring out the modernisation of Kerala society.

It was easy for the British authorities to implement their policies which were motivated by colonialist interests in the political lives of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar as the British had dominated over the political domain of these three regions. The political atmosphere was so congenial to the British colonialists for disseminating their agendas in these two princely states and the rest of Kerala through the proper channels. After achieving their political domination over Kerala, the British colonialist began to implement its divergent tools and apparatuses for exploiting the resources of this land.

The intervention of the British colonialists into the economy of Kerala caused the breaking of the land relations of this land and also the integration of traditional economy of Kerala in to the modern world economy. Under colonialism the land became a property which could be bought and sold. Moreover money economy became widespread in Kerala. The introduction of plantation agriculture created far reaching consequences in the existing social and economic spheres of Kerala.<sup>7</sup> The emergence of an upwardly mobile group in Kerala could be considered as the by-product of colonial intervention in the traditional

economy of Kerala<sup>8</sup>. These upwardly mobile groups (Ezhavas, Syrian Christians etc.) were able to realise the potentials and possibilities of colonialism. It is to be noted that the colonial mediated political economy of Kerala had supplied many opportunities to be utilised by any sections of the society.

In short, as a result of colonial intervention in Kerala the agrarian relations, judicial system, educational field etc. underwent drastic changes. Economic changes paved the way for the emergence of upwardly mobile groups in Kerala- Ezhavas and Syrian Christians. Moreover the colonial judicial systems not only alter the traditional land relations and 'nattunadappu' but it created a new professional group from the indigenous people who were given English education. The introduction of new means of travel and communication, above all the introduction of printing technology in Kerala etc. had a great impact in the Kerala society<sup>9</sup>.

It is to be noted that a small group from each castes, except the downtrodden castes, had got opportunities to utilise the possibilities of colonial modernity. As a result of this, a small group of enlightened and educated youths began to come up from each caste groups who can be technically called as 'middleclass'. Along with the emergence of the middle classes and various apparatuses of colonial modernity public sphere was being formed there during the second half of the 19th century in Kerala. It seems that the public sphere which was formed in Kerala was the creation of middle class. Yet colonialism was the force behind the emergence of both the middle class and the public sphere in Kerala. The social transformation was the main intention behind the functioning of the public sphere and of those who got access in to it-the middle class from Nairs, Ezhavas, Syrian Christians, Muslims, Namboothiries etc.

It was for stimulating the social transformation that the middle classes from each caste took initiative for social reform movements in the second half of the 19th century. As the public sphere was not represented by all the caste groups of Kerala there had been an inner contradiction in the functioning of public sphere. The downtrodden caste group like Pulayyas, Paryas etc were not able to enter in to the 'public sphere' because they were not in a position to understand the possibilities of colonialism<sup>10</sup>. But at the same time those who could emerge as representatives of caste groups like Ezhavas, Nairs etc. were able to empower themselves and tried to reform and re define their respective castes in the context of colonial modernity. It would be interesting to examine the emergence of caste organisations in Kerala in the particular social milieu of Colonial Modernity.

It is to be noted that the Middle Class who emerged in the context of colonial modernity in Kerala was not a capitalist class rather the educated professional and upwardly mobile group of that period. They carved out a space for themselves in the liberal space brought by the 'colonial modernity'. Therefore it could be stated that the public sphere which was formed in Kerala was the creation of Middle Class<sup>11</sup>.

#### **EMERGENCE CASTE ORGANISATIONS IN KERALA**

Since the people of Kerala suffered much from the Brahmanic Sanskritic tradition they felt the presence of colonialism and liberal material culture as a new experience. Therefore the people showed enthusiasm and attraction towards the apparatus of the hegemonic culture of colonialism and made use of its possibilities for transformation and wellbeing of the society. The caste group like Ezhavas, Nairs, Namboothiries and the religious sects like Christians and Muslims were compelled to redefine their social location and identity in the socio-cultural and religious landscape of colonial Kerala.

#### **NAIR SERVICE SOCIETY (NSS)**

Since the Nairs got a place just below the Brahmins in the traditional society of Kerala they were free from all the intricacies of 'Jati Maryadas'. As they were given high positions in the society every possible opportunity was utilised very well by them in the traditional society. But in the context of colonial modernity the status and privileges of the upper caste Nairs lost its relevance because the signifiers of colonial modernity was so powerful to transmute the practices in the traditional society of Kerala. Naturally, these developments compelled the English educated Nairs to relocate and redefine their jati status in the newly formed colonial milieu of Kerala. The western educated Nair youths began to approach critically the entire social practices among the Nairs. Thus the collective attempts of the western educated youth from Nairs led to the emergence of several caste organisations in Travancore like Kerala Nair Samajam, Nair Brithya Sangam etc. in the public sphere of 19th century Kerala<sup>12</sup>. It is to be noted that these organisations of Nairs were very much influenced by the Western social institutions and their ways of life. The concept of 'individualism' took deep roots in the minds of the emerging educated Nair youths. Yet in the Taravadu, the Marumakkathayam, sambandam etc were prevailing as unchanging institutions. But the emerging middle class from the Nairs could not accommodate the traditional system of Taravadu, Marumakkathayam, the supreme status of Karanavar, the institution of sambandam<sup>13</sup>. They approached

the colonial legality and judicial system which had implemented in the colonial Kerala by the British. Thus the different organs of colonial modernity have been utilised to destroy the most ritualistic and sturdy institutions of traditional society.

The colonial urban milieu was the social space from where the voices of reform came out against the existing values, rituals, practices etc of Nair Taravadu. Thus Nairs as a subject of colonial modernity became a powerful agency of transformation of traditional structure of Nair life with organisational strategy. Under Nair Service Society (NSS), organised and led by Nair Middle Class, different sub groups among the Nairs began to be unified as a single category and these middle class claimed as a community and began to be known as 'Nair Community'. Thus, as a result of jati relocation by the Nair middle class, a new world view, value consciousness, notion of morality etc got a momentum in their attempt of producing and perpetuating new power relations in the society during the colonial period and after. Thus a new caste organisation came in to existence which became a very strong pressure group in Kerala in the course of time.

#### **SREE NARAYANA DHARMA PARIPALANA YOGAM (SNDP YOGAM)**

Ezhavas had enjoyed a little bit of freedom and 'separate identity' even in the rigid system of jati hierarchy of the pre-colonial period. Therefore the Ezhavas could convert their extraneous status in the society in the various other forms of power and material status. Likewise during the colonial period also they could utilise its possibilities and could accommodate themselves to the different organs of colonialism. As Ezhavas could understand the liberatory potentials of colonial modernity they decided to redefine and to relocate their self. Even though the material status of Ezhavas was prosperous in the changed colonial milieu, their social status was still at the lowest level. It was this condition which made western educated middle class from the Ezhavas obstinate to enter in to the newly formed 'Public sphere' of Kerala with an organisation named Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam). Under the charismatic presence of Sree Narayana Guru, the Middle Class from Ezhavas could attract the attention of the society towards their problems. In spite of their economic and educational achievements the Ezhavas had to face bitter experience of stigmatisation in the society even in the second half of the 19th century. Sometimes they were even denied job opportunities in the government services where the members of the upper caste occupied the higher posts. There aroused a feeling of Ezhavaness in the midst of this negligence which unified them in the public sphere. Its first instance could be identified from the Ezhava memorial of 1896. It was a political interference of the Ezhava middle class to capture the denied rights in the newly formed public spheres of Kerala. This shows that the Ezhava could relocate their identity obstinately in the cultural surroundings of colonial modernity. It is to be noted that among the Ezhavas also it was the middle class who led the reform movement.

In the locale of colonial modernity Sree Narayana Guru could be seen as a catalyst in the process of re locating the self of Ezhavas. He always advised the Ezhavas to get rid of their stigmatised social condition. In order to overcome the stigmatised social status of Ezhavas, Guru suggested them to be prosperous economically, educationally, organisationally and above all philosophically. Here, he himself redefined the existing rituals and practices of Ezhavas. He even utilised Brahmanic rituals, practices and philosophical teaching etc. for eradicating the social injustice and decadence of society especially the Jati system. Despite being an Ezhava, Guru could exert symbolic power over the society which he derived from his 'sanyasa'. All these favourable conditions were utilised by the Ezhava middle class which made them aware of the necessity to break the bondage of caste and to acquire a prestigious status in the society. In this social milieu Guru's sanyasa was captured by the Ezhava middle class for breaking the social set up of that period.

But the movement initiated by Sree Narayana Guru (SNDP) did not reach in the wider sense of a social reform movement. Instead with the function of SNDP yogam, a feeling of Ezhavaness was brought in and the Yogam leaders claimed that SNDP unified the Ezhavas as a community. Most of the time the speeches and activities of the leaders of Ezhava social reform movement including Guru addressed only the Ezhava social reform movement including Guru addressed only the Ezhavas. They mainly concentrated on the economic as well as social well-being of their caste. Soon SNDP yogam became a strong organisation among Ezhavas in Kerala.

#### **YOGAKSHEMA SABHA**

When these entire caste group started to organise themselves for achieving their goal in the society the Nambuthiries who were in the top of the caste hierarchy in Kerala also wanted to rally behind their own organisation. It was the colonial educated youth from the Nambuthiries who took initiative for such a

venture during the beginning of the 20th century. They were well aware of the fact that if they keep aloof from the material realities of colonial modernity they would be marginalised. This paved the way for the emergence of Yogakshema Sabha as an Organisation of Namboothiri Brahmins of Kerala. The main objective of the organisation was to educate the traditional Namboothiries about the need and necessity of an Organisation like Yogakshema sabha for achieving their goal in the changed social milieu. The colonial modernity had an adverse impact over the Namboothiries because in the changed scenario the Namboothiries became one the subjects of the British colonialism. Moreover the apparatus of British colonial modernity had grabbed many privileges of Namboothiries in the society. For example the the economic power brought out by colonial modernity caused the destruction of Namboothiries as an economic power. The modern technologies and means of transportation altered the notion of sacred space and sacred body of Namboothiries. The colonial legality uprooted the maryadas system which had declared the infallibility of Namboothiries during the pre-colonial period in Kerala. As they lost their full dominance over their material resources they were no longer able to maintain power over the society with the signifiers of their body. Therefore the Namboothiries were compelled to develop a new concept of life in the changed social of Kerala. This idea was actually manifested through an Organisation named Yogakshema Sabha which actively functions among the Namboothires to educate and protect their caste interest in the changed colonial scenario.

#### SADHU JANAPARIPALANA SANGHAM

All the caste and religious groups of Kerala either organised or became stronger enough to articulate themselves in the society by the beginning of 20th century. But the interests of the weaker sections like the lower castes and women were not addressed in the newly emerged so called 'public sphere of Kerala. It was in this context a novel idea of solidarity evolved among the lower caste for the first time in Kerala. As a common platform for the poor people (Sadhu Janam) named Sadhu Jana Paripalana Sangam was established by Ayyankali, the first Dalit leader of Kerala. Since the lower castes were denied power over the resources they utilised their labour power as weapon to interfere in the public sphere and demanded for their rights as human beings. Though the colonial liberal space offered them individual rights in the society the upper castes were not ready to accommodate the lower castes as human being. So the Sandhu Jana paripalana Sangam became a pioneering attempt as a caste organisation of lower castes in Kerala.

#### CONCLUSION:

The interference of all the caste group in the particular social milieu of Kerala during 19th century for the eradication of social evils like untouchably and other caste discrimination are popularly known as social reform movement in the academic as well as in the common parlour of Kerala. But it seems that the social reform movement initiated by the middle castes from each caste group of Kerala were trying to strengthen the interests of their own castes in an organised way which paved the way for the emergence of different caste organisations in Kerala. In other words the social reform movement led by middle class belonging to the various castes mainly focussed for protecting their caste interest not for an egalitarian social system. Therefore many problems like the question of poverty, women and the pathetic condition of Dalit etc. remained unanswered in the society of Kerala.

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