



L.M.S.MISSIONARIES AND THE ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

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ABSTRACT :

Slavery was an universal social evil and had its origin from time immemorial .The origin of slavery in India is closely related with the beginning of the caste system which, in turn, was based on our hierarchical social order. In ancient India the aborigines who were conquered by the Aryans were called dasas or dasyus.They were treated like slaves and were meant to serve the members of the Aryan society.¹It is seen from the writings of Marco Polo².Calcutta was an important center of slave trade where foreigners as well as Indians flocked together for the purchase of slaves.³

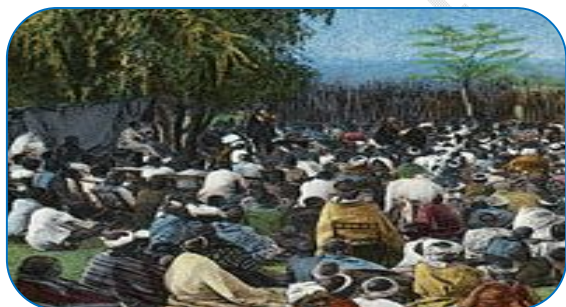
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INTRODUCTION

Unlike in other parts of India the system of slavery in the southernmost part of India had certain peculiarities.Pepole belonging to certain castes like the Pulayas and Parayas were viewed as hereditary slaves, and it was impossible for them to relieve themselves from this wretched plight even if they strived.The Brahmins made a grand and steep rise to power and the whole field of activities came under their thumb. All the powers and authorities were in the hands of the Brahmins.

They dictated rules and social customs which were to be obeyed by all.The works or services of public importance were only divided among the Brahmins. It was this division of labour which later turned into caste distinctions and degradations that lead to slavery.

There were several slave classes like the Parayas and Pulayas in Kanyakumari District but the first constituted the bulk of the total slave population. Debtors who found it difficult to pay back their loans,sold themselves to creditors and served them till the liability was over. Poothany village in the Agasteeswaram taluk, had a good cluster of houses belonging to these classes of people⁴ . A document , dated 27th April 1430 A.D. from South Travancore reveals that some men and women of Paraya community were given as dowry together with cows, paddy-fields and copper vessels⁵ .Another



¹ Kusuman, K.K.,*Slavery in Travancore*, Trivandrum, 1978,p.19.

² Marcopolo, Travels, Vol.II ,trans; Yule, London, 1903,p.11.

³ Joy Gnanadason,*A Forgotten History*, Madras, 1994. P.21.

⁴ Letter from the Dewan Peishear of Padmanabhapuram to the Dewan of Travancore, 1st April 1873,English Records,Kerala Government Secretariat, Trivandrum.

⁵ Ibid.,p.45.

document, which is rather a slave deed, dated 29th June 1910 A.D. discloses that a vellatti sold for fifty Kaliyugaraman panams⁶. Yet another document dated 23rd May 1797 A.D. brings to light that a Paraya woman and her son were sold for one hundred and fifty panams⁷. The streets where the Brahmins and Sudras occupied were not accessible to the slave class. Untouchability and Unapproachability which seemed to have been observed in dealing the slaves in the later period. Because of the low-caste origin, the slaves were only employed for agricultural and menial work and kept away from the houses of their masters. There were prescribed distances to be observed by a Pulaya if he needed to have dialogue with men of higher castes.

The services of the Parayas of Kanyakumari District were of an outstanding nature. They were the pillars of the agriculture oriented economy of the land, In spite of the commendable social services rendered by them, what they got in return was contempt and neglect, Public streets were inaccessible to them. If a Paraya wanted to marry, he had to convey his desire first to his master, who however, was bound to meet the expenses connected with the marriage⁸. A paraya had to keep a distance of half a furlong from the people of higher caste.

There were also a number of other castes and tribes who suffered under slavery or to her social disabilities. It would be relevant in this context to have a bird's eye view of the economic structure of the period which accommodated slaves in such large members. The economy of the district to a very large extent, centered on agriculture, and the caste people were the sole custodians of all arable as well as waste lands.⁹ The slaves did not and could not possess any land owing to social and economic reasons. Even if a slave possessed the necessary economic background, there was not even a remote chance to purchase land.

An important feature of the pollution rules of the slave classes was their inability to take revenge on those who transgressed the established boundaries of such customs. If a slave had any grievance, he might purify himself by taking a bath, that was all that he could do. In the relation with high castes, the violation of such rules by slaves was always followed by the slaves in the course of their social movements.¹⁰ They had to observe certain approved distances in their dealings with the people of high caste.

Thus, the slaves were denied even the small comforts to human life. They were systematically tortured both physically and mentally. Those who escaped were chased and brought back and severe punishments were given to them in such a manner so as to create terror in others who were likely to follow the example.

The Christian missionaries who were moving among the common people with the motive of spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ came into contact with slaves and this enabled them to know with the horrible realities pertaining to slavery. In 1811, J.Abbs after his personal detection of the matter from the southern parts of Travancore opined that they cannot calculate how many of the sons bondage were prematurely removed from this world in childhood for want of sufficient nourishment and clothing. Those who reach maturity are destined to work like beasts of burden to live in wretched houses to eat the most offensive of animals and reptiles and to be treated as outcastes by their fellow creatures.¹¹

It was the, L.M.S. missionaries who first raised their voice against slavery and drew the attention of the general public as well as the authorities to this evil peep into the circumstances that led to its abolition will reveal the nature of the role played by the missionaries on this virtual issue. Their influence in the administrative and political affairs of Travancore in a way, was helped to the redress of many social evils to which a large portion of the population was subjected.¹² The tendency gathered the force of motion during the Resident ship of Col.Munro who had the rare privilege of holding the deanship of Travancore as well. The

⁶ Kerala Society Papers, Series V,p.283,(Hereinafter K.S.P).

⁷ Ibid., p.284

⁸ Ward and Conner, *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States*, Trivandrum, 1863, p.140.

⁹ Velu Pillai, T.K.,*The Iravaiicbic Siale Manual*, Vol.iii, Trivandrum, 1996, p.142.

¹⁰ K.S.P., Series, 5,p.280.

¹¹ Samuel Matteer,*Native Life in Travancore*, London, 1883,p.304.

¹² William Logan, *Malabar*,Vol.i, Madras, 1951,p.149.

influence of the L.M.S Missionaries and personal interest of Col.Munro enabled Rani Lakshmi Bai to introduce social reforms by which the suppressed classes secured many privileges¹³.

The Proclamation published in the year 1812 reminded to the general public that the natives and foreigners who for the sake of profit, but at a cheap rate the boys and girls of the several low caste people of this country, sell them higher price, take them to distant places and pay taxes at sea – ports and thus make a regular brain of them. As this is really unbecoming and disgraceful custom, which ought to be checked, it was made mention in the proclamation that we hereby notify that no person shall, for purposes of cultivation up or sell Kuravaurs, Parayyas, Malayars, Vedars and others in mortgage. *Janman*¹⁴ or pattam, as is done in many places or get title deeds with by the prominent land-holders of the place concerning them, or engage such people for cultivation and that no people for cultivation and that no people of any other caste shall beyond this natural customs, buy or sell children their own caste or pay toll to the Sirkar. Anyone that acts in opposition to the notification given above, and has a regular dealing of the slaves shall be subject to punishments, their property be confiscated and they themselves be banished from the country.

Even after, the Proclamation of the Rani, slavery existed in different parts of the State. The Children Missionaries while preaching among the common people came to know the gruesome realities connected with slavery. Mrs. Mault, the lady missionary gives a touching incident of a girl, who was educated in the boarding school and she failed to secure her freedom from the master. A girl of about 11 years of age was found near the residence of Mrs. Mault in a state of utter fatigue due to hunger. After some relief, she told Mrs. Mault that she was a slave and owing to her master's heartless beating she had run away.¹⁵ So she was given asylum by Mrs. Mault.

After ten days a gloomy looking man appeared and demanded his slave girl. Every possible effort was made by Mrs. Mault to induce him to show clemency by offering to accept the cost of her freedom. But he was in vain. He said that he was not for her money, but he demanded the girl slave. In 1841 Rev. Abbs observed the plight of the slaves of south Travancore in person.¹⁶ The other missionaries also noticed the evils and wrote that, they cannot but feel sorry for these poor sufferers; and if consistently with their higher objects, they can produce for them some relief from their temporal distress, it was their delight to do so. Further they declared that the state was priest-ridden and by no means a model which it had long been represented to be.¹⁷ The missionaries believed that it was the inalienable right the lower classes of South Travancore as of any other people to fight for their right and to enjoy the fruits of their soil.¹⁸

Though the motives behind this Proclamation are to be appreciated, it indirectly aimed at the confinement of slavery in Travancore. Therefore the Indian Government was compelled to take positive steps against the institutions of slavery. This came in the form of Act V of 1843.

In Malabar, dealing in slaves had been prohibited by the Commissioners during the last decade of the 18th century.¹⁹ The question of slavery and slave trade attracted the early attention of Honourable Company's Government. So early as 1792, the year in which British rule commenced, a Proclamation was issued by the Commissioners against buying and selling of slaves. A person offering a slave for sale was to be considered a thief. The slave was to be forfeited and the person offering him for sale was to be fined five times his value.²⁰ But, in Travancore the major step towards this end, was initiated by the Missionaries. In 1887, they prepared a memorandum in which the lamentable of the King Utram Marthabndavarma. The chief ameliorative measures proposed were

¹³ Kusuman, K.K., Op.cit., p.77

¹⁴ Janmam (or) Pattam, The right of proprietorship which the owner has over property. It literally means 'birth right'. A kind of ownership instituted in Kerala by Parasurama.

¹⁵ Letter from Mrs. Mault to the Foreign Secretary, 2nd June 1830, New Series, Vol. iii, p.511. Janmam (or) Pattam- The right of proprietorship of which the owner has over his property, It literally means 'birth right'. A kind of ownership instituted in Kerala by Parasurama.

¹⁶ samuel matter, op.cit.,

¹⁷ london missionary society report 1814, p.72.

¹⁸ agur. cm., op.cit., p. 890.

¹⁹ william logan, malabar, vol.i, maais, 1951, p.149.

²⁰ Ibid. p.151.

- I. No traffic in slaves should be permitted.
- II. It should be made penal as in British India by the Act of 1843
- III. Slaves should acquire and possess property like other classes
- IV. And hereditary slavery should be done away with.²¹

Memorializes pointed out that as a first step towards abolition, they wanted the king to emancipate the Sirkar slaves from their bondage. Such a step they reminded him would make his name precious in Travancore for generations to come as the reliever of the oppressed. 'We venture to submit to your Highness that history of slavery shows that its extinctions greatly conduces to the wealth'. Intelligence and social comport of man, wherever it had been achieved.²²

The Church Mission Records for 1850 read that the condition of these unhappy beings was without a parallel in the whole range of history. They were so wretchedly provided with the necessaries of life that the most unwilling things were a treat to them. They were bought and sold like cattle and were often ill treated. The owners had formerly power to flog them and chain them and in some cases to mutilate them and even to deprive them of their lives²³. Thus, from the religious point of view the condition was favorable for missionaries and as such their activities could be justified, But, there was storm of opposition from the caste Hindus who could not tolerate the ameliorative measures and conversion policies adopted by the missionaries.²⁴

However, it was Gen,Cullen ,the British Resident of Travancore, who forwarded the memorandum to the Maharaja for necessary action. On behalf of the Maharaja, the Dewan replied to the Resident that "His Highness would never fail to give his attention to the unfortunate class of people referred to in the missionaries' petition."²⁵

The Resident General Cullen was not satisfied with the reply sent by the Dewan.The continuous efforts of the missionaries compelled the Resident to address a memorandum in the early part of 1849 to the Dewan of Travancore, recommending certain measures for improving the condition of slaves and for the gradual abolition of slavery in the State.²⁶

In his memorandum to the Dewan ,the Resident wanted the Dewan to observe the Provision of Act V of 1843 passed by the Indian Government. He also put forth certain suggestions like the government to publish to disconnect itself with the preparation of slavery and the abolition of slavery and also demanded the non preparation of father ,mother and children and the restriction of slaves or transfer beyond a certain distance from the district of their birth, Securing to the enslaves the full amount of fine when employed on Government work, prohibition of child labor allowance to the slaves when they had no work in the fields of their masters and the like were also found in the list of suggestions.²⁷ The Dewan of Cochin was also given a copy of this memorandum corresponding to the same. The Cochin Sirkar expressed its opposition but Travancore was wavering .However, because of the pressure of the Court of Directors, the Travancore authorities expressed their feelings to look into this virtual issue. They prepared a draft Proclamation and sent it to the Resident; but the Resident found the draft inadequate. On 20 November 1852,the Dewan sent a revised Draft largely observing the guidelines laid down by the Resident in the memorandum dated 12th March 1849 and submitted it for the approval of the Resident .But the recommendations of the Resident were not acceptable to the Travancore Government.²⁸

In September 1853 the Travancore authorities prepared another draft Proclamation and the copies of t it were sent to the Dewan of Cochin and the Resident for their consideration. The Resident perfectly

²¹ Kusuman,k.k.,op.cit.,p.45.

²² English Records,Public Department,Government of Kerala Memorandum of the Missionaries 19th March 1847.

²³ Ibid.,p.302.

²⁴ Mckackenzie,G.T.,*Christianity in Travancore*,Trivandrum,1901,p.51.

²⁵ *English Records,petition of L.M.S.Missionaries to the King of Travancore*,19th March1847,p26.

²⁶ Saradamoni,K.,*Aggestic Stavery in Kerala in the 19th Century* ,Travandrum,1974,p220.

²⁷ English Records,Resident's letter to the Dewan of Travancore, 12th March,1849.

²⁸ Saradamoni,K.,op,cit.,230.

approved the same.²⁹ The contents of this draft Proclamation congratulated the Raja for his beneficial and liberal policy, he also justified the reluctance of the Travancore Government to free adult sarkar slaves as they almost clause controversial, as it blamed the missionaries for making use of the emancipation for conversion.³⁰ In the meantime, the Government of Madras Wanted to see the proposed reform enacted at the earlier. This could be seen from M.C.Montgomery's letter to the Chief Secretary to the Madras Government.³¹ It was in this background that the historic Proclamation of 1853 abolishing slavery was issued...

The Proclamation of 1853 was not devoid of loopholes and drawbacks. Despite the proclamation, dealings in slaves continued and this could not go unnoticed by the British. The Resident was dissatisfied with the working of the controversial second and fifth clause in the Proclamation. Soon he wrote a series of letters to the Dewan of Travancore stressing one draft or the other. In one of the letters he requested the Government to discontinue the tax levied on the Sarkar slaves.³² In another letter the Resident mentioned the cruel practice of selling free men as slaves at Eraniel³³. But the Government of Travancore replied that the parties involved in the transaction were men who were perfectly unaware of the recent Proclamation. At the same time the indifferent attitude of the Travancore Government became well-known to the authorities both in this country and abroad.³⁴ As a solution to this problem, the Resident suggested the re-publication which is more definite than this are..In order to make the matters clear. the Government arrange many discussions.³⁵

The salient features of the discussion between the differing parties were (a) abolition of slavery was not attempted after a full understanding of its origin, nature and extent and the institution impact on the slaves (b) all those came forward with the idea of abolition of slavery or amelioration of the condition of the slaves. Despite the discussions and debates held at different stages, the objects of the proclamation could not be rectified. The failure of the 1853 Proclamation to achieve the real purpose for which it was meant created a sense of awareness in the minds of both British and the natives of the State of Travancore. Finally yielding to the pressure of the Resident, the Maharaja Sri Chitra Thirunal withdrew the first Proclamation and issued another in its place on 24th June, 1855 and according to this Proclamation slavery was socially abolished.³⁶

The zeal and enthusiasm of the missionaries in the amelioration of slaves were to be appreciated. It was the drive and initiative which shook the conscience of all. It was their enthusiasm which was later championed by the Resident. But they did not depend on government action alone; that acted as the vanguard of the reform moment by striking at the roots of this evil through a pragmatic approach

²⁹ English Records, Residents letter to the Dewan of Travancore, 10th September, 1853.

³⁰ Saradmoni, K., op.cit.p231.

³¹ English Records, Resident's letter to the Dewan of Travancore, 5th May, 1854.

³² English Records, Resident's letter to the Dewan of Travancore, 8th July 1854.

³³ Ibid, p.78.

³⁴ English Records, Extract from the Minutes of Constitution, 11th July, 1854.

³⁵ Saradmoni, K., op.cit., p.223.

³⁶ Kusuman, k.k., op.cit., p.53.